

Prologue

Mariana's POV

You would have thought that I would be spending one of the rare days that it decided to rain in LA back in the comfort of my own home with my daughter, watching a movie with a big bowl of popcorn sitting between us or staring out of the window playing I spy to pass the time, but no. Instead, I was spending yet another night at the library with my nose buried in three different books at once as I studied for yet another upcoming test.

I had been sitting in the same spot skimming over the same words on the same pages for three hours, and I still couldn't tell you what I was studying. Letters and numbers were blurring together, equations and formulas were all starting to look the exact same, and I was starting to think that I'd accidentally picked up a book that was written in an entirely different language.

Don't get me wrong, when it came time to study, I was usually a confused mess even on my best days, but today was not my best day, and my brain had been transformed into nothing more than a puddle of mush long before I'd even come to the library.

I was exhausted. I had been running around like a maniac all day. In between the three classes that I had to attend, I had two houses to clean, a prescription and some groceries to pick up for an elderly lady that had hired me to help her out for the day, and a tutoring session with a highschooler who spent the whole hour and a half ignoring me in favor of using his phone. And I'm pretty sure he was trying to take pictures of my legs during the rare moments when he did pay attention to me, but I don't even want to think about that.

I started studying for my own classes as soon as he'd left, and by the time I'd cracked open my own textbooks, my brain had already been reduced to a useless mess inside my head, but my test was in three days and I couldn't afford to fail it, so here I was still forcing myself to study. Why? I didn't know. At this rate, I was going to fail the test regardless. I couldn't understand the material no matter how hard I tried, just as it always seemed to be these days.

With a defeated sigh, I blinked the sleep out of my eyes and leaned in closer to my books as if that would magically make the material easier to understand. I figured I would just keep studying until the rain slacked up enough for me to start heading home.

I was counting down the minutes until it did, but the moment never came.

The rain only became heavier as the minutes ticked by. What had once been a light flow had turned into a full-fledged storm. Lightning struck, thunder boomed, and I was filled to the brim with guilt.

My daughter, Juliette, hated storms more than anything. She'd been terrified of them ever since she was a toddler and the only way to keep her calm was to lock ourselves inside my bedroom and hide under the covers together until the storm passed. She was still always terrified, but at the very least, she got to cling to me, and I could be there to remind her that everything would be okay. It wasn't much, but it was all I could do to comfort her.

Now she wouldn't even get to have that because I was anywhere but at home with her once again. Between attending my classes, trying to cram in some study sessions, and picking up every odd job that I could possibly find, it seemed as if I never had any free time to spend with my baby girl these days. Once again, I was left to wonder whether all this was worth it.

Was getting my education really worth all the hassle it caused me? Was it worth working myself to exhaustion on a constant basis? Was it worth missing out on so much of my daughter's life?

Storms, birthday parties, meetings with her teachers, playdates... So many moments that I had to see played out through shaky video recordings and blurry photos. So many moments that I had to hear about hours after the fact because I couldn't be there to witness them myself.

I knew that I shouldn't beat myself up over it. I was doing the best I could. I had to work in order to put food on the table and I couldn't disappoint my parents yet again, so I had to get my degree. It was all they'd asked of me. Just one simple thing.

There was no use in thinking about whether it was worth it now anyway. What was done was done. I had spent the last four years working toward getting my degree, and this was my senior year. My last year. All I had to do was hang on for a little while longer.

'Just a little while longer. Just a little while longer,' the five words were playing on a loop inside my mind as I dug through my bag in an attempt to find my cell phone.

All the blood drained from my face the moment I did. It was dead. I didn't have any idea how long it'd been dead, but it was dead. Which meant that I could've been missing a phone call from Juliette at that very moment, which meant that not only was I not there for her in person, but I also wasn't even there for her via a freaking phone call. A phone call was the bare minimum, and I couldn't even do that much for her. I had failed to be there for her yet again.

I tried not to panic as I blinked the tears out of my eyes and scrambled to find my charger. I knew that I had nothing to worry about—Juliette was with my sister, Marisol, at her house right now, perfectly safe with her auntie, but still. What if she was crying for me? What if she was wondering why I wasn't answering her calls? What if she thought that I didn't care about her?

I'd forgotten to put my charger in my bag today. How I could forget something as important as that, I don't know. Maybe it was just because this morning had been rough. Juliette was screaming her head off at six o'clock in the morning because she couldn't find her favorite

unicorn-patterned pants, and I was mentally throwing a tantrum because I couldn't find three homework assignments that I knew I'd completed. It wasn't either of our best moments.

If only I'd paid attention to the weather forecast today rather than focusing on trying to find Juliette a pair of shoes that weren't mismatched and a bra that didn't make my boobs look like one boob, I would have noticed that there was going to be a storm today and I would have known to get home before it could get this bad.

There wasn't any time to dwell on what could have been, though. I needed to get to a phone and call my child before I managed to convince myself that she'd died from the heartbreak of knowing that her own mother abandoned her.

I flung myself out of my seat and scanned the library quickly. There were barely any people in sight, but my eyes caught on a man sitting a few tables away who just so happened to be pulling his phone away from his ear and hanging up. I stumbled over my own two feet, rushing over to him as soon as humanly possible as my heart pounded in my chest.

The moment he was within earshot, the words came tumbling out of my mouth.

"I'm so sorry, I don't want to bother you and I know this is weird, but would it be possible for me to use your phone just for a minute? I have to call my daughter—she's only seven and she's afraid of storms and it's storming and I'm not there and I need to make sure that she's okay because I—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," the man's eyes widened slightly as he looked me up and down. "It's okay. Yes, of course, you can use it. Here."

He handed me the phone the same way you would hand a carrot to a baby bunny. As if trying not to startle me. I didn't even have the time to think about how much of a mess I must have appeared to be as I took the phone and began dialing Marisol's number immediately.

“Thank you,” I told him as I waited for her to pick up.

“It’s no problem.”

“Hello?”

“Marisol, is everything okay? Is Juliette okay? I’m so sorry I’m not there—I didn’t know it was going to get this bad and my phone died, and I don’t have a charger—”

“Mariana, relax, she’s doing just fine,” Marisol laughed. “We made a stormproof pillow tent to keep us safe and we even have a hardworking crew of stuffed animals guarding it to make absolutely sure that nothing can get inside to harm us. And snacks. Most importantly, we have snacks.”

“Doritos!” Juliette chimed in.

“We’re fine,” Marisol repeated. “Everything is all good here, so don’t worry—”

“Everything is not all good here,” Juliette yelled, and I could hear a little shuffling, no doubt Juliette snatching the phone. “You’re not inside the fort, mommy, what if you die?!” she sounded an even mix of concerned and fed up. I couldn’t figure out whether I should laugh or cry.

“She’s not going to die,” I could hear Marisol trying to comfort her.

“I’m not going to die.”

“You’re supposed to be here!” Juliette continued fussing. “How can I protect you if you aren’t here?! You have to be inside the fort I built, or your chances of survival are not good!”

“I’m going to be just fine,” I laughed, wiping my eyes. “I’m just happy that you’re not scared.”

“Aunt Marisol taught me how to build the best protective fort ever, and also, if I crunch on my chips loud enough, I can barely even hear the thunder!”

“But not too many chips, though, right? You don’t want to get a tummy ache!”

“Um...I’m gonna give the phone back to auntie Marisol. Love you!”

“I love you too,” my eyes narrowed as I listened to Juliette whispering about how she didn’t want to talk to me about how many chips she’d had so she was giving the phone back. When Marisol had taken it back and I was sure that she’d taken it off speaker, I let out a quiet sigh. “She went from sobbing her little heart out throughout the entirety of a storm to scolding me for not being inside of her protective fort and happily munching on potato chips. And I don’t even know when that change happened. I’m sorry—”

“Don’t start with all that apologizing,” Marisol chided. “You would have been here if you could’ve, but you’ve had a busy day today.”

“Every day is a busy day,” I muttered under my breath. “Why am I always too busy for my own daughter?”

“Stop it! You’re doing your best and you’re only one person. You can’t be everywhere at once.”

“I should at least be where it matters,” I sniffled.

“Mariana...Don’t beat yourself up over this, okay? Everything is fine—Juliette is doing just fine—and we’ll be here whenever you get here. All of this is going to pay off in the end, okay? Just keep trekking for a bit longer.”

“I will.”

“Good. We’ll see you later. Love you!”

“Love you too.”

I had to take a few moments to collect myself after hanging up the phone, but I quickly snapped out of my daze when I heard the man who had lent me his phone clearing his throat.

I blinked my tears away quickly before turning to face him again and I sent him a thankful smile as I handed it back. “Thanks. I-I’m sorry...” my cheeks began to heat up as I realized that he’d just witnessed that whole conversation.

And that he happened to be incredibly handsome.

He had dark hair and light eyes that sparkled even in the dim lighting, and he was muscular. I could see his muscles straining against the tight-fitting long-sleeve shirt that he was wearing. His well-put-together appearance had me suddenly feeling hyper-aware about my...Not so well-put-together appearance.

I was standing in front of a guy that looked like a model for some overpriced designer cologne with my long hair forming a bird’s nest on my head, enough bags under my eyes to hide things in between, and wearing a ratty old blouse and a pair of jeans that were probably older than me.

Once again, not my best moment.

“No need to apologize. It’s okay, really,” he flashed me a smile that had my stomach dropping to my ass. His eyes lit up as the smile came onto his face. Plump pink lips stretched until pearly white teeth were on full display—and was that a dimple poking out of his cheek?

God, this man was beautiful. I was starting to regret not putting on any makeup this morning or...for the last couple of years.

I sent him my best smile and a small nod before turning to walk away, unsure of what else to say, but his voice caused me to halt in place once again.

“Was—Was that your daughter?” he rubbed the back of his neck, sending me a sheepish smile when I turned to face him again. “Sorry, I just couldn’t help but overhear.”

“It’s all right. Yeah, that was my daughter.”

“Wow, you look so young to be a mother,” his eyes widened when I raised a brow, and he quickly shook his head. “I mean—It’s not that I’m judging or saying it’s wrong or anything...I’m not saying anything at all, other than that you look young, and you said she’s seven, so...” he fell silent, biting his lip and squeezing his eyes shut for a moment. “Sorry. I suck.”

I huffed out a laugh, failing to keep the amused smile off my face. “It’s okay. I had her pretty young. I’m twenty-four.”

“Oh, cool. I’m twenty-nine.”

“Cool...”

The two of us stared at each other. The silence between us stretched on for five seconds, and that was about three seconds too long for me, so I turned to walk away again.

“Oh—Um, I’m Elliott, by the way. Elliott Vaughn. What’s your name?” he asked quickly. I must have looked weirded out when I turned to face him once again because his cheeks turned bright red, and he let out an exasperated noise. “I’m sorry, it’s just that...I think the storm is going to last for a little while which means I’ll be stuck here for a while, and I don’t want to spend the whole time by myself. You look nice, so...What do you say? Maybe we could talk?”

“I don’t know...” I don’t know what possessed me to turn down the opportunity to chat with a guy this fine, but the words came out of my mouth before I could think to stop them.

“There’s nothing better to do, is there?” he raised his brows.

I paused as I thought about it. I could use this time to continue studying but I'd rather fling myself off a bridge. Or, instead of doing either of those things, I could spend some time talking to this insanely attractive man.

The choice was clear. I went to grab my things and brought them over to his table, taking a seat across from him with a tired smile.

"So, what brings you here so late?" I questioned awkwardly.

He chuckled. "It's only seven."

"That's kind of late to be inside a library when you're not a college student with deadlines to meet and no semblance of a social life," I shrugged. "You're not a college student, are you?"

"No," he shook his head. "I was just spending the day with my niece, Janie. She's six and she wanted to spend the day 'exploring' with me, so we paid a visit to all her favorite places. A couple of stores, a food truck, an ice cream parlor, and even her favorite museum, which is where we were coming from when it started raining. She loves the library so I told her we could wait here until the storm clears up."

"Oh, that's so nice," I grinned. "Where is she?"

"With my bo—babysitter! The babysitter."

"You brought a babysitter along with you guys?" I furrowed my brows.

"No, ugh—her babysitter just so happened to be here too--Small world!" he chuckled. "So, she ran off to be with him. They're probably knee-deep in Junie B. Jones books now."

"Cute!"

"Yeah...So, you're in college? How's that going? What are you studying?"

I raised my shoulders before allowing them to droop again. "I'm double majoring in business and accounting. It's...Well, honestly, it's not going well."

"Really? Are you failing?"

"No, I'm just barely passing, but it's..." I sighed, shaking my head before letting out a quiet laugh. "Sorry, I'll take any and every opportunity to bitch about how sucky it's been if I'm not careful, so I won't even get into it—"

"No, no, college is hard. I don't mind listening to you complain about it," he smiled as he rested his elbows on the table. "Go ahead, I'm all ears."

I eyed him skeptically for a moment, but it didn't seem as if he was just offering a listening ear to be polite. He seemed genuinely interested, so I shrugged and continued. "It's just been tough. Juggling college, work, and being a single mother has been hard, and maybe it would feel worth it if I actually cared about the degree that I'm getting, but I don't. I have no interest in business and I've always sucked at math, so I don't intend to get a job in accounting either. I don't need that kind of headache every day for the rest of my working life," I snorted.

"College is hard enough without having to work or care for a child," he nodded. "I can see why you're stressed. But why are you double majoring in business and accounting if you don't care about either?"

"My parents. They wanted me to get this degree and I thought it was the least I could do. I didn't want to disappoint them again—ugh, they weren't so happy about me getting pregnant at a young age—and when I told them that I wanted to move here, they offered to pay for my education and housing...They just failed to mention that they were going to stop paying for the housing after the first three months," I grumbled under my breath.

"Damn," he whistled. "Why'd they stop?"

“Because doing things like that is just in their nature,” I scoffed. “It’s just like the time when I was ten and they told me I could take ballet but they didn’t tell me that they were going to take me out of the class just a few weeks later because—And I quote—I’d gotten to have a taste of it but we all knew I wasn’t going to become a professional ballerina so there was no point in continuing. Or when I was fifteen and they promised to match whatever I saved up to buy a car when I turned sixteen, but they failed to mention that I’d have to pay them back their half of the money plus interest plus the insurance and any repairs it needed because—And I quote, yet again—that’s just the way the real world works. And if I missed out on a payment, they would confiscate my driver’s license and I would lose all driving privileges. So, even though I’d talked to them about wanting to focus on my education for a little while longer before going out to get a job, I ended up having to get a job anyway—as they originally wanted me to—in order to pay the bills.”

“Damn,” he frowned. “That’s pretty harsh.”

“Nothing they did when I was younger could compare to them making me think that everything would be well taken care of if I moved here only to have them refuse to continue paying for the bills that they offered and promised to pay for once I’d already started my life here...” I let out a frustrated huff before shaking my head at myself. “I’m sorry. Nobody wants to hear a grown woman bitching about having to take care of her own responsibilities, I just—”

“No, I understand. They didn’t mention that they were only going to pay for the first three months, and they definitely should have before sending you to LA of all places. It’s expensive to live here,” he chuckled. “Well, I guess that’s an understatement.”

“Yeah...But let’s not spend the whole time talking about me. What about you? Do you happen to have a set of parents from hell too?” I laughed, and he winced.

“They aren’t exactly up for any parent of the year awards. My mom isn’t so bad—she has some old-fashioned beliefs which can cause problems sometimes, and she can be pretty strict, but aside from that, she’s great. Especially when compared to my dad.”

“What’s your dad like?”

“Oh,” Elliott heaved a heavy sigh as he rolled his eyes. “He’s a sleazeball. A cutthroat businessman with the shortest temper that anyone’s ever had, slimy business practices, and the inability to be kind to anyone he deems to be beneath him. All he cares about is making money, and I’m convinced the only reason he even had kids in the first place was because he wanted to have someone to groom into his version of the perfect businessperson to take over his business when he was ready to slow down....Sorry...Nobody wants to hear a grown man bitch about his daddy issues,” he chortled.

“Sometimes you just have to let it out,” I shrugged. “What kind of business does he have anyway?”

“Oh...Ugh...He just owns a small company.”

“Mm,” I hummed. “Well, what about you? What do you do for work?”

“I...” he paused for a couple of moments, shrugging his shoulders as he let out a deep chuckle.

“I just work for my dad. You know, like...At his small company. I actually work there as an accountant! So, that’s a coincidence, huh?” he let out a nervous laugh and I tilted my head.

“It is a coincidence! What kind of company is it?”

“Oh, just a small startup. Hey, so, if it was up to you, what kind of a degree would you be getting?”

The sudden question caught me off guard, but I figured he wasn't in the mood to talk about work right now, and I completely understood that. I perked up as I thought about the degree that I always wanted to pursue anyway. "A degree in fine arts."

"Really? Why?" he smiled. Another maddeningly beautiful smile that made his eyes light up and his dimple poke out. I averted my gaze, distracting myself by rubbing a finger across a bump in the otherwise smooth table.

"I've been obsessed with art ever since I was younger. Drawing and painting, in particular! I do it whenever I have spare time! Which...Is basically never nowadays, but when I was younger, I was creating art constantly! It's a simple concept, but I find it to be the coolest in the world; getting to create something with your own two hands. Something that only you could have ever made because only you could have imagined it. Even with basic paintings of everyday items, though, I love seeing the way that one person decides to draw it in comparison to another. And I just find it so interesting, the way that art has evolved throughout history, yet at its core, it's somehow managed to say somewhat of the same. I love studying historical pieces and learning about artists from different time periods because it's always mind-blowing when I—"

The moment I finally looked at him again, my cheeks began to burn from embarrassment. I'm prone to rambling about just about anything, anyway, but when it comes to something that I love, like art, I can really run my mouth a mile a minute. He didn't seem to mind, though. He was staring at me with such an intense gaze as if he was hanging onto my every word. Instead of looking bored or annoyed, he looked intrigued. The undivided attention he gave me had me suddenly feeling shy.

"I'm sorry—"

"You apologize a lot," he observed, waving me off. "And there's no need. I love a woman who's passionate about what she loves. I think people are always the most beautiful versions of

themselves when they talk about the things that make them happy. You're the prime example of that."

My mouth fell open and I scrambled to come up with something to say, but all I could do was sit there and stammer over my words like an idiot as he continued staring at me. Or through me. It felt as if he was staring right through me.

"Um, I—I wouldn't necessarily describe myself as beautiful right now," I let out a dry laugh as I shook my head.

"Why not?" he furrowed his brows.

I sent him a look. "I look like a character from The Walking Dead."

"That's not the insult you think it is."

"What? The characters in that show look like Hell most of the time. And rightfully so. They're fighting zombies 24/7, for Christ's sake."

"Sasha? Rosita? Carol?" he sent me a 'duh' look that had me scoffing and crossing my arms over my chest. "Even in the middle of an apocalypse, they were gorgeous. I bet if you were in The Walking Dead universe, you'd be the hottest woman out there battling zombies!"

"Isn't Carol old enough to be your mom?"

"I'm not questioning your taste in men, you don't question my taste in women," he grumbled defensively. "Just take the compliment and go."

"I'm not going to take the compliment," I stuck my tongue out at him. "I bet you say that to every woman you meet."

“What, that they’d be the hottest woman in the apocalypse? No, that’s a pretty niche thing to say. I can guarantee you, I’ve only said it to you.”

“So, then, what are the more common pick-up lines that you like to use on all the women that you must flirt with on a daily basis,” I teased, resting my chin on my fist.

“Are you implying that I’m a womanizer?”

“A guy that looks like you has to be.”

“Oh, I see,” he smirked. “This is all just because you think I’m hot. Like, the best-looking, sexiest, most jaw-droppingly handsome guy that you’ve ever seen before in your life.”

“A few more adjectives than I would have used, but sure, I won’t deny that you’re attractive.”

“Thank you. That means a lot coming from the most beautiful woman that I’ve ever seen in my life.”

“Stop it,” I waved him off quickly.

“I mean it!” he chuckled before shaking his head. “I don’t get out much—”

“Clearly, if I’m the most beautiful woman that you’ve seen.”

“Stop it,” it was his turn to wave me off this time. “I just mean that I don’t usually get to have real conversations with women like you when I do go out. I don’t just say that kind of thing to anyone, trust me. You really are stunning.”

“What do you mean by women like me?” I questioned skeptically

“You seem normal,” he answered easily. “Hard-working. Ambitious. You seem like a good mother too, from what I heard during that phone call. Those are the qualities that I think make a

woman beautiful. It's what's on the inside that counts, as cliché as it may sound. I've come to learn that outer beauty isn't everything."

"Mm, thank you," I humbled before grumbling to myself. "But I'm not so sure about that last one. I can't exactly say that I've been mother of the year lately."

"My sister, Yana--Janie's mother--tends to beat herself up a lot too. She's a successful businesswoman, and that comes with some sacrifice. She can't always be there when Janie needs her either, but she damn sure tries to be. I think that makes her a good mom."

I nodded, letting out a quiet laugh. "I hope I get to meet this Janie before you leave. I'm sure she's adorable..." If she's anything like her uncle.

"I'm sure she'd like that. She loves meeting new people," he chuckled before stretching. "In the meantime, maybe we could grab something from the vending machine? Or sneak into the staff room and fix ourselves some hot chocolate while we debate which The Walking Dead deaths were the saddest."

"It's like eighty degrees out, but yeah, I could go for some hot chocolate. And Carl's death was easily the most gut-wrenching. That kid was the whole heart of the show! Who even is Rick without Carl?!"

“She fell asleep about an hour after the phone call. You guys might as well sleep over tonight. It’s really not a problem!” Marisol smiled as the two of us tip-toed out of the guest room. It had become somewhat of Juliette’s room.

“Are you sure Daniel wouldn’t mind?”

“Of course not! My family is his family.”

“Well, I’m sorry again for getting here so late.”

“Stop apologizing,” Marisol scolded, slapping my arm. I winced, crinkling my nose as I rubbed the sore spot. For her to be two years younger than me, she sure does bully me a whole lot.

“You have nothing to apologize for, and trust me, I don’t mind helping out whenever I can. I love Juliette, and Daniel does too! It’s nice having her around.”

“Are you two thinking about bringing your own little one into the world?” I sent her a sly smile and she cringed.

“In this economy? I don’t think so.”

“Daniel’s studying to become a doctor and you’re getting a business degree. I don’t think finances would be a problem for you,” I shrugged.

“I don’t know about that. With the way the wedding planning is going, we might be in debt for the rest of our lives after the ceremony. I swear Daniel’s an even bigger diva than I am. I thought it was supposed to be the bride’s job to plan a wedding so lavish that it would have the next generation still paying off debt, and the groom’s job to hone it in, but no, he’s the one requesting live doves—You know what, no, I’m not going to fuss about this tonight,” she huffed, roaming over to the fridge as soon as we entered the kitchen. I wasn’t surprised when she pulled a

platter of chocolate chip cookies out of it. She always had been a stress baker. And then she liked to stress eat what she'd stress-baked. "Back to you. Did you get a lot of studying done, at least?"

"Eh," I shrugged as I slumped against the kitchen counter. "A few hours, but I may as well have just skipped out on studying altogether. I'm still going to fail my test because I don't understand a damn thing. And if that happens then I'm just going to feel even worse about failing to be there for Juliette tonight because it wouldn't have even been worth it in the end. Not that it would be worth it even if I did get a good grade, but—"

"You have got to stop being so hard on yourself, seriously. Juliette will understand when she's older, just how hard her mother worked for her. She'll thank you for always providing for her and she'll respect you for getting your education in the midst of it too. You should be proud of yourself because believe me, she's going to be very proud of you too."

"Thank you," I sucked in a deep breath before slowly letting it out again. "You always know exactly what to say. I really owe you so much for everything that you've done for me and Juliette. I know it should be me helping you out when you need it since I'm your older sister, but I—I promise, I won't always be such a mess, and someday, I'll be the one that you can come to when you need help with something."

"Don't even worry about it," she waved me off. "Think of this as payback for all the times you stood up for me against our parents when we were kids. Remember when dad tried to ship me off to boarding school just because I had my first kiss? At seventeen," she rolled her eyes and I snickered.

"Don't even remind me. I think that was my fault too. I don't think he wanted to risk another of his daughters getting pregnant so soon..."

She sent me a look, fighting off a laugh as she quickly changed the topic. "By the way, how did you call if your phone was dead?"

"Oh..." I pursed my lips, trying my best not to start blushing again as I thought back on my time with Elliott. "I just asked to use some guy's phone."

"Oh?" a smirk came onto Marisol's face in all of two seconds. "A guy?"

"Marisol, please, don't start this! You and I both know that I don't have the time to be dealing with any men."

I'd told Elliott that much before leaving. He'd spent the next two hours trying his best to charm my pants off. Or maybe he wasn't trying at all, and my pants were just dangerously close to being charmed off anyways. But one thing I knew for sure was that he was flirting with me. He was just as attracted to me as I was to him. He'd told me so, quite bluntly, on multiple occasions. At first, I'd kind of just assumed that he was one of those guys with a flirtatious personality who hit on every woman that he talked to but had no serious intention to take it any farther than that.

But then he'd asked for my phone number. He made it clear that he actually wanted to keep in contact with me. And I realized that for the first time in years, there was a guy who was seriously interested in me, who I was just as seriously interested in.

That was a terrifying realization to come to.

I made it clear to him that I didn't have the time for anything romantic and that things between us would likely go nowhere.

And his response was a very serious, "I know your schedule must be busy and I understand that, but I want to see you again. So, I'll find a way to see you again. Soon," and a wink, and

another dimpled smile, and an amused laugh as I nearly tripped over my own two feet while trying to walk away from him.

“You’re blushing,” Marisol gasped. “Oh my God, what happened?! Who is he? I haven’t seen you blush over a guy in...Maybe ever!”

“Stop it,” I huffed. “He’s just some random guy that I talked to for a while since I had nothing better to do while stuck in the library.”

“You could have kept studying,” she sent me a knowing look. “Or read one of the thousands of books there instead. And isn’t there a media room where you can use the computers or even watch TV—”

“All right, you’ve made your point.”

“How do you feel about a double marriage ceremony? I think having a joint wedding would be disastrous, in terms of planning, but it would turn out beautiful in the end.”

“I hate you.”

“You love me. Maybe even as much as you love library guy!”

I groaned, covering my face with my hands. “I got his phone number, and that’s it. Honestly, I don’t think it’ll go any farther. He seemed like a nice guy, but holy shit, he was handsome! He has to have, like, a billion girls trying to get with him at any given moment.”

“And yet, he spent hours talking to you.”

“And I’m way too busy to pursue a relationship right now,” I continued. “Not that I think he even wants a relationship with me, I mean, we barely even know each other.”

“You’re hot and cool and awesome, so I’m sure any guy would love a relationship with you!”

“I feel like even Juliette could give a better pep talk than that.”

“You need to talk to him again soon. I don’t want to hear about you not having the time to pursue it,” she frowned. “You never know where this could go, Mariana. You haven’t been with anyone since...He who shall not be named. I know it’s got to be scary to get back out there after that whole shitshow, but you deserve to experience real love and I’m sure you could find that if you gave it a try. Who knows, maybe you won’t even have to go searching for it. Maybe you’ll find it with hot library dude!”

“But—”

“No buts,” she wagged a finger at me. “You have to start taking the time out for yourself to actually live your life. You can’t just study, work, and be a mom all the time. You have to find time for your own needs too.”

I opened my mouth to argue but she was already patting me on the shoulder, bidding me goodnight, and then stalking out of the kitchen. I sighed as I turned to head back to the guest room.

Her words were on replay inside my head as I trudged through my bedtime routine. Turning my phone on to see how much it had charged, tugging my clothes off, and changing into my pajamas, making sure to set an alarm for tomorrow morning. I wondered if maybe I should take Marisol’s advice and try my hand at dating again. Sure, it would be hard with my schedule, but maybe it wouldn’t be completely impossible...

What was I even thinking? I spent a few hours talking to a random guy in the library one time and now I was mentally rearranging my entire schedule in an attempt to fit time for romance into it. I was being ridiculous. Elliott had probably already forgotten about me by now.

But when I picked my phone up to check it one last time before going to sleep, I saw a message from an unsaved number flashing on my screen.

'I'm going to dream of you, and I hope you'll dream of me too. Love, Elliott'

Chapter One

Elliott's POV

Three months later

"Now, remember what we talked about, okay?" I send Janie a stern look, closing the car door once she's hopped out. "No hitting, biting, pinching, or pulling, you have to share the toys you play with, you have to be respectful to Miss Campbell, and most importantly, you cannot mention our bodyguard or the company, or anything about money—No bragging. None."

"What does it matter if I say something about Mr. Clark? He's gonna follow us around all day anyway, just like he always does."

"Yes, but only the two of us know that, right?" I squat down to be at her height. "Mr. Clark is gonna make sure that nobody else can tell that he's following us. You know how he does that sometimes."

"Like hide and seek in plain sight," she nods. "I don't see how people can't seek him. He's not good at hiding—he's really big!"

"It's easier to find him when you know that you're looking for him. Which is why we don't bring him up around other people—we don't need them to know that he's hiding."

"I don't think Mr. Clark really knows how to play hide and seek," she seems to be thinking out loud. "The whole point is to be found. If he doesn't want people finding him then—"

“It’s not exactly hide and seek. Just a little similar.”

“Not very similar at all. He hides in plain sight and doesn’t want to be found. He’s basically playing a whole different game.”

“Janie,” I sigh. “That’s not the point. The point is, we can’t mention him. Let’s go over the rules again—”

“No hitting, no bragging, no Mr. Clark, use manners, I got it!” Janie huffs as she tries to pull me along. “Can we please hurry? I want to meet Juliette before I turn eighty-five and then I’ll be too old to play with her!”

I roll my eyes, fighting to keep the smile off my face as I finally allow her to start dragging me toward Mariana’s apartment. It’s Janie’s playdate and she’s the one meeting someone new for the first time, yet she’s excited and I’m the one who’s nervous.

Mariana and I have spent some time together, sure. We’ve been texting every day since we first met, we have phone calls and Facetimes at least a couple of times per week, I take her on mini café dates whenever we can squeeze it in between her classes, and I’ve even been helping her study at the library. But today is different. Today, it isn’t going to be a brief exchange of text messages, a five-minute phone call, or a rushed quote-on-quote ‘date’ at a café. The little time that we do actually get to spend together isn’t going to be spent trying to figure out mathematical equations and memorize vocabulary for tests. We’re actually going to get the chance to sit down for an extended period of time and spend time together.

This is technically our first official date.

Granted, today is supposed to be mostly about the kids, but...It’s close enough.

“Hurry!” Janie whines, turning to pout at me. If it wasn’t for me holding her hand, she’d probably break out in a sprint. “You’re taller than me, so how come it takes you longer to get from one place to another?!”

“The longer the limbs, the harder they are to operate.”

Despite all Janie’s complaining, we end up standing in front of Mariana’s door in no time. I take a deep breath before knocking and try to keep my heart from beating out of my chest while we wait for an answer.

Janie lets out an excited squeal the moment the door swings open. “Hello! I’m Janie, remember me, Miss Campbell?!”

“Oh—Yeah,” Mariana laughs. “Hey, Janie! You know, you can just call me Mariana.”

“I don’t think I can. Uncle Elliott gave me a long speech about manners.”

“Oh,” Mariana wears an amused smile as she quirks a brow at me, and my heart skips a beat. She looks beautiful. She must have just had a shower because her long hair is dripping wet, and her skin is shiny, practically glowing. Instead of her usual blouse and jeans, she’s wearing a floral-printed dress. She looks beautiful. “You can just call me whatever you’re most comfortable with then. You look beautiful!” her voice draws me out of my trance.

“Thank you,” Janie giggles, spinning around to show off her outfit. It’s a variation of the same outfit that she always likes to wear. A white shirt and a navy-blue skirt. She calls this her businesswoman attire. “I bet Juliette looks beautiful too! Is she here?!” Janie leans forward, trying her best to peer around Mariana’s form.

“Janie,” I scold. “Don’t be rude.”

“I’m not! I just want to give her her gift! We brought gifts,” she informs Mariana, thrusting the barbie doll that she’s holding up to show her. “See? This Barbie is a scientist!”

“Oh, I bet Juliette would love that! She has a dollhouse full of barbies, and I’m sure she’d be happy to add this one to it! Maybe since you were kind enough to bring it for her, she’ll give you one of hers in return.”

“That’s okay, I already have all the Barbies,” Janie shrugs. I clear my throat and she quickly adds, “But I’m not bragging!”

Mariana’s giggle is like music to my ears. She’s been stressed lately—honestly, she’s always stressed—but she never seems to let life keep her down. She looks tired, with bags under her half-closed eyes and her skin looking paler than usual, but she somehow still looks radiant. Maybe it’s the big smile that she wears while staring at Janie with adoration in her eyes.

“Juliette!” Mariana calls as she ushers us inside. “Our guests are here, come and say hi! She’s a little shy at first but she’ll warm up to you quickly once she sees how nice you are.”

“I hope so! I don’t have a best friend yet and I need one,” Janie smiles, showing off her missing front tooth. Mariana pouts, clutching her chest as she turns to look at me.

“She’s precious.”

“You’ve only known her for a short time. Don’t speak so fast,” I joke. “And, ugh, these are for you, by the way…”

Mariana’s eyes widen when she finally catches sight of the bouquet of flowers in my hand. The flowers in it are purple, pink, and blue. Her favorite colors. I bite my lip, watching as she looks over them after I hand them to her. She doesn’t say anything for a while, just stares at them while twisting the bouquet around again and again.

“Do you like them?” I finally ask after a long stretch of silence. “I wasn’t sure which kind to get you, so I just—I’m sorry if you don’t like them.”

“No, I love them,” she chokes out a laugh. “I...I’m sorry, you just caught me by surprise. It’s just that this is the first time that I’ve ever gotten flowers from a man...” she murmurs. Her cheeks turn a rosy color, and she tries to hide it by pushing her hair in front of her face. I don’t comment on it, letting out a soft chuckle as her eyes lock with mine. “Thank you. This really means a lot to me.”

“It’s no problem, Mariana. I’ll buy you flowers any time.”

She bites her lip as she stares at me and I try to pull my eyes away from her, but I can’t. Not until I hear little footsteps thudding against the carpet and coming toward us. My eyes snap toward the little girl that I’ve heard so much about, and I smile when she sends Janie and me a small wave before hiding behind her mother’s leg. She looks just like Mariana. The same long, dark hair and wide, sparkly eyes. She’s very cute with her mismatched clothes on—A pink shirt with princesses all over it and a mint green tutu.

“Juliette, this is Janie and Mr. Vaughn—”

“I brought you a barbie so we can be best friends!” Janie cuts Mariana off, running to stand in front of Juliette even as the girl tries harder to hide behind Mariana. “She’s a scientist barbie! And I bet she’ll fit in with all the other dolls in your dollhouse too! Can I see it? Is it really big? Is it pink? I have a pink dollhouse in my room!”

“It is pink,” Juliette murmurs, gingerly taking the barbie and looking it over. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome! Do you have more tutus? I want to wear one too!”

“I have a lot of them, in all different colors...Do you want to wear the rainbow one?”

“Yeah!” Janie cheers.

A smile finally breaks out on Juliette’s face as she holds a hand out for Janie to take. “I have matching bows too! Come on!”

Just like that, Mariana and I are completely forgotten about. We both snicker as she leads me into the kitchen, muttering about needing to find a vase to keep her flowers in.

“I’m glad we’re doing this,” she tells me, gesturing for me to take a seat at the kitchen table. “I think Juliette and Janie will be good friends!”

“I hope so. It would give us an excuse to see each other more often,” I smirk. “Is this a chocolate cake? Did your sister make it? It looks so good!”

“She and her fiancé are currently trying to figure out the seating arrangement for the wedding,” she winces. “This is the tenth cake she’s baked this week. I have muffins, cupcakes, cookies, pies, and tarts too if you want some.”

“Yikes,” I grin, happily accepting the plate that she hands me. “She should really start her own bakery.”

“That’s what I always say! But she’s convinced that she’s only good at baking when she’s stressed, and honestly, I’m starting to believe it too. She can never get the cookies perfectly crunchy on the outside and gooey in the center unless she’s going through a crisis,” she giggles, shaking her head. “But speaking of work, how’s it going for you?”

“Oh, it’s fine...” I open my mouth to say something else, but the words die on my tongue. I don’t know what to say. She thinks I’m just an accountant at my father’s startup company but that couldn’t be further from the truth. I’ve never been good at lying to the people that I care about,

so for my own sake, I'm trying to keep from talking about work as much as possible. Lies are always easier to keep up with when you keep them vague.

I sigh, watching her as she slices a piece of cake for both of us. I want to just tell her the truth. Now's a good time, isn't it? We're just sitting here, about to stuff our faces with dessert while the kids play in Juliette's room. Why shouldn't I tell her right now?

I open my mouth to say something but then close it right back. Is now really the time for it? Do I really need to bring it up right now? I just want to spend a little more time with her before I ruin things...and this could definitely ruin things.

"Hey, I was wondering..." Mariana's voice draws me out of my thoughts, and I take it as a sign. I should stop thinking about this for now and just focus on enjoying the day with Mariana as I've been intending to.

I smile and raise my brows, waiting for her to continue, and she nibbles on her bottom lip for a moment before averting her gaze. "It's just that I have tomorrow off too, and Juliette's going to be with Marisol because Marisol wants to take her shopping—I'm pretty sure she just wants to give me the chance to spend more time with you--so I won't be busy or anything if you wanted to...Maybe we could..."

"I'll plan a date for us," I grin "Our first official date...Wow, and here I thought that this was it. Not that this wouldn't be an awesome first date! We have chocolate cake and each other, and the sound of two screaming kids in the background too. What else could we possibly need?"

"Milk," she smirks as she waltzes toward the fridge. "And I can't believe that I'm actually going out on a date...I haven't been on a date since before I had Juliette. Oh, God, what do I wear?"

I hum, chewing up the remainder of the cake that I'd just shoved into my mouth as I think about it. "Something casual. Comfortable."

“You’re not one of those guys that thinks that hiking is the epitome of a perfect first date, are you?” she groans. “Because I’m really not picky, but I’m sorry, hiking is where I draw the line.”

“No hiking,” I chuckle. “I promise, I’m going to plan something special.”

“It doesn’t have to be anything extravagant; I mean, this is pretty last minute so—”

“I’m going to make it special for you,” I repeat, sending her a sincere look. “It’s your first time going out on a date in years and you’re letting me have the honor of taking you. Of course, I’m going to plan something special.”

“I—” she stumbles over her words, blushing as she lets out a quiet laugh while pouring my glass of milk. “Don’t talk with your mouth full,” she mumbles after a while.

“Yeah, it probably would have been more romantic if I didn’t,” I admit, and I can’t wipe the grin off my face as I listen to the giggles that she lets out.

She takes a seat and I immediately swipe a piece of her cake, laughing when she sends me a death glare.

“Why? We have the exact same kind of cake.”

“Yeah, but food tastes better when it comes from someone else’s plate, doesn’t it?”

“Not if you get punched in the mouth after stealing it. Then all you can taste is blood,” she grumbles.

“So, not a fan of sharing food. Noted...We could at least still feed each other, though, right? Come on,” I smile as I fork a piece of the cake and gesture for her to do the same.

“You have to be kidding,” she laughs. “Isn’t this cringey? Are we going to be those people who call each other pet names and feed each other until everyone around us wants to either die from secondhand embarrassment or kill us instead?”

“You tell me,” I give her my best sultry look. Her laughter is infectious, and I can’t help laughing too when she accidentally lets out a squeak which causes her to laugh even louder.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” she snorts after picking up her own piece of cake and carefully interlocking our arms. “I can’t even remember the last time I did something so silly.”

“That’s the whole point,” my smile widens. “You deserve to let loose a little, have a little fun. Even if it’s just shoving cake into each other’s mouths.”

“Oh God—” I cut her complaining off by pushing the cake into her mouth and she nearly chokes. I laugh as she sputters, but she quickly shoves her own cake up against my lips. I don’t open my mouth in time, so all I have is frosting smeared across my chin and a small piece of cake now lying on the floor.

“Five-second rule?” I wiggle my brows.

She cringes and rushes to pick it up with a paper towel. “Don’t you dare! And, ugh... You’ve got a little something...” she smirks as she points at her lips.

I send her a bemused look. “You don’t say.”

“You almost made me choke to death. You deserved it,” she shrugs. “Here, let me—”

I grab her wrist when she tries to wipe my lips with the paper towel and lean forward to press a kiss against her lips instead. She gasps, and I smirk after pulling away almost as soon as I’d kissed her. “Now we’ve both got a little something...” I mock, pointing at my own lips.

“I—” she lets out a surprised laugh, avoiding eye contact as she wipes her mouth. “I’ll get you back for that.”

“Mm, I’m sure you will.”

She wipes my lips, biting her own as she does, and I let out an amused chuckle after she continues staring for a few seconds too long.

“You must want me to kiss you again.”

“I didn’t say that,” she bites down on her lip even harder.

“You were thinking it.”

“You have no proof.”

“Why is it so hard to admit that you want to be kissed?” I whisper. “Have you always been this easily flustered or is it just because you haven’t dated anyone in a while?”

“I’m not easily flustered.”

I make a point of leaning in closer to her and my lips twitch, though I try my best to keep the smirk off my face as she sucks in a deep breath, holding it, her eyes widening and cheeks turning an even darker shade of pink as she stares at me. “I beg to differ.”

Mariana opens her mouth, but no words come out as her eyes flicker between mine and my lips.

I want to pull her in for another kiss, but there’s something about forcing her to make the first move that I like. She stares at my lips longingly as her own begin to form a pout. I get the feeling that she wants me to pull her in for another kiss too.

When her eyes shift up to look into mine again, she sends me a sexy look that I almost can't deny. Almost. But I sharpen my gaze, fire burning in my eyes as I quirk my brow, still waiting for her to make the first move.

She looks at my lips again and it seems as if she will. She leans forward just slightly. Just enough so that our lips are dangerously close to touching. Less than an inch apart.

"Mommy!"

"Miss Campbell!"

Mariana jolts, darting away from me as the little girls come soaring into the room, Janie knocking into Juliette's back when the girls suddenly come to a halt .

I blink, my heart racing in my chest as I attempt to pull myself together and forget all about our little moment in favor of paying attention to the kids instead.

"Mom, can we have a tea party?!" Juliette questions with large, doe eyes. I'm not sure how Mariana can deny her anything. "Pretty please with a cherry on top?"

"I don't know, I think a tea party would be a lot for us to get set up...Maybe you guys could save that for next time?"

"But we want it now," Juliette frowns, tears already catching in her lashes.

"Juliette—" Mariana warns.

"You guys don't want to have a boring old tea party when you could pay a visit to the best restaurant ever instead," I smile. "Wouldn't you prefer to have McDonald's? You could get chicken nuggets, play in the play place, and maybe even have a milkshake after that! What do you think?" I turn to crook a brow at Mariana, and she smiles, nodding.

“But you have to clean up and get your shoes on first!”

“Yes!” Juliette cheers before turning to stare at me with wide eyes. “You’re awesome! She never says yes to McDonald’s!”

“Wha—It’s supposed to be for special occasions,” Mariana huffs. “That’s how it was for me as a kid!”

“But that was a really, really, really long time ago!” Juliette fusses.

I cover my mouth to hide my laughter as Mariana narrows her eyes and scoffs. “Go get your shoes on before I change my mind.”

“Juliette, come on! I bet I can get my shoes on faster than you!” Janie shouts.

“No way, mine don’t even have laces!”

The two of them dart off yet again, ignoring Mariana’s warnings to stop running in the house as they do. I put on my best innocent look when she turns to glare at me.

“I saw you laughing about her calling me old.”

“I was just coughing. And I’m sorry for suggesting McDonald’s without asking. I just figured it would be better to divert their attention before any early tantrums could break out.”

“It’s fine. This is a special occasion anyway. It’s Juliette’s first play date in a couple of months, the first time I’ve actually been able to be the one to have one for her in God knows how long, and the first time that we haven’t had to hang out in a place where we have to keep our voices down,” she giggles. “Let me just go get my purse.”

“You won’t need it. I’m paying.”

“Oh, no, I can’t ask you to do that—”

“It’s McDonald’s,” I snicker. “All of our food together will probably be less than twenty dollars.”

“Well—You’re not wrong,” she laughs. “But next time, it’s on me.”

“Sure thing,” I lie.

“Janie is a little firecracker,” Mariana giggles as we watch them through the window. Janie is dragging Juliette around, introducing her to all the other kids. “I suspect that they’ll have a whole gang of new friends within the next couple of minutes.”

“Definitely! She makes friends with everyone she meets. I wish I could’ve been like her as a kid.”

“What were you like as a kid?” she tilts her head. “I bet you were cute.”

“Oh, you bet! With my chubby cheeks, crooked teeth, and the bowl cut that I should have let go of well before I turned sixteen, and yet...” I cringe. “I was very cute. And shy. I never spoke to anyone that wasn’t part of my immediate family.”

“I was the opposite. Whenever I had the chance to talk to anyone aside from my family, I was happy to,” she laughs. “Even little me despised my parents, so I would go around asking

random strangers to be my new family. You can only imagine how insufferable I was after watching Matilda! I wouldn't stop begging my art teacher to adopt me."

"Speaking of art..." I wiggle my brows, chuckling when she begins groaning already. "I seem to remember you telling me that you'd show me yours soon, and that was a month ago! When are you gonna let me see it?"

"I thought you were going to forget about that," she grumbles.

"Of course not. You spent three hours lecturing me on the importance of color theory and you expect me to forget that you're an artist? No, I need to see what you've created! I know it's probably amazing."

"Key word; probably, but what if it's awful? What if you hate it?"

"I doubt I will."

"But what if you do?"

"Then I'll jump behind the counter and find tomatoes to throw at you," I send her a look and she rolls her eyes.

"I'll show you a few pieces just because I don't think you'll leave me alone about this until I do, but after that, no more art talk. I can't stand talking about it when I can't find the time to paint anymore."

She stands up and comes around the table, sliding into my side of the booth, and my breath catches in my throat as our arms touch. It feels ridiculous to get so worked up over something so small—the kiss was one thing, but to have goosebumps forming on my skin just because her arm is touching mine is a whole other--and yet, I can feel my heart pounding harder in my chest

the moment her skin comes into contact with mine. I try to ignore it, clearing my throat while focusing my eyes on her phone screen.

She pulls up her gallery, giggling as she has to scroll through hundreds of pictures of Juliette in order to get to even one of her paintings. I'm laughing too until she clicks on the photo, and my eyes land on the most beautiful painting that I've ever seen. It's totally unique—a psychedelic art piece that looks like nothing I've ever seen before.

"You really made this?"

"Yeah," she smiles. "I keep a picture of it handy because it's probably the best painting that I've ever done. I made it when I was sixteen—"

"Sixteen?! You made that at sixteen?!" my eyes practically bulge out of my head as she nods and begins scrolling to find another picture.

"Yeah! The inspiration just hit me suddenly, and I started it at two o'clock in the morning, worked on it throughout the whole day, and didn't finish until five o'clock the next morning...Ooh, I like this one too! This won first prize in a competition that I entered during my senior year of high school!"

This painting is just as gorgeous as the last one, if not even better, and if they're this stunning through a phone screen then I can only imagine how breathtaking they must be in person!

She continues showing me different paintings and each one is even better than the last.

Honestly, I was expecting her to be good, but not this good. This looks like the work of someone who's been painting at a professional level for decades.

"Mariana, why didn't you tell me you were this good?! These are incredible!"

“Are you just saying that?” she smiles. “I’m going to be honest, I always thought I was good but other than the art classes that I took in high school, I’ve never had any formal training, so I don’t know. Maybe they just look good to me because I can’t spot all the things wrong with them?”

“Believe me, there’s nothing wrong with them. They’re incredible, and you don’t need formal training to be an incredible artist...Wow,” I shake my head. “I seriously can’t believe that you—”

“Oh, hold that thought, I’m sorry,” she murmurs once her phone starts to ring. “I have to take this, but I’ll be right back.”

“Okay, take your time.”

My eyes catch on her behind when she stands up, but I pull my eyes away and turn to look at the kids when she walks away, mentally scolding myself for being such a dog. I spot Janie and Juliette right away because they’re just coming down the bright yellow slide together, screaming happily as they hold hands. My heart swells as I watch them. I’m happy they’re getting along so well, and I’m really hoping that they actually will become best friends because hopefully, they’ll be seeing a lot more of each other.

I’m trying not to get too ahead of myself, but the more time I spend with Mariana, the stronger my feelings grow, and I can’t help but wonder if she’s actually the one for me. It’s too early to be having thoughts like that, but I can’t help the way I’ve been feeling since the very beginning, and all I know is that I want to keep spending time with her. I want her to be a part of my life for the foreseeable future.

I push those thoughts to the back of my mind when she comes back, and I frown when I notice that she doesn’t look nearly as happy as she had just a minute ago before she left.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she shakes her head, shooting me a small smile. “It was just a call about work. I’m gonna have a busy day on Monday.”

“Oh,” I frown. I know what a busy day for her means. I don’t know how she does it. She works in between her classes and it’s usually a whole bunch of ripping and running, unless she chooses to do remote work instead, but regardless, she’s always doing something. Dog walking, Uber driving, ghostwriting, data entry, door dashing, tutoring...All just to make barely enough to scrape by. And then she catches up on her studying and tends to Juliette.

She looks exhausted and I know she must be. I wish that I could just offer to pay all her bills for her so that she can focus on studying and resting more, but I can’t exactly do that without raising some suspicion, and I’m fairly sure that she wouldn’t take me up on the offer anyway.

But...

I know what I can do.

“Listen, I hope I’m not overstepping here, but...You can’t go on like this—”

“Elliott, please, I’ve been doing this for four years now, and if I’ve lasted this long then I can keep making it work for just a little bit longer,” she sighs.

I’m guessing I’m not the first one who’s tried to give her this speech.

“Fine, yeah. You can, but you don’t have to.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I know of a steady job that would be a perfect fit for you,” I grin.

“There isn’t a job in this city that I haven’t already applied to, I swear,” she grumbles. “None of them are single-mother friendly. I can’t afford daycare—I can’t even afford to hire a babysitter,

and I can't ask Marisol to watch Juliette even more than she does now. I can try working first shift, but Juliette has a weak immune system and gets sick often. Jobs tend to become less understanding when you have to leave work five or six times a month to pick up your sick daughter."

"Trust me, I understand, and I wouldn't suggest this job if I didn't think that it wasn't a good fit. Just hear me out, please," I send her a pleading look and she sighs, nibbling on her bottom lip as she nods slightly. "It's a job that you'd love. It just so happens that I'm close friends with a higher-up at an animation company just twenty minutes away. I could get you an interview with him as soon as tomorrow! He always works on Sundays," I shrug when she opens her mouth to argue. "It may not be your ideal job—you'd probably have to work as a secretary or an assistant to start out—but you could always work your way up. One day, you could end up on the animation team! They could use someone as talented as you."

"Elliott—"

"The work would be steady, even the starting pay is incredible, and it's flexible. Definitely single-mother friendly. You won't be reprimanded for having to deal with a family emergency! Just think about it, okay? It could cut down on all the running around to different places for work and having to wonder whether or not you'll even make enough to pay all your bills for the month."

"Elliott...Thank you so much for thinking about me. I don't even know what to say..." she cries, and my eyes widen as I immediately reach over to grab her hand.

"It's okay, Mariana. I just want you to be able to take it easy after working so hard for so long. I really think this could help...Are you okay?"

“I am,” she snuffles, shaking her head as she lets out a quiet laugh. “I’m sorry. These are happy tears! I just—I don’t want to get my hopes up, but it would be amazing if this could work out. I spent so much time searching for a job like this for so long and I was never able to find anything and—and working for an animation company?! That would be insane!”

“I really hope it’ll work out for you, and I definitely think that it will. You’re smart, you have a lot of experience, and I don’t think anyone would be able to resist you because you’re just--”

Her lips are pressed against mine before I can even register it. My eyes widen before fluttering shut as I tilt my head to deepen the kiss, groaning when her lips part and her mouth easily welcomes my tongue. Time seems to stop as I focus completely on the feeling of her soft lips pressed against mine. The people chattering around us, the kids screaming, the workers calling out orders...It all fades into the background as my free hand grips her waist, pulling her closer to me, and our lips press together as the kiss becomes a little more heated.

She pulls away before we draw attention to ourselves, and I chase her lips until she giggles and rests a hand on my chest to keep some space between us. “Easy, babe, this is supposed to be a family-friendly environment.”

Babe. I groan as I replay the word in my head a few times. Babe.

I give her one final peck before squeezing her hand and nudging her a little. “Now, I know this is a very bad time, but I’ve seriously got to take a leak.”

The burst of laughter that spills out of her has my heart fluttering in my chest. Again. It’s been doing that a lot lately. I imagine my poor heart will be going through a lot more too. Mariana has it right in the palm of her hand, whether she knows it or not. For my sake, I hope she doesn’t.

I can't rip my eyes away from her even as I walk to the bathroom. It's not until I round the corner and she's no longer in my line of vision that I whip out my cell phone and make a call to my assistant. He picks up after one ring.

"Hey, boss, what can I do for you?"

"Griffin, listen, I need you to do something for me tomorrow. I need you to act as if you're a manager and interview a woman by the name of Mariana Campbell. You're going to give her the job no matter what but be convincing during the interview. You want her to think that you're considering multiple candidates, but ultimately, you'll decide on her. She'll be interviewing for a secretary or assistant position. Whichever one she seems most interested in, give it to her, and tell her she'll be making thirty dollars an hour."

"Thirty dollars an—I don't even make thirty dollars an hour!" he hisses.

"You'll be making thirty-five if you do what I told you to do."

"Oh—Of course, sir, I'll do it! I-I mean, not just because you offered me a raise! Of course, I would do whatever you asked regardless—"

"Griffin," I cut him off quickly. "I can't talk for long. Just use my office to do the interview and make sure you get rid of anything that could give away the fact that it isn't really yours. And do not mention me, or anyone else with the last name Vaughn, understand?"

"I understand, sir."

"Thank you," I hang up before he can respond and push my phone back into my pocket before walking back to our table. I send Clark a discreet nod and I smile when I get back to our table and see Janie and Juliette slumped in the seat across from Mariana and I's. "You two sure look like you had a lot of fun," I chuckle as I ruffle Janie's already mussed-up hair.

“Yeah, but I’m tired now...Can we have that milkshake you promised us?”

“Sure, but I think we should have it to go,” I smirk, pointing at Juliette. She’s leaning over, already half asleep and dangerously close to face-planting the table.

“Do we have to go home after we leave here?” Janie pouts.

“No,” Juliette murmurs. “Don’t go...”

I glance at Mariana, and she smiles, shrugging her shoulders. “No, you don’t have to go home just yet. You can play for a little while longer.”

“Yes!”

“Yay!”

Chapter Two

Elliott's POV

"Isn't this piece just stunning?" my mom grins, pointing toward the fifth painting that she's pointed out in two minutes. "I think I'll place a bid on this one too. It would look good in the family room!"

"That's the third one that you said would look good in the family room, and none of them go well together," my eldest sister, Yana, points out.

"I'll find a way to make it work, and if not, I'll hang them elsewhere," mom waves her off before gasping and pointing toward another one. "Now, that looks like something that should be hanging up in the dining room!" she speed-walks off to get a better look at it, and Yana and I share an amused look.

"Why does she do this every time? She's never kept the same painting hung up for more than a month--" Yana tsks, but her eyes widen as she suddenly catches sight of Janie touching a sculpture with a 'Do Not Touch' sign right next to it. "Janie Erin Sinclair, get away from that right now!" she scolds before running toward her.

"And then, there were two," my best friend, Axel, smirks as he crosses his arms over his chest and stares at the painting across from us. "What in the Hell is this supposed to be?"

"I think it's just a blob," we both laugh.

"Do you think I could get away with painting a big blob and selling it for a hundred thousand dollars?" Axel turns to me, raising a brow.

I side-eye him. “I’ve seen you try and fail to draw stick figures. I really don’t think you could.”

He grunts, shoving his hands in his pockets as we move on to look at the next painting. “So how did your date go?”

“Great, besides she still doesn’t know what I really do...and I’m having Griffin offer her a job...”

“What?! How’d that happen? Why didn’t you tell her? You said you were going to!”

“What was I supposed to say? Hey, funny story, Mariana. I’m not an accountant like I told you I was. I’m actually the CEO of a multi-billion-dollar animation company which used to be my father’s. Same thing, basically, right?” The thought of the look on her face when she realizes I’ve been lying to her actually makes my stomach turn. “Yeah, I’m sure that would go over well...”

“Ya, you’re right. It’s not going to go over well, at all. So good luck with that!”

“Wow, thanks for your support.”

“No worries, I do what I can!” he smacks me on the back and smiles. But now I’m really in my head. And this big blob of a painting we’re staring at like we are convinced it’s somehow going to take on a new shape is not helping.

I really wish that I’d just told her the truth from the very beginning, but I couldn’t.

It’s just that she was so damn beautiful. The moment I set eyes on her, I felt something stirring inside me. Maybe it’s dumb, but I’ve always believed in love at first sight, yet I’ve never experienced it until the moment I saw her. I’ve been with plenty of women before. When I was a teenager just heading off to college, I slept around so much that half the ladies in my class must have stories about being with me. Throughout my twenties, I’ve tried my luck with several relationships, and none of them worked out in the end. I never felt too strongly about the women that I was with, and it was always clear that they were only with me because of my fortune.

Recently, my parents have been setting me up on dates with all sorts of different women, trying to force me to settle down. They think having a long-term relationship would be good for my public image, plus, all three of my siblings are settling down and starting families. Yana is married to a successful businessman—Janie's father. My sister, Rebecca, is married to a successful lawyer, and she just found out that she's pregnant with their first child. My brother, Peter, is married to a socialite named Stephanie, and they're trying for their first child too. I'm the second oldest of my siblings, and yet, I'm the last to find someone to settle down with. My parents aren't happy about that, but what can I do?

I don't want to end up with a gold-digging socialite who only cares about my money, so the women that they keep setting me up on dates with just aren't doing it for me. Honestly, up until three months ago, I thought that maybe I'd end up alone. No matter how many women I was with, I could never seem to find the one that made me feel something more than just short-lived lust.

But then Mariana came along, and I wanted her from the moment I saw her. I thought she was beautiful, yes, but it was more than just that. It was also the fact that she seemed like such a strong-willed and hardworking woman. A woman who cared deeply about her child, and who was doing her best to keep pushing forward to get her degree. A woman that I could relate to, even if we did come from two totally different worlds.

We have so much in common. We both have soured relationships with overbearing parents that won't allow us to live our lives the way we want to live them, for one thing. We both have strong ambitions and no idea what comes next for us, plus a strong fear of the future as a result of that. We share the same sense of humor, the same beliefs, the same ideas. We even share the same passion for the arts. She's an artist and I own an animation company, for Christ's sake! That can't be a coincidence. We couldn't be any more of a perfect match!

The cherry on top of the cake is the fact that she doesn't know who I am. She doesn't know about my billionaire status, which means that she doesn't have any ulterior motives. That night in the library, the two of us sat down and had a real conversation with one another, and it wasn't because she was trying to get in my good graces in hopes of getting her hands on my fortune. It was simply because she saw me as a person and decided to give me a chance solely based on that.

It's something so simple, but it's rare for me.

"It feels good to be seen as another person and not just as some rich CEO you know?" I mumble after a while. "I just want to be able to experience being in a normal relationship for a little while longer before I risk losing everything that the two of us have already invested."

"Hey, I get that," Axel smiles, "But you know, if you're not just screwing around here building a relationship on the foundation of a lie isn't exactly healthy."

"I know. I can't lie to her forever. I just want to hold on to this feeling for a little while longer before casually mentioning that I have a slightly different job than I originally told her I did."

"The sooner the better ."

"I know, you're right," For once Axel is the voice of reason. Maybe the world is turning on its axis.

"Right about what?"

My dad's curt tone of voice has me practically jumping out of my skin. He seems to appear out of thin air, suddenly standing on my other side. I could've sworn he was all the way across the room just a second ago.

"Oh, we were just talking about—"

“The painting,” I cut Axel off quickly, sending him a discreet look. “Axel thinks that it’s a commentary on today’s society. I think he might be right. From the muted and dull colors that the artist chose to the brush strokes they used...The message is loud and clear!”

It’s a pretty good explanation for a painting that I didn’t even spare a glance at. Or so I thought.

“This is the most vibrant piece of artwork I’ve seen since we’ve been here,” dad glances at the painting and then back at me, the permanent scowl on his face only deepening. “I’ve been telling you for years to get those eyes of yours checked. It’s no wonder the animation that the company has been putting out lately has been mediocre. You probably can’t even see what you’re approving to be released...” he grumbles to himself as he stalks off.

“What was the point of him giving me the company if he was just going to complain about every decision I make as CEO? Shouldn’t he have just kept his position if that was going to be the case?” I glower.

“Easy there, Tiger,” Axel chuckles. “Have you mentioned Mariana to your parents?”

“Are you kidding? Um no...,” I scowl before fixing my face into another expression. I can’t stand being compared to my father for any reason, and I’ve been told that I look just like him when I pull that face. Mostly by my mother. “Dad’s never satisfied with anything. He thinks I’m completely incapable of doing anything right, including finding my own girlfriend slash future wife. And what if they decide they want to meet her? If my little white lie doesn’t make her run for the hills, they surely will.”

Axel lets out a sigh as he massages his temples. “Your life is just too stressful for me to deal with. I could really use a massage right about now.”

“Poor you,” I grumble, tugging my phone out of my pocket once it begins to vibrate. “Oh, it’s Griffin. I’m gonna take this.”

“Good, good. I’m going to go flirt with Rebecca until her husband comes along to chase me away.”

I cringe as I answer the phone. “Hello?”

“Hey, boss! Just wanted to let you know that everything went great! Mariana’s officially working at SJV Animation as a secretary—”

“Tenth floor or below, though, right? So, the likelihood of us bumping into each other isn’t great.”

“Of course, sir! She’ll be working on the fourth floor, I gave her an employee card that doesn’t allow her access to any floor above the tenth, and I told her the hours would be flexible, but I made sure to give her some options for times when you would most likely not be here. I was wondering if you’d like me to give everyone a briefing. You know, warn them about not mentioning you when she’s around?”

“Shit...” I didn’t exactly think that far ahead. “Ugh...Maybe that won’t be necessary. Just keep an eye on Mariana, especially during breaks. I doubt any of the staff will be just dying to talk about me, but if it seems as if they’re going to, pull her away from the conversation.”

“Will do!”

“Great. Thanks, Griffin.”

“My pleasure, sir!”

I hang up the phone and turn around, my eyes widening when I see my dad standing just a few feet away eyeing a painting.

I’m starting to wonder if the man can teleport.

“You certainly are jumpy today,” he comments without pulling his eyes away from the painting.

"You keep randomly popping up. I thought you were all the way over there with mom—"

"I was, but I wanted to take another look at this painting that you described as 'muted' and 'dull' despite it being the opposite. Something about it really struck me."

"Oh," I murmur, nodding and attempting to appear interested as I walk toward him. "Yeah, well I-I just thought—"

"You know what I think?" he turns to glare at me. "I think you're hiding something. Is there something going on at the company?"

"Dad, please, it's nothing like that," I huff.

"You aren't screwing up anything are you? Or making decisions that would have the company's stock dropping faster than a speeding bullet?"

"And here I thought I'd be able to stop dealing with these kinds of interrogations just a few months after I took over the company. Yet it's been five years, and still..." I let out a bitter chuckle.

"I told you I'd stop questioning you when I felt like I could trust you to do your damn job correctly without royally fucking up the empire that I built and carried on my own back for decades. Trust me, I didn't know when passing the company down to you that I'd still be concerned enough to ask these kinds of questions five years down the line either. Otherwise, I would have never decided to put the future of my company in your incompetent little hands."

I wanted to blurt out, 'Am I incompetent or are you just an overbearing control freak who likes to pretend that the world will burst into flames if it doesn't revolve around him and if he isn't in charge of it? If you weren't too busy interrogating me all the time, you'd realize that your precious company has never thrived more than it has since you left. Now, instead of being

remembered as an animation studio that prevailed in the nineties and died out just a few decades later, it can be remembered as an animation studio that started out in the nineties and only improved as time passed rather than staying back in the olden days. You're welcome.' But I knew better.

"I don't appreciate you insinuating that I don't know how to run the company that I've been running very efficiently for five years now. But here we are."

"You two knock it off," my mom whisper-yells as she storms over to us. "I could hear you guys fussing from all the way over there. Is now really the time to be getting into this? Again?"

My dad's brows pinch together as he opens his mouth to say something, but I quickly cut him off. "No, it's not. I don't have time for this anyway. I have somewhere else to be soon."

"Where are you going?" she questions with a frustrated huff. "Today was supposed to be a nice family outing—"

"And it was," I force a smile as I lean down to press a kiss to her cheek. "Just as it always is, every other week when we have to have one of these precious family outings," I roll my eyes.

"But I have something important to do later, so I'm leaving now. See you later."

I ignore the sound of her calling after me and send Axel a wave as I pass by him, my disgusted-looking sister, and her angry-looking husband. My exit couldn't be timed more perfectly.

Mariana's POV

“—And it was so intimidating because I swear, I've never been inside a building that big before in my entire life! Your friend was super nice, and he was very impressed with my resume, and—Oh my God, Elliott, his office was so cool! It was huge! And it was on the twentieth floor, so the view was incredible—You know, when you told me you were friends with a higher-up, I didn't know you meant that he was that high up!”

“Well, I am quite likable if you haven't noticed,” Elliott smiles in that sexy way he does that makes me want to tear his clothes off.

I circle back to the conversation so I would stop envisioning him naked. “Your friend told me that he's the CEO of the company. You never mentioned that before.” He's been driving for thirty minutes now, and we've passed most of the fancy restaurants that I know about and the movie theaters too. I hate to say it, but aside from dinner and a movie, I don't have any idea where someone would even go on a date. I try not to think too hard about just how out of the loop I am for only being twenty-four.

“Did you like him?”

“Yeah! He was nice, but he was a bit braggy. I could tell that he was a bit full of himself.”

“Really?” Elliott's brow twitches.

“Yeah! And said he owns four mansions and a farm, apparently. ” I murmur.

“You know what? We're almost there,” Elliott changes the subject, sending me a tight-lipped smile.

“You seem a little tense. Are you okay?”

“Totally!” he says quickly before clearing his throat as he makes a sharp turn. I cling to my seat and send him a confused look when we start going down a seemingly random dirt road.

“Well, this went from sweet to scary in a second. You’re not planning to kill me, are you?”

“I’m not planning to kill you,” he chuckles. “I planned something really special, and since it’s a nice day out, I thought it’d be perfect if we could spend the evening doing what I have planned outside.”

“Mhm,” I send him a skeptical look and he scoffs.

“Do I look like the kind of guy who could kill someone?”

“You’re not exactly a scrawny little weakling, and even those have to be watched out for. But if you’re going to do it, I’d rather you kill me now.”

I feel better when we end up parking near a beautiful clearing a few minutes later, but I’m right back to feeling skeptical when he hands me a blindfold to put on. “I have to get a few things out of the trunk.”

I put the blindfold on while I hear him rummaging around in the trunk. The anticipation is almost overwhelming as the minutes tick by with me listening to him running back and forth, grabbing stuff before going off somewhere to set it up. Maybe it’s a picnic? Maybe he’s actually taken me somewhere to skinny dip? But I doubt he’d have to set anything up for that...

I don’t have to keep guessing for long. He finally comes around to open my car door and help me out. He carefully guides me about five steps forward before we come to a sudden stop.

“Fuck it,” I hear him mutter under his breath before he picks me up bridal style, and I let out a surprised screech.

“Elliott! Put me down before we both hit the ground! I’m too heavy for you to be—” My words drift off as he swoops me up. I can feel the bulge of his muscles and his cologne is intoxicating. Great, I’m back to envisioning him naked again. Oddly enough this feels a little erotic.

A minute later, I’m snapped out of my thoughts as he gently places me on my feet again and tugs at my blindfold. “Okay, I really hope you like it, but this is supposed to be all about you, so if you don’t like it then that’s totally fine and we can go somewhere else and do something else instead,” he rambles. “Really, it’s not going to hurt my feelings or anything if you don’t want to stay, so just let me know and—”

“Oh my God,” I gasp after my eyes adjust to the light. My mouth hangs open as I stare at the scene in front of us. There is a huge blanket spread over the grass, a couple of canvases, and more paint and art supplies than one would be able to find inside a Michael’s or a Joann’s, or both combined. The sight of it has tears forming in my eyes.

I haven’t even been within the same vicinity of this number of supplies in years. I haven’t had the time to paint a single thing in years. And the fact that Elliott took the time to set something like this up for me means the world to me.

“This is...I can’t believe you did this,” I murmur. “This is perfect. Thank you so much!”

For once, it’s his turn to become a flustered mess. He sends me a sheepish smile as he shrugs his shoulder and avoids looking into my eyes. “It’s—I mean, it’s no problem, I just—I...It’s the one thing that I knew you’d probably love.”

“You were so right. I do love it. I do,” he lets out a surprised noise when I fling myself into him, giving him a tight hug, but he reciprocates it immediately and pulls me even closer with a fond chuckle.

"I'm glad you do. We should get started, huh? This isn't the only thing that I have planned for us, but I made sure we'd have at least a few hours to enjoy painting before we have to pack it up."

"Yeah, of course," I smile, pulling away from him in favor of running over to plop down on the blanket. "This is so exciting! I don't even know what to do...I've had so many ideas for things that I wanted to paint but didn't have time to. I don't know which one to tackle first!"

"Well, the good thing is that you'll hopefully have a lot more free time to work on your art now that you got that job! So, don't feel like you have to do it all today, okay?"

"Oh, you're right!" I gasp. "I can know for sure that I'll have my weekends off now, and sometimes I even get three-day weekends! I have more time for studying and to spend with Juliette and now I have a steady routine and--Ooh, and I get health benefits and—Elliott, you're never going to believe how much they're paying me!"

"How much are they paying you, baby?"

"Thirty dollars an hour! Is that not insane?!"

"It is insane," he smiles. "That's great, Mariana, really...Is it enough, do you think? I mean...You don't need more, do you? Is thirty an hour enough to cover all your bills or—"

"It's more than enough!" I exclaim. "My bills will be paid on time and in full, for sure, and it leaves me a little wiggle room. I can add to my savings or pay my sister for helping me out with Juliette or—or I could buy Juliette, like, so many toys...Holy shit, she's going to have a good Christmas this year! I'm sorry, I'm rambling, but I'm just so excited!"

"Don't apologize. I like seeing you like this. You deserve to be stress-free, always."

I smile, reaching over to squeeze his hand. "Thank you, really. I owe you big time for telling me about this job."

“You don’t owe me anything...But if you do want to pay me back for it, I’ll collect my payment in the form of a kiss.”

“Geez, you’re so corny,” I roll my eyes, but I lean in to give him a kiss anyway. It’s gentle and sweet at first, and it’s only meant to be a short peck, but he rests his hand on the back of my neck to keep me in place and presses his lips more firmly against mine.

My heart races inside my chest as I melt into the kiss. It’s been a long time since I’ve kissed a man like this, and I don’t remember it ever feeling this good. This right. Our lips slot together perfectly.

Heat builds in the pit of my stomach as the kiss becomes more intense. His lips press against mine even harder, and the addictive feeling of his tongue sliding over mine has my cunt throbbing as my wetness leaks into my panties.

The feeling is amazing as is, but I crave more of it. Having his hand on the back of my neck isn’t enough, I need more of his skin on mine. Having his mouth on mine isn’t enough, I need even more of him. I need him even closer to me.

I’m about two seconds away from crawling into his lap when he finally pulls away, and the whine that forces its way out of my throat is enough to snap me back into reality. My cheeks start to burn as he stares at me, his expression equal parts amused and surprised.

“Well—”

“Not a word,” I warn him. “Shouldn’t we be painting by now?”

He smirks, staring at me with a dark look in his eyes for a few moments before he finally nods. “I guess we should.”

"I don't understand how you do it," Elliott looks perplexed and sounds amazed as he gawks at my half-finished painting. I laugh, shaking my head at his dramatics. "I would never think to draw something like that...Look at how plain mine is compared to yours."

"It's not plain, it's beautiful! I love cats!"

He's painting a beautiful den full of cats, some on cat trees, some chasing one another around, some playing with cat toys, some sleeping in the sunlight that shines through the large window in the spacious den...It's a gorgeous picture, although I may be a little biased because any painting that includes cats is automatically destined to have my whole heart.

My painting is going to be a 3D painting of people in a beautiful field of flowers up in space.

"I do too, but I think my painting is still boring compared to yours. How did you get into making this kind of art anyway? Is there an artist that inspired you?"

"Not really," I shrug. "I think I started making paintings like this because it was like...My coping mechanism? My release? My parents were neat freaks and not to mention perfectionists. I never felt like I could make any mistakes around them. I always felt like I had to be the most well-put-together and perfect version of myself whenever I was with them. So, basically, the same way you'd present yourself to strangers. With family, you're supposed to be able to let loose, relax, and not worry so much about what they think of you. With strangers, of course, you

do worry about what they think of you and so you put on a mask and try to pretend that you have all your shit together because you want to make a good impression...Well, it's the same way with my parents."

"Oof," he huffs. "It's exhausting when you have to put that mask on all the time, even in what's supposed to be the comfort of your own home."

"It really is. So, I think I started making art like this because it's the one place where I felt like I could truly express the mess that was my inner self. I didn't need to worry about making my paintings neat and perfectly presentable and well put together because they were mine, for my eyes only—at least for a while. Just colors and shapes and nonsensical scenarios painted on a canvas that didn't really matter. Painting messy, trippy art was very therapeutic for me."

"That makes perfect sense. I'm glad you were able to find an outlet—and I'm glad you have the time to get back to it now. You just seem so passionate about your art and I'm happy that you can start working on it again."

"I am too," I grin. "I definitely need this back. Just...A little time to get my feelings out on the canvas. The last couple of years have been hellish with work and college and everything, so I've needed this."

"Hey, you're almost done with college," he smiles. "Just a while longer and you'll be finished. You'll have even more free time on your hands! You must be so excited."

"Mm," I suck in a breath through my teeth, shrugging. "Yeah, I guess. It's like a huge relief but also feels like even more weight being put on my shoulders at the same time. Do you think that's weird?"

"I don't know...Why does it feel like more weight is being put on your shoulders? I'd think it'd be the opposite."

"I thought so too but now it's starting to feel real. I'll be graduating from college soon and then I'll no longer be a hardworking college student working toward her degree. Instead, I'll be...What, exactly?" I sigh. "I don't know. I've been anxious about the future. I'm good for now with the new job you helped me get, but I can't be a secretary forever. Shouldn't I be a bit more ambitious?"

"What do you want to do then? Is there a specific career that you're planning to go after?"

"That's the problem. I don't know...My only goals have always been to make sure that I could get my degree so that my parents wouldn't be even more disappointed in me than they already are and to achieve something that could make Juliette proud of me too. And I know that I want to create a better life for us, but I'm not even sure what that looks like. I've been so busy for the last couple of years, and it's just been one thing after another, so I've been going, going, going, and I haven't had the time to sit and think about what I'm actually going to do with my life. I know for a fact that I don't want a career in business, and definitely not accounting, but I'll most likely have to settle for one or the other because that's what I got my degree in. And honestly, the thought scares me because I don't want to be miserable all throughout the rest of my working life, but I most definitely will be if I start a career in either of those fields."

"I think you're missing the obvious option here," he chuckles. "Why won't you consider a career in art? I mean, I understand if you don't want to profit off your passion, but—"

"Elliott, please," I laugh. "Be realistic."

"I am! You're way more talented than you give yourself credit for. I mean, look at what you just made. In less than an hour, at that," he points at my painting and I shrug.

"I'm not saying it's bad, but I don't think it's good enough for me to become some famous artist or something."

“I disagree, but that aside, I think you’re looking at it the wrong way. You don’t have to be the kind of artist who has her paintings displayed in museums and sells them for thousands of dollars. Don’t get me wrong, I think you could, but if that seems like an unobtainable goal to you, then consider taking another route. You could share and sell your artwork online or use social media to make money. You could give lessons on how to make art like yours or something. I’m sure people would love it.”

“I don’t know...I never thought of it like that,” I murmur.

“There is a whole plethora of options that you could consider! But also...You happen to be working at a massive animation studio right now. You may just be a secretary for now, but I have a feeling that you could become an animator if you wanted to. Maybe you just have to take a chance and show your art to the right people. I’m sure the higher-ups would be amazed by it and offer you a position.”

“Your optimism is contagious,” I giggle. “Maybe one day I’ll make a fool of myself by trying, but it’s probably best if I don’t for the time being. I don’t want to be the annoying new girl who immediately starts bugging people about looking at my artwork. Seems obnoxious.”

“Give it a while, then try,” he agrees. “I’m sure you’ll succeed.”

“Thank you, Elliott. Aside from my sister—and Juliette, of course--I think you may be the only person who’s shown me this much support in my entire life. My parents never encouraged me to take chances or believe in myself...I’m sorry to keep complaining about them. I think my relationship with them has just been weighing on me pretty heavily lately,” I let out an embarrassed chuckle and he shakes his head quickly.

"No, you never have to apologize to me for that. I can't stress enough how much I understand. It hurts to not have a good relationship with the people that are supposed to love you most in the world."

I frown. "I think I've been talking about my own problems way too much. What about you? What's happening with you and your family?"

"Same old, same old," he lets out a bitter chuckle. "Don't get me wrong, I love them, and aside from my dad, I have a decent relationship with them all. My siblings have all been there for me when I needed them most. My mom is very loving, and she tries her best to keep the peace between me and my dad...My dad is a cold, heartless, vindictive man who'll never be satisfied no matter what I do...You know he keeps trying to find someone for me to settle down with? He and my mom both are trying to force me into a relationship with one of the women that they keep picking out for me."

"Yikes. I don't think I would be able to handle that kind of meddling. I really hate things like that. Who are they to tell you who to be with?"

"Exactly! It's just that they're old fashioned and they think I need to settle down with someone since I'm already close to thirty. They don't care anything about the natural progression of things. They don't care if I'm truly in love or happy in whatever relationship they're trying to force on me at the time. It's all about image to them, and I can't understand how they can be so superficial. I'm convinced that their willingness to marry someone you don't truly love is the whole reason why my entire family's relationships feel superficial. I love my siblings and they love me, but even with them, it's like...I never felt like there was unconditional love or a close, unbreakable bond between us. It just feels like we all happened to be born into the same family so now we're stuck together. I feel bad for feeling that way, but it's the way I've always felt, and I can't help it."

“You don’t have to feel bad,” I tell him softly. “If that’s how you feel then it just is, and it’s valid. Unfortunately, some families are just like that. Some are close-knit with genuine bonds, and others are just not that close no matter how hard they may try to be. I don’t understand why it has to be like that, but it is, and you’re not wrong for acknowledging that that’s the way your family is.”

“Yeah,” he sighs. “Well, what I don’t think my parents realize is that I want to settle down just as much as they want me to. My whole life, I’ve wanted the chance to create my own family. The perfect one. I mean—I know no family is actually perfect, but I want mine to be as close as it gets. I want the kind of family that I never had. The kind that can talk to each other about any and everything without fear of judgment. The kind that loves each other unconditionally, and that can spend time together all the time because they want to, not out of what feels like an obligation. The kind that can talk openly about their problems and feelings and that can have small talk without it feeling awkward. And I want to be the good father that I never got to have. I want to get married to the woman I genuinely love and become the perfect husband and father. These are simple things, but it feels impossible to obtain them right now. But one day...I really want to one day. I hope I do.”

“I...I want that too,” I whisper, clearing my throat when he turns to look at me. “For you, I mean. I want—I hope you...Yeah,” I nod.

His lips finally stretch into a smile again, and I’m relieved as the previously pained expression is wiped off his face and replaced by the usual brightness that I’ve become accustomed to. The light that I look forward to seeing in his eyes is there again. It has me smiling as well.

“I’ve never gotten to say any of that out loud before. It feels good to not have to walk around with all that built up inside me anymore...I always just wanted to find someone who would listen to me, and truly hear me. You’re the first person who’s really given me that. Thank you.”

I bite my lip in an attempt to hide my smile, shrugging. “No need to thank me. I love...Getting to talk like this. And everything...”

He huffs out a soft chuckle. “I love that too, Mariana.”

A giggle bursts out of me right as I’m attempting to swallow the last of my wine, and Elliott laughs as some of it spills over my chin. I laugh too, only slightly embarrassed as I wipe it off with my napkin. “You made me do that,” I accuse, and he shakes his head.

“I didn’t say anything!”

“I was thinking about what you said earlier! About the dog that attacked you when you were little—“ I wheeze, and he huffs.

“Do you know how cruel a person you have to be to laugh at a man’s most traumatic memory like that?”

“I wish my most traumatic memory was getting ‘attacked’ by a poodle!”

“Poodles can be a lot more vicious than people give them credit for,” he hisses. “I’m telling you, that dog was from Hell! I thought I was going to die that day!”

“Well, I’m so happy that you were able to survive. What a shame it would be if you hadn’t lived to tell the tale of the ‘evil’ little poodle that attacked you,” I snort. The two of us burst into laughter again for the fifth time in the last two minutes—and at this point, I’m not sure whether it’s because the conversation is actually funny or if it’s because we’re both a little tipsy after sharing a bottle—or three—of wine. Either way, it feels great. I haven’t laughed this hard in God knows how long.

“Tonight has been so perfect,” I murmur once our laughter finally dies down again. “This is definitely the best date that I’ve ever been on.”

“From what you’ve told me, it doesn’t seem like I’ve had much competition, but I’ll take it. I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself so much, baby.”

I grin, narrowing my eyes at him. “I’m just curious about something. Tonight went a little too perfectly, don’t you think?”

“What do you mean?” he blinks, sending me an innocent look.

I purse my lips, leaning back in my seat as I cross my arms over my chest.

Marisol called just as the two of us had been heading back to the car after finishing our paintings. Apparently, Juliette was just dying to spend the night with her, so the two of them had dropped by my apartment to pick up a few things for her, and conveniently, Marisol had decided to bring over some groceries that she’d picked up. She’d apparently been planning to cook a special dinner for her and Daniel tonight, but since Juliette was sleeping over, they decided to go out to eat instead.

So, all the ingredients for steak and chicken alfredo, and a few big bottles of wine had been left in my apartment, just waiting for me when I got back—along with a fancy tablecloth and pretty

flowers in vases and decorative candles to go on the table too. And Elliott had volunteered to cook for me since all the food was here anyway.

What a funny little coincidence.

“Did you put my sister up to this?”

“Up to what?”

“Elliott—”

“Okay, fine, I’ll admit that this all didn’t happen by random chance, but it wasn’t my idea!”

“So, Marisol put you up to this?”

“No,” he chuckles. “It was Juliette.”

“Juliette?” I gawk.

“Yesterday, when Janie was telling you about every dream that she could remember having throughout the entirety of her life, Juliette was asking me if one day the two of them could have a sleepover. I told her that I was sure that Janie would love to, but that she’d have to ask you first. And then she asked when you and I were going to have our sleepover, and I asked what she meant by that. So then, she proceeded to explain that because we seemed to be good friends, we needed to have a sleepover soon because that’s what best friends do. And then she told me that she thought you liked me as even more of a best friend,” he smirks. “But don’t tell her I told you she said that because she asked me not to. Anyway, she said that because you seemed to like me even more than best friends do, we should definitely have a sleepover soon. It got the wheels turning in my head so...Yeah, I might have called your sister when I got home to ask for some help in making this happen. But it technically wasn’t my idea, it was Juliette’s! And it was a good one.”

“And what gave you the impression that I’d be interested in having a sleepover with you?” I smirk, and he chokes on the last of his wine just as I had earlier. I send him a smug look as he huffs out a laugh.

“Maybe the way you’ve been eye fucking me at every given opportunity?”

I pause for a moment before letting out a quiet giggle. “Yeah, there’s no denying that, but can you blame me? You’re hot.”

“Look who’s talking. Do you have any idea how hard it is for me to keep my hands off you when you’re walking around in those skin-tight jeans and cute little sundresses of yours?”

“It can’t be too hard. Unfortunately for me, you’ve done a very good job of keeping your hands to yourself.”

He stands up, holding a hand out for me to take as he stares at me with lust swirling in his eyes. “We can change that,” he murmurs seriously.

I raise my brows and wrap my arms around his neck.

Instead of responding, I stand on my tippy toes to give him a kiss.

It’s a slow, yet frenzied kiss that has my head spinning. Maybe it’s just me—I hope it’s not just me who feels this way—but the second our lips collide; my heart starts pounding so loud that I have to wonder if he can hear it too. I’ve already become used to the feeling of his tongue tangling with mine and I didn’t realize how badly I’d been craving it up until now. But now that I have it, it feels right. The feeling of his tongue swirling around mine, him breathing into my mouth, the sound of his lips smacking against mine—it all feels right.

The way he kisses me as if it's the last time that he'll ever get to has me feeling weak in the knees. Maybe that's why the two of us start stumbling. Out of the kitchen and into the living room. Out of the living room and into the hallway. Out of the hallway and into my bedroom.

We fall onto my bed unceremoniously and my heart begins to race even faster. How's that possible? I'm so anxious. But good anxious. Is this really about to happen? Should this be happening? I don't know. I want it to happen.

Elliott pulls away from me—five or six times, and ends up slotting his lips against mine again a second later each and every time, except for the final one when he's finally able to hold himself back for long enough to ask, "Is this okay?"

"I don't know—"

"Do you want—"

"Yes, I want it!"

He chuckles, holding my face in both his hands and pressing kisses all over it. Getting a simple kiss on the forehead from him should not be doing things to me, but it is. My God, I want him.

His smile is so gorgeous, and his eye-smile is just beautiful, and his tan skin is still shiny from when he was sweating due to the heat in the kitchen earlier. And he can cook. Like a chef in a five-star restaurant.

I could not want this man any more than I do right now.

"Are you sure? You know we don't have to do this right now, right? I want you so fucking bad, Mariana, but we can wait if you—"

And he asks what I want and checks in on how I'm feeling. I guess I was wrong. I could want him even more. I do.

“Elliott, please take my panties off before I soak through them!” His eyes seem to darken at the sound of the words, so I keep talking. “I want you, I want this—now, please.”

“Fuck,” he curses under his breath before taking his shirt off. “Condom?”

“There,” I point in the general direction of my nightstand for all of two seconds before ripping my own shirt off as well.

He’s simultaneously fumbling with the zipper on his pants and reaching over to pull my drawer open and pluck out a condom as I struggle to get my bra off and squirm around clumsily until I’ve managed to get my shorts off too. Our clothes end up in a pile on the floor beside the bed in no time, and he rips the condom wrapper off with his teeth before leaning forward to kiss me while he puts it on.

His nose knocks against mine and then it’s our teeth knocking together as his free hand slides down my waist, over my stomach, then my breasts. I barely know what to do with my own hands. I’m already overwhelmed with the feeling of him touching me in a way that I haven’t been touched in a very long time, and I’m a little intimidated by how naturally his hand explores my body without any sort of hesitation as if he’s done this a million times before. But then, when I finally do settle for resting one of my hands on the nape of his neck and the other on his back when he lays down between my legs, I find that it comes naturally to me too.

His skin is smooth as I run my fingers along it, his shoulders are broad, and his back is muscular. His hands are big too, and warm. I gasp against his lips when one of them travels between my legs, cupping me tightly. The thumb of his other hand rubs circles against my hip bone while two of his fingers spread me apart.

My whole body tenses up when he dips a finger between my folds.

“Mariana,” he murmurs against my lips before pulling away from our kiss completely. His eyes are blown as he stares down at me and I’m sure mine look the same. “Have you touched yourself recently?” he whispers.

“What?” if my eyes weren’t wide before, they are now.

“When’s the last time you had something inside?”

“I—|—”

“Just so I know how much prep you need, that’s all,” he chuckles, and I gasp when he pinches my clit before sliding his finger down to tap against my hole. “Can you take my finger, baby?”

“I would like to take much more than that,” I grumble under my breath.

He smirks. “Be patient. We’ve got all night. Now answer my question. I need you to be clear with me.”

“I’ve...Fingered myself a couple of times. Recently.”

“How recently?”

I nibble on my bottom lip for a moment. “Last night...”

“Hm,” he dips his finger inside, grinning as I take him inside easily, and I gasp as I feel another of his fingers coming up to join it. He pushes them in slowly, crooking them slightly before pulling them out and sinking back in again. My back arches slightly and it takes all my strength not to start moaning already. “Last night, huh? And what could have possibly had you so riled up that you had to fingerfuck yourself last night?”

“Elliott!” it was supposed to come out sounding more chiding, or like a firm warning. Instead, it came out as a desperate whine at best. Elliott looks even smugger as he leans down to give me a brief kiss.

“It’s only two fingers, Mariana, why don’t you hold out on screaming my name until after I’ve gotten my dick inside you?” he bites my bottom lip the moment it seems as if I’m about to start fussing again, and amusement twinkles in his eyes as mine widen even more than before. “We didn’t leave until eight o’clock last night, and aren’t you usually in bed, asleep, by ten at the latest? Why do I get the feeling you rushed through your nighttime routine and hopped into bed the second you could in order to touch yourself while thinking about...What? Our moment in the kitchen? Or was it something else?”

He can’t actually be expecting an answer. Not when his fingers are pounding into me much faster than before, and harder. Not while his other hand is sliding up my chest and resting over my neck. My eyes flutter shut when he squeezes just slightly, just for a moment.

“I-I don’t think I really need any prep,” I stammer instead. “I can take you, I—if you want to go ahead and...”

“And what?” I glare at him, and he raises a brow. “And what?” he repeats.

“Fuck me,” I whisper. “Please.”

“Just yesterday you were blushing like a shy little schoolgirl at the thought of kissing me, and now you’re begging me to fuck you?”

“I’d hardly count that as begging,” I huff.

“You’re right, you could do better than that.”

“I am not about to beg—” he squeezes my throat again right around the same time that he plunges his fingers back inside, and the tips of them brush right against my G-spot, causing me to jolt. He does it again, and again, and again, until I’m panting and tensing up and struggling to keep my legs from clamping around him and squeezing him to death. And then he stops and removes his fingers without any warning.

“Ask again,” he orders sternly. “I want to hear it again.”

I huff. “Please, fuck me.”

“Again.”

“Elliott—”

“If you want it, you’ll ask again. Ask again, Mariana.”

“Please...Fuck me.”

“Again.”

“Elliott, please fuck me. I—I need you inside me so bad! Please just fuck me already!”

“I could really get used to hearing that,” he mumbles as he lines himself up with my entrance. I gasp when I feel the tip of his cock nudging up against me. “I’m sure I’ll get to,” he smirks.

I barely register the words, clinging to his arms and wrapping my legs around his waist as he pushes himself in slowly. I can feel every inch of his girth stretching me out as he slides in, and he’s careful not to go too fast but the feeling is still so intense. He pulls me in for another kiss, this one sloppier than the last as I pant into his mouth and his tongue slides over my lips. When he’s managed to bottom out inside of me, he goes still, giving me a little time to adjust to his impressive size. I’m already trembling. The feeling of his length tucked between my inner walls and nestled deep inside me is overwhelming in the best way.

He groans after a minute when I clench around him as he pulls his hips back before snapping them forward again. An exploratory thrust that has me mewling into his mouth and squeezing him tighter with my legs.

“You okay?” he breathes, his voice strained as he grinds against me.

“Mhm,” I’m more than okay. My whole body feels as if it’s on fire and I’m so wet that I can feel myself leaking around his length and dirtying the sheets. Jolts of electricity seem to be coursing through my body, causing me to shudder every other second. He’s barely even moved, but my cunt is tingling and throbbing so ferociously that it hurts. I need more. “Move. You can move now,” I croak out.

I’m thankful when he doesn’t tease me, and instead, begins to move as I’d asked. He grinds against me a few more times, his hips connected with mine and the tip of his cock poking against my G-spot, but soon, he’s grabbing my hips and holding them down before he begins to thrust in and out of me.

His thrusts are slow and shallow, but they have me covering my mouth in order to muffle my moans.

Elliott grabs my wrist and yanks it down to rest at my side before gripping my hip again. “No, let me hear you,” he murmurs. “I wanna hear how pretty you sound.”

The whimper I let out is embarrassing enough to have me putting my hand right back over my mouth again just a second later, but I remove it when he sends me a hard look.

“You feel so fucking good,” he whispers, and my body reacts to his words by clenching around him even harder. He groans, leaning down to rest his face in the crook of my neck. His whole body is on top of mine, our sweat-slicked skin sticking together as I’m caged in between his

body and the bed. In this position, he's able to fuck into me impossibly deep, and all I can do is squirm underneath him, simultaneously trying to get away from him and get closer.

"Shit, I—Fuck," I give up on forming the proper words and allow my eyes to roll back when he grips my hips even tighter and begins to fuck me even harder. His thrusts are forceful enough to have the headboard banging into the wall and the bed squeaking with every move. That mixed with the sound of me moaning and him groaning in my ear, and the sound of skin slapping against skin and his cock pounding into my wet hole—it's so vulgar, but somehow, that brings me even closer to the edge.

He begins to mouth at my neck, his tongue poking out to lick long strips up the exposed skin before he finds a spot near my collarbone and presses a kiss there. The soft, gentle peck is a sharp contrast to the harsh nip he gives the same spot a second later.

I barely even realize that it's me who's letting out that whiny, high-pitched moan that fills the room a second later, but even when it does register, I'm past the point of being capable of feeling embarrassed. Elliott is sucking on the spot he just bit hard enough to draw blood and squeezing my hips hard enough to leave bruises and fucking me hard enough to make it hurt. I can only focus on the flames that have been ignited in the pit of my stomach, and the way it feels as if my impending orgasm is being sucked out of me, getting closer and closer to the forefront as the seconds pass.

"Elliott," I cry out. "I don't—I'm not gonna last long, I-I need to cum, please!"

"I want you to," he licks over the spot that he'd previously been sucking, clearly satisfied with his work as he kisses his way up my neck again. His lips press a kiss to my jawline, close to my ear, and my eyes flutter shut, my whole body jerking and spasming when he bites it just as he had done to the last spot. "Let go, Mariana. I want you to let yourself come. Make an even bigger mess all over my cock. Go on, baby. Cum."

I don't know what it is that pushes me over the edge. I don't know if it's the words, the deep-as-the-ocean voice, or the dark chuckle that follows after he's finished speaking. I don't know if it's the way he begins to suck on my neck again, or the way one of his hands comes up to squeeze my breast, his fingers pinching and tugging on my nipples a moment later. Maybe it's none of that. Maybe it's the way he begins to snap his hips even faster—even harder—or maybe it's simply the fact that this is a completely different side of the easy-going, sweetheart of a man that I've gotten used to spending time with.

But regardless, my body is following his command just a few seconds later, drawing up taut as my hips buck up and my back arches off the bed. Only for a second before he's holding me down again, fucking me through my orgasm as I claw at his back and let out an incomprehensible string of curses. His movements don't halt for even a second. Even as I'm thrashing around beneath him and biting down on his shoulder and tugging too harshly at his hair. Even as my body refuses to stop convulsing and my head is spinning and I'm floating ten feet in the air, seeing nothing but stars and sparks and fog and haze.

I don't realize I'm crying until he lifts his head to look at me and then immediately leans down to kiss my tears away.

"That's okay," he whispers, slowing down just slightly. "You're okay. You're okay, right?"

"M'okay!" more than okay. I've never felt this much pleasure in my entire life.

"I'm—shit, I'm close too," he grunts, and I make a conscious effort to squeeze him as tight as I can. I haven't even ridden my high out all the way and I'm feeling so sensitive after having the most intense orgasm of my life, but I suddenly don't feel nearly as satisfied as I had just a few seconds before. Instead, now, I feel as if I need him to reach his climax too. He'd made me feel so good and now I want him to feel good too.

“Almost there?” I pant as I stare up at him with half-lidded eyes. “Are you gonna cum for me too? I want you to. Fuck me harder, Elliott. Use me,” I don’t even know where the words come from, but they tumble out of my mouth before I can stop them, and they seem to be all the encouragement that Elliott needs because he growls and digs his fingernails into my breast as he goes even harder.

“So good,” he murmurs, strained. His hair hangs in his face, damp with sweat which drips off his brow and onto me. I can barely believe my eyes as I look up at him, wondering how the hell I managed to get a man that looks this good. My eyes trail his body, catching first on his muscular arms, then on his hard chest, then his abs. I’m starting to wonder whether the pleasure I’m experiencing is still from my previous orgasm or if I’m building up to another one already.

“You look so fucking good. You feel so fucking good. Taking me so well,” his hips stutter and he throws his head back. I let out another loud moan when his hand moves to grip my thigh, and then slides down to press against my cunt. His thumb begins to rub circles over my clit and I start to cum again, immediately.

The feeling of me gripping him so tightly must send him over the edge too. He curses, leaning down to rest his head on my shoulder as he continues to fuck into my heat with sporadic thrusts, his warm breath hitting my neck until he pulls his head up, pressing our mouths together.

I can barely kiss him back, or breathe, or think. All I can do is moan and whimper and squeeze my eyes shut as I wait for my head to stop spinning again.

I’m convinced that I blacked out for a minute because somehow, suddenly, he’s pulled out of me and collapsed beside me, and I’m cradled in his arms and still trying to catch my breath while he whispers in my ear.

I can't comprehend the words at first, but soon, I can make out the compliments and praises and the reassurances that I didn't even know I needed in the first place. 'You're so good. You were so good. So perfect, Mariana. Made me feel so good.'

There's a warm, fuzzy feeling that settles in my stomach as I listen to him. The same persistent feeling of butterflies fluttering inside me too. I cling to him, letting out a contented sigh as I continue to listen to him talk.

A few minutes later, when I have enough strength to lift my head, I give him a kiss and giggle as I push myself even closer to him. "That was amazing!"

"You're telling me," he groans, massaging my side. "You really liked everything? I wasn't too rough? Nothing was too much?"

"No," I smile. "It was perfect. Best sex of my life."

He chuckles. "Unsurprisingly. I'm incredible at everything I do."

I roll my eyes. "Including me, I guess."

He snorts, but he doesn't respond aside from that as he slowly maneuvers himself off the bed.

My heart begins to race in my chest and I'm not proud of the panicked feeling that starts to take over me. "W-Where are you going?"

"Nowhere, baby," he reassures quickly, stroking my cheek. "I'm just gonna run us a bath. Okay?"

"Oh," I nod, blushing. "Okay."

"I wouldn't just leave you after having sex, you know," he uses the gentle tone of voice that never fails to make me feel calm and confident that everything will be okay. I melt into the mattress, nodding my head.

“I know.”

He doesn't seem convinced, probably because he's learned how to figure out when I'm lying.

“I really like you,” he murmurs. “And I want...I want us to have a lot more nights like tonight, okay? Not just the sex. The date too. I want to take you out as often as you'll allow me, and I promise, I'll make every date special. I know you don't have much free time on your hands, but I promise, Mariana, I'll be worth your time. I will.”

“I—” I can't wipe the goofy smile off my face no matter how hard I try. “I like you too. And I'll be worth your time too...And I'll be looking forward to those dates, but I don't need anything extra special every time. I just want to spend time with you.”

He smiles, leaning down to give me a soft kiss. His lips linger on mine for just a few seconds before he pulls away and starts to stroke my cheek again. I've never had a man look at me with such a gentle and tender gaze before. It's comforting and flattering, and maybe a little scary to be looked at like that, but I love it.

“Then that's what we'll do. We'll spend time together. I'll give you everything you want, Mariana. I promise.”

“In that case...I do want that bath you offered,” I snicker. “You kind of made a mess of me, after all.”

He smirks. “Should I do it again before we go for our bath?”

I want to turn him down but my cunt clenches in interest and I hesitate.

“It wouldn't kill us to have one more round,” I tell him.

Chapter Three

Elliott's POV

Two months later

"Way to be discreet," Axel chuckles, clapping me on the back. I nearly jump out of my skin and hurry to shove my phone into my pocket until I realize that it's just him. I let out a breath of relief when I look around and see that the rest of my family is still out in the family room, engaged in a heated debate about God knows what. I wasn't in the mood to sit around and listen to them argue over nonsense, so I'd excused myself and headed to the dining room instead. That was over thirty minutes ago, and I hadn't looked up from my phone ever since.

"What are you talking about?" I clear my throat as I slowly take my phone out again. "I'm not trying to be discreet about anything. I'm not doing anything," my words sound unconvincing even to my own ears, but I simply shrug my shoulders and play innocent when he raises a brow at me.

"Judging by the way you were smiling down at that phone like a schoolboy with a crush, I'm guessing you were texting your future wifey," he teases, making kissy faces at me.

"Am I really that obvious?"

"I don't know how you haven't been found out yet. You look just like what you are: A man in love."

I can't argue with that, so I don't even try to. "You'd be in love with her too if you met her," I sigh, smiling. "She's everything I've ever wanted in a woman and more."

"You're so lovesick, I think I'm gonna gag," he laughs. "But seriously, I'm glad things are going well. You've been spending a lot of time with her, huh? I guess things are starting to get serious?"

"Yeah, ever since I got her that job at the company, she's had a lot more free time on her hands. We've been going on dates almost every weekend—and I've been spending more time with her daughter during her and Janie's playdates too. She's really warmed up to me, which is great because she's Mariana's everything, and if she didn't like me, obviously there's no way things would work out between me and Mariana. And Janie loves Mariana too! Mariana's so good with kids," my smile widens as I think back on all the times that I'd gotten to watch Mariana interact with the two little girls. She was a natural when it came to taking care of kids, and she was an incredible mother. That was an understatement.

"You've been talking about kids a lot lately," Axel sends me a sly smile. "Why do I get the feeling there's a reason for that?"

"I'm just mentioning it," I pause, lifting my shoulders as I fumble with the hem of my sleeve. "It's just nice to know how good she is with them. You know, just in case...One day..."

"You're already thinking about starting a family with her!" he gasps, and I shush him quickly as I whip my head around to make sure that none of my family is around to hear. They're still too busy bickering, thank God. "This is even more serious than I thought!"

"Well, I—It's just that we've been having so much sex that it's hard not to think about it, that's all..." I mutter under my breath, letting out a dark chuckle. Mariana and I can't seem to keep our

hands off one another for even a second these days. We've been fucking every time we get the chance since the very first time.

"Well, I'm just letting you know right now that I'd be honored to be the flower boy at your wedding," he chuckles before twisting his lips. "But before the wedding talk...Maybe you two should be having another talk instead?"

I sigh. "I just haven't been able to find the right time to tell her the truth yet, but I'm going to. Soon."

"It's been five months," he sends me a look. "Soon better be real soon or else you'll be newlyweds with a newborn, and she'll still think that she's sending you off to work as an accountant at your dad's company. You better not let it get that far."

"I'm not going to let it get that far," I huff. "Do you think I'm crazy? I'll tell her when the time is—" he kicks me under the table, shaking his head quickly, and I wince. Before I can ask him what the hell he was kicking me for, I hear footsteps behind me.

'Thanks' I mouth before turning around. I'm filled with dread when I see dad standing there, scowling as he swirls his whiskey around inside his glass. He sends Axel a glare and Axel clears his throat, excusing himself quickly.

"Hey, dad," I try not to sound as bitter and exasperated as I already feel. It's funny how fast my mood can change just from having to be in close proximity to him. I used to feel bad for always having such a negative reaction to him, but it's not like it isn't warranted. I'm guessing he didn't come in here to have a pleasant conversation.

"You'll be attending the company's annual fundraiser next month, won't you, Elliott?" he grunts as he sits down in Axel's previous spot.

My eyes flutter shut for a moment as a headache begins to come on just that quickly. I nod, staring him in the eye a second later. "Yes, of course, dad. I always attend it." Isn't that the whole point of being a damn CEO? Attending an endless number of fundraisers under the guise of trying to do something good for charity when everyone knows it's really all about networking and trying to find a way to mooch business relationships with other higher-ups? Does he think I'm stupid? Does he really think I would skip out on attending a fundraiser that I've attended every damn year for five years now? "There are a few major names in the industry that I'm interested in talking to during the event, so—" I try to prevent the speech that I already know is coming, but he starts it up anyway, just as he always does.

"Good because there will be a lot of important people there and you're going to need their support going into the New Year if you don't want the company's stock, influence, and public image to plummet. I've even gone out of my way to make you a list of people whose asses you need to be kissing as if your life depends on it because you can't afford to not have a business relationship with them. They could make or break—"

"Dad," I clear my throat. "I don't need a list. Trust me, I know very well who I should be trying to connect with—"

"Not trying to connect with," he snarls. "Who you will connect with. The word 'trying' implies that failure is an option, and it's not. You need to be on your shit during this event. You can't afford to fuck up the way you did a few years ago."

The fuck up in question is the one business deal that didn't go through during my first year as CEO. Every other deal that I've pursued has been a success. Every other connection that I've attempted to build has been built. But of course, he doesn't ever acknowledge that.

"Right," I mutter. "I got it."

“And you need a date for this event,” he tells me after a long pause. “You can’t show up alone this year. You’re nearly thirty years old and still, no wife, no kids...” he sighs, shaking his head. “Image matters. I don’t understand why you don’t understand that.”

I clench my jaw. “I’ll have a date.”

“Oh, I know you will. I’ve already found a woman who I believe you would be interested in. Or at the very least, should be.”

“Dad—”

“She’s a beautiful young thing. Twenty-two years old, and pursuing a career as a supermodel,” he smirks. “Her mommy and daddy are big names in the fashion industry—apparently, they were models themselves back in the day, and now they’re designers—So, I’m guessing she will be too in just a few years. She’ll have all eyes on her in no time, which means you will have all eyes on you as her husband, which means all eyes will be on the company too. It’s a match made in heaven.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” I let out a bitter chuckle. “She’s a little too young for me and I’ve never even met her.”

“You will. At the fundraiser.”

“No, I don’t think I will. I’ll have a date, but it won’t be her. It’ll be someone that I actually like. Someone that I managed to find on my own.”

He narrows his eyes at me as he leans back in his seat, and I roll my eyes.

I’m used to that look. It’s the one he likes to give me when he’s trying to intimidate me, and it used to work when I was younger, but now it’s just ridiculous. When is he going to realize that

I'm not some scrawny little teenager who idolizes his father and wants to live up to his expectations anymore?

"Elliott—"

"Let's just drop the topic," I mutter, standing up. "I think I'll just go and say goodbye to everyone. I have somewhere to be in a little while."

"Hm," he grunts. I can feel his eyes on me as I storm out of the kitchen, but I try my best to disregard the uncomfortable feeling as I make my sudden departure.

I'm still fuming as I think about the conversation that I had with my dad, even when I park in the parking lot of the restaurant where I'm supposed to be meeting Mariana at nearly an hour later. I wish I could stop letting him get under my skin, but it's easier said than done, especially when he has the audacity to keep insisting on setting me up with some random girl that I don't even know when I have the only woman that I want already.

I take a deep breath and try to calm myself down as I unbuckle my seatbelt. It's not just the anger and frustration that have me feeling anxious, though. It's also the fact that I know that this date with Mariana may not end too well...

It originally wasn't my intention to tell her the truth during our date today, but after that conversation with dad, I think it's time. Axel is right. I can't keep putting off telling her the truth, and I don't want things between us to go too far before I finally tell her. Honestly, I think we're way past the point of it going too far already, but still, it's better to tell her now than later.

I just can't keep dealing with my parents trying to set me up with other women either. It's insulting to me that they could think I'd want anyone aside from my Mariana. I know I shouldn't feel that way because they don't even know about her yet, but I can't help it if the thought of being set up with some random little rich girl makes me want to puke. How could I ever want that when I already have the most perfect woman that I've ever met?

The one and only true love of my life.

Maybe I was trying to deny how strong my feelings for her were at first, but I'm done with that now. I love her. I'm in love with her, and I don't want anyone else but her. I want to take her to that event and show her off to everyone and I want them to see how much I love her too. I want to rub the fact that I have something that they never will in all their faces.

But that can only happen if I'm honest with her.

My heart pounds in my chest as I make my way inside the elegant restaurant. I'm so nervous that I feel like I'm going to be sick, and I have half a mind to run right back out to the car, call her and cancel the date, and then go home and pretend that nothing even happened.

But I've been a coward for way too long already and it's time for me to put an end to that.

Mariana deserves to know the truth. I just hope that she can forgive me for lying to her for this long.

“Hey, baby!” Mariana chirps the moment I’ve made it back to our usual booth. This is our favorite restaurant. We’ve made a habit of coming here whenever we can—usually on Wednesdays when Mariana gets a two-hour lunch break, courtesy of Griffin, or so she thinks.

Maybe I should wait to tell her. I don’t want to ruin this place for us by associating it with a bad memory. If this talk doesn’t go well then neither of us would ever be able to eat here again.

Yeah, I should definitely wait...

No, I shouldn’t.

‘She deserves to know the truth’, I remind myself over and over again as I greet her with a bright smile.

“Hey, beautiful. How’s your day been so far?”

Maybe this won’t be so bad. Maybe the conversation will go well. Maybe she’ll understand.

“You should know,” she giggles as we slide into the booths. “We’ve been texting nonstop all morning. Oh, and I already ordered our favorites! It should be out soon enough.”

I know she’ll be angry, but I think we will be able to work through it. I’m willing to do whatever it takes to regain her trust and earn her forgiveness.

“Sounds great, I’m starving,” I chuckle.

I’m feeling so conflicted. I hate that I had to lie to her, but I can’t say I regret it. I never would have been able to pursue a relationship with her without being filled with doubt about whether her feelings for me were real or not if she’d known about my real occupation. But now, I know who she is as a person. I know that she isn’t the kind of woman who chases after a man just because of his money because she’s shown me time and time again that that isn’t who she is.

“How’s your day been?” she asks after a slight pause. “You look a little tense. Did something happen while you were spending time with your family?”

“Something always happens when I spend time with them,” I scoff. “But it’s nothing for you to worry about, baby.”

“Are you sure? Because I don’t mind listening if you want to talk about it. You know that.”

“I do,” I send her a strained smile as I clear my throat. “Thank you, but I think I’d rather talk about something else... There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you.”

“Okay,” she tilts her head. I swallow thickly as her eyes seem to pierce through me. I’m pretty sure that I’ve already broken out into a sweat.

“It’s just that I haven’t exactly been hone—”

“Hold that thought,” she stops me quickly when her cell phone begins ringing, sending me a sheepish smile. “I’m sorry, it’s probably just my sister or something. I’ll mute...” She stops talking and raises her brows. “Oh, it’s Juliette’s school. I need to take this.”

“Of course!” I nod. “Go ahead, I’ll wait.”

She sends me a smile as she answers the phone and lifts it up to her ear. “Hello?”

I watch her face carefully as she listens to the person on the other side of the line. At first, I assume that Juliette either got into some trouble, or more likely, got sick and needs to be picked up, but Mariana’s expression goes from calm to shocked to panicked in the span of a couple of seconds, and that isn’t how she normally reacts to a call about Juliette getting sick.

“No—No, he can’t pick her up!” she starts scooting out of her seat and struggling to get her coat on and I quickly follow suit.

“What’s wrong?” I whisper.

She ignores me in favor of yelling into the phone. “No, don’t let her go with him for any reason! She doesn’t even know him—Keep him away from her, I’ll be there in ten minutes!”

The two of us are already rushing out of the restaurant by the time she hangs up the phone. We practically sprint to my car as she explains, “It was one of the office attendants calling to ask if Juliette’s biological father could pick her up! He’s trying to take her out of school, but his name isn’t on the file, so he’s not supposed to be able to check her out early. But he showed up with her birth certificate as proof that he’s her father and he’s demanding that they let her go with him!”

“Her father? Why’s he—She’s never even met him, why would he—”

“He’s not even supposed to know that we’re here,” she cries. “That was kind of the whole point of us moving all the way out here!”

I’m taking off down the road before the two of us can even get our doors closed all the way. I don’t know much about Juliette’s father because Mariana never talks about him. She’s only mentioned that things didn’t work out between the two of them and that he wasn’t good for her, but that’s about all she’s said.

It’s all I need to know in order to hate his guts. To have a woman as phenomenal as Mariana and lose her is insane, and I’m guessing this guy can’t exactly be a good man if she had to move states just to get away from him.

I clutch the steering wheel tight enough to make my knuckles turn white as I step on the gas. Juliette’s probably scared and confused right now, and I’m determined to get to her as fast as I can.