Acknowledgement
When I say it takes an army to write a book, I might be exaggerating slightly, but there is so much that
goes on behind the scenes that needs to be recognized.
Firstly, to my wonderful husband and remarkable little girl; this past year has been hard and hectic,
thanks for allowing me my space and time to finish telling the stories that are taking up far too much
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rather be stranded on an island with.
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Dedication
To Jessica Fraser.
My friend, my editor, and Potter companion.
Thanks for the encouragement and humor over the past year.
CHAPTER 1

WREN

*Pull it together, Wren,* I silently berated myself, looking at my reflection in the mirror of the cramped airplane restroom. If my overwhelming fear of flying hadn’t already taken over, I was sure I’d be suffering a case of claustrophobia. Flying shouldn’t be this hard, not after all this time; yet it had never gotten any easier as the years went by. It wasn’t like I stayed in one place. I’ve been on countless flights over the years, even overseas, but they have all been difficult, ever since my world had crashed down around me, leaving me a broken shell of a woman I desperately wanted to be.

The Adderall or Xanax only went so far; my memories were a far stronger force than good prescription drugs. I took one prior to my first flight of the day from New York to Miami, but now, six hours later, it had all but worn off, and with my travel companion now fast asleep from her twenty-hour flight from Australia, it was up to me to stay conscious for the two of us.

I smoothed my long brown hair, ensuring my stylist covered all my blond roots before tying it up in a high ponytail. Grasping at straws to keep my mind occupied, I examined the little makeup I had on, not that I’d be able to reapply given my hands were shaking so much I was afraid they might shake off my body entirely.

Exiting the anxiety-inducing coffin the airlines like to call a restroom, I made my way up the aisle a few rows to our first-class seats. The lights were dimmed for my second flight of the day, an evening flight. Many of the passengers were either asleep, reading or watching the screens in front of them to pass the time on the three-hour flight.

My friend Cassy was among the few that were currently sound asleep and wouldn’t notice if the plane went down in a ball of fire. The thought hit too close to home, making me dizzy enough to reach out to the seat in front of me to steady myself.

‘You alright there?’ the gorgeous young guy I’d noticed at the airport asked, pulling out his earbuds.

I gave him a weak, weary smile. ‘Just not good with flying.’

He smiled a truly genuine smile, showing off perfect white teeth that momentarily took my mind off catastrophic endings. ‘Hang in there.’

I nodded and turned to take my seat directly across the aisle from him. I envied Cassy, who had made herself comfortable, or at least as comfortable as possible on a commercial flight, albeit first class. She was peacefully asleep, enjoying the flight. I reached down to pick up her blanket that had fallen on the floor and covered her back up, tucking another pillow under her side so her ribs were cushioned on the armrest. I then brushed the hair out of her face before sitting back and buckling my seatbelt.

‘Your girlfriend is a lucky lady,’ the hot-as-hell guy sitting next to me commented. I smiled at his assumption that Cassy and I were in a relationship. Sure I was doting on her, but I was like that with my friends. Still, it was very forward-thinking of him and also far from the truth. I loved my female friends, but all my relationships had been with men. While Cassy and I had been friends for years, we literally just met for the first time in person about a half-hour before we boarded this plane. Until today, we’d been friends of the virtual kind. We FaceTimed nearly every day and exchanged emails or messages constantly, both in a personal and professional manner.

The main reason we’d never met in person was the vast body of water known as the Pacific Ocean
floating rudely between the east coast of Australia and the west coast of my great country of America, separating our two amazing continents. Given I had panic attacks at the thought of my New York to Miami flight, I’d need serious drug intervention to attempt that flight across the Pacific.

This was the start of her “freedom vacation,” as we were calling it...her first time out of Australia, and her first time traveling without her parents. While she would be working a bit over the next two months in between being a tourist and book signings, the main purpose of this trip was really about seeing the world and gaining some first-hand, real-world experiences to expand her storytelling, something she was already excelling at, or so say her fans and the New York Times.

In addition to being one of my best friends, Cassy was also a client of mine. Years ago when she was first starting out, my former college roommate and very best friend, Lana, stumbled across Cassy’s first foray into writing on a self-publishing site popular for fan fiction. Her short stories were gaining a lot of popularity. Being an English major, I caught a lot of grammar mistakes and offered my editing services to her to gain exposure for my own brand. It had been a win-win kind of situation. Lana took her on as a client when she started her own social media business, Social Solutions. Then things really took off for Cassy when her book was featured on the Mylie the Millennial blog. The golden Mylie touch, as we like to say.

Fast forward a few years. I was fresh off an exhausting eight-month internship with a top literary agency in New York who recently offered me a full-time position. To their disappointment, I’ve had to defer accepting the position full time until June, after I fulfilled a favor for one of my nearest and dearest starting in January.

Until then, I was going to relax and catch up on sleep during the Christmas to New Years' lull with copious amounts of alcohol on a beach in St. Martin with my little Aussie friend fresh off a breakup with a serious narcissist.

I put my earbuds in and turned on one of my self-guided meditation recordings to help calm my nerves for the remainder of the flight. I was doing great until the turbulence started on the descent. I checked Cassy’s seat belt when the sign came on as she was still in a practically comatose state of sleep. White-knuckled, I held on to the armrest, shaking beyond reason.

‘Just breath,’ the gorgeous guy next to me encouraged, placing one of his hands over mine, helping to still my shaking and lower my anxiety; They were large, and I could easily tell they were strong by the callouses from long hours of use. I raised my head to be greeted by his deep grey eyes. ‘Our mom’s not great with flying either.’ The guy who looked a lot like him sitting in the window seat nodded in agreement.

‘There are meds you can take,’ he suggested. ‘Does wonders for our mom.’ By his comment and their similar looks, he confirmed their brotherly relation.

‘I took one on my earlier flight, and it’s worn off. She had a direct flight from Australia to Miami and is exhausted; someone needs to stay functional until we get to the hotel.’

‘So where’s your functional third-wheel then?’ the blond-haired guy holding onto my hand teased, looking around.

He got a smile out of me, I'll give him that. ‘Look, I’m here. I’ve got you. Everything is going to be fine, okay?’ He gave my hand a tight squeeze and held it until the plane was firmly planted back on solid ground, only letting go when a flight attendant or passenger needed to get through.

I woke Cassy up as we started to taxi on the tarmac toward the terminal. ‘We’re there already?’ she asked, sounding confused and looking around getting her bearings.

When the plane stopped, I took off my seat belt and started to get our bags down from the overhead compartment, however, the gorgeous blond guy whose hand I’d been holding for the past hour reached
over me and took both our bags down for us effortlessly. I could see his chest filling out the Dartmouth College Lacrosse t-shirt very nicely, and his arms were Men’s Health worthy.

‘Thanks for everything.’ I blushed, looking up to him. He was at least a foot taller than I was and extremely fit.

‘You got her from here?’ The brunette brother asked me as Cassy and I exited the plane, tossing a Boston College Hockey backpack over his shoulder. They were either smart or athletic, possibly both, but they were both definitely hot and the only good thing about the flight over the past three hours.

‘I can take it from here.’ I tapped my foot on the ground. ‘I’m good with gravity now.’

‘Great. Maybe we’ll see you around the island.’ The blond hottie smirked as we made our way to collect our bags.
CHAPTER 2

WREN

Last night, Cassy and I crashed almost as soon as we reached our hotel suite on the French side of the island. The suite was a one-bedroom overlooking the water. As she’d been traveling for over a day with little sleep, I offered her the bedroom for the first few nights, while I took the sofa bed in the living room, having agreed on a midweek switch. Though I had been tired, I had a hard time getting to sleep, which wasn’t anything new. My dark, lonely thoughts were always strongest at this time of day and worse over the holidays. A new year was about to start, and, like every December for the past eight years, I swore I was going to start afresh in January. Of course, it never worked; there was never any special magic solution. Some years had been better than the others, but this year I struggled with being in New York and all the memories that place held for me from my past.

It was after midnight before I finally fell asleep. I had always been a rather deep sleeper and hadn’t heard Cassy get up or leave the suite earlier this morning. It was the smell of bacon and coffee that woke me, even though Cassy had been trying to be as quiet as possible.

I reached over to grab my phone, seeing that it was just after nine in the morning. ‘Sorry,’ Cassy whispered.

‘It’s alright. I didn’t think I’d sleep this long.’ I sat up, pulling on a pair of shorts I unknowingly peeled off during my sleep, not used to sleeping with much more than a tiny tank top and panties.

‘Well, now that you’re up, you are not going to believe what I found at the breakfast buffet.’

‘Please, let it be an unlimited supply of bacon,’ I answered, eyeing the plate of food on the table.

‘Oh there’s bacon, but it’s the sausage you have to check out.’ She started giggling at her own joke.

‘Have you been hitting the mimosa’s already?’ I stood, pouring myself a cup of coffee from the carafe she had the foresight to bring back to the room.

I lifted the cover to the plate of food, only to find fruit, yogurt and some egg whites and grilled vegetables. ‘There’s no sausage.’ I spun around to face her.

‘The sausage was wearing the Dartmouth College sweater just like he was on the plane last night.’

‘The smile on her face was telling me that she was cooking something up in that devious mind of hers.

‘They are at this resort?’ I nearly choked on my coffee.

‘It appeared so, unless they came to steal the bacon. I didn’t talk to them. They were eating with an older couple, maybe their parents? But the blond guy recognized me and gave me a wink as I was waiting for more coffee.’

I held up the cup. ‘Thanks for this by the way.’

After eating the healthy breakfast she brought back for me, we showered, applied a bit of makeup and got our beach bag together before heading down to the private beach on the resort. Cassy needed a day or two to get used to the massive time change before she went out exploring the island and checking out the different surfing spots on her list.

‘I heard back from one of the local surfing pros,’ Cassy told me as we settled into two lounge chairs. ‘He’s got a few boards I can borrow and will take me out to a few spots this week.’

‘Are you comfortable going with a stranger?’ I looked over at her, trying to judge how naive she was.

‘It’s a group thing,’ she assured. ‘I’ve booked through a website. They do group tours almost
daily, weather dependent. I’m not going to be alone, and they have good reviews. It’s not like I need lessons; I just need to be brought to the places and to have someone plan the transportation and keep an eye out for me. I’m not just going to go into the water alone without anyone knowing where I am and who to contact in case of an emergency.’

‘Am I your emergency contact?’ I asked with a high-pitched voice.

‘Presently, yes. Is that a problem?’

I shook my head and let out an audible, ‘Wow.’ Cassy followed my line of sight to see the two guys from the plane walk into view, shirtless and holding lacrosse sticks. They were most certainly athletic. Their toned bodies left very little wonderment as to what they studied at university; lacrosse or hockey as evident by the hats they both wore.

‘Dartmouth is a university, right?’ Cassy asked me.

‘Umm hum,’ I confirmed, not able to tear my eyes away from the guy who held my anxiety at bay, preventing a full-on meltdown yesterday on the plane.

‘Are you just going to eye-fuck them all afternoon, or should you maybe talk to them?’

‘Why me?’ I turned to talk to her.

‘I’m not interested in a holiday hookup. I’m so off men at the moment.’ She leaned back into her chair, raising her iPad, but it wasn’t fooling anyone. We both knew she was still checking out the guys.

I didn’t blame her for wanting to swear off men; her ex did a number on her. A break was what she needed, not more mind games, guilt or distractions.

‘He is hot though,’ I commented, looking over the top of the book I was pretending to read.

‘They are both hot, but which one, in particular, are you looking at?’ She wasn’t exaggerating. They were both drop-dead gorgeous, so much so, most of the women and some of the men were unable to stop looking at them tossing a ball back and forth with the lacrosse sticks they brought with them down to the beach.

‘The blond one.’

‘Mr. Dartmouth.’ She smirked, and I was unable to stop the smile that came upon my face.

The blond guy whipped the ball, however, his brother missed it, causing both of them to sprint in our direction. If it wasn’t intentional, it was a pretty big coincidence.

‘Ladies,’ the blond said, scooping up the ball with his stick, raking his eyes over the entire length of my body, seeming to appreciate my coral-pink bikini or the body it barely covered. Only making eye contact with Cassy, giving her a curt nod before looking back to me, he asked, ‘Having a good day?’

I looked up to the sky and then out to the water. ‘Perfect weather, fantastic view.’

‘No kidding.’ He didn’t look away from me, extending his free hand. ‘I’m Eli…’

‘Mom’s waving us over,’ the brother interrupted, rolling his eyes. ‘Sorry, obligatory lunch date,’ he offered as an apology.

‘We’ll see you later on?’ Eli asked, ‘Can we get drinks?’

‘Seeing as the drinks are complimentary, you’re going to have to do better than that,’ Cassy shot back.

The brother turned around. ‘We can do better. We’re hitting up a bar tonight, good food, better drinks, great music, decent company.’ He smiled and winked at us.

‘Best of all, me.’ Eli smirked, owning his cocky comment completely.

‘Meet us in the lobby at eight,’ the brother instructed.

Eli gave me puppy dog eyes. ‘Come on, you can’t say no. It’s my birthday.’
I looked over to Cassy, willing her to agree. I let out a relieved sigh when she nodded. ‘Sure, seeing as it’s your birthday and all.’

* * *

Just after eight, we emerged from the elevator looking hot, but in a very subdued way. I had my hair down in soft waves, a strapless blue dress that just covered my firm ass and my sparkly golden Christian Louboutin’s that made my legs look sinfully sexy. Cassy looked just as hot. She wore her hair up in a low-braided bun, a black off-the-shoulder dress with black ankle boots and a bunch of long silver and red necklaces that pulled everything together by matching her ruby red lips.

I learned she was brilliant with makeup, doing mine in mere minutes when it would have taken me at least half an hour. Even though I wore makeup nearly every day, it still took forever for me to apply it just right.

The boys were both in dark jeans, simple button-down shirts and comfortable casual shoes. It really was unfair how little effort they needed to put in to look that good. The kicker was that they were comfortable, and their feet wouldn’t be protesting by the end of the night. They were leaning against the reception desk, arranging a cab to take us to the downtown area where all the nightclubs and bars were.

Eli turned around and did a double-take as we approached them. ‘Damn,’ he breathed out. The brother laughed and hit Eli in the chest. ‘There, they showed. You can stop stressing.’ ‘Did you think we weren’t going to come?’ Cassy asked in a seductive tone, teasing them. ‘I... I didn’t know,’ Eli admitted.

‘I’m Otis, by the way.’ The brother now had a name and started to walk toward the doors. ‘The driver should be here soon.’

Our first stop of the night was a martini and tapas bar overlooking the water. We nursed a drink and ordered a few things to share before hitting up a nightclub where we danced until our feet were screaming. Taking a seat after countless shots, Cassy and I were ready to call it a night.

‘We’re gonna head home,’ I said to Eli, his arm wrapped around my shoulder.

‘No, don’t go yet. It’s not my birthday for another half hour.’ I laughed, looking up to him. ‘It’s actually your birthday...you weren’t pulling our leg?’ I asked, to which he nodded in affirmation.

‘Our feet are killing us,’ Cassy admitted.

‘There are some pubs down the street,’ Otis suggested.

‘No, that’s fine. I’d feel bad if you changed your plans.’ It was the truth. Nothing worse than a party-pooper swooping in and altering things all because of her amazing footwear.

‘Shhh.’ Eli placed a finger on my lips. ‘No, we’re gonna stay together. A pub’s better. We can sit and drink.’

Eli took my hand and led me out of the bar to the street. ‘Shall I give you a piggyback ride?’ I tugged on the bottom of my barely-there dress. ‘This dress isn’t exactly made for piggyback rides.’

He looked me up and down, twirling me around as he was still holding my hand. ‘That it is not.’ He pulled me into his side and whispered into my ear, ‘It might not be made for that kind of ride, but it’s inspiring all kinds of other ride images.’

I wrapped my free arm around his neck. ‘If you think the dress is inspiring, I’d like to see what you’re willing to do to see what’s underneath, because that’s really...stimulating.’

His mouth fell open, and he pulled me into him tighter. ‘I’m all ears and open to suggestions.’
‘Karaoke!’ Cassy came up behind me and pointed to a pub across the street.

‘Hell yeah,’ I agreed and started to make my way in said direction, still holding on to Eli's hand.

‘Ah hell, I haven’t had enough alcohol for karaoke,’ Otis complained but followed behind us.

‘Yet brother,’ Eli corrected. ‘We haven’t had enough alcohol for karaoke, yet.’

‘To the bar, then the songbooks.’ Cassy was excited at the possibility.

With a pitcher of margaritas and a few beers for the boys, we found a corner booth and started to look through the song catalogs.

‘What’s with the lack of Aussie representation on these lists?’ Cassy complained, flipping through the pages. ‘We are more than a few AC/DC songs.’

‘What’s wrong with AC/DC?’ Eli was defensive.

‘Nothing, and don’t even think about it. They are our national treasure and one of our greatest exports. All I’m saying is that I’m in the mood for a little Savage Garden or Kylie Minogue.’

‘What about Keith Urban?’ I asked.

‘Another treasure to be sure, but I'm not exactly rocking the country look tonight.’ She Vanna White-ed her outfit to make her point. ‘Ohh, I could get into Five Seconds of Summer.’ Her voice went to a high pitch.

‘Let’s pick for each other,’ Otis smirked, looking over to his brother with a devilish grin.

Eli took a deep pull of his beer. ‘Ok, hit me with your worst.’

Otis grabbed the book from his brother and looked through it before closing it and walking up to the DJ booth to sign his brother up. I pushed the book to him. ‘Are you going to pick for your brother?’

Eli tapped his forehead. ‘I already have one picked.’ He opened the book, looking through the pages. ‘Can I pick for you also?’

‘You don’t know what I like, or dislike.’ It was a true statement for music, but the way it came out was sexual.

‘How about we get to know each other then?’ Eli slid closer to me, sweeping my hair off my shoulder to expose my neck, brushing his lips over it. ‘Let's do a little song exchange also. You pick for me next round, I’ll pick for you this round.’

I placed my hand on his thigh under the table. ‘What if I have eclectic taste?’

‘I’m up for trying anything at least once.’ He kissed my earlobe. ‘Twice if it doesn’t kill me the first time around.’

I squeezed his thigh, trailing a finger a bit higher until I felt a large bulge. ‘That’s what I like to hear.’

We picked each other's songs as we sat through two horrible singers before a local favorite took the stage and belted out a Celine Dion classic that had everyone cheering.

‘Next up, we have Eli to cool us down with some “Ice, Ice Baby,”’ the DJ announced. A horrified Eli looked over to his brother.

‘Just wait,’ he threatened.

‘Bring it, bro. I’m ready for whatever you’ve got in store for me.’ Otis beamed with an amused look on his face.

Eli made his way up to the stage, taking the mic in his hand and nodding over to the DJ, indicating he was more than ready.

‘Let’s see if my brother’s pasty vanilla ass can pull this one off.’

To everyone sitting at the table and many in the karaoke bar, his rapping abilities was surprising. When he finished his version, he asked the DJ something then took the stage again.
'It is with my greatest pleasure to call my brother, Otis, to the stage to serenade us all with his version of “Barbie Girl.”'

I looked over to Otis to see him take it all in stride, laughing as he walked onto the stage, taking the mic from his brother.

As soon as Eli got back to his seat, he immediately got his phone out and started to film his brother performing the well-known 90’s teeny-bopper tune. I had to give it to him, he didn't skip a beat as if it was his choice in song all along. Owning the performance as if it wasn’t embarrassing for a large, muscled man, and he was all man, to totally shine up on stage.

Making some changes to the song and using the mic as a prop - “Wrapped in plastic, I’m fantastic” - he placed the mic at his crotch and gyrated it into the air, winking at an older woman near him making her blush and her husband look uncomfortable.

The crowd laughed as they applauded him upon finishing, ‘Thanks, I’m here all night.’

There was one mediocre performer before Cassy was called to the stage. ‘How’s my lipstick?’ she asked as she stood.

‘Perfect. Break a leg,’ I encouraged as she strutted to the stage.

‘This song is dedicated to my ex, who’s still down under, but not far enough to be in hell where the bastard belongs.’ Her announcement got a lot of heartening cheers. She did a great rendition of 5 Seconds of Summer’s “Youngblood.”

‘Great job.’ I hugged her as she came back to our seats where we polished off the pitcher of margaritas as Otis came back with tequila shots.

‘Get ready, it’s almost someone's birthday.’ Otis placed the tray on the table, dishing out his phone to check the time.

‘Next up we have Wren here to perform “Not a Regular Night,” and it most certainly isn’t,’ the DJ announced.

My head shot up to look at Eli. ‘Not a Regular Night?’ I asked.

‘It’s by Challenger. Please tell me you’ve heard of them. The popular band from the ’90s and early 2000s.’

I looked at him deadpan, standing to take the stage. ‘Yeah, of course I know who Challenger are. They are timeless.’ It was the truth; they reinvented pop-rock a few decades ago and their music had stood the test of time along the way. Inspiring dozens of bands with their unique tempo, storytelling and performance style.

‘Do you know the song?’

I smiled at him over my shoulder. ‘I was born to sing this song.’ I knew the song inside and out having grown up on the music.

‘Okay.’ I took the mic. ‘Who’s ready to rock out?’ I asked the crowd.

One patron replied with, ‘I love Challenger.’

I smiled at him, ‘Me too,’ before I looked over to the DJ. ‘Let’s do it.’

I didn’t need the screen with the words, and I had just enough alcohol in me to really let loose up on the stage.

‘Ohhh,’ I mused, ‘It all started out fine. But now I’ve lost my mind. Was in a trance when I lost my pants…’ I pulled my short dress up just a few inches exposing my thigh that much more. ‘Can you fill in the blanks?’ I played my air guitar with the signature moves Challenger’s frontman Dustin Spruce was famous for. I could see and hear my table cheering me on and everyone in the bar getting into it.

‘Best performance of the night, ladies and gentleman.’ The DJ applauded as I returned the mic to
the stand, taking a mini bow, all that my micro dress would allow.

‘You are amazing.’ Eli’s arms were around my waist as soon as I was in reach of him, and, to my very pleasant surprise, his lips found their way to mine.

The tune of “Happy Birthday” started to play on the speakers. ‘I have just been informed that we have a birthday in the house tonight,’ the DJ announced, and we saw Otis making his way back from the DJ booth. ‘Can everyone raise a glass to Eli.’

Cassy had her shot glass already in the air. ‘Cheers mate.’ She downed it in one go and the rest of us followed.

‘To getting shitfaced,’ Eli toasted.
‘To finally being legal back home.’ That one statement had me choking on the tequila.
‘You’re only twenty-one?’
Otis laughed. ‘He’s very mature for his young age.’
‘Why, how old are you?’ Eli asked, kissing my temple.
‘Older than you are.’
He shrugged. ‘As long as you’re not underage, age isn’t an issue for me.’

It wasn’t a huge issue for me, just a small one. At twenty-five, I was three years older than he was. Typically, I liked my guys older, however, I hadn’t given much thought to his age. I guess I knew he was in university, but I would have thought he was older than having just turned twenty-one. Why didn’t twenty-one-year-olds look like this when I was at university? Not that my own appearance represented my age. I was always carded no matter how mature I tried to look or who I was with, I still looked barely legal myself.

He pulled me in closer to him. ‘Everything okay?’

I looked up to him, not sure how to answer, so I just nodded with a smile, thinking how I should proceed with him and the night.
The light was shining brightly through the open curtains of the hotel suite as I heard the repetitive knocking on the hotel door. I looked over to see my brother's bed hadn’t been slept in and felt the blankets move next to me.

I spun around to find Wren covering her body with the blanket and shielding her eyes with her other hand.

‘Make the knocking stop,’ she moaned.

I rolled out of bed wearing a pair of boxers and opened the door to find my brother in the clothes he’d worn the night before. ‘You look like shit,” I commented, blocking him from entering the room. ‘Have you looked in the mirror?’

‘No, because your knocking woke me up.’ ‘Let me in.’ My brother tried to push me out of the way. I looked over to the bed where Wren was covered up.

‘Go get breakfast and come back.’

‘I need to change; I'm not going down in the clothes I slept in.’

‘Where did you sleep?’

‘In Wren’s bed…’

‘Alone?’ I asked in a low tone.

‘Of course alone.’ He wasn’t impressed that I even had to ask. He was trying to change his ways. Last year he’d reunited with a girl that we knew as kids, and apparently she’d changed him. Me on the other hand, I was still trying to find my way.

‘Let him in to change.’ We heard Wren’s voice. ‘I’m covered.’

‘Don’t look,’ I uncharacteristically warned, letting him through to gather some clothes from his suitcase before slipping into the bathroom as I laid back down in the bed next to a wrapped-up Wren. ‘I hope we didn’t do anything?’ She phrased her thoughts as a question.

I was rather shocked at her confession. I rolled over, pulling her closer to me. ‘Why, are you married, engaged or something?’

She let out a giggle. ‘Nothing like that I assure you.’ She turned to face me. ‘I was just so drunk; I don’t want to miss the memory of fucking you.’

She leaned in to kiss me, and I assumed she’d gotten over our age difference. ‘Now that would be a birthday present for the ages.’ I kissed her again before adding, ‘And I agree, I wouldn’t want to miss out on that memory either.’

‘No? You want to remember your first time?’

She had a way of making me laugh. ‘It wouldn't be my first time, but I guarantee that I can rock your world like no other.’

‘That’s some ego.’ She draped her arm around my neck, and I pushed my erection into her legs through the thickness of the blankets.

‘I know.’ I laughed, kissing her again as she mumbled something. ‘Did you just say I’m the hottest?’

She tried to swat me away. ‘I said, and so modest.’

‘So you don’t think I’m hot?’
Running her fingers over my chest and down my chiseled abs, she replied, ‘Like you don’t already know how hot and tempting you are.’

‘You’re the sexiest thing I’ve seen in a long time and definitely the finest I’ve ever held in my arms, let alone my bed.’ It just flowed out of my mouth and as much as I wanted to take it back for laying it on so thick, it was absolutely the truth.

‘Mmm.’ She kissed my neck. ‘Sometimes I like it when you open your mouth.’

‘I can do a lot of good things with this mouth, you just wait and see.’ She pulled back and looked at me, raising an eyebrow. ‘What?’ I questioned the look she was giving me.

She shook her head. ‘I just wasn’t expecting a holiday hook up was all.’

‘Is that what this is?’ She went to sit up, but I held her in place, wanting to get to the bottom of our conversation. I had her in my bed, and I wanted more of her.

‘Eli, I’m super busy, I can’t give you anything more than a few hours while here on the island. I’m here with Cassy, and we’re supposed to be working and having some fun on the side. When I fly home, I’m going to be multitasking, and I’m not even sure how I’m going to keep all the balls I’m juggling in the air.’

I thought about what she said, and I was in no position to promise her anything more than what she was offering. Fuck, my life was complicated enough. ‘So long as my balls are in the mix while on holiday, I can agree to those terms.’

There was a knock on the bathroom door. ‘I’m exiting the bathroom. Make sure there’s no dicks to be seen.’

Wren pulled the cover up slightly. ‘All clear,’ she answered my brother.

‘Did you get mom’s text?’

‘Otis get out,’ I growled.

‘Check your phone. We’re boarding the boat at two.’ He left the room, and I leaned back into my pillow.

‘Uggg,’ I moaned. It was my birthday, I was hungover as fuck and had a sexy as hell, and if my assumption was right of what was under the blanket, naked girl in my bed with me. ‘Do you and Cassy want to go sailing with me, Otis, my mom and her boyfriend?’

‘I think you should spend the day with your mom.’ She went to get out of bed, but I pulled her back. ‘Eli, I’ve got to pee, find my clothing and let Cas know I’m still alive.’

As much as I hated to let her go, she had a point. ‘Fine, but why don’t you go get Cassy and meet me down for breakfast?’

She pulled the sheet around her and walked to the bathroom, picking up her dress and my shirt from last night on her way. I grabbed my phone and looked at all the missed messages from family and friends, wishing me a happy birthday, including the messages from my mother trying to get ahold of me. After assuring her that I’d be ready for the sailing excursion she had booked for the family today, I pulled on a pair of shorts as Wren exited the bathroom wearing my shirt, the bottom half tied around her waist in a knot, and her dress from last night now more of a pencil skirt.

‘I’ll return the shirt later.’ She strutted past me, carrying her heels in her hand and walking out of my room without a backwards glance to me, leaving me wanting more, so much more.

* * *

I found my brother in the restaurant of the resort sitting with our mother and her boyfriend, Claude, who was closer to my own age than hers. He wasn’t necessarily a bad guy, just not the kind I wanted with my mother. I liked him a hell of a lot more than my father’s wife. The step-monster fit the bill in every sense of the word. She hated Otis and myself and didn’t try to hide her disgust whenever we
were around. She’s poisoned our father toward us and he only seemed to want us around when it suited his grand plan. He was a climber to be sure and was only concerned in appearances that would further his own agenda. His wife was no different; the higher he went, the more money she got to spend and the more doors that opened for her socially.

Sadly, Otis and I were used to it by now.

‘Happy birthday my baby boy.’ My mother reached out to me from her seat, and I bent over to give her a hug.

‘Thanks mom.’ I looked over to the breakfast buffet table. ‘I’m just going to get some food, be right back.’

As I was loading up my plate with food, I saw Cassy walk in, joining me in line. ‘How are you feeling this morning?’

I shrugged, looking around. ‘I’m alright. Where’s Wren?’

‘Showering. She sent me down for the food, and said to tell you that we’re on for sailing this afternoon.’

‘Really? That’s awesome.’

‘Well, it’s not like we have anything better to do,’ she mocked in a playfully bored tone.

‘Do you guys want to hang out this morning?’

She shook her head, filling a bowl with fruit. ‘Wren and I have work to do this morning, but we’ll meet you after lunch.’

I didn’t like it, but I had no choice but to accept it. I rejoined my family at the table to make mindless chit-chat and let my mother know that two girls would be joining us sailing. She hadn’t been thrilled about the idea, however, to my surprise, didn’t make too much of a fuss. It was no secret that she was protective of us and had made it clear to more than one girl that no one was ever going to be good enough for us. She loved her time with her boys, which unfortunately, had not been much these days with Otis and I both attending school in and around the Boston area and her still living in Montreal amid traveling the world with her photographer boyfriend. Still, we saw her more than our father, who was only a few hours away in New York City.

‘We need to hit up the gym,’ my brother said, and I inwardly groaned. I knew it had to be done. We were both top-level athletes. Otis played varsity hockey for Boston College and would enter the NHL draft this summer and was expected to go in the first round, while I was on a lacrosse scholarship with hopes of also playing professionally one day.

Working out hungover was never a walk in the park, but I’d done it so often that it no longer affected me like it once did. After a grueling hour and a half, I’d had enough and felt all the alcohol had been sweated out of my system. This afternoon, I’d be in top shape for sailing.

I appreciated my mother going out of her way to book the excursion and dinner on a remote island off the coast. Growing up, we spent a lot of time at our cottage on a large lake near a popular ski resort in Quebec, Canada. The past few years, Otis and I were lucky if we got to have a few days there given our schedules with camps and training. I missed being out on our boat, tubing or jetting around on the jet skis.

My mother hadn’t welcomed Wren and Cassy when they boarded the boat, not that I had expected her to. It wasn’t until we anchored to have a dip to cool off that Claude broke the ice, speaking with Cassy first.

‘Is that an Australian accent I hear?’

Cassy, being ever so friendly, smiled. ‘Sure is. Yours sounds French?’

‘French Canadian,’ he corrected. ‘We live in Montreal.’
‘Montreal?’ Wren mouthed at me, and I nodded.
‘Otis and I go to school in the US, though,’ I whispered in her ear.
‘So what brings you to St. Martin?’ Claude continued.
‘Well, I had some work things on this side of the globe, so I’m taking full advantage of my first time out of Australia. Starting with this little vacation for some sun and surfing here with Wren, Disney next week, work the following week in the area, then I’m heading to Europe for some touristy things and more work.’
‘What is it that you do for work that would bring you all over the globe?’ my mother asked in that superior tone she had mastered.
‘Cassy is a best-selling author,’ Wren answered for her friend proudly.
My mother sniffed at the answer. ‘According to what list?’
Cassy looked at my mother confidently. ‘Well, Amazon and the New York Times.’
‘And USA today,’ Wren added.
My mother sat up and took notice. While she wasn’t as socially ambitious as my step-mother, she did like to name drop and share stories with her group of close friends. ‘What’s your name again?’
‘Cassy Beard. I’ve written the Hungry Eyes series, some stand alones, and I’m working on my new series that will be released in the Spring.’
I could tell my mother was impressed and knew who Cassy was, but then she turned her attention to Wren, having given her the stink eye since she walked onto the boat. I hadn’t been shy about keeping my hands to myself, and I knew my mother was feeling threatened that I’d be taken away from her. Otis and Cassy had been friendly, but it was clear from the other night that neither one of them was looking for a hookup.
‘And what’s your story?’ my mother spat out, looking down at Wren. I looked over the girl sitting so close to me that our legs were touching. In all the chatting we’d done, we hadn’t touched on the basic fundamental things.
‘I’m a freelance writer,’ Wren started. ‘I’ve just finished an internship with the Grove Agency and will start with them full time in June.’
‘June?’ I asked, thinking that was still six months away and why there was such a delay.
She looked at me. ‘A few months ago, someone really close to me asked me to take on a job. After everything they did for me over the years, I simply couldn’t say no. So, I’ll be continuing to work as an agent to Cassy and one other author, in addition to the freelance writing I do for a few blogs.’
‘And of course editing,’ Cassy added.
‘Right.’ Wren smiled at her friend. ‘But I’ve limited myself to only three clients now.’
‘So, you’re an agent?’ Otis asked, to which Wren just nodded, taking a sip of her drink. ‘You’re nothing like my agent.’
Wren looked up to my brother. ‘Why do you need an agent?’
‘It’s his draft year.’ Our mother beamed.
‘Draft?’ Cassy questioned, looking confused.
‘The NHL draft,’ Otis offered, but Cassy still looked confused. ‘Professional hockey.’
‘Oh, like ice hockey?’ She was surprised.
‘Exactly.’ My mother wrapped an arm around Otis. ‘You probably don’t have that where you’re from.’
Cassy smiled. ‘No, we’re more rugby and soccer, a bit of cricket. I’ve seen hockey on TV a few times, but I’ve never even been skating.’
All Otis could do was laugh at this. We were so young when we learned to skate that neither of us
remember it. I grew up playing hockey and was really good. But in an effort to piss my father off, I switched to lacrosse a few years ago and actually enjoyed playing. It was no longer about making my father happy, impressing him or a way to feel validated. I now played a sport I loved for the thrill of the game, getting better and improving my technique, personal growth and setting goals for myself. If anything, my father still discouraged me from playing, pressuring me at every opportunity to pick up the lumber and lace up my skates I was defiant when it came to this. Otis was good, too good to be as defiant as I had been, plus he lived for the game; even our father's manipulations couldn’t cast a shadow over his one true love.

‘You’ve never been skating?’ Otis was shocked.

‘Rollerblading sure, but ice skating, no.’

‘Do you have ice rinks?’

Cassy nodded. ‘Yes, I know we do. I used to work at a law firm, and one of the lawyers broke his wrist taking his son skating once; that was enough warning for me. I’ll stick to my surfboard, and leave the ice skates for the Americans.’

‘Canadians,’ my mother corrected, very sensitive to the subtle distinction. ‘You wouldn't want me calling you a Kiwi, I’m sure’

Cassy just produced a polite smile, clearly swallowing her words. I knew what my mother was like, so I tossed Cassy a bone to break the tension. ‘So you surf?’

Cassy’s face lit up. ‘Yeah, been surfing since I was a little girl. My dad had me on a board before I even started school. I’m heading out tomorrow if you guys want to join me.’ She looked between Otis and myself.

‘As fun as that sounds,’ Otis replied, ‘my team contract doesn't allow me.’

I looked to Wren. ‘Do you surf?’

Wren laughed. ‘No even close. I’ve tried snowboarding a few times, and it wasn’t pretty.’

‘Do you like any sports?’ I turned to talk with just her as the others started their own conversations when my mother and Claude walked to another part of the boat having refilled their drinks.

‘Watching, sure. Playing, I'm afraid I'm not very talented. I have a treadmill for my cardio and go to yoga classes a few times a week. I did dance when I was little, but…’ she trailed off with a haunted look to her eyes.

She looked so sad and vulnerable in that moment that I wanted to take all the hurt and fear away from her. ‘I played hockey when I was younger also. My dad soured the whole experience, so I put down my hockey stick and picked up a crosse a few years ago and haven’t looked back.’

‘Crosse?’

‘Sorry, a lacrosse stick.’ I smiled at her, picking up her hand.

‘So I take it your parents are divorced?’

‘Yeah, the thirty-year-old photographer isn’t my dear old dad.’ I looked to the other end of the boat where my mother’s boyfriend had his arm around her in a warm embrace. I was happy she’d found love and was happy, but the whole relationship was just odd in my opinion. ‘In fact, he’s the complete opposite of the man who fathered me.’

‘Daddy drama?’ Wren proposed, and then covered her mouth. ‘Shit, sorry, you don’t have to answer that.’

I smiled, taking her hand and kissing the back of it. ‘It’s ok. There’s just bad blood between me and my father, and his she-devil, also known as his wife.’

‘That bad?’

I closed my eyes and tilted my face to the warm sun, needing the feeling of warmth as the thought
of the woman sent cold shivers down my spine, ‘Worse. Otis and I just spent Christmas with them. Well, that's a stretch. We were there for show for his holiday parties. Pawns in his strategic plan to climb the ladder. Typically, we spend Christmas with my mother, as my father’s wife doesn’t like us around. However, this year we served a purpose, well, Otis served a purpose. I just had to be there to complete the family portrait to sell the whole family bond he was trying to portray to his work colleagues and board members. It's just hard to be around fake people like that.’

Recently, my father needed his public image padded and used us more and more these days to do just that. Otis’s budding hockey career was just the icing on the top of the proverbial cake.

‘I’m sorry, that’s horrible.’

I shrugged. ‘I’m used to it now. He and his wife are all about appearances. He’s always had his sights set on the biggest role of all, though I doubt he’ll ever get it. Karma has to be a bitch and rip him apart sooner or later.’ There was no love lost between me and my father. After the hell he put my mother through when they were married, all the extra-marital affairs and the verbal abuse he subjected her to, I’d never forgive him. I could take the verbal lashings he enjoyed dishing out to me, his new favorite punching bag, but I wouldn't stand for him doing it to my mother. She had been nothing but supportive and loyal to him during their marriage, something I hadn't understood and still don’t.

Their divorce had been a long time coming and was ugly.

Otis and I knew from a young age what was expected of us, the squeaky clean reputation that would help pave his path to becoming the next NHL commissioner. The narcissist in him wasn’t going to be happy with any other senior executive role. My mother never fit that mold. She was a free spirit who enjoyed a fun time, not the strict rules my father tried to impose on her. Needless to say, it caused a lot of friction in their marriage. His cheating didn’t help matters. Seems that in addition to being a narcissist, he was also a hypocrite.

Most kids would have been devastated when their parents divorced, but even though I was rather young, I was happy they no longer lived together, and I got to spend my time with my mother with only sporadic visits with my father and his now wife.

As much as it pained me to admit it, Claude was good for my mom. He was young, care free and seemed to love her in a way she never got from my father. His job had him traveling all over the world, and that suited my mother’s ideal lifestyle. It meant that I got less time with her, but it was a fair trade to see her happy.

‘So, what about your family? Any drama there?’

She couldn’t look me in the eye but simply shook her head. ‘That topic is a buzzkill.’ I knew that look and her dismissive attitude. She had her own family drama that she couldn't or wouldn’t talk about.
CHAPTER 4

WREN

‘Where’s your sidekick?’

‘Who’s to say I’m not her sidekick?’

‘Baby, you’re the main attraction; she’s just the opening act.’ He leaned down and kissed me with an urgent hunger I’d never felt before. ‘I missed you yesterday.’

Yesterday I joined Cassy on the surfing excursion. I stayed close to the beach, trying to stand up on a surfboard, while she was out there actually surfing. I knew she surfed at home, I just didn’t really know she was actually any good at it. When the surf pro and tour operator commented that she was really good, I knew I wasn’t just biased based on her being my friend.

‘Where’s your sidekick?’ I asked, referring to his brother.

‘He’s doing some training. He injured his shoulder last month, and thankfully he’s been able to keep it on the down-low so scouts and teams wouldn’t know. The Christmas break was a blessing, so he’s just gotta ease back into it. I was just with him; Claude is taking over because I needed to see you.’

‘Awww, aren’t you cute.’ I pinched his cheek. This god-like form in front of me was anything but cute, as were his kisses that made me melt, but it was just too fun to tease him.

‘Cute?’ He feigned insult. ‘How about I take you to a nude beach and show you just how cute I am.’

I raised an eyebrow, not sure what to think past the thought of seeing him naked in all his sexy ripped glory. ‘Not sure that’s really my scene.’ However, there was the promise of the sausage Cassy kept reminding of.

He took my hand and tried to pull me up. ‘You can keep this very sexy bikini on, or not.’ He smirked.

‘Totally up to you.’

‘Tempting, but I have a phone call I’m waiting on and another I need to make.’

‘Okay, you wrap up your work, even though this is paradise and you really should be relaxing. I’ll go get my things and order us a ride out. Will Cassy be joining us?’

I laughed. ‘We’re good friends and all, but not that good. I love her dearly, but I don’t need to see that side of her.’

‘You just crushed the dreams I had of the two of you sharing a room together.’

‘In your dreams, Dartmouth boy.’ I pushed him out of my way as I stood up. ‘Come to my room in an hour. I’ll be ready to go then.’

I made my business call first to discuss the freelance work I do for the Mylie the Millennial blog, one of the most popular lifestyle blogs for millennials. I’ve been a contributing author for a few years, and it proved to be a great outlet for my own writing - a career path I once thought of pursuing before I found my talents laid elsewhere. I loved representing authors and helping them in their careers, but there was still something so freeing to sit and just write passionate articles on topics I was ardent about. Sure, I wasn’t writing books like Mylie or Cassy, but my creative outlet was still being fulfilled.

My hour was nearly finished as I was packing up my beach bag when my phone started ringing a familiar tune, ‘Well, it’s about time you called me. I was starting to think you forgot about me.’
Hardly.’ Jax’s familiar baritone voice came through my phone’s speaker. ‘I’ve been out of service areas for the past few days, and one of the other workers had the satellite phone at another camp.’

‘Where are you now?’ I asked, walking into the bathroom to get a towel and unlocking the door to the suite for Eli.

‘We’ve just chartered to Managua this morning, and I fly back to New York tomorrow.’ I couldn’t help but hear him yawn on the other end of the call.

‘Sounds like you need a nap.’

‘I can’t wait to sleep in my own bed,’ he sighed. ‘Cots in the jungle for the past two months have been hard on my back.’

‘Having you in the jungle has been hard on my mental stability,’ I deadpanned. I loved that he led a charity foundation helping women start their own small businesses, but I couldn’t help but worry for his safety. He was all I had left in this world that tied me to my past.

‘I know, but you’re my lucky penny, and see, I’ve made it out safe and sound again.’

‘I can’t wait to see you. I’ve missed you so much, and I need some Jax time before I leave the city, so you better make sure your calendar is free for me.’

‘You know it’s always free for my favorite penny.’

Yeah, yeah, lip service,’ I said, turning around to see Eli standing in the doorway. I smiled at him and raised a finger, indicating I needed another moment then waved him into the room. ‘I’ll meet you at your apartment on the second. We’ll order burgers and catch up on Supernatural. You better have kept your word and not watched it without me.’ Jax was typically a carefree kind of guy, but he took this one series we watched together very seriously. It’s been part of our lives since we were kids, even before we were of the age we should have watched it, but our babysitter did and allowed us to stay up to watch with her.

‘I stayed loyal to our pact.’ I picked up my beach bag and put on a large-brimmed beach hat.

‘Listen, sorry to cut this short, but I’m just heading out to the beach. Text me when you land tomorrow.’

‘I will. Love you, Pen.’

‘Love you too.’ I disconnected the call and looked up to an uncomfortable Eli.

‘Boyfriend?’

I laughed because what else could I do. It was preposterous that there’d be anything like that between Jax and I. ‘Hardly. Jax is practically family to me. He’s been working abroad for the past few months in remote areas in Central America so we have been separated, and I miss him. He’s been working away a lot lately, so I haven’t got to spend much time with him. He’s like a brother to me. We’re really close.’

A relieved look came over him. ‘Okay, but are you single? I mean, is there a boyfriend or anyone at home?’

‘I’ve got some plants I'm pretty attached to, but other than them, my work is my only commitment. I don't have time for anything more right now. I’m about to start a new project that will take me through to the summer, and I have to concentrate on that…’

‘In the meantime…’ He took my hand as we reached the elevator. Stepping inside, he slowly backed me up against the wall and kissed me lightly and teasingly. ‘Let’s concentrate on relaxing and enjoying your vacation.’

Our taxi dropped us off at the pathway to Happy Bay Beach. We made our way down the path, and I snapped a picture of the Be Happy sign welcoming us, and another sign announcing that there was a
nudist beach up ahead. I snapped another picture as an article came to mind about the importance of vitamin D in the winter months and sunscreen in the summer months - reminding me to reapply to private areas if I grew a pair and took my bikini top off. But I couldn't help but think of the importance of getting some good D, the exact kind I felt Eli could offer up in spades.

‘Probably not a good idea to take pictures down on the beach,’ Eli said in a slightly nervous voice.

‘Obviously.’ I slid my phone back into the waterproof case I’d brought with me. ‘I can’t have pics of me ending up on the internet in a state of undress.’ I pulled my hat down and made sure my sunglasses were still on.

‘Why, are you famous or something?’ I’d been successfully hiding since I graduated high school six years ago. Aside from my best friend and former college roommate Lana, no one else knew what I was hiding from. Well, and Jax, but he’s also trying to fly under the radar for his own reasons. Our past hadn’t caught up with us yet, and I’d hate for there to be nude pics of me if that should happen. So far I’ve been able to live a relatively normal life. Coloring my hair brown, often wearing my glasses and going light on the makeup unless going out has worked so far. Every so often there was mention of Jax and myself, and whenever a google alert came up, I made sure to go light on the makeup and replaced my contacts with glasses.

I know at some point I’ll have to go back to my natural blond and take back my identity. This whole thing has gone on for too long, but I felt as if I needed to earn my spot as a literary agent without the influence that my family might have had over me getting hired or securing clients.

‘Funny.’ I brushed his comment off. He might know of my father, but it wasn’t likely he knew about me. ‘My sidekick is the only famous person I know on the island, and even then she’s only famous in certain circles.’

He seemed to think this over and was satisfied with the answer when he proposed we get a drink. Taking my hand, he led me to the right of the path where a small shack was serving drinks to people who were clothed. With two fruity cocktails in plastic glasses in hand, we walked down the beach to where a rope in the sand separated the clothed section to the clothing-optional section.

‘Is it topless or completely nude?’ I asked, looking down the beach further to a few people in various states of undress.

‘Honestly, I have no idea. I’ve never been here,’ he confessed. ‘Let it be whatever you want it to be, but if you don’t want people looking at your face, just lose the bikini top.’ His smirk was large, and I heard the excitement in his voice.

‘And what will you take off?’ I looked at him in just his swim shorts.

‘Question is, what are you going to take off me?’ There was humor in his voice.

We walked to the far end of the beach where the clusters of beach-goers thinned out, far away from anyone. As we walked, it was hard not to gawk or laugh as a few cases might have been. Before today I would have thought I was mature enough to walk through a nude beach and keep my cool, however, I just proved myself wrong.

After laying out our towels, we finished our drinks before I took out the sunscreen to reapply.

‘Need help?’ Eli asked, taking the bottle from my hand and getting my back for me, before crawling around to face me, or more like looking at my chest. ‘What about there? Burnt nipples sound painful.’

‘Sounds to me that you just don’t want any excuses for me to deny you access to them later.’ He leaned forward to kiss me. ‘You already know me so well.’

I took the sunscreen from him, put a dab on my fingers and rubbed it on my nipples and small
‘Turn around, and I’ll rub some on your white ass.’ I playfully pushed him away from me.

‘How do you know it’s white?’

‘Well...’ I laid down next to him, resting my head on my beach bag. ‘First, you just said this is your first time to a nude beach, and second, I’m pretty sure it’s too cold at Dartmouth for you to go streaking in the middle of the day long enough for you to get a tan.’

He let out a laugh. ‘True, New England is cold this time of year. That could cause some serious shrinkage. Thankfully, it’s nice and warm here, so if you really feel the need, I have something else you can rub.’

I turned to face him. ‘Wanna go in the water?’

‘I thought you’d never ask. I’m melting out here.’

We walked hand in hand into the water, and when I was up to my shoulders, I untied my bikini top and tossed it in the water next to us where it floated in the direction of the relatively empty beach.

He went quiet, looking down to see me beneath the water. Wrapping his arms around me and locking his lips on me in no time, I wrapped my legs around his waist feeling him getting harder as I rubbed against him. ‘Do you want me to unleash the beast?’ he asked, trailing his tongue down my neck.

‘That’s some over-inflated ego.’

‘Something’s over inflated, and it’s not my ego at the moment.’ He moaned as he squeezed me closer to him.

‘Seeing as I took something off, fair is fair.’ I took one of my boobs in my hand, unhooking myself from him, treading water to give him the opportunity to take off his swim shorts. ‘Besides, I need to see the goods before I can commit to an opinion of your member one way or another.’

He tossed his shorts toward the beach before reaching out to take me in his arms again. ‘So you want to commit to me now?’

I rolled my eyes at his words, but also at the hardness rubbing up against my now throbbing clit.

‘No, I can only give you the next few days, nothing more.’

‘Then I say we make the most of the next few days.’

We got pretty hot and heavy in the water. I had to make it clear where my limits were. ‘I’m not having sex in the ocean.’

‘No, we can’t anyway, I didn't bring any condoms,’ he admitted. I was relieved to know that we were both on the same page for the moment, and he wouldn’t question wearing a condom if it came down to it.

I could feel a large, hard appendage rubbing up between us, however. I hadn’t reached down to explore his body yet, enjoying the friction it was currently offering between my legs. Nevertheless, I needed more, and if he wasn’t about to take the first step, then I surely would. I dropped one of my arms and reached down between us, taking his very large dick in my hand, or what I could of it. I didn’t think my hands were that small, but I couldn't wrap my hand all the way around it.

‘Wow,’ I said, surprised, looking at him wearing a smug look. I guess there was a valid reason why all my ego comments against him just rolled off his back. A man with a cock this size really was entitled to have an over-inflated ego. ‘You’re huge.’

‘Is that a problem?’

I kissed him. ‘Other than the carpal tunnel I may develop in getting you off, no, this is definitely not a problem.’

He trailed a hand from the breast he was playing with to the seam of my bikini bottoms. ‘Can these
I shook my head. ‘No, but you’re still welcomed to what’s underneath.’

He looked at me as he pulled the bottom part aside and slid his fingers through my bare mounds, brushing up against my clit, causing my breath to catch. ‘You like that?’ I nodded, squeezing him tighter as I worked him. ‘You want me to keep doing this?’ he asked, rubbing me.

‘If you stop, I stop,’ I threatened.

‘Point taken.’ He kissed my neck, sliding a finger into me. ‘Fuck, you are a tight little thing.’

His long fingers worked in and out of me as another rubbed circular movements over my clit, all while I worked his hard cock the best I could with my hand. I was positive if anyone on the beach was watching us, they were left with no questions as to what it was we were doing.

I couldn’t keep my moaning to myself, his fingers had found my G spot, and he was applying the perfect amount of pressure on my clit, I could feel my orgasm building, and it couldn’t come soon enough. I was overdue for a proper mind-blowing orgasm at the hands of someone else and Eli was the one who was about to serve a fresh one up with those magical hands of his.

‘That’s it, babe. Come all over my fingers. I’m not far behind you.’ His words were all I needed to reach the finish line, leaning into him as I momentarily lost myself as my own waves crashed through me as literal waves blocked my sounds from those on the beach.

As I was finding my footing again, I felt Eli’s hand wrap over mine and increase the speed to the hand job I had been giving him. ‘That’s it.’ He moaned as his face gave away that he had caught up to me. Breathless, he wrapped me in his arms and kissed me for a long while before I pulled away and looked at his deep grey eyes.

‘I think we need to take this back to a private room at the hotel.’

‘I think you’re right,’ he agreed.

Finding our clothing on the shore, he walked out of water covering himself with his hands - as in plural, because one wasn’t going to suffice - until we were back to our towels and used both hands to ring out his shorts before putting them back on and helping me tie my bikini again.

I got our phones out of my bag. ‘I’ll find us a cab,’ he informed me, standing to his feet. ‘You think Otis will mind finding somewhere else to sleep tonight?’

‘I really don’t give a fuck if he minds or not.’ He was leaning over me, nibbling on my ear lobe.

Resting a hand on his chest, trying to pull away, I requested, ‘Get us a cab, and I’ll let Cassy know I’m going to pick up a few things to spend the night with you.’

He held onto me tighter. ‘Trust me, there’s nothing you will need.’

‘We need protection.’ I looked up to him, trying to make a point.

Leaning in to give me a quick kiss, he said, ‘I’ve got us covered.’

He walked down the beach, and I hung back admiring his backside, tossing our things in the bag and calling Cassy, who picked up on the third ring. ‘How was surfing,’ I asked.

‘Amazing. What did you get up to?’

I could feel myself starting to blush. ‘Went to another beach with Eli. We’re heading back to the hotel now, but I’m going to stay with him tonight if you don’t mind.’

‘Girl, you need to have fun.’ I could hear the smile in her voice. ‘Besides, I’m wiped from surfing, and the jet lag is still kicking my ass. I might just call it a night…”

‘Well, just a heads up, Otis may need the sofa again.’

‘No problem. He’s not trying to get into my pants, so I’m cool with it. But just so you know, I expect to hear all the juicy details tomorrow.’

I shook my head, biting my lip to suppress the chuckle. ‘If I come back. If his package is anything
to go off, and the way he kisses me with his whole body, we may never leave his bed.’
‘Save the dramatic prose for helping me write my next book.’
‘Oh my god, he’s going to make such a great muse.’ I bounced happily as I all but skipped down
the beach, carrying my beach bag. I wasn’t one for random hookups. I’d had a few boyfriends, two
semi-serious ones in university, but never anything longer than a year and never anything deep. I
couldn’t possibly do deep when I carried so much baggage and wasn’t emotionally or mentally ready
to fully open up to anyone aside from my two best friends.

Jax and Lana were everything to me. Sure I had other friends, but they were on a whole other
level. They each brought something different and unique to my life but were equally invested in my
welfare and happiness. Perhaps Jax and I were closer because we’d known each other our entire
lives, and when shit hit the fan, we took on the world together. We’d been through some really dark
times, times when I didn't think the light would ever break through. Like being lost in Marinna’s
Trench, deep in the abyss, where light cannot reach, unable to penetrate through the layers of darkness
that is the vastness of the ocean.

But we made it and are somewhat functioning members of society, for the most part. Depending on
who you ask. We were young and still had time to sort this so-called life out.

Thoughts of being young had me thinking of Eli, who was even younger, twenty-one to my twenty-
five. While it was only a few years’ difference, I felt so much older than I actually was, Likely from
all I’ve been through and navigating the world on my own for the most part.

When I caught up to Eli, he was waiting at the end of the beach path where the taxi had dropped us
off, still shirtless and looking oh so very sexy. I felt like I was in a dream.

I walked up behind him and wrapped my arms around him like it was such a natural thing to do.
He made me feel comfortable so much quicker than I’d ever felt with anyone before. Perhaps it was
because I knew there was no chance of needing to divulge things I never wanted to. ‘The cab will be
here in a few minutes.’

He turned around in my arms, wrapping me up in his, kissing the top of my head. ‘I’ve wanted you
since I saw you at the airport in Miami, hoping that you would be getting on our flight. Not only was
that wish granted, thankfully we were sitting near to each other, and I was there to help you through
your panic attack. Then when I saw you on the beach that first day, I knew it was a sign. Good things
happen in groups of three.’

‘I’ve been wondering if that dick of yours will bring me pain or pleasure, or both.’
He smirked that cocky smile of his and his sarcastic dry humor shone through. ‘Here I am, trying to
be nice and for once attempting some kind of romance, and you’re writing hallmark cards.’
I kissed him. ‘Well, I am a writer.’

‘Well, with a mind like yours, you will be giving that bondage author lady a run for her money.’
I couldn't help but laugh… bondage author lady.
‘I don’t want to talk about work or anything personal, I just want to be intimately acquainted with
your cock by the morning.’
‘Oh, your pussy will be on a first-name basis with him, so much so, she’s not going to want to let
him go.’
‘Promises, promises.’ I pulled away, trailing a finger down his chest.
I sent Otis a text message as the taxi approached the resort we were staying at.

ELI: I’m going to need you out of the room now. Cassy said you can crash there tonight.
OTIS: Got it! I’ll find your girl's little Aussie friend.

My girl. It had a nice ring to it, but she’d made it clear that this was just a holiday fling, and I wasn’t sure she’d still want to be with me if she knew some of the things she assumed weren’t exactly accurate. It wasn’t as if I lied to her, I just haven’t corrected some of the things she thought to be true, Seeing as we were going to be a temporary thing,

I didn't see any reason to divulge the truth, especially now that we were about to have one hell of an evening together.

Thank fuck Otis wasn’t giving me shit about needing privacy. It’s not like it’s been all that long since I last got laid, but I just had a feeling Wren was going to blow my mind. Hell, she already had with just her hand. I was ready to blow just thinking what that smart mouth and tight pussy were going to feel like.

I paid for the cab, and we hurried to the elevators. ‘Are you hungry? Should we get room service or something?’ she asked me.

‘I’m only starved for you.’ I pushed her up against the wall and kissed her as our lives depended on it. The doors opened, and a middle-aged couple cleared their throats to let us know we were no longer alone before stepping into the elevator as we untangled our bodies from one another.

Giggling as we exited the elevator, I hurriedly led Wren to my room, fumbling with the key card, all too eager to be inside of the room to be inside of her.

Pushing open the door, I pulled Wren inside and started to untie her little bikini. It was a crime to keep her chest covered up. They were the perfect size, not so small that I felt like I was back in junior high, but not too big that they were hard to handle; they were just right, just like she was proving to be.

‘Shower first.’ Wren moaned breathlessly, pulling away from my kiss. ‘Too much sand in crevices.’

I followed her into the bathroom and turned on the shower as she finger-combed her hair out and slipped out of the rest of her clothing until she was standing in the middle of the bathroom stark naked. She looked me over. ‘You showering with your shorts on?’ She stepped into the shower and looked over her shoulder at me. ‘Because it’s hard to suck you off through board shorts.’

The board shorts she was referring to were nearly ripped from my hard erection pressing on the seams, begging to be freed. I pushed them down and kicked off my sandals before stepping in behind her, engulfing her in my arms from behind.

‘That got you moving.’ She laughed.

‘The promise of a blow job will always have me moving; I assure you of that.’

She rinsed her hair as I washed off my body, then we switched as I stroked myself watching her rinse her body of sand and soap.

She kept looking down at me, and I let go of myself, feeling self-conscious as I'd never jerked myself off in front of anyone before. ‘No, I love watching you do that.’

I continued what I was doing as she did a final rinse of her hair. ‘Stay hard for me,’ she cooed. ‘I
want you hard and ready.’

‘Babe, you're naked and soaking wet.’ I reached out and tweaked her nipple with my free hand. ‘I doubt I’ll lose this erection before I have to leave the island.’

With one final turn under the water, she faced me and dropped to her knees. ‘I’ve been wondering if I could even fit you in my mouth and debating how far I could take you down my throat.’ She took my dick from me and stroked from my base upwards, kissing my tip with her lips. ‘Care to make any wagers?’

She looked up to me from her position on her knees, licking my swollen head with the tip of her tongue.

‘I can guarantee I’m not going to last long before I blow my load again, regardless of how far you can take me. But you seem like the kind of girl who gives it her best, so let's take some measurements of your throat and move on to that tight pussy of yours.’

‘Mmm,’ she moaned, opening her mouth, allowing me to feed her my length. She wrapped one hand around my base, stroking me as her tongue and lips did wonders to the rest of me.

‘Ah, fuck!’ I sputtered leaning my shoulders against the tiles for support, wrapping my hand around the back of her head. ‘Atta girl.’

I felt her relaxing her tongue and taking me further into her mouth, bobbing in and out a few times on her own before pulling off entirely to catch her breath. ‘I can’t take you any deeper. I’m sorry. You're too thick.’

I was shocked by her statement. ‘Trust me, you have nothing to apologize for. This feels incredible...you have no idea.’ I took her head in my hand again and gently guided her in and out only to set the speed I wanted, not to push her to take more than she could; I wasn't much into gagging, and she didn’t deserve that. ‘Just like that,’ I encouraged, savoring the feel of her mouth sucking me off while her palm and fingers worked my base.

I felt the familiar sensation start to build in my lower back, spreading around to my front and knew I was going to come soon. ‘I’m close,’ I warned her, but she didn’t budge or pull off as many girls did. I moaned, ‘Wren,’ and went to pull her off, but she took her free hand and held onto the back of my thigh, looking up to me with heavy eyes, my dick still firmly in her mouth, hitting the back of her throat over and over and… ‘Fuck…’ I cried, filling her mouth with my cum as she slowed her movements, allowing me to take over, to use her how I needed to. Few girls have ever let me do this, and it was one of hell of a turn on for me. The ownership and control it implied had me remaining hard and ready to go again.

She slowly made her way to her feet, kissing her way up my body and turned off the shower as she did so. ‘Babe, that was incredible.’ I wrapped my arms around her, picking her up, and she hooked her legs around my waist.

Stepping out of the shower and walking to the bed, I laid her in the middle on her back. Sitting back on my heels, I looked down at her, spread eagle in front of me, her whole body laid out in all its beautiful glory.

‘You’re so beautiful,’ I said in a low voice, trailing my hands up her legs, spreading them wider as I went. ‘Now I want to see if you taste as good as you look.’ I looked up at her face, seeking permission. The smile she rewarded me with was all the confirmation I needed that she was good to go.

I slid my index finger through her folds, down until I was at her entrance, gliding into her. I moaned at how hot and wet she already was. I slipped in another finger, gathering as much of her juices as I could before pulling out and using her own lubrication to coat her clit and circled it with
my thumb. As I re-entered her with two fingers again, I was so turned on as she settle into my touch with her eyes closed. She had one hand close to where my own was working on her, her other massaging her own breast, seemingly on reflex.

When I pulled my fingers out of her and away from her clit, she let out a whimper and opened her eyes, searching for answers. I smiled at her, lifting my fingers to my mouth, licking one before putting them into my mouth to suck them clean of her juices. Fuck she tasted divine. ‘Mmm, my tongue is a bit jealous. How about I let him play too?’ As a rule, I didn’t eat girls out, but there was just something about Wren. Her pussy called to me on a whole other level. It’d been years since I’d gone down on a chick, and I hadn’t missed it, but right now, I felt I had to taste her, to bury my face between her legs to get her off as if my life depended on it.

She nodded desperately as I lowered my shoulders down between her legs, holding her legs further apart, noting how flexible she was, filing that away for later. I spread her folds apart with my fingers and licked her up and down, teasing her a few times, knowing I was purposely missing her clit. ‘If your tongue can’t find my clit, can I recommend your thumb get back to work,’ she cried impatiently.

‘Patience my little beaver...good things come to those who wait.’

‘You will soon find out that patience isn’t one of my finer qualities.’ She went to sit up, but I pushed her back down and got the hint that she was desperate for an orgasm, and who was I to deny her that. After all, she just gave me one of the best damn orgasms of my life in the shower.

I slid two fingers back into her as I pressed my tongue to her already swollen clit, licking it, sucking it, all the while pumping in and out of her with my fingers. She was pushing up into my face, needing more, and I wasn’t about to deny her anything. Giving her everything I had, I soon started to feel her walls tighten around my fingers as she reached down and grabbed onto my hair, pulling me into her as she rode her orgasm out on my face. I didn’t let up until she did, pulling my face up to meet her as I crawled up to her, kissing her, sharing her own juices with her. It was the hottest fucking thing, and I was so hard and turned on at the moment I thought I might come right then and there.

I pressed into her stomach with my rock hard erection, ‘I’m desperate to be inside you,’ I sighed into her mouth.

‘Do you have condoms?’ she asked, nipping my earlobe with her teeth.

As hard as it was to pull away from her touch and be out of arm’s reach of her naked body, I walked over to my closet where my suitcase was stashed and ruffled through it, pulling out the box I’d picked up before getting on the plane last week at the CVS next to my father’s New York City apartment.

She looked at the box and raised an eyebrow. ‘Magnum? Is that the biggest size they have?’

I smirked. ‘Unfortunately they don’t come in Eli Extra yet.’ She shook her head at my stupid joke as I opened the box and took out a foil packet, settling between her legs once again, rolling on the condom. ‘So, just to be clear, you want to have sex right?’

‘What is this, circle yes or no?’ she mocked me.

‘Well, I just like to have consent. It’s kinda a big deal to me,’ I told her, not able to hide the serious note to my voice. I’d seen too many of my friends, both guys and girls, get in trouble by not getting or giving consent.

‘I appreciate that, and yes, you have my consent. Do you need it in writing?’

I shook my head. ‘No, verbal is good enough for me.’

‘What about you? Do I have your consent?’ She was still mocking me.

‘I’ll have you know, male consent is a thing.’
She smiled and looked down at my sheathed dick. ‘I’d say you rolling on your own condom was consent enough for me. Now that we’ve established we are two consulting adults, can we maybe get on to the main attraction?’

She didn’t need to coax me. I was more than willing and ready. I lined up at her entrance, spreading her juices, ensuring she was lubed enough to take my size with as little discomfort as possible. I entered her slowly, allowing her tight little body to adjust. ‘You good?’ I asked, leaning over her with hands on both sides of her head.

‘Yeah.’ She moved her hips, running her fingers down my six-pack.

‘Your body is what wet dreams are made of.’

‘Except, this is your new reality.’ I started to roll my hips, starting off slow, pulling out and pushing back in, increasing my speed and depth each time.

‘I wasn’t sure if your dick would even fit, or how it would feel…’ She was breathless. ‘But fucking hell Eli.’

I smiled, loving her confession. I knew I was big. I’d been in enough locker rooms in my life to know that I was beyond being well endowed.

But the fact that she was loving it, it had my balls tightening quicker than I wanted them to. It didn’t hurt that she has some fucking unicorn pussy that felt and tasted better than anything I’d ever felt in my life. I slowed down, resting my forehead on Wren’s.

“What’s wrong?” she coaxed, wrapping her legs around me.

‘Your fucking unicorn pussy is bringing on a case of premature ejaculation,’ I moaned, trying to get myself under control.

‘Unicorn pussy?’ She started to laugh, and the vibrating sensation was egging my dick on to the point I had to pull out of her completely.

‘Nooo,’ she cried, reaching down to take hold of my traitorous member standing at full attention between my legs as she started to rub her clit with her other hand. ‘Eli, I’m so close. Please don’t stop. We have the rest of the night for you to work on your stamina.’

Fuck, those words, along with her pussy were going to be my downfall. I let her guide me back into her, and when she hooked those luscious legs around me once again, I went wild, not holding back. When I felt her already-tight pussy constricting around me even tighter, I lost all sense of being and let go as we both cried each other's names in the throes of our own orgasms.

I pulled out of her, conscious of a full condom and not wanting to risk anything, unsure if she was on any birth control, but remained over her, holding my body weight with my arms. ‘That was…’ I panted, unable to catch my breath or my train of thought.

‘Otherworldly,’ she finished for me.

Otherworldly was an accurate description.
I hadn’t expected to hit it off with Eli so well. As much as I tried to push pause and hit the breaks, my body pulled me closer and closer to him. It was a feeling I had yet to experience with anyone, and on our last night on the island, I wasn’t sure what to make it of. Cassy and I were on the first flight out in the morning back to Miami and onwards to New York for me.

While I spent my days with Cassy either being a tourist or working, I ultimately ended up spending the past four nights with Eli, and tonight would be no different. A few times I’d almost let personal information slip, feeling my walls crumble as my trust in him somehow was building. Yet not to the point I could go places I’d ventured with very few people. In the end I bit back, catching myself from divulging too much. After all, this was just some harmless fun. Why did he need to know all about me? If my previous boyfriends didn’t know the real me, and most of my close friends, why did he need to?

I did manage to tell Cassy this afternoon about my past and who my family had been. While she was slightly shocked by my secrets, she understood my need to separate my current life from that of my past. She also admitted that it filled in a lot of holes she had about me. I was nervous, but it was always so much of a relief to tell those I was close to; I hated the feeling of constantly lying to those I cared about.

Eli knew the basics. I graduated from Northeastern, worked at a literacy agency and lived in New York City. No need to get into the nitty-gritty as this was just a holiday fling. We had both agreed to it.

So why was I feeling gutted at leaving him tomorrow?

I was dressed in a simple sundress when I rolled my packed suitcase to the door and grabbed my backpack which held my clothing for tomorrow's flight, Yoga pants, sweater and pair of sneakers. Otis and Eli were chatting out on the balcony, and I could tell just by looking at Otis, he wasn’t thrilled at the prospect of spending yet another night somewhere other than the bed he’d been promised. I wish I could sympathise, but my hormones were overruling any feelings of me being selfless. If the hotel wasn’t to capacity, I’d have sprung for another room; it wasn’t like I couldn’t afford it.

‘Come on, don’t complain. It’s the last night, and I’ll make it up to you,’ Eli was promising.
‘Whatever…’
‘Hey, not my fault you're stuck on some bitch who won’t give you the time of day.’
Otis took a step forward and got in his brother's face. ‘Don’t you ever call her that, and you know why she won’t come near me.’
‘Fine, I’ll agree that mom crossed a line, but if Layla’s weak enough to be manipulated and bullied by mom, she’d never make it as a WAG. I’d consider this a win in the long run.’
‘You would? You don’t consider girls at all in the long term.’
‘Not true.’
‘Ready?’ I interrupted, feeling it was as good of a time as any, not wanting to hear the rest of what Eli might have had to say on the matter. If I was the reason he was starting to consider something, anything long term, then I was in bigger trouble that I already felt. I didn’t need any more fuel keeping me on this island tomorrow.
Oh yeah.' He wiggled his eyebrows at me, reaching out and taking my hand as we walked down the deck and along the outdoor path that led away from the walkout suites, back to the regular rooms of the hotel.

Once inside the room, Eli offered me a drink. ‘I’m good. Need to give my liver a break. I’ve been rather rude to it since we landed on this island.’

‘Meh.’ He shrugged, looking me over. ‘We’re young and on vacation.’

‘Now we’re both wearing entirely too many clothes, in fact, any clothes at this stage is too many.’

I pulled my dress over my head and let it drop to the floor, standing there in a yellow lace bra and thong panty set that left very little to the imagination. Not that he had to imagine. He’d already seen everything I had to offer on multiple occasions.

His eyes raked over me, taking everything in. I never really like to be looked at, to be observed in such a way. I normally would have shied away, feeling that if someone looked too long they would figure me out and know I was a fake. But with Eli it was different, he made me comfortable and at ease in my own skin.

The alarm on both our phones went off far quicker than either of us wanted them to the next morning. Stretching, I felt sore from a long night of fucking, interspersed with surpassingly tender moments as well. As much as I kept telling myself there was nothing between the two of us, it was hard to deny that we both felt a connection during those slow lazy sessions; our bodies saying everything our lips wouldn’t. I didn’t want to think about leaving. Thinking of it would only make it hurt more to get on the plane and fly away from him, likely to never see him again. Thankfully, I had six months of catching up to do with Jax over the next two days to keep my mind occupied, and a new job to prepare for in a new town after that. I would be able to get past this, and I had enough on my plate to concentrate on to do just that.

It was the deal I’d made with myself and the one I told Eli we needed to stick to, just a holiday fling, some fun in the sun and between the sheets. After showering, putting on a bit of make-up and piling my long brown hair up in a messy bun, I pulled my sneakers on at the same time Eli was getting dressed.

‘Why are you getting dressed?’

‘I’m going to the airport with you to see you off,’ he informed me.

I shook my head. ‘Eli, please, can we just say our goodbyes here in private and not in public?’

‘But…’

‘Please, it’s going to be hard enough to walk out of this room. I really don’t want an audience when I leave you for good.’

He walked over and sat on the bed, pulling me onto his lap. ‘Wren, it doesn’t have to be the end. I know you wanted to leave this just a holiday fling and not look back, but I really want to keep in touch. I’m in New York often…’

‘Eli…’

‘At least let’s exchange phone numbers, emails, something. I can’t let you walk out that door and only be able to think of you in the past tense.’

Wow, that was some line, and I knew the feeling all too well.

‘I’m going through big changes in my life,’ I told him. ‘I can’t have distractions right now, and I have to concentrate on my new job. I’m not even going to be in New York for the next six months.’

‘At least give me your email.’ I conceded without much thought, giving him both my email and phone number, to which he quickly sent me messages on both. When my phone dinged with incoming messages he said, ‘Now you can get a hold of me should you need me for anything.’
'I don't think I'll be needing a booty call anytime soon. You have left me well and truly fucked.'
He smirked. ‘I aim to please.’

He gave me a long hug goodbye in the lobby of the hotel where Cassy was waiting for me in the airport shuttle. His final kiss was everything that an ending kiss of some epic fling should be, long and sensual, telling me that he had feelings and this thing wasn’t anywhere near being over as I had said it would be.

Getting on the plane had been as difficult as I thought it would be. We were two days into a new year and I needed to make the most of it. Cassy knew it and kept me distracted the entire flight to Miami. We both had connecting flights, me home to New York and her on to Orlando to carry on with her working vacation. I was so incredibly proud of how far she had come over the past few years and the positive way in which she had done it. She had stayed true to herself, and her fans not only fell in love with her books, but her personality also. It was almost impossible not to like her, and what she gave her fans was only a fraction of what she gave to her friends. I just happened to be one of the lucky ones she called a friend.

I had known, long before meeting her on this trip, that we were meant to be friends and that even if we both walked away from the book world we would remain close lifelong friends.

‘You look happy,’ Jax commented, looking over at me halfway into the second show from his end of the sofa. ‘You got laid on the trip didn’t you?’

I smirked and shrugged. Whereas he was comfortable in oversharing, I still felt strange talking about my sex life with him. ‘Maybe.’ I went back to the show until it finished and turned to look at him. ‘What happened with that chick who went to volunteer with you?’

He rolled his eyes, noting that I wasn’t calling her by her given name. ‘She came for a bit but is back here now.’

‘Are you going to see her before you go again?’ He’d been hung up on this one chick for years, and they finally started seeing each other before he left for work six months ago.

He shrugged. ‘Probably just going to let that one fizzle out. There’s no future for us.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘It’s her family,’ he sighed. ‘It doesn’t matter how much money is in my trust fund, it’s the way our fathers made it.’

I knew the type he was talking about; we’d gone to school with many of them. The old money, the wall-street bankers, the social elite. In fact, the school was where the two of them met a decade ago, and he’d been pining after her since then. She was the fool who kept dismissing him. I mean, he was gorgeous, and as incestual as that was for me to admit, it was 100% true.

‘Oh,’ he added. ‘And while my mother might be a blond-haired, blue-eyed, fair-skinned beauty, my father’s blackness or half blackness even, will not sit well for their pedigree…’

He trailed off, and I was enraged that in this day and age race could still factor in being accepted. Our fathers’ past was one thing, but disregarding my best friend, the guy who I loved as my brother, because his skin was a beautiful darker shade than the rest was unacceptable on so many levels.

‘It’s the twenty-first century.’ I shook my head, still not able to wrap my head around this backwards mentality of thinking.

He sighed, ‘They missed that memo.’

‘Her loss, but at least you accept this now and move on rather than pinning after her for another decade.’

‘Tell me about your hook up.’ He leaned back to look at me as I turned off the TV, clearly not
letting me off the hook with this one.

‘Nothing much to tell. Eli and I were just a holiday fling, nothing more. I’ve got too much on my plate to even entertain the idea of a relationship, even a casual one at the moment. In the summer, when I’m back to living here, then I can maybe think about dating or finding someone. I’m only twenty-five and in no rush.’

‘Listen, at twenty-seven, I’m starting to feel the need to settle down. You’re next.’

‘How would that work with your line of work?’ I asked. ‘I mean, traveling to remote areas of the world doesn’t exactly lend itself to family life. Seeing as our fathers were absent a lot, we know that more than anyone.’

He ran a hand through his hair. ‘I know, I’ve been thinking about ways to diversify my role a bit, training people, creating more jobs, and setting up hubs in areas so I’m not always needing to be in the field.’

I sat there listening for the longest time to the ideas he had to advance the work of the foundation my mother had founded nearly thirty years ago. After graduating from Columbia University in New York a few years back, he took over the foundation and started transforming it into one of the biggest micro-loan foundations supporting women to start their own small businesses. From buying sewing machines to starting a local tailoring business, or securing a lease to open a small food shop. Most recently, we fundraised to help build a school and a clinic. However, the main mission was supporting local women to empower them to be self-sufficient and provide for their families, harnessing the skills they already had.

He was so passionate about what he did and had such a knack for it too. He was a people person, and it was hard not to like him. His good looks didn’t hurt either.

I let out a long yawn. ‘Go to bed. You look exhausted. We’ll get lunch tomorrow.’ He stood and strode to the door in his bare feet. ‘I’m just across the hall.’

When this building was being renovated, our fathers had bought the top two floors and converted them into two very large penthouse suites and two decent-sized family apartments on the floor below ours. Our floor, which had only two doors, was only accessible by fob as were our apartments. A few years ago when I moved back, Charlie, our long-time family lawyer and resident of one of the regular-sized apartments downstairs, overhauled the security system for us. Our security, after all these years, was still paramount for him, and I’d never forgotten all that he’d done for me over the years.
CHAPTER 7

Wren

JANUARY

After my world crashed down around me years ago, I couldn't stay in our hometown just outside Allentown in Pennsylvania. I barely finished my freshman year of high school at my public school. However, Jax’s mother ensured I passed and survived the saddest summer in history. I followed Jax to attend his private school to start my sophomore year of high school. The private preparatory school was a few hours away in Wendell, Massachusetts. It was filled with the elite and privileged of New York City and the New England area. Add to the mix a few international kids and those recruited to play sports, and you still had a very stuck-up, judgmental, egotistical student body.

I was one of the youngest and ripe prey for the mean girls and bullying bastards of the higher grades. Everyone knew who I was, whose daughter I was and what had happened six months ago. Jax was in grade 11 and had already been at the school for a year. He’d gone through the news of our fathers’ deaths with his classmates. They supported him, and likely judged him, as they were all judging me now. If it wasn’t for the big-brotherly way in which he handled me, I'd have been eaten alive that first year.

One saving grace was Helen Melody, a first-year teacher and my resident supervisor. With a degree in English and a minor in child development psychology, she knew exactly where I was coming from and how hurt and lost I was. After getting settled into my room and accepting that I’d have a roommate for the next few years, I tried as best as I could to fit in.

Bridgett, who ended up being my roommate for two of my four years there, was kind enough, but we’d never spoken since graduation nor have we made any effort to maintain a friendship post-Wendell Academy. Jax on the other hand had been in love with her. As much as I should be sympathizing with his possible broken heart, I was happy to finally see he’d come around to see her true colors, or her lack of accepting any other color than her own. It was satisfying to see he was dropping his fascination in planning a future with her. I’d seen it for the past few years, but Jackson Spark wasn’t the kind of guy you could tell not to do something, because he’d do anything to prove himself right.

Helen, or Miss Melody as I called her back then, soon discovered my love of reading and writing, and we bonded over books. She was one of the few younger teachers at the school. Seeing as many had seemingly been there for millennia at the time and remained during my time there, they were slowly either retiring or dying from old age and being replaced with new teachers. Throughout it all, Helen and I developed a very close bond over the four years I attended Wendell Academy, one that had grown even after I graduated. I stood for her at her wedding three years ago and had already been asked to be her child's god-mother when it was born in the next week or two. She’s the big sister I never had, and we’ve remained extremely close over the years.

When she asked me to return to Wendell to fill in teaching her English class, taking on the role of resident supervisor for the remainder of the school year, I accepted.

I was hesitant and nervous as hell to return, fearing my identity would be revealed. However, Helen had personally spoken with the handful of teachers who knew me from my time as a student and explained that I now went by Wren Price and would appreciate them not bringing up the fact I had once been a student at Wendell.
I was twenty-five, yet still didn’t have my driver’s license. I never really felt the need to have one, seeing as I was either at private school with Jax, who loved to drive his many cars, or lived in New York or Chicago, both with great public transportation systems and cars were more of a hindrance to getting around.

Helen and her husband Chris, also a fellow teacher at the school, were waiting inside the train station for me. I hadn’t seen her since the summertime when she was just starting to show, but now she was so big, she couldn’t even zip up Chris’s jacket around her protruding baby bump.

‘Look at you,’ I gushed. ‘Can I?’ I asked before touching her belly.

‘Of course.’ She took my hands and placed them on her firm, round belly. ‘It’s not moving at the moment, for once. Let me try falling asleep, and it will be up for a game of soccer.’

I turned to Chris. ‘Hi there.’ Chris had been my science teacher for my last two years, and it’s been really nice getting to know him over the years outside of the classroom. He understood my bond and connection with his wife and he’s always been super supportive of me, even showing his protective side a time or two over the years toward me. He had no idea what that meant to me. That they were willing to stand beside me when I had no one else and needed them most. For years I’d felt lost, but knowing I had them made facing the big bad world a bit more tolerable.

I spent the afternoon with them, catching up at their house and enjoying one of Helen’s amazing meals before they dropped me off at the school and showed me to my room, the same one Helen had lived in for many years before she and Chris moved in together into an on-campus house. I was very familiar with the space. There was a small kitchenette off a tiny living room area that had a love seat, coffee table, wall-mounted TV and a desk with a lamp. The bedroom area was just beyond with a double bed, dresser, nightstand and off that, a small bathroom with stand-up shower. I knew that I’d be giving up baths for the foreseeable future, and I accepted that to repay a favor to Helen.

I’d just have to take advantage of the few weekends I’d have off to either go home to NYC or visit Lana in Boston, both only a train ride away.

When they left, I took a few hours to unpack my clothing, make my bed with the bedding Helen and Chris had given me and put away the few bags of groceries I’d picked up before heading here. Mainly snacks as I was encouraged to eat with the students and staff in the cafeteria, however, I lived here for four years and knew the quality of the food and that I’d need to skip a few cafeteria meals to both keep my figure and my sanity.

Before heading to bed, I walked up to the classrooms through the connecting tunnels and halls, dropping off the few things I’d need for my classroom; some stationary, a plant - I loved plants - a digital projector I could hook up via Bluetooth to my iPad, chargers and a shawl because I remembered how freezing the classrooms could get in the winter here.

It was surreal walking through the halls again for the first time in many years. Across the hall from my classroom was a picture I was in with the rest of my graduating class, all dressed in our maroon and mustard-colored uniforms, looking young and naive. My natural blond hair showing and my real name written underneath, a name that I hadn’t used since graduating from this school, a name I was relieved to not hear on Helens’ lips tonight.

As I was about the leave, there was a knock at the door, and I was welcomed officially by the new headmaster. Until now, I’d only met with him via video conferencing, and he was so happy I was able to fill in for Helen as it was hard to get qualified people to fill in for a short contract.

True to Helen, he wasn’t as old school or stuffy as the previous headmaster, and he was supportive of the spin I was going to be putting on the delivery of the curriculum she had curated over the years.
The following day, I spent the day meeting girls who would be living on my floor for the next few months, along with being introduced to the teachers. Only a few I’d known from before, and they all called me Wren and didn’t allude to anything from our shared past. I think they understood how important it was to me to preserve my new identity, how I didn’t want anything influencing my future career that was already moving at an impressive pace or the way the students would treat me.

There was only one teacher, a younger guy named Ted Cedars, who had been a substitute teacher and part-time resident supervisor in the boy’s dorm during my senior year that gave me a few double takes as I sat down across from him with a small tray of food at dinner time. It was as if he might recognize me, however, I’d never actually spoken to him as a student, and I looked quite different. I was wearing contacts, and my bobbed, styled, blond hair was now long brunette locks, he introduced himself as if meeting me for the first time. Clearly, Helen and Christ hadn’t spoken to him, or may not have made the connection to inform him.

‘Hello, I’m Ted Cedars.’ He looked at me, almost finishing his meal. ‘Have we met? Did you go to Mount Holyoke for college?’

I smiled at him and shook the hand he extended toward me. ‘No, I went to Northwestern. I’m the new English teacher.’

‘You must just have one of those faces.’

I smiled at him. ‘Must be. What do you teach?’

‘I’m the head of the boy’s dorm, the lacrosse coach, overseer of the athletic programs and a substitute teacher when there’s literally no one else that could possibly do it. And by that, I mean I’m the absolute last resort to be in the classroom. I personally think they would choose the bus driver, the janitor or the cafeteria lady, you name it, over me. I’m the last resort, but hey, I win them lacrosse championships, so they let me stick around.’

‘Busy man, I see.’ I smiled at him, trying to keep the conversation light and away from me as much as possible.

‘So, Northwestern. You from Chicago then?’

I shook my head, taking a sip of my water. ‘No, New York, you?’

‘NYC. Lots of our students are from there. Me, I'm from Boston.’

‘My best friend lives in Boston, a great city.’

He finished chewing before replying, ‘It is, but I don't get home much now during the school year, so busy with life here at the school.’ He looked down at the smartwatch on his wrist. ‘Which reminds me, I need to check in on some of the boys. See you tomorrow then?’

Relieved I passed my first test, I was able to eat some of the salad I'd prepared for myself and made idle chit chat with some of the other teachers before retiring to my room for a little cry to relieve myself of my anxiety that had been building all day and try to rid myself of the fears I had for tomorrow before sleep.
CHAPTER 8

WREN

The alarm went off at five in the morning, and I grumbled as I turned it off, willing myself not to hit snooze or fall back to sleep. I promised myself that I'd start new routines while here, including using the state of the art gym to get back into shape. I wasn’t fat, and most people would think I didn’t need to even look at a gym, let alone spend time working out, but parts of me had gotten soft over the years.

I’d gained weight during my senior year of university, and while I managed to lose some of that weight during my internship last year, I wanted to firm up my stomach, tone my legs and prevent any more baked goods that I seemed to be addicted to from sticking to my hips and ass. I also knew from experience that exercise helps keep my mental health in stride, and I knew I was going to need all the help I could get with that being back here and so many memories being brought to the surface.

There was no one in the gym when I arrived just before half-past five. It wasn’t until I was finishing up that a few students and staff started to trickle in, including Ted and some of his lacrosse boys. ‘Good Morning, Wren,’ he greeted as I was doing a set of cool-down stretches on the mats. ‘Warming up?’

‘Actually, just cooling down. I was the first one in.’ I looked up at him as I stood up.

‘Good luck with your first day,’ he called after me with a wink as I started to walk out of the gym. ‘Thanks,’ I called back, omitting my own wink. I was grateful for the friendly gesture, but I wasn’t about to lead anyone one, especially someone I worked with. There were some lines I wasn’t going to cross.

I was way out of my depth and comfort zone being back here. I’d already questioned my decision a dozen times this morning before my hair was even dry from my shower. I was, by far the youngest teacher at the school, by at least a decade. I was closer to the age of my students than I was to the younger faculty, and I say that very loosely.

At least I was teaching high school English, a subject I had not only majored in at University, but a field I was currently working in as a literary agent and book editor. While I had to stick to certain curriculum outcomes, I was given free rein with assignments and was told to think outside the box and to prepare the kids for the real world. The assignment part I could do, and I also knew I could make it fun and engaging, something no other teacher had ever done for me. However, preparing them for the real world was an entirely different task all-together, like I knew what that fucking was.

I was just twenty-five years old and had gone from high school to my bachelor's to my master's, to traveling with Jax, to interning for the past eight months and now I was here.

I’d never really lived in the real world. At least, my world wasn't the real world. I’d lived enough to know that my life wasn’t ordinary or average. How could anyone with a trust fund the size of mine live an ordinary life?

I was hoping that my connections to the Mylie the Millennial blog would buy me some street cred with my students or at least the females among them. Before arriving here, I’d had to make my personal social media account super private and locked down, which kind of sucked because I really enjoyed the interactions it brought me.

Taking one final look in the mirror, I thought I looked really cute today, I had on a pair of deep-purple high-waist pants with a high-bow belt, paired with a light-grey fitted knit turtleneck tucked in.
I’d spend time putting some curls in my hair and let them fall loose down my back. I had little makeup on as I was still sun-kissed from my holiday.

‘Miss Price, is it?’ I heard my name and looked to the doorway to see a middle-aged, greying man in a suit walk into my classroom. He extended his hand to me. ‘Darcy Kline,’ he introduced, and I knew he was the assistant headmaster, placing a folder on the desk I was standing in front of. ‘Sorry I wasn’t able to meet with you yesterday. We only got back to town late last night ourselves.’

The majority of the teachers here lived on the campus of the small private school. One of the things that appealed to me was that my room was going to be provided, and I wouldn’t have to commute daily in a cab, seeing as Uber wasn’t a common thing in such a rural area.

I was teaching four English classes a day and giving up every second weekend for duty shifts in the dorms – which meant I was a glorified babysitter for teenagers. I really didn’t mind it. This job was going to give me plenty of time off to work on my editing and freelance writing for one of the world’s biggest blogs, an opportunity I felt privileged to be a part of. In addition to that, I continued to manage the few clients I represented as a literary agent. Thankfully, they understood my situation at the moment, and none of them were going to require heavy hand-holding for the next few months.

‘That’s not a problem. I was getting my apartment situated and my lessons for the week finalized.’

He tapped the folder on my desk. ‘Your class lists are in there.’

A bell rang, and he looked at the clock on the wall. ‘I’m just across the hall. Don’t let the little bastards intimidate you, or they will eat you alive and sacrifice your firstborn.’

I couldn’t catch my mouth in time from hitting the floor. He laughed and tapped me on the shoulder. ‘Just don’t take any of their privileged bullshit.’ I smiled and nodded in agreement. I knew all too well what privileged bullshit was. I was once on the other side of this dynamic, sitting in the very seats that started to fill up with students.

I knew when I signed on I would be working with the spawns of the upper elites of society. ‘I’ll try my best,’ I assured him as best I could, not even convincing myself, as the first group of students walked in, all giving me the once-over.

When the second bell had rung, nearly all of the dozen or so seats in the class were full. I smiled at them, opening up the folder and looking at the attendance sheet with sixteen names on it.

I went through the list. When I was at the second to last name, ‘Elliot Tremblay,’ I called and looked up.

‘He’s not back yet,’ the only other guy in the class I hadn't confirmed yet announced.

‘Ezra Vader?’

‘The one and only.’

I shook my head and slid the list back into the folder. ‘Welcome back. I hope you all had a great break. I’ll be here with you for the rest of the year. I’ve read over the notes from Ms. Melody.’ I winced for dramatic effect. ‘A bit dry. I hope that I can make the rest of the year a bit more relevant to you in terms of what you will need next year at college and beyond.’

I gave them an enthusiastic smile. ‘Ok, instead of me standing up here blabbing on about myself, I want you all to take out your phones, which shouldn't be hard, as many of you are already on them. I don’t care if you have them out, but I'm here to teach you, and I do expect you to learn and participate in class.’

I turned to the blackboard and wrote the URL for Mylie’s blog. ‘I want you all to go to this website.’

‘Mylie?’ I heard one of the girls ask.

‘The one and only,’ I responded, looking at Ezra.
As expected, the females loved this exercise, while many of the guys groaned.

‘Shit, is that you?’ one of the guys asked.

‘Yes, I am Wren Price, the author of that featured article today, and many others on there. In addition to being your new English teacher, I’m a freelance writer, editor, and literary agent at one of the biggest literary agencies in New York. However, aside from filling your minds with enriching information to shape your outlook, my other main gig is working as one of a few contributing authors for Mylie’s lifestyle blog. As you will see, my most recent article is all about the importance of Vitamin D. I am not a nutritionist or a health professional by any means, but that didn’t mean that I couldn’t write about it. I have an English degree with a focus on creative writing from Northwestern. I am one of the least qualified people to be talking about vitamins, but have a read through the article, and we will discuss it.’

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is how you make education relevant in today’s social media and technology-obsessed world.

When I saw some of the students finishing the article and flipping over to Instagram, I stood back up. ‘Ok, so that took you what, less than five minutes to read?’

I saw all the students nodding their heads. ‘Great, well, it took me about four hours to write, not to mention about an additional six hours to research and an hour-long conversation with a public health nurse to validate what I wanted to say. It would have been easy to just google the information, but then it wouldn’t have been credible, and credibility is really lacking in today's world. I’m sure you’ve all heard of fake news?’

‘How much do you get paid for writing?’ one of the girls asked me, dismissing my lesson entirely.

I giggled. ‘That, my friend, is between me and... Mylie.’ I caught myself, nearly giving the driving force behind the book's identity away.

The girl's face fell. ‘Do you actually know her, or him or whoever Mylie is, or is it a bunch of people?’

‘I do know who “Mylie” is, but I also have an ironclad NDA. Given who most of your parents are, I'm sure you are all well versed with the finer details of those contracts, so don’t bother asking me who it is, what they are like or anything like that, because, literally, I can't tell you.’

‘Literally, you could,’ Ezra smirked, calling me out on my choice of words, and knew the technical meaning behind the word of tongue. Smart kid...too bad I already pegged him for a smart ass.

‘Figure of speech, Mr. One-and-Only. Now, I want everyone to get paper or your tablets out to start taking some notes.’ As I waited for everyone, I started to introduce one of the main themes we would be covering this term. ‘How the increasing use of technology is leading to the degradation of the English language across a variety of mediums.’

Overall, I would say that my first day went surprisingly well. I taught four classes, grades nine to twelve, and would do this four days a week. One evening a week I would be assisting honors students in their seminar held on Thursday evenings.

I sent a text off to Cassy, not knowing her schedule now that she was on a working holiday, and I didn't want to take time away from that, knowing that she was currently at Disney World with some of her fan friends she’d made over the years. Then I called Lana to tell her about the day. I knew she preferred text messages as she had hang-ups on talking, but with me, I knew it was different. I missed her and hoped I would be able to see her soon. Geographically speaking, we were closer than we had been over the past few years. I was only a few hours’ drive from Boston, where she was now living.

The next opportunity I got, I’d be making plans to get in some Lana time and catch up on all the
antics of her crazy sister and her family.
I stayed up later than I should have last night polishing off my next few articles, but when inspiration strikes, one has to take full advantage of it.

I missed the gym this morning, but made a point to pencil in a session later on after I was finished teaching for the day. I showered, did my hair and put on another cute outfit to fool my students into thinking I was a professional. Yesterday, I hibernated in my small apartment for the most part, leaving briefly in the afternoon to restock my fruit collection and grab a sandwich just before all the kids arrived for lunch in the cafeteria. Tonight, I would embark on my first weekday duty shift as a residential supervisor, ensuring the kids weren’t running wild. Instead, I was to oversee them studying and adhering to lights out. Thankfully, I was only responsible for the girl’s dorm.

Basically, I had to make sure no one was running away, drinking, fucking, or doing drugs. Having been a student here not so long ago, I knew all those things went on and how students found creative ways to pull them off. However, given the chatting levels last night when I came back from the gym, I didn’t know how much studying was going on.

Today I was wearing a cute tunic type dress, with patterned thick tights and high-heeled shoes. I was sure my feet would be killing me by the end of the day, but at least I had a break for marking or planning after lunch before my last class of the day and would be able to rest back in my apartment. However, I noticed over the past two days I’d been teaching that many of the teachers preferred to hang out at the cafeteria during their free periods, close to the surprisingly decent coffee. It wasn’t the gourmet stuff I’d become accustomed to at the cafes near my apartment back home, but it no longer was the instant stuff they had when I was last living here either.

Small wins.

After a hearty breakfast sandwich, I made a mental note to get my ass to the gym tonight. I had to work hard to keep my figure. I wasn't going to put on another freshman fifteen.

I arrived at my class early to queue up the YouTube videos I wanted to highlight today regarding integrity. At the first bell, many of my students started to arrive, and by the second bell, I noticed that a few students hadn't yet arrived.

‘Good morning guys and girls,’ I greeted them happily, treating them with the respect I hoped they would return to me and picked up the attendance sheet, hoping that I could remember most of the students' names now that it was Wednesday and my third day of teaching. ‘Melissa?’ I asked, looking around. ‘Does anyone know where she is?’

There were a few giggles, giggles that I could only assume meant something was up. ‘Okay then, what about Ezra, and does anyone know if Elliot is back yet?’ It was mid-week, and he was the only student who hadn’t been to the two classes I'd already taught.

‘He’s back now, but probably just running late. They had practice this morning,’ one of the guys told me.

I smiled at him. ‘Thanks.’

‘Okay, so let’s get started. Get out your tablets,’ I informed them, inwardly rolling my eyes. It wasn’t so hard to be prepared. ‘During our last two classes we spoke about credibility. Does anyone wish to share some of their thoughts they wrote down?’

As I asked the question, I heard voices in the hallway, carrying on and laughing, then saw Melissa
walk in, hanging on to every word being spoken by a very familiar voice.

Time slowed down, and my vision clouded at the same time my knees went weak. Thank fuck I was standing next to the desk that was able to support me. Holy shit. Eli, or his doppelgänger, was walking into my class. He glanced over to me, and I knew from his instant change of expression, recognition crossed his face also.

It wasn’t a twin, or a look alike. It was Eli, one and the same.

I had to compose myself, and quickly. I looked at the other students in the room who were glancing at the late arrivals and with any luck, had missed my monetary loss of functions. Clearly, these two guys walking into the class were popular, given the looks on everyone else's faces. ‘Take a seat. You are already late.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’ Eli smirked, looking me over and making me feel things that are so very, very wrong for a teacher to feel for a student. Only this time last week, when he was balls deep in me, he wasn’t my student, and I wasn’t his teacher.

Fuck, fuck, fuckety, fuck, fuck.

I somehow managed to get through the rest of the class as best I could, despite my phone pinging on my desk constantly. Seeing the look on Eli’s, or should I say Elliot’s, face and the fact he kept texting, told me that when I checked my messages, I was going to have a few dozen from him. I still hadn’t responded to the message he’d sent me the day before, reminding me just how much our bodies missed each other.

This wasn’t good.

I did my best to ignore him, even though my eyes kept wandering to where he sat in the back and I'd need to change my undies later. Yeah, I was totally failing at trying to not let him affect me.

When the bell rang to indicate our class had ended for the day, I wanted to talk to him, needed to talk to him, to confirm it was him and beg him to stop messaging me and above all, to tell him to keep his mouth shut about what had happened between the two of us on the island. But with all the eyes and ears around, I couldn't risk it. He was clearly trying to delay leaving class, but Ezra was ushering him along, and I could see Melissa at the door waiting for them, which had me wondering which of the two she was waiting for.

‘Elliott, is it?’ I asked, looking at him as he walked from his desk in the back of the classroom, following his friend.

‘Yeah, sorry, I didn’t catch your last name.’ He wore a smirk that told me he knew my pussy was bare and how it felt, but he didn’t know this basic piece of information.

‘Price,’ I informed him, trying to hide the bitter bite in my tone. ‘I don’t have time now, but can you find me by the end of the day to discuss what we went over in the last two classes, please.’

‘Sure thing, Miss Price.’ - His wicked smile on full display. - ‘I’ll find you.’ To that, I was sure. Fate seemed to guarantee to keep fucking with me.

He joined his friends waiting for him at the door, and I overheard Ezra say, ‘Didn’t I tell you she was hot as fuck?’

‘Ezra, she’s your teacher,’ Melissa implored.

‘And your point is?’

‘That’s gross,’ she pointed out.

You are telling me, girl. You are telling me.

I joined the teachers for lunch, as I knew if I went back to my own room in the headspace I was in, I was likely to quit or never come out again. The only seats available faced the back end of the cafeteria, and the one I unconsciously chose provided a direct view of Elliot. Gorgeous, all-
consuming, well-endowed Elliot.

Fuck, I really hoped he was of legal age, or I was about to be doubly screwed over and not in the pleasurable way he already knew how to do so well and at such an age, whatever that might be.

*Please don’t let him be jailbait.*

To keep my mind off of him, and to prevent my eyes from further undressing him from his uniform he wore so very, very well. I threw myself into forced conversation with a few teachers, all the while keeping an eye on Eli. When they all left to prepare for their next class, I took out my tablet, making it look like I was doing some research, which I kind of was. I needed to find as much information as I could on Elliott Tremblay. Only a few things on lacrosse came up, with lots of articles on his brother Otis, who, it actually turned out, was a rising hockey star in his own right. I smiled thinking that they hadn’t been blowing smoke out of their own asses.

Eli was the last of his friends to leave, carrying his tray and glancing over to me as he walked to the disposal tray area. There were still a few students and some staff around the cafeteria, and I knew we couldn't talk here, that we needed to be somewhere private to have the conversation I knew we needed to have. But after further thought, being somewhere private with him was a terrible idea. I could never be alone in private with him anymore.

Somewhere with background noise would be the next best thing, and I was happy to discover that Eli had already put that together by leading us to the tray disposal area, where the sounds from the dishwashers, running water and dishes clanging would drown out our conversation.

I walked up behind him. ‘We need to talk.’

‘Agreed,’ he said, turning to face me with a serious look on his face. ‘Why the fuck didn’t you return my messages?’

I snorted. ‘Messages? Seriously? We have bigger fucking things to sort out than texts at the moment,’ I hissed in a low angry voice.

‘Wren.’

‘Miss Price.’

He looked at me, his lips slowly smiling. ‘Wren, we both know we are well and truly past me calling you Miss Price, unless of course, you have some kinky fantasy. I could get behind that...we both know you like it from behind.’

‘Stop that.’ I waved my hands. ‘Please tell me you’re not jailbait.’

He laughed. ‘I’m legal.’

‘How old?’ I asked. ‘Clearly not twenty-one as you led me to believe…’

‘I’m nineteen. I was held back a year when we moved back home, to Canada, from Sweden.’

Right, I remembered him telling me about living there with his family when he was younger and that he was from Canada, where the legal drinking age is nineteen to our twenty-one. “Legal back home.” His brother hadn’t been lying, at least not about that.

‘What happened to Dartmouth?’ I crossed my arms in defense, calling him out on his bullshit.

‘Dartmouth is my future…’

‘You led me to believe it was your present.’ I snapped.

‘So?’ He smirked. ‘Not like it would have changed anything. Not like you told me you were a teacher at Wendell.’

‘You better not have told anyone about us.’ ‘No one knows it was you...’

‘Jesus Eli.’ I buried my head in my hands as I felt his arms wrap around me.

Instantly, I pulled away and took a step back. ‘No,’ I whispered, shaking my head, frantically looking around to make sure no one saw us. ‘You can’t do that, and you need to delete any photos
with me in them off of your phone.’
He smirked. ‘Not a chance.’
‘At least take them off your phone. What if someone sees them. I’ll be screwed.’
He licked his lips. ‘Last I remember, you like to be screwed.’
I hit him. ‘Stop that. Delete the photos, and do not talk about me. Forget about what happened.’
He shook his head before walking away. ‘Impossible.’
CHAPTER 10

WREN

The following week, the boys were playing an exhibition lacrosse game about an hour’s drive from
the school. Knowing this allowed me to breathe a breath of air and leave my room without my anxiety
reaching a fever pitch. The thought of running into Eli outside of the classroom had me panicking. He
hadn’t been subtle about wanting time with me, preferably alone.

He discovered after only a few days that I typically worked out early in the mornings before any of
the teams got in there around 6 am. Low and behold, he started showing up right at 5:30 when I tried
to get my workouts in before anyone else. Two days of that and I knew it hadn’t been a coincidence.
Since then, I’d been sneaking workouts in whenever I knew he was off campus or otherwise engaged.
And yes, I was well attuned to his schedule like the obsessed stalker that I was.

I’d learned a lot about Elliot Tremblay over the past two weeks. He was one of the most popular
kids at school; all the guys wanted to be his friend, and all the girls wanted to suck his dick, and many
of them had been doing just that until he’d come back from Christmas break apparently.

I’d overheard a few girls on more than one occasion complaining how he’d been snubbing them
and not interested in hooking up. They had all kinds of theories from a girlfriend to steroid use making
it difficult for him to get it up.

I’d also found out that he left campus two to three times a week and drove down to Holyoke to
train with a skills trainer for Lacrosse. This also allowed him to have his car on campus, something
very few of the students were permitted.

I’d learned that he drank milk with every meal and always had food with him. Be it a piece of
fruit, a granola bar or bag of goldfish crackers, the boy had a huge appetite and often couldn't go an
entire class without eating.

I knew that it wasn’t normal to be so attuned to all of these things, especially seeing as he was my
student, but my attraction to him hadn’t just switched off because our dynamic shifted so drastically.
And if his text messages were anything to go by, he didn’t seem to care at all about it. He just wanted
to pick up where we’d left it on the island.

Fat fucking chance of that happening.

I was taking full advantage of Eli and the lacrosse team playing an exhibition game a few towns
over and was working out in the gym after dinner while I could. I hated being in there with anyone on
a good day, least of all, being with him and his friends. I felt his eyes on me even when he wasn’t
looking directly at me.

I was hyper-aware of when he was near. It was my body’s natural reaction to its dopamine supply.
It knew the difference between the real thing and the synthetic battery-operated substitute I was
currently offering.

I needed at least an hour on the elliptical tonight. I’d been skipping and slacking, and couldn't fully
blame Eli and his band of misfits. More like, I could blame myself for taking on too much. I was
heading to Boston tomorrow to visit Lana for the long weekend. I desperately needed to get out of
here and talk about the shit show that was my life with her.

It wasn’t something I dared to speak on the phone about in case someone heard me, and there was
no way whatsoever I would be putting that in writing.

That would be like signing my own death warrant. I wanted to fulfill my commitment to finishing
this job, and I'd hate to let Helen down when this is the only thing she's ever asked of me in all the years that I've known her. It was the least I could do after everything she has given me over the years.

With ten minutes to go on the elliptical, I saw Ezra walk down the hallway followed by Eli and a few other lacrosse players. He didn’t stop, nor did he acknowledge me, but I knew he saw me. His lip curled up just slightly as his eyes didn't fully meet mine.

They were talking about playing Halo and ordering pizza, even though it was their mandatory study time. I had the impression that they owned the school and could likely get away with just about anything.

I pushed through the last ten minutes and did a few cool-down stretches before I made my way back to my apartment on the other side of the building. Thankfully it was all connected, and I didn't have to go outside. January in New England was no joke.

I checked my email and saw that Mylie had sent through a few more chapters to edit and provide comments on. Not only did she have one of the most popular blogs out there, she was also a best-selling author. She capitalized on her massive following and released her stories, chapter by chapter on her blog. While her blog was great, her books took it to a whole other level, even causing her site to crash due to user overload in the early days.

I stretched my neck. It was going to be a long night. Just like everyone else, I was obsessed with her stories and was just as eager as her fans to know what happened next. I just got them months before anyone else did. The one I was currently editing was different from what she wrote in the past.

I knew she was likely going through something. It was grittier and edgier than before. I already knew it wasn’t going to have a happy ending. Her readers were going to be pissed but still love her all the same.

I peeled off my sweat-soaked clothing and got into the shower. There were few things I really splurged on, and my hair care products were one of them. I loved my hair and made sure I kept it looking as good and healthy as I could.

As I was rinsing the shampoo, I heard a door close. I paused, but didn’t hear anything else. I was still getting used to all the sounds of this place. It was like living in a dorm, but only with younger kids that I was somewhat responsible for. Scary thought.

I heard a cell phone ping, but it wasn’t one of my own programmed sounds. ‘Hello?’ I called out, working the conditioner through my hair.

‘Don’t scream.’ I heard the confident alpha voice of Eli on the other side of my shower curtain.

I didn’t believe my ears so I poked my head around, covering my body. ‘What the fuck?’ I shouted as I saw him standing in my bathroom in a pair of sweatpants, bare-chested, holding what I only assumed was his shirt I saw him wearing not twenty minutes ago.

‘I said don’t scream,’ he said in a low, calm voice.

‘I didn’t, now get the fuck out,’ I yelled.

‘Shhh, fuck, someone’s going to hear you.’

‘Good…’

‘No Wren, that would be very bad.’

‘For you!’ I closed the curtain and started to rinse the conditioner from my hair. ‘When I’m done rinsing, you better be gone.’

I didn't hear anything for a few moments, but hoping for the best with Eli was futile. Just as I was reaching for my loofah and body wash, he pulled back the curtain and stepped into the shower. ‘Let me.’ He took the luffa from me.
I hit him, and not the playful taps he got when we had been on vacation. These were forceful fists hitting his hard chest. ‘Get the fuck out of...’ I screamed again, but only got half of it out as I had intended before his hand covered my mouth and his face was less than an inch from mine.

‘Stop,’ he commanded. ‘I’m going to remove my hand, and if you scream, all that is going to do is cause unwanted attention for both you and me. No amount of yelling or punching is going to get me out of this shower. I had a long game and need to wash up.’

He removed his hand, and I stood there, shocked at the entire situation.

My student was naked in the shower with me. He took the body wash, poured a generous amount on my luffa and started to wash my arm. I grabbed it from him, did a quick scrub of my body before rinsing the conditioner from my hair. All the while he stood inches from me, his eyes roaming my body as he washed himself. I hurried out of the shower, grabbing a towel and closing the door behind me.

‘What the actual fuck?’ I breathed out, hurrying to make sure all my curtains were closed and my door was locked. How the hell did he even get in here?

As I heard the shower shut off, I hastily dug a pair of shorts from my drawer and pulled a large t-shirt on.

He opened the bathroom door. ‘Can I have a towel?’

‘No,’ I said frankly, wide-eyed at his audacity.

He walked toward me in all his naked glory, his cock hard and ready to go. God damn how I missed that.

He really did have a magnificent one.

‘See something you like?’ he asked, undoing the turban I had made from the towel on my head, drying his body with it.

‘N...no,’ I stuttered as I walked away from him. There was only so far that I could go in this tiny apartment.

‘Liar.’ He chuckled, and I knew he was right behind me.

‘Eli, you have to get dressed and leave right now.’

He dried off when I turned around - ‘Study time is almost over. People will be mulling about for the next hour. I say we make it count.’

‘They will be looking for you.’

He smirked, walking back into the bathroom to collect his clothes. ‘They don’t check on us.’

‘Why? They should.’

He raised an eyebrow. ‘They know better.’

I took a deep breath and looked to the ceiling. I'd been told the same for a handful of the girls as well, one of them being my own student, Melissa.

‘Fine, get dressed and you can stay here till it’s safe.’ I looked at him, still standing naked in front of me. But put your clothes on.

I went to take a seat at my desk before turning around to look at him again. ‘Wait, how did you get in? I know I locked the door, and I always check before I get in the shower.’

‘I have a master key.’

‘You what?’ I shouted, before lowering my voice. ‘Who else does?’ He just shrugged my question off. ‘No, I need to know. That’s not safe, I don’t want anyone just coming into my room like this.’

He shook his head. ‘No one will.’

I stared at him. ‘Eli, you better not have said anything.’

He walked over to my bed and laid down, still stark naked and hard. ‘I didn’t. I just called dibs.’
‘Eli,’ I whispered
‘Don’t worry, they all think it’s a joke, but still, I made the claim. No one else can.’
‘Do they think you will act on it?’

He shook his head. ‘No, but I will be making a show of flirting with you, so get ready.’ He started to touch himself. I really should have looked away, but I just couldn’t pull my eyes away from him. He was hot and I knew what he was packing, and I was a sucker for punishing myself with things that were clearly off limits. ‘In the meantime, come here. I’ve missed your mouth.’

I crossed my arms. ‘That is not going to happen, you can stay here till everyone’s back in their rooms, then you need to get the fuck out. And just so we are clear, you cannot come back here. Ever.’
‘Don’t you miss him,’ he mocked, stroking himself again,
I shook my head as I dug my palms into my eyes. ‘This cannot be my life. What could I have possibly done, besides fuck a high school student, to warrant this kind of torment?’

I hadn’t realized I had gotten to my feet and had been pacing when I saw my empty chair, which I sat down in, thinking it might stop my mind from spinning into a free fall. ‘Seriously, I have a shit ton of work to do.’ I couldn't look at him, because looking at him meant looking at his cock, and I was already wet and turned on; a girl only had so much resolve.
‘Anything I can help with?’ he asked, sounding genuine. Lowering my defense, I looked at him. ‘You know, tit for tat. You help me, I help you.’

I rolled my eyes. ‘You are incorrigible. Get a book or my tablet. Just occupy yourself. I really have to start working.’
‘I’m occupied, though I could use a hand, literally.’
‘You have two hands and only one dick...I’d say you’re winning at the moment.’
‘Winning would be buried in you.’
‘Then you’re going to be a loser. Deal with it.’
I saw from the corner of my eye that he had stood and was walking over to me, stopping directly behind me, before spinning me in my chair to face him, eye level with his one-eyed monster.
‘Say yes,’ he commanded, stroking himself, so close to my mouth that all it would take was for me to stick out my tongue to taste him.

I looked directly up to him. ‘No.’

He stood where he was as he started to work himself. I knew his end game. He wanted to either get me to cave or come all over me. I wasn’t going to be a willing participant. I couldn’t. I should stop him, but damn if this wasn’t one of the hottest most erotic moments of my life. He trailed the thumb of his free hand down my face, and I allowed it, causing goosebumps to form all along my spine. He took a deep breath as he started jerking himself faster and harder.

_Turn around, Wren_, the rational part of my brain was demanding, but my libido had me firmly planted where I was, unmoving.

Even when I let him slide his thumb across my lips, circling back and pushing its way inside my mouth, past my teeth, I swirled my tongue around his thumb, closed my lips and sucked, looking into his eyes as he came in the little cleavage my oversized t-shirt provided.
‘That wasn’t so hard, now was it.’ He panted as if he’d just run a marathon. I bit his thumb before he snatched it out of my mouth. ‘Kinky. Where was that on the island?’
‘Hiding with your ability to tell the truth.’ I looked down at my shirt. ‘Really?’
‘What, would you rather in your mouth?’
‘I would have rather you not to have broken into my room to start with.’
‘Really?’ He bent over and went to touch me between my legs, but I turned and swatted his hand.
‘Because I bet you are dripping wet for me.’

‘No, just my shirt is dripping with your cum, asshole.’ I walked into my bathroom, closing the door behind me. ‘When I get out of here, you better be gone or I will call security and tell them about your master key.’
‘Where you headed Miss P?’ Ezra asked, opening the passenger door of an expensive-looking Audi.

‘Have we scared you off yet?’ I looked at him carrying a weekend bag hung over his shoulder as he eyed my small carry-on roller suitcase.

I snorted a laugh. ‘Oh please, pre-pubescent boys don’t scare me, but to answer your first question, seeing as this is my first weekend off since I’ve been here, I’m taking advantage of it and heading into Boston to see my best friend.’ It was God’s honest truth. I’d been here at the school for a solid month, with brief reprieves of escaping over to Helen’s house to spend time with her and her newborn son, helping with household chores and trying my best to cook the limited meals I was somewhat good at. Christopher Junior, or Kit as they had been affectionately calling him, had been born almost two weeks ago, and I was already head over heels in love with the tiny human. Their company was a welcomed distraction from everything going on inside my overcrowded head. They also provided a much-needed change of scenery from the small space I’d been holed up in, coming out only to teach and join fellow staff for a few meals every so often.

I really had been busy between editing the final chapters in Mylie’s next series, assisting Cassy through some administrative things regarding her book orders for the signings and planning lessons, not to mention marking my students’ homework; it had been the busiest month of recent memory for me. But I welcomed the chaos. It kept me from thinking of Eli all the time. He was still there, as much as I tried to push him aside and refocus whenever my thoughts started to wander, and they wandered often to that last night on the island, to his body, how he knew how to play mine so well, but then I often sobered when I thought of his age and the fact he was now my student.

‘Cool,’ he replied. ‘Is that where you’re from?’

Knowing he was from NYC, and not wanting to open up that door, I simply shook my head.

‘Pennsylvania,’ I told him, which technically wasn’t a lie.

‘Cool, my aunt lives up there.’

‘That’s nice, but it’s a big place. I doubt I know her.’

‘Just as well. She’s a piece of work. Probably why her husband keeps his condo in the city with his side piece.’

I shook my head in disgust. ‘Charming.’

Eli came jogging up to the car, carrying his own bag and a lacrosse stick, looking down to my bag and back up to me. ‘Need a ride?’ he asked in a suggestive way that didn’t leave any room for interpretation.

I laughed. ‘No, you’ve done enough.’ It was a double-edged comment. ‘Thank you, and I appreciate the offer, but my taxi should be here any moment.’

‘Ya know Miss P,’ Ezra started as he sat in the car. ‘Eli is driving into Boston after he drops me off at the train station. Would help you avoid the train.’

‘Thank you Ezra, but I need to get some work done on the train, and I think it would be highly inappropriate to take such a ride from a student,’ I said more for Eli’s ears than anyone else’s, reinforcing my no fraternization policy.

‘I can give you a ride any time.’ He winked, knowing that Ezra couldn't see him.

‘Have a nice weekend, boys. I’ll see you Monday.’
‘Later Miss P.,’ I heard Ezra say as Eli’s window was closing, and he was already taking off out of the small parking lot and down the front entrance, through the imposing gates.

I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I had been holding as my taxi came buzzing up the same path Eli had just departed from.

I needed this weekend, this time with Lana and alcohol. Lots of alcohol. The past month has been intense at Wendell, all due to one persistent little boy. Letting out a sigh, even I couldn’t fool myself into thinking he was little, nor was he a boy. There was nothing little about him. His personality screamed larger than life. It was hard to ignore his over-imposing presence in a room, even a large dining room filled with hundreds of students and staff. And then there was his charm that filled my classroom nearly every day. He was smart, and, judging by the way students and even many of the staff idolized him, he was a wonder on the lacrosse field too, something I’d yet to witness in person. And then there was that body of his. Again, nothing small about him. I had to squeeze my thighs together and shake my head to keep from going down that road further.

I was staying with my best friend, her sister and their family, a group of people I was very comfortable being around and who I’ve spent a lot of time with in the past.

It was nearly ten in the evening when we finally got back to Lana’s house, where her sister Zoe had a pitcher of sangria waiting in the living room with a plate of nachos.

‘You’re kind of perfect, you know?’ I hugged Zoe, eyeing the alcohol and her youngest, an infant little boy she was rocking in her arms.

‘Kinda?’ she teased. ‘Listen, I don’t know how you’ve lasted this long in a school filled with entitled teenagers. You need to be nominated for sainthood or something.’

I settled down in a chair opposite them, my eyes closed and face lifted to the ceiling as if in surrender. ‘Oh, you don’t even know the half of it.

Lana poured me a glass, and I settled back into the chair, tucking my feet under me and proceeded to tell them about my trip to St. Martin with Cassy, all the fun we had together, the college boys we met and the subsequent fun I’d had with Eli, noting that I’d told him in advance it was only a holiday fling. I was busy, but we exchanged numbers.

‘Has he messaged you?’ Zoe wiggled her eyebrows? ‘Dartmouth isn’t far from here…’

‘I have it on good authority that he’s here in Boston this weekend.’

‘Is that why you’re here?’ Lana asked, and I could almost hear the disappointment in her voice. I knew she was looking forward to our weekend together just as much as I was. We’d planned to have a lot of fun with a little bit of work on the side.

‘Not at all. I just found out on my way here, and besides, I’m not seeing him. It’s complicated, you see. He doesn’t go to Dartmouth, at least not yet. He’s been offered a scholarship to play there in the fall, to start his freshman year there.’

‘He’s in high school?’ Lana and Zoe both choked on their drinks.

‘Oh, wait, it gets better.’ I took a long drink for good measure. ‘He’s a student at Wendell, the school I’m working at, and I’m his English teacher.’

They sat frozen to their spots next to one another on the sofa across from me, both unable to speak. From Lana, that was natural. Zoe, on the other hand, always had something to say, usually inappropriate and totally hilarious.

‘So, tell me, how exactly does he earn extra credit with you?’ And there it was.

I tossed a chip at her. ‘He doesn’t. If anything, I’m constantly having to remind him to back the fuck away, and let me tell you, my resolve is weakening the more the time goes on. It’s so hard to be in the same space as him. But then I remember he lied to me and he’s only nineteen.’
‘At least he’s legal,’ Lana offered with a sheepish smile. ‘True. I just feel like shit. Here I was thinking I wasn’t broken, after all these years trying to date, trying to find a connection with someone and every single one of them missing the mark, and missing by a long shot. Then comes this Adonis of a man, or at least that’s what he fooled me into thinking, but Adonis all the same. We just clicked, you know?’ I looked to Lana, who unfortunately didn't know, but I prayed someday she would find out. And then to Zoe, who I knew, knew exactly what I was talking about. ‘And not just on a physical level. We talked, I mean really talked. I wanted to take some time to get settled in with the new job and finish the edits for Mylie and just organize my life before I contacted him to see if he felt it like I did. But then he walked into my English class wearing a school uniform. I hadn’t admitted this to even myself yet, trying to convince myself it was just a fling. I just felt so cheated by the entire situation, and I was left feeling as if a future had been stolen from me.’ I could feel the familiar sting of tears on the back of my eyes, and I knew I’d be hard pressed to stop them from appearing. I was an all or nothing kind of girl, and no boy had ever made me cry before. Lana knew this, it was evident by the fearful look on her face. She knew my feelings for Eli had been serious, and I was taking this harder than I should be after only a week spent together.

The following day, we were both nursing slight hangovers, having shared a large pitcher of sangria and staying up far too late. I worked with Lana most of the morning then excused myself when Zoe returned from a play date with her oldest, an energetic toddler, to go work on Mylie related content. After dinner prepared by Zoe’s husband on one of his nights off, we all got ready and joined some of Zoe’s friends at a pub for a girl’s night out.

‘It’s too bad Amplify isn’t playing tonight.’ Lana looked over to Amber, one of her sister’s best friends.

‘I know.’ She pouted, looking at me. ‘I’m dating one of the guitarists. They are really good.’ I nodded, taking a sip of my martini. ‘What do they play?’

‘Pop rock, heavy on the bass with catchy rhythms; think of Maroon five, Challenger, One Republic, Coldplay and the like.’

I swallowed hard trying to hide my feelings - yet again. ‘Great bands to be compared to.’

‘They are so good. I can't wait for you to hear them, for everyone to hear them. I just know they are going to go far someday.’

We were all dressed up and looking hot sitting at a high top when I felt a hand press up to my lower back. I swung around and was shocked to see a very amused Otis standing behind me.

‘Oh my God,’ I breathed, looking around to try and find his brother. ‘Fancy seeing you here, teach,’ he said with a smirk on his face, telling me he knew everything. ‘So, you got a weekend pass?’

I just smiled and shook my head. ‘As if he hasn’t already told you.’ He just shrugged. ‘And you should have said something on the island about his age…’

‘Why, what would it have changed? How could we have known you were going to that school to take a fill-in teaching job? You told us you were an agent.’

‘I am. I’m there as a favor to a friend. You should have said something and not let me sleep with a teenager.’

He let out a chuckle. ‘You say that like it’s a bad thing. He’s nineteen and well past the legal age.’

‘You could have told me that.’

‘You could have asked,’ he countered.

‘You were celebrating his birthday. You said he was legal now. I thought legal to drink, not legal
to vote. Even then, he’s still too young for me. There’s a big fucking difference, especially now.’

‘Why, how old are you? You don’t look a day past nineteen yourself.’

‘Yeah, well, I’m twenty-five years old, and now I’m his fucking teacher. How did you think that was okay?’

‘Why, you didn’t break any laws.’ Otis shrugged, taking another drink from his bottle of beer.

‘But I am now.’

‘No, you are not. He’s legal, in all 50 states and most countries for that matter. I don’t see why you think it’s necessary to be ignoring him and treating him different from anyone else and treating him bad...’

‘I’m not treating him badly. Jesus Christ, he walked in on me taking a shower in the privacy of my own apartment. If anyone is crossing the line, it’s him. You need to tell him to back off. I’m going to lose my job, and he’s going to get expelled.’ I was getting worked up and could feel my blood pressure increasing and my face reddening, and not just from the hard lemonade.

Otis just chuckled. ‘There’s no way he’s getting expelled. No one at that school gets expelled. Nor is he leaving the school, unless it’s in a body bag or handcuffs, and even then I am sure our father would get him off and back in your class the very next day, so you better get used to my baby brother being around.’

‘Um no, I won’t. You need to tell him to back off.’

‘I can tell him, but we both know he’s not going to listen. He’s too hung up on you.’

‘Speaking of, did he not have a fake ID to get in here tonight?’

Otis laughed. ‘He’s going to be pissed he drank too much at the arena watching our game tonight. Let’s just say he’s not handling your rejection of him well and has been drinking all day to momentarily distract himself from his feelings because he’s already confessed there’s no alcohol strong enough for him to forget you. I’ll have to let him know he missed out on seeing you like this.’ His eyes roamed my body. ‘Can’t say he’s wrong in seeing what he does in you.’
CHAPTER 12

ELI

She was driving me fucking crazy. More so, her rules were. Having to sit and listen to her in class from the back of the room over the past three weeks, hearing that voice that I knew all too well, how it sounded when she orgasmed, how those lips she spoke with looked wrapped around my cock and those hands she used to accent her words, how they felt on my body...being so close but kept at arm's length was pure torture.

But it was more than just a physical need with her, and that’s what fucking pissed me off the most. We shared a connection on the island, one I had thought we could resume even after I walked into my English class and realized she was my new teacher. Sure, that threw a wrench into my plan, but I just figured we’d have to be stealth about it. Unlike her, I saw her new role at Wendell as a good sign. It was like the universe was continually putting us in each other's paths for a reason.

Unfortunately, she didn't feel the same way.

I was hungover as fuck as I parked my car and made my way through the train station on a mission to find Wren and take her back to school myself. Seeing as Otis saw her out last night, I was betting she was still in the city and catching one of two trains that were headed westbound to the small town the private school was housed within.

If she wasn’t going to take the late morning train, then I'd sit my ass down and wait all day if need be. We needed to talk, and I wasn’t about to allow her to slip through my fingers again.

I dug out my phone and was looking through social media, glancing up after every few stories to look around for the brunette beauty that had taken over my every thought, both when I was sleeping or awake.

I saw her walk in and go to the screens to find her platform. Shoving my phone back into my pocket, I walked up to her and put my hand on her suitcase. ‘No need, I'm driving you back to the school.’

She looked up, alarmed to see me and scanning the room ‘There’s no one else here who might see us together if that’s what you're so worried about.’ I hooked an arm around her waist and started to guide her out of the terminal, but she wasn’t budging.

‘Eli…’

I bent over so I was next to her ear and spoke in a low voice. ‘Wren, you have tested me over the past few weeks to my breaking point. I’m done playing it your way, because I'm a gentleman, I'm going to give you the choice of walking out of here on your own two feet, easy and without a scene. Or, I will carry you out. Just know that I’m not above attracting attention.’ I pulled back and saw the sheer hatred in her eyes for me. Good, just as I wanted her...fired up.

‘You wouldn't dare.’ She crossed her arms over her chest.

I raised an eyebrow, meeting her blow for blow. ‘No? You want to test me?’

She didn’t budge, and after our staring contest got old, I scooped her up, one arm under the back of her knees and the other around her back, as if I was carrying her over the threshold on our wedding night. Squirming, she tried to get out of my hold, and I squeezed her tighter. She looked me in the eyes and smiled sweetly at me.

‘See, this isn’t so bad now is it?’ I said, feeling as if I had won as I took one step before I felt a searing pain in my nipple. Looking down, she had her hand inside my jacket and was pinching me in
what felt like a vice grip.

‘Put me the fuck down right now,’ she growled in warning, starting to twist her hand and my
nipple along with it.
I did as she requested, and she let go of me. ‘Get in the car, Wren.’
She glared at me with an icy stare, taking a step forward. ‘Alright, just don’t fucking touch me.’
‘Atta girl,’ I mocked, grabbing her suitcase, rolling it behind me as I watched her fine ass walk
away from me toward the doors. I took her hand upon exiting. ‘This way.’ I guided her to the parking
lot and opened her door for her like the true gentleman I surely wasn’t.

She hesitated, yet to my delight got in. I put her suitcase in the trunk next to my own before I got in
and started the car. She didn’t say a word to me, didn’t even look over toward me for the first half-
hour of the drive.

‘Hungry?’ I asked her, seeing the sign telling me there was an exit coming up soon with food, gas
and shelter. Still, she ignored me. It was lunchtime, and I was starving. Nothing new there. With how
much I trained and my muscle mass, I was constantly hungry and ate an abundance of food.
I pulled off the exit. ‘There’s a McDonald’s, a Subway...I think there might even be a Chipotle
further down.’ Her silent treatment continued. ‘Well, seeing as I’m still hungover as fuck, I need some
grease to soak up the remaining alcohol.’ I pulled into McDonald's and parked. ‘I’m not big on eating
in the car. Can you come in with me?’

She glared over to me. ‘Only because I have to pee.’ She grabbed her purse off the floor,
slamming the door behind her and storming off in the direction of the bathrooms once inside while I
ordered.

I was carrying the tray of food to the table when she came out. ‘Wren.’ I called her name and
waved her over. She looked down at the table, and I handed her a box. ‘Seeing as you're acting like a
petulant child, I got you a Happy Meal.’

She dropped the box and took one of my Big Macs before walking out. ‘Unlock the car, asshole,’
she yelled over her shoulder, giving a passing father walking in with his son a wincing look as she
left the restaurant.
It had started to snow, and I could be a bigger asshole and leave the car locked, forcing her to
come back inside, or I could let her eat in my car. I debated this as I took a bite of the other Big Mac,
finishing it in just a few bites, and started to work on my fries when I noticed she’d walked back in
and took a seat next to the doors, eating my food.
I ate everything I’d ordered, drank the milk that came with the kid’s meal and took the two bottles
of water with me. ‘Let’s go,’ I snapped, walking past her.

I started the car and turned up the heat while I waited for Wren to take her sweet ass time. ‘You
could have just opened the car for me when I asked.’
‘I don’t eat in here,’ I said without looking at her. She was really starting to test my restraint and
piss me off.
I weaved through town, rushing to get back to the highway. ‘Look, we need to talk. I thought if I
could get you alone in a car for a few hours we could do that. We have almost two hours to go. Can
we be civil?’
She turned in her seat to look at me for the first time since we left the train station almost an hour
ago. ‘Eli, you lied to me,’ she screamed.

‘I never lied to you.’ I corrected. I might be a lot of things, but I wasn’t a liar. ‘I’ll never lie to
you.’
‘Okay, you let me assume and never corrected me. In my book, that’s even worse.’
‘You can’t deny the connection we have.’ I went to put my hand on her knee, but she slapped it away.

‘I said don’t fucking touch me, Elliot.’

Elliot. She must mean business.

‘Wren, I can’t help it. You’re like a magnet for me. I can’t sleep, can’t concentrate, knowing that you’re just on the other side of campus, and all bets are off when I’m in your class or watching you in the cafeteria. We can’t last the rest of the school year like this.’

‘We?’ She snorted. ‘You don’t have a choice, and even if there was the remote possibility of a “we,” which there isn’t, There’s no way I’d act on anything with you again. You have no idea how much you hurt me.’

‘Hurt you?’ My head snapped over to look at her. She looked so vulnerable at that moment that I did the only thing I could. I pulled off to the side of the highway. ‘How did I hurt you? I never wanted that.’

She shook her head and tried to turn away from me. I knew if she did, she would be shutting me out again, and I wasn’t having that. I took her head in my hands and looked deeply into her eyes. ‘Wren, babe, talk to me, please. Tell me how to fix this.’

She shook her head free of my hands. ‘That’s just it. You can’t. I really thought there was something. You were right on that, there was something. You have no idea how hard it is for me to admit that I felt something for you. Even when I thought you were a twenty-one-year-old Dartmouth lacrosse player, it was hard to believe that I’d found someone to click with. Yes, I felt the connection on the island. I won’t lie to you and say I didn’t. But all that came crashing down when you walked into my classroom.’ She let out a sad laugh. ‘I’d been played by a fucking high school student. Do you have any idea how that makes me feel?’

‘I never played you, Wren,’ I took her hand and held on tightly when I realized she wasn’t pulling away. ‘You are not the kind of girl to play around with. Do you think I want to have these feelings? Fuck, I’m not even twenty years old yet. I should be wanting to play the field, fuck knows that’s what I’ve been doing and what I’d planned on doing for the next few years, but I can’t even look at other girls. I only want you, and it’s infuriating.’ I let go of her hand and hit the steering wheel. ‘I shouldn’t be thinking of ways to be with you, ways we can make a long-distance relationship work next year. How to convince you to move to Dartmouth with me.’

She let out a condescending laugh. ‘Like that would ever be an option.’

‘Fine, okay. So maybe I’m getting a little ahead of myself,’ I admitted. ‘But I’m not letting you go or giving up on you.’

‘You don’t have a choice; we can’t be together.’

‘Why?’ I pressed.

‘Because I’m your teacher.’

‘I don’t fucking care, and I doubt anyone else would, really. But if it’s such a big fucking sore point for you, we can keep it on the DL.’

She looked at me like I had three heads and was speaking Dothraki. ‘Elliott, there’s no us. Not now, not later.’

‘I refuse to accept that…’

‘You don’t have a choice,’ she told me pointedly.

‘We’ll see.’ I shrugged, looking into my mirrors, seeing a break in cars and pulling out to carry on our journey. ‘Either you agree to pick things up where we left off on the island, and I’ll even do your shitty down low experience, or I tell the school you only took the job to continue our relationship.’
She smirked and shook her head, not even appearing to think it over. ‘Look Wren, I’m not letting you go. If you don’t let me in, I’m going to show the pics to the school.’

She laughed at me. ‘Show them all you want. They would never believe you.’ ‘I think you underestimate the power I hold at the school,’ I told her, knowing I was one of the golden boys and untouchable.

Again, she laughed at me. ‘And you underestimate me. I didn’t know at the time you would be my student. I didn’t even think you were in high school, something you were all too willing to let me believe, might I remind you of your deception.’

‘They don’t know that. I can make up a story and say we met, got involved and you wanted a job here to be close to me. And I guarantee they will believe me.’

‘No, they won’t,’ she said ever so confidently, again giggling like she was actually enjoying this. ‘That’s not going to fly, because they know who I really am, and the real reason I’m here.’

Hesitating, I started to feel she was keeping things from me. ‘And what might that be?’ I prompted, trying to call her bluff.

‘I was handpicked by Helen back in the summer and approved to take this assignment back in September.’

Well shit, this was starting to toss a wrench into my plan to get back with her. ‘Helen, as is Ms. Melody?’

‘Yes.’ She was sitting smugly in her seat.

‘I can still say…’

‘Eli, nothing you can say will change the fact that the school will know you are lying. If you want, I can tell them the truth. I’m sure they will not like it, and I will likely have to leave the school. Which means all that will do is separate you from me and further add to the resentment I already hold toward you. I made Helen a promise I’d fill in for her maternity leave so she can spend a few months, rather than a few weeks, with her child. If you take that away from her, I promise I’ll never forgive you for that.’

‘So, I take it you are friends with her or something.’

‘Or something, yeah.’

She had me by the balls, yet again. Of all the scenarios I’d thought of, I never planned on her knowing Ms. Melody.

‘But she's old and shit.’

She let out a genuinely amused laugh, not the condescending ones she’d been giving me. ‘She’s not old. She’s like thirty-seven.’

I looked over to her, wondering how she would even know the exact age of my former English teacher. ‘How do you even know her?’

‘Because we started Wendell at the same time, her as a teacher, me as a student.’

My mouth fell open. I wasn't often shocked, but at that moment, I absolutely was. ‘You went to Wendell?’

‘Yes, so when I tell you your plan to blackmail me back onto your dick won't work, trust me when I say it will backfire.’

‘It’s not just about fucking you, Wren. I do miss talking to you, spending time with you.’

‘Well, you have a real funny way of showing that.’ She looked at me with sorrow in her eyes. ‘Usually, you don’t blackmail and manipulate those you supposedly care about.’

It wasn’t supposedly. I did truly have feelings for this incredibly complex woman sitting next to
She might have won this round, but it was far from over.
Chapter 13

Wren

February

All anyone could talk about since I arrived back to school last Sunday with Eli was the mysterious gastro illness that originated in Europe and was plaguing millions, wreaking havoc on medical systems, and as the days went by, deaths started to accumulate for those who didn’t get quick medical attention. Thankfully, the outbreak wasn’t as bad in America as it was in Europe. Managing the limited spread so far, the government was using lessons learned from previous global health crises by taking swift action, declaring states of emergencies and imposing curfews and travel bans. Meaning even if I wanted to, I wasn’t going to be able to leave this campus for at least the next three weeks, at which time, public health officials expected to know the source of the illness and have a handle on how to diagnose, treat and hopefully eradicate.

Unfortunately, Cassy was currently stuck sharing the flat she rented, unable to leave as all flights to and from Europe, the hardest hit area of the world, were grounded for at least a month.

Here at the school, while the students were antsy that they weren’t able to leave campus to go to the store or even go home for the next few weekends, the staff were just as anxious as to how this was going to affect morale and the mental and emotional health of the students.

We had been busy preparing events and ways to keep the students occupied. It was Saturday, and a bunch of students and teachers had just come back from a hike on a nearby trail. I’d participated along with Ted and his lacrosse team who he had doing some outdoor cross training, which meant Eli had been present. He was never far from me these days it seemed. No matter where I went, he wasn’t far from my line of sight.

He’d been coy and kept a distance, but his text messages had been straight to the point, and the video clips were downright pornographic. He wasn’t shy in letting me know how he felt. Some days I’d get long emails or voice messages telling me about his day, or asking me about mine, telling me things I wish he’d say in class, and adding private things that I was happy he kept to these personal messages.

He was trying, and, as much as my walls tried to crumble, I was constantly there to reinforce them; I would not take that chance. If I gave in and we were caught, not only would I break my promise to Helen, but I’d also lose my job. And if it got out then, my career would be over before I really had a chance for it to flourish.

‘I’ve just bought the new Joker movie digitally. Want to watch it with me tonight?’ Ted asked at dinner. ‘If not that, I’ve got a bunch of the Avengers movies, including the newest one.’ He’d been showing me just as much interest as Eli had been; the only difference was, he was able to ask me outright and sit next to me every time I made an appearance in the cafeteria, which I’ll admit, hadn’t been much this week. Mylie’s been trying to keep spirits high, which has meant more articles, and moving up the release date of her new series, which has caused me to move a few things around so I could concentrate on working with her. There were some near-sleepless nights, not to mention early mornings calming Cassy’s fears about being alone in London with basically a perfect stranger as a roommate. However, since she admitted he was totally hot, I’ve started feeling less sorry for her and more jealous.

It wasn’t like Ted was ugly. He wasn’t, and some might even consider him mildly attractive,
however, when all I could see was Eli, literally and figuratively, it was hard to appreciate what Ted might have to offer.

I’d been so engaged in conversations with my fellow colleagues, a feat that actually surprised me, that I hadn’t noticed many of the students had already left the cafeteria while the staff had stayed, seeing as they had no other place they could go.

My phone dinged, and I saw that it was a message from Eli, who I’d saved in my phone as BAIT, because that’s exactly how I needed to think of him: jailbait.

**BAIT: Head to your room, I wanna sext with you.**

I rolled my eyes, giving my head a curt shake, and went back to talking to Ted. ‘I’m so exhausted from today.’ It wasn’t a lie. I really was. Added to that, burning my own candle at both ends didn’t help matters any. I knew that I had hours of work ahead of me, and based on the looks Eli was giving me, I’d be fending off very provocative text messages from him in addition.

‘I have a comfy sofa and warm blankets. I’ll make us some Irish coffees and, if you're really lucky, even break into my snack stash.’ Ted smirked as if that was something special.

Ugh, why couldn't I just give in and enjoy the moment, perhaps even flirt back?

Oh, right, the glaring eyes Eli was currently stabbing me with kind of put a damper on even entertaining that idea. It was pissing me off, and I wanted it to stop. At least I kept telling myself I did.

‘Sure, but I can’t promise I’ll make it to the end of the movie.’ I pursed my lips.

‘Then I’ll make sure you have a pillow to go with the blanket.’

‘Just let me go shower and change,’ I told him, pushing away from the table and taking my tray with me to the disposal area where, surprise, surprise, Eli had been waiting for me.

‘Not happening.’ His alpha dominance was showing.

‘Excuse me?’ I asked, enraged at his presumptuous attitude when it came to my free will and independence.

‘You’re not going to Ted’s apartment to...do whatever it is he is trying to tempt you with.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry. Since when do you get to make decisions for me or tell me what to do?’ My voice was full of sarcasm. ‘That’s right, you don’t. So fuck off.’

I turned on my heels and went to walk away, but a strong hand wrapped around my bicep, halting me in place. ‘Wren, don’t push me…’

‘Or what?’ I questioned with an icy edge to my voice.

If looks could kill, I’d need resuscitation. No words were needed; his eyes told me everything. Feeling brave, I patted his chest. ‘That’s what I thought. Now, be a good boy and go back to your playdate with your little friends.’

It wasn’t like I wanted to watch an action movie at someone else's place, Ted’s place. I had nothing against the guy, but I would have much rather changed into a pair of sweatpants, put on my favorite rock band hoodie and binge watched Netflix. However, I knew that if I were to stay in my own apartment, I’d ultimately just end up working, like I’ve done every night since I got here. The only nights I’ve taken off had been the two nights I’d spent in Boston with Lana, however, we’d worked most of those days.

Going to spend time with Ted was going to send a direct message to Eli, that I wasn’t his. He didn’t have a say or the right to say what I did, and it was a stark reminder that he was my student.

I left the hoodie on my bed and pulled a knitted sweater and scarf over my yoga pants and Ugg boots to walk through the tunnels to the other side of campus to the boy’s dorm. I’d been there a few times before during my work duties and knew that Ted’s room was on the same floor as Eli’s and the
Walking down the hall, I saw and heard a bunch of boys in and around Eli’s room. It appeared they were playing some video game between a few different rooms. I hadn’t even needed to knock on Ted’s door. It was already open. ‘Hello?’ I peeked in and saw Ted in the kitchenette area pouring hot water from a kettle.

‘Come in,’ he called, and I walked in, taking a seat on the lone chair so as to not give him the wrong impression that I was down for cuddling on the sofa that was on the smaller size. Not as tiny as my love seat, but not that much bigger.

Coming into the room, he set my coffee down in front of me and closed the door to his apartment. Motioning to the door, he said, ‘Otherwise, they will drown out the surround sound.’

‘Are they always this loud?’

He shrugged his shoulders. ‘It depends. Usually they leave on the weekends and get it all out of their system, but now…’ he trailed off. ‘It’s not like we can say much when it’s that group leading it anyways.’

I rolled my eyes. I knew what he meant. A fat lot of good it would do him to tell Eli, Ezra and their group of minions otherwise.

We weren’t even a half-hour into the movie when the sounds in the hall were getting louder, and we heard the unmistakable sound of giggling girls.

The boys could get away with a lot of shit on campus, but co-ed parties in the dorms was the one thing we as staff could not turn a blind eye to. ‘Was that?’ Ted tried to ask when we both heard Ezra call out an explicit request using Melissa’s name.

Ted groaned and paused the movie. ‘Sorry.’

‘Let’s kennel them up.’ I stood, folding the blanket, knowing that our night was likely over.

‘Hey,’ Ted called out when he opened the door. ‘I need everyone in their rooms now.’

When I stepped out into the hall, all eyes landed on me. ‘Girls, that includes you also.’

‘That includes you also Miss P.’ Eli’s voice was arctic, and his stare glacial when he looked over to Ted. ‘Coach Cedar, I’m sure you’re well aware of the no fraternizing policy with co-workers without letting the administration know. That’s just a sexual-harassment-in-the-workplace case waiting to happen, which is why you have both agreed to written intentions when you signed your contracts.’

I looked at him, floored as to why he would know what was in our contracts and how a student could find this out. However shocked I was, it shouldn’t have surprised me. Eli seemed the kind of person who was both resourceful and keen for covering all the bases in his plot to keep me away from Ted, or any other guy for that matter.

‘I assure you that we’re just watching a movie, or were trying to until your little impromptu co-ed party started, going against the one policy you know you’re not allowed to break.’

Eli just shrugged. ‘You want to cock block us…I’m just repaying the favor.’

‘We’ve been lenient with lights out, but I think you’ve all taken it too far. Lights out in ten minutes.’ Ted turned to me and put his hand on my shoulder. I tried to shrug out of his touch, but I was backed up against the door and a wall, preventing me from moving without making it look too obvious to the other students. Ted hadn’t gotten the hint from the subtle shrug.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Eli rushing toward us yelling, ‘You fucker, she clearly doesn’t want you to touch her.’ He was creating a scene, causing everyone on the floor to turn in our direction. Those in their rooms stood in doorways to not miss out on the drama I seemed to be in the middle of. I could smell the alcohol on Eli when he came close enough to forcefully remove Ted’s
hand from my shoulder.

Mortified, and a bit scared for my own safety, and that of the girls who were present, I hurried down the hallway and tried to usher them to the stairwell.

‘Elliot Tremblay, unless you want to be sidelined during future games, I suggest that you take your hands off me and remember I am your coach and your resident supervisor; you are not to speak to me like that.’

‘And I really shouldn’t have to remind you that she’s a co-worker, and you don’t put hands on women if they don’t want it. Read the signs, asshole. She’s not interested in you.’

Ted raised a finger and pointed it in Eli’s face, to which Eli pushed it away with a cocky smirk. ‘You need to back off and mind your own business.’

It was a pissing contest between the two of them that we were all fearing would end in a physical altercation. Thankfully, Ezra stepped up and pulled Eli back and walked him down the hallway toward us and their rooms. ‘Dude, you’re taking the whole calling dibs to a whole other level don’t you think?’ Ezra’s voice was low and condescending, but I could still hear it as the girls finally started to heed my warnings to get back to their rooms and none too soon. I was done with this night and with all men, high school boys included.
Truly, I had been tired when Ted asked me to join him to watch a movie earlier at dinner. After the events that had just unfolded, I felt myself completely exhausted by the time I got all the girls back into their rooms and ensured the connecting hallway doors were all locked. With heavy eyelids, I wrote up an incident report for the school administration of the events of the night, omitting the whole pissing contest between Eli and Ted, not wanting to bring any further undue attention to myself.

But the boy had a way of sending my libido into overdrive with his alpha smugness. After a few rounds with my vibrator, I was as satisfied as I was going to get with the imitation, longing for the real thing. The kind of orgasm only Eli had ever been able to deliver. Falling asleep to the thoughts of all the pleasures his tongue was able to bring, I was having the most marvelous dream of his fingers deep inside me, massaging my G-post as his tongue danced provocatively over my clit, over and over and over.

It was then that I felt a cold hand massaging one of my bare breasts, and I awoke with a start to find out that it hadn’t been a dream. Wanting to scream as I tried to sit up, Eli’s strong hand held my chest as his eyes found mine. I swallowed my fear, and wasn’t able to find my own voice.

‘I’d almost forgotten how amazing you tasted.’ He slurred his words, clearly blind drunk, pulling his fingers out of me and pressing one to my lips as he haphazardly moved up my body. ‘Taste yourself.’

I moved my head to the side to which he took as an invitation to kiss my neck in the place that he’d discovered on the island, the spot that made me weak. Unable to hold back a moan, he slipped a finger back into me and circled his thumb around my clit, resuming his narrowed massages of intimate spots that he knew - even in his drunk state - would have me undone momentarily. Despite having brought myself to orgasm not more than a few hours ago, my body betrayed me as it started to build, chasing the release it craved.

‘Fuck yeah, baby. That’s it,’ he purred as I came hard on his fingers that were still working my insides. ‘See how responsive you are to me; you need to stop denying yourself this.’ He pulled his fingers out and settled himself between my thighs, pulling himself free of his boxers.

‘Say yes,’ he growled next to my ear, hovering over me, his hard length pressed up against my opening.

I swallowed, fearful of denying him. He was drunk, that much I could tell, and while we’d been tipsy before, I had always been willing to fuck him on the island. Would he stop now or take what he wanted regardless of my pleas for him to stop?

‘No, please Eli, no,’ I cried out, begging with him to stop before it went any further and things between us would be forever changed. ‘Please stop. You don’t want to do this to us.’ I was clawing at him when I managed to get my hand up to his face and push him away from my face with everything I had. I had never been so terrified in all my life. I’d always considered myself one of the lucky women who’d never been sexually assaulted, having tried to make good, smart decisions. Ultimately, I was starting to realize that no matter how safe one tried to keep themselves, sexual assault wasn’t the fault of the victim.

When he finally pulled back, recognition crossed his face. While his eyes were still glossy and his head still swimming in alcohol, he must have seen the sheer, absolute terror on my face because he
pulled back and shook his head. ‘Oh my God, what am I doing?’

He rolled off of me, and I tried to take that movement to scramble out of the bed, but he was too quick. He reached out and pulled me closer to him, his bare chest against my half-covered back. ‘I’m so sorry, baby.’ He held me tightly to him, and, if I wasn’t terrified, I might have thought it was protective rather than a possessed effort, almost as if he was trying to protect me from himself—unknowingly he was the only monster I needed protecting from at this very moment. ‘Babe, I’m so sorry. Forgive me,’ he slurred and passed out mid-sentence before asking me for forgiveness that would likely never come.

Seeing this alternative side of Eli brought back so many memories from when I was younger, of my father wasted out of his mind, my mother trying to reason with him, pleading for him to put the bottle down, to head back to rehab. I've seen how destructive alcohol could be on an individual and on a family. I’d lived it growing up. While there had only been a few short relapses, the wake of damage left was hard to move on from. Forgive yes, because my father had an illness, but forgetting was impossible.

I never wanted to be in the same unfortunate position as my mother, loving someone with so many demons that at times got too much that the only thing they felt they could do was drown them with copious amounts of the hardest liquor available.

I’d been drunk. My previous boyfriends had been drunk. But never had it been like tonight, Past the point of being who they truly were as a human, having truly been overtaken by the dark side of the devil's juice, as it’s often called. It scared me, this unfamiliar territory.

I laid there unmoving for some time, even after his breaths were deep and his snoring light. I knew he was sound asleep and likely out for the night.

Ever so gently, I peeled his arm from around my waist and slid out of bed, finding my panties he’d clearly tossed on the floor and pulling on a pair of sweatpants with the Challenger World Tour hoodie that had been my father’s, before tossing some electronics into my purse and slipping out my door. It wasn’t until I was down the stairwell and trying to unlock one of the doors with shaky hands that I willed myself to take a few calming breaths.

I don't remember how I got to Helen’s house. All I knew was that the tears wouldn't stop as I rang their doorbell in the middle of the night, knowing that I might wake up the baby and scare them half to death, but I didn’t feel safe going back to the dorms, and the teacher’s homes on the other side of the property felt like the only place I could breathe a sigh of relief.

‘Pen...I mean, Wren?’ Chris opened their front door and took me in. ‘What’s wrong?’ He went to reach out to me, but I involuntarily flinched.

‘Hon, who is it?’ I heard Helen’s voice calling from down the hallway.

‘Sweetheart.’ Chris’s voice was soft and soothing. ‘Why don’t you come in out of the cold. You’re not even wearing shoes.’

Sure enough, I looked down to see that my bare feet were covered in snow, and I was only now feeling the effects. It was then that I let out the sob I'd been holding in and fell down at his feet inside his doorway.
The dinging of my cell phone felt and sounded like fireworks going off inside my head. Needing it to stop, I went to reach for my phone on the side of my bed, only to be met with a cement wall.

Slowly peeking one eye open, sure enough, where I thought my phone would be charging next to my bed, there was a wall. I rolled over onto my back and fully opened both eyes to take stock of where I was for another episode of wake-up roulette. It wouldn't be the first time I'd woken up unsure of where I had been the night before. Likely wasn't going to be the last either.

It wasn't a dorm room that I'd ever seen, that was for sure, but through the doorway, I could see what looked to be Wren’s living area of her apartment - if that’s what this could even be called. The bed I was in was void of anyone else and cold as if she hadn't been there in some time.

‘Wren?’ I called out, my voice hoarse and my head pounding from the knowing sound of my own voice. There was nothing but silence that met me from the apparently vacant apartment. I didn’t remember getting here last night or how she must have reacted to me showing up, however, I thought it couldn't have been that bad if I was able to wake up unharmed in her bed the following morning. With those thoughts passing through my head, I pulled the blanket up over me and fell back to sleep without checking my phone.

Even before waking up again a few hours later, my head was pounding. I mustered the energy to open my eyes to look around her still empty bed. On the table next to her bed was a framed picture of Wren when she was younger and what appeared to be her sister as the girl looked very much like her.

Last night was still a blur, and, as to how I came to be in Wren’s bed, still a mystery. But I knew I must have drunk a hell of a lot for my head to hurt this much. I groaned in agony as I leaned over the bed to pull my phone out of the pocket of my jeans before laying back down with my eyes closed, willing the room to stop spinning before looking at my phone. I saw that it was later than I would have thought, which was fine with me as I didn’t know how much energy I would have to face the day with anyways.

I sat up, trying to peer further into the living room area to see if she was on the love seat or at her desk. ‘Wren?’ I moaned. My throat hurt, my head hurt and my eyes hurt from the dim light that was poking through the blinds. ‘Wren baby, come back to bed.’

There was no sound, and I didn't have the energy to try and get up. Given the state I was in, I did the only thing that I could; I closed my eyes and tried to remember what happened last night. Leave it to my drunk ass to forget what might have been a turning point in mine and Wren’s relationship.

I hadn’t meant to fall back to sleep again, but I must have, given the change in the light of the room. I sat up, realizing I had no clothing on, hoping, wondering if Wren had come around. I had been pestering her. Damn, I wished I remembered. ‘Wren.’ I called her name, but again, there was still no answer. I got up, hauling my ass across the room to enjoy a shower in her private bathroom. I loved the smell of her, and washing myself with her scent was going to remind me of all the good times we had together on the island. And even if she wasn’t here, I wanted to keep her smell on me all day. I got dressed and sent her off a text message.

**ELI: Babe, where are you at?**
I missed breakfast and lunch, and I didn't have much food left in my room given I hadn’t been able
to get to a grocery store due to our national lockdown. Looking through Wren’s cupboards, she didn’t have much either. I sat down on her loveseat and ordered some food through a local restaurant, one of the only ones who delivered in this small town.

I made my way back to my own room, taking a detour through the classrooms and the teacher's lounge, but Wren wasn’t in either of those places. Walking through the cafeteria and one of the common rooms also proved useless. It didn't make sense that she would just leave me. She wasn’t anywhere to be found on the main campus, nor was she answering text messages, not that she ever did, but the fact I was worried had me asking her to confirm she was okay. I couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d done something really stupid.

I didn’t know what happened last night, but her silence all day had me worrying it wasn’t all rainbows and butterflies as I had thought earlier this morning.

By the time I got back to my room, my app was notifying me that my food was ready to be picked up at the front entrance. Greasy food was exactly what I needed, in addition to a bottle of Advil and about ten gallons of water, to flush all the Jack Daniels out of my system.

By dinner time, I still hadn’t heard from Wren, and I hadn't seen her at the dining hall that evening either.

I thought perhaps she was embarrassed by what had happened in the hallway with Ted last night, but no one was seeming to mention it or care, except Ted himself who was shooting me daggers. Practice this week was going to suck; he seemed like the spiteful kind of bastard.

I tried to convince myself that perhaps we just kept missing each other in the places I looked for her today, or her phone died, or she was at a teacher’s house planning our next school event to keep us occupied and having dinner there. She could have ordered dinner or cooked one of the packs of ramen noodle in her cupboards as I knew she didn't always eat her meals in the cafeteria like most of the teachers did. She did more so now than when she first arrived. Regardless, I was still hoping to see her. I didn’t understand why she was ghosting me. I was in no shape to train, but I hauled my ass to the gym to help sweat the hangover out of my system before heading back to my room to work on an assignment.

The next morning came all too quickly, and I knew Coach Cedar was going to hand me my ass today, and likely for the foreseeable future, for embarrassing him Saturday night. That part of the night I do remember. It was only after then that we broke open another bottle of the hard stuff. I was only nineteen years old, still a teen, and already I felt my liver was letting me down. To be fair, I had thoroughly abused it for years now, thanks to it being my only reprieve from dealing with my father. It was no wonder it was cashing in on it’s right to start fighting back.

I made it through the first two classes of the day. I was eager to get to English, more eager to see my English teacher. The one woman, the only woman, to ever get under my skin.

‘Hey Eli,’ I heard Melissa call my name. ‘Ezra told me you guys got up to no good on Saturday night after I left. You could have texted. I would have come back.’ This one grated on my last nerve. Why I ever opened the door with her I had no idea. Oh, wait, yes I did. She gave a decent blow job.

‘I can’t remember the night. All I know is, I woke up the next afternoon in a lounge in a different part of the school.’

‘In the teacher's lounge? You are so lucky you didn’t get caught.’

‘Like they would care...it’s me.’ I got away with everything here.

‘That’s true. Anyway, next time you will have to invite me to the party. We always have so much fun when we party. And I don't like it when you party without me.’

And there she goes again, talking like we were together, when I know for a fact she’s been hanging
off Ezra’s dick for weeks now. We were never together. Never will be. But for some reason, she
feels the need to stake a claim on me. ‘Sure Melissa, I think we’re all headed into the city in a few
weeks, depending on how the lockdown goes. You know how things go.’

‘We should totally spend a weekend together in Boston or New York. Go to a game, you know?’
I knew, but there was no way I would ever entertain the idea with her.

‘Right, sure.’ I dismissed it, like she even knew the first thing there was to know about hockey.

Wren was looking through some files on her tablet. She was big on using interactive media to
teach us. It was actually really cool. She got us and met us on our platforms. Some of the YouTube
videos she used to get points across were really on point. Sure, we were reading some shit ass novel
written about three hundred years ago that made no sense in today’s world. The book didn’t capture
my attention, and it was likely because I was a guy, but I didn’t get the whole foreshadowing or
symbolism shit; not that I really gave two shits about, but I had to praise her that she was really up
there, doing her best trying to relate things back to us, using relevant examples as to how it could be
perceived today. Elizabeth Bennet may have enjoyed writing letters back in the day. That wouldn’t fly
in the twenty-first century. Today, she’d be dropping memes to his Instagram account, and Wren got
that. I just wished she’d respond to any of my direct messages.

I loved that she could get up in front of the class and teach us like that. It all boiled down to Wren
being amazing, it just made me respect and love her so much more.

Holy shit, I nearly tripped over my feet as my brain went to a place I didn’t think it capable of. No
harm. It was a slip and was only in my head, not on my lips so it didn’t really count. Right? I really
needed to see a doctor and have them surgically find my manhood.

This wasn’t good.
This wasn’t good at all.

She hadn’t seen me yet, but I couldn't take my eyes off her. It was the same thing every day. Before
I even stepped foot in the classroom for the day, my eyes were roaming to find her, and for the entire
seventy-five minutes I was in the class, they were glued to her. I heard every word she spoke,
recorded every gesture she made. I also knew when I made her flustered by making certain comments,
especially when I sent her text messages. Suggestive ones.

Especially on those days when she wore pants and kept her phone in her pocket. I loved when it
was on vibrate.

I’d send her text after text. Too bad the phone was on her hip or in her back pocket, And not a bit
more front and center. There really wasn’t anything better than getting this woman off.

When I walked into the class, Ezra was already sitting at his normal seat. Wren’s head was
already buried in her tablet. When she finally did look up and noticed me, my world stopped. I had
never seen such a terrified look on her face before, not even the first time we met and she was shaking
from her fear of flying. I knew instantly that I was the cause of it this time, and it made me want to
vomit. I knew that I had fucked up.

Her color drained, her eyes popped, and she had never looked so terrified to see anyone in her
entire life. I didn't know what happened on Saturday night. Whatever it was, I knew I crossed a line.
Just how far over that line I went, I wasn’t sure.

She started stuttering. ‘T...take your seats.’ She wasn’t as composed as she normally always was,
far from it in fact. She was a wreck, and if I knew her better, in the way I longed to know her better, I
would say she wanted to run out of the classroom so we wouldn't see her cry. Because right then, she
looked on the verge of it. I just stared at her, mouth agape, not knowing what it was I should have
done in that moment, take my seat as instructed or go to her?
G…guys, quiet. Sit down.’ She was stuttering again, fidgeting with her tablet and not able to look at me. ‘S…so today I want to show you this v….video on you…YouTube.’ She could barely get the sentence out. She was looking everywhere except at me. Not sure if anyone else picked up on it other than me, but I totally got it, and I knew it was all directed at me because of what I couldn’t remember doing, and I fucking hated it. I hated that I had no idea what I did or how to make it right between the two of us. Fuck, what did I do Saturday night?

I don’t remember. I don’t remember a goddamn thing.

But I do know, whatever I did, I not only pissed her off, but I scared the fuck out of her along with it. My girl, whose eyes always shone with a sparkle, were dull and muted like a grey veil had been drawn over them. Almost dead-like. She was terrified. And I knew without a doubt I did that to her. If I did what I think I might have, I would never ever forgive myself.

But I can’t imagine I would have; I loved her. I respected her. I always asked for permission. Even with girls I didn’t even bother asking their name, I always asked for their consent. Always. The only other time I showed up in her room, she said no and I stopped - well kinda. I didn't force her to touch me, instead, I took care of myself and I knew she enjoyed the show just as much as I enjoyed watching her squirm. When she had asked me to leave, I’d left. Begrudgingly, but I did.

Why would Saturday have been any different? What could have transpired for her to look at me like this? I didn’t know.

It was hard to pay attention to her class. She was scatterbrained to the point Ezra looked at me and asked, ‘Dude, what’s wrong with Miss P?’

I just shrugged, not even wanting to open my mouth to elaborate. Because the sinking feeling I had was making me feel nauseous at the very thought of it. Making me want to spew my breakfast. But I wasn’t going to do that; that would only make things worse for her.

My Wren.

Jesus, what did I do?

At the end of class, I allowed everyone to leave, and I tried to talk to her. But she wasn’t having it. Not even a little bit.

She had been clearly trying to put on a brave face for the class, but it immediately faulted when she looked up to see me standing at her desk without anyone else in the class. She took a step back and was blocked by the wall. Sheer panic took over. Her breathing was labored, and she was looking for a way out, for an escape from being anywhere but in a classroom alone with me.

‘Look, there are people out in the hallway,’ I whispered, but it clearly fell on deaf ears. I took a few steps back further into the classroom, leaving her with a straight line of escape toward the door. ‘Wren, for what it’s worth, I’m sorry. For what, I don’t know. The last thing I remember was playing PlayStation and drinking, then I woke up the next morning in your bed. Clearly something happened, and I'm so sorry, but I need to know. Please, when you're ready, tell me. Even if it's answering one of my many text messages, let me know why I have you so spooked and what, if anything, I can do to make it up to you. Or at least rid you of this terrified look you have.’

She seemed to be hearing me, even if she wasn’t going to or be able to answer. She did make brief eye contact before she spoke with a broken voice, and her hands up as if to tell me not to move. ‘No, no, you need to leave me alone.’ Her voice was broken, as were our hearts, as she rushed from the classroom and as far and as fast away from me as she possibly could.
The rest of the day seemed to drag on forever. I don’t remember my lectures, my notebook remained untouched as did my lunch. It was now the end of the day, and my stomach was killing me, both from nerves and it being empty - something it wasn’t used to.

‘Elliott, hang back a moment.’ Mr. Strickey called to me as I was trying as best as I could to dash out of the classroom at the end of my last class of the day.

With my books in my hand, I called over my shoulder, ‘I’ve got practice.’

‘You are going to have a serious problem if you don’t take a seat and hear me out.’ I looked at the clock on the wall. I would be pushing it trying to make it before practice started as it was. I wanted to try and check in on Wren to see if she was okay.

Mr. Strickey walked to the door and closed it behind him. Typically, teachers here had an open-door policy, and not in the fact that all teachers were approachable. It was that they typically kept the door open for meetings, so I was rather confident that this wasn’t going to be a typical meeting.

‘What’s up?’ I asked, trying to break the tension that hung thick in the air. ‘How’s Ms. Melody and the baby?’ His wife was my former English teacher, who Wren apparently knew, and I was starting to wonder how well she knew my Biology teacher, given they were married

‘The baby is perfect.’ He grinned from ear to ear.

‘And the misses?’

He took a deep breath, ‘My wife would be doing a hell of a lot better if she didn’t have to worry about one of her most adored and favorite people on this planet getting raped at work, especially seeing as Miss Price is only here as a personal favor to her. Consider this your first and only warning. The next time, and I hope to God for both your sakes there isn’t, but if there is, it won’t be me you will be chatting to, it will be a police officer.’

*Rape*

That word shocked me, and I was trying to roll over what he had just said again in my head, trying to make sense and question if what he said was what I had heard.

‘What?’ I bellowed. ‘No, you’ve got this all wrong. I’d never hurt Wren.’

‘Miss Price.’

‘Look, I don’t even know what happened Saturday night, trust me. I appreciate that isn’t an excuse, but I’d never do anything that would warrant the police.’

I couldn’t speak. I wasn't going to incriminate myself. There wasn’t too much my father had taught me, but that was one thing. The fear of his wrath alone always had me playing by the rules, even if I skirted them sometimes, but rape? No, that wasn’t a line I would ever approach let alone cross.

I paced the room. ‘Fuck, what happened? Please tell me I didn’t… No, I couldn't have.’ I couldn't even say it, there was just no way. ‘Consent means something to me. Mr. Strickey, tell me what happened.’

‘You showed up to her room, pissed out of your mind drunk, slurring, not able to talk, and apparently not able to hear either…’

‘Fuck, tell me I stopped.’

‘She didn’t think you were going to., She fought you off.’ He poked me in the chest. ‘You, who’s nearly twice as big and a hell of a lot stronger than her.’
‘Tell me I stopped,’ I pleaded. ‘I’m not a rapist.’

‘Eventually, but not before you terrified the life out of her,’ he finally admitted. ‘Trust me, if you hadn’t stopped, you’d be cuffed in a cell at this very moment. Not even your father would get you out of it.’

I let out the biggest sigh of relief of my life.

‘Touch her again, no... Don’t even think about touching her again. She’s off-limits to you. I don’t care what happened before, but from here on out, she doesn’t exist outside your English class. She is nothing more than your English teacher, do you get me?’

He knew.

‘What did she tell you?’

‘Does it matter?’

‘Kinda...’

He looked at me. ‘We know about the island and how you wanted to blackmail her.’

‘It wasn’t like that,’ I cut him off.

‘Eli, she’s young. She has her entire future ahead of her. She’s trying to make it on her own. You won’t know what that’s like, but she doesn't have a family to open doors for her. If she gets caught up in any scandal, that will follow her, making her life very difficult. She knows this. That is why she’s not going to let anything happen between the two of you. If you try to force it, that’s going to make your life very difficult. I’m pretty sure no university is going to sign a convicted rapist to their roster, or even one who’s been accused. Leave her alone. I do not want to have this conversation again, nor do I want Wren to show up in my house in the middle of the night shaking with fear and sobbing to the point she can’t form words.’

I buried my face into my hands. No. How could I have messed this up so royally?

‘I just want to get one thing clear. Miss Price, she is off-limits, do I make myself one thousand percent clear?’

‘I need to apologize.’

Mr. Strickey crossed the space between us. ‘No.’ He placed his hand on my chest, preventing me from leaving the room and heading straight to her. ‘No. You do that by leaving her alone.’

‘No, I need to at least tell her I’m sorry.’

‘I’ll let her know.’

‘How do you even know her?’ I asked, my voice skeptical.

He laughed at me. ‘You can change those thoughts right now. I’ve known Wren for years; she’s like family to Helen and me, and the fact that you don’t know that or how I know her should tell you something.’

‘I know she was a student here.’

He gave me a pointed look. ‘Something she doesn't want anyone to know about.’ I nodded at his warning, but I couldn't help but wonder what else she didn’t want anyone to know about, what secrets she was keeping from me, secrets that I had no way of finding out from her now.

‘Can I assure my wife she has nothing to worry about?’

I nodded, and I meant it.

‘Good.’ He clapped me on the back, indicating we were done. I picked up my books and went to leave. ‘And Eli, how about you lay off the alcohol for a bit. As you said, it’s no excuse.’

I was late for practice already, what was another few minutes. As I was changing and drinking one of my protein shakes, I opened up my laptop and ordered a bouquet of flowers for Wren.
W,
I'm so sorry I scared you.
Please know I'd never hurt you.
   I'll back off now.
Not because I want to,
but because I finally get it.
   I'm sorry, truly.
E
ELI

The weeks of lockdown at the school had been excruciatingly hard. Made harder by the fact that I had to cut all contact with Wren only to have salt poured in my wound daily from seeing her in the cafeteria, in the classroom and around the campus during all the extra events the school was putting on to keep us entertained and our spirits up.

I can attest that at least for me, I’d never been so low. Needing and wanting to take a break from the bottle only made facing my feelings more painful. I hit the gym hard and worked with my lacrosse skills trainer virtually as best as we could. So when the source of the virus was identified and treatment started, infections rapidly declined, and, at least in America, restrictions were somewhat lifted. I was the first person to take advantage of it and got the hell out of the school as fast and as often as possible. Between visiting Otis in Boston and the increased number of days I drove to Holyoake to work in person with my trainer ahead of the playoff season, I was getting out and clearing my head as best I could.

Yet, I couldn't just pick up and leave all together. First and foremost, I was at the school to get an education, and I needed to pass English to graduate. English meant Wren, and Wren meant heartache. I wasn’t able to turn my feelings off, as much as I wanted to. Some days were easier than others, but this week was hard. Something was seriously up with Wren. I’d seen it coming for a few days now. It was Thursday, and she just wasn’t herself. Physically, she was sitting in her chair. She put a movie on for us to watch and sat staring aimlessly out the window. I knew she was completely checked out. Even yesterday she had no interest in answering any of Melissa's endless questions - not that I could blame her. We were all getting sick and tired of Melissa.

She thought Wren had some magical formula on how to become an influencer. And as the days went by, Melissa was getting increasingly persistent that Wren was being spiteful and just not telling her how to hit it big with millions of followers.

‘Looks like someone isn’t representing her brand these days,’ Melissa snickers, looking over at a less-than-put-together Wren.

‘Stop it,’ I prompted her in a warning tone.

She rolled her eyes at me. ‘What? Just calling it like I see it.’

‘Well, keep your commentary to yourself. No one asked you, and no one cares about your opinion of how our English teacher looks.’

‘Someone’s sensitive today…’ she snickered, trying to get support from a few of our classmates who had turned to eavesdrop on our conversation when we should have been watching the movie.

‘At least I’m not being a catty, pretentious, uppity bitch,’ I fired back. ‘She’s still working like two other jobs besides trying to teach us.’ She scrunched her face up at my words. ‘Not everyone has a trust fund to fall back on.’

I just wanted to tell Melissa the truth; she wasn’t interesting, sexy or funny. She was climbing an uphill battle on a mountain that was growing faster than she was capable of keeping up. She wasn’t going to be an influencer, and all of us around her knew that. Okay, there were worse things in life to be, but she could have set the bar a bit higher, especially given the fact her father was richer than rich and could afford to buy her just about anything, except for organic followers, and that was something that she was trying desperately to get right now. Given her trust fund and father’s connections, one
would think if it was going to happen, it would have already.

Today, Wren’s eyes were haunted, but not in the way that told me she was scared. I knew the difference at this point. I’d seen her scared, terrified even. Yet, sitting there staring out at the grey winter’s sky, she was withdrawn and a million miles away.

Her hair that she usually took great pride in, no matter if she wore it down in loose waves, straight or up in a neat ponytail or bun, always looked perfect without a hair out of place. Today, it was in a messy bun on top of her head, much like she wore on this island when she didn’t have a care in the world when she wasn’t constantly being judged by rich students. This was the third day in a row, and today was even worse. As I knew, as likely everyone else did, that she didn’t even have a speck of makeup on.

I liked the look on her; it was natural, reminding me of her getting out of bed and piling her mane on top of her head first thing. Or when she was swimming or relaxing on the beach. I missed those days when it was carefree and we were hanging out just being ourselves. It also didn’t hurt that we spent a lot of that time having a lot of mind-blowing sex.

I loved the fact that, for the most part, Wren took pride in her appearance. She didn't overdo it. She was very subtle and went for a clean classic look, wearing minimal makeup, just enough to know it was there. I had seen her fresh-faced, out of a shower or first thing in the morning. Here at the school, she would wear a bit of mascara or a bit of eyeshadow. Some days, depending on what she was wearing, she’d break out the lipstick or even eyeliner. However, today, I doubted if she even washed her face. I appreciated that she didn’t wear the caked-on foundation or false inch-long lashes like so many of my classmates did.

That’s one thing I loved about her. She was classically beautiful. She didn’t need makeup, but the little that she often wore only enhanced her naturally beautiful features. Again, not that she needed it.

Her clothes were always professional and sleek. I often wondered how she afforded her wardrobe on the modest teacher’s salary I knew she was making. She had mentioned she had interned in New York, and I can’t imagine they paid much. Surely, whatever she made would have gone to rent. It must have been all the other side jobs she worked, but I wasn’t so sure they were very lucrative either. Adding to that, she had recently been a student. Either she had a scholarship or was drowning in student debt. However, all those thoughts went to the wayside when she mentioned she had once been a student here. At that point, I assumed she was a trust-fund kid, just a well-adjusted one, unlike many of my current classmates.

So many questions I had for her, yet no way for me to ask them. I took Mr. Strickey’s warning to heart and left her alone.

Even if I wanted to ensure she had enough money to live on, it wasn’t like I could ask or even offer her assistance. I had no right to. Her clothes were higher-end, some fancy designer. I do remember what she wore on the island. Her shoes wore Louboutins. I knew those because I had a mother who was addicted to buying them as a way to spend my father’s money.

I didn't know if they were hers, but she and Cassy seemed to be completely different sizes, so I’m going to go out on a limb and say that Wren had some money, somehow. She didn't seem the kind to wear a knock off. When I say I watched her and paid attention, I wasn't paying lip service; I was serious.

The last few days, she’d been wearing leggings, tunics and flats. She wasn’t polished anymore. She was here because she had to be. Tuesday she taught a bit, yesterday she tried, but when everything was all over the map, she gave up and told us to work on an assignment. Today, she didn’t even try. She put on a documentary and told us to take notes.
I promised I was going to keep my distance from her. It was a promise that took everything in me to keep. I didn’t seek her out, and there had never been a chance encounter that presented itself.

Now that the lockdown measures had lifted slightly, I was permitted to meet with my personal trainer who was helping me further develop my skills a few times a week. My skills coach was needed if I wanted to start on the varsity team in the fall. I had a program, and I was working on it. It would help me keep in shape for summer camps and summer recreation leagues.

When the class was over, Wren had to shake her head to get with the program. Even she recognized she wasn’t paying attention. I sent her a text letting her know the class was almost over, but she didn’t even look down to read it. It took a question from one of the girls in class after the bell had rung to wake her.

‘Miss Price, can we leave?’

Wren looked to her, and then to the rest of the class. ‘Oh, yes, sorry. Great class. Sorry, just not feeling myself. I will see you guys tomorrow, or not tomorrow, I don't teach tomorrow. Have a great weekend.’

I slowly gathered my things, delaying my exit, not needing to rush to another class as it was lunchtime. I turned to Ezra. ‘Hey man, I'll catch up with you. Save me a place in line.’ I didn't need to tell him that. I could cut wherever I wanted.

When everyone was out of the classroom, I stood by the door, and turned to face her. ‘Miss P?’

‘Eli?’

‘You okay?’

She gave me a slight nod, trying to compose her facial features, but I knew her well enough to know she wasn’t. ‘I will be. Go on and eat lunch.’

‘Are you coming? You should probably eat something.’ I didn't want her to get weak or dehydrated.

‘Yeah, sure.’

‘I can wait for you.’ I gave her my genuine smile. One I didn't use very often anymore, one I wanted to reserve solely for her.

‘Probably not a good idea,’ she replied in a low voice.

‘What if I want to talk about my assignment?’ I flirted unconsciously.

‘I know you don’t want to talk about your assignment,’ she stated matter of factly.

‘No,’ I agreed with her, smirking. ‘You are right. I just want to talk to you. It looks like you could use someone to talk to.’

‘Thank you for your concern, Eli, but as I said, everything is going to be okay.’

‘If you say so,’ I mumbled. ‘Let's go, I’m hungry,’ I commanded after I looked around and didn’t suspect anyone was around.

She rolled her eyes and grabbed her purse that was in her drawer and looked at her phone messages. ‘You don’t have to text me when we are in the same classroom.’

‘Yeah, well about that…’ I smirked. ‘I can’t always blurt out loud what I want to say. Trust me, you don’t want that either.’

‘No?’ Her eyes had a glimmer of life in them for the first time in days.

‘No, definitely not.’

As a teacher, she didn’t have to wait in line, and she went to grab what she wanted when we reached the cafeteria. I found Ezra, stood next to him, and it wasn’t long before I was seated with my plate of carbs. I was going to need it. My trainer was going to work me hard tonight like he always did. I took my normal spot, the one that gave me a direct line of sight to the teachers' tables, where I
could see Wren, who was sitting next to Coach Cedar. I really did hate that guy. He’d never given up trying to get into her pants. I mean, neither had I, but I just wasn’t so obvious about it. Okay, maybe I had been, but I had backed off. This fucker wasn’t getting any of her hints, and it seemed that he annoyed the fuck out of her while trying. I know he annoyed the fuck out of me.

The rest of the day dragged on. I had Biology with Mr. Strictly as my last class of the day. I’d heeded his advice in not only giving Wren her distance, but I’d put down the bottle. It was a wake-up call for me. Blacking out to the point that I didn’t remember almost losing everything. It wasn’t my favorite class, but I also needed a science credit to graduate. Biology seemed to be the best and easiest one to take. I also had math with Mr. Strickey. I didn’t really care for math, but seeing as I was going to major in business, I did need to know numbers and stats. Calculus I didn’t think I’d ever use once I graduated, but whatever, it was required to graduate.

The two afternoon classes were the longest. I always preferred the days when I had Wren in the afternoons, only because it gave me a longer time to stare at her in all her beauty.

As was my routine on training days, I would attend half of our practice with the team before a quick drive south on the highway to the town of Holyoke where my trainer was located. My parking spot was behind the dorms and near the back stairway next to Wren’s apartment entrance. As I was getting into my car to drive to training, I saw her getting into a cab. I wondered where she was going. I had the time and decided to do some stalking of my own. When the cab pulled out, I followed it, all the way to the Red Baron Pub.

It wasn’t even four o’clock and already Wren was headed to a bar. I knew she didn’t drink much. Even when we were on the island, I had only ever really seen her drunk once. Sure, she drank wine, and had even had a mixed drink here or there. She drank and was buzzed, but as far as being drunk, I think that was only on my birthday. And even then, I wouldn’t say she was plastered. No, she didn’t tie one on like I was in the habit of doing until recently. She knew what she was doing and remembered it the next day.

I watched as she paid for the cab and walked into the bar. I looked at the time on my dash. I did need to get going, but I really wanted to go in and see what was up with her. Why was she at a bar at four o’clock in the afternoon on a Thursday, especially given the mood she’d been exhibiting this week?

But I left it alone, praying I wouldn’t regret it as I pulled away, merging onto the highway, heading to meet my trainer which turned out to be a shit session considering I couldn’t detach my thoughts from Wren being in a bar and my biggest fear...wondering if she was alone or with someone else.

I knew there was something wrong, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that I needed to help her. Something was clearly bothering her and had been all week. But I couldn’t help someone who, for one, wouldn’t let me in, and for another, didn’t want me around.

Three hours later, I was taking the exit for the town my private school was located in, wondering if Wren was still at the bar, hoping to God she wasn’t. Because if she was, and had been drinking for the past three hours, she was going to be well and truly wasted. I parked, went into a sub place that was right next door to the bar, placed my order and said I’d be right back to pick it up. While it was being prepared, I nipped into the bar next door. Sure enough, Wren was at the bar, hardly able to sit up, resting her sleepy head on her arms.

‘Fuck,’ I groaned under my breath. This wasn’t good, Not good at all. I walked up to her. ‘What are you doing here? You can’t be here.’

The bartender gave me a quizzical look. ‘Hey man, leave her alone.’
‘Um, no, you need to leave her alone. I have to take her back to the school. People are looking for her.’

It wasn’t a lie completely. I was sure someone might be looking for her, or would eventually. And I did have to bring her back to the school; there was no way I was leaving here without her. Except when I said I needed to bring her back to the school, they assumed she was a student. I wasn’t about to correct them - apparently I was good at doing that.

When someone like me walked into a bar around here, they all knew I went to the school up on the hill. It was one of the main employers of this quaint little town.

‘Hey, she had an ID,’ the bartender said in his defense.

‘So do I, but I’m not twenty-one, yet one of my IDs says I’m twenty-three.’ It was true, not that I really ever needed to use my brother’s ID, but there were situations when it came in handy.

‘Eli, leave me alone,’ Wren slurred, finally speaking for the first time.

‘No can do Wren. You have got to come back to the school. I cannot leave you here. Alone.’

The bartender agreed with me. ‘Miss, you have got to go with your friend here. I can’t be serving minors, especially ones from the school. It’s just not good for me or my business.’

‘I’m not a minor,’ she cried, digging into her purse. ‘Look…’

I quickly put my hand over hers. ‘Yes, we all know you have an ID, but come on, we have to go. I’m not leaving you here. You know it’s not safe. Please let me take you.’ I looked at her intently, commanding her to do as I was telling her. I saw she was pissed off, even behind the drunk gaze, yet when it came to her safety, I didn’t give a fuck for her personal feelings.

‘Why? What do you think is going to happen between the two of us?’ She clung on to me.

‘Nothing. I’m going to take you home, give you a few Advil, maybe a couple bottles of Gatorade, and that will be it,’ I said holding the door open for her to walk out into the cool evening air. ‘I’ve already been warned about trying anything else.’

‘Yeah, too bad for that…’

‘You weren’t the only one who warned me away.’

‘I know. It was silly and premature. I could really use a distraction tonight.’ She wrapped her arms around my neck. ‘What do you say? One round, one night only?’ she whispered in my ear, nibbling the lobe as she did so.

I unhooked her arms from around my neck, holding on to her as she was too unsteady on her feet, walking to my parked car. ‘Come on Wren, into the car.’

‘Have you christened this car yet?’

Finally, after a bunch of back and forth and her shamelessly flirting with me, I got her into my car. Ignoring all her advances, even when she copped a feel, clearly noticing the wood I was sporting - a guy only had so much resolve when the woman he loved, the hottest one he’d ever seen was practically begging him to fuck her.

‘Doesn’t matter, it’s not happening.’

‘I still turn you on…’

‘Every goddamn day,’ I grunted, and she giggled. ‘I need to grab my sub from right next door. I’ll be right back.’

I closed her door and hastily made my way to the sub shop, paying for a few extra bottles of Gatorade. As I came back to my car, opening my door, I heard the unmistakable sound of Wren vomiting. And not just a little bit sick, this was projectile vomit all over my floor, dashboard and her lap. She was trying, I’ll give her that, to put it in her lap and catch it, but the amount that was coming out of her mouth wasn’t anything she could contain with her little hands.
I hurried around to the passenger side of the car, opening the door for her and letting her puke all over the street, inadvertently also hitting my pants and sneakers.

'I'm so sorry, oh my God.'

'That's ok babe,' I consoled her, rubbing her back. 'Get it all out.'

'I got it on you.'

'You sure did. That's fine.'

'And your car.'

'No worries. Not the first time this car will be detailed.' I sighed, hoping I still had the local guy's number in my phone.

'Really?' she asked me, looking up with wide eyes.

'Ezra isn't great at holding his liquor either.'

'I'll pay you for the cleaning.'

'No…no it's fine. My dad's MasterCard has it covered. How are you feeling now?'

'Drunk.' She rested her head against the passenger seat. 'You don't say.' I chuckled, closing the door again and hopping into the driver's seat. 'I don't think that's going to change anytime soon. Let's get you back to your room, get some fluids and pills into you, and you are going to need to take a shower.'

'Okay.' She finally agreed with me for the first time since leaving the island. Thank fuck for small miracles.

'Here, let me help you.' She had started to fall asleep on the drive home. I opened the car door and gave her shoulder a slight shake. 'Wren, come on. We are home.'

I parked as close to her entrance as possible, helping her out of the car and up the backstairs which only teachers used.

She opened her eyes and looked at me. 'Eli, I threw up.'

'You sure did.'

'I made a mess, huh?'

'Yes, you made a mess.' I hooked my arm around her back and under her arm. 'Come on, let me help you up to your apartment. Is that okay?'

'Arg, like it even matters at this point.' The snide comment was hard not to catch.

'It does. I don't want to make you uncomfortable.'

'I'm covered in puke. You are covered in my puke. I think we are past the stage of either of us being uncomfortable.'

I chuckled at that. She had a point. Even in all her drunken glory, she was at least aware of the situation.

She tried to stand up but fell forward into my arms, getting more puke on me. I held her from around her waist, grabbing my sub with the other. I was starving after a grueling two and half hour practice, but the smell of puke was making me less so at the moment.

'You're going to be okay,' I kept reminding her as we walked up the stairs.

'Shh, okay?' I whispered.

'I can be quiet, unless your fucking me, then I have no restraint.'

'Wren, shut your mouth right now.' I ordered in a firm tone.

She made an exaggerated zipping of her mouth and throwing away the key movement as I basically carried her up to her apartment.

As we slowly made it up the two flights of stairs to her apartment, I asked, 'Where are your keys?'

'In my purse.' She thankfully had enough sense to bring her purse and her jacket, which were both
pretty much covered in vomit at this point also.

I dug her key out of her purse and unlocked her door. ‘Wren, I’m going to come in because I don’t think you should be alone right now.’

‘Really, or is it that you want to get into my pants?’

I just shook my head looking at the mess of her, knowing she was only offering because of how drunk and vulnerable she was. Hard pass. ‘I’m going to take a rain check tonight babe.’

I walked her straight to the bathroom. ‘No, I just don't want you alone right now.’

I put my sub on her desk, then walked into her bathroom and turned the shower on. She had enough sense to start undressing in the tub as the water started to wash away her filth.

I took the opportunity to get her some clean clothes from her dresser and a towel from a shelf next to her bathroom. I walked back in to find her standing there without anything on. ‘Here are some things. I’ll be out there.’

‘You don't need to go. It’s not like you haven’t seen it all before, and have been trying to. Here, I'm handing it to you.’

‘I’ve apologized for that Wren.’

‘I know, now I’m the one apologizing.’

‘You have nothing to be sorry for.’ I closed the shower curtain over, put the toilet lid down and took a seat. I figured it would be better to stay close in case she fell. ‘Why are you drinking like that in the first place?’

When she didn’t answer for a few moments, I nipped out to the main room and took one of the bottles of Gatorade and opened it before giving it to her in the shower. She still hadn’t answered my question but didn’t bother to pull the curtain closed. Instead, she stood under the water, sipping the drink I'd given her.

‘Wren?’ I stood and looked at her, standing in the shower, her eyes closed as the water cascaded down around her.

I detached the showerhead and rinsed her body, making sure she was clean. She was so far gone at this point; it was hard for her to even talk.

I got her out of the shower, wrapping her arms around my neck, and wrapped the towel around her before I lifted her and placed her on her feet, leading her into her bedroom, sitting her on her bed.

I dressed her in a pair of shorts and a t-shirt I found in her dresser, and then tried to dry her hair like I saw her do many times on the beach. I’d never done this before. I had no idea if I was doing it right. All I knew was that I wanted to get the water from her hair. The last thing I wanted was for her to be cold or uncomfortable. She was going to be in a world of hurt tomorrow enough as it was.

‘I got you,’ I reminded her.

‘Eli,’ she slurred, her head wobbling.

‘Don't worry, Wren, I'm here. I got you. I'm not going to leave you,’ I assured her. ‘Unless of course, you want me to leave, in which case, I’ll call Ms. Melody or Mr. Strickey to come take care of you.

‘I got sick.’ She reached out and held on to me.

‘Yes, because you drink too much.’

‘I know. I always drink too much today.’

‘Today? As in every day?’

‘No just today, this day. I’m alone today.’

‘I’ve got you. You’re not alone.’

‘Eli, I am alone. I'm all alone. They died and left me alone. No one cared. They all left me alone.
No one cares except Jax.’
I heard her say his name before, on the island. He was the guy I thought was her boyfriend, but she insisted they were best friends who were like family. But Wren being Wren, she didn’t get personal. That was our deal. There were no personal things ever exchanged.
‘That’s your best friend?’ I questioned.
‘Yeah, but he’s just as fucked up today as I am…’ and she let out a sob. I hated to see her like this. I wrapped my arms around her and held her tight. ‘You have me.’
‘If only I had you. I don’t have you, because I can’t have you. But I do want you, just so you know. I just can’t. And that’s probably good, because people just die on me. And I really don’t want you to die, because then I’d be alone again.’
Her words were killing me, cutting me to the core. This sweet beautiful girl was so broken, and no matter how tightly I held her, she wasn’t going to fit back together how she once had been. She’d been like this for a while. I could tell her exterior shell was hard and impenetrable from years of fortifying herself. It was why it was so easy for her to take our holiday hook up as just a fling, even when we both felt the spark. The chemistry that was off the charts between us from the first time I took her hand on the plane.
‘No Wren, you do have me, however you want me, however we can have each other. You will always be able to count on me for the big important things, you understand. I’m always going to be here for you. I am going to stay here tonight and make sure you are safe. And forever, I will make sure you are protected. I don’t want anything to hurt you and no one can hurt you. You will never be alone.’
I laid her down, covering her with her blanket. The things she was saying weighed heavy on my mind. It was true, I had suspected that her parents had died, but I didn’t know how they died.
I needed to get her to drink some water. It was hard to let her go, even knowing it was only going to be for a brief moment, but it was worth it. I got her to finish the bottle of Gatorade she had started in the shower in addition to two Advil.
I would have to wake up throughout the night to make sure she drank more or ensure she hadn’t been sick again.
As it was she was going to be in a world of hurt tomorrow, thankfully she wasn’t teaching.
But I now knew why she was so drunk. She was likely just trying to dull the pain of what was likely the most painful day of her life. I knew all about chasing that feeling of nothingness that lay at the bottom of an empty bottle all too well.
I shouldn’t have drank as much as I had, but it was unavoidable. Everything had become so compounded over the past few months; the lockdown had only intensified all of that. Given the massive hangover I was dealing with, a longer lockdown might have helped alleviate how rough I was feeling this morning. While many restrictions were lifted, we weren’t able to cross state borders and were strongly encouraged to stay within our own regions still. I unfortunately took advantage of this by venturing into that bar last night. The timing couldn’t have been better. I was getting depressed and anxious about more than just being campus-bound. The end of February was always the hardest time of year for me.

I remembered everything from last night...the way he calmed me, ensured I got home safely and hadn’t left me to be taken advantage of by some local guy. I wasn’t big on one night stands, but the anniversary of my parents’ death had resulted in more than one over the years. I was mortified that I had vomited all over his car, a car that he didn’t eat in, his baby, and pride and joy. I could only imagine how pissed off he was going to be with me for ruining it in such a spectacular way.

As much as I pressured him to let me have a one-night stand, he resisted and just wanted to be the rock I needed him to be, even after I lost all my inhibitions by throwing myself onto him last night. His rejection was both a welcomed relief and a disappointment. There was no winning with this guy. My body craved him, yet my mind wouldn't allow it to happen.

My words flowed last night as he held me in his arms, assuring me I wasn’t alone. But the truth was, I was alone and always would be.

Covering me with my blanket, he laid next to me, holding me securely in his arms. I’d never felt so content and cared for since before I’d lost everything that mattered to me.

‘You should sleep,’ Eli had whispered in my ear. ‘I’m not going anywhere unless you want me to.’ I hugged his arms to me tighter. ‘No, please, stay. I don’t want to be alone, tonight of all nights.’

‘I’m here, if you need to talk, or if you just need me to hold you. I’ll do that as long as it takes.’

I laid in his arms for a while, letting his words sink in, and the feeling of contentment helped sober me as I intermittently took sips of the Gatorade he’d had the foresight to get me.

‘I was just sixteen,’ I started, laying back into his arms. ‘They went all out for my sweet sixteen. My parents took me and a few girls who were as close to friends as I had to New York City, as we lived in Pennsylvania at that point. They made a whole weekend of it. We rented a hotel suite, ordered room service, had a spa day and went to see Mamma Mia! on Broadway; it was the show that we would be performing for the spring musical. It had been a fun weekend. My parents were exceptional. Despite their hectic schedules, they always put me and my sister, Piper, first. There wasn’t a day that went by that I didn’t question if they loved me or not. It wasn’t hard to see we were their world. Dad had a work thing; there was always a work thing. We traveled a lot with him, and most of the time it was awesome. We got to see the world, but on this particular trip, I had a scheduling conflict because of the musical I was performing in. I was playing the character Sophie, and it was high school, so understudies weren’t a thing. My parents agreed to let me stay at home for the weekend as they would be back on Monday in time to pick me up from school. They came to opening night on Friday but had to depart right after dropping me off at home. A few hours later…’
trailed off, letting out a sob. I’d only ever retold this story once, to Lana many years ago. Even when I told Cassy about my family, I didn’t go into this level of detail. She knew they had died.

‘They all died, my parents and my sister, along with all the others on the flight. Jax’s Dad, their other best friend and his family.’ I wiped my eyes, thankful I wasn’t looking at Eli. I couldn't have taken his pitying looks. ‘I didn’t even find out until I took a taxi to the school the next morning to prepare for our matinee performance. It was the vice principal who told me. No one from my father’s so-called team had bothered to call me. They were too concerned with the media inquiries. Jax’s father was my guardian named in the will. My father was estranged from his family, not like they were capable of taking care of me, and my mother grew up in the foster system with no family to speak of. Jax was on a cultural exchange in New Zealand with his mother as a chaperone. It took over a day to track them down and another four days to get them back home to Pennsylvania between all the flight delays, a mechanical problem in Hawaii and then a snowstorm that shut down airports on the east coast. In all that time, no one came to check on me. No one called me. Business associates of my father’s had made plans for his funeral, and not once did they reach out to me. I missed my parents' own funeral because I was an afterthought. Jax’s mom was so pissed when she got back to town and took charge.’

‘I’m so sorry.’ Eli’s voice was strained with emotions. ‘That’s terrible. Who does that to a little girl.’

‘People, I learned in the months after their death, my father was in the process of firing.’ I finally turned in his arms to face him. ‘Jax’s mom, Michelle, took me home as soon as they got back to our town and petitioned the court for temporary guardianship, and then I moved in with them for a time. It was a legal nightmare, dealing with my father’s will and my mother’s son, my half-brother, and his father.’ I shook my head, not wanting to get into that ugly mess. ‘I was to become a ward of the state, but at that point, I was sixteen. On the advice of Charlie, a lawyer Jax’s dad had been dealing with for almost a year, and who is now like family to us, I applied for and was given emancipation. By that time, I’d already been here at Wendell, so I endured my time here before I went on to Northwestern in Chicago to try and discover who Wren Price was and how she was going to leave her mark on the world.’

My time at Wendell hadn’t been great. I was the daughter who lived, a child who many news outlets reported had died. My blond hair, light blue eyes and pale complexion, along with the fact I was supposed to be dead, earned me the name Ghost.

And that’s how I felt for the three years I spent here. Jax had it easier than I did. He had friends, was popular and embraced his new life without his father. I, on the other hand, just wanted to retreat and leave the past behind, a past that ultimately took my entire family from me.

‘And what have you found out about yourself?’ Eli looked down with a huge smile on his face. ‘That I can’t hold my liquor, have pretty shitty judgment, even worse choices in men, or as the case may be most recently, teenage boys…’

‘You hurt me.’ He laughed. ‘But it can’t be all bad, because when I look at you, I see nothing but greatness.’

‘You're kind, and seeing me through rose-colored glasses.’ I snuggled into him, feeling myself starting to sober up after expelling most of the alcohol in my stomach all over Eli and his car.

‘Try to get some sleep. You’re going to need your strength tomorrow,’ Eli encouraged, adjusting our bodies so that we were comfortable.

The emotional toll the past few days and tonight took on me had me falling peacefully into a deep and calm sleep. This time of year, my dreams usually haunted me, preventing me from sleeping, but
knowing Eli was holding me together, I was able to get a solid sleep for the first time in over a week.

When I awoke the next morning, he was gone, but he’d left a note on a piece of torn notebook paper between a new bottle of Gatorade and a pack of Advil.

Wren,

Drink as much as you can and take two pills.
I have practice but will bring you breakfast before class.
Text me if you need me.
E, xox

Sitting up slowly, I did as the note instructed and looked at the time on my phone that he must have set up to charge next to my bed. It was almost seven in the morning. Opening my messages, I saw one sent in the middle of the night.

JAX: I love you.

It was a simple message that said everything. He wasn’t an emotional guy and didn’t get gushy, but when I needed it, he broke out the big words, and that was as big as they got in either of our books.

WREN: Love you too, bro. Thanks! Thinking of you. Xx

I laid back down, and it wasn’t long before sleep claimed me once again but only briefly. Eli had returned with a fast-food breakfast sandwich that I knew he would have had to leave campus and drive to get, or have it delivered, which I figured was the most probable seeing as his car was likely unusable until professionally cleaned.

‘For when you're feeling well enough to eat.’ He placed the sandwich on my nightstand with a large coffee. He was already dressed for class and freshly showered. ‘How’s the head?’

I winced. ‘It’s been better. Thankfully I don’t have to teach today.’

‘Shall I check back in on you at lunch?’

I slowly sat up and shook my head. ‘No, thanks. I don’t want anyone to see you.’ His face fell, but I took his hand by instinct, not bothering to drop it once I realized what I had done. ‘Eli, I really appreciate what you did for me last night, and I’d like to ask you to keep what I told you between the two of us please.’

‘Of course. I’d never betray your confidence, and there’s no need to thank me, Wren. I’d do anything to protect you and make sure you were okay.’

‘I will be; this is just a hard week for me is all.’

He looked at me intently. ‘Yeah, I get that now. I’m just glad I was here for you.’

We heard the first bell ring out in the distance. ‘I should get going, but text me if you need anything.’

I wasn’t going to text him. It had been a mistake letting him stay here with me, confiding in him and using him to chase away the monsters that tormented my dreams. If only he wasn’t my student, or a high school student in general, he might have made the perfect boyfriend for me. He was caring in a way no other guy had ever been with me in the past. He didn’t push to find out information, even when I was telling him about my family. He didn’t need all the little details, not that he was going to get them. Some things needed to stay buried, at least for now.

There would come a day when I’d open up about my parents, about their careers, about everything, but I wasn’t there yet, and I wasn’t sure he was the one who I’d open up to, even if it felt like he could be. The whole student-teacher thing had me thrown. It was a sick joke the universe was playing on me, testing me. For what, I still hadn’t worked it out.
It was just after noon when there was a knock at the door. Rolling my eyes, I remained in bed, not wanting Eli to get caught and out us or my indiscretions the night before to anyone, let alone students or other staff. It was bad enough Helen and Chris already knew. It wasn't until I heard the distinct sound of a baby fussing, that I threw my blankets off me and rushed to open my apartment door. Helen stood there, baby carrier in one hand, and a large pizza box in the other. ‘Eli mentioned to Chris that you had a rough night.’ She smiled at me as she walked in, allowing me to take the baby still in the carrier from her and sitting him on the love seat next to me.

‘He did, did he?’

‘Yeah, apparently he was really worried and didn’t want to come back to check on you again, so he reached out to Chris.’

‘I bet that went over like a lead balloon.’ I mocked, rolling my eyes, knowing how threatening Chris had been last time toward Eli, and rightly so. ‘Eli must have been rather worried to take that route.’

‘I think Chris is feeling like I am right about now. Disappointed that we’d been too caught up with the baby to remember the date. I’m sorry. How are you?’ She handed me a plate with two large slices of pepperoni and mushroom pizza, my favorite.

“Well you didn’t forget my favorite pizza, so all is forgiven,’ I said, taking a bite and chewing the cheesy carb goodness. ‘But, it could have been worse. Eli found me and brought me home, but not before I vomited all over the passenger seat of his car.’ I laughed as I took another bite.

‘Karma is a bitch,’ Helen laughed, eating her own pizza. ‘I guess that’s why he’s out there now with some guy, probably getting totally ripped, looking to triple charge him.’

‘Serves him right. What nineteen-year-old needs to be driving a hundred-grand Audi?’ I shook my head. I wasn’t big into cars, yet knew more than I cared to, thanks to Jax’s slight obsession with them.

After inhaling the pizza, I took the baby out of his car seat and snuggled with him, playing with his little fingers and spoiling him with kisses. It had been a long time since I'd been around a baby. I was young myself when Jax’s mom had her third child, her second with her husband. Jax had been a surprise. And while his dad always took care of them, his parents never lived together, yet got along great and had been successful at the whole co-parenting thing until his death exactly nine years ago last night.

‘So,” Helen prompted. ‘Truthfully, how are you doing?’

‘On the whole dead family front?’ I looked up to her and shrugged. ‘Same as any other year. Maybe slightly better off than previous years…’ I trailed off. ‘I don’t know, Eli was really sweet last night. It surprised me, and I had zero fear that he’d hurt me, quite the opposite actually.’

‘Meaning?’

I laughed. ‘Meaning I was stark naked in the shower trying to rinse vomit out of my hair and he helped me when I tried to…’ I felt my face getting red. ‘Let’s just say he could have taken advantage of me, but he didn’t, even when I bluntly asked him to.’ I buried my face in my hands. ‘Helen, this is bad.’

‘You were drunk.’

‘We both know that’s no excuse because we wouldn’t have let him get away with that.’ I shook my head, running my hands through my knotted hair. ‘I don’t think I should be here any longer. It’s not appropriate.’

Her face fell, and I reached out to take her hand. ‘I can find you a replacement. Hell, I’ll even pay someone extra to come in. Don’t worry. I’m not going to leave you high and dry and make you return to work before it’s time.’
‘I think you should stay.’ She looked up to me. ‘I mean, yeah, get your hormones in check. Do what you have to do, without actually doing him, at least until he graduates, but please stay. I love having you so close again.’

I took a deep breath and held it for a few beats before letting it all out. ‘I just can’t see it ending well. I shouldn’t have stayed for as long as I have. What if the school finds out?’

The baby started to fuss and she took him from me, latching him on to feed him. ‘We’re not going to say anything and if Eli was, he would have by now. But I get the feeling he wants you to stick around just as much as we do and knows that can only happen if the secret is protected. No one is going to find out because the only people who know anything, aren’t about to start slipping up now.’
I didn’t think it was a good idea when Chris had asked me to be a chaperone for the lacrosse team and to help manage all the logistics of rooms, meals and transportation when they attended the state championships. I repeatedly expressed this, even on the morning that we left on a chartered bus. However, with everyone else either being sick or away with other teams, there were very few left to attend, so there I was.

With lockdown restrictions lifted for sporting events, we were in Worcester, Massachusetts for the state lacrosse championships, representing the school at the state finals. It was a big deal, and I was incredibly proud of the team, especially of how dedicated Eli had been over the past few months, praise I’d also heard from various teachers.

It’s been two months since Eli showed up drunk in my room terrifying me and three weeks since he found me drunk in a bar and took care of me, ensuring my safety and not asking for or expecting anything in return. Even after the peace offering, I had to give it to him; he was still respecting my need for distance, giving it to me, but checking in on me almost daily either in person at the end of class or in a simple text message. Many times, reminding me that I wasn’t alone and he was there if all I needed to do was talk. There were no sexual advances or crude remarks, and for that I was grateful, even if I could have used the distraction or comic relief on the bad days. And there were bad days. Since the anniversary of my parent’s death, it had been hard on me, harder than in years past. I think it had to do with being at the school where my emotions had been so fresh, where I had been without them for the first time. Added to that, I had someone who I wanted, who cared for me, yet I knew we couldn't be together, even if I broke all the rules and allowed it.

The night he took me back to my room and made sure I was safe and not left for prey, something changed between the two of us. He no longer looked at me with a look of disgust and disappointment on his part for what he almost did to me. I was now met with a smile of respect and a hint of lust.

Lust was something we both clearly shared; it was a feeling I had to deal with every single day. I knew when he walked into class without even seeing him.

Between the time of the incident in my bed and the time he saved me at the bar, it was like he didn’t exist. He was there physically, but he was withdrawn from me. He sat silently in the back of the class, never offering opinions or participating in class discussions. He poured it all out in his assignments, so I knew he was paying attention, probably more so than any of the other students. He was such a great athlete, but I knew he was going somewhere after he was done playing sports for a living. He was smart, and I saw it in his other grades as well. As teachers do, we discussed students when putting together progress reports. He was destined for great things. He was such a great leader both on and off the field.

For the two days while we were away from the school, I organized the boys from the hotel, to the field, to meals and back to the hotel. And while at the hotel, it was like herding cats trying to keep them contained and behaving in a respectful manner that the school could be somewhat proud of. On the third day, the boys won the state lacrosse championships. They were undefeated for the entire year, winning all games, tournaments public and private.

I knew he would be going to Dartmouth in the fall. The coaching staff had been there to see the
final game of his high school career. They had taken him out to dinner along with his brother who had driven up for the day, and I suspected was driving him back to the hotel.

I headed down to the lobby to settle up a bill for the morning, waiting in line for my turn at the reception desk. Instantly, I knew he was there without needing to look around. It had been raining heavily and when I turned to look at him, he was shaking the water off his jacket.

‘Hey Miss P.’ He nodded as he walked by me, looking up to see a group of his teammates exiting the elevator.

I turned in their direction as they went to walk by. ‘Where are you guys going?’
‘The school reserved non-smoking rooms,’ one of the guys complained.
‘Well, you shouldn’t be smoking anyway.’
‘Miss P, come on,’ the same guy groaned.
‘It’s pouring out there,’ Eli said, shaking his wet coat on one of them.

‘Five minutes, I’m going to be here settling up a bill. If you are not back by the time I finish, I will come out and drag you up,’ I warned in my not-so-scary voice, pointing at each of them in the group.
‘But I didn't see you, I didn’t hear you, I know nothing of this.’
‘Naw Miss P, it will only take us a minute to smoke this joint.’
‘Wait, wait, wait, no. Cigarettes are one thing. You can’t be smoking weed.’
‘Miss P, technically we can’t be drinking alcohol either, but you know we’re doing that.’ Another one of them winked at me while the other all smirked, including Eli.

I huffed out a breath.

‘I’ll go make sure they come back up,’ Eli offered. I knew from the time on the island he didn't smoke anything, so I could be sure he didn’t want to join them to partake.

‘Okay, thanks.’ He nodded, following his team members outside, glancing back once to look at me before turning the corner and walking out the front doors of the hotel.

It took some time for the bills to be settled up and amalgamated. The guys had all come back in and were upstairs when I heard the elevator doors ping open again. Eli was changed from his wet clothing wearing a hoodie and a pair of black sweatpants, holding his key card. ‘Can I help you?’ the other receptionist offered, as my final receipts were being printed out.

‘Yeah, my key card stopped working.’ Eli handed it over and told her his room number.

She reprogramed it and handed it back just as I was being given an envelope of papers that the school's accounting department would need.

‘How was dinner?’ I asked, following him toward the elevator, knowing that it would have been uncomfortable to wait for the elevator in complete awkward silence standing next to each other.

‘Good. Better than the pizza I'm sure the guys ordered.’ He was spot on, and continued, ‘It was nice of the coaching staff to come down. They have one of the best programs around, so I’m happy I’ll be able to be a part of it in the fall.’

‘Have you been to the campus?’

He nodded as the elevator doors opened and we stepped in. ‘Yeah, I've been up a few times for summer camps. They want me to come back to do an official signing. They want pics for some social media shit. I told them I would go, not that I’m taking any financial scholarship from them, but more just signing to the team’

‘Why?’ I asked, hitting the button for the fifteenth floor.

He shrugged. ‘My family can pay. Why not give some kid whose family can't have a chance to attend college?’ I smiled at his big heart. ‘Plus, I’ll be able to see Otis on the way back, make a weekend out of it before hockey takes over his life entirely.’
‘Is he good?’
Eli nodded and smirked. ‘Yeah, he’s really good. He’s entering the NHL draft this year. I mean, he could have for the past few years, but he really wanted his degree, plus delaying it has been a slap to our dad’s face, so he’s killing two birds with one stone, ya know. He wanted to prove he’s got the talent and not just being drafted because our dad’s high up with the league. Nepotism at this best, but naw, he’s really good.’

‘So why didn’t you do hockey?’
‘Because I didn’t want that pressure, and I wanted to piss off my dad, punish him for cheating on my mom. This was the only way I knew how then...get back at him through hockey, or lack thereof. I was always better than Otis, even being 4 years younger. I could have already been drafted when I quit a few years ago. I was on the trajectory, and I was a hell of a lot better than Otis, might still be, but I haven't laced up in a while.’

Just then, the elevator jerked and the lights flickered before going out completely. I let out a scream and before the emergency lights came back on, I was wrapped in Eli’s arms.

‘I think it’s a power cut,’ he said, hitting various buttons without producing any change. He opened the phone box and picked up the phone. ‘I saw some lightning when the guys were out and heard thunder also.

‘Hello?’ a nervous voice came from the other end of the line.
‘Hi, we’re stuck in the elevator.’
‘Ok sir, I’m sorry to hear that,’ the voice said. ‘There appears to be a power outage. I will call you back when I have more information.’
‘Thanks?’ Eli said and hung the phone back on the wall, ‘Did you hear?’
I nodded and sat down on the floor, ‘Might as well get as comfortable as we can. This might be a while.’

‘It’s not surprising. The weather is horrible out,’ he commented, and I started to laugh.
‘What’s so funny?’
‘Just that we’ve resorted to talking about the weather.’
He took a seat next to me, so close that our legs were touching.
‘Wren,’ he started before I corrected him.
‘It’s Miss Price.’
‘It’s Wren. I’m Eli.’ He looked straight into my eyes. ‘Listen, can we talk, like really talk, like we are now? Please?’
‘Eli, you know as well as I do that, that isn’t a good idea.’
‘I know, but…’ His voice cracked and he tucked his chin into his chest looking down to the floor.
‘Wren, I’m so sorry.’
I couldn't look at him. It was getting too serious. ‘I bet you’re sorry that you didn’t stay up with your friends partying in the room party that I know is going on. But don’t worry, I’m not going to say anything.’ I was deflecting, trying to change the subject.
‘Yeah, they are all getting drunk, and I haven’t had anything to drink in months, since that night. I’m not about to do that.’

‘No?’
‘No. Last time I had anything to drink I fucked up the best thing that ever happened to me.’
‘Eli, I’m not the best…’
‘Shut up. I'll be the one to determine that. And you are, you don’t see it, but you are the only person who I can talk to like this. You don’t judge; you just see me. You have since the first day I met you.’
‘Eli you don’t even know me.’
‘Wren, I do.’
‘Eli, Wren isn’t even my first name, so trust me when I say, no, you don’t.’ I shocked myself by
letting this piece of me slip.
‘Then what is your name?’
‘I can’t say.’
‘So what, you have a fake identity?’
‘No, Wren Price is on my birth certificate, they are just my middle names. My first and last name, I
just don’t use those, not anymore.’
‘Why not?’
‘I just don’t. Can’t we just leave it at that?’
‘You don’t trust me?’
‘Eli, think of everything that’s happened. Of course I don’t.’
‘Wren.’ I could tell he was struggling. His voice was cracking, and he was fidgeting. I could tell
he wanted to reach out and touch me, but every time he tried he snapped his hand away or moved his
legs further from me before they found their way next to mine again. He was struggling to keep the
promise to not touch me, to keep away.
And it broke my heart because I wanted him to. As much as I still needed the space, as much as I
didn't trust him, as much as he hurt and terrified me, was as much as his touch soothed me and gave
me hope for a future full of promise and pleasures.
I didn’t want to see him like this. I did care about him, as everything he just said was absolutely
true. I knew if we had met under different circumstances, or if they were different at this very moment,
we wouldn't still be chatting in an elevator. We wouldn't be talking at all, but we would be in my
hotel room, together. I knew if it were different, beyond a shadow of a doubt, I would be with him.
That we would be together, that he would know everything.
I’d let him in like I hadn’t let anyone in, in years. Very few people knew. I didn't need the pity; I
didn't want the pity. I reached out and I wrapped my hand around his forearm. ‘Eli, I think we need to
leave well enough alone.’
‘Can you forgive me?’ His voice was pained. ‘Because I still can’t remember that night. You tell
me I didn't do it. But your looks tell another story. The way you look at me tells me I terrify you.’
‘Because you do. Not just because of what almost happened, but because…’
‘Because what Wren?’
‘Because I do have feelings for you, but I can’t act on them. You understand that, right?’
‘No, I don’t,’ he hissed. ‘I mean, yes, I do understand it, but we can keep it under wraps. We have
the weekends. I can come to your room or we can leave the school.’
‘Eli, we can’t.’
‘We’ll see about that,’ he huffed out in a low breath.
‘Don’t try to manipulate me,’ I scolded back
‘I need you in my life.’
‘Eli, you are going to college in the fall. In September you will be a freshman, and trust me, you
will not even remember who I am.’
‘Wren, I can guarantee you that there’s not a day that I will live and take a breath on this earth that
I will not think of you. You don’t understand. You are ingrained in me; you are a part of me. I met you
and it was like I was existing, and now I'm living, mind you it's felt like a hell loop as of late, but you
awoke something inside of me. You don’t understand what you have done. You have crawled under
my skin; you’ve gotten to me. Wren, I was falling in love with you.’
‘I think you need to stop.’
‘You can’t stop love. The heart wants what it wants.’
‘Oh, are we quoting Selena Gomez now?’ I laughed, trying to brush it off.
‘You know what I mean. Don’t cheapen this.’ His voice got softer, and he turned, brushing a strand of hair out of my face, letting my cheek rest in his palm.
‘Eli, you need to... go do you...’
‘By doing you, that’s how I do me, and not just in the sexual sense either. Wren, this time, stuck in an elevator with you, right now, this means more to me than anything over the last few months. More than winning fucking states earlier today. I played for you. I’ve been playing shit. Maybe you don’t see it, or you don’t care. Knowing you were there, watching me, cheering me on...I need that, I need you. I want you. What can I do to make that happen?’
‘Eli, you can’t do anything. You’re my student.’
‘And what happens when I’m not,’ he questioned me.
‘You'll be at Dartmouth, and I'll be...’
‘You'll be what?’
‘I don't know.’
‘You'll be where?’
‘New York, working eighty-hour weeks at the agency, trying to make a name for myself in the literary world, just like you’ll be crazy busy making a name for yourself on the lacrosse field.’ I spelled out what our futures looked like, independent from one another because that’s the only way I could look at the future without going crazy.
‘Wren, let me in.’
‘You don’t understand,’ I screamed.
‘That’s because you’re not letting me in,’ he yelled back, the sound echoing off the walls in the enclosed space.
I turned away from him, resting my head back on the wall, feeling him take my hand in his. ‘I’m sorry. I don't want to fight.’
I remained silent for some time, wondering how long we’ve been in the elevator and cursing the fact I left my phone in my room to charge. He pulled me closer to him and onto his lap, cradling me and holding me close. ‘Is this okay?’ he asked, positing me so we were both comfortable.
I looked around. ‘Don’t worry.’ He smirked. I already looked for cameras. There are none.’ Trusting his word, I rested my head on his strong broad shoulder and hooked an arm around his back. ‘I just miss you, Wren, or whatever your name is.’
‘I go by Wren now,’ I told him. ‘My best friends call me Wren, well aside from Jax, because, well, he’s knowing me since I was born and just can’t get in the habit or remember most of the time.’ That wasn’t entirely the truth, but I wasn’t about to go into the details behind my given name. ‘And I miss you too,’ I admitted, as hard as it was.
‘Do you think, once I graduate and we’ve left this place behind, do you think there’s a chance for us?’
I looked up to him, reading his face and looking into his eyes. They weren’t lying to me. He really wanted this, a future with me. At that moment he leaned down and closed the small distance between our mouths, joining them ever so lightly, allowing me to make the next move, showing me I was in control and the ball was firmly positioned in my court.
I raked a hand through his hair, which was in desperate need of being cut. While I like the scruffy
look and the extra hair to hold, I had just become accustomed to him maintaining his popper clean-cut prep school looks. I pulled him closer to me, pressing my lips against his and kissing him back like we had done time and time again on the island. He didn’t take long to react, kissing me back and holding my body close to his. How I missed this, his lips, his hands on me, wrapped in his arms. There were many other things about him that I missed also, but I wasn’t about to undress in an elevator to show him just how much I missed them. I felt him growing hard under me, a sure tell sign he was enjoying our kiss.

‘Fuck, Wren, I want you so much.’ He was breathless as he pulled away from my lips and started kissing my neck, cupping my breast over my shirt.

I moved my body so that I was now straddling him, his hands sliding down my back, holding on to each of my ass cheeks, giving them a playful squeeze. ‘Do you have any idea what those skirts and high waisted pants did to me in class? This ass looks fabulous bare, in bikini bottoms and apparently covered in teasing teaching clothing. I would spend half the class thinking about my grandmother just so I wouldn’t rip through my pants with the raging hard-on you provoke in me.’ He held me down and grounded said enlarged member into the top of my thighs. ‘And now, these tight little yoga pants have done it. If we didn’t need to walk out of this elevator in front of people, I’d have already ripped them off you.’

Feeling him press against my clit had me moaning in longing for what I knew he was capable of. ‘This really is the worst kind of tease there is.’

He reached between us with one hand, adjusting himself and poking at the waistband of my pants. ‘It doesn’t just have to be a tease…’

‘Eli, what if the doors open?’

‘Relax. We’d hear them trying to open the doors, or feel the elevator move. Just give me a little access. We both know my fingers are more than capable of getting you off.’

I groaned into his lips, knowing he was absolutely right. ‘Yeah, but it’s your dick I’m really jonesing for.’ The confession left my mouth before I had a chance to even think it, let alone stop myself from uttering the words.

‘There’s my dirty girl,’ his voice lustful.

‘I’m not…’ I started to protest, but his lips cut me off with a kiss as he dipped his fingers under the waistband of my yoga pants.

‘Do you want me to continue?’ he asked, resting our foreheads together.

‘I should say no…’ I whined. ‘But I want you too bad.’

‘So, can I take that as a yes?’ he asked, looking at me. ‘Wren, I’m not doing anything without your implicit consent from here on out.’

‘Yes, Jesus, yes.’

‘It’s Eli.’ He smirked before his lips found mine again, and his fingers were already parting me, his thumb finding my clit in record time and two fingers slipping into me. ‘Fuck, you’re so wet.’

‘Yeah, well, you might need to think of your gran during class, but I need to change my panties after the way you eye fuck me from the back of the room.’

He laughed a throaty laugh, finding a rhythm with his hand that had my orgasm building. I should try and make it last, savor the pleasure by drawing it out, but I was greedy, and my body needed the release only he was capable of giving me. I was climbing and soon I would be soaring off the edge, falling into oblivion.

‘That’s it, baby,’ he encouraged, as I found myself, writhing and riding his fingers, greedily kissing him as I started my freefall, letting out a moan that he drowned out by a deep kiss. He didn't
let up until he knew I was well and truly satiated.

I fell into his chest, panting and trying to catch my breath, his fingers still down my pants. ‘Just
give me a minute.’

‘You can have a lifetime if that’s what you want.’ He kissed my temple and rubbed my back with
his free hand.

When I was back in control of my body and mental functions, I tried to pull away from him, ‘No, I
like you like this.’ He held me in place, but removed his fingers from my pants.

‘You don’t want the favor returned?’ I asked, walking my fingers down his stomach, still covered
by his t-shirt. Clearly I hadn't regained control of my mental functions after all; my libido was still
diving this train into the side of a mountain.

He looked at me across the small distance he’d let me put between us. ‘First, that wasn’t a favor. I
love doing that. And second, I didn’t do that just to get a hand job in return.’

‘I wasn’t thinking of just a hand job.’ I licked my lips in a circular motion.

He let out a low guttural sound. ‘Fuck, Wren, you’re killing me.’

My fingers were at the top of his sweatpants and creeping further under. ‘Yes or no Mr.
Trembley?’

‘Yes, like you ever need to ask me.’ His voice was breathy, and he was moving his hips to pull his
pants down just enough to free his massive dick.

I’d miss this thing. I smiled to myself as I took the hard length in my hand, giving it a firm stroke to
get accustomed to it once again. It really was remarkable, the tip already glistening with pre-cum. I
greedily licked, swirling my tongue around his tip before taking him into my mouth, working him in
further and further back until he was hitting the back of my throat. As many times as I tried on this
island, he was simply too big to take further, not that I think he minded much. he always seemed to
thoroughly enjoy himself when I sucked him off.

‘Atta girl.’ He held my hair back from my face, and I could see him looking down at me with
wonderment.

I took one of my hands and started to stroke his base, letting my tongue and mouth work his tip and
as much of the shaft as my mouth could physically take, which wasn't much. He moved his hips
slightly, setting the pace he wanted, his hand pulling my hair anytime I took him deep and letting out
an audible moan when the suction was driving him insane.

‘Babe, I’m not going to last much longer,’ he warned, but I didn’t need it. I swallowed him before,
and I wasn't about to stop and deny him that. Plus, a puddle of cum on the elevator floor would be a
dead giveaway as to how we spent our time during the power outage.

Just then, there was a knocking on the door and the lights were flickering on. ‘Now or never,’ I
managed to mumble right before I felt him jerk forward, emptying in my mouth, trying to muffle his
own distinct pleasure.

We felt the elevator car start to move and looked at one another with a panicked look, one where I
adjusted my clothing as I moved away from him, and he pulled up his pants. We had just made it to
opposite sides of the elevator when the doors opened. Ted and a few of the team members were
standing there looking concerned. I stood up, envelope in hand, smoothed my hair and stepped out of
the elevator.

‘Are you alright?’ Ted asked, looking me over.

I rolled my eyes. ‘Of course. Eli didn’t actually bore me to death with talk of Dartmouth.’ It
wasn’t a lie; we did speak of the fall. But little did they all know, it was what we had been doing that
sparked life back into my dull existence.
‘Okay boys,’ Ted called out. ‘Lights out in five. Again, a great game today, but it’s time to call it a night. I don’t want to have to wake you all up in the morning.’

There was a text message waiting for me when I got back to my room.

**BAIT:** I’ll get stuck in an elevator with you anytime.

**BAIT:** Sweet dreams Babe, xx

What. Have. I. Done?
It had been three months. Three fucking months since I’d been buried deep inside Wren’s pussy, and I was developing carpal tunnel. Her blow job last week wasn’t enough to sustain me. Sure, I could go to Melissa, or just about any other girl at the school for anything from a hand job to a full-service orgie. All I had to do was simply ask, but I wasn’t interested. Wren had ruined me from ever enjoying the touch of another woman.

There really was such a thing as a unicorn pussy. I’d joked with her about it before, but here I was, a true believer. It wasn’t as scary as it should have been, given I wasn’t even twenty yet. I thought I had at least another decade of pussy before I had to lay claim to one and one alone. And yes, I would be faithful, not like my scumbag of a father. Little did I know, one would claim me.

Being stuck together in the elevator after the state championship was a turning point for us, it was alone time that the two of us needed. Since returning from state finals, she’d been keeping me at a physical distance, yet, was willing to text and even sext with me, but never on video, for fear someone would see or hear her, which I totally understood. I respected her limits with regard to that.

She had the morning off from teaching. Students were in class, and I had it on good authority that the administrative staff was off-campus for their weekly donut and coffee break at one of the local cafes.

I had a free period that I wasn’t interested in using to work on assignments. It was the first time our stars aligned like this. I hadn’t been back to this room since the night she had her drunken meltdown on the anniversary of her parent’s death. Even then I wasn’t supposed to be there, but she had been in no state to be left alone. I hadn’t noticed then, but she must have installed a heavy-duty lock after the night I almost took things past the line of no return.

She’d installed a deadbolt, to keep a deadbeat guy like myself out, all so that she could sleep at night. The thought of it made me sick to my stomach. Only truly horrible men do that to women.

As my key wasn’t working, I knocked and sent her a text message. She opened the door moments later with headphones on, classic Challenger blasting on the other end.

‘What are you doing here?’ she hissed, looking around and pulling me into the apartment. Sure enough, there was a deadbolt on the door, I eyed it then looked to her. ‘It was necessary at the time.’

‘Sorry.’ I was disgusted and disappointed with myself to the point I couldn’t look at her.

‘And I’ve forgiven you and appreciate you not drinking.’ She went to close her curtains in a rush.

‘But you really shouldn't be here.’

‘Admins are out, teachers and students are in class, I’ve got a free period...I think this is exactly where I need to be. Let’s work up an appetite before lunch.’ I took the headphones off her head, tossing them aside and taking her hoodie in my hands to help her out of it before she stopped me.

‘Eli, we’ve been over this.’

‘I need you so badly.’ I knew I sounded like a toddler, but I had no shame when it came to her.

‘All good things come to good boys who wait,’ she teased, trying to distance herself from me.

‘Easter break is still too far away,’ I complained, kissing her. Our school delayed March break and extended our Easter break into a two-week holiday for us this year. With Mom and Claude in the Middle East at the moment, I was going to be splitting my time between hanging out with Otis in Boston and the obligatory family dinner in New York with my sperm donor and his evil clone.
She smiled and pushed me away. ‘Break is tomorrow. I think you can manage. Now get out of here, and I’ll meet you after school then.’

She had promised me time together during our break, telling me it would be worth my while to wait. I fully intended to cash in on those promises, however, I was hoping to get a little sneak preview before the weekend. Wren had made up her mind long ago about us not being together at school, but I wasn’t about to make it easy for her to stick to her guns.

It had been the same thing with getting her to accept a ride into Boston at the start of our break. To me, it made sense to just pick her up at her door and head out, but she wasn’t having it, instead creating an elaborate plan to prevent anyone from seeing her accepting a ride from me, in my car or otherwise.

The following day, I met her at a gas station on the further end of town, one that no one who knew us should have been at. I was already waiting for her when her cab pulled up. She hauled her suitcase out of the back and rolled it to the door of the station, heading inside. I didn’t know this was part of the plan, but a few minutes later she emerged with a bag, clearly filled with snacks for the road.

‘Seeing as you can’t go long without eating, I thought I’d help you out.’

I looked at all the food, and, while thoughtful, I was already panicking about messing up my car, the car I’d recently had professionally cleaned. ‘Don’t even think of telling me I can’t eat. If you can get my vomit out without anyone being any the wiser, you can take a vacuum to suck the crumbs off the seat.’

I rolled my eyes and started to dive off. ‘Buckle up.’

We chatted the entire drive, only stopping once for something more than snacks to hold us over until we got to Boston, where I was planning on taking her out for dinner at a proper restaurant for once.

I dropped my bags and sporting equipment off at Otis’s apartment before heading to an area near her friend’s house, driving around until we found a locally owned restaurant, something that was important for her to support since the global illness had forced many to close either temporarily or permanently. It showed her character that she was rooting for the underdog, and supporting local businesses now that everything was reopened. It just made me love her even more for it.

Settling on a Thai place, I parked the car and held her hand as we walked down the street and into the restaurant. It felt nice to just be normal and outside the restricting confines of campus, even more so after the lockdown in February.

We stayed eating, talking and drinking for far longer than I thought we would. I didn’t want to push my luck with my fake ID and only ordered a soda, which was a good thing, seeing as Wren confessed she didn’t have her driver’s license, which still boggled me.

Driving her to her best friend’s place, I was trying to go slow, not wanting our evening to end. I wasn’t going to presume that I could stay with her, or even visit for a few hours. I did the gentlemanly thing and carried her bag to the door where a tall, muscular man answered.

‘Wren.’ He smiled and looked up to me nodding.

I looked him over, confused as I was under the impression that her best friend was a female. ‘Hey Nolan. How’s it going?’

He opened the door further and ushered us into the house. ‘It’s going. Starting to slow down at the hospital, thank fuck!’ He sighed. ‘The girls are just in the kitchen making nachos and I think drinks.’ He closed the door behind us and extended his hand. ‘I’m Nolan, Zoe’s husband.’

He clarified that he wasn’t the friend, and I tried my best to hide the relief on my face as I shook his hand. ‘Eli.’
A petite, young-looking woman entered the hallway from what must have been the kitchen, her hair full of curls and wearing a Northwestern hoodie. I’d seen a framed picture of this woman, although she didn’t look much older than myself. This was who I assumed was the friend she was here to see.

‘Lovey,’ Wren beamed, hugging her friend who wore a huge smile and hugged her back, eyeing me as she did it. Wren pinched the hoodie. ‘Feeling nostalgic?’

She just shrugged and gave me a weak smile to which I extended my hand. ‘Hello, I’m Eli.’

‘She knows all about you.’ Wren turned to me and patted me on my chest.

‘Oh shit.’ Nolan looked at me, fisting his hand and bringing it to his mouth trying to stifle his laugh. ‘This is the kid?’ I glared at him. ‘No disrespect, but you just don’t look like a high school kid.’

‘I can assure you, I’m no kid,’ I bit out.

‘Maybe that’s your cue to go.’ Wren muttered.

Nonsense.’ A redhead entered the hallway, walking straight up to me. ‘If he can put up with Wren’s bullshit, he can last a few rounds of trivia with us.’ She looked me over. ‘Take your coat and boots off...we don’t bite.’

‘But I like it when you nibble.’ Nolan slapped her ass as she walked away.

I was surprised by the gesture and public comment. ‘You get used to it,’ Wren told me, to which I heard a small voice, whom I assumed to be Lana’s, retreating back to the kitchen add, ‘No you don’t.’ Wren looked over her shoulder. ‘Oh, that’s odd.’

‘What?’

‘Lana spoke.’

I took a seat on the sofa next to Wren. ‘Does she typically not?’

‘Not much, and not around new people.’

I looked around the huge house decorated with modern and high-end furniture. ‘So what’s the deal here?’

‘The house, my friends, what?’

‘Everything,’ I answered.

‘Lana’s my best friend...’

I cut her off, ‘I know that Everyone else.’

‘Well, Zoe, the redhead who so graciously offered for you to crash her coveted games night, is Lana’s sister, and Nolan is her husband. They have two kids, who I’m assuming are upstairs sleeping.’

‘You assume right, so keep the noise down.’ He pulled a monitor with a screen out from his back pocket and placed it on the table next to where Zoe had placed a large bowl of homemade guacamole and an even larger bowl of tortilla chips.

‘They all live together,’ she said in a low voice as Zoe pulled a box from a cupboard under the TV, and it all started to make sense. ‘Nolan is a doctor...’

‘Pediatrics.’ Nolan Smirked. ‘So if you need a check-up...’

‘Nolan.’ Zoe kicked him for me. ‘Stop, besides, look at him. He’s beat your ass any day of the week.’

Nolan puffed out a breath. ‘Only because I lived at the hospital all of February and couldn’t get a workout in.’

‘Mmm-hmm.’ Zoe rolled her eyes. ‘That’s it. Just keep telling yourself that.’

‘Sorry we can’t all train every day.’ He poked her in the hip.

‘These commoners just don’t get our dedication to our sport,’ Zoe said, taking a seat next to me on the sofa.
"I turned to look at her. 'What do you play?'

She smiled and looked between Wren and me, then back to Wren who responded, 'I didn’t tell him anything. He came in here blind.'

'I’m an Olympic swimmer, Zoe Fraser.'

'Fraser-Abbas,' Nolan corrected her,

I knew the name, sure I did. I just hadn’t made the connection or recognized her out of context, but now that she said her name, recognition dawned on me. 'Oh, yeah. I see it now. You just look different with your clothes on.'

I looked over to Nolan as I said it, and he saw red for a brief moment before nodding. 'Ok kid, game on.'

'Well, this night just got interesting,' Lana mumbled from her chair on the opposite side of Wren.

'You can always count on me to bring the entertainment.' Wren shrugged, diving into the nachos and guac.

As much as I enjoyed spending time in Boston with my brother, tonight turned out to be a good time without him even being there. It was odd, as we’d been inseparable for most of our lives, actually enjoying one another’s company, not merely spending time together because we were related. Even if we weren’t, he was the kind of guy you would want to be friends with. I knew tonight he would be home, taking it easy. Likely he got in a workout earlier in the evening, had a good meal and was watching something on Netflix.

I’m sure many of his teammates were doing the complete opposite, but that was what was going to separate them from working a mundane job, sitting at a desk from nine-to-five, and playing in the NHL or another professional hockey league as Otis would be doing this time next year. He had the drive in him, just as I did. I missed hockey occasionally, but found a new sport to master in lacrosse, and I too had the drive to make it as far as I could go, hoping to make it more mainstream in the years to come.

As we finished our board game, I got a text from my brother asking if I was staying at his place tonight and when I could be expected. 'Are you late for curfew?' Nolan asked me.

I shook my head. 'Nope, just your mom texting for a booty call.'

He raised his eyebrow and shook his head with a grin. 'Moms and teachers, boy you get around.'

He stood and took the baby monitor. 'I’m heading to bed. I’ve got early rounds tomorrow morning.'

He looked over to me, his playful manner replaced with a serious look on his face. 'Nice to meet you. Be kind to Wren.'

I winced playfully. 'You should be telling her to be kind to me. You have no idea the shit she gives me.'

'Not a chance. You wanna play in the big leagues, you gotta be prepared to get knocked around.'

I smirked a sly smile. 'She’s worth the bruising.'

As much as I didn’t want to leave Wren, I knew it was for the best. Otis needed to get to sleep, and I didn’t have a key to get into his apartment.

I kissed Wren goodnight and left with the promise to see her tomorrow evening where she was planning to accompany me to Otis's hockey game and dinner afterward. With any luck, it wouldn't end there.
I wish I could say I hadn’t been distracted and that Lana and I had had a productive day. I wish my thoughts hadn't been consumed by Eli and I could give feedback on chapters that required my attention before my client could proceed. I wish Eli and I had spent the night together.

I wish.

That’s all I was able to do because the truth was, he was all I was able to think about. Morning. Noon. And all night. It was now early evening, and I was waiting for him to pick me up. The day wasn’t a complete write-off. Lana and I did get some work done, and Kelsey came over for a working lunch where she filled us in on her unusual sex life and all that it entailed. It really should have been too much information, but it was exciting stuff. Especially after having to sideline my sex life because of the favor I was doing for Helen. I really hoped at the end of this it would prove to her how much I loved her and was grateful for all she had given me over the years. The icing on the cake was that I got to play with Zoe’s adorable children and let her do my hair and makeup.

She was fussing too much, to the point I had to remind her I was going to watch a hockey game and likely to some pub afterward for wings, pizza and beer, to which she joked that my invitation to spend the night at her house had been revoked, and Lana agreed with her. ‘Just pretend he’s not your student for the next two weeks and have some fun.’ That was her advice.

Easier said than done.

He was my student, and I knew that it was already going to be hard when we went back to school in two weeks. Hell, ever since the elevator it’s been damn near impossible to see him in class, in the gym and around campus without wanting to climb up his body and stake my claim on him.

There was a knock at the door just as I was finishing up reading a story to Nikki in the living room. Lana answered the door and let Eli into the living room in her typical silence as I read the last page.

‘Again,’ the little girl sitting in my lap pleaded.

‘Sweetie, I’ll read you another story tomorrow, but right now I’m going to watch hockey with my friend.’

‘Can I come?’ she asked sweetly.

‘Oh, you don’t want to come with me. It’s going to be very cold in the arena, and you will miss the yummy pizza mommy ordered and your bedtime.’

She pouted but accepted it, allowing me to place her on the floor to play with her little brother on his play mat.

I looked at Lana. ‘You got them?’ She nodded and took a seat on the sofa I had just vacated with a warm bottle for her nephew. ‘See you later.’

She let out a giggle as she reached down to pick up the baby to give him the bottle as we left the house.

‘I don't think she likes me much.’ Eli sounded self-conscious.

‘What?’ I spun to look at him as we reached his car in the driveway. ‘No way. She totally likes you.’

‘She didn't say a word to me.’

‘She spoke last night.’ I reminded him as we left the house.
We were playing a game.

Yeah, but usually she doesn't speak much as it is, and hardly ever around new people. She’s extremely shy; it’s just how she is. But I can tell she's okay with you. Just don't take it personally. Some days I'll call her and she’ll say all but 10 words to me.’

So how does that even work.’ He asked, opening the driver's side door to get in.

I shrugged when I settled into the passenger side seat. ‘I don’t know. It just does. She’s my best friend aside from Jax. It took a while for her to talk to me, like months of sharing a dorm room. But then we ended up becoming best friends somehow and lived together for the rest of college in Chicago. She pushes herself for work when she can't get her most trusted employee Kelsey to do it for her. She’s come a long way since freshman year.’

He buckled his seatbelt and turned on the car, ‘I meant to ask you, why Chicago?’

‘Northwestern is a great school and had what I wanted. Plus, different scenery and somewhere I could run away from my past.’

He looked at me intently, not pushing for more information, knowing he wasn’t likely to get more than had already shared.

We filled up on concession food and took a few beers to our seats to watch Otis play. ‘I should have asked, but do you even like hockey?’

‘I like watching live sports. You’d be hard-pressed to find me watching a game on TV, but this is entertaining,’ I told him.

‘Do you know anything about it?’

I took a drink of my beer and looked at the rink. ‘Sure, the men with skates and sticks, hit the black thing into the net, The team with the most points wins the Stanley cup.’

He nearly choked on his beer for how hard he started to laugh. ‘Well, this is college hockey, so no Stanley cup here, but hopefully next year Otis will be playing for Lord Stanley’s cup.’

It was a fun and exciting night cheering on Otis and his team to another victory. We headed back to the locker room area after the game to wait for Otis, however, it proved futile as Otis was with his agent and talking to a few scouts who had come to watch him play.

Eli sent him a text to tell him he’d order him food and would save him a stool at the pub we were headed to. ‘Babe, I want to have a few drinks,’ Eli said after our server left with our drink order. He placed his hand on my thigh. He’d been rather hands-on all-night, something I hadn’t been opposed to. ‘So, I’m going to propose that you stay with me at Otis’ place, but if you’re not cool with that, then I’ll get you an Uber, though I’ve kinda been looking forward to you staying with me in the guest room. The futon isn't the best, but I will surely make up for it.’

‘You’re incorrigible.’ I leaned in and kissed him, just as I heard his brother’s voice.

‘Get a room.’

‘Stop hating.’ Eli pushed his brother away and kept kissing me.

Throughout the night, the drinks flowed. I saw just how popular Otis was while learning a new phrase, Puck Bunny, and there were plenty in attendance, many of whom had their eyes set on Eli as well.

I couldn’t help but laugh at the entire situation. As many of his teammates started to leave, each with their own bunny, I too was feeling the effects of the alcohol and just wanted to be alone with Eli at last.

‘How about we test that futon out?’ I ran a finger down his abs, itching for more of his body.

‘Thought, you’d never ask.’ He skullled the rest of his beer and made eye contact with Otis, who was all too willing to peel himself off of one of the bunnies who had been ever so attentive to him all
night. Eli had been drinking a bit tonight, and at first I felt somewhat nervous, considering, and when I gave him a suspicious look he told me he was laying off the hard liquor and that a few beers didn’t have the same potency for him to get drunk. However, I knew better. Alcohol was alcohol and for those with dependency issues, it made little difference. It took will to stay away from any of it, and a bottle of beer could easily turn into a bottle of rum and a weeklong bender. I felt torn about saying anything, I didn’t want to come across as his mother, but given what happened the last time he blacked out from drinking, I couldn't deny that I was concerned. I didn’t know where we stood with each other and questioned if I should say anything.

‘Flying solo again?’ Eli teased as we walked into Otis’s condo. ‘Goodnight brother, Hands Solo brother.’

The room was clearly meant to be an office, but the futon with blankets and pillows would do, and the door that offered privacy was an added bonus. However, I was so desperate, I’d have overlooked that and asked Otis to stay in his room.

Eli closed the door and wrapped his arms around me, picking me up and carrying me over to the futon, laying me down in the center of it, hovering over me. ‘Finally, I’ve got you where I need you.’

He shuffled down my body and hooked his thumbs in the waistband of my leggings, and panties. I lifted my hips, not wanting to waste any time delaying the foreplay and main event that was building. He slid his hands up my bare legs to my thighs, spreading them apart and taking a long lustful look. I clenched in need, knowing what was coming. When he bent, I pulled his shirt off as he unbuttoned his pants and kicked his way out of them as his lips found my inner thigh before his tongue parted my folds. I was so thankful that he wasn’t teasing me as he’d done on the island. He knew we both needed each other's bodies, at least tonight there was an urgency. Tomorrow we could go back to taking our time.

I draped an arm over my face, shameful that I knew all too well that this wasn’t going to be a one-night deal. My resolve was lost, and we were heading down a road that could only end badly.

I held onto the pillow and rotated my hips into his face, finding exactly the pressure I needed as he slipped two fingers into me, caressing my G-spot. My hands found his head and pulled at his hair then clawed at his shoulders, willing him to keep going. With my hips bucking into his face and my back arched, I fell into the oblivion of my long overdue orgasm, screaming out his name, wanting him to relent, needing him to continue. My body missed his touch, craved every inch of his body, some parts more than others.

I had barely had a chance to catch my breath before Eli begrudgingly withdrew his fingers from me. I would have protested, if his lips on mine hadn’t prevented me from anything other than returning his kiss.

I welcomed the sound of foil ripping after he leaned over the futon and was wrapping himself from his kneeling position between my legs.

‘We’re still on the same page here, right?’

‘Yes, Eli,’ I whispered. ‘I want you, until I tell you no, which I can't see happening. I want you, this.’

‘Us.’ He leaned over and kissed me positively, feeling the head of his dick positioned at my entrance, causing nervous flutters in my belly at the “us” he just muttered and at what we were about to do, again.

Leaning back on his heels, he rubbed his sheathed dick up and down over my sex, spreading the evidence of my last orgasm. I looked up, locking my eyes with his as he pushed into me slowly, and I took him, inch by glorious inch, his eyes silently telling me that I was his and he was mine.
When he was buried inside me, he stilled, allowing my body to adjust. ‘Fuck, you’re so tight. I’ve fucking missed your body, this tight wet pussy. Please don’t deny me it again.’

I raised my hip in a sign for him to continue, as I could tell that his self-control was waning. He started off slow, circling his hips, both of us moaning unintelligibly at the sensations. His hands held my thighs apart, giving him greater access as he withdrew so that only his tip remained inside me, before sliding back in, to the point he bottomed out. He did this over and over until he shoved my legs upward and started phishing into me harder and faster. I was offering him everything I had: my trust, my body and my heart.

It was pure bliss. His dick kept hitting my g-spot, and I felt another orgasm building as he cried my name, tossing his head back, digging his fingers into my hips as his orgasm shuttered though him.

I couldn’t take my eyes off him as we tipped over the edge together. Looking down at me, catching his breath, there was no mistaking the look of pure satisfaction on his face. His lips curled in a smug smile as he leaned over to kiss me as he pulled out of me, as if it was the most intimate thing between us.

‘Give me a second. I’ll be right back.’ He hopped off the futon and out of the room in all his naked glory to dispose of the condom.

* * *

I’d been craving to be back in Eli’s arms for so long, despite my insistence to keep him away I was relished in waking up, wrapped in his arms.

‘Do you want to go get breakfast?’ Eli asked, his eyes still closed.

I looked up to him, wondering if he forgot. ‘I’m heading home. I have a baby shower to attend this afternoon.

I saw the blank look on his face. ‘Didn’t I tell you?’

‘Can I come with you?’

‘You want to go to a baby shower for a couple you’ve never met or heard of before this morning?’

He huffed. ‘No, but I do want to spend more time with you before I have to endure time with my father and his lapdog.’

I thought about it, and he had a point. I wasn’t ready to give up any precious time we had together, however, I couldn’t very well take him to the shower. I’d worked too hard to keep certain things under wraps.

‘Sure, we can spend a few days there.’

‘Should I book a hotel or an Airbnb?’

I gave him a quizzical look. If you want some privacy and alone time, go right ahead, but I’m staying at my house.’

‘You have a house?’ he asked, sounding rather surprised.

‘I never sold my parent’s house. I don’t live there, but I do stay there when I go back which, I admit, isn’t as often as I’d like.’ I told him as we got out of bed and started to dress.

After picking up my things from Lana’s place and fending off inquisitive questions from both Lana and Zoe, we were finally headed west to my hometown.

‘You can meet Jax, and you’ll see that he’s very much like a brother,’ I told him, noting that I needed to send him a text message.

Eli didn’t reply, but didn’t object to anything I’d just said either.

It was going to be an odd line to tow, that was for sure. Never had I been in this position with a guy before. Jax had met guys I’d been dating when he would visit in Chicago, but he knew as much as I did at the time they were place-fillers, nothing serious.
Was that all Eli was?
That had yet to be seen, which was why I still needed to keep things casual.
Thinking back to the last time I was at the house over Christmas, I thought of the things I needed Jax to do before I got to the house with Eli.

WREN: Hey, Eli is driving me home. Can you go to the house and remove the family photos and anything else incriminating and put them downstairs? There are not many.

It was true, few areas of the house had pictures of my parents, as it wasn’t my mother’s style to have knick-knacks or mementos out. Those that had been around were either in my bedroom or had been taken to the New York apartment when I moved to live there on a more permanent basis.

An hour later, I received a text back from him.
JAX: Photos from your room are hidden, other things in the rec room can be passed off as art. The basement is locked.

WREN: Thanks
JAX: Burgers and beers tonight?
WREN: Rain check, but can you keep Eli occupied while I’m at the shower?
JAX: Not if he’s a wanker
WREN: Be nice!

JAX: Me? You’re the one lying to the poor guy.

Shit, he had a point, unfortunately.
‘So who’s having a baby?’
‘Jax’s little sister, or well, half-sister, Meadow.’
Eli looked over to me. ‘How young is she.’
I let out a chuckle. ‘Well, I say little sister, but she’s twenty, still too young if you ask me. It was kind of a whoops baby.’
‘Christ, she’s like my age.’ Eli said his thoughts aloud. ‘Poor thing.’
‘Her and her boyfriend seem pretty happy about it, so that’s a good thing, and Michelle is excited to be a grandmother.’
‘I’d lose my shit.’ He signed and looked at me. ‘Maybe I should have asked this already, but are you on birth control?’
I turned in my seat. ‘Of course, but condoms are still necessary.’
‘No shit. I never want to have kids.’
His comment pained me even though it shouldn’t have. I wasn’t ready to have kids, but I did want them one day. ‘That’s a big claim.’

He shrugged, keeping his eyes on the road as if what he said was no big deal. ‘I just refuse to fuck up a kid as my father has done to me; It’s not fair. I’d never do that to someone, especially an innocent child.’

‘You wouldn’t do that. I think you’re too aware of how he wronged you to ever take your own failures out on a child, not that I think you’d ever fail in anything you tried to do.’

He looked over and took my hand in his, bringing it to his mouth and kissing it. ‘Thank you, you are very kind, but I’ll never become my father. I can only ensure that by never becoming a father, period.’

I sat there thinking about what he had said for a moment. ‘You know, not every parent is perfect, but it doesn't mean we love them any less. My father struggled with addictions. He got them under control for the most part before he had me and my sister, but it was always there in the background. Drugs and alcohol were around him all the time because of what he did, but his love for us won out.
He found other ways to deal with his demons, and they were pretty horrific at the hands of his own father, but he never laid a hand on my sister or myself.

‘What about your mother?’

I laughed. ‘Yeah right. He worshiped her. My mother suffered enough abuse at the hands of her ex. It was hard on my father, even years afterward.’

‘Why?’ he asked me. ‘I mean…’

I held on to his hand as he drove. ‘No, it’s okay. He met my mother when she was young, too young…’

‘Sounds familiar.’ He chuckled.

‘No, as in jailbait and not yet legal.’ I gave him a look. ‘They kept meeting at random events and then started planning secret getaways when they couldn’t stay away from one another. They married pretty much as soon as she was legal. But he was sliding deeper and deeper into his addiction. She couldn’t watch him ruin his life, and he refused to get help or do the whole rehab thing. So she left him and moved to California to pursue other opportunities. She met her ex and soon found herself pregnant by him. The man had a very bad temper, and when Garett was about two years old, her ex beat her so badly that she ended up in the hospital; he nearly killed her. She had been trying to leave him, and he caught her. At this time, my father had been clean and sober for over a year. Finding out that she was pregnant with another man's baby was his wake up call. He’d lost the woman he loved to his addiction and was at risk of losing everything else he’d worked so hard for. So he got himself clean and was there for my mom when she got out of the hospital and used all his power to lock up her ex, well, for a few years at least.’

‘Where is he now?’

‘He is still in LA, trying to salvage a career that was decimated with his conviction.’

‘And your brother?’

I shivered at the thought that I was half related to that bastard. ‘Garett is also out in LA. His dad managed to get shared custody of him when he was in high school, so he went to a private school out on the west coast to be closer to his bastard of a father, the same father who poisoned his mind to our family.’

‘How much older is he than you?’

‘Almost six years,’ I answered. ‘Mom and dad took it slow when he moved her back out here, and he had commitments he couldn’t get out of for those first two years, but they found their way back to one another and finally got married, and had my sister and myself. Garrett lived with us up until high school, but it wasn’t easy. He never made it easy. My father tried, he really tried to bond with him, but Garett was truly his miserable father’s son.’

‘So you don’t see him at all?’

I shook my head. ‘No. When our mother died, he tried to contest the will. Due to the deaths of my mother and sister, I was left with his entire estate. My mother, who in comparison had a small amount, left everything to her charitable foundation, the foundation she spent her life building, and aside from her children and father was her pride and joy. That was ironclad and no judge would touch it. Garett and his father then tried to go after my father’s fortune.’ I shook my head at the nastiness. ‘It got very ugly. I was fifteen, without a guardian technically. Thankfully, Michelle stepped in, not that I ever doubted she would. She didn’t do it for compensation or anything, just her love for me and my family. Garett was in his last year at UCLA, and my father had been paying for his tuition and giving him a small living allowance, even though he was living with his biological father. As soon as the news broke, they contacted my father’s lawyer, not me, wondering when the reading of the
will would be.

‘Needless to say, they were not listed in the will, so they were not invited to the reading. Charlie, who’s mine and Jax’s lawyer and close family friend now, helped me through everything, using his own money to pay for my tuition at Wendell as my inheritance was tied up in the courts because of Garrett contesting it. Michelle used her and her new husband’s salaries to make sure I had clothing and a living allowance. This dragged on for years until they finally ran out of money to pay their own lawyers. So the short answer is, Garett is in LA, and I have only spoken a few words to him since my parent’s death and even then, I haven’t seen or heard from him in at least five years, and I don’t expect to. If I never speak to him again, it will be too soon.’

‘That’s horrible,’ he mumbled.

I apparently had diarrhea of the mouth as I continued, ‘Garett never wanted me, even when he was asked about guardianship over me when I had no other living family. He only asked how much money he would get out of it. He never loved me like a brother should love his sister. He’d never been nice to me, even when we lived together, making life harder than it had to be, opposing my father at every opportunity he got. So, I don’t consider him family. Jax is family, even if not by blood, but in every sense that counts, and I know Michelle and her husband love me. Charlie, too, I’d say loves me in a protective way. He’s been looking out for my best interests for nine years now. Even when he needs to scold me and redirect me, I appreciate him being the parental figure in my life, in Jax’s life too, even though he has a mother and a stepfather.’

Eli had his hand resting on my thigh, still holding on to my hand, and gave it a reassuring squeeze. ‘Well, you’re not alone now, and I don’t want those kinds of people in our life. I am happy that you have put them behind you. As soon as I can, I will be cutting ties from my father also.’

‘Well, it came at a cost. Charlie gave him money with very strong strings attached to it, strings that kept them away from me and their mouths shut about the family,’ I confessed, instructing Eli to take the next exit. We’d been chatting the entire trip, so the time flew by. I got more personal than I had intended to. He was slowly breaking down my walls, and I just hoped that I could trust him, that it wasn’t going to all come crashing down. I didn’t want to be left picking up the pieces to rebuild my fortress once again.

‘I get that. I still need my father, until I’m twenty-one and have my trust fund, or as Otis points out, until he’s signed and we can both flip dear old dad the bird.’

‘Otis wants to cut ties also?’

‘Otis isn’t as hateful as I am, but yes, he’s done with the games also,’ Eli confessed. ‘We both just want to move forward in our lives without him being a part of them, and the sooner the better.’

I wasn’t sure what it was about being in the car that had me spilling everything I typically kept hidden from everyone and rarely liked to think about myself. As we drew closer to my house, I was getting anxious, driving down the rural roads taking us to the street I essentially grew up on. I felt my hands fidgeting in my lap, wondering what Eli was going to think. ‘Just this street up ahead, right before the bridge.’

Eli slowed and turned off the road, passing two large homes with even larger lawns on either side of the street. I knew he saw the security camera on the front driveways, but it didn’t seem to faze him. He looked at Michelle’s house with a bunch of balloons out front. ‘That’s where the shower is.’ I pointed, and he slowed down and was about to turn. ‘No, not yet. I’m just a few houses up’

‘Well, that’s convenient,’ he said.

‘Sure is,’ I agreed and pointed to the house across the street. ‘That’s where Jax lives, or at least, that’s where the house is. He’s a bit of a nomad.’
To this he was surprised. ‘So his mother lives there, and he lives there? Why two houses?’
‘Jax was also an *oops* baby. His father wanted him close, so he bought his mother a house on the street.’
‘Isn’t she married?’
‘She is now,’ I confirmed. ‘Mike is a great guy, and he and Jax’s father got along really well actually until his death. I guess it looks odd, living down the street from your ex, but it worked for them.’
‘I’d never be able to see you with another guy.’ He growled as I told him what driveway to pull into.

Our house was mainly a single-story home, with a large loft in the middle making it look even bigger from the outside. The four-car garage on the side of the house had Eli intrigued. While the house was large, it wasn't huge, imposing or ostentatious. It was a large family home on a private road shared with neighbors of similar means and need for secluded privacy.

He took our bags as I went to the front door, put in the code and disarmed the alarm system. ‘Nice digs,’ he commented, walking in and shutting the door behind him.

‘It’s home,’ I turned to him and hugged him. ‘But I’ve never brought anyone here. Lana’s not even been here before. Not because I didn’t want her here, but we’ve just always hung with her family instead.’

He leaned down to kiss me. ‘I feel honored and know the significance. I’ve never bought a girl home yet either.’

I took his hand and showed him around the living areas of the house. In the kitchen I opened the fridge, noting there wasn’t anything more than some condiments. ‘Might need to grab a few things from the store later.’

I then showed him the living room and walked him down the hall to my bedroom, keeping clear of the other side of the house where my parent's room had been, a room I hardly went into, a room that largely sat untouched for the better part of nine years now. My room also hadn’t changed too much over the years. I’d taken down the One Direction posters and bought new pillows, but that was about it. My pale, pink walls accented well with my white furniture, black and white bedding and black curtains with photos of Paris on my walls.

‘Charming,’ Eli mocked, looking around.

‘The guest room is down the hall,’ I teased. ‘Or, you could stay in my sister's lavender room with lots of stuffies.’

‘There’s no chance of me being anywhere you are not.’ He hooked his arm around me, pulling me closer and walking me back to the bed. ‘And I think we should christen this bed before we do anything else.’

I put my hands on his chest. ‘As much as I’d love that, I need to change and get ready to go to the baby shower.’

‘I’ll be quick,’ he persisted, kissing me with more vigor, and I could already feel him hard against my stomach, tugging my pants down and spinning me around with my clothing pooled at my knees. I kicked out of them entirely as I heard the familiar sound of foil being ripped behind me, just before Eli’s hand bent me over the bed, and he grabbed my hips, positioning them where he needed them to enter me in one quick movement from behind. ‘Hold on baby, this isn’t going to be gentle.’

He wasn’t lying, nor did he disappoint, not that he ever did. He didn't hold back like he often did. He was pounding into me from behind, his fingers digging into my hips holding me in place, ‘If you’re going to cum, I’m going to need you to do it soon,’ he panted behind me.
I could already feel mine building as I gripped my blanket under me. ‘Yes,’ I screamed, as both our orgasms hit us simultaneously.

He gave me a light slap on my bare ass. ‘Atta girl.’

Pulling out, he walked into my ensuite bathroom, pulling off the condom and holding his pants up as I took stock of myself in my large mirror near my closet. I needed to shower and do something with my hair, put on makeup and get changed into the dress I’d brought with me for this event, all within the hour.

‘Eli, in the kitchen, there should be a bunch of parcels. Can you open them and make sure the presents are all wrapped while I get ready?’ I asked as I turned the shower on and took my shirt off. He looked me over with a smirk on his face. I pushed him away. ‘Go, I have to get ready.’
I had been in the kitchen, flattening the cardboard box her gifts came in, when I heard the distinct sound of a door closing and a male voice calling out from the hallway, ‘Yo Pen. Where you at?’

I stepped out into the hallway to see a tall man with skin that reminded me of cattails, shoulder-length brown hair covered in a black beanie hat. He wore a blue long-sleeved t-shirt with a puffy black vest and skinny jeans. I noticed he’d already kicked off his boots at the door. He stopped walking when he saw me, his whole face lighting up with a genuine smile, taking me by surprise. I thought I would have been met with some kind of hostility or at least apprehension, but he was friendly and clearly comfortable in this house.

‘Hey man, you must be Eli.’ He walked over to me and shook my hand. ‘I’m Jax. I’ve heard a lot about you.’

‘Same,’ I replied, standing at the end of the island with my arms crossed at my chest. He walked past me to take a seat at the island in front of all the gifts. ‘Are all these for Jenny?’

‘Your sister?’ I asked, and he nodded, looking at them all. ‘Then yes. Wren asked me to take them out of the packing boxes for her. She’s just getting ready.’

‘Cool,’ he said, hopping off the stool and walking toward her bedroom.

‘Hey man.’ I hurried after him. ‘Wren’s getting ready. You’re not going in there.’

He turned to face me. ‘Yo, I’m not about to walk in on her. She’s like my sister, okay. I don’t need to see that.’ I looked at him with skepticism. Wren was beautiful, and no man in their right mind would think otherwise. ‘Trust me, I just want to tell her to hurry the fuck up. My mom’s wondering where she is.’

I walked with him down the hall. He stopped just before her door. ‘Pen, Mom’s waiting on you.’

‘I know.’ She came to the door, her hair and makeup done, but still only wearing a towel. ‘Two minutes,’ she told him and looked up to me. ‘Oh good, you’ve met. Jax, can you put the presents in your car. I’m going to wear heels and need a drive down.’

I helped him carry the presents out to his Range Rover parked next to my TT RS Coupe, ‘Nice ride.’ He commenced looking my baby over.

‘I can say the same.’ I followed him.

‘Oh, this is nothing. I just use this to commute back and forth on the highway. You’ll have to come over to my garage, and I’ll show you all my babies.’

I smiled wide as he opened the back hatch. It was no secret that I loved cars. ‘Yeah, cool. I’d like that.’

I hurried back into the house to find Wren walking down the hall in a pink, lace dress and high beige heels, carrying a matching clutch purse. She wore her hair in waves and had just a bit of light makeup on, but she looked amazing.

‘Wow, babe. You look very beautiful.’ I took her hand and kissed it, not wanting to mess up her makeup; my mother would be very proud of me at that moment.

‘Ready?’ Jax poked his head around the corner, and we followed him out to the Range Rover, Wren locking up the house before we went. She sat in the backseat, leaving me to sit in the front passenger seat.

The party was just a few driveways down the street, and there were already lots of cars lining the
road outside. Jax pulled in, blocking in an older model BMW SUV, and turned to me. 'You're welcome to come in, but might advise you to wait here. It’s full of women, and my mother is spinning already.’ He laughed. ‘I'm just going to bring in all the gifts Princess Price here bought for my sister, and we’ll go grab some food.’

I only went out to help Wren walk up to the house, carrying a larger box, handing it off to her when she was inside the house, and made my way back to the Range Rover to wait for Jax.

'So, what do you feel like eating?' he asked me, backing out of the driveway.

'You’re the expert around here.'

'Are you high maintenance or do…'

'I’m a pretty basic guy,' I cut him off. 'Yeah, my family has money, but I’m not a kept man. When it comes down to it, I’m a simple guy. I like all foods; the less fancy the better in my opinion. I’m good with anything you could find on Park Avenue all the way to roasting hotdogs over the fire at our cottage in the woods.'

'Cool, we’ll go to this hole-in-the-wall Lebanese shawarma place that I love.'

He waved to someone walking on the street and made a comment about him being nosey, as he headed in the opposite direction that we had come. He hadn’t been wrong. It was a hole in the wall and as far from fancy as one could get. However, it was really good. The guys there all seemed to know Jax and wanted to know about his latest travels and how long he’d be around.

After eating and listening to Jax tell the guys about his latest trip down to Central America and the work he was doing, we headed back to Wren’s house, ‘She’s got a better pool table, but I got the better booze...your choice.’ He gave me the choice as we pulled onto their street.

I cringed. ‘I hit the keg pretty hard last night, and I’ve got to train tomorrow because all I’ve done today is sit in a car and f…’ I trailed off.

‘Yeah, I don’t think I want you to finish that sentence if it’s what I think you and Pen have been up to.’

'Pen?' I questioned.

‘Wren, Princess, Pen.’ He shrugged, ‘You’ve got to admit, she's a bit of a princess.’

'Not really, but then again, I’ve had limited interactions with her. She was pretty chill on the island, and I mainly see the hard-working side of her, and sides you don’t wish to talk about.’

Jax pulled into her driveway, ignoring my remark, parking next to my car and hopping out. I followed him to the door and he spoke. ‘Hard-working, yes, that she is. Too much in my opinion, But it seems to make her happy, so I can’t knock it. If she’s busy, she’s not in trouble.’ He looked seriously at me when we got to the door. ‘She’s not going to get in trouble, right?’

And I got it. For the first time, I saw a big, older, protective brother, ‘Not as long as I can prevent it,’ I promised him and looked ahead. ‘I don’t have a key.’

He punched in a passcode on the door, and it unlocked. ‘No worries.’

I followed him to the back of the house off the kitchen where a large games room was housed. A massive pool table sat in the middle of the room, flanked on one end by a big screen TV and comfy seating, and a minibar at the other end.

'So there’s wine, a few beers, and I think I might have left a bottle of scotch here.’ He was looking behind the bar.

'Just a beer for me,’ I said, walking up to him, taking in the room.

‘Pretty cool, right?’ Jax asked, following my eyes. ‘The ultimate man cave. Our dad’s spent so much time here.’

‘Yeah, it’s a dream man cave. Well, except for all the Philadelphia Flyers memorabilia,’ I
commented.

‘Hey man, when in Rome…’ Jax found the bottle he was looking for and poured himself a glass. ‘Let me guess, you’re a Bruins fan,’ he asked, and I cringed. ‘Ok, Rangers then?’

I shrugged. ‘They’re not too bad, but I’m a Canadian boy, so it’s my birthright to support the Montreal Canadiens.’

Now it was Jax’s time to cringe. ‘Sounds like you are just as much as a glutton for punishment. The only thing worse would be to support the Leafs.’

I held up a finger to him. ‘That’s just sacrilegious.’ We both laughed, and he handed me a beer. ‘On that, we agree.’

‘The saving grace is the Challenger memorabilia.’ I commented on some of the framed things around the room, the platinum record memorabilia and a few album covers.

‘You like Challenger?’ Jax asked me with a huge smile on his face.

‘One of the best bands ever. I grew up on their music. Love it still,’ I told him. ‘You?’

He nodded. ‘We were the same. Challenger was huge in our life.’

‘Clearly, if Wren’s dad’s had all this stuff.’ I laughed. ‘You know, on one of the first nights Wren and I went out on the island, she did karaoke to one of their songs. Did a hell of a rendition to it also.’

This caused him to laugh. ‘She must have been very drunk or really trying to impress you.’ He racked the balls on the pool table, and we chatted about sports while we played...teams we liked, players we didn’t. My involvement in lacrosse and my brother’s chances at being drafted.

‘We should check out a game sometime. None of my friends like hockey. I’d be nice to go with someone who understands what’s going on and wants to be there.’

‘Any time you want. I can get us seats or in a box for just about any game,’ I told him. It was one thing I didn’t mind using my father for.

‘Your brother already has pull?’ Jax asked me, sinking the eight ball by accident, defaulting the win to me.

‘No, my dad works for the league in New York. Easiest to get Rangers or Islander tickets, even Devils. I can see what he can get over the next week if you’re free.’

He smiled. ‘Yeah? That would be great. I’m here for the weekend, have meetings next week in the city, but have to be back here for Easter. If we can’t make it work next week, I will definitely take you up on the offer another time.’

We played pool all night, and I had to admit, I actually liked Jax, if we had met under other circumstances, he’d be the kind of guy I’d want to be friends with.

‘So, I have to ask. What the hell did you think when you first walked into class and realized she was your teacher.’ Jax started to laugh, and I’d bet money he’d been holding the question all night. Now that he was well into the bottle of scotch, his inhibitions were lowered.

I had to laugh also. ‘Well, I was stunned, clearly. At first, I thought she was a doppelganger. She said she was an agent, but then I saw recognition cross her face as well, and my stomach dropped. I sat there the entire class trying to make sense of it and texting her to figure out if I was being punked or something. Turns out, I wasn’t, and boy was she pissed when I tried to pick up where we had left things on the island.’

Jax started to look at me with that pissed, don’t fuck with him expression.

‘Alright, I get it, there are things you don’t want to be mentioned.’

‘If you had a sister, you’d understand.’

‘Thankfully, I just have one brother, and at times he’s enough.’ I hit another ball into the corner and continued. ‘I gave her the distance she needed. She’s super scared to be caught. And as you said,
I don’t want trouble for her, so even though it’s hard, I’ll wait patiently for June and enjoy times like these we get to have.’

Jax's phone rang with the Jaws theme. ‘Speak of the Devil.’

‘You want me to get her? I’ve only had two beers.’ I knew he’d drank a lot, and even though it was just down the street, I wasn't about to put her life in danger.

‘Sure. Drop me off at my driveway, and I'll get in my car tomorrow.’

And just like that, my introduction evening with Jax had come to a pleasant close, and my night was about to get that much better with Wren.
CHAPTER 23

WREN

So many firsts in one's life. Here I was, in my mid-twenties, having just brought a boy home for the first time. And not just home for dinner and to meet the family, or in my case, family friends. I had brought him home for a sleepover, and now I was waking up naked in his arms after a night of really, really good sex. The kind that left you sore, but in the best possible way, and craving more.

I only woke because Eli untangled my body from his own and was trying to get out of bed. ‘Where do you think you’re going?’ I groaned groggily, not wanting to lose the warmth of his hard body next to mine, and, selfishly, I was hoping for a lazy morning of rolling around between the sheets with one another.

‘Go back to sleep. I’m just going to go out for a run and try to do some training.’ He pulled the covers up over me before bending over to kiss my temple.

‘There’s a home gym.’ I opened my eyes, watching him pull on a pair of boxers. ‘Down at the other end of the house. Just don’t go through the double doors; that’s my parent's room and no one goes in there.’

A big smile crossed his face at the possibility of a home gym, a glutton for punishment. ‘Yeah? That would be ideal, and don’t worry, I won't go in there.’ He dressed in workout clothing, covering up his hard, toned body before walking back to the bed and sitting down next to me to put his sneakers on. He kissed me on the forehead. ‘Go back to sleep, then we can go get breakfast somewhere.’

‘Oh, I forgot to tell you.’ I snuggled into my pillow under the covers. ‘Michelle is having us over for dinner tonight.’

I had been tired after our long night together, therefore I had no problem getting back to sleep, even if it wasn’t all that sound. My body hummed knowing Eli was near and that I had unlimited, uninterrupted access to him without the potential of getting caught. We had fallen into each other so comfortably, seemingly picking up where we had left off on the island. The absences I’d imposed over the past few months really did make our hearts, and, more so, our bodies grow fonder for one another. We had well and truly spent the night making up for lost time. I was starting to seriously question why I denied myself all the pleasures he was dishing out.

I was awoken to Eli peppering kisses down my back. I could feel his warmth and smell that he was freshly showered. I turned around to find him only in a towel, thankful he didn't bother putting on clothes; they were so overrated with him anyways.

He trailed his hands down my abdomen, his fingers dusting the undersides of my breasts as he leaned over so he could trace circles over my nipples with his warm tongue before closing his mouth and sucking on them. He let the tip of his tongue slide down my torso, peppering kisses along the way until I felt his strong hands spreading my thighs wide. ‘Spectacular,’ he whispered, kissing each of my inner thighs before spreading my folds with his fingers, slipping two in. ‘You’re already so wet and ready for me.’

I reached down and found his length, large and solid under the towel. Seems we’re both ready to go.

‘I’m always ready to go with you around.’ He moaned as I started to stroke him, and he continued to finger me.

‘Eli.’ I gasped as his thumb brushed over my clit, feeling the telltale signs of an orgasm building. I
was struggling to stay coherent and focus on the hand job I was trying to give to Eli when I felt the rush of my release crash into me. I think I heard Eli say my name, encouraging me to ride out the rest of my orgasm on his fingers, not letting up until I was completely out of my mind and soaring high.

As I came down and regained a bit of my senses, I blurted out, ‘Condom.’

I felt his body vibrating with laughter as he pulled his fingers out of me and climbed over me to reach the nightstand where the box of condoms were sitting. ‘Someone’s a bit eager.’ He rested back on his knees, rolling the condom down over his impressive length, a size I was still boggled that I could accommodate.

He hitched my legs up around him as he slid into me. Laying over me, I felt his hard chest press into mine as he rolled his hips, going deeper and deeper. Building to that fast urgent tempo we both relished, the one that left us gasping to catch our breath and our muscles shaking after we shared an orgasm.

We were lying in bed, enjoying a lazy morning exploring each other's bodies and thoughts. I loved talking to him almost as much as I loved the way he fucked me. He was easy and fun to talk to. He didn’t push me to share more than I was willing to, yet he never refused or skirted around any topic I asked of him.

As we still had no food in the house, I ordered breakfast in, not wanting to leave the warm cocoon of my bed or, as the morning progressed, his arms around me in the living room, watching Netflix.

It was after lunch when my phone started to ring on the stand next to me.

It was Jax, groaning, I peeled myself out of Eli’s arms, rolling off him to answer it. ‘Yes?’ He should have known better.

‘Hey, princess. Is your boyfriend there?’

I rolled my eyes. ‘Yes, what do you want?’

‘To talk to him,’ he snapped.

‘You called me to talk to Eli?’ I asked, dumbfounded.

‘Yes.’

I put the phone on speaker. ‘Hey, man.’ Eli greeted my best friend with a confused look on his face, checking mine for assurance.

‘Hey, you want to come over and test drive some cars?’

Eli’s face lit up like a kid at Christmas time as my jaw dropped. Jax didn’t make friends easily. He was too used to people using him for his connections, money, bragging rights of being the friend of the son of Curtis Sparks, or worse, all of the above. That was the main driving factor as to why I used my middle names and kept my former family life separate and hidden from my everyday life.

Eli looked at me, questioning what he should do. ‘Go. I should catch up on some work.’

I could tell he was conflicted when he was getting dressed. I knew Eli loved cars from the conversations we’d had, and Jax was obsessed with them, His garage would be like a playground for Eli.

For hours I sat in my mother’s old home office with my trusty laptop and wrote blog entries. I had fallen behind in recent weeks, having too much on my plate and lots of pages to edit. Spending the past few days solely with Eli only put me that much more behind, Yet it was totally worth it. It wasn’t until I heard Eli and Jax laughing from the entranceway that I looked up at the time and noticed that it had become darker outside. So often, when I was in the zone, I lost track of all time, becoming so immersed in the words.

I got up and walked to the living room where Jax was turning on the TV. Eli wrapped his arms around me, as if drawn to me by a magnetic force he couldn’t pull away from. ‘Have you seen his
cars?'

‘You mean the collection that is going to bankrupt him if he doesn’t get his spending under control.’ I gave Jax a pointed look. It wasn’t the first time he’d heard these comments from me.

‘It’s a commitment, not an addiction,’ he reminded me in a serious tone.

‘It’s a bit excessive,’ I countered.

‘I work hard; I’m allowed to treat myself.’

‘Then get a job that pays you,’ I deadpanned. It wasn’t like Jax was bad with his spending; this was really his only vice, but the fact that he had nearly 2 million dollars’ worth of vehicles in his two garages was a bit much for a twenty-five-year-old.

‘You don’t make much?’ Eli asked, sitting down on the sofa, pulling me down next to him.

‘I don’t take a salary,’ Jax responded, not looking at Eli, just trying to find something on the TV.

‘My trust fund is sufficient, and if the foundation paid me, then it’s less money for the woman we help out.’

I could tell by the look on Eli’s face that he respected Jax just that much more. Don’t get me wrong. I thought what he did was admirable, and I loved that he took over my mother’s foundation and was really making something of it on an international scale. I just worried that he’d need more out of life someday.

I felt Eli’s phone vibrate in his pocket next to my hip. When he dug it out and read the message, I saw it was from Otis. Eli looked over to Jax. ‘We’ve got a few tickets for the Rangers, Lightning game the day after tomorrow if you’re still interested.’ Eli looked between the two of us.

Jax looked excited. I knew he loved hockey but rarely went to see live games in person. Pulling out his phone, he looked at his calendar. ‘Yeah, that works for me. Thanks, man.’

‘No problem,’ Eli replied, turning to me, ‘Do you have any friends you want to invite?’

I shook my head. ‘No.’

‘I can use my Dartmouth story…’

I shook my head again, not able to look at him in the eye. It wasn’t that I was ashamed of Eli, it was just a bit embarrassing that I didn’t have a social base to draw friends from really. ‘What is it, Wren?’

‘Aside from Jax, I don’t really have friends in the City. I see Lana and her family, and they are enough for me. And besides, after college when I moved to NYC I worked so much that it was impossible to find time to make friends.’

‘There’s Marcie,’ Jax mentioned with a smirk, throwing me a bone and reminding me that I did have some friends. I wasn’t a social pariah. Marcie was a girl I went to Northwestern with who moved back home to New York City after we graduated. We had been friends during college and managed to meet up a few times during my nearly year-long internship at the agency in New York. But she was just as busy with getting her start-up up and running.

I rolled my eyes. ‘She’s busy with her harem of women.’

This got Eli’s attention. ‘Harem of women?’

‘Madam Marcie,’ Jax laughed.

‘She’s not a madam, and it’s not an escort service.’ I didn't know why I sounded defensive. I was proud that she managed to get her company up and running and had plans to expand in other cities.

‘She sets beautiful women up with men who need a date, and there’s money exchanged,’ Jax deadpanned.

‘It’s different. There’s no sex, the women are educated, and it’s for a specific age group, for public events and to help increase the public image for the client. And, she has both men and women,’
I tried to correct him.

‘Sorry, babe. Sounds like an escort service to me.’ Eli kissed my temple.

Jax looked at his phone. ‘Mom says dinner will be ready in a half hour. Let’s go early so she has time to interrogate Eli first.’ Jax was laughing, but I knew what was coming. I’d never brought a guy home, and, being the protective mama bear-type I knew Michelle to be, Eli was in for a rough evening.
‘Spend the night with me.’ Eli kissed my shoulder as we were getting our jackets on in the restaurant after spending the entire day and evening together in New York, the third straight since returning to the city from my Pennsylvania house. At first, I was hesitant to be out with him in public. Afraid someone was going to spot us, but he assured me that most of the students from the school would either be at their Hampton homes, some exotic beach or not frequenting the places he thoughtfully took me. Meaning we found a lot of unique places off the beaten path. Indoor go-karting, rooftop mini-putt and lots of small ma and pa restaurants, not a Michelin Star in sight, despite how good the food was.

We even drove up to Connecticut to watch a professional lacrosse the other night. It was great to get back to doing normal things after being cooped up for weeks. I loved seeing how much he enjoyed the game and how invested he was, more so than at the hockey game. We had planned to spend the night in a hotel instead of driving back to the city late at night and to actually spend the night together. We’d both been going to our own homes in the evenings since returning to the city, me to work, and Eli for family obligations or to not leave Otis alone with the soul-sucking dementors for too long.

The other night, Jax and I joined Eli and Otis at Madison Square Garden for a hockey game. The guys were in their element having a great time. After the game, Otis and Eli had to go meet with their father in the executive area. We clearly weren’t included in the invitation, and it was well enough. I had no desire to meet his father, and I was exhausted. I wanted to shower and sleep in my own bed in my apartment. As Jax and I lived on the same floor, we shared a cab to a pizza place around the corner from our converted warehouse apartment complex in Soho before walking the rest of the way.

‘He’s a decent guy,’ Jax said to me, looking at me oddly as we took the elevator up. I felt a “But” coming on. I had been wondering when Jax was going to give his opinion on Eli. Clearly he’d recognized I didn’t view Eli as simply a placeholder, given that I’d brought him home and introduced him to Michelle and the rest of her family.

‘But…’

He shook his head. ‘But nothing. I like him. Just be careful until you leave the school. Seems like his dad’s a piece of work and will do anything to protect his image. We both know what those kinds of people are capable of.’

Jax wasn’t wrong. Eli’s dad was the kind that would do whatever it took, take down his own mother if it meant he could get just that much more ahead in the world. Unfortunately, our own father’s had been around people like that before their deaths, and we knew first hand they not only caused drama, but they also caused damage to names, reputations and bank accounts.

‘Wren?’ Eli prompted me back into the here and now. ‘Spend the night with me. I’m not going to see you for the rest of the break.’ I sighed and leaned into him as we walked down the street. He was right. I needed to be back in Allentown tomorrow for Easter with Michelle and the extended family. My train left in the morning, and I couldn’t be late for Mass in the afternoon. Jax left town today for a meeting in Philadelphia.

I wasn’t ready to bring him back to my apartment. For one, the location and sheer size of my apartment might be a dead giveaway to the size of my trust fund, and I didn’t feel like I could get into the specifics of that with him yet. The other was that one look around and he would either think I was
a bit obsessed, or he would figure out just who my father was. Again, I wasn’t ready for that.

“How close is your place?” I asked him. “Can we go there? I’m not ready to have you in my
apartment yet.”

“Sure. Dad’s place is big, and we rarely cross paths,” he told me, taking my hand in his and
leading me. “Want to walk? It’s not too far from here.”

I nodded and we chatted, holding hands until we came to a large, older apartment building in
Hell’s Kitchen. It had a doorman, and I could tell that anything less would not do with the image his
father needed to maintain.

Taking the elevator to the 8th floor, we got off and walked to a corner unit. Eli was right, it was
large. It was only past ten in the evening on a Thursday night, but it already looked as if everyone was
in bed. “Do you want a drink?” Eli asked in a low voice, and I gathered that he too assumed his father
and his wife were asleep.

“No.” I went on my tiptoes and kissed him. “Please tell me your room isn’t close to your dad’s
because I just want you.”

He looked to one end of the open concept living area. “Nope, as far as we can get, and I don’t care
about Otis, if he’s even home.”

His room was small, but then again, this was a New York City apartment, likely refurbished in the
eighties. He was lucky to even have his own room. “Single bed?” I laughed. “It’s a good thing you like
to cuddle.”

“Cuddle?” he arched an eyebrow. “I’m in the mood to fuck, not to cuddle.”

“What time is it?” I asked, sitting up in a panic with daylight flooding the room, desperately
scrambling to find my phone.

Eli mumbled something incoherent as I grabbed one of his hoodies, tossing it on, and found my
purse and panties. “Shit,” I cried, seeing the time and knowing I was going to be cutting it super close
to catching my train. It was a good thing that I had clothes at the house, as I didn’t have time to go
back to my apartment. It only meant that I’d be leaving behind my laptop. I’d just have to use one of
my old ones and email myself everything else. It also meant that I would have to come back to the city
before heading back to school early next week to gather my clothes and electronic devices.

“Eli.” I knelt over the bed after I pulled my jeans on and shoved my shirt from the night before into
my purse, leaving his hoodie on. “I have to go. I’m going to miss my train.”

He lazily sat up, still half asleep. “Okay, let me get dressed…”

“No time.” I grabbed my shoes and jacket off the floor. “I’ll text you when I’m on the train if I
make it on time.” If not, Michelle and the family were going to be disappointed in me. Easter was
their thing. The whole weekend we had traditions that went back to when we were kids. Even my
own mother let Michelle lead Easter; it was her favorite holiday, and our father’s were never
allowed to be away working during this weekend. My mom loved Halloween and would go all out -
to each their own. Me, I tended to try and avoid any and all holidays, still feeling them too hard to
deal with, but with Michelle or Lana’s family dragged me into their families celebrations. I often had
no choice but to partake and increase my alcohol consumption.

My mouth was so dry, due to the damn bottle of wine with dinner last night, I nipped into the
kitchen and felt as if I won the lottery when I saw a few bottles of water in the fridge just as I heard
the distinct sound of a throat being cleared. I took the bottle, closing the fridge, and turned around to
see an older man in a robe standing at the end of the counter.
‘Can I help you?’
I shook my head. ‘Just needed this,’ I said weakly, holding up a bottle of water I'd taken from the fridge.

‘Who the hell are you?’ He looked pissed at having a stranger in his kitchen, invading his personal space.

‘Um, I’m at Wendell with Eli,’ I answered, leaving out that I was his son’s teacher, looking down at my phone and boots in my hand. ‘Sorry, I really have to go catch my train home. If not, my family’s going to disown me for missing Mass.’

I hurried out of the kitchen without looking back, and as I reached the elevators, I stopped to put my boots on. Anxiety was reaching a fever pitch as I survived the impromptu meeting with Eli’s father and kept looking at the time on my phone, willing it to slow down so I could get my ass on the train to Allentown in time to shower and not reek of a night of sex before I attended church for the Good Friday Mass.

It might have been Good Friday and a holiday, but it was also NYC, and the traffic was as busy as always. Arriving at Grand Central Station, I paused only briefly to look for my platform and sprinted all the way, hopping on the first car just as the doors were closing. My lungs felt like they were on fire. I had to take the first empty seat I found, just to catch my breath, and stop the stars that were forming behind my eyes. I hadn’t been doing as much cardio as I should have been, nor had I been using the school gym regularly over the past few months. At first, seeing Eli was a terrifying reminder of that night when he almost ruined the chance of ever having a future with me, and most recently, it was all I could do to not jump him when I saw him in class. I didn't need to add fuel to my libido by watching him work out in grey sweatpants or without a shirt on, flexing his muscles.

I was getting wet just thinking about it, and it had only been a few hours since he was last inside me, giving me one of the countless orgasms I’d had over the past few days.

Hours. It had only been mere hours, and already I was going through dick withdrawals. Not just any dick...Eli’s dick. A dick that poets could write about. The kind that needed their own series on PornHub.

I made my way to my ticketed seat, grabbing a coffee and a muffin on my way. Once settled in, I sent off messages to both Jax and Eli then closed my eyes for some much-needed rest until I arrived in my hometown.

Jax picked me up in one of his ostentatious luxury cars that cost more than most homes the average American has a mortgage on, causing everyone to look at us, knowing exactly who we were. It wasn’t any good trying to hide who I was around here; everyone knew. I tried to keep my head down, but it was useless.

‘You look rough Pen. You going to make it through Mass and the family dinner at my Gran’s?’
‘I just need to shower,’ I told him as he sped down the road back to our street.

‘Good, because you smell like…’

‘Stop!’ I held up a hand. ‘We are not having this conversation. Not now, not ever.’

‘Listen, I don’t like talking about it either.’

‘So don’t,’ I huffed out and took a breath to calm myself. ‘Tell me about how the meeting went yesterday.

For the rest of the drive home, Jax proceeded to tell me how his meeting with an inner-city women's shelter and support organization wanted to partner with the foundation to offer similar microloans to their own clients and how they thought the partnership could benefit the both of them. It had been in-line with the vision of how Jax wanted to grow and expand the foundation; it also might
keep him closer, something I was all for.

‘I told them any further talks would have to wait until after my next trip,’ he told me, pulling onto our street and dropping me at my house. ‘Mom bought you some groceries this time.’

I smiled and thanked him for the ride and let him know I'd text him when I was ready for church. I wasn’t big on religion, but it was important to Michelle and her mother, so at Easter and at Christmas, we went as a family because they were big on it. I didn’t complain. Neither did Jax or his sisters. We didn’t show we didn’t want to be there. We just got on with it, and sometimes the words spoke to me, whether I wanted to hear them or not.

That night at dinner, a lot of attention was paid to me and the fact that I finally brought a boy home last weekend. Of course, in true fashion, I did everything I could to get the attendance away from me and threw Jax under the bus.

‘I think Jax needs to start looking for something more than a one-night stand.’

He shot me a death glare. ‘I don’t have time…’

‘Yeah, yeah.’ Michelle waved for him to shut his mouth. ‘Enough of that. You want people to give you millions to fund all these programs and projects? You need to get serious. You need a serious girl on your arm, and not some arm candy either, so you can stop that train of thought right there. A true partner will support you and the foundation's vision.’

I sat there playing with my food, a huge smile on my face, knowing what I had done worked.

‘You need a girl who’s going to be able to hold a conversation and build you and your foundation up, giving the investors confidence that they are not just tossing money at some playboy.’

Michelle was right, as she usually was, and I could see by how uncomfortable Jax was at the moment, he knew it. Perhaps it had something to do with the comment he made a few months ago about starting to feel the pull to settle down. I had thought he was referring to staying put and not traveling so much, but the more Michelle talked, the more it made sense and it frightened me.

Jax and I were growing up, and, while he and Eli got along great, I worried that if Jax got serious with someone, that it might somehow negatively affect our friendship. It’s already sustained so much, and I shouldn't be as insecure as I was, but I knew how loving someone could alter a person to the core of their being. I’d like to think that if Eli and Jax despised one another that I’d be able to find a middle ground, but when push came to shove, where would my loyalties fall?

I was falling in love with Eli, that much I’d accepted over the past few days, but when our backs were against the wall, what would prevail and what, or who, would be left behind? Could love be the victor, or would I become a fond memory Eli had of high school and a story to be shared at frat parties?
The past two weeks had been the longest in my life, seriously. I was jonesing for Eli bad. Our nightly texting sessions just wasn’t cutting it, nor were the few times we managed to leave campus and drive down a deserted country road and made out like high school students in his car. The irony of that wasn’t lost on me.

We had the most amazing time together during our break, and I missed the carefree time we were able to enjoy. It made being back at the school that much harder. I knew it would be difficult, yet, I couldn’t have known just how much so. I had made it abundantly clear that on the school grounds we were nothing more than a student and a teacher. He hated my rules, and pushed them every opportunity he got. However, he somewhat respected my wishes. When we were off campus or knew we were alone, all rules went out the window.

Teaching was the hardest part. The sight of him, the sound of his voice, his smell when he walked in and just being in close proximity, did things to me I never thought possible. I’d read about it in the romance books I loved, but always thought it was just another fictitious element like all male leads possessing alpha tendencies, big egos matched with confidence and being well hung. Eli checked all the boxes.

I had started a countdown to graduation day scheduled for the start of June, with 4 more weeks to go. I could do it. I had to do it.

Aside from lusting over Eli every minute of every day, and stressing out that we’d get caught, everything else in my life was going well. I was keeping my head well above water with all my various jobs. Cassy was finally back in Australia, writing her best work ever while being locked down in London, and editing it had been so exciting. I got tingling feelings while reading it. I was put off at first that it was about aliens, but the story ended up being so different and intriguing that I needed to know what would happen next. Plus, there was really hot alien sex that made me wish Eli hadn’t been on the other side of campus in his dorm room, but in my bed with me instead.

Lana had made a new friend, a male friend at that, and was even taking to him it seemed. I wasn’t sure who was more shocked...her family, her friends, or herself.

The only snag in my life was that Jax was trekking through some remote part of Central America again and was only reachable by his satellite phone, and only when it was charged. I was really hoping this was going to be his last trip like this. While I admired what he was doing, I still worried about him something fierce.

I started working out during the evening study time and took on helping with the organization of a large Lacrosse tournament the school was hosting this weekend. It was an exhibition and a chance to showcase up and coming players from many schools in the area. It would benefit students who were looking for scholarships, both for private schools and universities alike. Basically, I was taking on anything to keep myself occupied, to help the next several weeks pass by.

I still hadn’t worked out what exactly would happen with Eli and myself once I was finished at Wendell Academy and Eli graduated. From what he had told me, he spent his summers either at Lacrosse camps or at his family's cottage in Canada. I also knew he hated spending time in NYC, where I’d be working and living. I figured that was due to his strained relationship with this father. Perhaps me being in the city would be the sweetener to alleviate the bitterness he had toward being
Then there was Dartmouth in the fall. He would likely try to spend as much time as he could with his brother, and it was anyone’s guess what team Otis would be drafted to next year and how far Eli would have to travel to see him.

The morning of the tournament, I was up at the ass crack of dawn to organize the student volunteers I bribed with a pizza and movie night next week instead of study time. Ted was already in the cafeteria waiting for the rest of his team to show up when I got there to fill up my travel mug, the one I knew I’d be refilling all day long to keep me going.

‘Good morning, Miss P.’ I spun around to see a smiling Eli already in his lacrosse jersey and warm-up suit, filling up a mug of coffee, adding it to the massive plate of food on his tray and four glasses of milk.

‘Good morning, Eli.’ I tried to keep the longing out of my voice and hoped my body stayed out of his personal space.

He looked me over. I was wearing a pair of jeans, boots and his Wendell hoodie, the one I’d stolen the morning I left his room in a rush. ‘Nice shirt,’ he said in a low voice and looked around to confirm we were alone at the coffee station, but I like it when you’re wearing nothing at all.’

I shook my head and took a sip of my coffee. ‘Stop.’

‘Will I see you around today?’ he asked me, adding some sugar to his coffee.

‘I’ll be around managing everything. You just have fun out on the field.’

‘Otis will be around. Say hi if you see him.’

I smiled up at him. It was really nice of his brother to come from Boston for the day when I knew it was a busy time for him and the team he played for. They were in the middle of the playoffs and were going for another title this year.

‘I will.’ I beamed as another student came to fill up a mug with coffee.

The morning flew by, and I was in the cafeteria ushering visiting teams in and out during their lunchtimes as it wasn’t big enough for everyone to eat at the same time, even with most of the students gone. As I was speaking to one of the team’s assistant coaches, instructing them which changing rooms they could use, I heard my name being called by a somewhat familiar voice. ‘Wren.’

I turned around to see Otis walking toward me with a big smile on his face which turned to alarm when he saw my official Wendell name tag, pinned to my shirt: W. Price, Teacher.

‘Please excuse me,’ I said to the visitor and walked toward Otis. ‘Hey there. Your brother…’

He reached for my name tag and quickly took it off and shoved it into the pouch of my hoodie. ‘Our Dad’s here,’ he explained, and none too soon. Sure enough, the man I saw in the kitchen two weeks ago, when I was clearly doing the walk of shame to make my escape.

My eyes went wide. I’d told Eli of my run-in with his father, and he confirmed that there were words exchanged between the two of them after the fact. Eli must have subsequently said something to his brother, and I was thankful for the heads up.

‘We meet again,’ their father said, giving me a once over, seemingly approving.

‘Hello, Mr. Trembley.’ I gave him a weak smile, clearly uncomfortable with the whole situation, wishing the floor would open up and swallow me whole.

‘Volunteering for Eli’s tournament?’

Eli’s tournament. In his mind, it wasn’t the schools, just his son’s. Too bad, I knew the only son that mattered to him was standing right next to us.

‘I suppose you just wanted to stay close.’ I winced at his assumption and view of the situation as if I didn’t have a life outside of him, as if Eli was the only thing in my life. He was a big part of it, but I
wasn’t some stupid airhead who hung off every word and tagged along riding his coattails. I had my
own life, a very fulfilling life, But I bit my tongue, trying to not draw any undue attention.

Just then, our own Lacrosse team entered the cafeteria, and the three of us looked to see Eli enter
with a huge smile on his face; clearly they had won their game and were riding a high. However, that
smile soon fell as he saw the three of us chatting. He sidestepped his team members who were
forming a line to get their lunch and walked over to us.

‘Dad?’ Eli said anxiously, looking between Otis and myself. ‘What are you doing here?’
‘Just formally introducing myself to your girlfriend.’

I cringed and looked behind me to ensure there was no one to overhear the bomb that was just
dropped. Eli laughed nervously and looked down at me. ‘I wouldn’t call her my girlfriend exactly, but
why are you at Wendell?’

Before he could answer I cut in. ‘Nice to meet you. I must make sure all the visiting teams are
where they should be.’ I stepped away and looked at my tablet that I had been carrying around with
me to message other volunteers and have access to all the agendas for the weekend.

‘Do you just want to get the photo-op over with you so you can leave?’ I heard Eli snap at his
father as I was walking away.

I was nearly hyperventilating as I left the cafeteria, finding a wall to steady myself against to stay
upright. I was hoping Eli would get his father to leave the school as soon as possible. There was so
much that that man could ruin with a few simple words.

I hadn’t been honest with Helen since returning from the extended Easter break, fearing what she
might say or worse, what she might think of me for acting on the feelings Eli and I had developed for
one another.

My tablet pinged in my hand. I looked down to see a message from one of the student volunteers
looking for a room to be unlocked. I made my way to the room in question, trying to busy myself with
the tournament. Once all the teams were where they should be, or had left for the day after losing their
games, I made my way to the field where the final game of the afternoon was being played. I’d rarely
seen Eli play, and I wanted to be there to see what might be one of his final high school games. I
stood off to the side with the teachers, cheering on our boys.

As we were all making our way back to the buildings, I was walking near Mr. Kline, our
headmaster, when Eli’s father appeared, and struck up a conversation with the headmaster, thanking
him for arranging the tournament and to ensure all pictures of Eli from the weekend were sent to him,
especially any notable awards he might be granted. I rolled my eyes. It sounded as if Mr. Trembley
was reminding Mr. Kline about the awards he expected for Eli. I saw right through it. He needed the
pictures to pad his own social media, and thus, his social image.

I was trying to walk away as fast as I could, and I was a decent distance away when I heard the
headmaster call out, ‘Miss Price.’

Shit, this wasn’t going to end well.

As much as I wanted to pretend I didn’t hear him, I wasn’t far enough away yet to get away with it.
Defeated, I looked over my shoulder, slowing my pace and desperately looking around for Otis.
However, I hadn’t seen him for a while, figuring he may have had to drive back to Boston for his own
game this evening.

‘Yes, Headmaster?’

‘I’d like you to meet Mr. Trembley, Elliott’s father.’ I gave a weak smile as I felt my knees were
about to give out beneath me. ‘Miss Price is Elliott’s English teacher filling in for Ms. Melody this
term.’
World, swallow me whole.
‘His t...teacher?’ Mr. Trembley nearly choked on his own words.
CHAPTER 26

ELI

Winning our last game of the day ensured we would play in the finals tomorrow, my team was on cloud nine, and I was so happy that many of my fellow team members had breakout games. I already had my fate sealed at Dartmouth in the fall. Knowing there were other scouts on campus today, I was all about trying to take a back seat and let them showcase their own talents.

I also wasn’t about to bring my A-game with my father watching. I saw that setting up my teammates for their turn in the spotlight was really pissing him off. This was the first time in three years that he’d come to watch me play, and even then, I knew it was at Otis’s insistence and that he was spending the weekend in Boston with my brother to support him in his team's playoff endeavors.

He’d only been at campus two other times in the three years I've been here; once was to drop me off, and the other was last year for a parent’s event, putting his best foot forward and all that shit that matters to people like him.

I was trying to delay my walk back to the main part of the building that housed the dorms, classrooms and cafeteria. I’d begrudgingly done my part earlier for him, gave him the pictures to brag about, sat with him and Otis as we ate lunch and pretended everything was great with our family. I made things look sparkly when nothing could have been farther from the truth. It took everything in me to hold my food down. I already had lost my appetite because he was here, now I was also stressing that he’d already spoken to Wren. Thankfully, Otis had the foresight to tell her to take her name tag off before dad got to her. With any luck, he would be gone soon and still be under the impression she was a student as he drove to Boston. I was under no illusions that he would want to stay for dinner, not when Otis was playing in a few hours and it was a two-hour drive back to Boston. I just wanted the fucker to leave campus so I could catch my breath and ensure Wren was okay.

But when I looked up, I could see that he was halfway up the hill back to the building, talking to the headmaster and Wren. I could feel all the blood drain from my body as I grabbed my bag and all but ran in their direction, watching Wren turn white and fighting to keep her composure as my father’s face turned red. He spun around so quickly, he was at risk for whiplash, his eyes finding mine, red with rage.

I had to get him away from Wren, give her a chance to find her footing and catch her thoughts that I knew were racing at the moment. She had been so freaked out when my father caught her in our kitchen looking for a bottle of water on her way to catch a train. I hadn’t blinked when she mentioned it, especially since the words she said could have implied that she was a student; she looked the part of a young, petite teenager touting a designer purse while wearing a Wendell hoodie.

I had told her not to worry about anything, that my father never came to the school. Seeing that my graduation was during the Stanley Cup Playoffs, it wasn’t likely that he wouldn’t make it; he hadn’t made time for Otis’s, so it wasn’t likely he’d be attending mine. Not that I wanted him to attend, and my mother had already planned to attend. They hadn’t been in each other’s company in almost six years, something I envied. If only I was as lucky as my mother.

But the look on both their faces told me that the connection had been made, and I was going to bet my left nut that it was the over-talkative headmaster who’d just delivered the blow.

Everything in my being told me to rush to her, to be the rock she needed me to be in this moment, to hold her and assure her that everything was going to be alright. I couldn’t lie to her. I knew it
wasn’t going to be alright, that my father knew and was going to do everything in his power to hurt me with this; that was his goal in life. More than getting Otis to the NHL, more than becoming the commissioner, he wanted to punish me.

I kept reminding myself that I had to keep my cool, to not show him just how much she meant to me. I veered off slightly, luring him away from Wren and the headmaster who, thankfully, were still making their way back to the buildings with the others.

‘Elliot,’ my father called, and I just looked at him, almost feeling sorry for how out of shape he was, hoping he’d go into cardiac arrest on the spot.

‘What?’ I snapped. ‘I got the picture with you, spoke with you in public...what more do you want?’

‘Your teacher?’ he roared, trying to push me into a tree, forgetting I had at least six inches on him and at least fifty pounds of pure muscle. I was in my prime, and he was middle-aged and not aging well. ‘Are you trying to bring me down?’

‘Are you fucking serious right now?’ I got close to him. ‘Are you even listening to yourself, old man?’

‘Do you know what would happen if this got out?’

‘If what got out?’ I tried to play dumb.

‘Elliot, don’t play me for a fool. That little piece of ass was in my kitchen looking well fucked a few weeks ago. That is over, do you hear me?’

I should have said yes or continued to deny it, but I wasn’t going to roll over and continue to let him disrespect Wren like that. I’d promised her she was no longer alone. While I knew she was still keeping big parts of her life from me, I needed to step up and prove to her she wasn’t just a piece of ass, like my father so eloquently put it.

I laughed at him. Laughed in his face. ‘That’s not likely to happen any time soon, if ever.’

‘Might I remind you that I cannot have any scandal attached to my name.’

‘Then maybe you shouldn’t have cheated on mom with all those women.’

‘I was discrete.’

I laughed again. ‘Not that discrete. Mom found you in bed with her friend for fuck’s sake.’

He was getting frustrated, running his hand through his thinning and receding hairline. Thank fuck male pattern baldness is passed through the mother’s side.

‘Elliot, I am so close...’

‘Look, I wish I cared, really I do, but I’ve suffered enough, and besides, you don’t think she can’t have a scandal.’

‘She’s just a lowly teacher.’

I grabbed his jacket. ‘She’s not, and I will be damned if I let you take anything more from me or from her. You have no idea her history.’ To be fair, I didn’t know everything yet either, but I was planning on being around to find out.

‘Mark my words, you will end this little infatuation or booty-call arrangement, whatever you want to call it. And if you think I’ve taken a lot from you, then you haven’t seen anything yet. Try and push the issue, and you will truly see how much more I can take.’

‘So your unrealistic career aspirations are more important than your own son’s happiness?’

‘My real son plays hockey; he knows how to make me happy. The moment you hung your skates up, you ceased being worthy of my attention.’

‘Unless it suits you, that is, like today. I guess you have to have at least one picture of me playing for that all-around father-of-the-year image you are going for.’ The man sickened me. I picked up my bag that had fallen off my shoulder. I took a final look at my father. ‘Don't you even think about
interfering with Wren. I promise if you do, it will come back to haunt you.’

‘Little boys shouldn't make idle threats,’ he cackled. ‘This thing with your teacher is over. Now, I
have a long drive back to Boston to watch a real sporting event. You would have thought you could
have at least played decently today, seeing as I drove all this way for once.’

‘So, it was fine when you thought she was a student?’

He smirked. ‘When I thought she was a student she was at least on the same level as you, seeing as
her family could have afforded to send her to this school. I assure you, all that tight little body sees in
you is your trust fund, one I will disinherit you from if this continues. Though I’ll admit, you choose
well. She's a fine piece of ass, but we don’t do scandal.’

With that, I stormed off. My trust fund was protected. I’d already checked with my mom’s lawyer
last summer, but I still had to wait until I was twenty-one. It wasn't huge, but it would provide a good
down payment for a house someday, and I was fine with that. I intended to make my own way in life. I
would prove to my father that I didn’t need his money or connections. My talent would get me
everything I needed, and I learned from him just how I didn’t want to climb to the top. I would learn
from his mistakes and avoid turning into anything remotely resembling him.

Back in my room, I stripped my dirty uniform off as quickly as humanly possible without ripping it
and grabbed my phone, dialing Wren. It rang four times before going to voicemail. I called three more
times before I conceded that she wasn’t going to pick up my call. Wrapping a towel around my waist,
I took a quick shower before heading down to the cafeteria, where I saw a sullen-looking Wren sitting
with a few of the student volunteers. She recapped the day and went over some things for the morning,
because above all, she was here to do a job and took on volunteering for this weekend to be close to
me and keep busy. It had been her weekend off, and I’d encouraged her to go to Boston to spend time
with Lana, but she insisted on staying, not wanting to be far from me. I couldn't help but think this was
all my fault.

I stopped by the table and smiled at everyone sitting, trying desperately not to single out Wren.
‘Thank you all for helping out today.’

‘No problem.’ One of the younger students blushed as she spoke to me. ‘You played really well
today.’

She clearly had no idea what she was talking about. I purposely played like shit. ‘Thanks, I
appreciate it,’ I replied to her and looked to Wren. ‘Miss Price, will you have a minute after dinner to
go over a question I have about the assignment?’

She looked up to me with a pain in her eyes and nodded. ‘Sure, I’ll meet you in my classroom in a
half hour if that works?’

‘Thanks.’

I went to get some food, starving from the day’s activities. Sitting with my team, I ate fast, not
participating in the conversation, just needing to talk to Wren. I watched her, shuffling her food
around her plate, looking down to her phone every so often to check the time. When she had picked
apart her food to the point it was indistinguishable as stir-fry, she excused herself from the rest of the
teachers and staff, leaving the cafeteria in the direction of her own apartment.

I finished eating and went to her classroom, using my master key to gain access. Seeing as this part
of the school was closed off to students during the evenings and weekends, it was kept locked.

I entered her dark classroom, keeping the lights off and lowering the blinds for further privacy
when she walked in and closed the door behind her.

‘I’m so…’ She put her hands up to stop my words and pushed me away from her physically, and I
felt it emotionally also.
‘Eli, this is bad, really bad.’ The panic was evident in her voice, and I couldn't help but notice that she couldn't look me in the eye.

‘I know Wren, but we’re in this together.’

She finally looked at me in the eye, ‘Eli, no. There can’t be any more togetherness.’

‘Wren, I’m of legal age. You haven’t broken any laws.’ I was trying to make her see reason, but it was falling on deaf ears.

‘What did your father say?’

‘That’s irrelevant…’

‘It’s not,’ she cried. ‘I need to know what he said, and if I’m going to lose my job and my reputation all for…’ She trailed off, and I was starting to see red.

‘All for what Wren?’ I prompted. ‘Finish what you were going to say.’

She shook her head and turned around, starting to pace the classroom.

‘Is your father going to say anything to the school? What does he know?’ She was starting to spin verbally.

‘I don’t know, but I really don’t care.’

‘Of course you don't fucking care,’ she snapped, spinning to face me. ‘I was just an easy lay. Your reputation and job are not on the line. You’re not going to disappoint one of your closest friends, a woman who's been like family. No, of course you don’t care. You don’t have anything to lose in this situation.’

She gave me one final look, shaking her head, before walking out of the classroom, leaving me alone with an abused heart.

She was wrong. I had her to lose, and she was the most important thing to me.
WREN

I might have had a sizable bank account, but the parents of this school had the power. Once upon a
time, I had a powerful family backing me also, I vaguely remember how it felt, but more so, I knew how isolated I was these days. I was under no illusions that without a family behind me, I was essentially a nobody, and I wasn’t ready to reveal who I was to try and buy myself some credibility. Likely, it would only backfire on me.

The look on Eli’s face hurt me deep down to my core. My words stung, but I couldn't sugar coat anything right now. He was still green to the world and didn’t fully grasp what I was up against. He’d told me enough about his father’s character to know that I was screwed, and not in a good way.

When I left Eli in the classroom, I didn't have intentions to seek out Helen, but minutes later, I found myself knocking on her door on a Saturday night, unannounced. I was just hoping that she didn't have company; I was already in a state. The tears started and I was shaking with nervousness, the fear of what she was going to think eating away at my sanity.

Helen answered the door holding her baby, looking as if he needed to be burped. Her face instantly dropped when she saw the look of me. ‘Wren?’

‘I messed up.’ I let out a sob as she pulled me into her house. It wasn’t lost on me that this was the second time I’d shown up in tears with Eli at the root of the problem. Only this time, I was the one in the wrong, having clearly crossed the line. ‘Are we alone?’

‘Yes.’ She led me into the small living room area in the front of the house. ‘Chris is having a poker night with his friends.’

Thank God for small miracles.

‘What’s going on?’ she asked, putting the baby in a rocker swing next to the sofa she took a seat on, and I followed.

‘I’m so sorry.’ I wiped my eyes, the tears unable to stop falling. ‘I really messed up.’

She took in a deep breath and reached out for my hand. ‘Does it have to do with Eli?’

I nodded, feeling so ashamed. ‘On this island, we had such a connection. I promise you, I tried. I really did try to suppress those feelings, and I have taken my job here seriously. I pushed him away, time and time again, and after the...well, you know the incident, he left me alone. Until he came to my rescue the night of the anniversary of my parent’s crash.’ I looked up to her, and she was sitting patiently, allowing me to talk, a worried look on her face.

‘That night, nothing happened. He was a gentleman. He knew I was drunk and vulnerable. I appreciated him just being there, and it was just like on the island, that strong connection. We’d been on better terms since the anniversary. He checked in with me every day, showing his caring side, not expecting or asking anything from me. Then when we went to state, everything changed. Well, I should say, it changed the night before we came home.’

I heard her suck in a breath of air in apparent surprise. ‘I’m so sorry, Helen. I knew it was wrong, and I should have told you sooner, but I was clearly ashamed. We were stuck in an elevator for a time and well, you’ve seen him, he’s gorgeous.’ I tried to make light of the situation with a laugh, but it came out as a snort instead. ‘Then we had that two-week break, and we spent time together, both at the Allentown house and a bit of sneaking around in New York. He took Jax and me to a game...’

‘So, does he know about your parents now?’ she asked, looking a bit hopeful.
I shook my head. ‘No, not quite there yet, nor shall we be after today, I should say.’

‘What happened today,’ she asked me in earnest.

‘Right before Easter, when we were on break, I spent the night at his place, just once. I was to leave the next morning for Easter in Allentown, you know.’ I waved my hand. She knew how important it was to Michelle and her side of the family. ‘I was going to stay the rest of the break up there to catch up on some work for clients and marking. My phone alarm didn’t go off. I had it set for PM not AM, so I was running late. I made the mistake of stopping for a bottle of water in the kitchen before leaving. That’s when his father saw me.’

Helen let out a groan, clearly seeing where this story was heading. ‘Eli said not to worry, his dad never comes to the school, and when he asked me who I was I said I was at Wendell with Eli, but that I had to run to catch a train or else my family would be upset with me.’

‘He assumed you were a student?’

I nodded. ‘Yeah, and then today, Otis, his older brother found me mere moments before his father walked into the cafeteria. Otis took my name tag off of me, and his father eyed me, clearly recognizing me from the morning in the kitchen.’

I stopped to take a breath and blow my nose.

‘Why do I feel like there’s more?’

‘Because I don’t have the kind of luck for it to just be left at that.’

‘No sweetie, you don’t,’ she agreed with me reluctantly, rubbing my leg in a caring gesture.

‘I went down to the field to catch the last few minutes of the game today. It was the only one I had the chance or time to see. Turned out to be a massive mistake. Kline was there, walking back to campus with Mr. Trembley, Eli’s dad. I guess the asshole wanted to make the most of actually being at the school for once and struck up a conversation with Kline, all in a bid to ensure Eli would have trophies to take pictures with.’ I couldn’t hold back my displeasure for the man. After all that Eli had revealed, I hated his father almost as much as his own son did. ‘Kline felt the need to introduce me…’

‘Don’t say it,’ Helen begged.

‘Yeah, as Eli’s English teacher for the term.’

‘Oh fuck!’ Helen exclaimed standing abruptly to her feet and starting to pace in her small living room. ‘What did his dad say?’

‘Nothing, at least I don’t think. My mind went blank. I think he might have said he needed to find his son, and the last I saw they were talking near the trees close to Kline’s house.’

I watched her as she paced some more, biting her fingernails and thinking. ‘Say something,’ I cried, her silence killing me.

‘Oh sweetie, I’m so sorry.’ she walked back over to the sofa and sat next to me, putting a reassuring arm around my shoulder, trying to console me. I hadn’t realized I had started to sob.

‘M...me too.’

‘No, no, don’t cry. We will get through this. Mr. Trembley will not want a scandal.’

‘He’s also not going to want his son fucking his English teacher either.’

She bit her lip. ‘No, I suppose not. Can you maybe end it for the next, what, a month? Four more weeks?’

I nodded, wiping away a tear. ‘I just told Eli before I came here. He doesn’t understand what’s at stake for me though. I mean, he’s only nineteen. How could he?’

‘Eli’s pretty mature for his age.’ Helen defended him, much to my surprise. ‘But he’s still pretty clueless to the real world. All these kids are when it comes right down to it.’

I nodded in agreement. ‘What do you think his father will do?’
She shrugged. ‘I think we just have to wait and see.’

Wait and see we did, however, we didn’t have to wait long. During lunch the next day, Headmaster Kline asked to speak with me after classes finished for the day, and I had no illusions as to what he wanted to talk to me about. I prepared for this the previous night. I started to pack all my things, and this morning put the few personal effects I had in my classroom into the top drawer. I would be sure to take them with me after class today as I doubted that I would be back teaching tomorrow.

Similarly, last night I started to pack my clothes and organize my electronics to take with me should I need to leave, or be asked to leave on short notice. It was the first time I appreciated how little I had brought with me.

I felt horrible, especially how this was going to reflect on Helen and Chris, both of whom nominated me to teach here, and whom the school knew I was close with. I really hoped this wasn’t going to affect their reputations. Destroying my own was one thing; taking down two lovely people in the process was something different entirely.

My last class of the day happened to be my seniors. Eli looked wrecked. I’d been keeping my distance somewhat, keeping our texting short and to the point, and I could see plain as day it was taking its toll on him. I assigned an independent project for each of my classes to start working on, that way it would give the school some time to get a teacher to fill in for me, even if it meant Helen coming back from her leave early. Something I was feeling gutted about the possibility of.

When the final bell of the day sounded, I opened up my desk drawer and put my few personal items in a large purse I’d had the mind to bring with me to class, something I rarely had to do.

‘What the fuck is all this?’ Eli growled in a low voice after the last person left the class, trying to take my purse from me to put my chargers, water bottle, lotion and lip balm back into my drawer.

‘Eli stop,’ I protested, pulling my bag back from his grip and refilling the few items he managed to pull out.

‘And this?’ He slammed the piece of paper outlining the project I had created for them. ‘You planning on going somewhere?’

I shook my head. ‘No, but I’m pretty sure Headmaster Kline is about to fire me.’ I handed him back the assignment sheet. ‘Now, if you will excuse me, I have a meeting I’d rather not be late for with my boss.’

I made to leave, but he held my arm. ‘Wren, what’s going on?’ His voice was softer now.

I turned to face him one more time. ‘I don't know. Kline asked me at lunch to meet him after class in his office. I can’t help but think I'm being fired.’

‘My dad hasn’t said anything.’

‘Do you really think he’d be so kind as to give you a heads up?’

He dropped his head, his shoulder slouched and shook his head, no longer able to look me in the eye. Without another word, I walked out of the classroom and likely, out of his life.

To my utter shock and disbelief, Mr. Trembley was on a large screen joining us via video conference in Kline’s office. As I took a seat, the receptionist handed him a stack of papers.

‘Thanks for coming in to meet with us this afternoon,’ Kline said, taking a seat and organizing the papers around me.

‘Well, get on with it, I don’t have all fucking day to deal with gold-digging pedophiles,’ Mr. Trembley yelled from the screen, causing both mine and Kline’s eyebrows to shoot up in surprise.

‘Mr. Trembley is very concerned about the sexual relationship that you are having with his son.'
He has stated that you were at their New York City apartment on the morning of Good Friday, and he seems to think his other son is aware of your so-called relationship.

‘Alleged,’ I stated, only looking at the headmaster and refusing to give Mr. Trembley any attention whatsoever.

‘As you know, we have a strict, no-exceptions-made policy for such relationships.’

‘I am aware,’ I agreed.

‘Wren, there’s really no easy way to say this. I am going to have to suspend your contract while we do a full investigation of the allegations brought on by Mr. Trembley.’

‘That was not the deal,’ Mr. Trembley cut in, and I could see from the corner of my eye that he was getting very red in the face. ‘You said the bitch was going to be fired.’

I looked to Kline. ‘I refuse to sit here and take that abuse. Either you turn that off now or deal with my lawyer.’

‘Lawyer?’ Mr. Trembley laughed. ‘That’s rich coming from a low-life like you. I’d like to see who you could afford.’

‘Kline, I can do this the easy way, under the condition you turn that monitor off right now, or the hard way with my lawyer and a wrongful termination suit.’

Kline looked at me. He knew who I really was and the financial backing I had in my corner. This was a fight he knew he would lose should he side with Eli’s father.

Kline turned to Eli’s father. ‘Mr. Trembley, I am going to have to ask you to be quiet or I will have no choice but to turn the video feed off. We also have a zero-tolerance policy for harassment here at the school.’

‘And that should extend to sexual harassment also.’

‘I assure it does.’

‘Fine. Say your piece, but I would like to speak to her when you are done to relay my terms laid out in the documents in front of you.’ Eli’s father sat back in his chair, arms folded over the belly he was growing.

I let out a sigh and gritted my teeth, turning to Kline who proceeded to speak. ‘As I was saying, at this time we are suspending your contract with the school, without pay.’

‘You know as well as I do I am doing this job without pay as a favor to Helen. There’s no pay to suspend.’

‘You can’t even be smart enough to get paid? Figured.’ We heard Mr. Trembley mutter on the screen, but both Kline and I ignored him.

‘Be that as it may,’ Kline continued. We will require you to vacate your residence and have no contact with Elliot Trembley during the investigation period. Do you understand the terms?’

I nodded. ‘I do.’

‘We will require you to vacate your room by the end of the day tomorrow.’

‘Thank you. However, I will not require that much time.’ I was being pleasant and agreeable. ‘I have lesson notes all up to date that I will email you, and all my classes have a large assignment they are currently working on that will take them to the end of next week at least.’

‘Mr. Trembley has taken it upon himself to draw up a cease and desist order and a restraining order.’

‘I might only have a Masters in English Literature and not a law degree, but seeing as Elliot is a legal adult, one without a mental incapacitation, I’m not sure someone else can draw up a restraining order on his behalf.’ I fought back just because Mr. Trembley was a piece of work and likely wasn’t used to being questioned.
‘Seeing as he was fucking his teacher, I’d say he lost all his mental facilities and wasn’t the only one.’

I rolled my eyes. ‘Allegedly.’ I wasn't about to admit to anything, nor lie flat out.

Headmaster Kline handed me a pile of paper that I recognized as legal documents, and Mr. Trembley spoke. ‘You have been served. Mr. Kline is my witness. You are to have no contact with my son now or ever again. Furthermore, this meeting and the entire affair cannot, under any circumstances, be made public. I will not be humiliated by the stupid actions of a horney kid. The sheer disrespect he has afforded me is mind-boggling. I have the full cooperation of Mr. Kline in that regard. A sexual abuse scandal at his fine establishment could be very detrimental to the future success of the school, and all the teachers who work there.’

I immediately thought of Helen and Chris and their dedication, loyalty and commitment to not only the school but the students they taught.

‘Furthermore, should you attempt to contact my son by any means, I will not hesitate to ruin you, something I already want to do. However, I fear Otis’s retaliation. He seems to think you’re a decent person, which would have made me wonder if you were fucking him also, but he’s hung up on some other poor bitch, so I doubt that’s the case.’

I bit my tongue, wanting to lash out at this bastard and his disregard for women in general and the lack of compassion for his children, even the one he supposedly likes.

‘I am aware that you are a writer for a popular blog and work for a literary agency.’ He seemed proud of himself for finding that out.

‘Congratulations. You know how to navigate a google search,’ I deadpanned, still not giving him the satisfaction of looking at the screen he was on, and I could tell he wasn’t used to being talked back to, especially by a female.

‘Imagine the hit the blog would take if I called you out publicly for the rape of a high school student. I would also think that, what’s it called? Oh right, the Grove Agency would end your employment with them. From what I understand, reputation is everything in that kind of work.’ He wasn’t wrong. Getting fired from the Grove Agency would crush any chance of me ever working in the literary world again. I also wouldn’t put the Mylie blog at risk. The creator has been exceptionally kind to me with work and friendship; I could never do that to her or her life's work.

‘And then there's my idiot son. Should he reach out to you, should you answer, I will tell Dartmouth of his indiscretions. Indiscretions that go against their code of conduct and would prevent him from playing, which in turn would prevent professional teams seeing his so-called talent, and he’d never make it professionally in the sport, not that I care one way or another. But I am sure you do, and I know it’s all he cares about.’

He wasn’t wrong. Playing in the National Lacrosse League was Eli’s main goal for the next five years. Beyond that, he wanted to work with a club as management, helping the sport grow.

‘Are we on the same page, Wren Price?’ The way he said my name made me nauseated as if it was a threat of things to come, yet he didn’t call me by my full, legal name, nor were the documents I was holding addressed to Penelope Wren Price Spruce; I breathed a breath of relief that he didn’t know my true identity.

‘I will never be on the same anything as you, but I will take your idle threats seriously. I will give your son the space you want, but I assure you, I cannot be held accountable for his actions.’

He laughed a menacingly cruel laugh. ‘Oh, don't you worry about him. I have ways to keep him away from you.’
14 MONTHS LATER

‘How was your flight?’ Jax asked me, rolling my suitcase into my apartment, having seen me exit the cab in front of our building, where the Priceless Futures offices were also housed on the ground floor.

‘Ugh,’ I groaned. ‘As good as flying gets with me.’ I hated flying and tried to avoid it as much as possible, however, since one of my clients hit it big last fall, work had brought me out to LA on a few occasions to oversee the beginning of production on her book series being turned into a Netflix series. It’s one of the main reasons I wanted to pursue my career, seeing clients soar. Thankfully, prescription drugs existed that reduced my anxiety and aided me in sleep during the six-hour flight.

‘Could have been worse, you could have had to fly back to Australia again.’

I winced. ‘Don’t remind me.’ Late last year, while Cassy and I were both suffering broken hearts, I flew down there for a few months to escape winter in New York and hoped a change of scenery would help mend my broken heart. While the time wasn’t all that bad, I’d managed to hook up and have fun with one of her extremely sexy friends she had recently met. It was just too bad that he was in the public eye, and I was adamant about staying under the radar. I was also too hung up on Eli still to entertain anything more than causal sex and enjoyed his company while down under.

It seemed no matter where I was in the world, I still missed Eli. I still missed him as much, if not more, than when I left Wendell. It had been fourteen months, but who was counting, since I’d last spoken or seen Eli. I still followed him on all his social media accounts and even attended a game or two when his university team was playing close enough for me to go stalk him incognito.

In addition, Jax and I often went to see his brother Otis play just over the river in New Jersey, some games I knew Eli had been at, again, thanks to me stalking his digital persona. I knew it wasn’t healthy. Trust me, on so many levels I knew, but I still couldn't resist; the pull had never gone away.

It was pouring salt on a wound, and I was a glutton for the punishment as if I needed to feel the pain to know that it had been real, and I was still heartbroken over it.

I thought he would have contacted me, but he never did. Not once. Not a text, a voice message, an email or flowers sent anonymously. I had thought his feelings were stronger than that, but I had been played - by a high school student no less - and it hurt. It hurt so much that over a year later, I still wasn’t completely over it despite all my efforts.

After leaving the school, I went home to Allentown and worked, did some home renovation projects, and, when Jax finally came home, spent time with him. Once I started with the Grove Agency, I threw myself into my work to the point of near exhaustion. My client’s careers were soaring, and I couldn't be prouder for them. It just meant I was spread very thin.

‘I thought you were going to Boston?’ I asked Jax as the elevator doors closed.

‘I went this past weekend. Had some things for the foundation that needed my attention, so I came back early,’ Jax informed me as we rode up in the elevator.

‘I was wondering why you were down there working so late.’ He had been working less and less at the foundation with the day-to-day things, focusing on securing funding and other endeavors that had started out as a passion project and took on a whole life onto itself.
‘Listen, there’s something I want to talk to you about. It has to do with the 10th anniversary.’ His voice was low and cautious. It had only been a few weeks since the anniversary of our father’s deaths and there were a lot of people looking to memorialize it.

‘I know, I got your email.’ I took off my jacket and went to the fridge to pour myself a glass of wine.

‘Well, I wouldn’t have known. You didn’t answer me.’ Jax fell onto my sofa, and I joined him.

‘I’m game.’

He sat up and looked at me, blinking. ‘Are you serious?’

I nodded. ‘Yeah, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking lately. It’s one of the reasons I’ve been going lighter with my hair. I’ve made my name in the publishing world all on my own merit. I’ve proven to myself that I no longer need to hide behind a veil of secrecy. There’s a lot of attention on their deaths and on them this year. I feel it’s time.’

It scared the shit out of me to take this step, but I knew I had to do it. In order to move forward with my life, I needed to be in control again, and I would never fully own my own destiny without making peace with my past and my true identity.

‘To be honest, I’m surprised no one had figured it out yet, given that you’re so obviously Curt’s son, and I’m close with you…’

‘I think a lot of people still think you died on that flight,’ he admitted, reminding me of my nickname from school.

\textit{Ghost.}

I knew by agreeing to step out of the shadows and take center stage with Jax for the whole world to see, would be the biggest leap I’d ever taken. I got goosebumps thinking of the possibility we could honor them and acknowledge them for who they were and who we were. I had been so afraid of getting hurt, that keeping that part of me closed off would prevent people from getting close, protecting myself. But I knew it was only an excuse.

I had become successful in one aspect of my life. My career had taken off, thanks to having Cassy and Mylie as clients. They brought top-shelf authors to our agency, and I have taken on one of them as a client while working with a few others on specific issues, sharing responsibilities with senior agents within our company. While that part of my life was in full bloom, my social life was still a seed needing to be nurtured. I’d made a few friends, both within the agency and out, notably, an acquaintance of Jax who fit in with the two of us so well, it was hard to fathom she only recently came into our lives. But when it came to dating, nothing had bloomed. That part of my life was a disaster. I tried dating, I really did. The only thing to come out of it was the comical anecdotes that Cassy used in her own writing and reminded me of just how lonely I truly was.

There was Anthony, the restaurateur, who thought bringing me to his restaurant and serving me, along with half the restaurant, would be a great date and way to get to know one another. Lee, who was one of Jax’s friends, claimed he was a professional gamer, yet lived with his parents and asked if I could pay for dinner. So really, he was just lazy, unemployed and wanted to play video games all day and night. No thanks.

Then there was Josh, who really did seem promising, even if he was slightly forward, asking me how I felt about dildos on our first date. It wouldn't have been so bad, except he wanted me to use it on him. I’m all about exploring your sexuality, but how about asking my favorite color or last name first.

As fun as he could have been, and I had no doubt he would have opened my eyes to many, many sides of sex I’d never experienced or heard of, I refused a second date. The perfect guy could have
Once upon a time, Eli admitted to me that he was falling for me, or at least he believed he was. I believed it too at the time, as I was falling right alongside him.

Moving on from him had been impossible, and would continue to be so. As of last month, all the news in the lacrosse world was that he had chosen to leave university early and enter the draft for the professional league. Two weeks ago, he was drafted to the NYC team. Again, thank god for social media It makes stalking so much easier.

I knew he was in the city, but in the past year, our paths hadn’t accidentally crossed, even when I put myself in the way for the exact thing to happen, so the likelihood that it would happen by chance was slim. If he had wanted to find me, he would have and it wouldn't have taken him this long. It just sucked because I had wanted closure, yet I wasn’t prepared to give his father proof or fuel to follow through on his promises to try and destroy me.

Jax queued up one of the final episodes of Supernatural. We had a pact to only watch it together, and with all of his travels, we were just getting around to it. It was bittersweet as it had been our thing for so many years and we didn’t want it to end, limiting the final season to one episode at a time. We were going to have to find an equally silly show to invest our time and thoughts over now, however, I didn’t know if anything would ever come as close.

‘What are your plans for the week?’ Jax asked me when the show was over, and I was picking at the kernels of unpopped popcorn.

‘Nina’s fixed me up on yet another blind date.’ I rolled my eyes and he laughed.

Our friend has taken it on as her personal mission to find me a match, or if not a match, a booty call at least. So far, she hadn’t been successful on either front. However, it’s been rather entertaining.
'Wake up.' My brother was standing over me, tugging the sheets off me.

‘Fuck off.’ I turned, pressing into my pillow, the room far too bright for my liking.

‘Eli, this has to stop.’ It was a warning, one I’d heard far too many times over the past week since I moved in with Otis in his New York apartment not far from where our father used to live and just over the river from where Otis practiced and played in the NHL.

When he had been looking at homes over in New Jersey last year after he was drafted, I convinced him it would be much easier and more convenient to live in Manhattan. He’d been regretting his decision ever since he signed the mortgage, hating the commute, traffic and lack of parking when he had visitors.

‘I know,’ I agreed with him, and I wasn’t just paying him lip service, I knew this moping around needed to stop, but dealing with feeling emotions without my drug of choice sucked. Sobriety sucked. Once my anti-depressants started to kick in, I was counting on life sucking just a little bit less.

‘I’m leaving for practice soon. Come train in the gym with us.’

I rolled over on my back. ‘Okay, give me ten minutes.’

‘You have five and don’t forget to eat something,’ he said, leaving my room already fully dressed.

I sat up, looking at the prescriptions on my nightstand and begrudgingly took one. My father had royally fucked me up for life.

I reached for my phone and opened up my folder with her pictures in them. My Wren, my greatest pleasure and worst heartache all wrapped up into one beautifully deceptive package. It had been over a year since I heard her voice, kissed her lips or brushed her hair out of her perfectly beautiful face. Over a year I’d been missing her while living it up at university.

I was naturally smart, and in the beginning it was easy for me to get good grades without much effort. After my first semester, I not only just had passing grades, grades that earned me a GPA well above what I needed to play varsity Lacrosse, which, let's face it, was my real major at Dartmouth. My minor, girls and drinking. Those two should have earned me a 4.0 GPA, and I never minded extra credit or pop quizzes.

Last year was the start of everything going downhill for me, physically, mentally and academically. Try as I might have to fuck Wren out of my system, it just hadn’t happened, and I worked extremely hard at it. I was so fucking resentful that she just gave up on me, on us, without so much as a fight or a glance back to check if I was okay. News flash, I wasn’t fine. I’m still not fucking fine.

I knew what my father was capable of, and at the time was helpless to do anything, not without fearing that I could possibly cause even more pain and damage to her personally and professionally. I’d done enough, and I knew it. I wasn’t about to be the catalyst to completely destroying everything she was working for. I wasn't in a great headspace, but I also wasn’t that selfish - I simply loved her more.

I’d seen her twice this week already. From afar, that is. Not up close, not within reach to touch her or talk to her, but from the shadows and across the street I watched. She still worked at the Grove Agency, a short walk to where she lived, the same building in Soho the foundation Jax worked at and where I'd picked her up from last year once.
Even though she’d apparently lost weight and didn’t seem to have that spark about her I loved so much, she still looked beautiful. Her hair was a bit shorter than it had been when I knew her and lighter too, almost blond. She didn’t have any social media and that made keeping tabs on her nearly impossible. I knew it was for the best. My father’s threats had been very real back then, and as much as I loved her, I wasn’t about to be the reason that everything she had worked so hard for was ripped out from under her. She’d had enough taken from her that I wasn’t going to add to the list. It was better for me to exit and let her flourish than for the two of us to struggle throughout life. I knew in the long run that wouldn’t make either of us happy. And she had appeared happy all the times I’ve seen her - from my safe distance across the street.

My father had threatened the both of us. For her, he would see to it that her life’s work would be a pile of ash, making it so that she’d never work in publishing ever again. At the time, I believed him, believed he had the power, and maybe he did at the time, maybe he didn’t.

For me, he was going to ruin my lacrosse career before it even started, blacklisting me as a sexual deviant that coerced women into bed to get ahead in the world. I was under no illusion he could make a convincing story; all he’d have to do was draw from his own life experiences.

He tried to tell me that Wren went silently with hush money, that she was just a gold digger, but I knew better. She’d gone to Wendell Academy, when or for how long I didn’t know, but I knew just from seeing her house and the cars her best friend had that she wasn’t in need of money. My father had lied to me to further try and discredit her and the reasons as to why she might want a worthless guy like me.

He’d hurt me, and it was the final straw in my relationship with him, Otis’s too. When my father called me that night, he laid out the terms she’d been served earlier in the day, Terms I didn’t agree with and terms I told him to shove up his ass. After sleeping on it and talking to Otis, I knew without a shadow of a doubt that he was absolutely serious.

Otis was already of age, meaning he had access to his trust fund and would be entering the NHL in a few months. It would have been my father’s crowning glory and tilted the board in his favor for the next commissioner.

Otis understood the rocky relationship I’d had with my father, one that had been getting progressively worse for years. Involving Wren in his war with me was the final straw. I’d left Wendell the next day. Distraught and unable to think straight, I headed straight for Boston to seek out the only ally I knew I could trust implicitly. I let Otis know in no uncertain terms that our father was essentially dead to me. To my surprise, Otis was on board making it a family affair all around. That night we agreed to cut him out of our lives once and for all, and we did just that without looking back.

Otis stopped returning his phone calls and emails, and asked his agent to stop cc’ing him on emails regarding prospective teams and endorsement deals. When my graduation came around, we told our mother that we would no longer speak to him based on what he had done. While my mother wasn’t happy with my situation with Wren, she agreed that what my father had done was out of line, but also didn’t trust him not to follow through. It was the warning I heeded that he did have power and would use it to get what he wanted, or at least prevent me from having what I needed most in this life - Wren by my side.

The day came for Otis’s draft. My mother and her ever-present boyfriend, Claude, were present in the stands when he went fourth overall to the New Jersey Devils. Our father had not been welcomed to sit with us. When his name came up in interviews with the media and with teams, Otis clearly stated he did not want to be associated with him under any circumstance, which in turn sent
shockwaves through the NHL management, board and the players association. Needless to say, a few short months later he was not nominated or selected as the new commissioner, nor was his contract for his position renewed. Our actions, or more so Otis’ actions, were the nail in his coffin. I’d always loved my brother, but him having my back was the reassurance I needed from slipping further into the bottle.

After losing his job and his position of power both in terms of his career and as our father, he retreated back to Montreal as he no longer had a work permit to live in America, taking his sour wife back with him. He was starting to feel just how it felt to be fucked - up the ass without lube. The icing on the cake came a few months ago when his soon-to-be ex-wife had reached out to Otis, seeking funds to put our father in a care home. Apparently, his mind had started to go a few years ago. It was something he managed to hide well: early-onset dementia. However, over the past year, he had deteriorated, and she didn’t trust him enough to leave him alone. We didn’t think it warranted placement in a care home, nor did it warrant an allowance to her to take care of him - especially when she was divorcing him.

We didn’t care if she had any dirt on him, he was no longer powerful, nor would he ever be again. And even if he were, it would have zero effect on mine and Otis’s life. We were done with him. It was laughable that she even entertained the idea that we’d ever talk to her, let alone give her money.

But what hurt more than my father’s betrayal was that Wren left me without so much as a backward glance. She could have contacted me, could have said goodbye. I’d never get the closure I needed because that was never a possibility. To have closure meant that it was over and done with. I still burned for her and the flame I carried had never been extinguished. There might have been less oxygen getting to the flame due to my alcohol consumption, but it never burned out completely.

In the end, I felt like I won, at least the game my father had initiated, the one I inadvertently became a player in. Little did he know I was just as competitive as he was. The piece-des-resistance was his mind going. I had fully intended to get Wren back, just when I was in the right headspace. I couldn't bring her into my folds at the moment. There was too much going on, and I didn’t want her drowning in it. I could wait another few months. I’d waited over a year already; I could do this - I had to do this.

A few weeks ago I was the top pick at the National Lacrosse League draft. I had always said that I would graduate and get my degree before I entered the draft just like Otis had. However, with my grades starting to slip - due to my mental health and self-medication - to the point I’d have been put on academic probation next year, playing was no longer an option for me. Thus, my decision to enter the draft had been cemented for me.

I knew I needed a change. I hadn’t graduated, but with the credits I carried over from my advanced placements at Wendell, and the two courses I took last summer, I wasn’t that far off from graduating. I knew if I was disciplined enough in the offseason, in a couple of years I’d finally get my business degree, something I would need when my playing days were over.

I looked at the time, hoping I’d be back in time to catch Wren on her walk home from work today. I knew it wasn’t normal, however, I needed to see her; it fed my soul and leveled out my head.

Training with my team officially started next week, however, I was expected to be in top shape when I showed up for training camp. I’d been working out a bit on my own, but even I knew I was falling behind. Otis knew it also, hence, I was in his car driving to their training center, and not for the first time. I needed to feel the energy of his teammates, teammates who were his friends and who had made me feel welcomed and worthy of my first overall draft pick last week.

On the drive home, I was feeling better than I had in weeks, that was until I got an email from my
coach with an invitation for dinner and drinks with the team for tomorrow night.

I groaned. ‘What’s up?’ Otis asked from the driver’s seat.

‘Coach is hosting a dinner and drinks meet and greet tomorrow.’

I didn’t have to look at Otis to see he was worried; I felt it in the air. ‘Hit up a meeting tomorrow before you go.’

I nodded, thinking if I could do it or not. My drinking had gotten out of hand this past year; it was my way to medicate and drown the torment my father had caused me over the years. It had been my downfall and the reason I could no longer play college lacrosse. So many things suffered, including my game. Thankfully, I managed to concentrate on that just enough and somehow managed to fool almost everyone. Everyone except my brother, who, upon writing my last final exam, picked me up at Dartmouth and drove me to a rehab facility near our mother’s house in Canada where I stayed for a month.

I was now working the program and had been sober for nearly two months. While that might not seem significant, I drank, to some extent, pretty much every day since Wren left me. I wasn’t blaming her, though. It had been my way of dealing with the loss I felt and the hurt my father had been causing me my entire life.

I honestly don’t know what I’d do without Otis always having my back. The twenty-eight days had been hard and intense. Not only was my body detoxing the alcohol from my system, but the counselors and therapists were making me confront feelings I drowned with copious amounts of alcohol. Nearly all of them originated from my father.

Now, I take an antidepressant every morning and have a prescription for anxiety meds, as I apparently need that also. However, I’ve yet to swallow one of those, knowing it can affect my game.

It didn’t go without notice that Otis had cleared his place of anything that could get me drunk, including hand sanitizer and mouthwash, which was just taking it too far. It wasn’t like I got drunk every day. I admitted that I had a problem, and I was slightly worried about how I would deal with being in a public place with everyone drinking, however, this was as good a chance as any to prove to myself that I could do it - resist the temptation. I had to do it if I stood any chance of ever having Wren in my life again.

I was starting with a clean slate with the team. I would establish myself as a dry player, and in doing so, hopefully inspire others to follow my path and help with my sobriety, not that I had disclosed to the team I’d had a problem. Doing so would have ruined any chance I had at being a professional athlete.

It was one thing to be a famous athlete and admit you had a disease; it was something else entirely to be a drunk college kid who couldn't get his partying under control.

I’d been going to AA meetings almost every day, usually after I saw Wren, a reminder of what I was staying sober for. She had confided in me that her father dealt with alcoholism and it caused her mother to leave him for a bit. I refused to let anything come between the two of us once I got her back...because I was certain I was going to get her back.

I missed her yesterday, opting to join Otis for dinner after we returned from training before he left for a playoff game in Nashville earlier today. The series was tied at two to two. Whoever won this round would go on to play for the Stanley Cup, they missed the playoffs last year by one goal. With a lot of work and trades in the offseason, the team pulled up their socks and got to it. With one of the best records in the league during the regular season, we were all rooting for a win and a chance at Lord Stanley's cup.

I worried all day about the upcoming meet and greet with my team. I’d met many players and some
of the coaching staff and management, but never in a social setting. I knew this day was coming. I called my therapist this morning, spoke with him, as I did twice a week. Today was all about going out tonight. He reminded me of my goals and what my strategies were for staying sober and in control of my life. He reminded me that I was an adult, free of my father’s chains.

I dressed casually in a pair of dark jeans, a long-sleeved, light blue dress shirt, and a pair of all-back Adidas sneakers for my trek from the apartment in midtown to the establishment in the East Village.

It was a warm evening in early-June, another month or so until the humidity would start to creep in along with the heat, making the walk and subway almost unbearable, forcing the welcomed air conditioning of an Uber.

The bar was large and already slightly crowded. Thankfully the screens looked as if they were gearing up to play Otis’s game. I saw a bunch of guys I’d met briefly the day I signed near the back with tables of finger food laid out behind a roped-off section. Unfortunately, there were no screens back there, and it was too far from the others. I envisioned needing to either move our private party closer to the screen or heading home to watch the game alone.

The guys welcomed me, the coach taking me aside and introducing me to everyone individually. I nursed a coke, then a club soda. No one questioned why I wasn't drinking, and I was happy to see that I wasn’t the only one rocking the virgin drinks.

I kept sneaking away from my group to catch parts of the game. After the first period, I found a seat next to some of my teammates during intermission and ate a bit of the food that kept coming out. We were a large group of athletes with healthy and somewhat insatiable appetites.

‘Been checking out the game?’ Brad, one of the other rookies and new drafts asked me.

‘Yeah.’

‘I’m not much of a Devils fan. I’m from Boston, so it's in my genes to support the Bruins.’ He smirked.

‘I’m a Canadiens fan myself, Montreal born and all, but my brother’s Otis Trembley, left-wing for the Devils. So it’s literally in my genes to support him.’ I smiled proudly at my brother’s accomplishments.

‘No shit.’ He sounded dumbfounded.

‘Yeah, so I’m extra invested in the game.’

‘Here’s to the Devils winning.’ He held up his bottle of beer to my club soda and clinked it. ‘You get to go to their games?’

I nodded, taking a sip. ‘I went the other night. It was just standing room, but better than nothing.’

I don’t know what caused me to look up toward the door and not to the screen, but I hadn’t been disappointed, for the vision was far more enticing than seeing my brother play hockey in his first NHL playoff round. She looked familiar, her hair blonder than it had been, wearing dark-rimmed glasses, but I’d know those big brown eyes anywhere. Her tits were still as perky as I remembered them, evident from the low-cut shirt exposing her cleavage, and that ass. I’d know that ass anywhere - naked, in sweats, and especially in that very slim-fitting, sexy-as-sin skirt she had on, pushed up by equally sexy heels.

She looked to the screen and smiled, pausing to check the score and watch the highlights from the first quarter, smiling broadly when Otis was shown. Interesting. It seemed as though she’d become a fan of hockey and paid attention to Otis’s games. I don’t know why, but I was suddenly incredibly jealous of my brother at that moment. When the screen cut to the sports broadcasters, she looked around the bar. I followed her gaze, and if I was jealous of my brother a moment ago, I was now
right livid as I watched her eyes land on a guy in a suit, flirting with the female bartender, clearly already having started to drink without her.

After my week of nearly stalking her, I never saw her with anyone. I didn’t think she was dating. She stood off to the side, studying him a moment before shaking her head, looking fed up. Was this guy her boyfriend? was he prone to cheating, to drinking?

He turned and saw her. She looked slightly confused when he waved. I was already making my way toward where she was. ‘Pink Marbles?’ he asked, approaching her.

Pink Marbles? What the fuck?

‘Sorry, this isn't going to work.’ She dismissed him and went to turn.

‘Wren,’ I called out to her, almost close enough to reach out and touch her.

Her head spun in my direction, eyes wide in utter shock and bewilderment.

‘E...Eli.’ I heard her breathe out my name as I reached her, standing right in front of her. ‘W...what are you doing...doing here?’

She could barely string a sentence together, and that had made me happier than it should have. ‘I’m here to save you from making a really stupid fucking mistake. Pink Marbles?’ I smirked, holding back a laugh and looking over the guy in the suit. ‘Is that going to be a problem?’

The guy looked at me with an angry look in his eyes as if I’d stolen his last meal. ‘Nope, never seen him before in my life,’ Wren told me.

‘But,’ the guy started. ‘You look just like the chick in the picture.’

She laughed. ‘I’m a chick now? Eli, do you see any feathers?’

I shook my head. ‘Nope, but I have a big worm if you’re hungry.’

She laughed out loud so much that she snorted that adorable sound she used to be so self-conscious about. ‘I see you're still awful.’

‘And you’re still beautiful.’ I tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. ‘And you now wear glasses.’

‘Shit.’ She pulled them off her face, but I knew she could hardly see without them or her contacts. ‘I ran out of contacts last week, and I’m having laser surgery next week, so I’m stuck with these. I was so busy at work that I must have forgotten to take them off before I got here.’

She was rambling, something she did when she was nervous. I took her glasses from her hand and replaced them on her gorgeous face flushed with nerves. ‘Please, I want you to see me as I see you.’

She gave me a shy smile, putting her hands on my shoulders. ‘You’re different, bigger, if that’s even possible.’ Her voice went low and I barely caught her say, ‘Hotter,’ under her breath, before she tugged on a piece of my hair that had grown out over the past few months. ‘And this.’

‘Blond?’ I asked the same, re-tucking the same strand of hair that came loose again.

‘Getting back to my origins.’ She shrugged.

‘I like it,’ I assured. ‘I like all of it. Can I get you a drink, Pinot Grigio, right?’

‘I’d love one, thanks’

I ordered her a glass of wine and briefly looked up to the screen to see the play had resumed. ‘I’ve been following him, well, Jax and I have,’ Wren admitted.

‘Yeah? That’s awesome. He will love to hear that.’ I told her as the bartender handed her a glass of wine. ‘How’s Jax?’

She smiled one of her genuinely huge smiles. ‘He’s Jax, you know. Always busy, but at least he’s busy staying put now. And you, congrats to you on your selection.’ I knew I was smiling with a huge goofy grin. She’d been keeping tabs on me also, and I felt like I was on cloud nine when I made that connection.

‘Thanks.’ I looked to the far end of the bar, to the roped-off section. ‘That’s the team over there.’
We’re having a meet and greet of sorts.’

She covered her mouth. ‘Oh, I’m so sorry. You should go back.’

I instinctively reached out to take her hand in mine and wouldn't let it go. ‘No chance of that happening now. I’ve got you here, and Otis up on the screen that I can’t really see from back there. Truth is, I’ve been sneaking up here all night to catch bits and pieces.’

She bit on her lower lip, thinking about whether she should leave me be or not. ‘Still, this meeting can’t end well…’ her voice trailed off, and I saw the anxiety starting to form. ‘Your dad,’ she whispered, and I saw the pain and longing in her eyes.
Chapter 30

WREN

I should have known things weren't going to go my way when my boss pulled me into a meeting ten minutes after I was supposed to leave for the day. When I wasn’t able to go home and change for the date I had this evening, I should have just called the rest of the night off. Things just continued to go downhill when I walked into the bar after rushing, feeling flustered and sweaty, only to find said date flirting with the bartender and already half in the bag. Overall, I had only been 10 minutes late; he shouldn’t have already been this drunk.

But then, things took a serious turn when out of nowhere I heard his voice. That voice I'd only heard in my dreams, the one that gave me goosebumps and set my libido on fire. I slowly turned to see Eli standing there in all his broad shoulders, shaggy hair and deep grey eyes I could get lost in for days.

Things moved seamlessly with us as if we hadn’t been silent for a year, as if the heartbreak and long lonely nights hadn’t happened. I had a drink in my hand, and we were flirting until everything started to come back to me. It had all felt so right until the realization set in, and I inwardly berated myself that it took me so long to fight through the haze of endorphins brought on from seeing Eli again for the first time. I felt my throat closing over as if I was having an allergic reaction at the very thought. ‘Your dad.’

According to the contract we had signed, even this little meeting was forbidden, going against the agreed-upon terms. Well, not so much agreed upon, as imposed.

Eli ran a thumb down my cheek, trying to erase the frown away. ‘He’s lost his mind.’

He wasn't wrong. His father had been certifiably insane with how much of a cruel narcissist he’d been toward me, and all the verbal and emotional trauma he’d put Eli through over the years.

‘He’s something alright…’

‘No, he’s literally losing his mind,’ Eli stated. ‘A few years ago he was diagnosed with early-onset dementia. He’s been an asshole his whole life; he’d have done this even without the diagnosis. We didn’t know, however, and it’s been getting progressively worse in the past year. He’s back in Canada. I haven’t spoken to him since...well, probably the same day as you last spoke to him. It’s karma in its best form possible.’ I looked up to him. He looked as if he’d made peace with the situation with his father. ‘Even Otis cut him out of his life, right before the draft. It’s all for the best. He was never a true father to us, and we’re both a lot happier with our decision. Trust me, he’s a non-issue.’

I so desperately wanted to know if he was a non-issue, then why hadn’t Eli sought me out? However, I didn’t get the opportunity to ask. A guy came up to us, seeming to know Eli. ‘What’s the score?’

‘It’s tied at the end of the second period.’ Eli answered the guy who was now looking at me.

‘Hello,’ he greeted. ‘I’m Brad.’

I could see Eli starting to get territorial already. ‘Hello, I’m Wren.’

‘Wren’s my…’ Eli looked down at me, wondering what exactly we were.

I said, ‘Ex,’ at the same time he said, ‘An old friend I haven’t seen in a while.’

Eli winced. ‘No, don’t say ex. Such an ugly word.’

‘Eli and I go way back.’ I looked at Brad. ‘And just so happened to run into each other.’
‘You have any friends I could, just so happen to run into?’
I laughed, shaking my head. ‘Actually, I was supposed to be meeting a guy here for a date, but thankfully, Eli was here to play hero and save me from my fated disaster.’
Eli shrugged, looking at Brad. ‘Not all heroes wear capes.’
‘Eli, the coach wants to say some words.’ He nodded his head to the back of the bar.
‘I’ll be right there.’ He let his teammate know and looked around. ‘Look, go grab that table that just freed up, order another wine and I’ll be back. Is that okay?’
I nodded in agreement. ‘Sure.’
He walked back to meet his team as I took a seat on a high stool, able to see the screen. I could also see Eli in my line of sight and couldn’t help but notice that he kept looking back at me, either to make sure I was really here or that I hadn’t left him. He didn’t have to worry about the latter. All my old feelings came roaring to the surface. I wasn’t going anywhere, except maybe home with him at the end of the night.
The game restarted, and I watched it as I answered some text messages on my phone. It was halfway through the last period, and I was on my third glass of wine when Eli came back, kissing me tenderly on my lips before taking a seat across from me, holding on to my hand and not letting it go.
‘Do you mind if we stay to finish the game?’
The Devils were up by one goal with half a period to go. ‘I don’t mind. Do you want another drink?’ Even I could hear the flirty tone in my voice. If he didn’t know before how desperate I was to continue our night, he knew now.
I saw something pass over his face, and I didn’t know what it was. He simply shook his head before looking up to the screen. When the game was over, he went to say goodbye to his team before taking my hand in a death grip to prevent any separation between us and leading me out of the bar.
‘What now?’ he asked, not sure what way to turn.
‘I’m in Soho. Where are you?’
‘I’m living with Otis up in midtown.’
‘I’m closer, plus I have to work in the morning, so let’s go to mine so I can get ready for work easier.’ He looked at me with an intense hunger in his eyes, making sure he’d heard me correctly. In the past, I was dead set against bringing anyone, including him, to my house. Yet I knew, if this was our restart and we were to be together again, things would have to be different this time. There would have to be no secrets, and besides, my biggest secret of all would soon be revealed in a few weeks anyway. It just killed me that I was under a contract to not tell anyone who wasn't already involved with the production.
‘Lead the way.’
We walked a short distance before flagging down a cab, I didn’t want to wait any longer to be properly reunited with him. I was nervous about bringing him up to the apartment. By the morning, he’d know the truth about who I really was, who my parents were, and I couldn’t go back from there. I trusted him and knew without a doubt that he wasn’t with me because of my real name or the amount of digits in my bank account.
He’d picked me up from this location once. I’d been downstairs in the foundation offices at the time, he never came up, and I never told him I lived in the apartments upstairs. ‘Does Jax still work there?’ he asked me as we walked by the foundation’s signage. ‘Kinda. He’s still the head of the organization, but he’s been working on other projects this past year or so.’
‘Cool, can’t wait to catch up with him again,’ he mentioned as we were waiting for the elevator, clearly indicating tonight wasn’t a one-time thing, that he too was thinking of a possible future for the
both of us.

Our building didn’t have a doorman, however, we had a maintenance guy who lived in a small studio in the back who looked after pretty much anything that needed doing from fixing things, cleaning of common areas and signing for packages.

‘He lives here, just across the hall from me.’ I let him know just as the elevator doors opened.

He smiled slyly at me. ‘Nope, not tonight. The only person I want to see is you, and I’d like to see a lot of you if I’m being honest.’

‘Well, if we’re being honest, I don’t only want to look.’ I winked at him as I pulled him by the hand to the door of my apartment when the elevator doors closed behind us on the 5th and top floor, or as high as the elevator went, exiting to see two doors on either side of the hallway. ‘This one.’ I was still holding his hand as I led him to the door with the number 10 painted on it. I typed in my code and flicked on a light when I entered.

‘Wow.’ He let out a breath as he walked in further, stopping at the kitchen island. He looked up to the second-floor loft then down to the very large open-concept kitchen, living room and open space that my sister and I use to rollerblade around in. His eyes landed on the floor-to-ceiling windows that offered a classic view of the iconic neighborhood I called home. ‘This is massive. I was expecting an apartment. I knew it would be nice, but this is…’

‘I know.’ I was starting to feel embarrassed. Most New Yorkers were squeezed into tiny quarters, and here I was, living it up, alone, in one of the most expensive apartments in Soho at having recently turned twenty-seven. To be fair, it was warmly decorated, and I felt at home here, unlike so many other Manhattan apartments I’ve been to that felt hollow and sterile. This felt like a home; this was my home.

‘You sure my dad didn’t pay you off?’ he joked, his eyes sparkling with mischief.

I playfully hit him. ‘Please, your dad never dreamt of having this kind of money, and never was money offered to me, not that I’d ever have taken it.’

‘True, he always was a stingy bastard, well, when it came to me that is, but this is impressive. You marry rich or something?’

‘No, but my mother did.’ I laughed, walking into the kitchen and opening a cupboard to grab a glass. ‘Hell, I can’t even get a guy to get through one date with me, let alone make it down the aisle.’ I poured myself a glass of water from the dispenser on the fridge.

‘That is not necessarily a bad thing.’ He smiled, walking closer to me. ‘So, there’s no one in your life?’

‘You really think you’d be here, in my place, if there was?’

‘I was hoping not.’

I shook my head. ‘Eli, there’s no one. Dating hasn’t been a priority. I’ve been busy with work.’ I looked up to him and asked the question I was scared to know the answer to. ‘What about you?’

He leaned down and kissed me, passionately holding me against him. ‘No, I didn’t do the dating thing at university. How could anyone measure up to you?’

I put my hands on his chest. ‘Eli, why didn't you…’ I left the question hanging.

He rested his forehead on mine. ‘I was scared of what he’d do to you mainly, and selfishly, what he’d do to me. I believed he had the power to break everything even further apart for the both of us, to see to it that I never played on so much as an intramural team again. Or at least, I thought he had that power. Now I’m not so sure. What I am sure about is that I’ve regretted it every day. But I’d like to put it all behind us. I just want to concentrate on the future, preferably a future with you in it.’

I looked at him. ‘Really?’
He took my face between his hands. ‘Really. Wren, I was coming back to you, I always was. I just needed to get some things settled first. This was going to happen. Tonight’s chance encounter just sped things up slightly. He took my water from me, placing the cup on the counter and taking my hand. ‘Which of these doors leads to your bed?’

I led him across the apartment and into one of the two bedrooms on the first floor. The second floor had the master bedroom, bathroom and loft office that I enjoyed using on days I worked from home, needing the peace and quiet the office didn’t afford me. I had never felt ready to move into my parents room. It still felt wrong, as if taking over their room was somehow betraying them. I knew it was a crazy and irrational thought, but slowly I was making strides to not only take control of my life without them in it, but also living in spaces that we once shared as a family.

‘Nice,’ he said before picking me up to carry me to my unmade bed and laying me in the middle of it. ‘Hmm.’ He stood at the end of the bed, unbuttoning his shirt. ‘Miss Price, you are wearing far too much clothing.’

He tossed his shirt aside, and I was unapologetic in staring at the sight of his chest and abs. He’d not only bulked up, but holy definition eight pack. We’d been apart long enough, and I deserved a moment to appreciate all that was in front of me. He kicked off his shoes and went to unbutton his pants as I turned to my side and unzipped my skirt, having already ditched my shoes as soon as we walked into the apartment. He pulled my skirt down my legs. ‘Now, to rid you of this shirt.’ He crawled up the bed and over my body, skimming his hands up my legs and under my shirt as he went, undressing me in a way that connected our bodies. I lifted my arms to pull off my shirt as he unhooked my bra, leaving us both only in our underwear. Me in a barely-there thong, and him in a pair of boxer briefs that were already starting to strain from his erection.

He leaned over me, kissing my lips and demanding I grant him access, crashing his tongue against mine, claiming my mouth before he did the same to every last inch of my body, slowly and teasingly making is his way to my neck, nipples, and navel, driving me wild for more of his touch. Hooking a finger in my panties, he tore them off before sliding two fingers inside me. ‘Wren, you’re already so wet and ready for me. If I didn’t need to taste you, I’d slam into you right now.’ He stroked his fingers along my inner walls, dragging them back and forth as if gesturing to come here. If he kept that up, I’d be coming sooner than I had hoped to last.

‘Eli.’ I moaned his name like a prayer, moving my hips as his fingers found the spot that set me off.

‘Atta girl.’ He grinned as I came undone from his fingers alone, my first orgasm washing over me as he lowered his face between my legs, taking no time at all for his tongue to find my clit, clearly not satisfied with giving me just one orgasm. It seemed like a never-ending orgasm as fireworks erupted all around me.

He always brought his A-game when it came to foreplay, but it seemed as if he’d earned a Ph.D. in this while at university. I quickly pushed the thought out of my mind, relishing in the feeling as I came down off my intense euphoric high from the best oral sex I’d ever experienced.

‘Condom?’ I asked as he was making his way up my body, kissing me along the way.

‘Someone’s eager.’ He chuckled as he leaned over the bed to get his wallet from his pants, pulling out two foil packets.

‘And you’re not?’

He ripped one of the packets open and rolled the condom on. ‘Oh, you have no idea just how much I missed being buried in your wet pussy.’

He knelt between my legs, pulling me closer as he lined himself up with my entrance. ‘Just go
slow at first, okay?’ I asked sheepishly. ‘It's just been a while.’
A huge smile came over his face. ‘Have you been waiting for me, untouched?’
I let out a laugh. He was delusional. ‘I said that my dating life sucked, not that my sex life was non-existent.’

His expression from a moment ago fell. ‘Oh, please don’t get sulky. The way you just ate my pussy tells me you have been far from celibate.’
‘That’s different.’
‘Why, because you're a guy?’ I cut him off, trying to sit up, but he held me down with a hand and leaned over me.

‘No, because I can’t think of any guy touching you without the need to murder him taking over.’ He kissed my lips, and I felt him push into me just slightly, going slow as I had requested. ‘And so we’re clear, I may have fucked around, but your pussy is the last I've tasted.’ This time he went in further before pulling out. ‘And it was worth the wait.’ On the next thrust he was almost all the way in and stilled for a few moments, allowing me to adjust to his girth. On his next thrust, I felt his balls hit me as he let out a low moan with his eyes closed. ‘Fuck, I almost forgot how amazing you felt.’

I touched his chiseled chest, watching as his abs flexed as he drove himself in and out of me, his eyes never leaving my face. He lowered himself so that he could kiss me, slowing his pace, allowing us to savor every moment of our reunion. His lips grazed mine, taking them smoothly and seductively, lighting my body on fire. I felt myself building.

‘Faster,’ I begged as he reached down and cupped my ass, holding me firmly in place as he started to pound into me.

‘Wren…’ He let out my name on a breath. I knew he was close. I could see his eyes pinched shut as if he was holding off his own release until mine caught up. Slipping a hand between us, I rubbed my clit and tipped myself over the edge, my pussy clutching his, milking his orgasm from him as we both traveled to galaxies neither of us knew existed until that very moment.
The night was everything makeup sex should be. Like she always had, she surprised me in all the best ways possible.

I awoke, tangled in her arms, legs and loose sheets, sun shining through the windows. We hadn’t bothered to pull the curtains over. She was still fast asleep, but I desperately had to take a piss and drink some water. Lightly, I moved out from under her, causing her to stir slightly. I covered her with the sheet before digging my phone out of my pants pocket and pulling on my boxers, walking out of the room in search of a bathroom. The only other door in her room had been opened and I could clearly tell it was a closet.

The apartment was huge. The large open space looked even bigger with the daylight flooding in. It was still hard to believe this was hers, especially now that I could see there was a second floor. Looking around, I saw the stairs were hidden behind the kitchen. I found the bathroom, relieving myself and washing up before heading to the kitchen, filling the glass she used last night and drinking. A night of fucking had left me dehydrated, however, it was so worth it in every possible way.

I looked at my phone. It was almost seven in the morning, and there were a few messages from Otis.

OTIS: Just landed, be home in a half-hour
OTIS: Where are you?
OTIS: Eli, are you okay?
OTIS: Please let me know you are fine.

I could almost hear the worry through his messages. He knew I was going out to the meet and greet and that I had been anxious over being at a bar for the first time. I should have messaged him last night to let him know, but with Wren, she was my one and only focus. Anything else in my life ceased to exist when she showed up.

ELI: I’m good. Sobriety intact, be home later this morning.

My morning run was already a write-off, but I needed to get in a workout of some sort today. To do that, I’d need fuel. It also won’t hurt to make Wren breakfast.

I opened up her fridge and didn't find much. No wonder she had lost weight. She didn't eat, it seemed. Opening up the cupboards, it was much of the same. In the second cupboard I opened, there were a few bottles of alcohol: tequila, scotch, vodka and a few bottles of wine. I looked at them a few moments before closing the cupboard door, knowing I'd need to find a meeting before I headed home. Finally, I found some cereal and poured the almond milk she had in the fridge over it. There was a first time for everything.

I heard her alarm go off in her room and some wrestling around before she walked out carrying a bra and a pair of panties, but not wearing either. ‘Oh,’ she said in a surprised voice, stopping when she saw me, looking me over. ‘I thought you had left.’ A smile started to form on her face, and she went to cover her chest with one arm and her bare pussy with the other.

‘Not a chance. I wanted to make you breakfast, but you don’t have any food.’

She shrugged. ‘I’m not very domestic. Jax usually orders dinner for us, and I nibble at work if I have time.’ She looked down. ‘I’m just going to shower and get ready for work.’

She seemed a bit off as she walked into the bathroom, closing the door behind her. She didn’t
leave it open in invitation, nor did she ask me to join her. I put my bowl in the dishwasher then got
dressed in her room, trying to fix the sheets we’d messed up the night before.

I walked back out to the living area. The large room was home to a grand piano, some free-
standing drums and a few different types of guitars on stands. I walked over to the built-in bookcases.
I wanted to look at the photos, to see if Wren was in any of them and what her younger self looked
like.

What I saw both shocked and confused me, but when I pieced everything she’d told me in the past,
and the items from her house in Allentown, it all made sense. A young, happy-looking Wren was
being held by none other than Dustin Spruce, front man of my favorite band, Challenger. They were
standing next to his wife Ana Price, one of the original Underwire Angels, holding another little girl.

‘Holy fuck,’ I muttered to myself; it all clicking. Anna Price...Wren Price.

‘I remember that picture being taken.’ Wren’s voice was close behind me. I turned to find her
wrapped in a towel. ‘We were in Argentina. Jax and his mother Michelle had just joined us for the
final leg of the tour. It was a rare day off for our dads, and we were spending it at the beach. All I
wanted to do was play, but Jax’s dad, Curtis Sparks, insisted we get a picture before we got all wet
and covered in sand.’

I was speechless. I didn’t know what to say. Challenger had been one of the most successful bands
of the last twenty or even thirty years. I still listened to their music all the time. When she had
mentioned that her sister and parents had been killed in an accident, I had figured it was a car
accident. One doesn’t automatically think of a private plane crashing in a freak accident. It brought me
back to the first time I met her and how terrified she seemed to be flying, holding her hand and her
squeezing mine during turbulence. Her fear of flying was justified based on her personal history.

She reached for another photo. It was identical to the cover of one of their most popular albums.
‘My mom had this commissioned on my fifth birthday. She did a rose-gold themed Victorian tea party
and used this silhouette of me on the invitations.’

‘Lucky Penny?’ I asked, referring to the name of the album that had been one of the biggest selling
albums of all time.

Her whole face lit up when I knew it. ‘Yeah. Wren’s my middle name. Penelope Wren Price-
Spruce. Much of the album was written by my dad and uncle Curt; it had been inspired by Jax, me and
my sister, who was a newborn at the time they were recording it. The song Sacrifice is actually about
being so sleep deprived you can lose your ability to make rational decisions, not about doing anything
for love. Dad loved the idea of me on the cover but not about using my image. When mom had this
done, it was a perfect fit. My nickname growing up was Penny.’

‘Pen. That’s what Jax called you a few times…’

‘Yeah, actually, his dad named me.’ She laughed. ‘Right when I was born, uncle Curt came into
the room and held me and said, “You’ve got a priceless penny right here.” It was a nod to my mom’s
last name, Price. Then at the same time, my mom and dad both said, Penelope.’

I was standing right next to her at this point. She had a huge smile on her face, but I saw that her
eyes were glossy. ‘Thank you for sharing that with me.’

She nodded, and I noticed she was dressed and her hair was still damp from her shower. ‘Can you
just not share this with anyone?’ Her voice cracked. ‘I’ve really tried to separate my two lives, trying
to make it on my own. Not that I’m ashamed of my family, quite the opposite, I just see Jax and how
most people only see him as Curt’s son, and usually they are more interested in asking about his dad,
than him, you know?’

‘I’d never betray you like that.’
She wrapped her arms around my neck, lifting to her tiptoes to kiss me. ‘I appreciate that. Now, I’d appreciate you taking me to get something to eat. You well and truly wore me out last night.’

‘Lead the way, lucky penny, and just so you know, you are priceless to me too.’

We stepped into a small cafe near her office, taking one of the limited tables that had just opened up. She sat down as I went to get us breakfast sandwiches and coffees. As I joined her, taking my first sip of coffee, I heard an all too familiar voice call my name. ‘Eli.’

I groaned and looked to Wren, who also recognized the voice. We both looked up to see Ezra in a suit carrying a coffee, a messenger bag hung across his body. ‘Ezra, hey man.’ I forced a smile as I was sure Wren was willing the floor to open up and swallow her whole.

‘Hey, I heard you were back in town. Congrats on the draft.’ He genuinely sounded happy to both see me and for my news. He did a double-take when he recognized my breakfast date. ‘Miss P, is that you?’

She gave him one of her fake smiles and pitched her eyebrows. ‘The one and only.’

He laughed, being taken back to our high school banter. ‘So, is this a thing?’ He looked between the two of us, neither of us saying a word and leaving him to make his own conclusion. ‘Way to go.’ He went to high five me, but I looked at him with a kind of look.

‘On your way to work?’ I asked, hoping he’d remember he needed to be somewhere and leave us the fuck alone.

He looked as if he’d rather be going for a lobotomy. ‘Yeah, the old man has me interning at one of his smaller practices to get more experience before bringing me up to the real offices. I don’t fucking appreciate the grunt work. My older brother didn’t have to go through this shit.’

‘Well, Rami never caused half the shit you used to either,’ Wren let out, taking a bite of her cheddar, bacon and egg bagel.

Ezra looked at Wren with an utterly confused look on her face. ‘How do you know my brother?’

She rolled her eyes as she finished chewing, took a sip of her coffee then answered, ‘I went to Wendell with him. He was a few years ahead of me.’

‘Y...you…’

‘Listen.’ I cut him off before he could play six degrees of separation and remain standing next to our table any longer. I only had a limited amount of time with Wren before she needed to work today, and she’d already told me on the way to the cafe that she had plans tonight with Jax she couldn’t get out of. ‘Why don’t we hang out soon? I’ll message you to set something up?’

He nodded, still a bit shocked by Wren’s statement. ‘Yeah, cool. Say hi to Otis for me, yeah?’

He finally left and Wren let out a huge sigh. I took her hand trying to calm her. ‘Sorry…’

‘He’s not the most discrete of people.’

‘I don’t care.’ She smiled, her eyes meeting mine. ‘We don’t have anything to hide do we?’

I didn’t know if she meant that if asked we were just two old acquaintances having breakfast after a random meeting in the cafe line or that she didn’t care if people knew I spend the night in her bed fucking her almost every which way I could.

‘I’d rather not hide,’ I confessed, needing to make my intentions with her clear from the start. ‘We did that before, and it almost ruined both of us.’

‘So far as your father is concerned, if he really isn’t going to sell us both out to the highest bidder, I don’t want to hide either.’

‘So next time I see Ezra, I can tell him you’re my girlfriend, that we’re in a relationship?’
‘So long as that story starts with us running into each other recently after not seeing each other for the past year and I left the school because I got sick.’

I nodded in agreement, still surprised everyone just accepted that she left due to an illness and not a scandal. I guess everyone liked her too much to ever consider she could have a devious bone about her.
For the past two weeks, I’d been spending all my free time with Eli, not that I had a whole hell of a lot of it. I’d just returned from Boston, having spent the weekend there, which turned out to be fine as Eli traveled with his brother's team to watch him play in Denver for the Stanley Cup Finals. They won in six games.

I felt bad that I still hadn’t told him about my trip out to LA. I hated keeping secrets. There had been so many of them during our first time around that I promised that we had a clean slate. The only snag in that plan was that our guest appearance in California next weekend was a surprise, and part of our contract was to not mention it to anyone to prevent any leaks. And now, the subsequent travel that I had just booked this morning on the drive back from Boston with Jax was another layer he wasn’t going to be happy about.

That evening, Eli and I were laying in bed after a few exhausting rounds. Looking at the clock, I knew I only had a few hours before I had to be up to start my work week. If I was going to be taking some time away from the office starting Wednesday, I had a lot of work to do over the next few days. ‘I’m going away on Wednesday,’ I told him, rolling over to face him, cuddling up to his side, his arm holding me in place.

‘Again?’ he questioned, seeming more disappointed than upset.

‘Sorry.’

‘Where to?’

‘LA for a few days, and then down to Australia for a few weeks.’

He shifted his body to look at me. ‘A few weeks? And you’re just telling me this now?’

‘I just booked it this morning on the drive back,’ I defended myself, not liking the accusation in his voice.

‘But I can’t come with you. I’ve got training camp and the start of the season.’

‘Jax is flying with me. He’d been wanting to do some outreach work there and network. Now that Cassy needs me, the timing is working out for us both to go. Last time I flew there alone didn't go so well...’

‘Babe.’ He brushed his thumb across my cheek. ‘I just hate the thought of being away from you, and for two weeks. Also, I wish you would have run it by me first.’ He looked up to the ceiling.

‘Well, it’s for work. I didn’t think I needed to get your permission, and it’s probably going to be closer to a month by the time I’m back here.’

‘I hate your job.’ He jokingly groaned, repeating a similar phrase from when I was his teacher. ‘And you don’t need my permission. I just wish I had known beforehand. Perhaps we could have made arrangements to...I don’t know. A month is just too long to be away from you.’

‘We still have the next few days.’ I raised my eyebrows at him suggestively.

‘Again?’ he asked with a look of amusement.

‘Unless you’re not up to the task.’ I reached under the sheets to feel him already getting hard in my hand.

He rolled me over on to my back, pinning me between him and my mattress. ‘I’m always up to pleasing you.’ He reached to the side table only to find the box of condoms empty.

‘We’re out?’ I almost cried, needing to feel him inside me once more before I slept tonight. ‘I’m
on birth control.’

‘I’m clean and committed to you one hundred percent. I’ve never gone without a condom.’ He looked down at me, assuring me of what I needed to hear.

‘I trust you.’ I said the three words that he knew held as much power as me saying I love you. I wasn’t ready to venture into the L-word territory yet. Even though I felt it in my heart, my lips were resistant to uttering them for fear of how he might react.

* * *

The next morning, we laid in bed longer than we should have, which meant we were rushing to get ready and out the door in order for me to make my 9AM meeting and Eli to make it to training camp with his team.

But after our night, we were both tired and relishing in taking our commitment to one another to new territories. He kept telling me how amazing I was and how great it felt; it was a reminder of how much he worshiped my body.

That evening, I worked well past my regular hours, causing me to eat cold pizza Jax had ordered, and endure his shitty mood while we went over parts for the music festival we were appearing at this weekend outside LA - the surprise I wasn’t able to tell Eli about, the one eating away at me.

I knew Eli was slightly disappointed with me springing the news on him that I was going away, but when I spoke to Cassy this past weekend, I knew it was for the best if I just bit the bullet and flew down to see her rather than trying to arrange our schedules and the massive time difference that was also our biggest obstacle. Plus, I felt her mental health was strained, and I hoped that my visit would help cheer her up during the difficult time she was still enduring since returning from London last year. She never mentioned the guy she was sharing the flat with by name, and I always suspected there was more to the story, and she was withholding major parts of what went down during her time in lockdown. Why, I didn’t know, and I respected her need for privacy too much to come straight out to ask her. But what I did piece together was that there was a guy, who she didn’t speak of and who she was likely trying - yet failing - to forget.

The week had flown by, and in the morning, Jax and I were flying out, Eli was in the kitchen making breakfast before he headed to training camp. I had just showered and dressed and was putting the final items in my carry-on bag while trying to tidy up my bedroom. I picked up the jeans Eli had on last night, folding them to put in the drawer I’d cleared for him when something fell from his pocket. I bent over and looked under my bed to see a bronze coin. I bent down and reached under my bed to grab it and instantly knew what it was. My heart sank at the realization as I held it in my hand, sitting on my bed to let the weight of what this tiny round piece of medal meant.

My father carried his own coin around with him every day, except his was for a number of years sober, not two months. There must have been some kind of mistake. Reaching in his pocket, there were no other coins or money. I put the pants in the drawer and grabbed my backpack off my freshly made bed. I walked into the kitchen and put the coin down next to Eli with a raised eyebrow.

‘What’s this?’

He looked down at it, putting another spoonful of cereal in his mouth and taking a big drink of his water before he answered nonchalantly. ‘It’s a sobriety coin.’

‘I know what it is. My dad’s got a whole collection of them. Why do you have it?’ I was trying, yet falling, to keep calm and let him explain that there was some kind of mix up.

‘I got it yesterday before I came over.’ Again, he was calm and collected as he delivered news I never expected to hear from him or any guy I was dating.

‘You’re in AA?’ I sputtered, hardly able to believe I was asking him this question. He nodded, his
face stern and serious. ‘And you kept it from me?’

‘It’s something I’m trying to work through.’ I could see and hear the embarrassment in his voice, so I took a calming breath to steady my voice and thoughts before I responded.

‘Well, congrats on two months, but don’t you think working through something as serious as alcoholism is something I should have known about and was made aware of so I could support you?’ Apparently my breathing hadn't calmed me, and my remarks were sounding a lot snarkier and self-righteous than I had wanted them to come across.

‘I’m not an alcoholic.’ I raised an eyebrow and put a hand on my hip at his remark. ‘Not in the sense that you might think. I recognized I had some issues and went to rehab right after my last exam and have been sober since. I talk to my shrink twice a week, go to meetings almost daily...I’m doing good.’

‘But I drink around you all the time.’ I covered my mouth, thinking that growing up we never had alcohol in the house, not even wine that I knew my mother enjoyed. I turned to look at the cupboard that housed my small alcohol stash, yet, a stash nonetheless.

Eli nodded. ‘It doesn’t bother me, and I rarely feel the need to reach for a bottle. You make me want to remain sober. You are helping me.’ I turned and opened the cupboard where I have a few bottles. ‘I haven’t touched them if that’s what you're wondering. I’ve known they were there since the first morning I spent here.’

Things had been going so well between the two of us. All along I kept waiting for the rug to be pulled out from beneath me. Things never went this smoothly for me. Never.

My phone pinged with a message from Jax, telling me the Uber would be here in 5 minutes. ‘I have to go…’

Eli’s arms were around me before I could make my way to the door where my bags were waiting for me. ‘Babe, please don’t be mad.’

‘Don’t be mad?’ I questioned. ‘Eli, you’ve been keeping things from me yet again. I thought we were well and truly past all this shit. I let you fuck me bare last night for fuck’s sake.’ I stepped out of his arms. ‘I’m just sad that you felt you couldn’t trust me with this. It makes me wonder what else you are keeping from me.’ He let his grip on me loosen.

Trust was everything to me. It had been something I struggled with ever since my parent’s death, and I knew I cherished trust and communication above anything else in my relationships. As a result, there were few people who I let get this close to me. If he could keep something as serious as an addiction from me, it made me question just how gullible I had been letting him back into my life and what other secrets he might be hiding from me in an effort to win me over once again.

However, I knew he’d already left his mark. I was in love with this man. I might not have said it yet, but I’d been feeling it in my heart for some time Which made his betrayal of keeping secrets hurt just that much more. He had weeks to tell me he was battling an addiction. He’d been going to AA meetings for weeks, essentially lying to me about where he was for large chunks of his days. It just went to show how busy I was that I didn’t recognize he disappeared from my life for hours here and there throughout the week.

‘Nothing. I’m not keeping anything from you. You’re everything to me and I do trust you.’

I turned around to face him. ‘Clearly not, because if I was everything as you say I am and if you truly trusted me, you would be able to share everything with me. I just feel like the past few weeks have been one big lie.’

‘Look I just was ashamed and didn’t want anything to interrupt the momentum we were building.’ ‘And look how that worked out for you.’ I walked to the door, tossing my backpack over my
shoulder, grabbing my purse in one hand and my large suitcase in the other.

‘Wren.’

I shook my head. ‘I’ll text you.’

‘Wren please.’ He went to walk toward me, but I put up a hand indicating for him to stop, that I
needed my own space right now.

‘Eli, I can’t right now. We’ll talk about it when I’m back.’

I turned and left the apartment, trusting him to lock up when he was ready to leave, seeing as he
had a key to my place and had all but officially moved in with me. That’s how much I had trusted him.
I was on the verge of tears that the trust didn’t extend both ways between us.

Here I was thinking that the communication aspect of our relationship was strong - not as strong as
our sexual chemistry, but still solid and something to build off of - only to have that idea crumble. It
was more than I could handle given the massive weekend I was embarking on. His betrayal was the
last thing I could deal with at the moment.
I’d known since I was a high school senior that Wren was the woman I was going to spend the rest of my life with. Even during the time that we were apart, I had hope of a long, happy future with her.

Things had been going so well, great in fact. Except for the one thing I’d been keeping from her, the big complicated issue of my sobriety. Otis warned me, like he always did. It was a warning I should have heeded. He told me I needed to be upfront with her and tell her about my meetings, rehab and sobriety. She never questioned that I wasn’t drinking, so I never felt the need to explain myself any more than that.

It wasn’t lost on me that I messed up by keeping things from her, but I just never knew how to address it or bring it up. What if she didn’t want my baggage? As a fan of the band Challenger, I knew she dealt with a father who struggled with addictions and that he had a few short relapses over the years. It was publicly documented.

I had no guarantees what I could offer her for our future in that regard. I couldn't predict if I would struggle or relapse. I intended to be different. I wasn’t going to be like that. I wasn’t dependent on the chemicals. I drank because I was depressed and traumatized by the verbal and emotional abuse I suffered at the hands of my father. I no longer depended on alcohol to dull that. I had therapy and antidepressants. They were working, and I was putting in the work with meetings and following the steps.

If my mindset right now was any indication, I was in a good place as I hadn't been tempted to fall back into old habits - even when she walked out on me. I had to trust that when she returned she would have calmed down and had a chance to process the bomb I'd dropped on her, and we could talk. With any luck, we’d talk about how our future looked.

I was also keeping busy, training, spending time with my brother as he was officially in his off season and making plans for my future. Including ensuring the fact that having Wren back in my life wasn’t going to tip my father into acting out on his threats. Otis’s lawyer had assured me that his mental incapacitation would prevent anything from happening. Also, as we didn’t speak, there was little chance of him ever finding out.

I’d been out a few times with the team and tonight was hanging out with Ezra, his brother and a few of his brother’s friends at a house warming party at Rami’s new penthouse he’d bought after making partner at his father’s law firm.

We had the Chart’s Music Festival streaming on the oversized big screen TV hooked up to a sound system with all the bells and whistles. This guy spared no expense, and while it was cool, I felt his priorities were misplaced.

I sat, sipping a bottle of water, telling people I was on a strict training regiment, still lying, still ashamed of myself.

It had been three days since Wren walked out on me, leaving me alone in her apartment. I’d only heard from her a few times since then. Once to let me know she landed, and this morning to let me know she was busy and didn’t have time to talk to me, not like she needed to tell me that. Apparently she’d been too busy to talk to me since she found my coin. I knew she was leaving tonight on a direct flight from LA to Sydney. Things were just going to get harder with her on the other side of the world, yet that wasn’t going to stop me from fighting for her.
I was ready to leave this party when I heard Ezra blurt out, ‘Dude, is that Miss P on stage?’

I looked up and sure enough, it was Wren and Jax, standing on stage with mics in their hands. Her hair was a lighter blond than it had been when she left on Wednesday, and she wore clothes I never thought she’d ever own, let alone wear on a stage that was being watched by millions of people, but she looked hot. More than hot, she was downright sexy up on stage. The Chart’s Music Festival was one of the biggest music festivals in the world, and each year they had secret surprise performances; it was one of the things that had people from all over the world paying to steam the concerts live.

‘Wow,’ Rami and another of his friends exclaimed at the same time.

‘It’s Jackson,’ Rami added.

His friend stated, ‘Well, Ghost sure did grow up.’

I looked up to him, but Ezra took the words from me. ‘Ghost?’

Half of the guys laughed. ‘Her nickname at Wendell was Ghost,’ someone said. I’d momentarily forgotten that Wren had been a student at Wendell and likely many of these guys would know her, it was clear from her previous comments to Ezra that she had known his brother.

‘She went there as a student? That’s how you know her?’ Ezra asked.

‘Everybody knew them. Jackson was popular, and not just because of his famous dad. Then Ghost came in our senior year.’

‘Her names not Ghost,’ I bit out.

‘Get this.’ Ezra called the attention to himself. ‘Miss P taught at our school for a few weeks covering for maternity leave, and now Eli here is hitting it.’

I glared at him. Damn, she’s sexy as fuck now,’ one of the guys said watching her onscreen. I felt like punching him the fuck out. I didn’t like them ogling her like that, but I supposed everyone watching was getting a stiffy from the sheer sex appeal she was oozing.

‘Why Ghost?’ I asked Rami.

He looked a bit uncomfortable, and I was sure it wasn't at all attributed to my scowl, ‘Well, the news reported that everyone on the plane died. They said Dusty Spruce, his wife and daughter…..’

‘He had two daughters,’ I bit out. ‘And Wren wasn’t on the plane. She was in a school play.’

‘Well, yeah, obviously. But she has such pale skin and light blond hair, she looked like a ghost. And given everyone thought she was dead...people started calling her Ghost.’

‘Well, stop,’ I warned. ‘She goes by Wren now.’

‘Wren?’ one of the guys asked. ‘She just introduced herself as Penelope Spruce-Price.

We skipped back to the beginning from the time the backdrop went black and the word CHALLENGER appeared, with album covers fluttering in and out.

She looked nervous as she and Jax emerged with their arms linked. No wonder she wasn’t able to chat with me today; she was otherwise occupied. It didn’t escape me that she kept this from me, just like she kept her identity from me initially. It was rich of her, calling me out on hiding things from her when she clearly had this up her sleeve the entire time we’d been back together. These stage performances don’t just come together. This would have been in the works for months. It made me question what else she was hiding.

‘Please give a warm Chart’s Festival welcome to the remaining Challenger children, Jackson Sparks and Penelope Spruce-Price,’ the announcer introduced them.

Behind them, a picture of the two of them still young enough to be in diapers with the original Challenger band, standing on the very stage they were walking out on.

‘It’s been a long time since we’ve been on this stage,’ Jax started. ‘Our fathers, along with Joey Fields, were regulars at the Chart’s Festival, they took this very stage at the inaugural festival. They
had just come off a world tour and released their third album, Lucky Penny - I’m sure some of you have heard of it.

The crowd started cheering as the backdrop changed to the album cover that I knew the story behind. She looked over her shoulder and smiled before facing the cheering crowd.

‘It’s been ten years since we lost our dads, and the rest of the world lost some of the most talented musicians, songwriters and performers to ever grace the stage. It’s been thirty years since they released their first album, and we are thrilled to announce that this year, we will be releasing two anniversary albums, with all proceeds going to support the Priceless Futures Foundation, a non-profit my mother started over twenty years ago. For more information, please visit our website.’

The website flashed at the bottom of the screen as Wren and Jax walked to a small drum set and guitar set up on the stage.

‘We’ve remained relatively quiet over the past decade, but would like to take this time to honor our fathers and uncle Joey the best way we know how.’ Jax spoke as he stood behind the drum and Wren picked up the guitar.

She looked scared shitless, but I could see the reassuring looks Jax kept giving her. ‘Not Leaving Without You, was a song that our fathers, along with uncle Joey, wrote when my little sister Piper, who was born premature, had to stay in the hospital for two weeks. Piper was never alone for those two weeks. My parents, and my uncles, Curt and Joey, took turns singing to her in the NICU, which is where this next song was born.’

They started to play a downbeat version of the platinum-selling single. When they finished, Jax took his mic and walked in front of the drum set, taking the guitar from Wren. ‘I was a difficult child,’ Jax mused, laughing. ‘And bedtime was the worst time of day for my parents. I truly gave them a run for their money. The song, Another Night, was written by my father out of frustration about trying to sleep-train me to stay in my own bed and go to sleep alone. We’ve asked a few friends to help us out with this song. Please welcome Max Cole on drums and Aaron Woods on keys.’

I stood there with my jaw agape as I watched Wren with awe. Her stage presence was huge. It was like someone else was possessing her body as she belted out her parts of the song, strutting around in her sky-high heels like she owned the stage and did this as a living. It was one thing to see her perform karaoke, but it was another thing entirely to see her rock out to a crowd of over a hundred thousand spectators and likely millions streaming live.

‘Ladies and gentlemen.’ Wren looked to the crowd, the camera straight on her. ‘It is my greatest pleasure to welcome our friends, Max, Aaron, Dayton and Ryan to the Chart’s Festival stage for the first, but surely not the last, time. Please give a huge welcome to the band Amplify.’

‘I love these guys,’ Rami said as I took a seat to process what I had just witnessed. Who was my girlfriend, and was I ever going to be enough for her now?

I couldn't help but feel our future slipping further and further away the more she shined on that stage. I also worried that the information of her true identity could get back to my father or his vindictive wife and make our life, or more so, her life difficult.
‘Nervous?’ Jax asked me as he took my hand in the back of the Uber on our way home from the airport. It’s been three and a half weeks since I was last in my apartment and three and a half weeks since I’d seen Eli. Three and a half weeks since I felt the sting of his betrayal and the weight of his lies. I thought the time would have given me perspective, but all it did was make me doubt myself and the decisions I’ve made up to this point in my life. I hated being so conflicted and was just going to let my heart lead me where it was meant to be.

Time had not dulled the pain. If anything, the distance and instances of the past three weeks just intensified the rift between the two of us. The emotional pain of his betrayal toward me, because that’s exactly what I felt it was, and the physical pain of being away from him, because already my body was suffering withdrawals from his touch, was too much to deal with.

‘That’s a bit of an understatement,’ I confessed, knowing Eli was at my apartment waiting for me, waiting on an explanation from me for my appearance at The Chart’s Festival, just as I was expecting his explanation as to why he kept his secret from me. Things were rocky before I even landed in Australia, but my relationship nearly ended two weeks ago when pictures of me and Luca Palmer went viral. He was a friend Cassy surfed with, and, oh yeah, rather famous for appearing in a string of blockbuster action movies. We had met him the same day at his charity surfing event last year when I had visited Cassy. She had been vague as to how she got the invite, but I figured it was because she was a brilliant surfer and somewhat famous locally.

I had a hard time wrapping my head around what my life had become.

We performed at the Chart’s Festival, one of the biggest stages in the world. I still couldn't believe how great it went. More than that, I can’t believe I actually went through with it. I now fully understood why our fathers loved performing live so much. The power I felt up there was akin to being invincible. All the nerves went out the window when I heard that first note. For years I’d been dead-set against being in the public eye as Penelope Spruce-Price, daughter of the larger-than-life rocker, Dusty Spruce. Yet, when Jax approached me about it months ago, floating the idea to do a tribute to our Dads at the Chart’s Festival, one of the largest festivals in the world, I reluctantly agreed. We had spent the past few weeks preparing and rehearsing for the show, the two of us and with Amplify.

I knew the catch. We’d perform, using our spot to promote the foundation internationally and Jax could use the stage to highlight Amplify, the band he was producing and trying to get off the ground. Yet it all came at a cost. I would have to give up my anonymity, the security blanket I held on to for years. It was a selfless act, and I knew I just furthered their thrust into fame while also building on the dream my mother had for her foundations all those years ago when she created it.

I had been a ball of nerves for weeks now. The only reprieve was the reappearance of Eli in my life. That was until that fateful morning three and a half weeks ago when I felt more betrayed than I ever had in my entire life. I wanted nothing more than to cancel the show altogether and cried to Jax on the flight out to LA. The night before the show I tossed and turned and wore a path in the carpet of my hotel room from all the nervous pacing I’d been doing.

I’d thrown up from sheer panic twice prior to taking the stage, but once I was out there, it was as if Dad was right there next to me, giving me his strength and stage presence to do his songs justice and
make him proud of me, of us. This wasn’t a life he wanted for his kids. He’d made that clear to me when I had shown interest in theater, acting and entertaining in general. He had been great with guiding me to find my passions, but he also warned me, as did uncle Curt with Jax, of the trappings of the industry. It had always stayed in my mind.

Thankfully, I found my passion in words and storytelling, it was a different kind of entertainment, but one that fulfilled me while also allowing me to keep the anonymity that I had cherished for so long. I would continue to separate Wren Price and Penelope Spruce-Price, however, I knew after tonight’s performance it would take more work on my part.

After the show, Jax and I took a helicopter from the festival grounds to the airport, and we flew directly to Sydney. I slept in a drug-induced state for most of the flight. Jax woke me to eat and made sure I drank water before giving me more medication to ensure I didn’t have another anxiety attack, tens of thousands of feet above the Pacific Ocean. I wasn’t ready for a repeat of my last flight home from visiting Cassy last year.

The drugs had worn off by the time we landed. Jax gathered our bags and led us through border control, to where Luca Palmer was waiting for us, and unbeknownst to us, a rouge, lone paparazzi who snapped a few pictures of Luca picking me up in his arms and kissing my cheek. It was innocent enough, however, the multiple ways one could spin the photos were astounding. More shocking was Eli’s reaction to the fabricated stories, demanding to know the truth and whether or not I cheated on him. I might have been pissed at him for withholding information, but I’d never cheat, especially not on someone who held my already fragile heart.

My picture with Luca wasn’t the only thing to go viral. Our performance on the stage was buzzworthy. The greatest hits album hit number one, and Amplify was now a household name.

As much as I tried to push thoughts of Eli away, he remained at the forefront of my mind, wrapped around my head like a vice grip. No matter how much I immersed myself in work with Cassy, staying at her house, appearing on Australian talk shows with Jax to promote the album and dispel any rumors that Luca and I were dating, I was distracted. Similarly, we had done a handful of virtual interviews in the days before he flew off for his business meetings in New Zealand. My thoughts always circled back to Eli, even though I was keeping my contact with him brief, to the point it could practically be considered non-existent. I needed the time to think, to decide what it was I wanted and how to proceed with him.

As we pulled up in front of our apartment building, I was still unsure as to what I should do. I knew that we were both holding things back from one another, and if this relationship had any chance of longevity and being a positive, healthy part of my life, we needed to cut the bullshit and open up to one another by strengthening our communication and trust in all areas. I’d be the first person to admit that I still had walls. I was breaking them down for him, but when I’d spent years fortifying them, old habits were hard to let go of.

‘I’ll leave my door unlocked,’ Jax told me as we exited the elevator, giving my shoulder a squeeze for support. He knew what I was facing when I opened the door.

Things with Eli had been strained during the time I was in LA, and he called after the airport picture of Luca and me hit the internet. But last week, when old pictures surfaced of us together on my last trip to Australia, he stopped contacting me altogether. I had to swallow my pride and call him for a change. I was worried about him and he needed to hear the truth, not the made-up stories so many outlets had been reporting.

It took half a day to try and get a hold of him, even with the time change, I knew he was simply ignoring me.
‘What Wren?’ He finally answered his phone, treating me more as an inconvenience than whatever our status currently was. I had thought I was his girlfriend, but now I didn't think I was even his friend.

‘First, you need to understand and believe me when I say there’s nothing between Luca and myself,’ I told him, wasting no time with pleasantries.

‘I believed you when you told me last week that he’s Cassy’s friend just picking you up from the airport. But those pictures looked like he was anything but just your friend Wren.’

There were multiple pictures from last year. We had been holding hands and getting close in a variety of settings. There was nothing scandalous about them, yet the media had a field day trying to guess who the new brunette in Luca Palmer's life was during my first trip. Thankfully, it garnered little interest state-side. It had been one of the reasons I hit pause on the fling that had developed between Luca and myself. And unlike what I had planned to be a fling with Eli, it was easy to just walk away from Luca and remain friendly. My heart wasn’t in it with Luca, and we didn’t have the connection Eli and I shared.

Ugh. I rolled my eyes. ‘Fine, we had a fling when I was in Australia last year, but…’

‘A fling?’ Eli questioned. ‘As in, you and I had a fling in high school?’

‘Spit it out, Eli, but don’t ask questions you’re not prepared to hear the answers to,’ I bit back. ‘Have you fucked him?’ He too wasn’t interested in wasting time either.

‘Not since the last time I was in Australia. I’m committed to you in every way possible.’ I was almost on the verge of tears at this point, standing on Cassy’s balcony, watching the sunrise.

‘Sure you are.’ It was all he said before he ended the call, leaving me in a puddle of sobs, not able to tell him the second reason I had called.

It was the last I’d heard from him until I turned my phone back on after we landed an hour ago.

ELI: I’m waiting for you at the apartment.

The hairs on my neck stood up at the possibility of seeing him, at the possibility of it ending, at all the endless possibilities that could come as a result of talking things through with him - if we even got that far.

Eli was sitting on the sofa drinking a protein shake, watching CNN. He was freshly showered, wearing sport shorts and a long-sleeved t-shirt with the logo of the team he played on. Clearly, he had come here from practice and made himself at home.

Turning off the TV and placing his shake on the coffee table, he stood and strode over to me, eating up the floor with his long strides before I had the chance to pull my backpack off. ‘Hey babe.’ His arms were around me, holding me tight. I could feel the tension we both held in the hug, yet felt a loss when he pulled away first.

‘Hey.’ I had a hard time making eye contact with him. ‘I need to shower.’ I really did need to shower, however, I needed to catch my breath and find my bearings more.

‘I’ve ordered food. Should I make you a coffee?’

I gave him a weak smile and shook my head. ‘No, I’m too tired. I’ll force myself to stay up a few hours but need to start adjusting my internal clock as soon as possible.’ The jet leg was never my friend, but like a hangover, something to endure after a good time.

I went to turn, but Eli caught my hand and spun me back to him, wrapping his hand around the back of my head and kissing me as if his next breath depended on melting my panties through a kiss alone. ‘I’ll still be here when you get out of the shower, when you wake up tomorrow, next week, next year and…’

I placed a finger on his lips. ‘I get your point. Let me shower, eat and we can talk. Eli, we have a
lot to talk about.’
He nodded in agreement. ‘Clearly we haven’t talked enough, but that changes tonight.’ He kissed my nose and spun me around in the direction of the bathroom, playfully smacking my ass as I walked away, sending a pool of wetness to my core.
Damn my libido. I needed to stay strong, to talk, to figure things out before we hopped back between the sheets. That part of our relationship didn’t need any work, in fact, it was pretty damn perfect.

Standing under the cascading warmth of my shower, I let the water wash away the flight, the negative energy that had been building in my body and the fear of confronting Eli. He had just said all the right words to me, but were they just talk? Empty words to placate me? I knew our issues couldn't be sorted in one night, but we could at least start to address them, tackling the big ones first.

I slipped on my fluffy bathrobe and wrapped my hair in a towel as I walked to my bedroom to find something clean and comfortable to wear as I saw Eli unpacking Chinese food at the kitchen island.

I emerged wearing sweatpants, a hoodie and slippers. I was dressed more for February, not June, but being as exhausted as I was, my internal thermometer was as out of whack as my internal clock. I walked over to where he was filling a glass of water for himself. ‘What do you want to drink?’

‘Water.’ I looked at the glass he was holding, feeling parched.
‘There’s soda and juice.’ He opened the fridge, ‘And I think you have wine in the cupboard.’

I looked to the cupboard in question, wondering if he’d tapped into it. ‘No, that’s fine.’

He placed the glass of water in front of me and proceeded to fill another for himself. ‘Wren, I don’t care if you drink around me. I don’t need a drink.’

‘Keep pushing me on the issue, and you may rethink that statement,’ I muttered out loud, not meaning to.

‘Not even then,’ he blurted out, clearly aggravated by my last comment.

We started eating, neither of us talking. I had been hungry, but my nerves and exhaustion were appetite killers. After just a few bites and playing with my food a bit, I pushed the plate to the side and looked up to Eli who was nearly done with his first plate. ‘You know, there’s so much talk about. With my Dad and Curt being in Challenger, uncle Joey gets little attention, but you know who’s almost forgotten?’

‘Vince... I forget his last name.’
‘McCaffery,’ I filled in. ‘I’m sure you know, but the four of them met in middle school, Challenger Middle School to be exact. That’s how the band was named. Since grade seven the four of them were inseparable. Throughout middle school, even high school. None of them had the means, grades or desire for college. They all stayed in Allentown, worked, gigged and practiced until they got signed. Even in high school, they always partied, always lived the rocker life. None more so than Vinny. Unfortunately, he never could get his addictions under control. Every stint in rehab failed. It cost him everything. Ultimately, he even lost his life to an overdose. I’m only thankful that my father wasn’t around to hear of that news. It nearly killed my father to kick him out of the band, more so to cut him off and out of our lives.’

‘Eli, I’ve seen the very ugly, dark side of addictions. I lived it. Growing up, for the most part my father was sober, but he did have his relapses. More than once, I lived it, felt my mother’s fears, what it did to him as a man, a husband, a father, a friend. It was hard to watch because to me he was this larger-than-life man who could do no wrong. Every time it got out of hand, he pushed us all away, making it harder and harder for him to climb out of the hole and back to us. If only he would have swallowed his pride and let us help him. I get there’s shame associated with it, but there shouldn’t be.
Addiction is a disease, one that needs treatment and a support system. You wouldn't deny a diabetic insulin, or an asthmatic their inhaler. Believe me when I say, a strong support system is going to be your biggest ally. Let me be part of that. Let me be your first stop when it gets too much. I will support you, not judge you, shame you or ridicule you. But keep things from me again...we’re done. You can help that, and I won't stand for it.’

He nodded, tears forming in his eyes. ‘God, you are so incredible. Do you know that?’
I smiled a cocky smile to lighten the mood. ‘Yeah, but I don’t mind the reminder.’
‘I really thought you were going to kick me to the curb when you got back.’
‘I really didn’t know what I was going to do,’ I confessed. It was the truth, I was testing the waters to see where my heart and head led me. ‘What do you want?’

He let out a stifled laugh before he stood up and walked to his duffle bag that was on the sofa, walked back to me and put a small velvet box on the island in front of me. ‘This is what I want.’

I held the box, taking in a deep breath before I opened it. It was a very large, princess cut solitaire diamond set in rose gold, ‘Is this what I think it is?’ He nodded in agreement. It was an engagement ring. ‘I thought you were pissed at me…’

Oh for sure I am pissed with you, and with Jax for keeping shit from me.’ He was clearly not hiding anything from me. ‘I bought that ring before you left, and after everything that’s happened over the past few weeks, and what you’ve said tonight, I find myself still very much in love with you.’

‘And wanting to marry me?’

He nodded. ‘After the shit with that Luca fucker, I shouldn’t…’ I went to talk, but he wouldn't let me get a word in edgewise. ‘Wren, I knew I was fucked when I took your hand that first time on the plane. Something happened for the first and only time in my life. When our eyes met and skin touched, there were feelings; that was something new for me. They haven’t reappeared with anyone else in all the time we were apart, not until I saw you again in that bar. Wren, what we have is special. I know that. I also know I’ve got a shit ton of baggage that I’m only starting to deal with. I’m on antidepressants. I’m in therapy twice a week, and I have you to talk me off the ledge when it gets too much. I’ve spent the past three weeks working that out. Now, if you’ll just give me the rest of our lives to make it up to you, I’d like to try.’

I felt the tears rolling down my cheeks. I wiped them away as I found my voice. ‘Eli, we have a long way to go, but there’s no one else I’d rather spend my life with.’

‘So, is that a yes?’

‘Yes, you fool, of course it is.’

He took the ring and slid it on my finger. It was a perfect fit. ‘I love you, Wren.’

He kissed me with everything inside of him: the broken past that got us here, the security he brought me in this moment and the promise of a better future.

‘I love you too, Eli,’ I breathed out, finally getting to tell him that second thing he never let me say over the phone on Cassy’s balcony. I wanted him to know that I’d come to terms with the fact I’d fallen in love with him a world away.

‘Now that’s outta the way, I have another really important question to ask you.’ He held a straight face, but the glimmer in his eyes told a different story.

‘I don’t think anything is ever going to be as significant as the question you just asked.’

‘Do you still want me to call you Wren?’

‘Why wouldn't I?’ I answered with my own question.
‘Well, because of your little performance. The media’s all been calling you Penelope; you introduced yourself as such.’
‘I’m still Wren. I’m still the same person you fell in love with. To the world I’m Penelope Spruce-Price, but in this home and with our friends and family, I just want to be Wren.’

He held me tighter in his arms. ‘To me, you will always be my lucky penny.’
EPILOGUE

WREN

6 MONTHS LATER

‘Have a great meeting, babe. Call me later when you have time.’ I hated being away from Eli for any amount of time. Given his traveling for lacrosse games, and my sporadic trips, it happened more than either of us liked, but it was all a part of our jobs, at least for now. We made a point to speak on the phone as much as possible, not just texts, but actually speaking, even if it was for less than a minute. His voice always settled me. Even when I wasn't stressing, he just brought this peace to me that grounded me in a way that nothing else ever had.

The past six months have passed in a blinding blur. We were loved up and made our friends sick with how much affection oozed from us when we were in proximity to one another. We’d officially moved in together, and with his emotional help, I renovated what had once been my parent’s bedroom on the second level of the apartment, and we officially made it our own. We decided that being engaged was good enough for the two of us for the time being, and we weren’t in a rush to tie the knot. The only thing it was going to change between us was a legal document. Things between us were damn near perfect, and we didn't want anything to interfere with that.

I was especially proud of the way he worked on his sobriety every day and talked openly about any struggles he felt with me. I can happily attest that our communication with each other had caught up with our sex life in that they were both strong and very much alive.

‘I will, but I've got to go now. The Uber just pulled up.’

‘I love you,’ he reminded me, the same way he always ended our conversations.

‘I love you too.’ I ended the call and slid into the backseat next to Cassy.

‘All’s good in the land of lovers?’

I blushed and couldn't help the huge smile that graced my face. ‘Sorry, I know it’s annoying.’ She shook her head. ‘Nonsense. I’m just happy everything worked out for the two of you in the end.’

I felt horrible that I was essentially rubbing my relationship in her face when I knew she wasn’t entirely over the mystery man she’d developed feelings for when they were locked down in London together more than a year and a half ago now. She refused to talk about him, and I got that it hurt, but sometimes talking about it made it better, to get another perspective on the situation.

I remember when the lockdown first happened. She had been so scared when she’d left the voice messages that first day when she feared she’d be kicked out and have nowhere else to go. My lawyer, Charlie, soon assured all of us that she had rights and could remain in the accommodations she had secured and paid for.

Her fears of staying in an apartment with a stranger soon turned to an annoyance, and when she let it slip the man she was sharing the apartment with was extremely sexy, I stopped feeling bad for her, especially as the days went by and that annoyance turned into something that resembled lust, and her writing reflected the same thing. I knew she was in trouble. But I never could have predicted that she’d end up heartbroken and worrying for her health when she was finally able to return home to Australia after the lockdown restrictions were lifted.

‘Your happily ever after is waiting, Just hang in there,’ I assured her, rubbing an encouraging
‘Hey now, I’ve got Amos.’ I gave her a pointed look, that said “Really? Cut the bullshit. You don't fool me.”

‘I think my bar is too high. Maybe I should start writing jerks and lower the bar. My characters are so complex, no one will ever compare.’

‘Don’t mess with your characters,’ I playfully warned her. ‘It’s because of those complexities Netflix picked your series, and we’re here meeting with them to get the project off the ground.’

She smiled, and I saw the goosebumps forming on her arms. ‘I still can’t believe it.’

I hooked my arm around her. ‘Oh believe it. This is all you, sweetie.’

‘And all your hard work too…’

‘Shhh,’ I implore, not wanting her to doubt herself today. Today I needed her to be strong and assertive. ‘Let’s get a coffee before we head in,’ I suggested when the Uber driver dropped us off in front of the office building our meetings were in this week.

‘Ready?’ I asked my client, who had the bonus of being one of my very best friends.

‘Yeah, to vomit maybe.’ She gave me a weak, nervous smile as we stepped into her new reality.

There were already people milling about. The two of us found our seats around a large table, placing our bags down and setting up our tablets and notebooks. Cassy was following my lead and taking everything in stride as various people came up to introduce themselves to her in person. We were standing around talking with Deidra, one of the screenwriters, when I heard our producer Rod called out, ‘Dylan, you made it. You look like shit.’

Cassy’s posture went from relaxed to ram-rod straight, and as her gaze shifted toward the door, her face fell. I didn’t blame her. I could get star struck like anyone else.

‘Night shoots.’ Dylan Voss, one of the biggest stars in Hollywood answered in his distinct Welch accent, looking like a modern heartthrob and part Viking, as his beard and hair were fashioned in the famous style his character sported on the widely popular show NORSE.

Cassy was starting to shake and turn pale. ‘Cas?’ I leaned in and questioned her sudden change.

Cassy won the lottery when Rod approached her to take on the role of producer. Anything he touched turned to Gold. It was no secret that he was itching to get his hands on the rights to develop Mylie's series into what would be hands down a blockbuster of a generation. My friend was still reluctant, but I was hoping that she would soon come around.

Rod started to walk over to us from one side of the room as Dylan advanced on us from the door. The entire time Cassy was shooting daggers in the direction of Dylan. I pinched her arm to get her to stop, but she didn’t seem to notice. Instead, she was hyper focused on the sexiest man alive walking toward us.

‘Cassy.’ Rod smiled, looking between her and Dylan. ‘I’d like to introduce you to my good friend, and a new producer on the project, Dylan Voss.’

‘What?’ she questioned, looking at me, begging to know if I knew this, and I just shook my head to confirm that I was just as shocked as she was that this massive superstar was putting his weight and name behind the series. How did one get so lucky?

‘Oh, Cas and I go way back. Don’t we, babe?’ Dylan soothed, and my jaw nearly hit the floor as my head snapped to look at a seething Cassy breathing heavily next to me.

‘You do?’ Both Rod and I asked in unison, utterly confused. While Rod seemed pleased at the development, I was in a state of shock. When did this happen, and how did I not know about it?

‘Still sticking to the NDA, I see,’ Dylan teased her, clearly ignoring her mood and only adding fuel to it. ‘I ripped that thing up. You are free to say anything you want.’
‘What I want to say isn’t appropriate for a professional environment such as this,’ she spit out, stepping past them and pulling me with her as we made our way to our seats.

‘Cassy?’ I looked to her for some understanding.

‘It’s him,’ Cassy hissed, standing next to me and holding on to my arm with a vice grip to remain standing.

‘Yeah, I know who Dylan Voss is. The entire world knows who he is.’ I tried to control my nerves.

‘No, you don’t understand.’ She gave me bug eyes. ‘It’s him. You know, the one I don’t speak of.’ Light. Bulb. Moment.

THE END

Dear Reader,
Thank you so much reading Blurred Boundaries. As an independent author, I’d appreciate you leaving a review. This helps get my books seen and Want to know what happens next in Cassy’s story? Pre-order Lockdown Lusk now, releasing June 2021.

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About the Author

Dawn Edwards is an author of contemporary and new adult romance. A lover of all things romantic, Dawn will forever be a reader first.

By day she works in public health - policy and planning. By night she stays sane through writing sexy words, spicy scenes and sassy heroines. Her books have a dash of suspense, because who doesn’t love a good twist?

When not living in her daydreams, she resides in Ottawa, Canada, enduring her husband's never-ending dad jokes, her daughters unlimited chit-chat, and plants who don’t talk back – yet!
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