

FINDING

Myself

amanda kaitlyn

Finding Beautiful

Amanda Kaitlyn

A woman he couldn't resist...A man that terrified her...

Aria Morgan spent four long, painful months building herself up after having had her heart broken. The last thing she wants is to meet a man that makes her weak in the knees at the sight of him. A man that calls her beautiful as if it's her name. A man that entices her to desire more than she ever has before.

The only thing she'd ever loved was ballet. The feeling she got when she stepped onto a stage just waiting for her to blow each and every spectator away with her passion for dance. But when she met Gavin, it seemed she wanted something more. Something she gave up on about four months ago.

It terrified her and excited her, but when he kissed her with both the gentleness she needed and the passion she craved, all her fears and doubts just melted away. She craved him. She needed his touch more than the air in her lungs, and the idea of losing the feel of it could break her heart in two.

But how could she trust again after being broken so painfully? Was it possible?

She had no idea. But Aria had to try.

"I'm going to give you the world. This is only the beginning, Beautiful"

When an irreversible loss rocks her world and shatters it to pieces, it forces her to push everyone she loves away. Even the man that's become vital to her in every way.

Can Gavin, a man so filled with love for the beautifully imperfect dancer hold on to her when their shared pain becomes too much to bear?

Dedication

To every person that encouraged, nurtured and pushed me to pursue this dream of mine.
I am immensely grateful.

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Prologue

"Aria, look," Farah whispers from our adjoined desks, as we sit toward the back of Mr. Nelson's history class. Her hazel eyes zero in on someone across the room, her slim eyebrows raised as she cocks her head to the side in that way that tells me she's looking at a guy. And she likes what she sees.

"What?" I whisper, peering down at my notebook filled with the lecture notes I'm supposed to memorize by next class. My overly excited best friend doesn't stop nudging me, even as I try in vain to ignore my curiosity at whom she's staring at. The last thing I'm interested in is some jock that Farah has her sights set on, but *hell*, I am curious. Aggravated, I turn to where she tilts her head and follow the movement only to gasp audibly, seeing a pair of chocolate brown eyes staring at me from three desks over.

I was right. He is what you'd call a jock. A Lakers cap is drawn low on his head and there are three girls surrounding him, wanting his attention while he has his sights set on me. He isn't staring, not in that way boys look at you with only one thing in mind. He's just looking at me. With curiosity. With wonder. I know who he is, practically everyone at Beaumont High does. Bryce Williams, a senior. He's the quarterback on our football team and definitely doesn't want for beauty. Chocolate-brown eyes, tousled black hair, and a muscular frame - he's any girl's dream. And he's looking at me? *No way*. My cheeks flame red at the thought and I hastily turn my head to see if there's someone behind me, but there's no one. Oh goodness, it's me. *Why the hell would he be looking at me?*

"He's looking at you!" my best friend gushes as I turn to see her biting her thumb in excitement.

When I look back at the boy, his eyebrows are raised and he has a wide smile playing on his full lips. I know I should look away. My sister warned me away from boys like him, especially after hearing what people say about him. They say he's dangerous; that his last girlfriend, Kristy Jenkins, fled to private school after only two months of seeing him. Looking across from him now, I don't know if I believe those rumors.

One

I clasp the locket in the palm of my hand and take a deep cleansing breath. The dancers, young women whom I've grown attached to over these past three weeks of endless training, practicing, and obsessing in readying ourselves for this very day, glide elegantly over the wooden floors, masses of grace and beauty. I watch and hope that I'll be just as confident when I take the floor. I approach my coach, mentor, and dance partner of six years, Eli Jones, and try to cover up my trembling hands with the wrap I'm holding. I don't know why I'm so nervous. Dancing is like walking to me. I've done it ever since I was old enough to put one foot in front of the other. It's been an outlet for me through the lonely nights of middle school and the stressful exam-filled days of high school, and especially through my four years at Julliard. It's been my relief from everyday life. But this will be the first time since my stay at the hospital four months ago that I'll dance in front of an audience. *Oh, shit.* What if I fall on my face? With my hands shaking terribly, that's a possibility.

My errant thoughts are interrupted by a hand on my shoulder, squeezing me from behind.

"You're going to do fine, Aria," Eli whispers in my ear with another squeeze to my shoulders. I smile because I'm afraid that if I speak, I won't make it to my dance before I talk my way out of it.

I have to do this. For me. For everything I've endured and every person that's lifted me up the numerous times I've fallen.

The slow instrumental of a Celine Dion melody begins, and I slip the gold-bowed ballet flats on my feet and pull my wavy black hair into a bun in preparation.

I pull in a deep breath as I glide onto the floor. It feels as if every moment leading up to this is enhancing my already frazzled nerves. My body is strung tight from my toes to the tips of my fingers. I haven't done this in so long, I'm terrified that I'll mess up. What do they say about riding a bike? Learning to drive? If you learned once, you'll positively remember how to do it no matter how much time has passed.

I really hope that's true.

I stretch my fingers to the ceiling, and as I do this, my eyes flick over to see my always supportive dance coach looking at me. When he nods his head, I know I can do this. *I've got this.* Taking another deep, deep breath, I begin to glide, making sure to stay in sync with the music playing overhead. *Near, far, wherever you are, I believe that the heart does go on. Once more you open the door and you're here in my heart and my heart will go on and on.* My eyes close to the words filled with such emotion, such depth. I move to express everything inside me, and soon I don't even have to think about the rhythm or the steps or the people from my academy's dance program watching my every move. I'm one with my body, the angelic music, and the heartbeat inside my chest. My right leg lifts as if in a trance while my other lifts in front of me in a perfect arch. I hold that position through a few strains of the violin and then glide back into position for my finish.

When the violin strains end, I go for my big ending and land it with easy grace as the audience

applauds for me. A larger-than-life smile spreads my lips, lifts my cheeks, and makes my eyes burn with the need to keep them open as I take in the number of people avidly applauding and celebrating.

This is my world and my love. All I need, I realize. With the grief and the sadness of the last four months, I'm at peace when I'm dancing. The pain, the heartbreak, and the fear I felt when I woke up in the hospital weeks ago just disappears.

I'm caught in a pair of skinny, but muscular, arms as soon as I'm within reach and I giggle as Eli lifts me off my feet and laughs in my ear. He squeezes me gently as he hangs on a little longer to our hug.

"You, my mistress, are back."

I meet his gaze and nod, knowing I truly am back. Eli lets me go as I see my sister Kel standing by the locker rooms. Hastily running to reach her, she hugs me so tightly. Her golden blonde hair engulfs me and I hug her back as tears sting my eyes.

"You were amazing, Aria. I'm so proud of you, honey." She grins against my head and I sniff into her Rolling Stones tee. I blink a few times so she doesn't think I'm sad today, because I'm not.

"Thanks for coming, Kel," I murmur, hooking one arm through hers to leave with everyone else in the building. We turn that way as she speaks only for my ears.

"I wouldn't have missed it for anything in this world. I'm just sorry Mama wouldn't come."

I close my eyes and remind myself to be strong. My mom hasn't talked to me ever since my older brother and her beloved son, died. I still remember the moment he flat lined. I was at Jeremy's bedside with my arm in a sling as he fought for every breath. A drunk driver ran into his side of the cab and he suffered internal bleeding along with broken ribs and massive head injuries. We had no idea whether he'd wake up, and even if he did, would he remember us? Would he be *our* Jeremy? Or would he be a vegetable for the rest of his life? In the end, though, his heart wasn't strong enough and he passed exactly one hour and twenty-two minutes after he was brought into the emergency room. It crushed me. *Hell, it broke me* along with Kel, and my mom especially, who placed all the blame on me. I think the pain got to be too much for her and the only way she could cope was to be angry. At the world. At me. But God, did it hurt.

I don't realize that tears are falling until they sting my cheeks and chin. Kel wipes them away, her amber eyes filled with worry. I miss him so much.

"It's okay," I whisper, struggling to rein in my emotions. Kel wraps her arm around me and leads me to her car, knowing that I have to move, to do something other than relive those terrible moments. We walk across the parking lot and I spot a canary yellow sports car with a black pinstripe detailed on each side. I can tell from the make that it is a fairly new Jaguar. I don't know all that much about cars, but this has to be the sexiest car I've ever laid eyes on. Every inch is sleek, painted in the lightest shade of yellow, and the designs up one side with thin lines of navy blue and black are a stark contrast to the bright yellow.

The hood is up and I catch the sight of a lean pair of hips pressed against one tire while

working under the hood.

I lose my breath when a pair of piercing blue-gray eyes lock on mine and I swear my heart stops beating. It feels as if the air around me is charged with something as I look ahead of me. My breath falters as I take in the man standing no more than twenty feet away. With brown tousled hair that makes me want

to run my fingers through it and a look in his eyes that makes me stop where I stand, I'm mesmerized. His eyes captivate mine, two clouds of brilliant blue and gray. His lean cheekbones and nose complement his face perfectly. His mouth is sculpted and tilted into a half-smile. Somehow, it makes my blood heat in anticipation. Gradually, my eyes sweep down his body. The man is wearing a white dress shirt that hugs his chest in the best ways and is unbuttoned at the top, along with black Wrangler jeans and black dress shoes to match. When my eyes return to his, he cocks his head to one side as if to ask *are you checking me out?* And I can't help the butterflies that take flight in my stomach. He's... *beautiful*. My brain seems to catch up with whatever my eyes are taking in and I immediately ask myself, *what the hell am I doing?* It's not as if I've never seen a good-looking man before. It just feels like my eyes are somehow drawn to him. I watch as he pulls a wrench out from under the hood of his car, straightens up, and closes the hood with a loud thud. As he turns, the way he carries himself is like sex on legs. It dawns on me that he doesn't seem cocky or full of himself like most guys could be with his looks, but he does have a sense of self-awareness and power in the way he moves.

I draw my eyes back to his and he steps forward. The smile he gives me makes me weak in the knees. God, what is happening to me? *Aria, calm down. He's just a man.*

"Like the view?" he asks, his voice gravelly with a southern charm that I hadn't expected. The sound seeps through me, through the space between us, through my overheated skin.

I open my mouth to speak, but I end up just taking in a breath and attempting to gather my thoughts. He watches me quietly, his eyes trained only on my face. I try to reason with myself to get in the car and drive away from him, but I can't truly think of anything that would cause me to run.

Okay, he is just a man, who is sinfully beautiful and has eyes that draw you in like a moth to a flame...

"Oh...um, yes. Is this yours?"

He nods and takes a step forward, startling me a tad when he takes my hand gently in his. The simple touch is like a spark between our bodies, sending tingles over my skin.

"She is," he says, that half-smile lighting up the dips and shallows of his face. I can see at least one day's worth of brown stubble across his jaw, my fingers itch to lift and touch him, feel the roughness I know I'll find along his jaw. I unknowingly bite my lip as he admires me with those eyes of his. God, his eyes are so deep, so full of mischief.

"She?" I cock my head to the side in confusion.

"Yes, that surprises you?" he teases me, his eyes narrowing a bit.

My mouth stretches into a shy smile, and I feel my heart flutter as he gazes down at me. "Let me guess, you named her, too?"

"I did. Jasmine, after the girl that broke my heart years ago. I'm hoping history won't repeat itself.

I can't imagine she'll run off with a French exchange student. You think?"

It makes me giggle, his having a name for his car, but it also saddens me knowing he's felt heartbreak. I can definitely relate. Heartbreak is something I know intimately, but doesn't everyone get their heart broken at one point?

"I hope not." I don't try to take my hand from his. The skin contact is just too intense for me to want to. Beside me, Kel tugs on my arm and smiles knowingly as she looks at our joined hands. *Oh goodness, what does she have in mind?*

Leaning closer to me, she whispers in my ear, "Shall I invite him tonight?"

I narrow my eyes at her and hastily shake my head, though I do want to see him again. My sister insisted on having a party to celebrate my graduation and its tonight.

Kel steps in front of me, probably to block me from his view when she gets a look at him. I watch her lean in to whisper in his ear and I vaguely wonder what he must smell like.

"Of course I'll be there. Thank you." I meet his eyes intentionally, wondering what he must be thinking of her taking a quick liking to him. His eyes sparkle with what I can only guess is mischief, and they don't leave mine while he talks with my sister.

My heart is on overdrive for the first time in my life and it's due to this man. I have to remind myself to focus on something other than his beauty or the speed of my heartbeat in my chest. He is just a man. I keep telling myself that.

"You don't have to come, Kel is just being nice," I half-whisper as he moves a step closer to me. I swear the heat in his gaze could burn me in two.

Shaking his head slightly, he gives me a smile that just about melts my heart. I wonder, could he possibly want to see me again? Do I want that?

"I'd really like to see you again. You're beautiful and mysterious and you intrigue me." *Beautiful and mysterious? God, what am I doing...?*

Still, I find myself nodding my head and I turn to my KIA before I say something else. My thoughts are rattled and all I can think about is how soft his lips look and how those eyes captivate mine.

Suddenly, he catches my hand again and immediately my heart speeds up as the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. His touch resonates through me and when I see the sincerity in his eyes, I gasp audibly.

"Can I at least have your name?"

This man's drawl knocks my heart into overdrive again, his eyes searching mine for long seconds.

I wonder what he's thinking as he trains his eyes intently on my face. A strand of my hair flies in front of my face and he deftly lifts it away and tucks it behind my ear. When his fingers dip to

my cheek where a blush has spread across my skin, fireworks spark underneath the touch.

"Aria," I whisper just loud enough for his ears, my name a whisper on my lips.

He nods, his eyes heating with something I wish I had a name for as his finger grazes my cheek and my eyes never leave his.

"Gavin," he murmurs, giving me his name. I bite my lip at the sound of it and find myself wanting to lean into his touch. The name fits him so well. *Gavin*.

"I'll see you tonight, Gavin." I breathe, feeling lighter as he smiles that crooked smile at me and takes my hand in his once more, not letting go until distance pulls our fingers away from each other.

"Tonight," he says.

"You're blushing, Ari. Holy shit," my sister says, giggling as we pull away from the curb where I can still see Gavin leaning against his car. Her eyes meet mine in the rear view mirror and I inwardly sigh.

I can't stop thinking about the way he seemed to focus completely on me. A man I've never met. I've never felt that with anyone I've dated. Undivided attention.

"That was...intense." I mumble to my still blushing sister as she starts her car.

"I'd say. And that car had to be expensive. Like something out of a movie."

I turn left and flit my eyes over to her with a grin. It was a Jaguar. It's one of the most expensive foreign automotive brands out there. When I explain this to her, she looks at me as if I have two heads and shakes her head.

"Forget the car, he was beautiful! You should have given him your number, honey. He was looking at you like you were water and he was thirsting for a tall glass."

I burst into giggles at that and she joins me as we pull into our apartment lot.

"You're horrible, Kel. I swear I don't know where you got your sense of humor."

She grins at me, giving me that look again. She knows I'm delaying what she wants to talk to me about. About the mysterious man we met today. About how I feel about seeing him again.

"Oh, come on, you couldn't take your eyes off him. I've never seen you react to a man like that. I think you should get back out there, Ari. Don't you think it's time?"

I sigh, feeling both terrified and excited at the idea of seeing him again.

"I don't know, Kel. It's only been four months and honestly, I have no idea how to put myself out there again. I'm not ready."

"I know, but if you don't try you could really regret not taking the chance." Her bright eyes implore me to say something, but I'm speechless. I haven't - no, I couldn't - let myself think about starting something new ever since I woke up in the hospital four months ago. I can't be hurt again. I won't let that happen. But Gavin...he looked at me like no other man has and it

confuses me. Am I ready?

"I don't know. It was like he saw me, the real me. Not the ballet dancer or the rich girl or the heartbroken teenager that everyone else sees when they look at me. But you saw him, Kel. He probably has a girlfriend or a wife! I can't compete with God knows who."

She doesn't answer me, just shakes her head and gets out of the car, then leans back in through the window to meet my guarded gaze.

"I didn't see a ring on his finger. And you're beautiful and mysterious, remember?"

I folded my fingers in my lap, trying to clear my thoughts. She's right. He did say that. The thoughts and emotions inside me have me tangled up, confused, hesitant. I don't know if I'm ready, will I ever be?

Commented [LD2]: Folded instead of "fold"??

"We both know I'm not ready for any sort of a relationship right now!" The words tumble out of me, my own insecurities voiced. My eyes sting with emotion and I turn my gaze away from the window.

I get out of the car and circle the back to meet her in the front of my car. I hope that maybe she'll just let this go, *please just let this go, Kel*. But I feel her brown eyes on me as I take the stairs. Taking my hands, she tugs me down to sit on the top step with her. My determined-as-hell sister looks at me, imploring me to listen, and it's not the first time today.

Sighing, I squeeze her hands with mine so she knows I'm listening.

"Ari, it was never your fault what Bryce did to you, and it doesn't mean that you aren't just as deserving of love as anyone else in this world."

No. With the sound of *his* name, my voice dies in my throat. I don't want to think about *him*. My chest aches with the memories that flood me from the sound of a man's name I haven't heard in weeks.

Kel doesn't let go, though. She takes hold of my wrists and glides up the sleeve of my sweatshirt until the yellowing bruises on my skin are revealed, along with the cuts marring the pale skin there. Shame washes over me, and my eyes close briefly as I fight to push down the sadness that tries to make its way into my thoughts. When the pain had gotten to be too much, when I believed I was just as useless as he made me feel, I found a way to take away the pain in my own way. It was the lowest point in my life and I couldn't see my self-worth when I was with him. I see it now, though.

"Look at me." Kel has tears in her eyes as she wipes the side of her cheek. In her eyes I see how much she worries for me. She knows just how much I've gone through, how long it's taken me to feel whole again.

"You. Are. Beautiful. Aria. It wasn't your fault what he did to you and you should never let the fear of getting hurt again stop you from going after what you want, honey. It's been four months, and the fact that you're dancing again tells me that you're moving on from the hurt and the pain Bryce inflicted.

Just keep your heart open, okay? You deserve happiness. I found it with Lucas and I know you can, too."

I nod, unable to speak as my heart swells with love for my remarkable sister. Kel kisses my forehead and squeezes my hand, giving me strength in this moment. Taking a deep breath, I

decide to give myself a chance. A chance for happiness. One date never killed anyone. Right?

"Let's go get ready for this party, huh?" I grab her hands and pull her to stand, hooking my arm in hers as we head upstairs to plan a celebration.

As we turn the corner and near the apartment, we see Lucas, my sister's fiance as of three days ago, leaning up against our door. With messy blond hair and a lip piercing, topaz green eyes and a lopsided smile, he's every girl's dream and I can see how happy she is with him. He looks up and smiles when he sees us.

"Hey, sweetheart." Immediately Kel steps into his arms and he kisses her forehead.

"You don't have your key?" she asks, smiling as she looks at him through her thick-lashed eyes.

"I do, just thought I'd wait for you. How did it go, Aria?"

Lucas wraps an arm around my sister's shoulder and then releases her to give me one of his well-known and loved bear hugs, lifting me off my feet easily. I grin and laugh and wipe the moisture from my eyes before he sees it.

"It went great," Kel says for me as Lucas takes my keys to unlock our door. The minute I make it to the couch I set my dance bag down and plop onto the love seat, where Kel joins me.

"You were amazing," Kel says, obviously seeing my doubts after this performance. I know she's right, but sometimes I can't help doubting myself. After that night, I don't know if I'll ever be able to love myself and believe in my abilities again.

Four Months Earlier

The sound of a loud crash coming from the kitchen makes my eyes fly open in a mixture of surprise and panic. Bryce comes home faithfully every day at six. Why would he come home at, God, two-thirty in the afternoon? My hands shake as I scramble to my feet, knowing what's coming. The only possible reason he'd come home early is because he's drunk. I make my way toward the bedroom door as a pit in my

stomach forms; fear that I've come to live with stopping my body in its place.

Commented [LD3]: forms;

"Where are you?" Bryce yells, making me jump when I see his cold eyes and clenched fists, ready to aim when the anger strikes him. I lift my head and I search for any sign of emotion or humanity in his eyes, but all I see is anger. That's all I ever see. Cold, dark eyes of anger and possibly hatred.

"I...I was sleeping, Bryce. I'm sorry." My voice shakes unintentionally.

He narrows his eyes at me, raises the empty bottle of whiskey in his hand, and throws it past my head, making me flinch and jump back from him.

"Do you know how worried I've been?" he asks, quiet venom in his words as he backs me into a corner and forces me to look into his reddened eyes. His hand grips my chin and his fist clenches against it, making me whimper at the force of his hold.

"I'm sorry...I..." He doesn't let me finish as his fist comes down hard on the side of my face and

the pain spreads across my skin. I cry out and fall back, my head hitting the hardwood floor with a hard smack.

I feel the blood trickle down my face and my body trembles in fear for what's to come. He looks down at me with his brown eyes almost black with anger as he curses and kicks me in the stomach. Once, twice, three times...I lose count as each blow molds into the other, searing the pain low in my abdomen as I shake with tears falling down my face. I struggle for breath, and as he grasps my hair in his right fist, my eyes close and the darkness overwhelms me as the pain ceases and I black out.

The pain wakes me up as I find myself lying face-up in the king-sized bed in Bryce's bedroom. My clothes are in a messy pile on the floor as I feel my panties being slid down my legs and his mouth nipping at my neck. *No, God, no!* He can't be doing this. This can't happen...

"No...No...Please...stop..." I plead, having no strength to struggle against his hands trapping me against the mattress. Bryce grins against my skin and grinds against my hips, making my body shake and tremble in fear. There was a time once when I thought I loved him. I would do anything to please him. But now I know that was only a game to him. This is the man I've come to know. I feel rough, merciless hands digging into my waist while his knee presses against my side. The last of my laced underwear comes off my leg and I pull my knee up and attempt to buck him off me.

"No!!!" I cry out, making contact with his stomach instead of his nether regions. I continue trying in vain to push against his hold, kicking my legs is useless.

"Oh, I love it when you fight me, princess. So feisty." I feel the rub of his lips against my jaw, my collarbone, my neck, and then my mouth. A whimper escapes me when he pushes his tongue in my mouth and *takes*.

"You. Are. Mine. Ari." He growls each word into the space between our mouths. His chuckle is empty and cruel against my ears. I'm still struggling, forcing my head to the side to try to escape his weight, his voice, his cold, clammy hands gripping my thighs.

And when he takes and takes and takes, there is no one there to hear my cries of agony. The sobs break through my chest and I cry silently, willing this to be a nightmare. My skin crawls with a dirty, horrid feeling and my eyes close, willing myself to die instead of live through this torture.

"Aria, sweetheart, open your eyes," my sister's sweet voice whispers as I force my eyes to open against the numb of pain in my body. She's sitting next to me, kissing and squeezing my hand in hers.

When I see her tear-streaked face and hear the beeps of a machine next to me, I realize where I am.

"What happened?" I choke out the words through a dry throat. My head is pounding and I can barely open my eyes to see my sister and an unfamiliar man standing next to her.

Kel leans forward and kisses my forehead. I hear her intake of breath and wait for her to tell me what happened. *Why am I here? In a hospital?*

"Dad found you in your apartment this morning. You were beaten...and..." Her voice trails off, as if she's unable to finish her sentence. I see tears build in her eyes and what's worse is when her voice breaks.

"Do you remember what happened?"

I take a deep breath, trying to lift my body that's numb from the medication I must be on. Pain spears me in the chest as I remember his face, my cries for him to stop, and the pain down there and throughout my whole body. I just don't understand how I hadn't seen him for what he really was until that moment. I was so blind. I cover my face with my hands in an effort to gather my scattered thoughts.

"He came home really angry...I tried to talk to him, but then he hit me and I must have blacked out because when I woke up I was in his bed. He...Oh, God..." My voice cracks as I realize the three words that I can't seem to wrap my head around. He loved me, I know he did, but last night, God, he was just...a monster.

Kel squeezes my hand and with her eyes full of sympathy and love, urges me to continue.

"He raped me, Kel," I say in a shaky voice, grasping onto her as she wraps her arms around me and hugs me tight, allowing me to finally let go of the overwhelming emotions that threaten to smother me.

Present Day

My hands are shaking from the force of the memories, the darkness that looms around me from my broken past. Lucas squeezes my shoulders from behind, bringing me back to the here and now.

"You okay, Aria?" Lucas asks over the brim of his second Corona Light. I blink, shaking my head to clear all thoughts of the past. I look to see Kel hurriedly setting out party platters, hanging streamers from the ceiling, and placing buckets of beer bottles on the tables in the living room. That makes me smile.

She's in her element right now. Planning a party, making the individual platters, and setting the decorations up, that's something she loves to do.

"Wow, she's excited."

He laughs, a light sound that I haven't heard in far too long. When he hands me a Blue Moon from the cooler, I look over to him and grin.

"She loves a party, huh?"

"She wouldn't be Kel if she didn't love this, right?" His eyes go to my sister, softening when Kel winks at him from across the room. *He's so good for her. Just what she deserves.*

I nod, lifting the beer to my lips.

"We invited someone today. We met him at the studio." Lucas is in the middle of raiding our fridge when he looks up, raising an eyebrow at me. His eyes narrow at me. He thinks I'm

kidding, since for most of the time he's known me, I have refused to even think about men. But now I want to. I want to be open to the future if that happy-ever-after is still a possibility for me.

"What?" His voice is incredulous, but he already has that grin across his face. And then, he erupts into a wide, no-holds-barred smile. One I've never seen before. Setting his beer down, Lucas wraps me up in a hug and squeezes too tight.

"You're finally getting back out there! That's great, Aria. Who is he?"

I blush and look away, not wanting to think about how bad I like Gavin, how close I came to leaning into his touch today. It's crazy and it scares me how much I reacted to him when we met.

"His name is Gavin. I don't know...after what happened with Bryce, I don't..." He steps up to me and squeezes my shoulders. It's reassurance.

"Any guy would be damn lucky to have you, Aria. Okay?"

I nod, giving him a smile, and run to catch up with Kel as she balances two trays in her hands. I hastily grab one from her and set it down on the kitchen island.

"Careful, sis"

"You ready, Kel?" Lucas calls from the living room, well into his third beer.

She grins at him, narrowing her eyes. She'll never say so, but she is totally smitten with that man.

It's only an hour later that we have everything set up and the DJ we hired for tonight arrives. I do my best to get him squared away at the table near the bar in our living room and find Kel on the couch with Lucas, deep in discussion. Needing a minute of fresh air, I open the doors to the balcony and close them behind me, taking a deep, fortifying breath. Then my phone rings.

"Hello?" It's an unknown number, which makes me nervous, as if Bryce would call me after all these weeks. *Would he? Would he come back and look for me after all this time? God, what would I do...?*

"Hello, my name is Peter Piers. I'm with Grayson Dance Academy. I'm calling about a spot in our program. How are you today, Ms. Morgan?" Relief and elation swim through me. This is the call I've been waiting for, praying for. Excitement quickens my pulse. I've been waiting for this call for weeks. I auditioned for his dance company, the very company that is known throughout the performance arts world as the most esteemed dance company in the country.

"Yes, thank you for getting back to me. I'm good. How are you?"

I'm proud that my voice doesn't crack with the nervousness I'm feeling at this moment.

I remember how nervous I've been all season about this program. It's a modern dance fellowship and at the end of it I could possibly have a position with any one of their world-renowned studios. It's been my dream since high school, hell, since the very first time I danced.

"I wanted to speak with you about this position. Are you still interested in a full-time spot with

our Modern Dance program?"

I beam in excitement, practically jumping in the heels I'm wearing.

"Absolutely." It's every dream I've ever had. My dance.

"Good, we're honored to have you. The footage I saw of you was phenomenal. You're a very talented dancer, Ms. Morgan." His voice is filled with awe and I know he means every word. Having the praise of *the* Peter Piers means so much.

"Thank you, Mr. Piers," I say, squeezing my eyes shut from the sting I feel from the tears that threaten to fall.

"I'll send the orientation paperwork to you as soon as I can. Welcome to the program!"

"Thank you. You won't regret this." It's a vow.

I hang up and jump when I see Kel at the door. She beams with such happiness and I know she's heard everything.

Two

"Did you hear?" I ask, and Kel smiles that proud sister smile that I've only seen twice before across her face.

She grabs me by the shoulders, her laughter ringing against my ear as she hugs me tight. We're both basking in this moment. The first happy moment we've had in so, so long.

"I knew you'd get it!" Kel squeals, squeezing me once more. She lets me go and has a wide grin on her face. She's happy for me, just like I knew she would be.

Swinging her arm around me, she whispers in my ear, "He's here, you know. He's talking with Lucas now." A blush rushes to my cheeks in anticipation. My joy in my news is replaced by the excitement and nervousness of seeing Gavin again.

"Do I look okay?" I rub my hands down my lavender mid-length summer dress, biting my lip when it starts to tremble. *I don't want to mess this up. Kel is right; it's time to live again.*

Kel's hand reaches out and squeezes mine.

"You're perfect, Ari." She tucks my hair behind my ears and gives me a little push toward the open door. I step inside and take another Blue Moon from the cooler before veering to a crowd of our high school friends.

"There you are!" Sasha, one of Kel's friend's, calls, wearing a short black dress and heavy makeup.

Ugh, I inwardly cringe at her high-pitched voice. I remember how many girls surrounded my sister in high school, but she was never superficial like these girls. Kel is in a class of her own. I walk up and take the bowl of pretzels that Lucas hands me. I look around for Gavin as I sip my third beer of the night.

"He had to make a call, Aria." Lucas gives me a knowing smile and throws an arm around me as he downs the last of his Samuel Adams.

"Have you seen that man? You might have to stake your claim before one of us snatches him away!"

Sasha squeals, nursing a cranberry martini. Immediately, I imagine kissing him in front of all these people, ruining him for her and all these other girls. But I'm not ready for that. For all I know, he's taken. What is going on with me today? It's not like he's the first hot guy I've laid eyes on these past four months. But, oh my, those eyes. The sculpture of his lean chest, narrow hips...

My thoughts are interrupted by a hand on my shoulder. The touch ignites shocks that light up my skin and I know *he* is behind me. I turn, meeting the crooked smile of the mystery man himself. My heart skips a beat as I look up into his eyes, feeling myself pulled toward him. It's like gravity.

"There you are! Do you want to dance?" Sasha chimes, looking up at him expectantly. Gavin gives me a wink and never takes his stormy blue eyes from mine as I notice the song change to a slow beat that I recognize as one by Coldplay. It's slow and reverent and melts my heart on the spot.

"A dance, Aria?" he asks quietly, his voice resonating through me in the best way. I place my hand in his and nod as he leads me onto the floor. Once we reach the middle of the dispersing crowd, he turns to me and wraps an arm around my waist, his right hand linked with my left as he sweeps me into him, leading us in a graceful slow dance. I look up at him and a smile plays on my lips.

Commented [LD4]: ...do you mean Coldplay?

"You showed up."

Gavin's face spreads into a wide, dimple-bearing, soul-consuming smile and it makes me feel lighter somehow. Then I realize he's dipped me in the circle of his arms, which makes my heart beat impossibly fast. I grab his biceps for balance and see his eyes blaze with amusement. I can feel every line of his lean, hard, muscled body on every line of my soft curves, and when he places a hand at the small of my back, my heart hammers in *desire*. God, how long has it been since I've desired or truly wanted a man?

Years. I haven't felt like this since my sophomore year in high school. I can't help but think how naive I was back then.

"Of course I did, Aria." He pulls me back into his arms, hooking them around my waist as he balances me again, and I link my hands around his neck, sucking in a breath at the sight and feel of him.

Wow, he's toned. I try to sort my thoughts into words.

"Why? I'm sure you had plans tonight before I gawked at your car and my sister invited you to our party." Gavin dips his head and his mouth is only inches from mine when he speaks.

"I did, but I wanted to see you again more. You look beautiful, by the way." His voice is deep and makes me draw closer to him.

"Thank you," I whisper breathlessly.

When he pulls me to his chest, I rest my head against his shoulder and his arms hold me close at the small of my back. My heart beats so fast, and as the song ends, I lift my head and give him my best smile when I feel the nervousness of opening up to this guy I don't even know. Am I really ready to do this?

"I have to go refill the refreshments. Save me a dance, will you?"

Gavin's dark brown hair falls into his eyes as he loosens his arms around me and nods, his eyes locked onto mine. I see uncertainty in the depths.

"Are you okay?" he asks, his hand coming up to my cheek. I suck in a breath, my heart racing at the contact of skin against skin.

"I'll be back, I promise." I just need to take a breath, some air to sort myself out.

Reluctantly, he lets me go and I try to calm my heart as I pull my best friend Farah outside with me. She's the only girl I know that will never sugarcoat things with me. That's what I need right now.

"What the hell, Aria, are you okay?" Farah asks as she grabs my hand and we sit on the steps. I take a deep breath and turn to her. She's been my rock for as long as I can remember. I don't know what I'd do without her.

"I don't know what I'm doing, Farah. I met this guy today and he's, God, so gorgeous. Like his eyes captivate me and when he was holding me just now, it felt so right, you know?"

She grins and squeezes my hand for reassurance, her reddish-brown hair tucked behind her ears, her knowing eyes seeing right through me.

"Then go with it, Aria. Don't start over thinking it!"

"He called me beautiful, Farah. I mean, I don't even know his last name! Is this crazy?"

She shakes her head and looks into my eyes, forcing me to be honest.

"Do you like him?" She cocks her head to the side, pinning me with her gaze.

"Yes."

"Then stop thinking about it. I can tell he likes you." I grin at the thought and narrow my eyes at her.

"Really? How?"

Her eyes gleam with a smile as she throws her arm around my shoulder.

"He couldn't keep his eyes off you. He asked us what your favorite band was so he could request it! Trust me, honey; he's in this with you."

Farah gives me another hug before she goes back into the house and I sit on the steps for another minute, deciding to give this a chance, knowing that if I shy away from him, I'll always wonder what could have been.

"Are you ready for that dance?" Gavin's smooth voice says from behind me, causing my heart to race just from the sound of it.

"Yeah." I lift my head and he offers his hand to me, a boyish smile on his lips.

I giggle at the gesture, letting him help me up and my eyes lock onto his.

"Can I ask you something?" I ask with my hand still wrapped around his. He nods, not letting go of me as he steadies me with a hand placed on my hip.

Trying to organize my jumbled thoughts, I briefly look up at the sun that's hiding behind a crescent-shaped cloud. When I look back into his eyes, I lay it all out there.

"Why do you like me? I mean, maybe I'm misreading this, but I...I like you. But why do you like me?"

He gives me that sexy lopsided smile that makes my knees weak and cups my cheek with his hand as I step closer to him.

"I just want to get to know you, Aria. You're beautiful and kind and I saw the passion inside you through your dancing. It was amazing, as if you lived for each step, each movement, and each spin.

Aria...you take my breath away." His eyes fill with some unnamed emotion that stirs something deep inside me.

I suck in a breath as my body is instantly drawn closer to his body.

"You saw me dancing?"

He nods, gliding his thumb over my cheek, leaving tingles everywhere he touches.

"Yes, I saw. You were incredible, Aria. It was elegant, yet modern. Every move amazed me along with the audience. Then when I saw you in the parking lot, I had to talk to you. It was like fate or maybe sheer luck. I don't know what it is, but there's something about you that draws me to you. I want more."

A delicious shiver runs up my spine at his words and when he places both hands on my face, tilting it up to meet his, I see his clear, blue eyes melding into mine.

"More?"

"Do you have a boyfriend, Aria?" he whispers, caressing my cheek achingly slow. I gasp, shaking my head and feeling how fast my heart is beating and the blood rushing through my veins. I feel alive and vibrant, as if my every breath lights my body anew.

"No."

He smiles and leans his forehead closer to mine. I can feel his breath upon my lips.

"I want to kiss you, Aria," he says, his voice deep with lust and a desire that takes my breath away.

Yes, please.

"Gavin..." I whisper, my voice breathy in anticipation.

He leans back, meeting my gaze so that it's impossible for me to look away. His blue-gray eyes capture mine and in this moment, I'm his.

"Yes or no, Aria?" he whispers, urging me closer to him with a hand at the small of my back as his other cups my cheek so gently. All I know is I want to be closer to him. I don't want to worry about whether this is the right thing after what I've gone through. I just want him closer now.

I nod my head, feeling his breath across my face as my chest presses against his. He smells like mint and his touch feels like a dream as I wrap my hands around his neck, my fingers grasping onto soft, smooth strands of his unruly hair.

"Yes."

He smiles, one hand moving across my cheek to my neck where he tilts my head while his arm wraps around my waist, his eyes blazing with a desire that takes my breath away.

"Tell me if you want me to stop, beautiful."

I moan deep in my throat, the sound of that word from his lips slipping past the last of my defenses as his mouth softly closes over mine. His heat engulfs my senses and I grab his hair, tangling my fingers in

it. I open my mouth to his. My leg comes up as if of its own volition and wraps around his waist while I gasp against his ardent, all consuming kiss. I've never been kissed like this. Savagely yet gently all at the

Commented [LD5]: .jts

same time. I hear Gavin groan, sending tingles up my spine, while his arms wrap around my

waist and one of his hands grasps the bottom of my short, satin dress. With his lips eagerly pressing to mine, his tongue slips slowly into my mouth, licking, tasting, and exploring me as I do the same, moaning in desire when he nips at my bottom lip. It sends a jolt of aching desire from my lips to my core. Wrapping both arms around his neck, pressing into him, I lock his mouth with mine and clutch onto his tee as passion runs through my veins. God, I can't get close enough.

"Aria," he whispers against my lips, pulling back an inch to meet my eyes, reading them for a moment before that gorgeous smile graces his mouth and he leans his forehead against mine. I let go of his shirt and wrap my hands around the back of his neck as I struggle to catch my breath.

"That was...wow," I whisper, smiling excitedly. His hand brushes my flushed cheek and his mouth sets in a smile that shows off his ruggedly handsome face.

"Amazing," he says, pressing his lips to mine softly once more before he leans back and grasps my hand, his eyes shining as he gazes down at me. "Do you want to dance, beautiful?"

I grin and nod as he leads me back inside. My heart beats fast and erratically in my chest. His fingers close over mine as we walk back to the almost empty dance floor where a soft melody by Shania Twain is playing. He pulls me into him and presses a hand to my waist. He sweeps me into a slow dance that is just as graceful as before, only this time he presses his mouth to my neck, turning me around so that my back is pressed to his lean chest and his arms wrap around my hips, swaying us easily to the beat.

I close my eyes, enjoying the feel of his ever-so-gentle touch and the feel of his mouth pressing on the side of my neck. And I know, from this moment on I'll be completely and totally his.

Once a Jason Walker song ends, three dances later, Gavin turns me to him and tucks a curl of my hair behind my ear. His finger grazes my cheek just barely and it makes my breath hitch.

The things I feel when I'm with him both scares me and excites me.

"Take a walk with me?" he asks, his hand on the back of my neck causing my skin to tingle from the feel of his touch.

"Of course. I just have to let Kel know. You want to meet me outside?"

He dips his head and presses a kiss to my lips, grazing a finger across my chin before pulling back and looking into my eyes.

"Sure, take your time."

I smile and kiss him once more before taking a step back and spotting Kel talking with Elliot, our cousin, over by the beer coolers.

"Hey! You leaving already?"

I nod, unable to keep the smile off my face, and I hug my arms around her, waving to Elliott from behind her head.

"I'm happy for you, Ari. You deserve some happiness," she whispers before she leans back, kissing my cheek and smoothing the hair from my face.

"We're just going to take a walk. I'll be back later for cleanup. Okay?"

She nods and steps back. I beam up at her, hoping that she's right about opening myself up to love again.

I find Gavin leaning against the door frame as I step outside. Breathing in the cool Chicago air, a smile graces my lips.

"Ready?"

He looks up from his phone and gives me a heart-stopping smile when he sees me staring unabashedly at him. The sudden thought comes to me that I might be pulling him away from his job or someone else. Doubt clouds my thoughts as I step toward him and see how clear his eyes are.

"I hope I'm not pulling you away from anything or..."

He gazes down at me almost comically and bites his lower lip to hide a smile.

"Do you really think I would've kissed you if I had anyone waiting on me?"

I let out the breath I'd been holding, hearing the sincerity in his voice while he places his hands on either side of my face and presses a soft kiss to my forehead.

"Sorry," I whisper, my hands on the middle of his chest. I rest my head on his shoulder. It feels so natural, as if I've known him for much longer than a few hours.

"No worries, we hardly know each other. Let's take a walk. There's a hiking trail not far from here that I want to show you."

I nod as he interlaces his fingers with mine and we head along the road leading to Marley's Cove, a hiking trail I haven't actually been to since Kel and I moved here a few months ago.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

I look up to see Gavin gazing over at me, running a hand through his messy brown hair. He's sitting on a rock on the top of the cove and I'm sitting under an oak tree just three feet away from him.

"I was just thinking that I'd like to know more about you," I say. He smiles and reaches out his hand to me. When I grasp it and stand closer to him, he scoots backward to the flattest surface of the rock and pulls me with him, so that I'm in between his legs. My back presses to his chest and his hand links with mine across my thigh.

"Ask me anything you want, Aria," he whispers, wrapping one arm around my waist and tucking me close to him. I take a deep breath, thinking of all the things I want to know about him. I start with an easy one.

"Why do you call me beautiful?"

I can feel his smile against my neck as he sucks in a breath.

I can't help the stutter of my heart and the wide smile on my lips as I place my arms around his arms that are wrapped around my stomach, reveling in the feel of his skin against mine.

"My turn," he whispers, smoothing my hair away from my neck. He places a kiss on the skin there, his lips moving in a circular motion as he speaks against my skin.

"When did you start dancing?" he asks, his deep voice next to my ear.

"When I began preschool, my mom enrolled me in a toddler dance academy, and my love for it grew from there."

"Is your mom a dancer?" Gavin's hands skate down my arms, causing goose bumps.

I giggle and press closer to him. Being in his arms feels better than I could have imagined.

"That's two questions, but no, she isn't. She's a model and travels a lot, too." The last thing I want to think about is my absentee mother, but he asked and, truly, I want Gavin to know me.

"Did I upset you?" he asks, turning me so that I'm facing him. I hastily shake my head, pressing it against his shoulder as his hand strokes up and down my back.

"No, she wasn't around a lot when I was growing up, though. I actually haven't talked to her in a long time."

Deftly, Gavin lifts my face with a finger under my chin and gazes into my eyes.

"I understand, but if she doesn't appreciate you then it's her loss, Aria, not yours."

My heart skips a beat at his heartfelt words as I lean my face into his touch.

"What about you, your parents?"

He gazes down at me and smiles softly. That smile makes my heart beat even faster.

"My mom and I have always been close. She's the glue that's always kept the family together. My dad, well, he passed away last year. It was a cardiac arrest."

I gasp audibly, my hand instinctively going to the locket resting against my chest. The pain of losing someone so important, so vital to you never heals completely and my chest tightens at the thought of his own pain. Leaning forward, I kiss his neck urgently, hating the thought of him losing his dad so suddenly. He rubs his hand up my back as if to reassure me also.

"I'm so sorry, Gavin. I can't imagine..." He presses his lips to my temple, silencing me. His arm wraps me tight against him.

"It's okay. I miss him. We all do, but he had a great life and I have to take some comfort in that."

He leans back, meeting my eyes as he nods, reassuring me with more than his words.

I can't imagine losing one of my parents so tragically, though I've felt that sort of pain before. Jeremy...

As if he's reading my mind, Gavin presses closer to me, giving me his warmth when a breeze

sways my hair back.

"Do you have any brothers? Sisters?" he asks, his eyes focused on mine.

"Yes, Kel's my sister. She's older by three years. And um..." My voice trails off as I wonder if I should tell him about Jeremy, unsure if I can get the words out without having my emotions get the best of me.

He tilts my face up and reads me with worry stretching over his face.

"Tell me," he whispers, holding me close, giving me strength.

"My brother Jeremy. He was four years older than me and the best brother I could have asked for.

He was my rock."

Gavin runs a hand over my cheek, never taking his eyes off mine.

"Was?" Gavin's eyes are filled with sudden concern as he gazes down at me with his hand against my cheek.

"Jeremy and I were on our way home from a dance competition when a semi sped through a red light and crashed into his cab. They...um...couldn't save him. He died from the blood loss." My voice breaks twice and a tear falls onto my cheek as I close my eyes, waiting for Gavin to make an excuse to leave. One day with me and I'm already a mess. The tightness in my chest feels as if my heart is being squeezed by a fist, my worst pain being voiced, I feel naked in front of him.

Will he pull away now? Will it be too much, too soon for him to deal with?

Will he see a damaged, unlovable girl in front of him or will he really and truly see me?

Gavin's thumb catches a tear against my chin and his lips press against my forehead so very lightly.

A feeling of such relief comes over me when he wraps his arms tightly around me and I press my face into his neck, letting myself feel the pain for this moment in time.

"I didn't mean to tell you all that. I'd understand if you walked away right now. I know, I'm a mess," I whisper, not daring to look into his eyes for fear of what I'll see there. Pity, regret, sadness, concern, maybe panic. I couldn't bear that so I just press closer to him as he whispers in my ear.

"You're not a mess, you're so goddamn strong. I can see how hard it is for you to talk about him.

I'm so sorry that you had to endure that. How long ago?"

I gaze up at him then and let out a breath as I see a fierce devotion in his face, not pity.

"May third will be the anniversary of his death. I'm okay though. He's in a better place now, and I have to believe that." He nods and pulls me back into his chest, stroking my back soothingly. It feels so good when my eyes close and after a moment, Gavin presses a kiss to

my forehead.

"I have a sister, Callie."

I smile and lean back to look into his eyes.

"Yeah? How old is she?"

His eyes fill with joy when he talks about her, his mouth turning up into a reminiscent smile.

"Sixteen years old as of April twelfth. She's a dancer, like you. Does some gymnastics, too. She's my mom's pride and joy, of course."

I grin and sweep locks of his brown hair off his face, my touch lingering.

"What do you do for work, Gavin?" My voice is teasing, but I genuinely want to know.

He hesitates as if he's gauging my reaction before he opens his mouth.

"My dad passed Thomas Corporations down to me, the family company, last spring. He'd been priming me for it since I was fifteen years old. I own and operate it now, along with my mom, of course, who runs the offices and legal aspects of it."

My breath catches. I struggle to imagine how much money he must make, owning a growing computer technology corporation like that. Mom always told me to follow the men with gold, but it doesn't make me want him any less or any more. It's just a surprise.

"Wow. I mean I figured you had a pretty high-end job to afford your Jaguar, but I didn't expect that. What do you do? It's computer technology, right?" He nods and leans back a little so his eyes meet mine in the setting sun.

"We try to innovate mobile and computer technologies for modern-day society. After Windows 8, our system was in almost every PC in America."

I give him a smile, reassuring him that I'm only curious about his work and not trying to pry.

"Windows 8?"

"Yeah, once we put together the idea, software, and patent for it, we sold it for quite a lot to Microsoft. It took them a while to give us a viable offer, though now we have access to almost any software or technology information program we'd need. Trust me; it was well worth the wait." My eyes light up hearing him talk about something he's very passionate about.

I lean into him to give him a soft kiss on the lips, losing my breath as he grasps onto the back of my neck to deepen it. His touch lingers along my oversensitive skin and I lean against it.

"What was that for?" he whispers as he presses a lingering kiss on my temple and runs a hand through my hair.

"Just wanted to let you know that you didn't scare me off, Gavin."

He smiles that shy smile at me, showing off how goddamn handsome his features are.

"Did you read my mind?"

"No, but I saw it in your eyes."

I bite my lip as he pulls me to him and begins to kiss my neck, licking as he goes. I feel heat in my core and wetness between my legs from my desire, my arousal for him growing.

"It's getting dark. I probably have to get back..." I whisper breathlessly as he groans against my skin. He doesn't want to let me go yet.

"I don't want to push you but..."

Something in his voice urges me to look up into his eyes and I see almost a vulnerability there. "I want to see you again, beautiful. Your sister, she told me that you might be a little gun-shy to a full-on relationship with me because of something in your past..." I gasp, feeling a little betrayed that Kel spoke with him about this despite that I do want to see him again. I want to be near him, just like this.

"But honestly, Aria, I want to be with you. You take my breath away; I don't think I could stay away, not unless it's what you wanted."

I suck in a breath, letting go of my fears. I struggle to find my words.

"Gavin, I like you so much. I think anyone else would have been running for the hills by now, but you're still here and you take my breath away, too. The way I feel about you, it's so new to me and, honestly, it scares the crap out of me. I mean I've spent the last six months being afraid to get too close to someone for fear of being hurt, but with you, I want to take that chance. I want to be with you, Gavin." I hold my breath as I read his expression, his eyes alight with relief and his hands on the sides of my face, banishing away the shivers on my skin as I lay my heart out to him, this man I've only known for a day.

His face stretches into a crooked smile, taking my breath away, and he presses his lips urgently to mine. Our mouths move together in perfect unison and when his tongue licks into my mouth, I moan through our kiss. He softens the kiss, his lips slowly and reverently pressing to mine as if he's memorizing the feel of me. He just *kisses* me, groaning deep in his throat. He pulls away, showering kisses over my parted lips, my cheeks, and then my temple.

"Oh, beautiful. I like you so much," he whispers, pressing his forehead against mine, both of us catching our breath.

I smile, not trying to hide the giggle that parts my lips.

"Gavin, I think we should take this slow, get to know each other and spend time together. There's no rush, right?"

He leans back and nods, giving me a kiss on the nose. His eyes are filled with want when he gazes down at me.

"No rush, okay? Can I take you out tomorrow?"

I blush and nod eagerly. I want, no, I *need* to see him again.

"Dinner. I can pick you up here at eight?"

I kiss the side of his mouth and hear the catch in his breathing.

"I'd love to."

He stands up, reaching out his hands to me. I grasp onto him and he wraps his arm around my shoulder, holding me close to him.

Once we reach the porch, I look back at him and smile, feeling more at peace now that I know I'll see him again.

"Can I text you?" he asks, his voice reverberating with that sexy drawl that makes my heart stutter.

I laugh a little, pulling out my phone as I lean my back into his chest.

"God, I love the sound of your laugh," he whispers, running his hands up my arms for warmth against the chill.

"Doesn't this feel a little backward? I give you my number after we make out like teenagers." His husky laugh makes my voice all breathy and I turn to him, giving him my phone. He hands me his. I program my number and hand it back to him.

"It does, huh? Well, this way I don't have to wait three days to call you for a date."

I giggle, gazing up at him. He traces his hand over my cheek, lighting up my skin in flames.

"Would you have been able to wait three days?"

He laughs, shaking his head and grasping my hand, leading me to the door.

"No way, maybe one, but not three, beautiful."

I get out my keys and unlock the door before turning back to him.

"Come here, Gavin," I whisper, my voice raspy with desire. He steps up to me, wrapping his arms around the small of my back and lifting me off my feet in a *whoosh*. I giggle happily when he crushes his lips against mine. His kiss is sweet, slow, and lazy as his tongue invades my mouth and his lips adore me.

When he pulls away, I'm breathless.

"Tomorrow, beautiful," he whispers, lifting our joined hands to his mouth and pressing his lips to my palm before stepping back.

I smile, my lips still tingling from the kiss. I close the door behind me and sigh while I put down my keys and head to the fridge for something to eat. My mind is still reeling from all that's happened, but for now, I'm happy.

Three

As I make my way into the kitchen, I see my dad giving Kel a hug. I squeal, a huge smile on my face since I haven't seen him in weeks. Excitement bubbles up inside me when he turns and sees me.

"Pumpkin, come here," Dad says, pulling away from my sister. I run into his arms, so happy to see him as he lifts me off my feet and kisses my cheek.

"When did you get here?" I ask, pulling back to take a look at him. I laugh, seeing his beard coming back. He has new lines around his eyes and mouth, but his deep amber eyes, the same as Kel's, are as bright as they've always been.

"You look happy, Aria," he says, twirling me in a circle like he always does.

"Dad, you seriously have to shave!" I laugh through the words. He throws his head back and laughs, pulling me with him. He makes his way into the kitchen where Kel places three plates of mac and cheese on the table.

"I'll take it under advisement, pumpkin," Dad winks at me.

Turning to my sister, he says, "This is great, Kel. Thank you." I sit down and he sits next to me, both of us digging into our dinner.

"Oh, my God, this is amazing, Kel!" I gush, enjoying her homemade food.

After dinner, we take Dad into the living room and watch reruns of *Full House*. He tells us all about his trip. It feels so good to have him back home, and when Kel goes to bed, I stay up and decide to tell him about Gavin.

"You okay, pumpkin?" He reaches for my hand and squeezes it.

I look up from my phone, hoping for a text, and give my dad a smile.

"Yeah. I met someone today, Dad."

He grins wide and gives me a kiss on my forehead. I know that he just wants me to be happy.

"Yeah? Kel may have told me about that, pumpkin. You like him?"

"Yeah, so much. I didn't think it was possible for me to open up to a guy so quickly after what happened with Bryce, but I really like him."

He pulls me into a hug and rubs his hand up and down my back. He smells like gasoline and cigarettes, as always. My dad has worked in his auto repair garage since I was a little girl. The smell of it lingers on him and it's come to smell like home to me.

"I'm so happy for you, pumpkin. Just take it slow, enjoy the chase. There's no rush, Aria. You deserve a guy who treats you right, who treasures you, like I treasured your mom for the time we were together."

Tears build in my eyes. I remember growing up and seeing how much they loved each other.

My mom stopped modeling when I was born, but she still did occasional shoots for local magazines and spreads. She loved her job, loved modeling. My dad always supported her dream. He would stay home with the three of us the nights she had to work, and when everything went up in flames after the accident, nothing was ever the same. My mom broke, emotionally and physically. I know she loved my dad with her whole heart, but she just couldn't take the never-ending pain of losing her son. She ran from us, from what happened, from everything. I'll never forget watching my dad's heart break when she left us. I rest my head against his chest. I needed this, this reassurance from my dad about starting something new with Gavin.

"Do you miss her, Daddy?" I ask, my voice clogged with tears.

He sighs and nods, his eyes filled with a trace of sadness. "Every day, but she made her choice, and no matter how much it hurt me and you girls, we have to accept that." His thumbs wipe my tears away and he dips his head to kiss my forehead. I'd be lost without him. My dad's strength put us back together after we broke apart. But I know he's never truly gotten over my mother. She was his one true love.

I rest my head on his shoulder again, not wanting to think about Mom.

"Can we talk about something else?"

"Sure, pumpkin. What's mystery man's name?"

I lift my head, narrowing my eyes at him. I love my dad, but ever since high school, he's run background checks on every one of my boyfriends or any boy I had an interest in. It's like he's trying to protect me before I get hurt, which is unnecessary since the nicest, kindest, and richest and most successful man that I dated turned out to be a monster. I shudder, thinking of his face, but Dad kisses my forehead for comfort as if he read where my mind had wandered.

"Just in case, Aria. It would put my mind at ease. After what happened with Bryce, I can't fathom the idea of you getting hurt again. I couldn't bear it, pumpkin."

I exhale, remembering my dad's broken face in my hospital room weeks ago.

"Gavin Thomas."

He raises his eyebrows skeptically at me.

"You mean the billionaire, Thomas Corporations CEO?"

I gasp, shocked that my dad knows who he is. Oh, crap.

"Yeah, I think he said something like that."

My dad throws his head back laughing and then smiles knowingly.

"Do you realize how much money that boy makes? Wow, wait till your mom finds out, Pumpkin."

Commented [LD7]: ..laughing

She's going to be so happy."

I inwardly cringe, not wanting to think about how much money he makes or what a "catch" my mom will say he is.

"Don't tell her, please, Dad. I just met him. None of that stuff matters to me," I whisper, looking anxiously up at him. He nods after a moment, giving my shoulder a squeeze.

"I won't. I promise. Just be careful with him. I'll let you know what I find out." He gets up and heads to the fridge, grabbing a water and his duffel bag off the edge of the couch. He crouches down and hugs me tight, kissing my forehead.

"Love you, Daddy," I whisper into his neck before he leans back and smiles warmly.

"Love you more, pumpkin."

After a nice hot shower I put on a pair of gray yoga pants and a tour tee of The Band Perry, pulling my hair into a messy bun. I crawl under the covers, grabbing the remote and flicking through channels until I find a police procedural that I like.

My mind is racing with curiosity about what Dad could find on Gavin, and when I see my Mac laptop screen flash with a new email, I reach over and pull it onto my lap. I open up Google Search and type in "Gavin Thomas."

I know I should stop myself, but in all honesty, I need to know what I'm getting myself into by pursuing a relationship with him.

When the results come up across the search engine, I slowly scroll down. There's a picture of Gavin and a blond, skinny woman with brown eyes. His hair is slicked back and he's wearing a gray Paul Smith three-piece suit tailored perfectly to hug his lean chest, arms, and toned thighs, and a dark green tie, while the woman wears a silver dress that shows off her prominent chest and long legs. He has to be at least twenty in this photo and I wonder vaguely how old he is now because he looks so young in this picture.

His arm wraps around her shoulder and she's smiling while she gazes at him. I feel a little jealousy that he had been so happy with this girl. Oh, my God! What if he still loves her? The caption reads: Young prodigy Gavin H. Thomas left at the altar by his high-end fashion model fiancée of two years, Jasmine Elliot.

The date underneath reads almost four years ago. Oh, no. I feel both relief and sadness as I read more. Then it dawns on me. Jasmine, his Jaguar, "after the girl that broke my heart years ago." I remember his heartfelt words from this afternoon. There's a lot about his business.

Billionaire Gavin Thomas takes the technology world by storm!

And...

Thomas spotted with younger sister Callie Joy at Raymond's in north end, Chicago.

Then I see something else that makes my heart stop. It stutters while I read on.

Son Gavin Henry Thomas devastated after tragedy strikes the family. At nineteen years old finds father James A. Thomas suffering from cardiac arrest. He died later that night, leaving Thomas Corporations to only son G. H. Thomas.

I close my laptop, feeling sad for a young Gavin, lost after his father's death. He must have felt so alone, having to be strong for his mother and sister while grieving his father's death.

I watch television and almost fall asleep before my phone vibrates with a text. I smile, my

sadness vanishing when I open the message and see it's from Gavin.

You still up, beautiful? I had a very interesting day with this gorgeous ballet dancer.

I giggle, warmth erasing the shivers across my skin. I text him back as I lean against my pillows.

Really? Do I know this dancer? She sounds wonderful.

I wait, switching off my television and pulling red covers over me as I lie down and feel my eyes getting heavy.

Then he answers me.

I think you might. She's your twin.

Hmm, I don't have a twin, Gavin. Could she possibly be me?

He only takes a minute to answer this time.

She's definitely you. How was the rest of your day?

Good, spent some time with my dad. He just got into town today. Hard to text when I'm this tired. Can I call you?

Not even thirty seconds later my phone rings loudly in my hand. I smile, feeling giddy as I answer.

"Hello?" I murmur, biting my bottom lip nervously.

"Hey, beautiful." My heart races at the sound of his husky voice.

"How was your night?"

He laughs, sending tingles over my body.

"Busy. I'm actually just driving home. I didn't wake you, did I?"

"No, I'm just falling asleep now. Isn't it a little late to be ending your workday?"

He chuckles again. I recognize the sound of a car engine in the background.

"It is, but I had a crazy day. Did I mention the dancer I met today?"

My heart speeds up and I'm smiling widely, even if he can't see me.

"I think you did. I actually told my dad I met you," I say, feeling a little unsure of how he's going to react.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, he said you're a billionaire CEO with high hopes."

"That's true. Does my job bother you at all?"

I'm surprised by his question, but I take a breath and answer honestly.

"I'm not sure. It surprised me, but I already like you so much. For me, it doesn't change anything between us."

I can almost hear his smile at the other end of the line.

"Happy to hear that. You have any preferences for dinner tomorrow?" I think for a moment, but know it wouldn't matter to me where we eat as long as I'm with Gavin.

"No, I just want to spend time with you."

"Same here."

Then I yawn loudly and blush, embarrassed.

"Get some rest, beautiful. I'll text you tomorrow."

I smile, surprised by his thoughtfulness.

"Yeah?" I ask.

"Yeah. Goodnight, beautiful."

I giggle and snuggle deeper into my pillow.

"Night, Gavin."

I hang up, placing my phone on the charger face up so I'll hear the alarm at ten for my studio session in the morning. Soon I close my eyes, hoping for sweet dreams.

Gavin

The cup of steaming hot coffee meeting my taste buds could be described as the highlight of my day on most days I spend in the office. Today was different. Meeting Aria Morgan was the highlight, and if I could have spent more time with her today, I would have jumped at the chance. I haven't truly thought about a girl or rather, a woman, in any way other than an easy fix at the end of a very long day in I don't know how long. Back in college, it had been different. I was convinced that my girlfriend at the time, Jasmine, was the one. *The one*. As I think about it now, I have to laugh at myself. I didn't know how naive that sentiment was. As if there was one woman that would stay by me through thick and through thin. As if there was a woman out there that could look past my name and the number attached to my bank account.

Maybe even past the dollar signs on my paycheck each month. I'd thought she was that one woman. Shit, was I wrong.

I sip my coffee slowly, closing my eyes for the briefest of moments and try to conjure up the memory of Aria from today. I'd never seen a pair of green eyes quite like hers. There were almost undetectable hints of gold in them, that I could only see when the light shone across her face. She had hair that reached past her shoulders and it settled there in big curls. My fingers had itched to reach through the space between us and sink into her curls. I knew they would be just as soft as they appeared to be. But those things weren't what drew me to her. It was the way she spoke. I knew she was smart and the way she spoke told me she saw the world to be much darker than women I had met before. I didn't need her to tell me to know that someone, somehow, had hurt her in her life. She had been disappointed, maybe mistreated,

maybe overlooked. The way she carried herself was like the way she danced.

Elegant.

Light.

With purpose.

Out of curiosity, I took my Blackberry out of my pocket and pulled up the text-messaging app. We had been talking back and forth and though it was late, I had an idea. I backed out of Aria's texts and opened a new one to Liz, my sister's friend and a close family friend. She had a very quaint, very well-known floral shop not too far from my office and I knew she would still be working, even at this hour. One thing we had in common was our addiction to work.

I need a favor, Liz.

It was barely five minutes before she responded.

Commented [LD8]: ..Blackberry

Commented [LD9]: ..text-messaging

Commented [LD10]: ..sister's

Commented [LD11]: ..well-known

Commented [LD12]: Is her name Lisa or Liz?

Anything for my favorite customer. What do you need?

A dozen flowers, something bright and colorful. It's for a friend of mine.

Hm, I think I can do that. See you soon.

I grinned as I moved to the counter of the coffee shop and handed the kid behind it my now empty coffee cup. I dipped a few dollars into the tip jar and slipped on my jacket as I left the shop.

As I drove toward Liz's store and smiled to myself, I shake my head in disbelief. What was I doing? I never did this. I never pursued a woman after only one day of meeting her.

Commented [LD13]: ..I shake my head in disbelief.

Yet, something in my mind told me that she was different.

Aria Morgan was special and I fully intended for her to know that.

I stepped into The Little Rose and grinned when I saw Liz arranging a bouquet for me. She really was a good friend.

"Hey! How does this look?"

"I love it" I hugged her as she worked and watched the different colors of daises, lilies and orchids blend and fit into a beautiful arrangement.

"Thank you for doing this."

I smiled at the redheaded girl I'd grown up with as she carefully wrapped plastic and wax paper around the flowers, not jostling even one of them. She looked up at me and nodded, waving away my money when I placed it on the table between us.

"Please, Gavin. You know better than that. It's on the house."

Commented [LD14]: ..it's

Shaking my head, I came behind her and before she could protest, slipped two bills into the pocket of her apron.

"Shh, I want to pay for it. I know this business doesn't run on your love of plants."

She nodded, though I knew she wasn't happy about it.

I moved to my car and started up the engine, eager to see the mysterious dancer once again.

Commented [LD15]: ..nodded.

Four

Aria

"Mine, Ari," he whispers, sending terrible shivers down my skin as I writhe against his hold, finding myself trapped against his hard, heavy, unyielding body. His cold, hard eyes stare down at me. He grasps the button of my jeans, undoing it and roughly pulling them down my legs as I sob, feeling helpless against his weight and his greedy hands.

"Please, stop. Stop, Bryce...you're hurting me...no!" I whimper and scream fearfully as he holds me down, he's having no mercy as I clutch the bed covers and sobs rack my body. The pain is relentless as I feel his hard lips against mine. I can't get away. It hurts!

"No! Get off me...It hurts!!" I writhe and scream, crying out for help as he slaps me hard across my cheek, making me whimper in pain. I yearn for it to stop, but it never does.

"Stop...please..."

He chuckles, taking me again as I feel my sex spasm painfully against his punishment. I have no way of getting him off me with his death grip on both my hands.

"Shut up, bitch."

"Stop!! Please...no... please..." I begin to beg.

Then I hear a faraway voice filled with panic and fear.

"Aria! Christ, please open your eyes, beautiful."

My eyes fly open, my hands grasping onto the sheets as the terror of my nightmare runs through my veins. My body shakes and trembles, aftershocks from the terror of the memories assaulting me.

God, I can't breathe.

A sob escapes me, then another and tears fall down my cheeks as I remember his face and the pain.

Oh, God, the pain. I'm shaking and it seems impossible to stop.

"Aria! Are you okay?" I look up through my tears and see Gavin sitting on the edge of my bed. His ruggedly handsome face is etched with panic when he gazes down into my eyes, his hand holding mine tightly, anchoring me.

I shake my head no. The sobs take over my body, my face falls into my hands, and my body shakes with the loud sobs coming from my chest. I can't stop them. The agony swallows me whole.

"Beautiful," he says, and without another word, he pulls me into his chest, lifting me as he sits against the headboard, his arms wrapped tightly around my trembling body. He sets me in his lap, holding me tight and I bury my face in his neck, clutching his shoulders for support. I let

my emotions take over my body, feeling the pain and the terror and the relief of being held.

"I can't..." I stutter, trying to talk through my tears. His hand runs up and down my back, banishing away the cold, dirty feeling that lingers on my skin from the dream.

"Shh, baby, I'm here. Just breathe," he whispers, kissing my forehead and tucking me close to him, his chin resting on the top of my head. I take in a breath, then slowly let it out.

"Again, Aria," he continues to whisper, watching me while I take another full breath and release it.

Commented [LD16]: , and then

I feel myself calm down from his warmth and that intoxicating scent of mint that only Gavin can make both calming and exciting at the same time.

He lifts his chin and places his palms on my cheeks, tilting my face up so his eyes meet mine. He gasps, seeing my disheveled state. I see his forehead crease with worry as he wipes my tears away with his thumbs and showers my face with soft kisses.

"How? When did you get here?" I whisper, finding comfort in his never wavering eyes and gentle touch upon my lower back and shoulder. One of his hands comes up to rest on my cheek, his touch so light it's as if I'm imagining it.

"I was on my way home and I wanted to bring you flowers to surprise you. When I got here, your sister let me in to give them to you. I found you in a nightmare. You looked so scared, so helpless, I had to wake you. I can't stand to see you like this, hurt and afraid, Aria. Are you okay? Please be honest with me."

I can't seem to form words so I rest my forehead against his, taking a deep breath to steady myself.

I'm okay, it was just a dream. I'm okay.

"I'm okay. It was horrible, but I'm okay," I finally whisper.

Gavin exhales, not letting go of me. He traces a pattern across my thigh, calming me.

"What do you need, baby?" I get butterflies despite my nightmare at the sound of him calling me that. I might even like it better than Beautiful.

"I don't know, Gavin. I can't fall back asleep after that. Can you just hold me for a while?"

He leans back, smiling warmly at me. My chest feels a bit lighter when he does that.

"That I can do."

His arms wrap around me, his hands gliding up my back to soothe me. Pressing my face to his chest, I focus on breathing in and out. God, he feels so good.

"Do you remember your nightmare?"

I lift my face from the solace of his warm skin as Gavin presses soft kisses to my forehead and temple. His warmth and voice and, oh, his touch, is so comforting, and even though I'm sure I won't see him after tonight, I can't bring myself to let him go just yet.

"I don't think I can talk about it right now, Gavin. I'm sorry, I just can't."

He gazes down at me and nods with understanding in his gaze.

My face flushes in shame and I realize what he must think of me.

"You must think I'm a basket case, Gavin. I'm so sorry; I didn't mean to break down on you like this."

He runs his fingers through my hair soothingly, and despite my embarrassment, I relax into his chest.

"Don't think that, beautiful. I like you. I want to be with you."

"Morning!" I hear Kel say as she sprints down the stairs with Lucas closely behind her. I'm sitting on a stool at the kitchen island and Gavin is looking ruggedly sexy, as always, standing next to me, drinking a cup of black coffee.

"Hey, sis. You remember Gavin, don't you?" She gives me a knowing smile, walks up, and hugs me while Lucas steps up to Gavin and they shake hands.

"Of course, it's great to see you again. Would you like an omelet?"

She begins to get out the ham, eggs, American cheese, and milk along with a pan and four plates.

"I'd love one, thank you," Gavin says, his voice smooth, and then his phone begins to ring. I still can't believe that he stayed here all night with me. We watched the news and talked about our favorite movies and music. It felt so natural to be with him without any pressure. When he leans close to me and my eyes dart up to meet his, the smile he gives me makes me weak in the knees.

"I have to take this. Do you mind if I step outside for a minute?"

I shake my head and pull his mouth down to mine. He smiles just a little bigger.

I press my lips against his again with a slow and tender kiss. He groans, tucking my hair behind my ear before he pulls away.

"No need to rush; I feel like I'm taking too much of your time anyway, Gavin. Last night was wonderful, but you didn't have to stay."

Gavin shakes his head and leans forward to press a soft kiss to my cheek.

"I wanted to and I'm glad I did. I would've just gone home, and I really wanted to see you again, beautiful."

I smile, satisfied with his answer as he steps away and heads toward the door with his phone pressed to his ear.

"You guys are so cute, honey. What happened last night?" Kel asks, sitting next to me while the pan heats on the stove.

"He brought me flowers, he held me, and we talked. It was my best night so far, Kel."

She smiles approvingly and hands me a glass of orange juice.

"That's really great, Aria. Did you guys...?" Immediately, I know where she's going. I jump forward and put a hand over her mouth, hastily shaking my head.

"No! No, not yet. We just talked and kissed and watched TV, had coffee. He's so much more than I could have imagined. I mean, he listens, and I think he really gets me. Which is crazy because I've only known him, what? A day?"

She just shakes her head and goes to start the omelets.

"I knew Luke here three hours and I knew he was different. There isn't a rule saying you need to know everything about a guy to start falling for him."

Lucas looks up from his tablet and narrows his eyes at Kel.

"You're such a liar, sweetheart. You were a goner from the moment you laid your eyes on me." He gives me a wink as my sister turns around, sets the burner on low, and walks over to Lucas. She sets herself in his lap and smacks his arm.

"You're so full of yourself!" Nuzzling her face into his neck, she smiles up at him.

He grins wider, chuckles and kisses her on the head.

"You know you love me, sweetheart."

"I do, smart ass."

As they begin to kiss I head over to the door and Gavin comes in, his brow creased with worry as he pushes his cell phone back into his pocket.

"Everything okay?" I ask, walking into his arms as he kisses my cheek.

"Just a problem that I need to fix. We've been trying to merge with Alcatraz Industries for the last quarter and it just fell through. I'm sorry, baby, but I have to head into the office for a few hours."

I can see the stress on his face and I hastily nod, not wanting him to feel bad for leaving.

"It's all good, Gavin. Thank you for staying with me. You didn't have to, though. You hardly got any sleep..."

He grabs my hand in his and lifts it to his lips, kissing my palm. I've found he only does this when he's worried.

"Hey, I loved spending time with you, Aria. I actually got better sleep here with you on that sectional than I do in my own bed."

I doubt that's true, but I smile and wrap my arms around his shoulders. He kisses my forehead and I find my eyes closing contentedly.

"Dinner tonight?" I whisper. Gavin pulls away and smiles, nodding his head.

"Absolutely."

Five

As I slip my ballet flats on and fasten the ribbons of my leotard, my cell rings. I skip over, almost falling as I'm reaching for it. I see Gavin's name on the screen and smile. It's been about a week since the night he held me, comforted me after that horrible dream. We've gone out to lunch almost every day, growing closer and I've found so many things I like about him. His laugh when I try to impersonate my family members or friends as I'm telling a story. His passion for the work his father has done in the technology world, the fierceness in which he speaks when we talk about his sister, Callie. I've learned he's very protective of the only daughter of James A. Thomas. I've learned he will only drink when in the company of people he trusts, for some people will stop at nothing to get close to him and his family. When he told me that, I was intimidated. The lavish life style he has is something that is not new to me and though it is a lot to take in, Gavin is much more than a billionaire or a CEO or even the owner of a very large, very reputable technology development company.

He is more.

"Hi"

Gavin's husky laugh makes my heart beat faster in my chest, loving the sound of it in my ears.

"What are you up to, beautiful?"

"Just stretching before my dance session with Eli."

He's silent for a moment, making me wonder what he's thinking about.

"Eli?" His voice hardens just a bit. I don't understand why.

"Yeah, he's my dance coach, Gavin."

"How long have you been working with him?"

I gnaw at the inside of my cheek, unsure why he's upset about this.

"A few years. You're not jealous are you?"

"No, I mean, not necessarily. Aria, I think we need to talk."

My heart just about stops at those words and I drop my bag on my foot.

"Shit! Shit!" I cry out, almost forgetting that he's still on the phone.

"Aria, are you okay?" he asks, as I cradle my foot like a baby.

"Um, yeah, I'm fine. Can we talk later? I have to go."

"Sure. I'll see you tonight?" His voice is still filled with concern.

"Of course." I hang up and decide to walk off my hurting foot while I search for Eli.

What's going on with Gavin? I mean, he was perfectly happy this morning and now?

God, what if he's changed his mind about us?

I try to work off my anxiousness while I do my normal exercises with Eli, finding a rhythm in the music and listening when he speaks encouragingly to me. After 25 minutes, I begin to wind down from my worries.

"Great job, Aria. Perfect. Now once more," Eli says over the music.

I take a deep breath, balancing on my feet before I close my eyes, finding my center and beginning my routine again.

This time I take it slow, going through each move on pace with the violins overhead.

When I finish my last step, I open my eyes and sink down to my knees. I take a swig of my Dasani water.

"You did great, Aria. You feeling okay?"

I nod, letting Eli pull me up, and I give him a smile and a side hug before making my way to where I left my bag and cowboy boots.

"See you next week?" Eli calls from the back of the gym, ducking his head under a beam above.

"Sure thing! Have a good one!" I call back, giving him a wave. I take off my ballet flats and place them in my bag and pull on my fleece jacket and boots.

As I make my way out to my Jeep, I'm surprised just how much I miss Gavin as my day goes on.

Sarah Bareilles' "Brave" starts playing when I pull into the driveway of my apartment. I recognize it as Farah's ring tone and I grab my cell off the dashboard.

"Hey, Farah."

"Oh, my God!! I talked to Kel. Tell me everything!!!"

I giggle at my friend's excitement, pulling my ballet bag over one shoulder and heading up the stairs toward the elevator of my apartment building.

"Shit, I wanted to tell you myself!" *Damn sister of mine...*

"I know, but I have to know now. You spent the night with him?"

"Uh, yes." I know what she's thinking...

"Okay, so sex scale with 1 being the best and 10 being the suckiest, how was he?"

I burst out laughing, earning a surprised glance from Kel as I unlock the door and sit on the sectional, trying and failing to give her evil eyes.

"Seriously! I've only known him a day! I haven't slept with him, you slut!"

She laughs hard and I can hear Jaden, her boy toy of the moment laughing, too.

"Oh, my God, I'm on speaker?" The blood rushes to my face.

"Well, duh! He's laughing his pretty little ass off!" She's still laughing.

Ugh, how embarrassing. My cheeks flame as I do a face palm.

"Hanging up now, bye!" I end the call, feeling my face burn. I make my way into our living room, and Kel, giggling, puts down her book.

"You told Farah?" She laughs again, giving me a squeeze as she hugs me.

"Yup!" She is still laughing her ass off, the smart ass.

At 6:10, I hop out of a refreshing shower, blow-dry my hair, and braid it behind my head so it's out of my eyes. I've picked out a light green dress that comes just above my knees to wear for dinner. I look in the mirror and suck in a breath, placing a pair of brown flats on my feet and my silver locket with an emerald birthstone in the center of the pendant around my neck. It was a birthday present from my dad that he gave me after Jeremy's funeral almost a year ago. It gives me strength knowing he'd be happy for me as I start something new.

I grab my phone and sit down on my bed, seeing three new messages from Gavin.

Can't wait to see you tonight, beautiful.

You sounded a little off on the phone. You okay, Aria?

I got out a little early. Are you home?

I text him back, thankful that I can see him tonight. An unsettling feeling in my chest hasn't left since our very brief phone call earlier.

I'm home, no worries. Are we still on for dinner?

Absolutely, I'm on my way over. I brought your favorite movie.

I smile at that and step out of my bedroom, still feeling a little unsure of this "talk" with him.

Kay, see u soon.

I slip my phone into a silver tote and set it on the counter. While opening the fridge and pulling out two Coronas, I hear the roar of his Jaguar outside. I bite my lip with excitement running through me as he softly knocks twice on the door.

I pull the door open and give him a smile, hoping he doesn't see my uneasiness. Those blue-gray eyes gaze down at me, blazing with excitement, as his bottom lip is trapped between his teeth.

"Hi," I say, stepping closer to him, my eyes sweeping over his sculpted frame. He wears black jeans hanging perfectly on his hips, with a blue Billy Joel tee that is just a shade darker than the color of his eyes.

His hair is messy and he has just a trace of stubble along his jaw.

"Ms. Morgan, are you checking me out?" he drawls, giving my hand a tug so I'm wrapped in his arms and I press my face to his neck, inhaling his minty scent.

"Most definitely, Mr. Thomas. You look edible."

In the next second, Gavin grasps my head in his hands and presses his lips to mine. I moan in both surprise and desire. His tongue explores, ravages, adores my mouth and I throw my arms around his neck while his hands grip my waist.

"You say something like that and I just want to stay in with you all night, beautiful."

I suck in a breath, my breathing erratic as I realize for the first time in my life I want to make love to a man. The first time I had sex I was sixteen years old, lost and naive, seeking love in a man that was never capable of it. But with Gavin, I know it would be my choice. It would be making love, and that makes me both happy and terrified at the same time.

"Hey, come back, beautiful," he says, his eyebrows drawn together. His thumbs trace my jaw and I lean into him, my epiphany settling inside my mind.

I want him. For the first time in my life, I want more.

"What?" I'm brought back to the here and now.

"You just got this faraway look, Aria. Where did you go?"

I shake my head, not wanting him to think something is wrong.

"Thinking. What did you bring me?"

He grins as if he has a surprise and shows me the Blu-ray case in his hand.

" *Final Destination 3.*"

I squeal happily and pull him into the apartment. I told him this is my favorite movie of all time.

As we walk into the living room, he sweeps my feet from under me and carries me to the couch, where he plops me down and laughs huskily. He leans forward, pecking my lips with a kiss. He puts the movie in and I turn on the TV.

"You're favorite, right?"

I smile and settle my legs on his lap. My fingers interlaced in his, Gavin places a soft kiss on the palm of my left hand.

"Hmm."

He smiles crookedly and switches off the lamp as I cuddle closer to his side, my legs thrown over his and his arm around my shoulders.

He presses his nose into my hair as the credits start.

"Mm-mm, you smell good, Aria."

I rest my head on his chest and breathe him in, loving the nearness of his solid, warm body.
This feels right.

Six

Even after the movie ends, we sit and cuddle and stare at each other, not saying anything. A hand rests at the small of my back when he takes a big breath and I feel him stiffen a little as he holds me.

"What happened earlier?" I murmur, trying to read his expression.

"I don't want to scare you off with what I'm about to say."

I gaze up at him, a little uneasy about what he could possibly say to scare me away.

"Look, if you're changing your mind after last night, Gavin, I'd completely..."

He interrupts with an index finger to my parted lips. His eyes blaze and I can't take mine away from his.

"I want us to be exclusive, baby."

My heart stops and then immediately speeds back to a rapid beat, soaring at the sound of those words. He hasn't changed his mind. He really wants to be with me, and I can see it in his eyes.

I gasp, rendered speechless, and his hand comes up to my cheek, his eyes clear of the darkness I saw before.

"Are you sure?" I whisper, my palm resting over his heart where I feel it beating just as fast as mine.

My chest fills with the desire for more with him. I skate my other hand to rest beside my left against his chest, just feeling his heart beat, his breaths.

Gavin smiles then, genuinely and places his hand over mine where they rest.

"You feel that?"

"Yes."

"You have such an effect on me. When I'm away from you, all I think about are your emerald green eyes and soft, vibrant smile. I want to be with you in every way possible. I don't want you to do this with anyone else, just me."

I can't help the way I smile at him and I grasp his hands in both of mine, hastily nodding my assent.

"No one else, I promise."

Then he kisses me. With a hand at the back of my neck and his arm wrapped tightly around my waist, he consumes me with his mouth, groaning when I suck on his bottom lip, nipping at it before I pull away.

"Ready for dinner?"

I grin, not being able to stop the joy this man incites within me. He helps me to my feet and holds my hand until we reach his car. *God, I love this car.*

"Jasmine, right?" I ask, running my hand down the hood of the car.

I see something pass over his features, telling me he doesn't want to talk about it. Maybe the car, but not the girl.

"Hey, will you tell me about her?" I ask, squeezing his hand in mine, gauging his reaction.

Gavin slowly turns to me and runs a hand through his hair, opening the passenger door for me like a gentleman. I can't help thinking that his mother must have raised him right.

"Soon, okay?" I nod, sitting in the seat before he closes the door, and a minute later the engine revs to life. It vibrates underneath us and it elicits a shiver of excitement to spread up my back and to my fingers.

What would it feel like if I unbuckled my seat belt and slid over his lap right now, with the rumble and tug of a Jaguars engine underneath us? I find myself biting my lip as the fantasy takes hold of my mind and my body.

"What are you thinking about, baby?"

"W-what?" My eyes go to his, cheeks reddening having been caught with the way my thoughts were turning. He narrows his eyes at me a bit and then shakes his head, his mouth turning up into a mischievous grin.

"Careful, please."

He smiles wickedly at me, giving me a wink. This elicits goose bumps over my skin for what's to come.

Commented [LD17]: and then shakes his head,

Commented [LD18]: This elicits

"Hang on tight, Ms. Morgan."

A delicious shiver runs through me at his deep voice, and the engine beneath us just excites me more.

When we pull onto a dirt road off of Eastern Avenue in South End, my eyes dart to Gavin, who has one hand on the steering wheel, the other interlaced in mine across my lap.

"What are you up to?"

He grins, not taking his eyes off the road.

"I'm taking my beautiful girl to dinner."

My heart skips a beat and I smile, biting down on my lip, his touch against my hand revving me to life.

"Oh, okay. I was just making sure you weren't taking me down a deserted road to hack me to pieces like in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*." He throws his head back and laughs, his eyes briefly flicking over to mine when we enter a clearing covered with green grass, and I see lilacs spread around the property.

I gasp, wondering where we are and how he knew what my favorite flower was.

A small brick building comes into view. It has a white door and small-town charm. There's a gravel walkway leading to the door, and the glass windows reaching the entire height of the building tell me that the lights inside are dimmed and it most likely has a romantic feel.

The sign above the entrance is in the shape of an Italian pasta dish with twinkling lights hanging from it and it reads Amore per La Casa. I'm speechless, my eyes blinking in disbelief as I take it all in.

Gavin looks over at me, smiling in amusement and using his hands to hold my face. I close my eyes and open them again, leaning up and pressing my mouth to his in thanks.

"This is beautiful, Gavin," I whisper, leaning away and gazing into his eyes.

He chuckles and kisses my hand softly.

"Wait till you see inside, Aria."

I grin and kiss him again, deeper this time.

He kisses me back, his hand anchoring my head to his mouth, gripping my hip with the other. I feel the tightening in my core, wanting to kiss every possible surface of his skin, but knowing I can't yet.

I'm breathless, forcing myself to pull away, my mouth tingling in aftershock from the kiss.

"How did you know?" I ask as he leads me up the walkway, his hand in mine.

"What?"

I lean down and pick up a lilac, cradling it in my palm.

"That this is my favorite flower. Did Kel tell you?"

He takes a step back, his eyes first filling with confusion and then with sheer excitement.

"Really, beautiful?"

I nod, my face stretching in happiness.

His eyes lock on to mine and he pulls me into him, wrapping an arm around my waist. The sweetest of kisses is pressed to my temple.

"Ever since yesterday, I've noticed you always smell like lilacs, Aria. It's intoxicating and sweet, making it impossible for me to stay away from you."

Oh, my. How can a guy like this exist and actually like me? My head is swimming with excitement, and also with worry that somehow I'm going to wake up from this dream tomorrow.

Gavin opens the wooden door for me and we step inside, the southern charm of this quaint Italian restaurant taking my breath away.

"Do you own this?" I have to ask.

He smiles lopsidedly at me, shaking his head.

"I'm a silent owner. My grandmother founded this place and my cousin Anthony and his wife Stella have run it for the last six years. All I do is help keep it thriving financially. It's amazing, isn't it?"

I grin and nod, pulling him to the reception desk where an older woman with red curly hair and

gray eyes smiles, welcoming us.

"Hey, Gavin. How are you doing, honey?" she says, her smile warm. Gavin takes her hand and smiles endearingly.

"I'm good, Stella. You look happy, as always. How's my cousin these days?"

She grabs two menus and leads us up the stairs to a balcony table with only two chairs and a black top.

"He's good, working hard. I swear he never stops!" She laughs lightly. "Will it just be you two tonight?"

Gavin smiles at me, pulling out a seat for me and grasping my hand before I sit.

"Yes, excuse my manners, please. Stella, this is Aria. Aria, this is Stella. She's part owner of this restaurant."

I smile and shake her hand, amazed at how deep her eyes are.

"A pleasure. This is a wonderful place, Stella. Thank you for having us."

She tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear, looking back to Gavin who places his hands on my shoulders, massaging gently.

"It's our honor, Aria. Have a wonderful meal on me, please."

"Thank you, Stella," I say as she places our menus in front of us and heads back the way she came.

"She's delightful, Gavin."

He smiles, his eyes alight with easy contentment.

"She is. I'm glad you got to meet her, Aria."

I smile back at him and pick up the menu, feeling lighter now that I've begun to see into the mystery that is Gavin Thomas. We order from what Stella recommends and I nibble on delicious bread and cheese as we wait.

"Here you go guys. Fresh from the oven. Do you need anything else at all?"

Stella graciously sets two steaming plates of food in front of us and refills our waters.

"No, no, thank you so much Stella. This looks amazing."

Gavin reaches across the table to take her hand in his, smiling at her in that charming way of his.

"Enjoy and please come back soon, OK?"

I nod around my first bite of pasta and hear Gavin speak to her some more.

"You're quiet, beautiful," Gavin says after she excuses herself to serve another table and I look up from my fettuccine Alfredo with basil and see his eyes looking into mine.

"Oh, sorry, I was just thinking about how much I love this place. It's so quaint and the food is delightful."

He doesn't smile like I expected. He puts down his fork and looks into my eyes, taking my hand across the table, making it impossible for me to hide from him.

"I don't think that's all there is, Aria. I want us to be honest with each other. This is all so new to me and I don't want to mess it up with you, beautiful. Please tell me what's wrong."

I sigh, putting down my fork and wiping my mouth a little before his eyes capture mine again.

"I don't know, you're just so...unexpected. You make me feel different, happy, worthy, even beautiful. I like being with you so much, and this is all so amazing, Gavin."

He exhales, a small smile playing on his lips.

"I want to make you feel all those things and more, and I feel the same way. I didn't plan to be so drawn to you like this, to feel this way, but it's here and it's amazing. Can't we just enjoy it?"

"I want to. I just can't help feeling like the floor's going to come out from underneath me at some point. Gavin, good things don't usually last for me."

Letting my hand go, he places two bills down on the table, then gets out of his seat and kneels beside me.

"Can I take you somewhere, beautiful?"

I nod, getting out of my seat. Gavin takes my hand in his and kisses my palm softly as we make our way out of the restaurant and, instead of leading me to the car, he walks toward the shoreline and onto the beach where I see the low tide.

There's a white cotton blanket laid out across the sand with a single red rose in the center of it.

When I see it, my lips twitch and a smile is widening my mouth as Gavin lifts me easily into his arms. He sits us down and settles me in his lap so my legs are folded and I'm facing him. The need I see in his eyes takes my breath away.

Seven

"I know you say that good things don't last for you and I can't promise you that this will. But I want to be with you, baby. I want to kiss you and touch you and cherish you. If this is moving too fast, just tell me and we can slow down. I'll never push you, but I need you to be honest with me." His voice is deep with emotion.

I suck in a breath, not wanting to slow this down but needing to be completely honest now.

"I'm sorry, Gavin. I do want to be with you and yes, this is fast but...it's what I want, more than anything. I don't want to slow this down." *I'm opening my heart to him, for better or for worse. I trust him.*

I see his exhalation of breath before he lifts his hands to my cheeks, holding my gaze to his. He searches my eyes, sees right through every defense I have around myself, and cuts through them to the very heart of me. This is the moment that I give myself to him. I lose the words I'm about to say when he pulls my face to his and lays those lips on mine.

I breathe him in, clutching my hands in his hair. My tongue slips into his mouth, moves with his in a passionate dance. Need consumes me as my fingers tangle into his hair. His arms hold me tight to his chest and his hands grip the hem of my dress. When he sucks on my bottom lip, I moan. *God*, I feel my sex clench in desire. He nips softly at my lip and then slips his tongue into my mouth again, stealing my breath from my lungs. My arms wrap tightly around his neck. *I need him now. I need to be his.* Those hands of his urge my legs around his waist as he ravages my mouth with his mouth, his scent engulfing my senses. My head swims with my desire for this man, something that is new and exciting to me.

"Aria, we should stop. I don't want to push you," he murmurs into the dip of my shoulder, laying light kisses and nips of his teeth over my neck and bare shoulder.

I shake my head, biting down on his lip when he tries to pull away. He groans deep at the back of his throat and holds me to him while he stands. With my legs tight around his hips and my arms clasped around his neck, he carries me to the Jaguar and puts me in it on the passenger side.

"Can I take you home?" His voice is velvet to my ears, so tender and soft.

I shake my head, knowing Kel and Lucas are home. I don't want any interruptions when we finally make love. When I finally give myself to him completely, I want it to be special. I want it to be right and perfect. With Gavin, I know it will be.

"My place?" he asks, skating his hand down the slope of my neck.

I nod eagerly and Gavin dips his head to kiss my lips quickly, his eyes alight with a smile. He closes the door and once he's inside places a hand on my leg, squeezing gently, and revs the engine to life.

My blood heats with anticipation as Gavin turns onto Rodrick Boulevard in East Side, then pulls up to an upscale apartment complex with what look like penthouse condominiums. The sign reads Jordan and Sons.

"You live here?" I'm in awe of my surroundings.

"Yes, I have a penthouse on the 23rd floor. It has a great view of the harbor."

Gavin parks in back of the complex. The alleyway is dimly lit and I look ahead where I see a back entrance I hadn't noticed before.

"Thank you," I whisper when he opens my door for me and wraps his arm around my shoulders, leading us toward the entrance.

"This way, I can avoid the crowds of reporters. Trust me, it's not fun to be the center of the tabloids so I use this entrance to avoid it all."

I nod, knowing firsthand what he means. Whenever my mother gets back from one of her trips overseas our house is bombarded by reporters and photographers looking for a story on the world-famous Andrea Candice Morgan. It was exciting when I was younger, but now it's just a hassle that I'd rather avoid.

"I know how that feels. Whenever my mom comes home we're surrounded by tabloid reporters.

My house, the studio, even Julliard is swarming with hundreds of them."

He meets my eyes. His eyes are clear as he smiles down at me.

"What's your mother's name?"

"Andrea."

I can see the understanding register in his face when he realizes who she is.

"I had no idea. She's very successful, I've heard. Did you ever want to be a model?"

He leads me down a corridor to a bank of elevators.

"No, dance has always been my passion."

He shakes his head, pulling me into the elevator and kissing my temple, his arms wrapped around my waist from behind.

"You're an amazing dancer, beautiful. What does your dad do?"

I snuggle into his embrace as the elevator ascends the floors.

"He's a carpenter and a mechanic. He's always worked for everything he has."

Gavin runs his hands over my back, making my skin tingle in response.

"You're proud of him, I can hear it in your voice."

"Yes." *How could I not be? My dad is the best man I've ever known.*

The elevator stops and Gavin takes my hand, turning left toward a black door with a brass doorknob.

"This is you?" I cock my head to the side in question.

He nods and I bite my lip, excited to see his place.

Gavin deftly unlocks the door and takes me inside, massaging my shoulders as I take in what I see.

It's nothing like I expected.

The walls are painted an earthy brown, with hardwood floors throughout the living room and dining room areas. The furniture has a modern feel to it, with dark cherry side tables, an entertainment center with a flat-screen television that has to be at least fifty inches wide, and a white leather couch and sectional. There's a red area rug across the space and a few modern art pieces along the walls. A round dining table that seats four matches the other wooden furniture and a brick fireplace with three picture frames above it complete the room. I walk over and run my hand along the mantel, seeing the care he takes of his furniture and space. There is nothing screaming "bachelor pad" to Gavin's place. From the modern art, simple decor, and pictures on the mantel, I can see what this man values. The first frame holds a photo of him, dressed in dark jeans and a black V-neck tee, his arm wrapped around a girl looking to be about sixteen years old. She has long light brown hair and blue eyes a few shades lighter than his. She's beautiful and looks a lot like Gavin. This must be his sister.

"Is this Callie?" I ask, my eyes darting to Gavin's before he steps behind me and nods with a warm smile across his face. I can see his love for her so clearly.

"Yes, that was at her birthday party last year. We took her to Paris."

I turn around and place my hands on his chest.

"This is very you, I like it."

He grins and runs the back of his hand against my cheek.

"We don't have to rush."

I nod, knowing that this will be the night that I'll give myself to him. I want to be with him, feel his touch and his mouth on my body as I make love to him. But my only fear is that the horrible memories of Bryce and that last night will come back to me. I don't know how I'd handle that.

Commented [LD19]: this is just the spacing that needs correcting.

"Can we watch a movie?" I ask, hoping he doesn't notice my uneasiness. He nods and brings me over to the couch. He sits behind me, so his arms wrap around my stomach and I can feel his warmth.

Without a word, the remote is placed in my hands.

"You don't want to pick?" My eyes go to his, narrowing in suspicion.

"All yours, beautiful." His warm voice encourages me.

As I flick through the movie listings On Demand, I see *Marley and Me* and click on it.

"Will you hate me if we watch a chick flick?" I tease, enjoying the feel of his arms. Gavin chuckles softly.

"Not at all."

I start the movie and rest my chin against his chest, curling into his side.

"Hmm, I like this," I whisper, looking up at Gavin through my eyelashes. A slow, sexy smile spreads across his handsome face and he wraps his arms around my waist and nuzzles his nose against my neck. Soon the movie begins and we both turn, watching the screen.

By the middle of the movie, my eyes start to get heavy so I rest my head on Gavin's shoulder and drift.

The pain radiated as he hit me hard across the face, his rings scratching me under my eye. He roughly tore my jeans down my legs and bit on my neck harshly. I cried out in pain, fighting to get away. He hit my face again and all too quickly slammed himself into me, his deathly strong hands keeping me beneath him.

"No! No!" I begged for mercy, for him to let me go, but he covered my mouth with his hand and took my body forcefully. The pain of his hands gripping me tightly kept me quiet, but when he slammed into me, his long erect penis inside me, I screamed and screamed, helpless to be heard.

"Stop! Stop..."

Tears course down my cheeks as my eyes open with panic soaring through me. Gavin's hands shake me gently. His blue-gray eyes are filled with worry as he wipes the tears from my cheeks and grasps onto my shaking hands tightly, not letting me go.

"Aria! Aria, you had a nightmare." Dipping his head, he showers my face with soft kisses.

My body is still shaking, trembling. I can't seem to pull air in through my parted mouth.

"Breathe, beautiful. Please just breathe."

Gavin places one of my hands across his chest and I feel his slowing heartbeat. I close my eyes and take a breath then slowly let it out. Feeling the beat of his heart begins to calm me.

"You feel that?" he whispers, echoing the words I've heard before.

"Yes." My voice is frail with the aftershocks of fear and panic.

"I'm right here, baby. I'm real." His soothing voice breaks the weight in my chest and when I look back into his deep eyes, I feel safe. Finally, I feel safe.

"This has to stop, Aria. I can't see you hurting and be helpless to stop it. Please, talk to me." His voice is begging me. I look up into his fearful eyes and crawl onto his lap. I bury my face into his neck and breathe him in, my tears soaking his tee shirt. Gavin wraps his arms around my back and lets me clutch onto him as the remnants of the nightmare play through my mind. He kisses the side of my face and strokes my hair while I breathe in and out.

Once I calm down, I know that I have to tell him about Bryce. It terrifies me because I know he could judge me or pull away from me after knowing the reality of my nightmares.

I lean away from his chest and wipe at my tears.

"Just let me get this all out, okay?" It's a plea. If I don't get this out now, I fear I'll never have the courage.

His body tenses, his hand comes up to caress my cheek as he nods.

"I won't judge you, beautiful. I promise."

I nod, thankful for his nearness, and in his hand holding mine I find the strength to tell him what happened four months ago.

"In my sophomore year in high school, I met Bryce. He was the quarterback on the football team, an A student, and I felt so special that he noticed me. I was a dance major and I liked him a lot, so maybe I didn't see the warning signs that I should have."

Gavin's blue-gray eyes take on a hardness as he sees where I could be leading, but I have to keep going. He squeezes my hand in reassurance, urging me to continue.

"We dated for five months and he was so sweet, gentle, kind, and perfect, or so I thought. He was patient with me, waiting until I was ready, and when we did go all the way, it felt right. I loved him. When spring break arrived we made plans to spend it at his parent's cabin. As time went on, he started to change.

Commented [LD20]: parent's

He wouldn't let me leave his sight, he got angry easily, and he insisted I take leave from my classes and stay there with him. One night, I slipped out to see Kel, trying to get some distance from him, but when I came back, he'd been drinking. That was the first night he hit me."

Gavin goes stiff beside me and presses his forehead against mine, his eyes soft and tender and never looking away from me. His sincerity binds me to him in this moment.

"I'm so sorry, beautiful." He kisses my forehead, my cheek, and my nose, and cradles my head in his hands. I know I have to tell him all of it, so I smile weakly and continue.

"I remember the pain more than anything else. And his eyes, they were brown, but when he got angry, they were so dark. He was a monster. He didn't see me. The rage was all he saw. His eyes looked black. Afterward, he cried and begged me to forgive him and since I loved him, I did. I hid my bruises the best I could from then on, trying to be the perfect girlfriend to him. But on his birthday he saw me talking with his cousin, Shaun, and he lost it. He beat me so hard that night that eventually I blacked out. I was so confused and I blamed myself, thinking that I was provoking him like he'd said. When he proposed the next morning, I was so afraid of what he'd do if I rejected him that I said yes. He bought me a ring and told me to never take it off. But of course I did, on the last night that I lived with him. I put it on the kitchen table and decided I was done with being abused. I wanted out. I just had no idea how to get away from him." I'm sobbing now, my body shaking again. I haven't spoken about any of this, not even to Kel. It's all too much, but I need to say it. All of it.

Gavin's eyes blaze with concern as a tear falls from my eye. I don't want his pity. I don't want him to look at me and see how truly broken I am.

"It's okay. You can tell me." His hands wrap around my shoulders, rubbing circles with his thumbs.

His touch is like a balm and I don't hesitate to lean against the press of his hands.

"He came raging into the bedroom. I knew what was coming. I tried, I promise, God, I tried to get away. I tried to calm him down, but he punched me and I fell backward. B-Bryce...he..."

I have to stop. The emotion is drowning me as I fall into Gavin's warm chest. I'm a mess. Tears gather in my eyes and fall down my face. *I can't do this, I can't... I'm not strong enough for this.*

"My beautiful, strong girl. I've got you. I have you." Gavin wraps me up into his arms, tightly holding me to his chest as he presses his mouth to my forehead. He waits for me to calm myself, and then I raise my face to his. His blue and gray eyes are all I see, all I need to. I bite my lower lip in an effort to stop the sadness that's been brought to the surface.

A sob escapes me when I remember that night, his eyes, and the pain.

So much pain, so many times I could have stopped the events that happened with the man I had thought was right for me. How could I have been so wrong, so dreadfully wrong?

Sometimes I still blame myself for it all.

"You can stop if you need to. You don't have to..."

I shake my head and summon the courage inside me to keep going.

"I need to," I whisper, grasping his shoulders and holding onto this man that I know I'm falling in love with. After tonight, he'll have my heart forever. I know that in my heart, even how much that notion scares me. I trust him with it and that's what frees me to give him all of me. I hate that the bad stuff has to come first, before we can move on from it.

"I blacked out that night and when I woke up, I was in his bed. He was on top of me, his hands...were holding me down. I couldn't get away."

Gavin shakes his head in panic, tightening his fists at his sides. I can see that his body is strung tight and his muscles are tense under my hands as I hold one of his hands in both of my much smaller ones.

Though his eyes are soft and concerned, I see such anger in them.

"God, no, Aria..." His voice breaks then, emotion taking over every gorgeous angle in his face.

"He r-raped me," I choke, my voice barely over a whisper. I begin to sob, my hands clenching into my knees in an effort to calm myself. I feel Gavin shift so his knees surround mine and then, *thank god*, his hands scoop my palms to his lips. He kisses each of my knuckles so gently before he wraps those smooth fingers around my nape. He covers my face in soft kisses. From the creases under my eyes to the bottom of my jaw, no spot of skin is untouched. As he stands, I'm swept against his chest and Gavin carries me tightly in his arms. Wrapping my arms around his shoulders, I clutch onto him, finding comfort in the warmth of his neck.

"I'm sorry...Aria, I'm so sorry," Gavin murmurs, setting me down on the bed but never letting my hands go. My heart begins to race in sudden panic. *What does he think of me now that I've told him?*

"If you want me to leave, I will. I know you didn't sign up for this when you met me. I understand if..." Gavin silences me with a tender kiss on the lips, his hands smoothing my hair.

"Shh, I want you to stay. This, this doesn't change anything, Aria."

I lean back, shocked, and see the emotion, the need in his eyes. Is he just saying that because he feels bad for me? Or does he truly mean it? I shift closer to him, opening his tensed fists at his sides. Anger won't solve anything and I refuse to let him be hurt by my past.

"What are you saying?" I run a hand over the stubble along his jaw, afraid to hope. Gavin's arm is holding me close as if he's afraid I'll disappear.

"Stay, beautiful. We don't have to do anything tonight, but I don't want to let you go yet."

"But...you can be honest, Gavin. You didn't sign up for this. He broke me... I-I don't know if I ever healed from it" My damn voice breaks when I say the last word. Before I know what's happening, Gavin's mouth is covering mine and his tongue is in my mouth. In his kiss I find solace and a tenderness that I hadn't expected.

"My beautiful, strong girl. You are not broken. You are amazing."

I smile up at him, finally believing the honesty I see in those blue-gray eyes of his. *He means it. He understands. He accepts me and he still wants me.*

"You're sure?" I whisper, pressing my palm to his heart. I feel its steady beat under my fingers. The smile Gavin gives me chases away the shadows I've been living in for so, so long. He leans his forehead against mine.

"Yes." As Gavin holds me close, we watch the flames in his vast fireplace.

"When?" he whispers after long minutes of holding me close.

"Four months ago."

"If this is moving too fast, Aria, just tell me. Your sister told me you had an ex, but, God, I had no idea."

I snuggle closer to him, pressing my head against his shoulder.

"It's not, I promise. I'm with you, Gavin."

This is all I want, all I need.

Eight

"What happened?" I hear Gavin's voice brush against the shell of my ear, soft like velvet but traced with concern as he speaks.

I turn to face him and his eyes, darkened with worry but still a brilliant blue gray, lock onto mine.

"I woke up in the hospital. The night they found me, I was in bad shape. My dad found me that way. He attacked Bryce, but he never got in trouble for that, thank God."

Gavin nods, his face calmer now, though I see the simmering anger in his eyes. He wants to protect me and it makes me feel safe knowing he feels that way.

"Is he..."

"Bryce-he's out of jail now, but I have a restraining order against him. If he steps within five hundred feet of me, he'll go back to prison."

I look up to see a stark, determined look in those eyes I've come to know so well. I can see what he is thinking and I hastily shake my head.

"I need a last name, Aria." So he can track down the bastard that hurt me and do what?

"No." I will not let him do that. It won't change anything.

I feel his chest tighten, the muscles clenching under my fingers.

Finally, Gavin sighs and stands up, pacing the length of the dining area. I can see the tension in his shoulders as he walks purposefully.

"I need to protect you, Aria. I can't live with the idea that he could find you again."

I get up and wrap my arms around his neck.

"You're not going after him. I won't let you."

He curses and pulls me into his arms again.

"I won't let him hurt you. I promise you."

I nod, safely wrapped in his arms.

"I know. Thank you."

The strains of a building melody begin and my feet glide across the floor, the steps graceful as I close my eyes and surrender myself to the rhythm of the music and the movement of my feet, my hands, and my body. I spin and take the last step before the music fades and the lights dim.

I grab my bag and turn to see Gavin with a soft smile across his face while he watches me in awe.

My cheeks flame as I didn't know he was watching, and I'm hoping I didn't make any mistakes in the steps.

God, he's sexy. He's wearing a gray sweater with black slacks, his hair slicked back from a shower. His stubble is still there, though. I inwardly smile, knowing how wonderful it feels under my fingertips.

"That was so beautiful, Aria," he says, handing me a water once I reach him.

"I didn't know you were watching." I feel my blush.

He grins slowly, grazing his knuckles against my jaw.

"You were flawless as always," he murmurs, pulling me to his warm chest before placing those lips over mine, breathing me in.

I'm lost in thought on the ride back to my apartment after a delightful picnic with my man, my Gavin. Yes, it's been a delightful three weeks since that night in his penthouse. He's taken me out almost every night, but he hasn't invited me up again. I know why, but I want him so badly I'll gladly have him across the studio's hardwood floors, the grass where he takes me to have a picnic just before sunset, even over the hood of his oh-so-sexy car. But that's not possible, unfortunately.

"Can we get takeout tonight?" I ask as we enter my apartment and I head to the bathroom to get out of my green knee-length dress. Gavin smiles crookedly and nods, giving me a quick kiss before he lets me go. My heart skips a beat at the sight of *that* dimple.

"Dinner?" he calls to me.

"You choose. I'm just going to change." I call back, suddenly getting an idea. Tonight's the night.

"No rush. I'll pick a movie, too."

I head to the bathroom and call over my shoulder.

"No horror movies!"

"But those are the best kind!" I hear the low sounds of his chuckle.

The chicken Parmesan makes me moan in appreciation. I feel Gavin's eyes on me when I watch a funny part in the movie he picked out for us. He arranged both the movie and the wonderful dinner all while I was in the bathroom. When I asked how, he just winked at me as if it was nothing. How did he do that? I look over and see his eyes still trained on me.

"You're not watching it," I say, pouting. Gavin mutes the television and leans forward once my plate is empty.

"I know. I'm watching you, beautiful."

I lean in and kiss him softly on the side of his mouth before taking our plates to the kitchen and

soaking them in soapy water.

"Come here, Aria," Gavin says, his voice smooth as I walk toward him. Every time I look at him, I have to remind myself to breathe. He's wearing a pair of low-slung blue jeans and a gray Rolling Stones tshirt. He's barefoot, which is so goddamn sexy, and his hair is messy. It always is. He pulls me into his arms and dips his head, his mouth hovering over mine.

"I want you tonight, baby."

I gasp, biting down on my lower lip to stifle a moan. *He wants me.*

"I want you, too, Gavin. I thought after I told you...maybe it changed..."

He shakes his head, his eyes blazing with sincerity and desire.

"Nothing could change the way I feel for you."

Then he kisses me. Gavin's hands grip my hips as I tangle my fingers in smooth, silky strands of his hair. His mouth is hungry against mine, his breath whispering against my lips. I open my mouth to him, my heart racing in excitement and my tongue licking impatiently into his mouth. He groans, nipping at my lip and sucking on it until I moan in desire. When he pulls away, his eyes are filled with pure lust.

"Are you sure? If you need to take this slow or to wait a while, then we will, Aria. You're in charge here." His voice is filled with softness, waiting for me to make a decision.

I hastily shake my head. I want this so badly with him I don't need to wait. I need him. His touch.

"I want this, Gavin. Make love to me." My voice is pleading, raspy with my need for him.

He exhales and slowly an enigmatic beautiful smile spreads over his face.

He grabs my hand and I follow him to my dimly lit bedroom. The heavenly smells make me pause on the threshold of my bedroom.

My breath catches when I see the bouquet of flowers on my dresser, filled with lilacs and daisies.

My eyes flicker over to my queen-size bed, covered in red rose petals. There are lit candles on every possible surface and it takes my breath away.

"Gavin?" He wraps his arms around me and sweeps my hair away from the back of my neck. He begins tantalizingly kissing and sucking on my skin. I moan, my skin breaking out in delicious goose bumps.

"How did you..."

He chuckles and begins massaging my shoulders, making me moan again from the feel of his hands on me.

"I wanted tonight to be special for us, beautiful. And I had some help."

I giggle, now knowing why Kel mysteriously disappeared to Dad's place tonight.

"Kel?" I murmur as he nestles his face into the back of my neck.

"Mm hm."

I moan when he begins kissing my neck again and his fingers lift the bottom of my shirt. I feel his hand slip underneath the fabric. His touch is warm and gentle against my back, gliding up my shirt as he goes. Gavin then turns me around and locks his eyes on mine, blue-gray to green. His hands grasp the bottom of my shirt and slowly lifts it up. When he pulls it over my head I see him suck in a breath. Those eyes roam over my upper body and then I see his shoulders tense a little and I realize what he's looking at.

Shit! Why didn't I just keep my shirt on? I close my eyes briefly until I feel his fingers run across a long pink scar on my right hip. The memories assault me and I remember the pain. What should have been fun, turned into a nightmare when Bryce pushed me down the stairs of the cabin the night of his birthday party and I had to get seventeen stitches on my torso.

"Oh, beautiful," Gavin whispers and suddenly he's on his knees in front of me. Leaning forward, he presses a kiss to the side of my scar, his lips gliding up the length of it. I feel as if he's healing my soul with just a simple kiss. With another kiss to my hip, his hands come up to cradle my face.

"You're so goddamn beautiful" he drawls, blinking up at me with his deep blue-gray eyes.

I bite my lip to stop from saying the words that threaten to tumble out. With eager fingers, I pull him up to me, desperately gripping the bottom of his shirt with my hand.

"Kiss me," I whisper, pulling him closer to me. My fingers start unbuttoning his dress shirt, revealing his golden skin.

A smile, the smile that Gavin saves only for me, takes over his features as he lifts my face and takes my mouth in a soft, passionate kiss. I moan as his hands move down to the top of my yoga pants.

"You first," I whisper, pushing the fabric from his torso with greedy hands. Gavin stands before me, chest bare, smoldering blue-gray eyes filled with desire. I suck in a breath of air at the sight of him.

Oh, my God. He's just as toned as I imagined, with a chiseled chest and a six-pack that shows his dedication to keeping himself fit. I run my hands down his chest, reveling in the feel of his smooth skin under my fingers. The muscles ripple and tighten under them.

His mouth closes over mine again. Gavin sweeps my legs from underneath me and parts my lips with his tongue. His scent overwhelms me. I wrap my arms around his neck and he sets me onto the bed so my head rests on the pillows. He begins to kiss ever so slowly down my neck, licking my flesh as he goes. There's nothing rushed about the way he kisses me. He's taking his time and God, I want him.

"Gavin, babe, please..." I skate my nails down his bared shoulders in need.

He lifts his head and smiles seductively at me, a kind of smile that teases me.

"Impatient?" Gavin asks against my skin.

I nod eagerly, reaching for his belt buckle.

"Aria..." he whispers when I press my lips to his jaw, teasing it with slow licks.

"I want you, Gavin. Here. Now. You." I kiss his neck, jaw, and chest in between each word.

He stops my hands and pulls them over my head. His soft eyes dance with want, mirroring my own, I'm sure. Gavin keeps my hands still while he gazes down at me.

"I want to take this slow, okay?"

I nod, succumbing to his lovely weight upon my lower stomach. After a beat, he releases my hands as he kisses down my jaw, nipping at my collarbone. I wrap my legs around his hips and then his mouth sucks at the top of my breasts. He deftly undoes the front clasp of my black lacy bra and slides the straps down my arms. I moan in ecstasy as his mouth closes over one of my nipples, hardening under his urgent mouth. He sucks and nips on it, causing a tightening in my core. I feel the warmth between my legs. My hands clench in the sheets, desire coursing through me. I whimper, my head falling back.

"Oh..." I whisper, feeling his mouth gliding over to my other breast. His tongue adores the skin and teases the nipple slowly before he sucks it into his mouth, releasing an impatient moan from my parted lips. *He's torturing me.*

"Please..." I beg, pulling his head to my urgent lips for a kiss.

He smiles against my mouth as he sits up and runs his hands down my chest, cupping each breast, before lowering them to the edge of my pants again.

Gavin slips his hands under the hem and begins to slowly pull off my pants as he kisses my stomach, my thighs, and my calves until finally all that's left on my tingling body is a pair of black lacy boy-short panties.

"If you need to stop at any time, Aria, just tell me and we'll stop." His voice is against my ear and his arms are on either side of my head as he keeps most of his weight off me.

I nod, taking his face in my hands. I see the hunger and lust in his eyes, but more than that, I see the care for me in them, too. He doesn't want to push me, which only makes me want him more.

"Don't stop. I want this, Gavin."

Gavin sits back on his heels. His blue-gray eyes never leave mine as he undoes his belt buckle and unzips his jeans. I'm breathless, watching him move off the bed and drop his jeans to the floor so that all he has on is a pair of navy blue boxers. My eyes sweep from his ruggedly handsome face to his chiseled chest, down to his firm abs and his oh-so-toned hips and thighs. I feel that ache between my legs in desire for him and the stutter of my heart in anticipation of making love to him.

I reach out my hand to him and he grasps it. He kisses the palm and hovers over me again.

"Aria, you take my breath away."

I pull his mouth to mine and kiss him until I have to come up for air.

He slides down the bed toward my ankles and begins to kiss the left one ever so softly. His mouth glides up my calf, over the knee, and up my thigh. I shiver with desire, having his mouth between my legs.

"Gavin..."

I moan as he repeats the process with my other leg, his hand stroking up my thigh.

"You feel so good," he whispers, and my eyes close from the sound of his husky voice and teasing touch. Impossibly, it feels like my first time making love to anyone. And although it isn't, while feeling Gavin's adoring touch and warm breath upon the skin of my thighs, I realize that this is completely new to me.

His fingers slip under the fabric of my panties and I suck in a breath.

"You okay?" he whispers, forcing my eyes open with one hand on my cheek.

"Please don't stop, Gavin."

"I won't, baby." He pulls my panties off and his boxers join them a moment later.

I wrap my arms around his shoulders and press my mouth to his as he parts my legs with his knee.

Anticipation curls deep in my belly, and when I see Gavin hovering over me, licking the seam of his bottom lip, my core clenches with that ache for him. I pull those delectable lips to mine, groaning in need as he bites down gently on my lower lip.

He pulls away, his hand sliding up my thighs as his forehead presses against mine.

"My beautiful girl," he says, sliding his palm up and over my aching center.

Please...

When his fingers enter me, I moan loudly, my mouth opening and my head falling backward against the pillow. I feel myself tighten around his fingers. *God, it's just so good, so right.*

"Oh, Gavin." He slides his body down on mine until I feel his warm breath between my legs. *Oh, yes.* My core tightens as his lips close around me, his tongue licking slowly into the folds, his fingers sliding in and out of me, working me. Fireworks shoot over my skin, curling into the depths of my body.

"Don't stop..." I whisper, tangling my fingers into his hair when his tongue pulls at my clit.

"Gavin! Aah..." I feel something build inside me as his mouth teases my clit, his fingers going faster. In. Out. In. Out. It's perfection and torture all in the same motion because, though I need to *feel*, I don't want him to stop loving me. Loving me. God, is that what he's doing?

Yes, we're making love. Together, right now. And it's the best thing I've ever felt.

"Gavin!" Hard waves of such intense pleasure engulf me that I see stars. I wrap my arms around his neck, not wanting to ever let go.

I call out his name over and over, louder and louder as the orgasm crashes around me. My body trembles with the force of it. I feel myself wet between my legs as Gavin pulls his fingers

away and slows his kissing as his mouth moves up my hip, my stomach, my chest. My skin tingles, my heart trembles, my eyes close when tears gather on my lashes. *I feel loved. Loved by this man so completely.*

My sheer desire returns, feeling myself coming down from what I'm convinced is my first ever orgasm. How can that be possible? My eyes open and are immediately captured by Gavin's.

"Was that your first orgasm, beautiful?" he murmurs into the skin of my neck.

I giggle, nodding my head as he smooths a strand of hair away from my face.

"Do you have...?" I flick my eyes down to where he's nestled between my legs.

He nods, sliding off the bed as he retrieves two condoms from his wallet. I feel the bed dip when he crawls over me again.

He begins kissing my neck, teasing my opening with his length. His breath is at my ear where he whispers against my skin.

"Do you need to stop?" His voice is filled with strained need mixed with his ever present care for me. I rub my fingers over his stubble, drowning in the desire I see in his eyes.

I shake my head, kissing his lips impatiently. He grabs the back of my neck and kisses me hard on my lips as he ever so slowly slides into me. I moan at the feeling of such fullness and a slight burn as I expand around him. I moan into his neck, kissing up to his mouth where he kisses me so passionately, his tongue sweeping over mine. I wrap my legs around his hips and in a matter of seconds the pleasure consumes my body. His mouth is closing over mine more softly now. Gavin cradles my face in his hands and my arms wrap around his back. I can't help but clutch onto him as he slowly moves out of me and back in again. I can feel myself build again and I lift my hips up to him, moaning in pleasure at the heavenly feeling of him inside me.

"Please, Gavin, faster," I murmur, whispering his name over and over in hot desire. He slides out of me and squeezes my hips in his large, oh-so-delightful hands, his fingers delving into my waist as his lips press to my collarbone.

"Jesus, baby." His voice shakes with the gravity of this moment, where I give myself to him and he loves me in the most heavenly way.

"Yes, Gavin. Please," I beg, my mouth whispering against his.

He pushes into me once more and I feel myself tighten around him as I call out his name in pure ecstasy. I find my release in the stars, whispering against his lips, never letting go.

The pleasure rocks through my veins, making my skin tingle and my eyes flutter open as I watch his face. His mouth parts as he groans and whispers my name. His lips press to my neck.

"Beautiful!" he roars, the grumble expanding his chest, and my nails sink into his shoulders.

He stills inside me and I feel him let go as his body trembles and mine starts to come down from my high. I press my lips to his, passionately. My soul is ripped open, my heart healed. My head is not able to stop my heart from falling irrevocably in love with this man. Gavin smiles

my smile and tugs my mouth back to his once I've pulled in a breath. His kiss leaves me breathless again as he sits up and pulls me into his arms, pressing his face to my hair. I wrap my arms around him while he does the same to me before he leans back and cups my cheeks. I feel the connection between us.

"Gavin," I whisper, holding onto his waist. We're both panting, breathing into each other's skin. Commented [LD21]: each other's

"Amazing," he whispers, kissing my forehead and laying me down on the mattress once more as he wraps his arms around me. I rest my head on his chest and gaze up at him through my lashes.

"Thank you for making tonight perfect, Gavin. It was amazing."

He smiles boyishly and presses a kiss to my temple, his hand stroking my hair.

"Sleep, baby."

Nine

My eyes flutter open after what seems like days and there is sunlight pouring in through the blinds.

I see my gorgeous man lying peacefully next to me, one hand stretched across my stomach, the other arm hugging his pillow. I snuggle closer into Gavin's chest, enjoying the warmth of his skin. His face is so handsome while he sleeps, and I can't stop myself from gliding my hands down his happy trail to rest upon his hips.

I kiss his jaw softly, rub my lips over the stubble there, and then step out of bed, intent on finding something to make breakfast for us. Once I'm in his spacious kitchen, I pull out a pan from the cabinet and some eggs, milk, grated cheese, and sliced ham from the fridge. I also grab bacon and sausage links to make a grand breakfast for Gavin before he wakes up. I turn on the radio, keeping the volume low and singing to myself along with Carrie Underwood. "Cowboy Casanova" has me dancing around his kitchen in my bare feet.

Once the omelets are made, I start on the bacon and sausages, swaying my hips with the music. I hear Gavin approach and my eyes flick over to his sexy bed hair and blue-gray eyes.

"What do you think you're doing?" he whispers against my ear, his arms coming up to wrap around my waist. Gavin lets his hands glide up the front of the shirt I'm wearing. His shirt.

"Um, isn't it obvious?" I murmur, my voice turning into a breathy moan when he closes his mouth over my earlobe, tugging gently. I hum, my eyes closing as he reaches around me to turn off the burners and pulls me hard against him. I feel his hard length and bite my lip in arousal. I want him again. *He's just so damn beautiful. And sexy...*

"You should've stayed in bed with me, beautiful." His voice is a low rumble against my neck. He reaches down and squeezes his hands around my ass, making my ache for him grow in my core. Those lips on my exposed neck make my head fall back against his chest, my eyes shutter closed. He turns me around and immediately my hands wrap around the back of his neck. Gavin picks me up, my legs wrapping around his hips instantly, the need to feel his hard body against mine palpable.

He leans me against the counter and sits me on the surface.

"You look so hot like this." His voice is a caress, a promise of things to come.

Running my hand down his faint chest hair, I press a kiss to the skin there.

"So do you."

He presses his mouth to mine, parting my lips with his tongue and tasting my mouth. I taste him back, pulling him closer and sliding his boxers off as his hands cradle my face, his kiss hungry yet gentle.

"I want you, Gavin. Now."

He grins against my urgent lips and without another word slides into my damp sex, groaning at the feel of me. My mouth falls open in response. God, he feels like heaven. He fills me

perfectly.

"Christ, you feel good, Aria." His voice tingles against my skin.

I press my lips to his chest as he slides completely out of me and then fills me up again, going faster and faster. I cry out, my body buzzing with my building orgasm.

"Gavin...Gavin...Gavin!" I repeat over and over, my mouth insistent against his neck, feeling myself so close to coming.

"Come for me," he whispers against my skin, igniting my blood as I scream his name in pleasure.

Then I fall apart, the waves crashing around me as I tremble in the aftershock.

"Oh, beautiful," he groans, burying himself inside me while he calls out my name like a prayer. I watch as he finds his own pleasure within the walls of my center.

"Aria," he whispers, taking my mouth in a tender kiss that takes the breath from my lungs and has me longing to go back to bed with him.

"The food is getting cold," I whisper against his lips, pouting. I feel his laugh rumble in his chest and I force myself to lean back to meet those deep eyes that sparkle in the sunlight.

"You are too good for me, you know that?"

I smile, not believing that at all.

"Why? Because I make you breakfast?"

He nods, running his mouth along my jaw, teasing the skin.

"All I wanted to do was make love to you again and here you are making me breakfast. You amaze me." The southern drawl I hear in his voice makes me want to close my eyes and listen to it all night long.

I pull him in for another kiss just as there's a hard, demanding knock on his door. His face falls to my shoulder and he chuckles into locks of my hair. I blush, pulling his lips to mine for a peck before he lifts me off the counter and sets me on my feet, a crooked smile across his face.
God, I'd do anything for that smile.

"Get dressed. I'll answer the door."

I hold up a finger, telling him to wait. I run back into the bedroom and grab his jeans. I come back and hand them to him, giving him a quick kiss on the lips before dashing back to get dressed.

Once he's gone down the hall, I look through the drawers in Gavin's dresser, finding a blue and white button-down shirt that is a bit too big for me. I pull it on and immediately his musky scent engulfs me. I slip on my silver flats I wore last night and grab my cell phone, dance bag, and Gavin's phone off his dresser. I pick up his tee from last night and walk out of the bedroom as I check the missed text messages on my phone. There is only one.

Commented [LD22]: aren't they at Gavin's house? Should it be "his"

Kel - Hey. I can't wait to hear everything!

I stop when I see Gavin hugging a young girl with reddish brown hair. He wraps her tight in his

embrace, cooing softly in her ear as she cries. *Oh, poor girl.* This must be Callie, his sister.

"What happened, sweetheart?"

"He didn't show up, I just needed to talk to someone. Is it OK that I'm here?" she whispers just loud enough for my ears. My eyes meet hers and I nod, giving her what I hope is reassurance.

Gavin leans back and brackets her face with his hands, softly wiping away her tears.

"I'm sorry, Cal. I know you liked him. Why don't you sit down? Aria made breakfast and you need to eat." She nods, sitting on the couch and wiping away her tears. Gavin crouches down in front of her, kissing her knuckles as he tells her everything's all right. My heart stutters, seeing how good and nurturing he is with her.

"Hey, I don't want to interrupt, babe," I say as I step forward, giving Callie a small smile. Gavin smiles at me, standing up and pulling me into his side.

"You could never be an interruption, Aria."

He looks almost apologetic as he gazes down at me.

I nod, kissing his cheek. I mouth the words "it's okay" and he just shakes his head with a smile I know he reserves only for me.

"Callie, sweetheart, this is the girl I told you about. Aria, this is my sister, Callie."

She stands and gives me a warm smile as we shake hands. She looks so young.

"Callie, it's great to meet you. Do you want to stay for breakfast?"

She nods and I make my way into the kitchen to finish, and maybe reheat the food and make an omelet for Callie, too.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know she was going to just show up like this, Aria," Gavin whispers as we eat, our left hands entwined across my lap. I hastily shake my head.

"It's okay. She needed you, Gavin. And she seems wonderful. I'm so glad I got to meet her."

He smiles, relieved, and looks over at Callie, who's watching TV and nursing a Pepsi.

Pulling on Gavin's hand, I lead him into the kitchen and sit myself on the counter.

"Look, I have a meeting this morning so I'll probably just drop her off at my mom's. I wish I could take her out and spend some time with her but with this merger..."

I place a hand on his mouth and shake my head. I bite my lip, having an idea that can cheer Callie up. "I could take her to the studio with me today. It might cheer her up, right?"

Gavin's eyes light up and I take my hand off his mouth.

"You wouldn't mind?"

"No, of course not. Maybe I can get to know her, distract her for a bit. She loves to dance, right?"

He nods, a smile on his lips. His palm skates over my cheek, his face brightening.

"She's going to be thrilled, Aria. Like I said, you're too good for me."

I grin and give him a soft kiss on the lips.

"That's too bad because you're stuck with me, baby."

His eyes heat and he pulls me in with his hands around my neck. I can feel his hot breath against my parted lips.

"Oh." Gavin presses his mouth to mine urgently and parts my lips with his tongue as one of his hands tangles in my hair. He nips softly at my bottom lip and I moan, gripping his shoulders while my tongue licks salaciously into his mouth. *God, I'll never get enough.*

I pout when he pulls away and leans his forehead against mine as we both struggle to catch our breath.

"Dinner tonight?" he asks, that smile crossing his lips in suggestion.

I lean back, now remembering that I made plans to have dinner and drinks with Kel.

"Actually, I promised Kel I'd have dinner and drinks with her tonight. Do you want to join us? Luke will be there, too."

He smiles widely and kisses my temple.

"Sure, baby."

"Gavin?" Callie calls from the living room, interrupting. I laugh softly and pull away from Gavin's mouth, stepping down from the counter.

"You want to meet for lunch?" Gavin's mouth comes down to my throat with the question.

I hook my hands over his shoulders and nod.

"I'm there."

He kisses my knuckles and nods, his eyes bright with a joy that I hadn't seen before when he takes his sister into his arms again.

"Sweetheart, do you want to go with Aria to her dance studio?"

Callie's smile is infectious as she nods. "That would be great, but can you tell Mom? My phone's dead."

"Sure. I have to go. I'll see you later, sis. Stay strong, okay?"

She grins, hugging Gavin before he pulls on the tee I hand him and picks up his sneakers off the living room floor.

"See you soon, beautiful," he whispers, giving me a lingering kiss before leaving out the front door.

My heart races and my cheeks heat. I pick up the dishes, making small talk with Callie.

"What kind of dance do you like?"

She smiles, her cheeks taking on a dimple that reminds me of Gavin.

"Modern ballet and some tap, but I never got that into it. It was more of my mother's forte. You know?"

"I can definitely relate to that. Come on, let's go."

"Aria! Where have you been?" Eli asks as we make our way into the studio.

"Sorry, Eli. Traffic. This is my friend, Callie. She dances, too."

Eli comes up to her and shakes her hand, smiling charmingly.

"Okay, let's get started, Aria, and if you want to do a session too, Ms. Callie, I'd be honored."

He winks and takes us onto the floor without another word. After a trying session, I sit cross-legged on the floor as I watch Callie take the mats, her hair pulled up and a pair of white ballet flats on her feet.

An instrumental of a Cindy Lauper song plays and Callie closes her eyes, finding her center. She moves across the floor gracefully, never missing a step. She's one with the song. She effortlessly glides through her routine, surprising me by how intricate her style is. She's so young, but when she dances, it's effortless.

"That was perfect, Callie," I say, handing her a water as she sits next to me.

"Really? I was nervous, actually."

"It was great. I can't believe how graceful your style is. How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

I pull her in for a hug and then pull back, surprised and awed at the talent of this girl.

"You're really talented, Callie. Truly."

"Thanks, so are you!"

We both laugh, easily comfortable with each other.

"So what happened with this boy?"

She sighs and her eyes take on a sadness.

"My boyfriend, Jude. We had dinner plans for our six-month anniversary and he didn't show up."

Oh my God, this poor girl.

"Oh, sweetie. It's his loss. Don't let him upset you like this. You have so much ahead of you, okay?"

She nods, giving me a small smile. I check the time to see it's almost one o'clock.

"Do you want to grab some lunch? Gavin and my friend Farah are going to meet us

downtown."

She nods and stands, pulling me up with her.

"Thanks for cheering me up, Aria." I grin and we head out to my Jeep.

"No problem, we girls have to stick together. Right?"

She laughs, agreeing.

I dial Gavin's number as I pull out of the parking lot. It seems like just yesterday that I met him here, so closed off to love. And now I'm falling for him. I'm breathless at the realization that I'm falling in love with Gavin Thomas. Is that possible after, what? Two weeks? But yet, here we are .

"Hello?" His gravelly voice shoots through me instantly.

"Hi, Gavin."

"Hey, beautiful. How's it going?" I feel the ache in my chest from missing him and it terrifies me.

"Good. We're on our way to Johnny's now. Your sister is such a good dancer, I couldn't believe it."

He laughs and I hear a horn on his end.

"She is. She trained in Paris, after all. See you soon, okay?"

"Okay."

I hang up and park before turning to Callie who's staring intently at her phone.

"Hey, stop waiting. He'll call. If he loves you, he'll call you. Let's go eat."

She nods and smiles, hopping out of the Jeep and heading straight inside the restaurant. I sigh, feeling badly for her heartbreak, knowing that normally waiting by the phone is a long, sad process that all teenage girls go through.

Gavin leans against the railing leading into Johnny's Grille, dressed in a white button-up dress shirt and black dress pants, and with a ruggedly handsome smile across his face.

"Better stop staring, handsome stranger. My boyfriend is going to be here any moment."

His smile widens and his eyes blaze with hunger for me.

"Is that so?" He walks up to me and cages me to the car door with his arms on each side of my face.

His eyes are filled with lust and amused mischief.

"You're such a tease, Ms. Morgan," he whispers, trailing kisses up my jaw, and my blood heats in anticipation for his mouth on mine.

"So are you, Mr. Thomas."

He grins, finally closing his lips around mine, igniting my blood and taking my breath away as he sucks lazily on my lower lip, nipping the skin. When his tongue coerces my lips apart and it slides along mine, I moan softly and I grip onto his hair.

"Is it weird that I missed you, beautiful?" he murmurs as his forehead leans against mine.

"If it's weird then so be it. Because I missed you, too."

He pulls back and cups my cheeks, smiling boyishly. All I can think is I'm in so much trouble with this man. I'm falling in love with him. Hell, I've already fallen.

Ten

"You look gorgeous, by the way." Gavin's blue-gray eyes are all I see and a shy smile comes to my mouth. He takes my hand and kisses my wrist, pulling back while he looks down at it for a long moment.

A pit of fear forms low in my stomach.

"I wanted to ask you about these, baby. Don't think I didn't notice last night."

I gasp in response. Hearing his voice so domineering is both exciting and worrying. My eyes drop to the four long cuts along my wrist from when my grief from Jeremy and the rejection and blame of my mother and myself got to be too much. The pain helped at the time, but I've never told anyone that. They're faded now, but they'll always be there to remind me of my weakness at the worst time in my life.

Gavin's hand gently grasps my chin and lifts my gaze to his clear blue eyes.

"Aria?" I see the concern and maybe anger in his eyes as he gazes down at me, his hand holding my wrist while his other cups my cheek.

"Can we talk after? Do you need to get back to work right away?"

He exhales, shaking his head. He wants to talk. I know he does.

"I'm free till five. We do need to talk, though."

I nod, placing my hand over his on my face.

"We will. I promise."

Gavin is quiet as he drives my Jeep back to my apartment, his hand in mine our only contact. The pit in my stomach feels like an abyss that only gets deeper over time. I'm terrified of hearing the words I know are true. *This is too much, too soon.*

"Babe?" My voice shakes, betraying the fear lingering inside me.

His eyes dart to mine, darkened in the Chicago sunset. My heart races and I bite down on my lip, afraid of the inevitable. He's only met me just weeks ago and I have so much baggage, he wants to end it.

I'm sure of it. As I realize that I could never hold a man like Gavin with my broken past, tears sting my eyes and I force myself to look away from him.

"Never mind," I murmur as I close my eyes, preparing myself for the blow that will shatter my fallen heart.

"Is anyone home?" Gavin asks, pulling into my complex. I flick my eyes over to his and shake my head.

"Are you okay, beautiful?" His voice is soft, worried, I think.

I grasp the handle next to me, thinking rather than saying how I feel.

He stops me when I push the door open, pulling me to him, his hands cupping my cheeks and his wide, all seeing eyes piercing into mine. I can't hide my emotions from him that show so clearly on my face.

"You've been crying?" Gavin's smooth voice caresses me, and I can't bring myself to look him in the eyes now.

I dip my head, dropping my gaze from his to my scarred wrist, wondering what he thinks of me now that he's seen them.

"Beautiful, no." Tears well in my eyes as he cradles my face in his hands and presses his lips to my forehead, leaving them there as he speaks softly.

"I'm not mad at you, baby. I'm just concerned. I thought we were honest with each other last night and then I saw these this morning. Why didn't you tell me?"

I nod, twining my hands in my lap and lift my eyes to his.

"I didn't want to scare you away, Gavin. You're just about the best thing that's ever happened to me and I don't want to ruin it with all my baggage."

He binds me up in his arms, not letting me hide from him, and then presses a kiss to my knuckles as he looks into my eyes.

"You don't have to worry about scaring me away, Aria. Trust me, when you meet my mother you'll see I'm not perfect. I have an ex who's in Rome right now and quite a few friends that you'll meet who will bore you to tears. I get jealous easily, I work way too much, and I can't stay away from you. You can take your pick. You aren't the only one with baggage and a less-than-perfect past. It's okay. We just need to be honest with each other."

I can't take my eyes off him while he caresses my face and his eyes soften.

"I thought it would be too much, Gavin. I don't want us to mess this up."

He presses a tender kiss to my mouth, not saying anything for a moment. Slowly he dips his head, grasps my wrists, and trails his mouth along the marred flesh there.

"We won't, baby. Come on, let's go inside."

Gavin crawls onto my bed and pulls me onto his lap, kissing my hair. "Tell me why, Aria."

I sigh, finding my words.

"When Jeremy died, I came out of his intensive care unit and told my mom and Kel he was gone. She was so upset and angry, she started to break down, yelling that it was my fault, his death, the accident, everything. I couldn't take it. I went home and just...broke, and I wanted to shut out the world. I knew my mom didn't mean what she said, but I started to blame myself. I started drinking, but when that didn't help, I reached for a razor. I think I just wanted to shut off the pain and the loss. I didn't want to hurt myself. It helped. The pain, the release of it, helped me cope at the time."

Gavin grazes his lips up my face, pressing a kiss to my temple.

"Was that the only time you did it?"

I nod, snuggling deeper into his embrace.

"You have to know that none of that was your fault. Your mom was grieving and I'm sure she didn't mean what she was saying."

I know he's right, but in a way I still blame myself for my brother's death. It's seemingly the only way I can justify the way Mom treated me.

"I know. I miss him, though. And I miss my mom. She changed after Jeremy died. She buries herself in work." *She left when we needed her the most.*

Gavin tucks my head under his chin and keeps me close. His warmth comforts me.

"Give her time, beautiful. She'll come home when she's ready."

I nuzzle my face into his neck and whisper into his skin, "I hope you're right."

He strokes his hand up my back and smooths my hair from the back of my neck. I'm so lost in his touch that I almost don't hear his whispered words.

"Are you okay?" Gavin's fingers wrap around my middle, holding me close.

I sigh, resting my hands over his forearms that rest against my hips.

"Yes, now I am." Having him to lean on means so much to me.

He tightens his hold on me and lifts one of my hands to his mouth, kissing it softly.

"Tomorrow is Saturday, the anniversary of his death, and I don't want you to be suffering with your grief anymore, baby. If you'll let me, I want to be here for you."

Something in his voice stirs me and I turn in his arms, my hands going to his chest when I see his smoldering eyes.

"Oh, Gavin. Thank you," I whisper, my mouth pressing to his jaw twice before I drop my face to his neck, breathing in his heavenly mint scent and something else that's distinctly HIM.

He rubs his hand up my back and strokes my hair, holding me to him for an immeasurable moment of time. He tugs my hair gently so I lift my head to look at him and when I do, I smile back as I feel my heart race with the sincerity I see in his eyes.

"Babe," I whisper, my hands clutching the fabric of his shirt as his breath parts my lips. He runs his fingers down my cheek and ever so slowly dips his head toward mine.

I'm already breathless when his mouth closes over mine, his lips treasuring mine gently, stealing my breath and sending tingles up my skin when he grasps the back of my neck with his hands. His tongue runs along my bottom lip, his teeth nipping at it hungrily. I moan, desire pooling in my core, my body yearning for him. A soft kiss turns into an urgent one, my hands tangled in his hair and my mouth opening to his. His tongue runs along mine, exploring, tasting, adjoining mine as we passionately eat at each other's mouths.

Commented [LD23]: each other's

"I want to make love to you so bad right now."

I pull away from his lips, breathless and wanton for him.

"Yes..."

He chuckles softly and begins to kiss my jaw, his mouth trailing down to my ear and the oh-so-sensitive spots along my neck.

I moan, moving closer as he grasps my hips and ravages my neck with soft nips and teasing kisses.

"I have a meeting with Techtronic's in twenty minutes," he whispers as he kisses down my shoulder and unzips my hoodie before pulling it off my body and tossing it on the floor.

When his lips graze my nipple through the fabric of my polo shirt, I groan, opening my legs eagerly.

"That's plenty of time."

Eleven

"See you tonight?" Gavin whispers as he leans against my door frame, his left hand laced with mine. I nod, an uneasy feeling settling in my gut.

"Yeah, sure."

His eyes look into mine in a strange, unreadable expression for a long moment before he moves off the frame and gives my forehead a kiss, his mouth gentle along my skin.

"Call me if you need me, okay?"

I nod, knowing I'm far from okay. I watch him walk out the door and get into the backseat of a town car. He must have called a driver to come get him while I was in the bedroom. Hastily, I grab my phone and wallet along with the car keys, needing to get some air before the feelings inside of me smother me.

"I miss you, sweetie," Farah whispers when she opens the door to her apartment on Eastern Avenue. She hugs me tightly and leans back, her eyebrows going up when she sees my expression. Ever since Gavin left for his meetings, I've had this pit in my stomach. I've come to rely on him so much in the last few weeks it terrifies me.

"Aria, is something wrong?" Her soft voice is traced with worry as she pulls me into the entryway and wraps an arm around my shoulder.

"I knew something was up with you at lunch. Did Gavin do something?"

I hastily shake my head, knowing how well they hit it off at lunch today.

"No, he's wonderful. Actually, I think I've fallen for him."

As I say those words, I gasp at how true they are. I long for his touch, the sound of his voice, the way he says my name. I need him. When I'm sad or happy or anything, I always need him.

"Have you told him?"

"Well, no."

"This is good, isn't it?" Her forehead creases in worry, her bright eyes narrowing.

"I don't know. I vowed to guard myself, to keep from getting attached, falling in love, and inevitably getting hurt. But Gavin, he just sees right through me. He doesn't let me hide. He feels so good...God, I'm so confused!"

She takes one of my hands and gives me a small smile.

"Sweetie, it's okay to let yourself trust him. I saw how he couldn't keep his eyes off you. He might not realize it yet, but he loves you. It's written all over his face! Trust me, this isn't one-sided."

I take a deep breath, hoping she's right. But how could he love me? My thoughts scatter as

Farah pulls me into her and hugs me.

"What should I do?" I should tell him how I feel. I should have told him already.

She sighs, pulling back and giving me a knowing smile, reminding me how lucky I am to have her.

"Just listen to your heart, Ari."

I smile, thanking her as we hug again. My stomach settles and my mind clears. Now I realize that the strange look Gavin gave me this afternoon wasn't concern or pity, it was bright, filled with care and a safe comfort. *Oh my God, it was love.*

Suddenly, Jaden bolts into the room, his phone pressed to his ear and his face looking surprisingly stressed. He usually looks so at ease, but now his eyebrows are drawn together and one hand is clenched into his black hair.

"She's here. Yes. All right. Bye, Chase."

Who's here? Who's Chase? My worries disappear and are replaced with confusion.

"Your boyfriend is worried about you. You should really help a guy out, Aria."

Immediately I stand, worry seeping through my veins. Gavin? Why would he be – *oh, no!* My scalp prickles when I realize I turned off my phone.

"What are you talking about? I just had lunch with him."

He folds his arms over his chest, agitated.

"My brother Chase works for him. He says that Mr. Thomas has been looking like crazy for you.

Did you guys have a fight or something?"

"No..."

Farah walks around me and steps up to Jaden.

"Relax, Jay. It's all right. She's here." He nods, his arm going around her as they head into the kitchen, leaving me reeling.

I reach into my pocket, hastily turning on my iPhone. Once my home screen pops up, I dial Gavin's cell and press it to my ear. I'm bordering between worry and nervousness.

"Aria!" he answers, his voice laced with worry.

"It's me," I whisper.

"Why did you turn your phone off?" His voice is strung tight.

"It slipped my mind. I was just talking to Farah. Why were you so worried?"

He exhales, obviously at war with something.

"You're at Farah's?"

"Yes."

"See you soon. Don't leave."

"Gavin... I can just meet you at home"

A low chuckle of laughter omits from him and it has no trace of humor in it. He must be really mad, I think to myself.

"Jaden told me where to find you, Aria. I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Okay."

His voice has such a dominant bite to it that when he hangs up on me, I just stand there staring at my phone screen for a good two minutes. *What the hell?*

Farah comes back in and takes a hold of my shoulders, lifting my gaze to hers.

"What did he say?"

"He's on his way. I have no idea what's going on with him."

She chuckles and pulls me into the kitchen with her.

"Welcome to the world of men and dating, sweetie!"

Once we finish off grilled cheese sandwiches and diet sodas, Farah pulls on her North Face jacket and Jaden leaves to start her Lexus.

"We're going to go to a movie and let you two have some time. Text me, okay?"

I nod, kissing her cheek and sitting back down at the kitchen island as I hear them pull out of the driveway.

I don't know how long I sit there, trying to make sense of my feelings. His overprotective nature drives me crazy, but makes my heart race, too. If he didn't love me, he wouldn't get so worried, would he?

There are so many things I love about him. His eyes, his crooked smile that makes me weak in the knees, the sound of his voice, and God, his kisses just take my breath away. Could this be right? I just don't know.

Okay, I do know. But I'm scared.

There's a soft knock on the front door and when I pull it open, I have to suck in a breath. Gavin's bright blue-gray eyes gaze down into mine, his forehead creasing as he lets out a breath, looking me up and down for injury, and his hand tentatively coming up to my cheek.

"Are you okay?" he whispers, pulling me into his chest and winding his arms tightly around me. I press my face to his neck and nod, feeling the tension leave his body as I clutch onto his collared shirt.

"Yeah. Why the overreaction, Gavin?"

He pulls away and runs both hands through his tousled hair, stepping into the apartment and

pacing the length of the living room a few times. When his eyes finally shift back to mine, they are filled with uncertainty.

"You can't do that to me, Aria. I couldn't call or text you, you weren't at your place. Do you have any idea what time it is?"

I gape up at him, at a loss for words.

"It's almost six, Aria. I was worried." His voice is filled with anguish and it tears at my heart knowing I caused him to worry. As quickly as I can, I go to him, cup his cheeks in my hands and gaze up into the wide pools of emotion that are his eyes. My breath catches, seeing concern and possibly love in his eyes.

"I'm sorry I worried you. Why were you so worried, though? It's not like we've been seeing each other for a long time." That last part just slips out. *Crap.*

His eyes harden at my last statement and abruptly he pulls away from me.

"I've been having one of my security guards detail Bryce Williams and he was seen in the Downtown South End. I thought, Christ, Aria. I was afraid he got to you!"

Bryce? Security detail? Oh, God. It feels like the bottom of my world drops away in those long seconds when I hear his name. I can't move. I can't breathe. I clutch onto the island behind me and gasp for air as the memories come back full force. His dark eyes. His grip on my chin when he got angry. The cold look in his eyes that last night when he took everything I'd had left to give.

"Wait, how did you know his last name?" I say in a broken voice.

"The police reports are a matter of public record, Aria. I had to protect you. This is the only way I know how." He's pacing and wearing a hole in Farah's kitchen floor.

"B-Bryce? He was...Oh, my God." The breath whooshes out of me and suddenly I feel lightheaded.

I begin to fall to the floor.

Gavin's intense eyes widen and he catches me in strong, sure arms. My body shakes with a cold shiver as his arms cradle me against his chest, kissing my forehead gently. His warmth spreads through the cold, replacing darkness with white-hot light.

"Shh, it's okay. You're safe, beautiful." His soft voice is the only thing I can focus on.

I shake my head. I'm so angry with myself for my carelessness. I gaze into Gavin's deep eyes, my heart stuttering when I see his fierce look, as if he'd step in front of a bullet to keep me safe. I know he would. I feel my heart break open, letting in the light and shining the truth that I've refused to admit until now. I love him. I love him. I can't lie to myself anymore. I'm in love with this man. *My Gavin.*

"I'm so sorry, Gavin. Please don't let me go," I whisper, my voice heavy with fear as he scoops me into his arms and settles me on the love seat before kneeling in front of me. He grasps my hands tightly in his and his stormy blue eyes capture mine.

"I love you, beautiful. I won't let you go."

I gasp for precious air, losing my voice as those three words replay in my mind over and over again. *I love you. I love you, beautiful.*

As the wheels start turning in my head again, my heart speeds up. It all starts to make sense. The look in his eyes, his gentle touch, his protectiveness. He can't stay away from me. Oh, my God, he loves me. And I fell for him that first day he called me beautiful.

"Aria, are you okay?" Gavin asks, his hands linked with mine across my thighs and his blue-gray eyes locked on mine. They swim with everything I haven't allowed myself to see until this very moment.

God, I'm so much in love with him.

"Could you say that again?" I whisper shakily. He slowly smiles, one of his hands cradling my cheek, his eyes blazing with such sincerity.

"I love you. I'm so in love with you. Ever since I saw you dance at the studio and your gorgeous green eyes looked into mine, I was gone, baby."

My heart stutters as those words seep through me. Then I realize that he isn't alone in this. I've been drawn to him since the very first time I laid eyes on him, only four weeks ago. I love him.

"You love me? You're not just saying this because of the situation with Bryce?"

Gavin shakes his head incredulously, taking my head in his hands gently. His eyes are filled with adoration, worry, concern, and the softness I've come to yearn for. Love.

"I. Love. You. Baby. I've never been surer of anything in my entire life."

I gaze up at him, seeing the sincerity and love in his deep blue eyes. Then I grasp his hands that hold my head and feel the moisture in my eyes. His admission seems to banish all of the doubts and insecurities I've been feeling in the past few days. He loves me, all of me. I'd had no idea.

"God, I love you, Gavin. I love you so much."

The words tumble out of me, my heart yearning for this man as he exhales, his eyes brighter now.

He shakes his head once in disbelief before pulling me onto his lap, wrapping one arm around my waist and tangling a hand in my unruly hair.

"Say that again, Aria."

I laugh a little, never taking my eyes off his.

"I love you." The words are wrenched from the deepest part of me. Then his mouth covers mine.

He presses those lips urgently to mine, parting them to him and holding me. One of his hands

caresses my cheek. I moan low at the back of my throat as I let go and give my heart to him, knowing he'll forever be the man I love more than anything in this world.

I wrap my arms around his back and lick into his mouth, needing more of him.

"Jesus Christ, Aria," he whispers against my lips as he sucks on my bottom lip, drawing another moan from my mouth.

"Take me to your place, Gavin."

He groans and attacks my neck with soft and passionate kisses.

"I'd love to, but we really need to talk about this. What happened with...?"

I put my hand over his mouth, stopping him, and shake my head.

"We will, I promise. But right now I need you to take me back to your place and make love to me on every surface in your penthouse. Can you do that?"

He chuckles, pulling away from me and tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

"Yes, ma'am."

He helps me up and wraps an arm around my shoulders as we head out of the house.

My mouth never leaves Gavin's as he pulls me into his apartment only ten minutes later. He closes the door behind us, pressing me up against it. I wrap my arms around his neck and hitch my legs around his hips, moaning when he softly bites down on my lower lip. He then slips his hand under my shirt, touching my bare back and groaning when he comes in contact with the lacy fabric of my Victoria's Secret bra.

He pulls off my shirt and gazes down at me with blazing blue eyes.

"I want you so much."

I smile, my blood heating in anticipation.

"I want you, Gavin."

Without another word, he sweeps me into his arms and carries me to his bedroom. He flicks on the lights and sets me on the edge of the comforter.

He steps back and slowly peels off his suit jacket, takes off his shoes, and undoes his navy blue tie.

He steps closer to me and I hastily kneel on the bed, undoing one button at a time on his black dress shirt.

"You're so beautiful, Aria," Gavin whispers, kissing my neck and covering my body with his once his shirt and dress pants are removed. He kisses me hungrily as he slides my jeans down my legs and leans back to look deep in my eyes.

"I was so worried today. I can't even think about something bad happening to you again, baby. I need you." The vulnerability in his voice is my undoing as I kiss his chest and neck, not

wanting to think about what he must have gone through today.

"I'm so sorry, I had no idea, Gavin."

He kisses my forehead, his fingers threading through my hair.

"I know. I'm not blaming you."

I tighten my arms around his shoulders and kiss his jaw eagerly.

"I need you, too, Gavin. Now that I've had you, I know I'd be lost without you."

He kisses my lips softly and leans his forehead against mine for a moment.

"I'm going to make love to you now, my beautiful."

My heart stutters as I open my legs to him, desire pooling in my core as I feel him at my entrance.

"Yes..."

In every caress, every kiss, every softly murmured sweet nothing he shows me just how much he loves me. And I'm lost to him.

Twelve

My lips graze Gavin's chest as I feel my man stir, his mouth tipping into a smile.

"Morning, baby."

I smile, raising my head and climbing over him, my knees on either side of his body. I feel him hardening under me and I smile, feeling my desire for him between my legs also.

"I love waking up next to you."

He grins, pulling me down to kiss me softly at first, but when I tangle my hands in his silky hair and he moans at the back of his throat, it turns much more passionate. I ravage his mouth with my own, tasting and reveling in the heavenly mint taste and smell of him. His hands glide down my back and squeeze my ass, enticing a loud moan out of me. I vaguely wonder why we decided to dress before bed last night. Gavin wanted me to be warm though I really wish we didn't have so many boundaries of fabric between us. I want to *feel* him.

"God, I want you. Now, here, right here, babe."

I slide my hands down his chest and push down his pajama bottoms as I settle my body on top of his.

He pulls away and pulls the straps of my camisole off my shoulders, unsnapping the clasp to my bra next and tossing it on the floor. Those eyes are filled with his desire for me and it takes my breath away.

Abruptly, he flips me onto my back and looms over me, his hands caging mine, and his blue-gray eyes blaze with excitement and lust.

"I want to feel you, beautiful."

I moan as he teases me with nips on my neck and shoulder. His breath is enticingly warm against my skin and it makes me ache for him so badly that when he pauses at my entrance, I clutch onto him and my head falls back, hot desire settling in my core and my ever-present need for him knotting my stomach.

"Aria, you're so ready," he whispers, taking my legs and wrapping them around his hips, spreading me open to him.

"Yes, Gavin. I'm yours."

His mouth closes over mine and his tongue coerces my lips apart with impatient licks, his hips meeting mine in heady anticipation.

"Please..."

His mouth runs across my jaw, licking at my neck and collarbone, covering my upper breasts with soft kisses that make my knees constrict around his hips in need. My body is humming.

"Gavin..."

"Hmm?"

He catches one of my nipples between his teeth and tugs softly, his tongue swirling around it ever so slowly. I call out with the tightening of my center, gripping onto his hair and closing my eyes as pulses of pleasure overcome my body.

"I love the way I make you feel," he whispers, moving to my other breast, licking as he goes. He adores my skin and finally, God, *finally* he pushes inside me with one full thrust.

"Yes! Oh, God, yes, Gavin." My voice is raspy with desire.

My hips meet his as he slides into me again, his mouth coming back to mine where he cradles my face with his hands and my arms wrap around his taut shoulders. Tears build in my eyes with how gently he makes love to me, as if he can't get enough of me. I feel exactly the same way. I hum softly when his lips come down to caress the sensitive skin of my breasts.

"Gavin, I love you," I whisper, flicking my eyes up to his all-encompassing blue-grays. They are filled with such emotion that it takes my breath away. Then he smiles slowly, that full mouth widening on his face.

"Beautiful, come for me," Gavin says, his breath against my neck.

I feel the tightening and tug deep inside me as my head is thrown back. The waves of intense euphoria crashing out of me. I grip onto him as I shatter, longer and harder than I ever have before. After, my lips press to his heated skin while my body hums with the depth of both my love for this man and the pleasure rocking me to the very heart of me. My eyes flutter open at the smooth sound of his voice.

"I love you," he whispers, his hips meeting mine once more. His body trembles and rocks inside me. His lips part when he finds his release within me, his head falling to the crook of my neck, my name the only words he can say.

"Aria, Aria, my Aria."

I breathe him in and he does the same, our souls merging into one.

Three Weeks Later

Excitedly, I open the UPS package from Grayson Dance Institute and grasp the pack of paper in my hands. Enrollment forms and a candidate handbook stare back at me. This is my dream. This internship could make my career. I skim through the first few pages as I feel Gavin's arms wrap around me from behind. He presses a kiss to my temple and then turns my face up to his with a hand cupping my cheek.

"Hi, baby," he whispers and his lips press to mine, a sweet inhaling of a kiss that leaves me wanting more.

"Hi, how did you sleep?" I turn into him, leaving the papers on the kitchen island as Gavin lifts and sits me onto it, that boyish smile across his face. My heart races in my chest seeing the love and excitement in his eyes.

"Very well with you in my arms. So your enrollment papers came?" He runs his hands up my thighs and his eyes captivate mine.

"Yes, I'm so excited! I can't believe I actually got the internship. It's such a good opportunity for me."

He smiles wider and lifts my hand to his mouth, placing a kiss on my knuckles.

"I'm so proud of you, beautiful. I do want to talk about a few things, though."

I nod, my fingers coming up to smooth strands of hair out of his eyes. He gazes down at me and I know where he's going with this. He's worried now that Bryce has been spotted around here. If I'm honest with myself, I'm afraid of coming face to face with that man again. The man that came so close to breaking everything I am. My soul, my very being, my hope for a future empty of pain and loss. Still, I don't want Gavin to worry, not about this.

"He isn't going to come looking for me, Gavin. If he does, he'll go back to prison. I'm sure he doesn't want that." *Unless he is here for me, to steal me away.* That dark thought causes a shiver to roll up my spine.

Gavin pulls me into his arms, locking me against the firmness of his chest. He shakes his head and closes his eyes briefly, obviously conflicted. God, I hate this. It took me so long to move on from what happened with Bryce and now that I'm truly happy, he shows up again and causes more trouble for me.

"I would feel much better if you stayed here with me, Aria. Please. Move in with me. If you are away from me, I'll be worried nonstop. I live closer to the academy and the studio and we'll be together.

Isn't that what you want?" His deep eyes meet mine and I see the hope and fear in them.

I gasp audibly, happiness and uncertainty soaring through me. He wants me to move in with him?

Am I ready for that? Yes. No. God, I don't know.

"Gavin, I don't want you to worry about me and of course I don't want to be away from you. But, I...Do you think we're ready to live together?" I bite my lip nervously. *Am I ready for this?*

He reaches up and cups my cheeks with his hands, grazing his thumbs along my cheekbones. My skin tingles from his gentle touch and the inseparable love I see in his blue-gray eyes. It's my undoing.

"Do you love me, Aria?" His voice reverberates through me, heating my blood and squeezing my heart with such need for this man. My answer isn't even a thought in my mind. It's not a choice for me to love him, he just takes my heart away with that smile and his gorgeous eyes that seem to read my every thought and emotion.

"Yes, Gavin. God, I do." I wrap one hand around the back of his neck, caressing his jaw with the fingers of my left. His stubble is rough against them, the contact fueling the riot of emotions inside me.

Love.

Desire.

Need.

He smiles crookedly, making my heart skip a beat in my chest. His hand goes to the back of my head, his fingers loosening the hair band holding my hair together until it falls to my shoulders and partially down my back. His eyes captivate mine as he runs his hand down my hair, to the base of my neck, and slips the strap of my tank top off my shoulder. His hand explores my skin. I gasp, my teeth closing around my bottom lip, desire churning in my core. His hand then runs down the length of my arm and down to the sliver of skin between the top of my yoga pants and the hem of the Miami Heat tank top I'm wearing. Kel got it for me on last year's trip to Florida. Warmth spreads across my skin and I can't help the low moan that slips out of my mouth.

"Does my touch make you want more? Are you thinking about the other places you'd like my hand to touch your soft skin? Does this..." He abruptly pinches my nipple through the cotton fabric, causing me to call out because of the arousal between my legs. "...make you feel the need to have me inside you, around you, consuming you completely?"

"Aaah...Gavin, please..." I whisper, my head falling back slightly as my eyes close in anticipation of his body pressing against mine. I can't form thoughts right now.

"Open your eyes, beautiful," he whispers, and when I do, I see his gaze full with a heady mix of sincerity and love. *I want him, I love him, this is right.*

He grasps my hips and pulls me against his chest, causing my hands to curl into his bare chest and my eyes to lock onto his blazing blues.

"Yes or no, Aria?" he whispers, repeating the words he said that first night he kissed me. My head swims with so many reasons for me to say no, but when I see the determination in his deep blue eyes, I nod and whisper my assent.

"Yes, Gavin."

Without another word, he carries me into his bedroom and lays me down onto the bed, his eyes lit up with such joy.

"I'm going to love you now, beautiful."

A hand traces across my cheek, trailing down to my jaw, and the sensation of it feels so good that I just want to enjoy it, revel in it, but instead I open my eyes and gasp when I see the depth in his. His mouth is only inches from mine. Those eyes have such sincerity in them that it makes it impossible for me to look away from them.

Thirteen

My eyes open to see sunlight pouring in, casting shadows across the bed, and Gavin is hovering over me, that ruggedly handsome face only inches from mine as he holds my face in his hands. A smile lingers on his lips, those lips that undo me so easily.

"Hi," I whisper, placing my hand against his chest and gliding it through his light chest hair before linking it with his hand across the teal colored sheets.

My eyelids close heavily as Gavin nuzzles my temple and spoons me from behind. His warmth almost lulls me to sleep, his hot breath against my tingling skin.

"You tired, beautiful?" he whispers huskily, his barely visible stubble gliding across my bare neck.

"Hmm."

I feel his smile against my neck and he draws me closer, kissing down my skin and moving to my shoulder.

"Is that a yes?"

"Hmm..."

He pulls my hair to one shoulder and tips my chin up so I meet the intensity of his gaze. His smile lights up his face as he gazes down at me.

"You're so beautiful, Aria," he whispers.

"You always say that," I laugh at him, moving closer to him still. I don't think I can ever be close enough. Gavin narrows his eyes at me, cupping my cheeks. His gaze turns more serious.

"It's true, Aria. Once I saw you I knew there would never be anyone else for me."

I lean back, my legs straddling his, my hands coming up to touch his jaw.

I love him so much.

"Gavin..."

I lift my mouth to his as if from gravity, kissing him passionately. I want him to feel all the emotions that simmer inside of me. Immediately he groans, grinding his hips into mine and grasping the back of my head with an urgent hold. His tongue lashes into my mouth hungrily then he traps my bottom lip between his teeth and it entices a low moan from my throat.

"You are perfect, baby," he whispers, pulling his mouth from mine and trailing it down my jaw, moving it to my hair and pressing a soft kiss on the top of my head.

"Hmm," I sigh, closing my eyes tiredly. With Gavin's arms cocooning me and his lips in my hair, I find sleep again,

Adrenaline pumps through me as Peter Piers and Justin Scott, the top coordinators in the program at Grayson Academy, flip through their clipboards and face me along with about twenty other dancers around me. Over the last three weeks I've gotten to know most of them, but now they're my competition for a position in this company. My dream job. I hold my breath as I wait for Peter to begin.

"Our decision hasn't been an easy one to make because all of you are such talented dancers. But unfortunately we can't take twenty-two of you. We can only take three. So we've chosen twelve of you to perform individually in our Summer Showcase. We will judge each of you on your performance and will then choose the three lucky ones to join our company as dancers."

It felt like I was suspended in air as I waited to hear the names. My name, please, my name.

"If I call your name that means you'll be one of our twelve finalists for a position with Grayson. If not, please know that all of you are incredible dancers and these decisions weren't made lightly."

We all nodded as Peter flipped a page over on his clipboard and cleared his throat. I pressed my lips together, holding on to hope and crossing my fingers behind my back.

"Dianna Ramirez, Jessica Lawrence, Sarah Kennedy."

The first three names were called and we all clapped for them as a few hugs were exchanged between the two slender blondes and a redhead that I learned trained in Paris, of all places.

"Ella Marley, Georgia Calvin, Kasey Phillips, Maya Scott."

My hands began to shake, my body buzzing with both excitement and nervousness.

Oh, God. Only five names left.

"Beth Mann."

More applause. "Candice Anthony, Melanie Lopez, Jasmine Elliot."

My heart skipped a beat at the name I immediately recognized. I turned to see the blonde I remembered from the tabloid pictures I saw weeks ago. Oh, my God, she's gorgeous. Golden blonde hair, sultry brown eyes, ivory skin, and slender hips.

I barely heard it when the last name was called.

"And Aria Morgan."

The crowd burst into applause, from the teary-eyed girls who hadn't made the cut to the smiling faces of the ones who had, like me.

I was pulled into a hug by Kelly, a girl I'd become the closest with. She squealed with joy as we hugged. I was in a state of shock. *Jasmine*. Gavin's beautiful ex-girlfriend. How had I not noticed her before?

"You're Aria, right?"

I turned away from Kelly and a few other girls to see Jasmine Elliott looking at me with a small smile on her face. Her bleach blonde hair and hazel eyes were all I could see and as I took her

it, I couldn't help the feeling that her smile was fake.

"Yes. You're Jasmine, right?" I practically stuttered, not sure how to act around the girl who'd hurt Gavin so badly in the past. She was in the past, yet, here she was.

"You were great, by the way. I'm glad you made the cut." Her wide, unblinking eyes meet mine and she tips her head to the side. I could tell she was sizing me up with the way she looked at me.

"You're Gavin's new girl?" she asks, judging me with her gaze. My heart drops and I have no idea what to say to this woman that my Gavin, my man, used to love and care for. I don't understand what he saw in her and why she is here now. Why does it seem that our pasts are coming at us from all sides? First Bryce and now her. I take a step back from her, not sure what to say.

"...I have to go. Sorry." I push past her, my mind reeling as I grab my bag and car keys, heading straight to the door. Once inside my car, I set my bag down and suck in a breath, trying to calm down. I thought she was in Rome. And she's so beautiful. A small part of me wonders what he sees in me when he could have her. I shake my head, tightening the strap of my bag on my shoulder. Where are these thoughts coming from? I know who he loves.

Commented [LD24]: A

I hear my phone ring then and I take it from my purse, surprised when I see Gavin's breathtaking face across the screen. As if he sensed that I need him or something. How does he do that?

"Hi," I whisper, trying to regain my equilibrium.

"Hey. How did it go today?" The sound of his deep, smooth voice chases the rest of my chills away and my heart begins to race for a completely different reason than it had before.

"Good. I'm a finalist." *I made the cut.*

"Yes! I am so proud of you, baby. Why don't you sound excited about it?"

I start my Jeep and ease out of the academy's parking lot.

"I think I'm just in shock, Gavin. I really am excited about it, though."

I can tell that he senses something is off with me, but I don't know what to tell him.

"Aria, what's wrong?" he asks, his voice filled with concern.

I exhale, not wanting to do this over the phone.

"We'll talk about it tonight, I promise. I have to go, Gavin."

I hear a loud screech in the background and then his rough breath across the phone.

"Okay."

When I hear the three soft knocks coming from the door of my apartment, I glance up from the oven, shutting it with my knee and peeling off the apron I'm wearing. My mind is still spinning, but I realized that Gavin was right. We both have pasts. I just have to trust in what we have. My insecurities got the best of me today and that's not fair, since Gavin never gave up on me. Even when I told him about my past, my baggage, he still wanted to be with me. So

why should Jasmine change anything?

"You're early," I say as I open the door to him. He has on gray slacks from work and a brown dress shirt with a collar. The sleeves are rolled up to his elbows in the sexiest way. His eyes are locked onto mine in an inseparable trance as he gazes down at me and steps inside. They are filled with determination, love, and some unnamed emotion I just can't read in the depths of his eyes.

"I wanted to see you, beautiful," he says, dipping his head and wrapping an arm around my waist while the other glides across my bare thigh as he hitches it around his hip. I moan when he sucks tenderly on my lower lip, grazing his teeth along the seam, teasing it. Every thought leaves my mind as I melt into his arms.

"We should talk," I whisper, leaning against him as Gavin carries me to the couch and pulls me onto his lap so we're facing each other and my legs wrap around his hips. I can see the curiosity and possible confusion in his eyes, and I know I should be honest with him.

"I met Jasmine today," I whisper. His hand freezes on its journey over my back and his eyes clear with understanding. He continues to rub his hands from my parted thighs up to my torso and on to my shoulders. His thumbs dig in to the muscles there and I almost lose my train of thought.

He knows my body so well.

"She was in Rome, I thought. Where did you see her?" He asks, his blue gray eyes lifting to meet mine. I skate my own hands down his chest and deftly under his dress shirt to feel the warmth of his skin.

"Actually, she is on my dance team. I didn't realize who she was until her name was called for the finalists, today."

Gavin nods, his forehead creased with an emotion I can't place. Worry? Maybe.

"Did she upset you?" he whispers. His hand comes up to settle at the nape of my neck, a finger tipping my chin up so I look into his eyes.

"No, it just surprised me. I didn't know she was a dancer, let alone one of my competitors at Grayson." My voice has an edge to it, betraying my simmering feelings of jealousy and doubt.

I see him run a hand through his hair and his eyes close briefly. His shoulders are tense, the calm of a moment ago, gone.

"I don't know why she came back here. She hasn't really stayed in touch in the last four years."

His eyes betray his frustration and I cup his cheeks with my hands. I just have to *touch* him.

"What's wrong? We don't need to talk about this. She's in the past, right?"

His blue gray eyes immediately soften and he leans his forehead against mine. I rest my palms against his beating heart over his shirt, needing the contact. His heart is beating fast and I love knowing how I affect him. He affects me just the same way.

"Absolutely, I'm just wondering why she's here now. There's nothing here for her. Her father and brothers live in Las Vegas and her only other family is in Aspen."

Commented [LD25]: ..affect him

Commented [LD26]: ..affects me

I take an uneasy breath, realizing a potential reason for her to be here. *Gavin*.

I slip off his lap and go to the kitchen, leaning against the island. *Is it possible that she wants him back?* I don't know why, I just need to think this through without the distraction of touching him.

"Could she be here for you?" I ask, dipping my eyes to where he's settled on the love seat.

Gavin looks at me as he rests his elbows on his knees.

"No. I mean, I don't think so."

I narrow my eyes at him, not sure how to take his evasive answer.

"It's been four years. Why would she come back now?"

I watch him move from his seat and start to pace back and forth, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Does it matter? I'm with you now, Aria."

I smile, the sincerity in his eyes driving away my doubts about Jasmine's intentions.

"You're right. I'm sorry," I whisper, going back to his side and crawling onto his lap. He kisses my forehead and I nuzzle my face into his neck. His scent engulfs me immediately. He's quiet for a few minutes as he holds me around my waist.

"Were you worried that she would change things between us?" he murmurs after a while. It's as if he read my mind and I meet his eyes, nodding.

"Just a little," I admit.

He lifts my chin and presses his mouth to mine, igniting my heartbeat with a slow, gentle, mesmerizing kiss. When he pulls away, I see the love in his eyes. Inwardly I scold myself. He loves me.

Why am I doubting that?

"I'm not going anywhere, baby."

I press closer to him and rest my head on his chest, enjoying the feel of him.

"I know, but what if she's..."

Gavin's lips at my ear stop me and he grabs my hand in his.

"That doesn't matter. Aria, I don't want her. I want you, beautiful."

Emotion stings my eyes at his honest words and when he presses his mouth to mine, I immediately slip my tongue into his mouth. Passion for him jolts my body, my skin, and my blood to life, and when he slants his mouth over mine and grazes his teeth over my lip and bites down gently, I moan softly. I grasp his silky hair in both hands and explore his hot mouth, feeling my desire for him low in my core.

"I. Want. You..." Gavin's whisper fuels my need as does his mouth as he begins kissing my jaw between each word. I moan, grabbing the first button of his collared shirt, anticipating what's to come.

Then the oven dings.

"Food's ready." I feel his low laugh against the skin of my neck, his stubble grazing my skin, making me want him even more. I groan in frustration, pulling back and giving him a wink as I push off the couch to grab the chicken Parmesan and garlic bread from the oven.

"You look so sexy in this apron, beautiful," Gavin says, wrapping his arms around my waist and kissing my neck softly as I wash the dishes and tip my head back against his chest. His mouth closes around my earlobe and he nips softly, making the ache between my legs worse.

"Will you make love to me, Gavin?" I whisper, turning in his arms to see his eyes heat.

"That's the plan."

"Do you miss him, beautiful?" Gavin murmurs as he leans over where I lay, tracing a hand over my bare hip as my eyes lock on the framed picture of Jeremy and me from my high school graduation last year. Somehow, seeing his picture hits home for me. God, I miss him so much. *How is it possible it's been a year already? I can't fathom how I've gone on.*

"Every day," I whisper as a tear escapes my eye. I remember that night so clearly. He was so happy for me that night, so full of life. He'd wanted the best for me, for my life.

Gavin's hand closes over my shoulder and he pulls me back toward him so my eyes meet his. He gazes down at me and immediately he gasps, leaning forward, cupping my cheeks in his hands, caressing them. I can feel his heart through his shirt, beating a steady rhythm. In this moment, he's what I lean into.

"He'd be so proud of you, baby." His forehead comes down to mine, hands touching my shoulders lovingly.

I nod, tangling my fingers in the hair at the back of his neck. Touching him is like a balm for me.

"I know."

Gavin leans back away from me and grazes his knuckles over my cheek again.

"I'm here for you, whatever you need. I know today is going to be hard for you."

I tighten my arms around his neck and press my lips to his for a soft, lingering kiss. Being in his arms immediately relaxes me. I don't know how I'd get through today without him. But thankfully, I don't have to.

"Thank you, Gavin. I was thinking we could move my things into the penthouse today. Do you want to?"

His eyes fill with wonder and he nods, kissing my temple.

"Absolutely. Come on, let's take a shower."

I feel my core tighten deliciously at the idea of taking a shower with him and I follow him down

the hall to my bathroom.

He turns on the shower head and then turns to me, his eyes heated with want.

I'm pulled against his chest and Gavin runs soft kisses along my jaw and then sucks tenderly on my collarbone, his hands moving down my body until he reaches the bottom of the oversized t-shirt I'm wearing.

"Gavin..." I whisper, a moan escaping my mouth as he glides his hands up my stomach and my rib cage, finally slipping the fabric over my head and dropping it to the floor.

"So beautiful," he whispers, taking my hand and leading me into the shower until we're standing under the hot spray.

"Turn around," he whispers, and as I do, he presses my hands on the wall of the shower and squeezes a large amount of body wash into his palm. Slowly, he covers my body with soap, and kissing my neck, teasing me, he turns me back toward him. The suds rinse off my skin and I look up into his blazing blue eyes.

"Lean your head back, baby. I'll wash your hair."

I smile at his thoughtfulness and comply, moaning loudly as he massages my scalp with his hands.

The pressure against my scalp along with the hot water and his touch take my breath away. I feel my body humming in desire for him again.

"Oh, Gavin," I moan breathlessly.

"I know."

He rinses my hair, his hands gently massaging my scalp and then, with a boyish smile, hands me the body wash.

"Wash me?"

I giggle, nodding, and squeeze some into my hand.

I press my mouth to his chest and glide my hands over his stomach, upward toward his neck and then down toward his length. He groans, his eyes widening and his lips parting.

"Baby, you're my undoing," he whispers as I run my soapy hands down from his neck to his arms until my hands intertwine with his.

"Same to you," I whisper as I reach for the shampoo and he tips his head back, letting me stroke my fingers through his hair.

As I massage his hair, I am reveling in the feel of him. I rinse him off and press into him, feeling my want for him again.

"Gavin, you feel so good." His eyes heat and he dips his head, capturing my mouth in a hard, wanton kiss. He licks along my tongue and wraps his arms around me, letting me feel his desire for me.

"Wrap your legs around me, Aria."

I do and he grins, kissing me softly now. He walks us out of the shower and sets me on the counter as he kneels in front of me.

"What are you...?"

Suddenly he dips his head and as he angles my hips toward him with his hands, runs his mouth over my inner thigh and ever so slowly licks my cleft in slow, hungry strokes.

"Gavin!" I cry out, arching into the feeling, grasping his hair in my hands as my head falls back.

Pleasure rocks my core in pulsating waves as he relentlessly kisses my cleft and licks inside me without stopping. I moan again, feeling my release coming. It overwhelms me, drowns me, surprises me.

"Gavin...please," I beg, needing something, and then he pushes two fingers inside me, rotating in and out, in and out. I struggle for breath as my body climbs, trembling with pleasure. I grasp onto him tighter and call out in pleasure when I shatter into a million vibrant pieces and grasp onto his hand holding mine against the vanity mirror, my eyes closed in ecstasy. "Wow" is all that falls from my lips after that.

After getting dressed and packing most of my things into boxes, we load his four-door Toyota Tundra. Gavin grazes kisses along my hand, driving with ease as the radio plays soft rock.

"Penny for your thoughts?" he whispers, pulling into the parkway of his penthouse so we can enter through the back entrance.

"Just feeling lucky to have found you, Gavin," I murmur, leaning across the console as he gives me a gentle kiss that leaves me wanting more.

"Trust me, I feel the same way. Let's get you unpacked and then I'd like to take you somewhere, baby."

A small smile plays along my lips as I remember each and every delightful surprise he's given me since I've known him.

"I love surprises," I say, biting down on my lip. He smiles wide, his eyes playful as he urges my lip from under my teeth with a lazy lick of his tongue.

"Good. I want to make you happy each and every day, Aria."

I gasp, not expecting his earnest words. I want to feel his love each and every day, too.

"You do, Gavin." Those are the only words I can say.

He winks at me, getting out of the truck and helping me out a moment later. His eyes look so blue in the sunlight, the blues of them shadowing the grays, that it takes my breath away.

"What is it?"

He gazes down at me, raising an eyebrow.

"I love your eyes," I whisper, grazing my teeth along his jaw and kissing the side of his mouth. He groans, chuckling lightly. It's such a sexy sound.

"I love you, Aria. And I love your smile, by the way."

My heart skips a beat.

He takes me around to the tailgate and begins to unload the four boxes stacked inside. He hands me my duffel bag and I go to the back door of the building to unlock it, since he's already given me a key to his place.

"Wait, babe," he says, stepping in front of me. I can see his shoulders tense as he unlocks the door easily. "I just want to be careful. My security team is inside and I don't want to catch them off guard."

I look up at him, forgetting his worries about Bryce, and I inwardly cringe, not wanting to think about his whereabouts right now. I would rather pretend he isn't a threat. I would rather him be long gone like he was for all this time.

He tucks me close to him and presses his lips to my forehead.

"Has something happened?"

"No, I'd tell you if something had. I promise. I just don't want to be careless."

I nod, leaning into him as he lets us into his apartment after a very long ride up to the top floor and sets the boxes down by the couch.

A dark-haired, slender man with the lightest of green eyes comes across the entryway. He has an earpiece to his ear and there are three men behind him, two with black hair and one blond. They're all dressed in casual wear but the way they carry themselves tells me they're anything but casual. The man in front steps forward, shakes Gavin's hand, and smiles.

"Mr. Thomas."

"Spencer. Everything clear?"

"Yes, of course. This must be Ms. Morgan. It's nice to meet you."

I offer my hand and he shakes it, his eyes welcoming. He can't be any older than 25 and must be the security lead Gavin told me about.

"Aria. It's nice to meet you, too."

Gavin wraps an arm around my waist and looks back to Spencer.

"This is Spencer. He's my security lead and friend."

He chuckles as if he doesn't agree, which Gavin echoes with his husky laugh.

"Come on, baby. Let's get you settled."

As I unpack my things, it excites me how well I adjust to this home-style penthouse. I set the picture of Jeremy and me by the bedside table and see another framed photo behind it. I pick it up, balancing it between my palms as I look down at the photograph that looks worn in the black frame. It's of an older woman with soft gray eyes and wrinkles around her eyes and

mouth. She has white wavy hair that's pulled into a bun and she wears a brown sweater and black slacks. I can see the resemblance in her face. Gavin stands next to her, smiling warmly with his arm around her shoulders, wearing a black suit jacket and a lavender-colored tie. I smile, seeing how close he must be with this woman.

"Hey, beautiful," Gavin murmurs, striding into the room and wrapping his arms around my waist from behind, nuzzling my cheek softly.

"Who's this?" I ask, looking up into his blue-gray eyes that are clear with his easygoing nature now that I'm all moved in.

"My grandmother from my dad's side. Tessa. We were really close when I was growing up."

I turn in his arms and press my hands to his cheeks when I see the tinge of sadness in his eyes.

"When?" I skate my fingers across his freshly-shaven jaw.

"Last year," he murmurs, almost to himself.

I pull him into my arms and wrap them around his back. Gavin presses his face into the swell of my neck and breathes me in. He leans back after a moment and his eyes are clear of the sadness. Instead, I see the love he has for me.

"I love you, Aria. Always."

I gasp, the sound dying on my lips as he dips his head and kisses me. His mouth engulfs me, his minty breath overwhelming my senses, and as he sucks my lower lip into his mouth, a moan slips from my parted lips.

I rest my forehead against his, trying to catch my breath.

"Can I take you somewhere, Aria?"

I smile, nodding as he grins that wide smile at me.

"Sure."

Fourteen

The sand seeps between my toes as Gavin leads me down to a picnic blanket a little ways down the beach. There's an over-sized basket sitting beside it, along with a bottle of wine in an ice bucket and a single red rose lying on the sand. I gasp, my eyes darting to his as he pulls me down to the blanket and sets me in his lap.

"When did you plan all this?"

His chuckle sends delicious tingles up my back.

"I have my ways, baby."

He lifts my chin with his finger and his eyes blaze with love. It takes my breath away.

"You're too good to me, Gavin," I whisper, resting my head across his shoulder. He looks so gorgeous with his hair mussed after his shower, and the way his blue tee, low slung jeans, and Columbia Motocross sweatshirt hug his body. His smile is teasing as he gazes down at me.

"You deserve the world, baby. And I'm going to do everything I can to give it to you."

"Gavin..."

I wrap my arms around his neck and press my mouth to his, moaning when he kisses me back passionately. He licks into my mouth and sucks adoringly on my lips, stealing the breath from my lungs and making my heart soar with love for this man.

He leans back with his eyes alight with humor. He winks at me, stirring my core with anticipation as he whips his shirt off over his head and scoops me in his arms, standing effortlessly. I squeal, grasping onto his neck when he starts running toward the shoreline. The sight of his half smile and blazing blues takes my breath away.

"What are you doing?" I yell, kicking my legs gleefully.

"I'm taking you in the water."

"No! It's probably so cold! Gavin!"

His husky laugh sends delicious shivers down my spine.

"Don't worry. I'll keep you warm," he says, winking down at me with a breathtaking smile on his face.

His mouth is hot against mine, his arms wrapped around my hips and my legs tight around his waist. His tongue licks along my lower lip as he murmurs against my urgent mouth.

"Let's finish this at home."

My heart soars at the sound of that one word that holds so much meaning. *Home*.

"I really like the sound of that," I whisper, inching away from his lips, grasping his gorgeous face between my palms.

His eyes are filled with want for me as he carries me out of the warmish water and sets me down beside the truck a moment later. He dries me off and as I wrap the pink towel around myself, I grab another one and dry him before kissing him quickly on the lips and hopping into the heated truck. The heat warms my fingers, banishing the goose bumps over my arms and legs.

"You're so beautiful, Aria. You take my breath away each and every time I see you."

His sincere voice and hungry blue eyes make my heart race with desire for him again. He grasps one of my hands in his and kisses my knuckles softly, not letting go even when we arrive back at the penthouse.

"I love you," I whisper, smiling as he dips his head toward mine. His nose runs along mine and the tender way he adores my mouth is heavenly. God, I never knew I needed this. But I do. His love has healed me in the best way possible.

"I love you, too, baby. Let's go inside."

I nod, looking up and spotting a white Lincoln in the spot next to us. When Gavin opens my door, his eyebrows are drawn together.

"That's Jasmine's car. I have no idea why she's here."

He grasps my hand and leads me inside, his face tense with frustration.

"Maybe she wants to apologize."

He shakes his head, tracing a finger down the side of my face as the elevator moves below us. What could she want? Uneasiness spreads through me the minute I see her slender frame in the doorway of the penthouse.

"I'll figure out what she wants."

I nod, trying to calm the worry etching through my mind. I kiss his cheek, giving him my best smile, and he hands me my purse as he runs a hand through his hair, probably steeling himself to talk to his ex for the first time in four years.

"I'll be in the bedroom." I wrap my hands around his broad shoulders and press my face into his neck.

"I won't be long."

I sit on the edge of the bed, waiting and waiting and waiting. The suspense ratchets up my anxiety.

I hear the front door close, and then footsteps down the hall.

Gavin opens the door and meets my eyes, his eyebrows drawn together in agitation. He sits next to me and gazes into my eyes, not saying anything just yet.

"Everything okay?" I ask. Nodding, he kisses my knuckles as I smooth his hair from his eyes. He looks tense, which only spikes my anxiety even more.

"I'm sorry she showed up here, Aria. I promise you, I didn't ask her to come."

"I know."

He sighs, the tension leaving his body all at once. His eyes clear as he gazes down at me more earnestly.

"She won't be back. I made it clear who I want now."

My heart stutters, his deep voice and clear eyes penetrating through my uneasiness.

I press closer to him and nuzzle my face into his neck.

"Make love to me, Gavin."

I see his blue-gray eyes fill with love for me and I moan as his mouth comes down, sucks and licks my throat, and his hands flex against my bottom. All my insecurities are forgotten as he makes slow, rough, gentle love to me again.

"Aria, baby, wake up."

My eyes flutter open to see Gavin sitting beside me, his smile lighting up his ruggedly handsome face. He wears a pair of faded Levi jeans and a button-down white shirt, the sleeves meeting his forearms.

His chest fills out the shirt perfectly and it makes my fingers itch to touch him. His mouth sweeps over mine, stealing my breath in the tenderness of it.

"Hi, handsome."

He laughs against my lips, his eyes filled with desire.

"Good morning, beautiful."

It's only then that I see the tray of pancakes, grits, scrambled eggs, and bacon. My stomach grumbles, seeing the delicious food Gavin made. I smile, biting my lip as he winks down at me.

"You made me breakfast?"

His lips tilt up in a smile that could make any girl swoon. It makes my heart race.

"Wasn't that our deal?"

I pull his face down to my parted lips, clutching onto his hair as he lifts the tray away from my lap and grazes his teeth along my jaw.

"Oh, yes."

His lips tease my neck and graze over my shoulder. I moan softly, gripping onto his shoulders as my head falls back.

"I want to try something, Aria," he whispers, his minty breath covering the oversensitive skin of my neck.

"Okay..." My eyes flutter close as I feel my core tighten.

"Grasp the headboard above your head now."

What? I open my eyes, seeing his heated gaze, and I comply. I grasp onto the wooden headboard with both hands, never taking my eyes off Gavin's.

"Gavin..."

He slips the sheet away from my breasts, leaning back and gazing adoringly at me. His heated look makes me feel so wanted it takes the breath from my lungs.

"Your body is so beautiful," he whispers, leaning forward as he cups my breasts in his hands. When his hot mouth covers one of my nipples, my sex clenches and my body yearns to touch him, pull him closer, something. I call out, gripping the wood beneath my hands even tighter.

"Gavin...please...I want to touch you," I moan. He licks around the areola of my left breast, making it achingly sensitive and hardened under his touch.

"Hush, beautiful. Feel me."

His tongue moves over to my other breast, his hand moving south as he nips down on my nipple, eliciting a cathartic groan from my parted lips. Pleasure rocks through me in a wave.

"Oh, my God!" I call out, trying in vain to grind against him. He heads south, his mouth adoring the skin of my belly, his hands parting my legs and running along my inner thighs. My skin zings to life and my legs wrap around his hips.

"Oh, Aria. You're so wet," he whispers, sliding a finger into my heat then adding another. I moan, feeling myself tighten around him. God, I need...

"Let the headboard go, Aria. Hold on to me," Gavin says, his voice a command. I moan when my overheated skin meets his as I grasp onto his forearms. My hips meet his fingers as he creates a heavenly rhythm. Once, twice, I tighten and writhe, feeling my release so close.

"Yes! Gavin!" I call out as he kisses down my neck and pushes three fingers into me once more. I cry out, exploding around him, my eyes falling shut in utter bliss.

"That was..."

He chuckles, kissing my temple as he hovers over me, kneeling between my legs. The fact that he's still completely dressed after that is such a turn on. His mussed hair falls into his eyes, his smile taking up his entire face, and his eyes gleam hungrily as he gazes down at me.

"Earth shattering?"

I giggle, kissing his collarbone. I revel in the taste of him, rubbing my hands down his chest.

"Among others," I whisper. He leans back, his mouth kissing my forehead gently.

"What do you want to do today, baby?"

"Um, actually there is something."

His eyebrows rise as he sits across from me, pulls me into his arms, and lays his hands around the back of my neck.

Commented [LD27]: ...rise

"I want to go see Jeremy's grave site."

I meant to go yesterday, but it slipped my mind and I haven't been there since the funeral. It's time.

He gazes down at me with his clear blue eyes. He nods, kissing my knuckles gently.

"Of course. Can I come with you?"

I smile, brushing my lips against his. How did I deserve this man?

"I'd love that."

His grave is just as I remember it, with a handful of lilies lying in front of the stone. They were always Kel's favorite, the only flowers Jeremy would give her on special occasions. I wonder when she was here.

I kneel in front of the stone and lay the white roses Gavin picked up for the grave site, remembering the beautiful bouquet Jeremy had given me on Valentine's Day after Bryce had ditched me for our anniversary. Jeremy always knew when I needed a lazy day with my brother.

Gage Jeremiah Morgan Beloved son and brother We will miss you

I skate my fingers down the lettering, the feel of the stone under my fingers bringing tears to my eyes as I remember the moment he slipped away from us. I can still hear his voice in my mind, so full of fondness for me. *"I love you, Ari. Be happy."* He was such a kind-hearted person. Why had he been taken from us so soon? Why not me? I feel tears well as my emotions overwhelm me. *Be strong for him. For Jeremy.*

I sit cross-legged, feeling Gavin kneel behind me. His hands run up and down my arms and I find the words I want to say to Jeremy, not knowing if it's possible that he'll hear me.

"I'm here, Jer. I'm sorry I haven't come to see you, but after you left us I kind of lost my way."

Gavin slips his arms around my waist and rests his chin on the top of my head. Just having him close gives me strength.

"I miss you so much, Jer. It's not the same without you, but I've found some happiness again. It's been a year since your accident and now it feels like I'm finally accepting what happened. I'm dancing again, and I've found love, just like you wanted for me."

Commented [LD28]: ..now it

Gavin kisses my temple, running a soothing hand up my back.

"Jer, I hope wherever you are, you're happy. You deserve that. I...I love you, Jeremy. Always."

I press a kiss to my left hand and press it to the tombstone above his name.

I feel a sense of clarity, knowing he's at peace now. At least I'm hoping he is.

"I miss him so much," I whisper, more to myself than Gavin. He pulls me to him, wrapping his arms around my middle as his lips linger on my forehead.

"I know."

I sniffle, turning deeper into his embrace. His eyes fill with such love, and I immediately lift my lips to his, needing to show my love for him. It's a slow, inhaling kiss that gives me butterflies. I gaze up at him, thankful for him.

"Thank you for being here," I whisper into his neck, my favorite place.

He smiles a soft smile, cupping my cheek in one of his hands.

"I told you. I'm not letting you go, beautiful." His hands clasp my face so lovingly.

My heart yearns for him as my body relaxes against his. *I love him so much.* I don't know how long we sit there, Gavin holding me with my head resting against his shoulder.

"Jeremy is his middle name?" he asks, lifting my chin to meet his clear gaze.

"Yes, Gage was my grandfather's name, but he never liked it. Everyone called him Jeremy. I think it fit him."

He nods, helping me up and grasping my hand in his. All I see are his blue-gray eyes.

This man is always so gentle with me, knowing exactly what I need even when I don't.

"Are you okay, Aria?" he asks, placing a kiss on my knuckles.

I gaze up at him and nod, tightening my hold on his hand.

"Better now, babe."

We step onto the sidewalk and down a little ways I see St. Luke's Lutheran Church, the church where I made my First Communion. There's a wedding going on and the sight of the wedding party gathering makes me realize something. I want it. I want him. I want to marry this man. How is that possible?

"Aria?"

Gavin cups my cheeks, bringing me back to the now.

"Oh, sorry."

"Daydreaming?" he whispers in my ear, his hot breath grazing my cheek.

"Maybe," I bite my lip to hide my giggle.

"Come on, baby." Somehow, he sees right through me.

Fifteen

I lean my head against Gavin's shoulder as he eases out into the midday traffic. His eyes flit down to mine and his lips tilt up into that youthful smile that first hooked me in the parking lot of Eli's studio.

His phone vibrates in the cup holder and I hand it to him, intertwining our fingers absentmindedly.

"Hi, Mom," he says. Crap, his mother?

"No. Yes, she's with me."

He gazes down at me, sighing and seeming agitated. What did she say?

"What? Mom...I'm not sure if that's a good idea..."

He pauses, listening. I wonder vaguely what his mother is like. She certainly raised him well.

"Okay, I'll talk to her about it. I love you. Bye."

He hangs up, huffing a laugh as he parks beside the studio.

"What was that about?"

He grins, kissing my lips softly as he leads me out of the Jaguar.

"She wants to meet you. How does dinner next Tuesday sound?"

Oh my.

"I'd love that. This might take a while since it's my last session before the showcase. Gavin, you don't have to stay."

He opens the glass door for me, a shadow of a smile on his handsome face.

"Only for a bit. I have an overseas conference call and a few meetings this afternoon."

Eli waves us over and I see Gavin's shoulders tense when he spots Eli's shaved head and piercing navy blue eyes.

"Eli, this is my boyfriend, Gavin Thomas."

"Nice to finally meet the man who's stolen Ms. Morgan's heart. I'm Eli Jenkins."

Gavin relaxes substantially and they shake hands, moving into easy conversation as I slip on my ballet flats and go to the center mat to begin stretching. My limbs ache more than usual. I'm sore from all the earth shattering lovemaking we've had over the last week. When I turn, I see Gavin's adoring stare as the music begins and Eli steps by my side.

Commented [LD29]: ..turn,

"You sore, Aria? I can see it in your stance."

I nod, stretching once more and pulling my hair into a messy bun. A slow, lingering melody begins and my eyes flutter closed. The notes collide into each other, creating a sad haunting mood as my first steps glide over the floor. As the dance ends, I keep my eyes closed, taking in a cleansing breath. It's as if I can see Jeremy applauding, just as he always had when I

performed. It calms me. When I open my eyes, I lock onto Gavin's intense gaze. He pulls me to him and I press my face to his neck, inhaling his minty scent.

"What did I do to deserve a goddess like you, baby?"

I kiss him at the side of his mouth, my heart skipping a beat at his hungry gaze.

"You're stuck with me, Gavin."

He smiles wide, cupping my cheeks as his mouth closes over mine, stealing my breath and creating tingles across the surface of my skin. His heady scent overwhelms me and hunger smothers my senses. My hands grip onto his hair. His tongue runs along my lower lip and his hands cup my cheeks, treasuring the tingling skin. I open to him, moaning his name as he explores my mouth eagerly. He is tasting, adoring, teasing, and torturing my mouth. He groans, his hot breath coming across my parted lips. I don't think I'll ever tire of this. His touch, his taste, his hands. It's addicting to me. Then, his phone rings.

"Sorry," he breathes, gazing down at his smart phone and frowning. "I have to go, baby. You okay to get home?"

I kiss his lips quickly, nodding.

"I'll have Kel bring my car here, no worries. How about I bring you dinner later. Will you be free by seven?"

His eyes brighten and his delectable mouth turns up into that smile I love.

"See you then, Aria. Don't turn off your phone, okay?"

I nod, our hands slipping away from each other from the distance of our bodies.

"You ready for a warm up?" Eli calls, forcing my gaze away from Gavin's departing backside. My cheeks heat and I nod, heading toward the mats once more.

I slip off my ballet flats and look up to see Kel leaning by the benches across the studio.

"Hey." She grins and throws an arm around my shoulder as we head out of the entrance and toward her BMW.

"How's the wedding planning going?" I ask as we drive to Henry's Pub, our favorite lunch spot in East End.

"Amazing! Everything's coming together. I can't believe in only two weeks I'll be married."

Her face lights up, and I see how genuinely happy she is. I'd wanted to be with her every step of the way as she plans her dream wedding but with the showcase coming up and the distraction that is Gavin Thomas, I think she knows my mind's been elsewhere.

"Good. I'm so sorry I haven't helped more with the wedding. If you need anything..."

She grasps my hand in hers and gives me a knowing smile.

"I know you're here for me. You've had so much going on... I completely understand."

I nod, my chest warming from the light that Kel carries in her eyes and her words.

"How's Gavin?"

"Well, things are....He's just so unbelievable. I told him I love him, Kel."

She parks in front of Henry's and gives me a shit-eating grin. Oh goodness.

"Oh, my God! And what did he say?"

I blush, remembering his heartfelt words.

"Like I said, unbelievable"

She squeals happily and hugs me tight, too tight.

"I'm so happy for you!"

She releases me, smiling.

"I know."

We walk into the dive and my stomach grumbles.

I moan in appreciation at the delicious triple stacked cheeseburger I'm well into. Kel picks at her fries, telling me all about the details of the wedding.

"Are you listening?"

I look up, nodding as my thoughts roam to Jasmine and the uneasy feeling I have that she's not going anywhere soon.

"Sorry, I was just lost in thought. This thing with Gavin's ex has me a little worried, you know?"

She gazes at me and shakes her head as if I'm crazy.

"That man is crazy for you, Aria. You know that. If his ex wants him back, so be it. He loves you. That's all that matters."

How does she know exactly what I need to hear? I relax, nodding. She's right. I'm being silly. He loves me.

"Thanks, Kel. Actually, do you mind if I order something to go? I thought I'd bring him some dinner."

She grins, popping a fry into her mouth as I wave over our waitress.

"Can I get an order of fettuccine Alfredo to go? With a Blue Moon?"

She smiles warmly, a strand of her red hair falling into her eye.

"No problem. Anything else?"

"No, thank you."

We stack our dishes and Kel's cell rings.

"I'll meet you in the car," she says, putting down her half of the bill as she scoots out of the

booth.

"Okay, hon."

With a to-go box in hand, I check my messages, figuring on at least one or two from Gavin.

Nothing. He must be busy, I tell myself and get into the car as Kel rants to someone about how this is her special day and she deserves the world. I bite my lip, feeling a little bad for whoever is on the other end of the line.

Commented [LD30]: I believe we can say "to-go" here??

After a detour to Glendale Florist for an order change that Kel insisted we had to do, she parks toward the front of Thomas.

"Your man is rich!"

I giggle, taking off my seat belt eagerly. Missing him already.

"I wouldn't care if he was a janitor, Kel."

She turns to me, smiling.

"I know, sweetie. Don't take too long, we've got that dinner tonight."

I grab the food and make my way into the building, amazed at how massively huge it is.

I hop onto the elevator, smoothing my sundress down my backside and letting my hair out of its bun. My mind starts to wander between floors. How is it possible to miss someone this much? It's just crazy.

I step off the elevator at the 26th floor, coming to a door that reads Gavin Thomas, CEO.

Somehow seeing his name on the door just excites me more. I open it and there's a long granite counter, a reception desk, and behind it is a man with blond hair and the darkest of blue eyes and a charming smile.

"Good afternoon, how may I help you?"

"Hi, I'm Aria Morgan. I'm here to see Gavin. We have a date."

His grin is infectious and he tells me to go down the hall and his office will be the first on the right.

"I'm sorry, Jazz," I overhear the carrying voices from the front lobby, and I know immediately who Gavin is talking to. Just hearing his voice laced with worry for someone else has my breath catching in my throat. Why is she in his office? What the hell?

Confusion, closely followed by a haze of unease settles inside me. My gut tells me to turn away and call Gavin tomorrow once I've had time to think about the questions swirling in my head. But my heart keeps me walking towards the open door to his office.

I hear his soft voice soothing her. *Jazz*. God, he's talking to Jasmine. I feel sick. When I round the corner I see his office door open, his arms wrapped around Jasmine, her long blonde hair pulled into a braid as she clutches onto him. His lips land in her hair as he holds her in his arms.

"I can't believe it, Gavin. I can't..." I can see them now and the sight guts me.

Jasmine is holding onto Gavin as she cries, her sounds loud and filled with anguish. I watch as

she sobs into his dress shirt and he holds her tighter. The embrace is intimate, and the sight of it is almost too much to watch.

"Shhh," he soothes her and when she pulls away, her hands grip the collar of his shirt while one of his hands is at the small of her back.

My heart beats a panicked rhythm in my chest and tears build in my eyes. I tell myself to look away. I can't possibly be witnessing this. When I see her lips press to his, all the breath leaves my body. A sound, low and guttural erupts from my chest, the pain searing through me at the sight. My Gavin with *her*. I hastily turn around, blocking the image from my sight. I can't take it anymore. How could he? After everything we had?

I'm still not enough for him.

The thought makes me want to get away from them as soon as possible.

Was it all a sham? Did he ever truly want me?

I drop the food on the floor by his office, tears streaming down my cheeks, and run toward the exit.

Doubts and hurt and so much anger fill me. My heart is being ripped apart, my stomach lurching as I make it just in time to empty the contents of my stomach into a trash can next to the outer doors of the office building.

How could I have been so stupid? He's probably been seeing her this whole time and I was just too blind to see it. I loved him....God, I love him with everything inside me. I run even faster away from the scene and then I hear footsteps behind me.

I hear his deep voice calling behind me. I try to wipe away my sadness as I realize he saw me. He came for me. Gavin yells my name louder and I halt at the sound of his voice. It's laced with something?

Shame? Worry? Fear, I think. I just don't know why.

"I swear to God this isn't what you think, Aria. You have to know..."

Anger seeps through me, replacing the crippling pain for a moment. I turn around and walk to him, my body vibrating with so many emotions I don't have a prayer of stopping the words bubbling up my dry throat.

"I have to know what, Gavin? Please tell me because it looks like I've seen enough!"

I wipe my mouth, sweeping my hair away from my face as the tears keep coming.

"Baby, I..." Before I know what I'm doing my hand flies out and lands forcefully against his cheek, knocking his face to the side. His eyes shoot back to mine, his gasp audible. I see the fear in his eyes now, along with a slow humming love that's ever present in his gaze. I can't stand it so I turn away from him, intent on walking away.

"Don't leave, Aria. Please listen to me!" His voice is filled with panic.

I run away from him but somehow can hear when he yells to me, his deep voice jolting me with the fierceness in it.

"You have to know you're my world, Aria!"

By the time I get into my sister's Jeep again, my entire body is shaking.

"Aria! Are you okay? What happened?"

I breathe in and out, struggling, and finally find the words.

"Please. Drive."

Sixteen

Kel hands me a steaming hot cup of cocoa and kneels beside me on her couch.

"What happened?"

I sigh, turning to her. I try to reach inside and grasp onto my inner strength but, honestly, I'm not sure if I have anything left.

"I saw him. Jasmine was there. His ex."

She gasps, wiping my tears away. Her eyes are filled with compassion and especially with my broken heart, I'm thankful to have such a loving sister.

"Why was she there?"

"I don't know. She was upset, I think. Gavin was holding her and then they kissed."

I take in a breath then slowly let it out, trying in vain to keep my tears at bay.

"Oh, sweetheart, I'm so sorry. What happened next?"

I gaze up at her, shrugging my shoulders in response.

"You didn't talk to him?"

I shake my head. What could he have possibly said to explain himself?

"I couldn't. I knew she wanted him back. I just never thought she'd take him from me like this."

Then Kel pulls me into her arms and I let go. The tears come and my body shakes with sobs, unrelenting and uncontrollable sobs. The whole time, all I can ask myself is how could he do this to me? How could the man that I've been slowly falling for these past weeks do this to me?

Once I've seemed to cry myself dry, I occupy myself by practicing the moves for my showcase performance tomorrow. My heart feels empty after seeing that slut kissing Gavin, but I refuse to waste any more tears. After my body is pushed to its limit I sink down on the mats in the guest bedroom and take a sip of water. For the first time, I listen to the words of the song playing.

*You hold me without touch,
You keep me without chains.
I never wanted anything so much.
To drown in your love,
And I'll feel your rain.
Set me free, leave me be
I don't want to fall another moment into your gravity.
Here I am and I stand so tall
Just the way I'm supposed to be.*

I remember the very moment I saw Gavin he took my breath away. Even with how badly I want to hate him, I can't, because I love him. How can it all just be in the past? I can't bring myself to believe that.

"Come on, Ari. You need some rest before the showcase tomorrow."

Kel shuts off the music and rests her hands on her hips.

"Okay, I'll try. No promises, though."

I get up and she hugs me tight, and then closes the door behind her as she leaves.

I crawl into the full-size bed, curling into a ball on my side and closing my eyes, willing sleep to find me. I yearn to feel Gavin's strong arms around me from behind, his chin resting against my shoulder as it always does as we fall asleep together. To hear him whisper "*Sleep, baby*" just before my eyes drift closed. And it's with thoughts of his sweet murmurs and love-filled eyes that I find sleep.

Gavin

I parked my car, felt my hands shaking where I gripped the steering wheel. Forcing a breath out of my lungs, I tried to calm myself down. All I could see was my beautiful girl's eyes when she walked- no, ran

Commented [LD31]: ..beautiful

away from me. From the pain I'd unknowingly caused her tonight. From the moment I opened my office door and saw Jasmine of all people huddled on the sectional, I knew I should have kicked her out, left her there, done something other than try to help. But goddamn it, if I'd done that, if I'd turned Jasmine away and been the heartless son of a bitch I used to be after she broke my heart all those years ago, I wouldn't deserve a girl like my Aria. My Beautiful. Then, she'd walked in at the worst possible time. I had my arms locked around Jasmine. Trying to comfort her, to somehow make her stop feeling so badly. When she told me her father cut her off financially I knew exactly how she was feeling. It was exactly how I had felt years ago. My dad and I had our problems, and when he'd cut me off from the money I was so used to, it was a shock. But eventually, it helped me.

I saw the hurt, the anger, and the doubts flitting out from Aria's guarded emerald green eyes. Could almost feel her withdrawing from me, could feel how her heart broke the moment she saw me holding her. Shit. I pulled both hands through my hair, clenching my fists. God, I was about to lose everything I'd ever wanted, I needed to fight for her. For Aria. If she would just answer her goddamn phone. I groaned aloud when I heard her soft voice in her voice-mail message. Again. If she would just listen, give me one chance to explain I could make this right. I had to make this right. Losing Aria was not an option. Christ, I couldn't even fathom living without her.

"Aria. I need to talk to you. Please. I love you more than anything and I promise you, I would never cheat on you. But since you won't answer your phone, I have to explain. Jasmine showed up at my office around 6:30, she was upset..." My voice cracks with the thick emotion crawling up my throat. I rest my head against the steering wheel and surrender to the heavy weight spreading through my chest.

"I swear to you, it's not what you think. She was barely holding herself together. Her father cut her off last week and she was a mess. I felt bad, knowing how she was feeling. When I was 16

years old, my dad temporarily cut me off when I was getting into some trouble with my friends at the time. I felt so angry, and betrayed, and hopeless. I hugged Jasmine, told her everything would be okay, that she could make her own money with her modeling and that it wasn't as bad as she thought. She started crying, Aria I promise you I don't feel anything for her. She kissed me, I had no idea she was going to do that. I pushed her off of me in the next second and then I saw you. Baby please believe me, I love you and I only want you. Call me..."

When I begrudgingly press end call on my phone, tears are welling in my eyes and they blur my vision.

Pushing my car's door open, I walk across the way towards the apartment building where my Beautiful girl lives with her sister. I climb up the steps to her door and pause to pull my left hand through my hair before knocking three times. Please let her be here. Let her give me a chance to explain. And I'm immediately disappointed when Luke pulls open the door. A smug grin spreads his face.

"Man you look like shit" I push his shoulder back and focus my eyes on the closed door to Aria's bedroom in the hallway not even ten feet behind him.

"Shut up, Luke. Is she here?" Hope fills my voice; I hadn't even realized I was going to end up here. But now, I'm determined to see her. To see that my girl is okay.

Commented [LD32]: ..voice;

"Asleep now, I think. But Gavin, you need to give her time. She's hurting right now."

God. I already knew this but having it said aloud caused the pit in my stomach to go deeper.

"Luke I -" I'm interrupted when Kaelyn slips out of the bedroom, her hand turning the knob closed once more. Her blonde hair is pulled into a bun and when she comes to stand beside Luke, I can see the tracks of tears staining her face. Fuck, I have to make this right. I have to.

"You both have to know-" my voice cracks, betraying me.

"I would rather die than hurt that girl in there. She's my world. I love her, Kel."

Her smile is wavering with emotion and when she looks up to Luke, nodding her head, he steps back and allows me to pass. I just need to see her. My Aria.

"Thank you, thank you" I whisper to Kaelyn as I lean down to kiss her cheek.

Commented [LD33]: ..Kaelyn as I lean.....

"Gavin?" Its Kaelyn's voice. I turn around, my hand closing around Aria's doorknob.

"Don't wake her, okay? It took a lot to get her to sleep, and her showcase is tomorrow"

I nod, hating that I can't make this right between us tonight. But I'll take her anyway I can get her, even if only for a few minutes. Luke takes Kel into the living room and the minute I'm alone I push open the bedroom door ever so slowly, not wanting to wake her.

"Mhmm" she moans in her sleep, making my heart beat just a little faster at the sound. Her black hair is splayed on her pillows, her face void of makeup. Christ, she's so goddamn beautiful.

As I watch her sleep - her chest rising and falling with each breath she takes, her lips softened in sleep, I know I'm completely gone over her. Losing her would break me, rip me apart. *How could I ever survive that? How could she?*

Aria

I'm forced awake by my residual panic and I suck in precious air. God, I must have had a nightmare. I hastily look at the clock, worried I've overslept. The bedside radio reads ten-thirteen in the morning. I take a deep breath, remembering Gavin's soothing words the night he found me here having a nightmare. *Breathe, Aria. Just breathe.*

"You up, honey?" Kel calls from the kitchen. I get up and begin making my bed in an effort to get my mind off the dream. *He left me.*

"Yeah, I'm awake," I call. I hear her talking to someone on the phone.

"I know, I'll try, but she's hurting right now. Gavin, she needs time. Okay, will do. Bye. "

Gavin called her? Why? I finish with my bed and grab my iPhone on the desk across the room.

When I wake the screen, I see twelve missed calls, six text messages, and three voice mails, all from Gavin.

My hand shakes as I contemplate listening to them. No. I'll surely fall apart hearing his voice right now.

She's right. I do need time to think, and to mend my heart if that's possible. I turn off my phone and get dressed in brown yoga pants and a white button-down shirt that fits me well. Leaving a few buttons undone, I slip my phone and car keys into my purse and go into the bathroom to fix my messy hair.

"Ready, Ari?" Luke asks as he makes his way into my room. I secure the French braid at the back of my head and smooth out my shirt.

Commented [LD34]: Luke??

"Yeah. Can you grab my dance bag? It should be on the bed."

"Sure thing."

He hooks it over his shoulder then places a hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently.

"How are you doing?"

I shrug as he hugs me to his side and we head to the car.

Focus, Aria, you can do this, I tell myself, willing not to cry about Gavin anymore. I have to be strong, if only for a few hours.

Only hours later, I sit with Kel and her fingers thread through my hair as she combs the black curls down my back, securing each one with a bobby pin.

"Ouch!" I yelp as one digs harshly into my scalp. Kel laughs nervously and releases the pin quickly, letting the curl fall from her fingers.

"Sorry, sweetie. You okay?"

I try to laugh, my heart seizing in my chest painfully as I keep seeing the same painful image

in my mind. Gavin kissing Jasmine. His ex. The woman he almost married.

"Sure, no worries."

Gavin's mouth, the one that's adored me and pleased me in the best ways, locked on another woman's lips. It's still so fresh in my mind.

"I really think you should call him, Aria. He sounded so panicked when he called me. Just...hear him out."

I hastily shake my head, closing my eyes as I feel tears build in my eyes. I don't want to do this. I don't even want to think about what I saw last night. Will my heart ever heal from seeing him kiss another woman? I don't think so.

"I can't."

I really hope she won't push the topic because I'm honestly not ready to hear Gavin's voice or see his face or feel his presence anytime soon. It would just be too much for me.

Before she can say anything, my iPhone rings a melody while lying on the vanity in front of us and we both look at it. Oh, holy crap. Could that be him?

"Hello?" I don't recognize the number but then I hear Callie's voice.

"Hi, Aria?"

She hiccups. I can hear her crying and voices in the background. Oh, no. Deep inside me, my heart stops as fear takes hold.

"What's happened, sweetheart? Are you okay?"

She sniffs and after a moment, I think she's calmed down.

"Something...well..."

There's a rustling noise and my hands shake, remembering that call I got when Jeremy got hurt. It was the most terrifying moment of my life.

"Hi, it's Jaden. I was here when we got the call. Gavin's car...He's been in an accident."

Oh, God. All the air leaves my lungs and I struggle to find words. Gavin?

"You're at Mercy West?" I choke out.

"Yes, Wing C in Emergency. Hurry."

I drop the phone to my lap and suck in a breath, my body strangled with a sob. My skin feels like ice and my heart drops into my stomach. I lost Jeremy and it all began with a phone call.

God, no. It's happening all over again.

Seventeen

Aria

Gavin has been admitted to the hospital, he's been in an accident. Aria, he's in critical condition. The words repeat over and over in my head and all the breath leaves my lungs as I hold the phone to my ear, clasping the locket in my hand for some sort of comfort. Gavin is hurt. Or worse... God. If only I had been with him last night, if only I hadn't run away. The fear unfurls in the pit of my stomach and pushes against my ribs as I struggle for words.

"Aria? Are you there sweetheart?" Lucas' familiar voice brings me back to the now.

"What? Yes, I'm here. What happened? Is he..."

I hear his slow exhale of breath, which only spurs my fears on even more.

"He's being looked at right now. Earlier, he called me and asked where your showcase was being held, and he said he had to see you. Aria, sweetheart, you have to know that he loves you so much. I could hear it in his voice; he was going crazy without you. I don't know what happened between him and his ex, but he was coming to see you. I can't believe he drove all the way from St. Louis to find you."

Commented [LD35]: ..voice;

Oh my God, no. He was coming to see me? Confusion clouds my thoughts as I remember the image of Gavin kissing Jasmine in his office, the pain of that moment so fresh in my mind. But then, he was coming to see me. What if - maybe, I overreacted? Oh God, what if I lose him because I didn't stop and talk to him?

Tears sting my eyes and I struggle for breath as Kel takes my phone from my hand and kneels in front of me with concern filled eyes.

"Luke? What's going on?"

I don't hear his response as I force myself to move my arms, sliding my hands out of my leotard and shawl, unpinning my hair and forcing deep breaths in and out of my lungs. Once I look myself again, I grab the pair of ripped Levi jeans and white V-neck tee with a brown knitted belt that ties at the waist. I brought them with me for after the performance, but all I can wrap my mind around at this moment is getting to Gavin as soon as possible.

"Of course I will, love you too."

Kel helps me get dressed and pulls my hair back into a low ponytail to keep it out of my eyes. Silent tears course down my cheeks as I struggle to get a hold on my emotions.

This is all my fault, oh God, Gavin. Please....

"Come on Aria, let's get to the hospital. It's going to be okay I promise you, honey."

She turns me around in the chair and cups my cheeks so I have to look into her soft eyes.

"Do you believe me?"

I nod, knowing she's right. I have to hold onto hope, Gavin needs me now. And God, I need him so much. I can't lose him, I can't lose the man that I love more than anything. My thoughts never stray from *him*.

Once we reach the hospital entrance, I throw the door of Kel's Lexus open and run towards the double doors. My feet carry me across the parking lot so fast that I find myself struggling to catch my breath. I know I should slow down, I know I haven't eaten today and I should wait for Kel to catch up with me. I know all of that, but all reason has fled my mind, I just have to get to Gavin. I have to.

"Ari!" Kel catches up with me and I force my feet to slow, feeling my throat dry from worrying my lip between my teeth.

She grabs my hand and looks into my eyes with such concern and love.

"I have to drive Lucas to work, but then I'll come right back I promise. OK?"

I nod as we turn the corner into the front lobby of the ER, spotting Lucas walking towards us with worry etched across his young looking face. His hair is messy and he's wearing a brown sweater with his usual styled black jeans that look wrinkled and worn. How long has he been here? *Minutes, hours? God, why didn't I just answer Gavin's calls?*

"Luke? Have they told you anything?"

I ask, my voice barely a whisper. He reaches us, and looks down at me before sweeping me into a hug and whispering in my ear. The strength of his hold is welcome as I sniff into his sweater.

"I'm not a family member, but I overheard the doctors saying that he has a concussion and some broken ribs when they were talking with Gavin's mother and his sister."

I suck in a breath, trying to find the strength to think positive right now . *Does that mean he may have more injuries? Or is he going to be OK?*

Unwillingly, my eyes are forced closed with the fear racking my body. How could this have happened to Gavin? Whenever I've been in his car with him, he's been a cautious but decisive driver. He wouldn't be driving recklessly to cause an accident like this. That is very much unlike him. Unless... *unless he was going out of his mind after I ran away from him, from us. Maybe he wasn't worried about his well-being and all he could focus on was getting back to me.* I hastily try to rid my mind of thoughts like that. It's not like there was any possible explanation he could have given me that would make me believe him. Believe that my initial thought when I saw that woman in his office was wrong or misguided. He was *kissing* her. His ex.

The woman that jilted him at the altar years ago. Gavin told me what that did to him. How could he? I feel the sharp glass of heartbreak in my chest from the memory of seeing him kissing another woman. I don't think I'll ever forget it, but if I hadn't run, would we be here now?

"Oh my God, this is all my fault," I whisper, a sob erupting from my chest as I bury my face into his shoulder.

Lucas rubs my back slowly and tightens his arms around me as I sob quietly into his sweater.

"Shh you have to stay positive, Ari. I saw him come in and I can tell you he wasn't in pain."

Was he truly not in pain? God, I hope that's true. Even with the past day's events I will never wish pain or hurt for Gavin. He's the one that brought me up when I couldn't stand myself. He *saved* me. God, he loved me. I don't think I'll ever stop loving him.

I sniff, nodding to reassure him I'm okay and I take a deep breath as Lucas releases me and wipes my tears away.

"I'm okay, go. It's OK, I'll see you later. Thank you, Luke," I whisper, faking a smile. Kel leans forward, giving me a kiss on my forehead.

"I'll be back soon, go see your man, Aria." She smiles warmly, hoping to lift my spirits and I wait until they turn the corner before wiping my cheeks and finding the strength to walk towards the emergency room where I see Callie sitting in a chair with her chin resting on her knees. Her eyes are looking lost as she stares across the waiting room to a conference room; the door is open.

"Callie?"

She looks up and her eyes light up as she gets up and walks over to me.

"Are you okay?" I ask as she hugs me and we sit in the waiting room chairs, her eyes are filled with tears. My own prick with moisture at the sight of this young girl's sadness.

"I can't believe this is happening. My mom is in with the doctors now."

"It's going to be okay, Callie." I turn, grabbing her hand as all my thoughts are centered on the last few weeks. The best moments of my life flood my mind. Making love for the first time with Gavin, breakfast in bed, the joy in his eyes when I told him I love him for the first time, and then, the terrifying image of his ex-fiancée locking lips with him inside his office yesterday.

I don't know how long we sit there, but eventually my legs start to fidget, feeling restless in the uncomfortable hospital's chair.

"Sweetie, I'm going to take a walk around for a bit."

She nods, giving me a half smile and I release her hand to head towards the bank of elevators. I pull out my phone, stepping into the thankfully empty car. I clasp the locket in both my hands as I close my eyes and take a deep, cleansing breath.

He's going to be okay. Gavin. My Gavin. He has to be OK. I love him. My goodness, I love him so much. Even if I'm so hurt by him right now, I know I still love him.

The voice mail alarm signals from my phone for the third time, and I can't ignore it anymore. Last night I missed him so much, I missed falling asleep in his arms. The feeling of his lips on mine as we lie in bed together. The heavenly sight of his face, as relaxed and handsome as he sleeps in the early hours of the morning. With tears building in my eyes, I select the first of three voice mail messages he left last night at 9:45 pm. I press "listen" and close my eyes, leaning against the stop button on the elevator's control panel.

The car slows to a stop between the third and fourth floors and Gavin's soft voice comes across my senses.

"Aria, please, call me. I know what you saw, but I promise you with everything I am that I did

not kiss Jasmine. Just please call me so I can explain. I love you, baby. Please call me."

Oh, my. His voice sounded so raw, so wounded. And so determined, there's another message at 11:18 pm and I suck in a breath when I hear his voice again.

"Aria. I need to talk to you. Please. I love you more than anything and I promise you, I would never cheat on you. But since you won't answer your phone, I have to explain. Jasmine showed up at my office around 6:30, she was upset..."

His voice is filled such raw emotion, it tears at my soul. Could he be telling the truth? Oh God, I should have just stopped to talk with him!

"Baby, it's not what you think. She was barely holding herself together. Her father cut her off last week and she was a mess. I felt bad, knowing how she was feeling. When I was sixteen years old, my dad temporarily cut me off when I was getting into some trouble with my friends at the time. I felt so angry, and betrayed, and hopeless. I hugged Jasmine, told her everything would be okay, that she could make her own money with her modeling and that it wasn't as bad as she thought. She started crying. Aria I promise you I don't feel anything for her. She kissed me; I had no idea she was going to do that. I pushed her off of me in the next second and then I saw you. Baby, please believe me, I love you and I only want you. Call me..."

Gavin's voice breaks, cracks on the last few words and a strangled sob escapes me as my legs give out on me. I slide to the floor, my back against the glass wall of the car as the tears escape my eyes and I cover my face with my hands. Oh, God. He's telling the truth, I can hear it in his voice. And I just....walked away. I didn't even let him explain, I just... left!

His last message is at 5:22pm, today. Only twenty minutes before I got the call from Callie.

His voice sounds more determined now, but still laced with such pain and sadness. Regret, maybe.

"Aria, this has gone on long enough. I've tried waiting for you to call me, or to show up at the penthouse, but I can't wait anymore. I'm coming to see you, baby. I'll see you soon."

He was coming to see me, he didn't kiss her, oh my God what if he blames me for this? Or, my breath evaporates from my lungs as I realize my biggest fear. What if.... I lose him?

Just like Jeremy, just like my darling brother. I can't, I won't lose him. I push myself to my feet and I press the button again to move the elevators car. But this time, I head for the first floor to go back to the Emergency Room. I have to see Gavin.

After twenty more minutes of waiting, a doctor comes out of the conference room and immediately, I stand along with Callie who's gripping my hand just a little too tight. Seeing the fear in her eyes brings me back to a little over a year ago when I was the one waiting for word about Jeremy, so unsure of what would happen, so scared of the inevitable. But now, all I want is for Gavin to be okay. So, I shake the doctor's hand and try to remain calm as I wait. He looks down, wiping beads of sweat from his forehead and then his eyes meet mine, navy blue, filled with uncertainty.

I don't know how long I stand there, the worst outcomes going through my mind before the doctor gives me a small smile and shakes Callie's hand in greeting.

"I'm Dr. John Lee, I operated on Gavin Thomas."

I nod, holding in the burst of emotions threatening to be released from within me.

"I'm...um... Aria Morgan, his girlfriend and this is Callie Thomas, his sister. How is he?"

"Well, Gavin is in stable condition. He does have four broken ribs and a concussion, some major cuts and bruising on his stomach from where glass from the driver's side window cut him, and from where he hit his head, there may be brain damage. We won't know more until he gains consciousness. I doubt it, since there's no indication of any in the scans we've run, but it is a possibility you should prepare yourself for."

I let out the breath I was holding in, my brain struggling to process all this information. He's alive, that's all I can focus on. Gavin is alive.

"If all goes well, he should make a full recovery. Would you like to see him?"

He takes my hand, getting my attention and I nod. *Stay strong, Aria, just a little longer.*

"Yes, where is he?" My heart beats faster at the thought of seeing Gavin, my Gavin.

"Room 172. He should be awake within a few hours."

I rush to follow the doctor, the fear still coursing through me though now it's mixed with a yearning of hope. Callie catches my hand as I walk away and I turn back, confused.

"You alright? Do you want me to stay with you?"

She shakes her head, her hand gripping mine. I hug her to me, whispering in her ear.

"If you need to talk, I'm here Callie."

"Thanks for being here, Ari," she whispers, pulling away with a half-smile.

"See you soon?" I nod, kissing her hand before heading back towards the corridor.

"Sure."

"Gavin, baby, I'm here." My voice is strained with emotion and I try to take deep breaths through the fear coursing through me. *What if he doesn't wake up? God, I can't fathom being without him. How would I survive it?*

I clutch his hand that isn't bound up in wires and tape, press his palm to my cheek in an effort to connect in even the smallest way. I just need him to open those gorgeous blue gray eyes of his.

I'm taken back to that first night he held me, so many weeks ago.

"Beautiful," he says, and without another word he pulls me into his chest, lifting me as he sits against the headboard, his arms wrapped tightly around my trembling body. He sets me in his lap, holding me tight and I bury my face in his neck, clutching onto his shoulders for support. I let my emotions take over my body, feeling the pain and the terror and the relief of being held.

"I can't...." I stutter, trying to talk through my tears. His hand runs up and down my back, banishing away the cold, dirty feeling that lingers on my skin from the dream.

"Shh, baby. I'm here, just breathe," he whispers, kissing my forehead and tucking me close to him, his chin resting on the top of my head. I suck in a breath, slowly letting it out.

"Again, Aria," he continues to whisper, watching me while I take another full breath and release it. I feel myself calm down from his warmth and that intoxicating scent of mint that only Gavin can make both calming and exciting at the same time.

He lifts his chin and places his palms on my cheeks, tilting my face up so his eyes meet mine. He gasps, seeing my disheveled state. I see his forehead crease with worry as he wipes my tears away with his thumbs and showers my face with soft kisses.

"How? When did you get here?" I whisper, finding comfort in his soft blue eyes and gentle touch.

"I was on my way home and I wanted to bring you flowers to surprise you. When I got here, Jesus, you looked so scared, so helpless, I had to wake you. I can't stand to see you like this, hurt and afraid, Aria. Are you okay? Please, be honest with me."

I can't seem to form words so I rest my forehead against his, taking a deep breath to steady myself. I'm okay, it was just a dream. I'm okay.

"I'm okay, it was horrible, but I'm okay," I finally whisper.

Gavin exhales, not letting go of me. He traces a pattern across my thigh, calming me.

"What do you need, baby?" I get butterflies despite my nightmare, at the sound of him calling me that. I might even like it better than Beautiful.

"I don't know, Gavin. I can't fall back asleep after that. Can you just hold me for a while?"

He leans back, smiling warmly at me.

"That I can do, Aria."

He wraps his arms around me, his hands gliding up my back to soothe me. Pressing my face to his chest, I focus on breathing in and out. God, he feels so good.

After so long just sitting with him, I remember something Dr. Lee said. Gavin might be able to hear me, feel my presence. Suddenly it makes perfect sense to me. I have to give him a reason to wake up, to come back. I have to talk to him, tell him everything I've been feeling the last three hours.

"Gavin..." I press my hand to the left of his chest where I can feel his slightly slower but still steady heartbeat underneath my fingers.

"I feel it. I feel your heart. It's still beating. Please, please come back to me."

Tears well in my eyes and I dip my head to his forearm as I silently cry. I'm so scared, so, so scared that I've lost this kind, passionate, beautiful man forever.

"I'm so sorry, Gavin. I left and I didn't let you explain. I was so hurt, so angry with you after what I saw in your office yesterday. I had no idea what to think, how to move on from you. I love you; I think I've loved you since the moment we first made love."

Commented [LD36]: ..YOU;

God, the truth of my last statement strikes right through my heart. I'd been so afraid to open up to him, to risk my heart. Afraid that I'd be all alone in this thing I'd found with Gavin. But when I looked up into his smoldering blue gray eyes while we were making love, I saw so much. I saw love. And I knew I'd fallen now and forever in love with him.

I kiss his hand and the tears don't stop as I pour my heart out for him. He's owned it ever since I fell in love with him just a few weeks ago.

"Before I met you, I was so closed off. I was so determined to stay away from any attachment, knowing how deeply my heart could be broken and I didn't want to risk that again. But you, God, Gavin, you got to me, you saw me and I couldn't stay away from you. I was afraid that you'd hurt me, but more than that, I was scared that I would lose you, Gavin. These last three hours have been the most terrifying of my life and I realized something. I'm completely and totally in love with you, baby. I'm so sorry I overreacted and I didn't let you explain. Please, open your eyes. Wake up so I can tell you how much I love you, Gavin. Please..."

I look tenderly at his face, waiting and waiting. Yearning for that soft smile to spread over his mouth, revealing his dimple. For those expressive blue eyes of his to bore into mine. But he doesn't stir, his eyes remain closed. I exhale and press my face to his neck, breathing his intoxicating scent into my nose. I press my hands to his chest, crying quietly into his neck. *Gavin, please come back to me...*

"I'm sorry, I love you" are the only words I can seem to utter as the sobs erupt out of me, my throat constricting as I release the emotions overwhelming my body.

Eighteen

There's a knock by the door and thankfully, I've collected myself enough to call out for whomever it is to enter. Callie and an older woman with dark brown hair and gray colored eyes that shift to mine walk in. *Gavin's mother. Oh my God this is Gavin's mother.*

"Ari, this is Elizabeth, my mom. Mom, this is Aria Morgan, Gavin's girlfriend."

She eyes me for a moment before stepping forward and gives me a warm smile. "It's wonderful to meet you, honey. Are you doing OK?"

She sits beside me and her eyes are soft with unshed tears. She looks so much like Gavin, it takes me aback for a moment.

"I'm not sure. I can't believe this happened and I just want him to wake up.."

A tear escapes my eye and she grabs my hand, holding it gently in hers and deftly wipes the tear away from my cheek.

"He's strong honey, and I know how much he loves you. He's going to wake up, and from what I've heard he'll have some making up to do."

I gasp, he talks to his mother about me? Oh, goodness.

"Why do you say that?"

She sighs, looking briefly to her son before her eyes shift back to mine. I spot Callie speaking softly to her brother on the other side of the bed and my heart constricts for her.

"We had dinner last night and honey, he was a mess. He told me what happened with Jasmine and I can tell you, that nothing is between him and that girl. From what I heard, he loves you more than anything. And I'm not telling you to forget what you saw, but Aria, he would never want to hurt you or betray you. I would bet my life on that."

I nod, knowing she's right. I don't know why I ran like that, but I have to explain it to him. He has to wake up, soon.

"He loves you, sweet girl. And I can see that you love him. Don't you?"

I nod, squeezing his hand in mine.

"God, I love him so much. I don't know what I would do if I lost him. Mrs. Thomas, I love your son very much."

She scoffs when I call her that, her lips lifting in a smile.

"Elizabeth, please honey. I'm going to take Callie home for a few hours, then we'll be back. Do you need anything?"

She leans forward and wraps her arms around me, her slender frame pressing to mine. I hug her back, sniffing into her beige colored, striped knitted jacket.

"No, I'm okay. Thank you, Elizabeth. It's nice to finally meet you. You raised an amazing son."

"Thank you, honey. You make him happy, that's all I want for him."

She smiles as she pulls away and stands. I see Callie coming over to hug me briefly, her sad eyes meeting mine.

"Take care of him?"

"Always."

They close the door behind them and I turn back to Gavin, running my hand up and down his forearm. The smooth skin beneath my fingertips starts to calm me.

"Your mother is delightful, by the way."

I place Gavin's hand onto the bed and sit beside him on the mattress, gazing down into his unguarded face.

I caress his cheek with my hand, noticing the rough edge of stubble across his jaw and lean forward, grazing my mouth across his forehead, kissing him tenderly.

"I never thought I would need this, but I do. Your touch, seeing the love in your eyes, getting to know your family. It's all so overwhelming, but I want it. I want to be with you. Please, Gavin. Please don't leave me." I kiss his mouth softly, then lean back again, feeling empty without him.

My breath hitches in my throat, and I sit back on the stool beside his bed, grasp his hand in both of mine and lay my head beside our adjoined hands. Before I know it, I drift.

"Aria, baby wake up." I feel a brush of his fingers against my bare lips, the slide of his fingertip between my parted folds, the softness of sheets hitched up on my bare thighs. I hum contentedly, wanting to go back to sleep but also wanting to wake up to my man pleasuring me so intimately.

"What are you doing?"

I feel Gavin's hands clasp my knees and they are urged farther apart.

"I'm touching you, Beautiful." He dips a finger into the wetness of my core and I gasp at the fullness, the tightening in my muscles and then my gasp turns into a whimper when suddenly his finger is gone and I'm left bereft and overcome with need. My eyes fly open.

"You can't do that! What are you...?"

My voice dies when I see the amazing picture in front of me. Gavin, completely naked, kneeling between my thighs and that sweet and sexy smile is staring right back at me.

"Hmm" is all I muster before I catapult myself into his arms, knocking him flat on his back and grasping his hips as I lower my mouth to his lower belly. I tease his length with squeezes around the base, kisses and bites all the way down his torso until my lips are at the apex of his thighs, just above where he's aching for me.

"Baby..." His voice is strained with need and my eyes flick up to his. I lose my breath all over again when I see him looking down at me with eyes filled with hunger, his lower lip trapped

between his teeth.

"I'm touching you." I tease, licking down his thick shaft, around the tip where I taste beads of moisture.

A low rumble comes from Gavin as his hands lock into thick strands of my hair.

"Fuck, that feels amazing. Aria, baby stop, you don't have to do that." I can hear the need in his voice but I also know that above all else, he considers me and my feelings in this moment. This is something we've never done.

He would never push me to do anything I didn't want to do.

"Shh." I trust him and I want to do this for him. I want to feel him lose himself in the pleasure I can give him. Gavin wraps a hand around my nape and tugs gently, wanting to pull me up, but I shake my head and wrap my mouth around his tip once more.

"Ahh, baby!" I taste the moisture and a cathartic moan escapes me.

I'm in a haze of pleasure and determination, hearing Gavin's moans as I take him even deeper into my mouth and love him in this new, heady way.

When his hands tighten in my hair, his fingers almost digging into my scalp, a sense of awareness settles into me. Even in the throes of passion, Gavin is never rough with me.

"Loosen up, babe." I whimper, attempting to pull back from him but his hands grab onto me even tighter.

Panic ebbs its way into my stomach.

"Come on, Princess. Don't stop now."

His roughened voice and harsh grip on my head thrashes me into reality. Oh, God, no. No, no no no! I know that voice. Bryce. It's not possible...

"Let me go!"

I come back into consciousness when I feel a hand on my shoulder. Panic, fear, pain, disgust – it's all coursing through me and making my body shake. It was just a dream. Just another stupid dream. Breathe, Aria. Just breathe. In and out. Once I've calmed, my eyes drift open and I lift my head to see Dr. Lee standing by the foot of the bed. I wipe my eyes and try for a smile, not sure how long I've slept.

"I thought you'd want these, his effects that we found on him when he came in."

He hands me a small plastic bag and I take it with shaking fingers. I can see his cell phone, keys, and brown threaded wallet through the clear bag in my hand. Is this all I have to hold onto? Everything he had on him when he was hit by the semi?

"Has he woken up at all?" The doctor asks, taking Gavin's chart out from the holder against the wall at his bedside.

"No, I've been here all night." I couldn't leave him, God I'll never leave his side again.

"That's normal in these circumstances, it shouldn't be long though. I'll be back in an hour or so to check his vitals," Dr. Lee says, a hopeful look in his eyes that takes me back.

That makes the heaviness in my chest lighten, knowing he should be conscious soon. I don't know how much more of this I can take, he has to wake up. I need him to wake up so I can tell him how wrong I was, how much he means to me.

I nod as the doctor leaves and I'm left alone again.

Once Dr. Lee is gone from the room I turn back to Gavin and kiss his hand, laying my head back to the bed and gaze up into the face that I fell in love with only weeks ago. I'm surprised at how tired I still am. *Only a few more hours*, I tell myself and my eyes close once more.

My sister wakes me some time later and she slips my favorite sweatshirt over my head. I try to smile as she hugs me tight, her arms wrapping around my waist and her hands smoothing down my back.

I spot Lucas standing by the doorway intently looking at the two of us. I can see how tired they both are, but Kel's love for me and Luke's love for my sister brings them here at close to one AM.

"Are you doing okay? I'm sorry it took me so long to get here." I can hear that she's worried for me.

She has to be the most caring person I know.

I give her a half smile to reassure her, not stopping myself from looking over at Gavin's gorgeous face. He looks so peaceful, the fear in the pit of my stomach is still there and it hasn't wavered since I got that call close to six hours ago.

"As okay as I can possibly be right now. I just wish he'd wake up, Kel."

She takes my hand and squeezes tightly.

"Don't give up; I know how much he loves you. He's crazy about you, Ari."

I know she's right, it just feels so hopeless right now. He should have woken by now, hell – he should never have been in this hospital. If it wasn't for the fact that he was headed to me, Gavin wouldn't have been on the road so late at night.

"What if he doesn't wake up, Sis? I can't-I can't imagine being without him."

My sister wraps her hand around mine across Gavin's bed and stares softly into my eyes.

"Have faith, Ari. Just, have faith. He loves you and he's here, that's all that matters, okay?"

I know she's right. I know, *God* I know it could have been so much worse. Gavin is here now, I have to focus on that. I have to remember how much he loves me.

Thankfully, over the next three hours, my wonderful sister keeps me busy talking about all the various details about the wedding. After a while, I can see her eyes getting heavy as she leans against Luke's chest. I squeeze her hand and give her my best smile to reassure her I'm okay.

"Hey, go home. I promise I'll keep you posted OK?"

She hastily shakes her head and tries to hide a yawn. She's so stubborn, so determined to be the rock in this family, even though she doesn't have to be. She can rely on Luke now and she has so many people around her. I can already see her preparing for a fight.

"No, I-" Kel argues, pushing away from Luke when he grasps her shoulders from behind her.

I look up at him and plead with him with my eyes.

"Go, Luke take her home please. I'll text you when he wakes up."

She sighs and I know she'll listen. I squeeze her hand and then she hugs me for long minutes and kisses my cheek. Luke kisses my forehead and gives me a soft smile. From the look he gives me, I know he wants to stay.

"You good?" he asks, dipping his head to look me in the eye.

I nod, turning back to my Gavin, my love.

Once they're gone, I pull my sweatshirt tight around me and lean my head against the bedside right next to our adjoined hands once more. And I drift.

"Beautiful."

A low voice wakes me, groggy and roughened from sleep and some other emotion. Immediately, I lift my head and my eyes dart to Gavin. His blue-gray eyes meet mine and tears build in my own. This time, their tears of such joy.

"Oh! Gavin! Thank God." I press my lips to his hand over and over again, reveling in the feel of his hand squeezing mine. Such joy and relief course through me. There's such intensity in his eyes and hopelessness? But why? My heart yearns for him, this man that has become so precious to me. The feeling of relief now that he's here, awake and well overwhelms me. He's awake, he came back. I can't get my mind around the suddenness of it all.

Commented [LD37]: ..here, awake, and.....

"Aria, you're here," Gavin whispers, his hand coming up to my cheek to wipe away the tears falling down. My skin tingles and hums from the touch.

"I came as soon as Callie called me, I couldn't stay away. Gavin I'm so sorry..."

He stops me with an index finger to my lips and his hand curls around mine, holding tight.

"Come here," he says, his voice groggy with sleep. I hastily sit beside him as he sits up, slowly. I can see the tenseness in his muscles from the strain of the pain he must be feeling.

"Please be careful, Gavin," I whisper, but he doesn't listen to me as he scoots forward, grasps the backs of my thighs and pulls me into his lap. Taking a hold of both my hands, his mouth comes down to kiss my knuckles gently. I blink up into the dark pools of blue and gray that are my undoing every single time. His eyes are fierce with so many emotions, it takes my breath away.

"Please don't apologize. I can't tell you how sorry I am about what happened yesterday, but I promise you I will find a way to prove it to you. Jasmine-"

I press my fingers to his lips, effectively silencing him and take his face in my hands. His rough stubble and smooth, warm skin of his cheeks make this moment all the more real, telling me that this isn't a dream. He's truly awake and here with me.

"I listened to your messages, Gavin. I believe you, I'm just so sorry I didn't stop and let you explain. I jumped to conclusions. I thought the worst. The image is still so fresh in my mind, but after hearing your voice mails I know I was wrong to think that you'd ever hurt me that way. I'm so sorry, Gavin." My voice shakes, trembles as I remember the mistake I thought Gavin made, the betrayal and hurt I'd felt when I saw them.

Commented [LD38]: ..made.

He shakes his head, grasping my hands again and looking deeply into my eyes. Tears trickle down my cheeks, and I close my eyes in an attempt to control the emotion that's pouring out of me. I need to be strong, for now, at least.

"Baby, please don't cry. Please." Gavin's deep voice makes my eyes fly open, my hands are grasping onto his neck in need, fear, and relief.

"Gavin, God, Gavin." I'm overcome with my love for him as I lift my mouth to his and I kiss him.

It's a kiss filled with our mutual love and the tenderness that Gavin's arms engulf me in feels like coming home. When we pull away, I'm panting for air. Our foreheads touch and Gavin presses me against him, his hands holding the back of my head as he gazes intently into my eyes. The tears fall to my cheeks still, and when his mouth closes over mine again, my body shudders in relief. He's here, he's alive, and we're together. *Oh, thank God.*

I could have lost him, I could have lost this. A sob erupts from the back of my throat, comes out in a hushed whimper against his mouth.

"Shh baby, I've got you," he whispers as he kisses me again. His lips engulf me, his breath mingling with mine and his hand delves into my hair as his tongue slips into my mouth. Need climbs through me, making me clench my hands to his hair and tug gently. My need for him overwhelms me, unfurling low in my core and I tighten my arms around his neck. His hands graze my cheeks, his touch so tender that it would make me cry if I wasn't already. I lose my breath in his kiss, my lips never leaving his. I tangle my hands in his hair, now longer than I've ever seen it before. It comes down to the back of his neck. The silky light brown strands curl around my fingertips.

When he pulls his lips from mine, his eyes are filled with such love, certainty, need, intensity, – God, so many emotions at once.

"Gavin..." I begin to cry harder, my body shuddering with the force of the overwhelming emotions breaking the dam inside me. *I need him...*

"Christ, no" he whispers, his lips coming up to my forehead tenderly as he wraps his arms tightly around me. I press my face into his neck, the warm skin under my nose comforts me and I breathe him in.

His minty smell makes my heart lift with the memories it evokes. My arms are wrapped around his shoulders and I lean against him. Gavin's lips press to my hair.

"I love you, Aria." His voice is filled with heavy emotion. I take a deep breath, needing to see his face when I say what I have to. I pull back, seeing the softness in his blue eyes. *He's really okay, he's really here. Oh, thank you, Jesus.*

"I was so scared," I murmur, placing my palms on his cheeks. I see the understanding register in his eyes, as if he's just realizing our reality.

Gavin pulls back fractionally, his eyes leaving mine for the first time since he's woken up.

They roam around the room, to the ceiling and the machines beside his bedside.

"Do you remember what happened?" I ask, my hands running up his chest when I feel the sudden tension in his body. I see the realization tick in his blue gray eyes.

"A Jeep, and a loading truck, I didn't even see them coming. Christ, it all happened so fast. I was coming to see you. Shit," he runs his hand through his slicked back hair and he gazes down at me with confused eyes.

"How long have I been here?" He looks down at me in question, trusting me.

I take his face in my hands, my thumbs skimming the yellowing bruises across his jaw.

"About twelve hours, I think. Are you feeling okay?"

He nods, pressing his lips gently to mine. Reassuringly, I think.

"I'll be okay."

I gaze up at him then lean forward and reach my fingers toward the call button behind the head of his bed. I feel his eyes on me, watching me.

Suddenly he grasps my hand and pulls me back, his eyes looking softer now.

"Really, Aria, I'm fine."

"Please, the doctor needs to check you. They'll give you something for the pain. Gavin, I almost lost you." My voice shakes and I bite my lip to control my emotions.

Gavin gasps, registering the imminent fear in my eyes, and nods. He runs his hands down my cheeks wiping away stray tears.

I love how gentle his touch is, as if I'm a precious jewel that could break. It's one of the many things I love about him.

"I'm so sorry, Beautiful." Hearing him call me that again makes me smile widely.

As we wait for the nurse, I can't help myself from pressing my hands to his chest and kissing him gently against the side of his mouth. When I pull away, I find myself wanting more, my thoughts being interrupted by Dr. Lee coming into the room and waving me out.

I lean forward and press a kiss to Gavin's forehead. He smiles *my* smile and lets our fingers slip from *each other's*, just like the day we met.

Commented [LD39]: ..each other's

Nineteen

I wait by the closed door of Gavin's room, knotting my hands across my lap. I just left him with Dr. Lee ten minutes ago and I'm already missing his touch. I can't believe he's really okay. It's all I can focus on right now. My thoughts are interrupted when Dr. Lee comes out of Gavin's hospital room and looks at me with a much more convincing smile than he gave me before. His kind eyes and easy going nature is almost the polar opposite from the grim looking doctor I met twelve hours ago.

"How are you doing, Aria?"

"I just want him to be okay. He's going to be okay right?" I can hear the hope in my voice.

"He will, Aria. From what I can tell, all his vitals are stable and his scans all came back clear. He may have some pain in his ribs for the next few weeks and maybe some headaches depending on how he reacts to the pain medications we've given him so just keep an eye out for that. Other than that, he's good to go." All I hear is *he's going to be okay*.

I smile, wholeheartedly for the first time in twelve hours. I take his outreached hand and pull my messy hair back into a messy bun when it falls in my face.

"Thank you for everything. When can he be discharged?"

"I'll file his papers now. You should be able to take him home in the morning."

"Okay."

He stalks away, leaving me beaming. I just want to have Gavin back home with me. God, I hate hospitals. Only a year ago this very hospital told me that my dear brother was gone from this world forever.

I still remember the feelings of devastation, hopelessness, and confusion. I was lost in a sea of hurt, not knowing how to move on from not only Jeremy's death but also the shattered heart I'd endured only months ago. But Gavin, he healed me, he saved me, he found me. I'm so very lucky to have him. He gave me a home when I thought I'd never feel that again. *Home*. Yes, that sounds good.

Hastily, I let myself back into the room, seeing my man scrolling through his phone as he sits up in bed. His eyebrows are drawn together in concentration, that mouth parted in the sexiest way. I lean my back against the closed door, watching him. His lips twitch with a smile and his eyes reach mine.

"Come here, Baby," he says, outreaching his hand to me as I come around the foot of his bed.

"Miss anything important?" I ask, rubbing my thumb against his stubbled jaw.

He grins, a boyish smile that reminds me of why I fell so hard for him just weeks ago. I sit beside him, running my hand over his roughened jaw, the stubble igniting my skin at the contact. His eyes alight with something that makes me want to swoon.

"A few meetings, a business lunch with clients from Seattle, nothing earth shattering."

Vaguely, I wonder why he never tells me about his work; he's very vague about it and he should be proud of the work he does. He's well off and could retire at his young age of twenty four, but I can tell Thomas Innovations in Technology means a lot to him. He enjoys it, even though he hasn't admitted it.

Commented [LD40]: ..Innovations

"Why don't you tell me about your work?" The sentence just tumbles out of me, and I realize that the words actually were said out loud. I bite down on my lip and continue to explore the skin of his jaw, reaching up to ever so gently run my thumb against the fading bruises on his face.

Gavin shrugs, his hand coming up to the back of my head and his fingers pull on the ribbon-tie holding my hair up and lets it fall back down my shoulders. I feel his fingers tease through it and I lean myself into the touch.

"I love your hair."

He runs his decadent fingers through the waves and tucks strands behind my ears.

After long moments of just playing with my hair and pressing soft kisses to my temple, nose and parted mouth, Gavin starts to speak.

"It's always felt like my father's company, not really mine. Don't get me wrong, I love Thomas and the business is thriving; the work intrigues me. I enjoy it, but it's not an empire I've built, it's my father's.

My father built everything, groomed the company to what it is today. I've only been a part of all of it for seven years or so."

I run my fingers over his chest, waiting for him to continue.

"The work he put in, Jesus, for half of his life - it's been his legacy, you know? How can I just take over all of that without feeling a little indebted?" His voice is filled with vulnerability. I know in this moment, he trusts me more than ever before. I'm seeing the intensity in his eyes and realize I've never thought about it that way.

Commented [LD41]: ..he trusts...

"But you should be proud of it, Gavin. Your father may have built it, but it's your empire now, and the work you do is completely your own. Baby, I'm proud of you."

In a flash, Gavin's eyes heat as he takes in my words and abruptly he pulls me into his chest, grunting lowly from the pain the motion causes. *Oh, shit, his ribs!*

"Gavin, careful, your ribs." That slow smile crosses his lips and he doesn't let me go.

"Trust me, it's worth the pain having you in my arms again. You have no idea..."

I have no idea about what? What was he going to say? Before I can ask, he speaks again with a voice filled with promise.

"You amaze me baby, I'm in awe of you. Even after these last twelve hours, I should be taking care of you, but here you are, loving me as always."

I see such love in his blue gray eyes and it brings tears to mine again.

"Gavin," I whisper, taking his face in both my hands.

"I'm always going to love you." The words come straight from my heart. I know I'll forever love this man. From the very moment I saw him, he's worked his way into my heart and there's no going back to my sheltered existence before I met him. I gaze up into the endless pools of blue and gray that are his eyes and the smile that he gives me is almost worth the pain of the

last two days that we've been apart.

"I love you so much, Aria, baby." His deep voice makes my heart constrict in sheer joy at hearing those deep, reverent words. Then his mouth comes down onto mine, fingers tangle in my wavy, unruly hair and I'm clutching onto him with everything I have. In his kiss, I'm home. Our tongues collide, dancing together. He pulls my bottom lip into his mouth tantalizingly and sucks. I moan softly in response. I feel him smiling against my lips.

"You are going to have to let me pamper you for the next few weeks. Doctor's orders, babe"
"Is that so? Now what did the good doctor say?" He begins to kiss down my throat ever so slowly.

Commented [LD42]: "You are..."

I giggle, hearing the tease in his voice. Oh, he's so good at distracting me. His lips graze down my neck, making goosebumps surface against my skin from his teasing touch.

"That you need to take it easy. Did he give you something for the pain?" I pull back, meeting his eyes and placing my hands on his shoulders.

When he sits back he shows the prescription slip Dr. Lee gave him and a roll of white bandage tape.

"Oh, good."

Gavin turns me so that my back leans against his chest and I can feel his heat in every line of my body. From my shoulders to my hips, I feel the hardness of his muscular frame against mine. I also feel roaming hands up and down my arms, soothing my goose bumps away.

"Mmhm." I press closer and turn to rest my head on his warm chest.

Time slows as we just sit with each other. The silence is comforting and I have no idea how much time has passed when I hear Gavin's gravelly voice close to my ear.

"You're so quiet, baby. Are you still worried about Jasmine?"

I lift my eyes to his and see the worry in them. Somehow, I feel a vulnerability now that everything is settled between us. My insecurities about Jasmine got the best of me and how do I know that won't happen again?

"Do you have feelings for her?" I whisper, my voice shaky with renewed doubt.

Gavin's eyes widen and before I know it, he's gently taking my face in his hands. Those eyes that I love so much are intensely locked onto mine and I lose my words, seeing the fierce determination in them.

"Listen to me, Aria. When I met Jasmine, I was a sophomore at Georgetown and she was the first girl that ever held my attention. I loved her, in my own way and when she left me, I was heartbroken. After that, I focused on the business, my career, establishing myself in the world of technology. I never thought

Commented [LD43]: Does this need to have an upper case "I"?

I'd find love again, not until you, Aria. I love you, baby. I have no feelings whatsoever for Jasmine." I hear the honest emotion in his voice and my heart leaps, his heartfelt words breaking through my apprehension.

I believe him.

I wrap my arms around his back and rest my forehead against his, reveling in the feel of his thumbs stroking along my collarbone. I breathe in his minty scent for a long moment in time.

"Gavin." I lean back, clasp his face in my urgent hands and kiss his temple, then his eyes and

down until my lips brush against his parted mouth.

"I love you, too," I whisper, seeing his eyes heat as he exhales and then grasps the back of my neck.

"God, Aria, I missed you."

His voice is deep with emotion and before I know it, his mouth closes over mine and I'm lost. His touch, the feel of his lips crushing to mine, his hot breath against my mouth as he delves his hands into my hair. The passion erupts from within me, desperation coursing through my veins as I realize how wrong I was about this man. I cling onto him, kissing him with every fiber of my being and when his tongue slips hungrily between my lips, a soft moan escapes me. I'm breathless, exploring him and feeling the tremors in his taut back as he licks expertly into my mouth, nipping teasingly on my bottom lip.

"Oh God, I want..." I whisper, my voice pleading but then his mouth hovers over mine again. He chuckles, a low youthful sound that makes desire pool low in my core. I love that sound.

"You want me to make love to you, baby?" Gavin asks, looking down at me with blazing blue-gray eyes.

A moan escapes me when he nips along my jaw and then soothes the skin over with his magical tongue.

"Gavin." It's a plea. For what, I'm not sure. To continue with this delicious torture or to stop?

Leaning back, he gives me a heart stopping, earth shattering smile and I can't help biting my lip to hide my answering smile.

"When can we get out of here?" he whispers, running his hands achingly slow up my thighs.

The promise in those words is infinite and I slip off the bed, settling myself against the chair beside him to regain my equilibrium.

"In the morning, I think. But you have to take it easy."

He shakes his head, grazing his knuckles down my cheek. I have a feeling he's not going to want to take it easy when we get home to our bed.

"Will you come home with me?"

His question surprises me and I hear that his voice is raw, vulnerable I think. It takes my breath away, making me realize how new all this is to us. It's as if we're teetering, getting to know each other for the first time with the fear of losing everything we've built so far.

"Gavin, of course I will," I say, my voice is just shy of a whisper.

I watch as he exhales deeply and leans forward to kiss the side of my mouth.

"I don't want you to worry about Jasmine."

His palm rests on my cheek, tipping my eyes up to his.

"I don't trust her, Gavin." I don't know why I have the need to say this, but I do. She knew that we were involved when she went to Gavin's office last week. She was upset, yes, I can

understand that. But that woman had no right to make a move on him, especially when she was the very person to break his heart years ago. I still picture the image of her lips on Gavin's. God, I hate that she kissed him. His kisses are mine, solely mine.

"You have nothing to worry about. You're all I see, Beautiful."

I look up at him, then squeeze his hand in mine. I lift it to my lips and kiss his palm.

"I trust you." I trust him completely. It's her that I don't trust.

"Then trust me to make sure she never comes between us again."

I nod, then skate my fingers over his heart through his shirt.

"I feel your heart beating," I whisper.

"It's real, baby. Listen to me." I wrap my arms around his neck and look into his eyes as he continues. The intensity in his eyes stops my heart altogether.

"I won't ever hurt you. Never again."

My heart leaps in my chest, not expecting that. How does he know exactly what I need to hear?

"Me either, Gavin. Me either."

After three hours of watching daytime television, settled in Gavin's lap with his hands around my middle and his lips pressing to the side of my neck, I hear him groan and then chuckle, grunting a little bit from his broken ribs. He hides it well, but I can tell he's not at his best. The doctor told me he should be taking it easy and I fully intend to make sure he does just that. At least this way I can take care of him. The thought of that fills me with joy, though I hate that my Gavin is in pain. My thoughts are rudely interrupted as he snatches the television remote away from me. I feel him smiling against the side of my head.

"No way! What are you doing!?" I squeal, fighting to reach the remote he so rudely grabbed out of my hand. I feel his grin as he catches my earlobe tantalizingly between his teeth. My core tightens deliciously at the contact.

"I'm changing it. This is torture, Beautiful. Three hours of damn soap operas!" I giggle, leaning my head against his chest and looking up at him through my eyelashes. I'm pouting, hoping he'll let me have my way. I was just getting interested in the *damn soap operas*. His stormy blues are soft and filled with amusement, gazing down at me as he bites his bottom lip to hide his laugh.

"I like them"

He grins now, unabashedly and leans down, running his lips along mine. His kiss is a gentle inhaling, a barely there touch to my mouth. I groan, wanting more as he pulls away and winks down at me.

"I can see the pain medication is kicking in," I say, not being able to hide a smirk. Deftly, Gavin flicks through channels as his eyes never leave mine.

"Don't you want to watch something else?" he whispers, his eyes dancing with humor. Oh, this man. He's trying to distract me, and with his lips along the back of my neck; it's working.

"Like what?" I ask.

Gavin's eyes are on the television screen now and they light up. Suddenly, he grins, grazing his mouth against my forehead when I see what he's chosen to watch. Final Destination 3, the movie I told him is my favorite when we first met. He remembered...

"You approve, baby?"

I nestle my face into his chest and nod, giving him a grin that doesn't hold anything back.

"Glad to hear it, Beautiful." Then he leans down, cradling my face in his palms as his mouth closes over mine, grazing his teeth over my lower lip with heartrending slowness. He brushes his mouth over mine gently, teasing me and I'm breathless as I lean into him.

"Gavin, please," I whisper, moaning low in my throat when he sucks my bottom lip into his mouth, nibbling at it teasingly. My skin tingles in desire for his touch and my breath falters, wishing we weren't in this hospital bed and instead, at home in his bed, our bed.

"You taste so good. Are you wearing something new?"

He wipes my hair from the back of my neck and his mouth glides down, kissing and sucking as he goes until his hot breath covers the top of my breasts just above my V-neck tee.

"Um, I'm not sure," I whisper, losing my train of thought as his index finger runs along the top of my breasts, his hand coming up to unbutton the first button of my blouse. I gasp, remembering where we are and what Dr. Lee said. *He needs to take it easy for the next few days...*

"Wait, you're supposed to take it easy, Gavin."

He ignores me, releasing the first and going on to the second button on my shirt as his other arm tightens around my waist. I lean back fractionally, the exposed skin of my breasts feeling bereft without his touch.

"Gavin, we have plenty of time and you're recovering. Your ribs are broken and Dr. Lee said you might experience some headaches. There's no rush." I don't know why I'm resisting his touch, our attraction is like a moth to a flame, and I have no hope of staying away for long.

Gavin's eyes are heated with want as he gazes down at me and runs his hands down my face. *Oh, I love his touch.*

"Aria, I missed you. I want you. Let me touch you."

His heartfelt confession knocks down my defenses and I sag against him, feeling his hands run up my thighs and then resting against my hips. God, I miss him so much.

"I missed you so much, baby." The words echo my thoughts and when I blink up to his eyes, I see the emotion in them.

"Oh, Gavin." I press against him, kissing his mouth briefly and then meeting his eyes again as tears build in my own.

"I was so afraid that I'd lose you. When Callie called me all I could think about was how I just walked away from you and if that had been the last time..... God, I-"

Gavin's eyes widen suddenly and he pulls me to him roughly, grunting low in his throat as he takes my face in his hands and kisses me with such passion, his tongue slipping into my mouth as he holds me tight against his chest. I feel his love pouring into me with each lash of his delectable tongue, each pull of his mouth against mine. I feel his hands leaving my face where they run down my sides to slip under the hem of my shirt. His hands run up the bare skin of my back, his tongue licking hungrily into my mouth.

He cherishes me with his kiss and I'm mesmerized, grasping onto his neck in need.

"Baby, I couldn't leave you. I love you more than I ever thought possible and I promise, I'm not going anywhere."

He kisses my forehead and leans back to wipe the tears that slipped down my cheeks.

"Okay," I whisper, returning my lips to his as he deftly undoes the last button and smiles that smile that always takes the breath from my lungs, his eyes filled with his desire for me.

From behind me, I hear someone knock twice on the door. A moment later, pulling away from Gavin's arms and twisting to see his mother peering into the room with a grin across her face. I gasp audibly. Shit! I slip off his lap hastily once I'm covered and stand by his bedside, feeling my cheeks heat.

She must think I'm jumping on her son while he's in a hospital bed after his accident! Oh, goodness, and I thought we'd hit it off at first, now who knows?

"Mom, I didn't know you were here," Gavin says, chuckling as she makes her way into the room.

Now seeing her without the cloud of emotion I'd had before Gavin awoke, I see how naturally beautiful his mother is. The shape of her face, the curve of her nose, even the gray eyes that compliment her ivory skin. She wears the same sweater and slacks, and I can see Gavin in the way she moves. Wow, they look so much alike.

She comes to me and kisses my cheek before leaning back and squeezes my hands. I smile, trying to hide my uneasiness. I want her to like me, though I have no idea how to make that happen since my relationship with my mother has never been smooth.

"It's nice to see some color in your cheeks, Aria. Sorry to interrupt," she smiles wider and gives me a wink before going to Gavin's bedside. She sits beside him and takes his hand in hers, leaning down as she kisses his forehead.

"You feeling okay, sweetheart?" She asks, gazing down at him lovingly.

"Yes, mom. I'm good now. When did you get here? I thought you were still in St. Louis to see Mr. Jamison?"

She shakes her head, and I go to the other side of his bed, where I sit in a chair, watching the motherly love Elizabeth has for her son.

"I finished yesterday. A few hours after you left, I came right here. I've been worried sick,

sweetheart. Don't you dare scare us like that again!"

He nods, squeezing his mom's hand.

"I'll do my best, Mama. Have you heard anything about the other drivers? Is anyone hurt?"

She's quiet all of a sudden and gazes down at him, then her eyes briefly shift to mine. Oh, no.

There's worry in them and maybe-fear? My heart constricts as a sense of dread courses through me. What's happened?

"The loader's driver, we don't know. He left the scene almost right away."

"And what about the other driver?" Gavin's voice sounds calm and collected while I'm internally freaking out. Why would the driver hit Gavin's car and then just take off? Isn't that against the law?

"Debbie Craig, yes, she's okay. She has a few broken ribs and a sprained ankle, but other than that she's fine."

Gavin tenses and he whispers something too low for me to hear to his mother.

"I'll take care of it as soon as I can. Dr. Lee said you're good to go so I'll call you tonight, OK?"

"Sure, mom." She kisses his cheek and leans over to clasp my hand in hers, squeezing gently.

"Relax, honey. It's all okay now." Her voice is soft, nurturing. It immediately puts me at ease.

"Thank you, Elizabeth." I hug her and lead her to the doorway. She smiles warmly and then makes her way out of the room.

Gavin's quiet beside me for a moment and when his eyes shift to mine, they're guarded and darkened by worry.

Commented [LD44]: Gavin is.....

"It's not your fault, Gavin," I whisper, running my hand over the stubble along his jaw and up his cheek. It really does grow quickly.

He takes a hold of my hand, pressing my palm to his lips for a kiss.

"I know. It's just a shock. I asked my mother to make sure that the other driver is taken care of, physical therapy, hospital time. Whatever it is she needs."

My heart yearns for him, seeing the compassion in his eyes and his actions. It's... sobering.

"And how did I deserve you?" I whisper, watching as he makes his way off the bed.

"Many reasons, baby. One being, you're you, Aria." Though his voice is teasing, I know his words are filled with meaning.

Gavin winces as he stands and I mirror him, seeing for the first time the pain he's in. I hold him up by his sides and he takes a deep breath, then slowly lets it out.

"I'm getting you more pain medication before we leave," I say, my eyes flicking down to his bandaged forearm. Some glass got into his arm and the gash had to be stitched up. I can see the dressing needs to be redone.

"You okay to stand?"

He nods, giving me half a smile as I lean over the bed and grab the roll of bandages by his bedside.

"Aria, I'm fine," he says, reaching for his jacket. I slap his hand away and lead him back to the bed and after a shake of his head, he sits in front of me and outstretches his injured arm to me.

"You spoil me, baby."

I grin, biting my lip as I undress his arm, being careful not to hurt him.

"Oh, trust me. This is only the beginning, I like taking care of you."

Once it's undressed, I gasp when I see the cut in the middle of his forearm, stitched together intricately. My heart squeezes at the sight of it. *God*, I hate seeing this, him hurt and injured. I swallow, reaching for the roll of bandages with the hand not holding his arm.

His blue-gray eyes blink up at me, softening when I gaze down at him. I worry my lip with my teeth, dressing his injury quickly and then exhaling audibly when the cut is covered in fresh bandaging, my eyes closing as I reassure myself that he's really OK. *He's OK, he's here with me.*

"Hey," Gavin whispers as he caresses my cheek and pulls me between his legs, hugging me around my waist and pressing his cheek against mine. His warmth is welcoming and I press a kiss to his collarbone, holding onto him as he holds me.

"I'm okay, we're okay." Gavin's voice soothes me, chases away my fears from the past two days. I clutch onto his strong, taut shoulders and his mouth comes up to kiss my temple. I sigh as he cups my cheeks with his big warm hands.

"I love you," I whisper, reveling in the feel of his hands upon my face. Gavin smiles big, creating tingles on my skin and joy to unfurl in my stomach. Then he kisses my lips softly. *God*, I love him. I wrap my hands around his neck and sink my fingers into his messy hair.

"I love you. Unconditionally, baby. Come on, let's go home."

God, that sounds good, *so good*.

Twenty

I ease out onto the freeway just as a familiar song comes onto the radio.

"This song," Gavin murmurs as he takes my free hand and lifts it to his mouth. Butterfly kisses that light me up from the inside are placed on my knuckles as he turns up the volume and when I hear lyrics sung in a deep, throaty voice with base and guitar in the background, I'm taken back to a party only weeks ago.

*Call it magic, call it true. I call it magic when I'm with you
And I just got broken, broken into two
Still I call it magic, when I'm next to you*

*And I don't, and I don't, and I don't, and I don't
No I don't, it's true
I don't, no, I don't, no, I don't, no, I don't
Want anybody else but you...*

I turn my eyes to Gavin's deep blue grays, filled with nothing but love. Pure, unconditional love that I've been too scared to believe in for so long is staring back at me. I look up into those bright eyes of his and I know the same love is shining in mine.

"You remember this song, baby?"

I smile softly, put the Lexus in park outside *our* penthouse and lean over to rest my hand on his chest just above his heart.

"It's ours. The way you make me feel, Gavin. It's magic."

Gavin closes the small gap between us, wrapping one hand around my neck and another around my waist to hold me close.

"Aria." Gavin's mouth closes over mine then and immediately my lips fall open to welcome his passionate kiss. The way he licks ardently into my mouth, as if I'll disappear at any moment, makes my heart beat rapidly and my hands pull gently on his, smooth, unruly hair.

"Gavin..." I say when I have a breath to speak but then I kiss him again, and again, deeper now that the desperation is flooding me. I clutch onto him and whisper against his mouth.

"Let me get you inside."

Gavin pulls back and meets my eyes, chewing on that bottom lip of his. God, my core tightens deliciously at the sight of him. So sexy, so carefree, so *mine*.

"Are you going to have your wicked way with me, Ms. Morgan?"

"Um, no. I'm going to take care of you. You're recovering from an accident, Gavin."

I remind him, but I'm reminding myself too because even though I want him with every molecule in my body, we can't rush his recovery; I don't – God, the last thing I want to do is cause any hurt to him.

When I look back into his eyes, he's still chewing on that lip, but now he's pouting. His lower lip is as tempting as he catches it between his teeth.

"Aria you can't be serious, we need –"

I cut him off with my hand to his mouth, then press a kiss to the line that's formed between his eyebrows.

"You need to rest. Come on, let's go inside."

"I'm fine, baby. Stop worrying," Gavin says for the third time since we walked in the front door. I pull out the top drawer in the marble topped island, which sits in the center of the kitchen.

"Shh" is all I say while I rummage through the piles of papers and excess mess in the drawer in front of me. I remember putting a takeout menu to Kel's favorite Italian restaurant in here before I left the penthouse that last day before the accident. Before my world almost fell apart at the seams.

"I think," Gavin drawls in that low voice of his as he comes up behind me and wraps his strong arms around me from behind, "that you should cook for me, baby."

"No way. If I cooked for you, you'd be back in the hospital tomorrow."

I chuckle, turning in his arms to see he's smirking already.

"You'll never know if you don't try, and maybe you'll be good at it."

My brow furrows and I hastily shake my head.

"I've tried, trust me. And cooking and I just don't mix," I say, turning back to the drawer and shuffling through more junk in an effort to find that menu I put in here.

Gavin doesn't say anything else, he just cups my nape in his hand and I can picture him smiling wider when he sees me sway against him at the skin on skin contact. He's trying to distract me. *God he feels so good and hard against me...*

"Hmm, Gavin," I moan softly.

His mouth comes down to kiss down my neck, along my shoulder and then one hand slides the strap of my tank top down so he can explore my skin with his mouth, lips and *Oh* his tongue.

"So smooth, you have the smoothest skin." He places another kiss to my flesh.

"The most beautiful shoulders... and these?" His hands come up towards my breasts.

Suddenly Gavin turns me and lifts me to sit on top of the marble counter top so that he is standing between my parted thighs. He slowly lifts my top over my head and sets it down somewhere behind him.

A loud moan bursts out of me when he cups both my breasts in his hands, kneading gently. Instantly, my core floods with arousal. Being *touched* after so long without it, it's magical.

"These. Are. Perfect."

When his mouth comes down to tease and torture me, my head falls back in such pleasure.

"Feels so good," I murmur, wrapping my legs around his hips and pushing the fingers of my free hand into his long hair.

Gavin licks and teases my breasts, around the areola and then bites down gently. Immediately my core is flooded.

"Oh God, oh my God, Gavin."

"So beautiful, *Mine*. "

He takes a hold of my hips and before I can think to stop him, he's kneeling in front of me and ever so slowly peeling off my boy short panties. When did he take my jeans off? I have no idea, all I can focus on is that now I'm bared to him and this man, he's here. He's truly here with me and all I can feel is my heady need to feel him inside me. I want to be consumed with him. I want to delight in the pleasure that only he can give me.

"Wait, Gavin. You're recovering..." I whisper, pressing my hand to his smooth cheek and those gorgeous eyes of his tip to meet mine.

"I'm okay, baby. Let me love you. Please, just let me love you now."

His soft, earnest words quiet my reservations about making love and when that slow, soft smile spreads over Gavin's mouth, I nod and sink my fingers back in to tangle with his hair.

There's not another word spoken before Gavin wraps his hands around my hips and urges me to part my legs wider for him.

"More," he whispers and I do. I open to him and moan cathartic ally when he begins kissing down my lower belly to my core where I'm aching for him so much.

"You are so fucking beautiful, Aria baby. I can't get enough," he murmurs as his mouth comes in contact with my opening. He rubs up and down, teasing me there and then finally, God, he settles in to taste me. Slow, long licks and soft nips to my flesh almost drive me to the point of pleasure, almost have me tumbling over into the abyss-but not quite. Gavin hums against my core, pressing two fingers inside me and rubbing in slow, deep circles. My skin lights up, my heart soars, and my sex clenches around him in an effort to make him go faster. I need-

"Aah - yes!" I call out suddenly as Gavin licks and pulls and devours me in that oh so wonderful way of his and I'm climbing higher and higher to ecstasy, so far that I know this is going to be a high I've never touched before.

"Please... Feels... Going to come, baby. Faster..." I'm moaning and lost for words as the waves crash through me, rip me open and make me soar into orgasm.

"Let go, Beautiful. I've got you," Gavin whispers and when he sucks my clit hard and fast, his mouth doing magical things to me-I fall.

"Oh, Gavin," I whisper, letting my eyes fall open.

"Bed," he murmurs into the hollow of my neck, scoops me into his arms and carries me towards the bedroom.

"Gavin... You're-"

"I'm fine, baby. I'm not straining myself by carrying you to our bed."

As he lays me across the cool-to-the-touch sheets, I let my eyes wander over him. From his gorgeous, out of this world sexy mouth, those deep eyes of his, the light bruising that goes down his neck from when he hit the side of the car in the accident, to his delectable chest, taut stomach and lean hips.

Gavin gives me a wide smile, warmed with affection for me and begins to unbuckle his jeans and tread the zipper down.

"You're staring."

"Hmm." I ignore him and continue to explore him with my eyes. He's just so - sexy. So completely sexy.

"I love you." The words come easily but still thick with the honesty those three words incite. Gavin's smirk matches the humor in his eyes as he saunters over to me.

"I have so much to offer, baby. But you just love me for my body."

Gavin teases, pushes me to my back and rests his arms on either side of my head.

"Well, I love your body, how could I not?" I kiss the side of his mouth softly, feeling his stubble against my lips.

"But what truly made me fall for you? It's this, Gavin. Your heart. The way you love me, the way you believe in me, in us." I blink up into his endless blue eyes and a warm smile is tipping his mouth up.

"Aria," he whispers, grasping my hands and pulling them above my head where he holds them with one of his own. He takes his other hand and caresses down from my torso to my navel, my core, and the apex of my thighs. A breathy moan escapes me when he dips one finger inside me and circles gently, around and around.

"I could touch you all day and never tire of it, Beautiful. Your body drives me crazy with need."

I wrap my legs around his waist and delight in the weight resting against my belly.

"Then take me, baby."

Gavin smiles naughtily, grasps my hips and *takes* me.

Twenty One

My eyes flutter open to the faint light of dawn coming through the large bay windows across the bedroom. I yawn and stretch my limbs happily, having the first truly good night of sleep in three days, having slept beside Gavin. Except for being woken up twice to make love in the late hours of last night, I feel more rested than I have in what feels like a very long time. I press my face into the pillow and let my eyes wander over to Gavin who's sleeping soundly beside me. His arm is stretched around my waist while he sleeps, as if he can't help but touch me, be close to me even as he sleeps in a deep slumber. His face is lit with the morning sun and gently, I skim my fingers down his cheek where I can barely see the bruising and cuts from the accident. God, he's gorgeous. It still seems unreal that this man is mine.

"Love you," I whisper into the hollow of his neck and press a kiss there.

"Hmm," he hums in his sleep, and I carefully slip out of bed, softly step onto the hardwood floor and locate a pair of yoga pants and my favorite cotton tee to wear for a lazy day at home.

Slipping into the bathroom, I hear my phone ringing from the kitchen. Hastily, I dress and pull my hair into a messy ponytail before heading to the kitchen to check my phone.

It's still somehow ringing when I step into the large kitchen that Gavin had done specifically for him when he bought this penthouse. God, I love this kitchen.

"Hey," I answer, seeing that Farah is calling. She sniffs on the other end of the phone, not answering me and immediately I'm worried.

"Sweetie? You there?"

"I-God, I'm so sorry Ari. Jay came home from Seattle yesterday and we both turned off our phones to have a day together, just to spend time. I had no idea-Gavin, is he okay?"

She's so upset, I can hear it in her voice.

"Hey, it's okay Farah. Gavin is home, everything is okay. Honestly, Kel was with me and so was Gavin's family. I wasn't alone." I hear her audible exhale.

"What happened? All Kel told me was that Gavin was in an accident and that you were at the hospital with him for most of the night."

I sit at the kitchen table and run my hand through my hair absentmindedly.

"I was at the last show for the academy, the showcase. Kel was with me getting ready and then I got that call from Callie. I swear to God Farah, my world stopped."

Hell, my heart stopped in those moments in between. Not knowing if he was okay, if I'd lost the love I'd found... it was unbearable.

"But he's alright? Was he injured?" Her voice is filled with concern and I so wish we were in the same room so I could hug her and reassure her not to feel guilty about any of this.

"No he's-he's OK. We're fine, now. Stop worrying, Sweetie. Enough about me. How are things

with Jaden?" I want to hear about something other than the last three days in the hospital.

"Wonderful, but I swear to God this man has the stamina of a bull."

I almost choke on the piece of toast I'm chewing after hearing that.

"Wow, Farah! Warn a girl why don't you?"

She starts laughing and soon I'm joining in, especially when she tells me how many times she and Jay the Bull went at it last night.

"And then he showed me ..." I stop listening when Gavin comes out of the bedroom and grins slowly at me. He's shirtless with a pair of loose-fitting blue pajama bottoms hanging low on his hips. A shot of desire courses through me at the sight of him. *He just rolled out of bed and I already want to drag him back in there...*

"Have to go, let's have lunch soon?"

"Oh, I see how it is. Gavin up for round two?" Farah teases and I know she's rolling her eyes.

My chair is spun towards where he's standing in front of me and those deep, deep eyes of his take me in.

"Bye, sweets."

I put down my phone and smile slowly at my man. He looks too damn sexy in the morning.

"Morning, baby." I lean forward and suck his bottom lip into my mouth, tugging gently.

"Hmm," Gavin groans, kisses me lightly and then tugs me to stand without another word.

"Where are we going?" I ask as he leads me out of the kitchen and back into the bedroom.

"Breakfast, I'm going to need my energy today."

"Oh?" I ask innocently, biting down on my lip when he smiles sexily at me.

He slides his hand down my nape and places a kiss at the top of my head.

"Because were not leaving this bed all. Day. Long."

Gavin keeps his hand holding mine as we walk to a small diner located close to the penthouse.

Even just the small contact of skin on skin keeps the buzz of need alive inside me.

"You're blushing," he murmurs, stopping on the sidewalk and cupping my cheeks gently.

"Am I?" I grin, knowing he knows exactly what I'd been thinking about just now. He knows me so well.

Gavin skims his thumbs over my jaw, drawing small circles, igniting my skin underneath his touch and my eyes fall closed.

"Open, baby."

I open my eyes and see the softness in his.

"These," he rubs his thumbs against my temples right next to my eyes, "are what made me fall for you, Beautiful. So bright, so expressive."

I smile softly, take his hands and kiss his palm. His words are filled with love and in this moment I feel so loved by this man.

"You're sweet." I tug his hand to keep walking and he follows, then wraps one strong arm around my shoulders to keep me close. God, he feels good.

Ruby's is nestled between downtown and South-side Chicago, with a large neon sign hanging above the entryway. It looks like one of those fifties diners you see on Happy Days where the waitresses rolled around in skates and did drive in service all day. It's cool and different and I immediately love it.

"This is so cool, Gavin. Why haven't I heard of a diner like this?"

He opens the glass door for me and places a hand at the small of my back. The contact sends tingles up my spine.

A small petite woman with strawberry blonde hair and sky blue eyes greets us.

"Greta! How are you?" Gavin says happily, obviously pleased to see her. I wonder how long he's been coming here. Years? Did he come here with his father? I flick my eyes up to him as Greta goes around a crowd of teenagers and clasps his hand in hers. Her warm eyes and kind nature is natural to her, it seems.

"Greta, this is the girl I told you about. Aria, meet Greta. She's my mother's best friend. And she makes the best Omelet known to man." He winks down at her, those blue gray eyes warm with affection and I see how near and dear Greta is to him, even after all these years.

"It's wonderful to meet you, Greta."

She pulls me in for a long hug, pats me softly on the back and to my surprise, whispers in my ear.

"You're good for him, Aria."

I lean away a bit and smile at her.

"He's good for me, too."

Then she takes my hand and leads me towards the back with Gavin surely behind us. I like her easygoing nature and her devotion to Gavin. She considers him family, and she wants him to be happy.

When we're both seated at a corner booth; away from the hustle and bustle of other diners, Greta leaves us to talk and decide.

"I really like her," I say as soon as we're alone. Gavin smiles widely and hands me an animated menu.

"Greta loves you already. Not that I can blame her."

His eyes are smiling and I look down to the menu, though I've already decided on an omelet with everything on it. I'm sure that it's the best known to man, as Gavin told me.

I feel his eyes on me as I flick through the brightly colored pages, seeing that this diner is the quaint, lively eatery that I hoped.

"Do you know what you want?" I ask, reaching over the table to wipe a strand of his light brown hair away from his eyes. Gavin leans forward and grasps a strand of my hair, twirls it around his finger.

"Yes, I think I do"

Twenty Two

The moment I taste Greta's infamous omelet, I moan in satisfaction.

"Oh my God, this is so good."

I take another bite and look up from my plate to see Gavin watching me. The look in his eyes is deep, hungry and it's not for food.

"What? It's really good."

"They're the best known to man, baby. I did warn you."

I take a sip of water and smile at him.

"You did. Can we get out of here, now?" I'm eager to go home and have him all to myself again.

Three days apart made me desperate to be with him, and he did say we had all day. I fully intend to soak up every precious minute with Gavin as much as I can.

Wiping his mouth with a napkin, Gavin takes my hand and helps me out of the booth and then puts two bills down on the table.

"Let's go."

As we're heading back towards the trail that leads to the penthouse and Garment district, my phone starts to ring. I'm tempted to let it go to voice mail, knowing that it couldn't be important this early in the morning. But Gavin smiles slowly, in that way I love. He nods, urging me to answer it. I take my cell out and look down at the screen in confusion. I don't recognize the number.

"Farah again?" he asks, sliding his fingers through mine. I'm honestly not sure until I remember that I do recognize the number. It's Mr. Pearson, as in *Grayson Academy*. *I haven't spoken to him since the showcase last week. Oh, no. Why could he possibly be calling me?*

"Hello?" I begin to bite my lip, nervously. There is only a sliver of hope inside me telling me that maybe he was able to keep my spot in the program. I did tell him that I had a family emergency and I couldn't attend the showcase. Maybe...

"Aria, this is John Pearson from the academy. How are you?"

I lift my eyes to see Gavin silently watching me. I mouth *Grayson Academy* to him and he nods but then frowns. He must see the fear in my eyes that I've lost my chance.

"I'm-well, I'm good," I stutter my words.

"Good. I wanted to let you know that the Showcase did have to go on without you and I couldn't keep your spot open. I did try, Aria, but it just wasn't possible. I'm sorry."

Immediately my heart falls into my belly and I feel tears well in my eyes. I lost the opportunity I've been working for these past weeks, hell months. But how could I have done anything

differently when I got that call from Gavin's sister? I had to go, I had to be with *him*.

"Thank you for letting me know, Mr. Pearson, and thank you so much for everything."

"I didn't do anything. Ms. Morgan, anyone could see your talent. I wish you all the best."

"Thank you."

I click off my phone and stare at it for a long time before I feel Gavin tip my chin up to look at me.

I sigh and open my eyes to see his worried expression.

"You OK, baby?" He frames my face with his hands and all I can see are his deep blue eyes.

"I lost the spot." The words are whispered, as if I'm telling myself and not him. I don't want to believe that I've truly lost such an amazing opportunity. The kind that could have *made* my career in dance.

It's what I've worked for all my life.

"How? The Showcase, Kel told me you were on next to perform when I called her. What happened, baby?" I rest my hands on his waist and take a deep breath.

"The moment Callie called me, nothing else mattered to me. The only thing I could focus on was getting to you, to the hospital. And well, the show must go on. They filled my spot."

I see the understanding in his eyes and as he cups my nape and dips his mouth to my forehead, the breath whooshes out of me.

"I'm sorry, Aria. I know how much you wanted that spot. It meant so much to you."

"I know." I rest my cheek against his chest and we stand there, him holding me around my shoulders, my nose pressed to his neck and I feel so safe in his arms. It hurts that I won't be able to work with the company and talents I thought, but there are so many other opportunities out there. This, right here, is what's important.

"Let's go home."

Gavin deftly unties my sneakers and pulls them off my feet as he kneels at the foot of the bed. I have my eyes closed and I'm enjoying the light touches he gives me as he undresses me slowly. His hands come up to my ankles where he peels off my socks, then glide up to my calves. I feel the comforter shift around me, Gavin climbing onto the bed and kneeling between my parted legs. The buzz of anticipation makes my body sensitive to each and every touch of his fingers.

"So smooth," he praises, skating his hands under the band of my yoga pants and slowly peeling them over my waist, down my thighs, and off my legs entirely.

"Please, Gavin. Love me," I beg, opening my eyes and reaching for his hand as he unbuckles his jeans, pulls the black belt off and drops them to the floor. I lose all the breath inside me as he stands in front of me wearing only a pair of navy blue boxers. Those blue gray eyes of his

are filled with wanton desire for me. For me only. I bite my lip to stifle the moan that bubbles up in my throat when he slides the boxers off his hips and lets them fall to the floor, too.

"I'm going to love you now, baby."

I smile wide and wrap my hands into his hair. God, I love how his messy hair goes every which way.

"Finally," I whisper against his lips as he kisses me breathless. Gavin's body hovers over me and both his knees are trapping mine. I feel the delicious weight of his want on my lower belly.

"I missed this." He places a kiss against my throat, right under my jaw.

"Having you in this bed." Another kiss to my throat where he settles in to tease me.

"Making love to you." The words aren't teasing and I know he's talking about our time apart.

"Gavin." My legs wrap around his waist and my hands smooth up his magnificent chest to frame his gorgeous, incomparable face. I have never seen deep eyes like his; they are my weakness for sure. I feel his hands close around my laced boy short panties; his breath hits my barely covered breasts.

"Oh, please..." I say and God, finally, he reaches under me and *rips* my panties from my body. My bra is next to go and then I'm bared under him. His eyes become hooded with lust, his bottom lip traps between his teeth and he smiles that oh so sexy smile.

"Stay" is all he says as light, teasing kisses continue down my nape. His hands grip my hips and he is hovering over me. I feel the heat from his body but not the press of his weight upon me. Not the toned muscles that flex as he wraps himself around me. I curl my hands around his biceps and blink into the depths of his eyes.

I *need* to feel it all. I am yearning for the weight of him and the touches he'll give me. I need it all.

"Please, baby. Let me feel you." I'm begging. It's only been three hours since I've felt him inside me and I'm feeling bereft without the feeling. I can feel my core tightening in anticipation for him.

"Always," he murmurs into my nape and then, oh God he's pushing into me. The slow motions he's using makes the filling feeling even better. I feel my muscles stretch around him, clench around him as he fills me up and then withdraws, then pushes back into me ever so slowly.

"Gavin," I moan, my head falling back in pleasure and my thighs tightening around his lean hips when he's buried to the hilt inside me. I want to stay just like this, feel him so deep inside me forever, but when he starts to move in and out, rubbing that oh so sensitive spot inside me, I can't stop the sound of a whimper and a moan that escapes me.

"My Aria, this is heaven. Being inside you is the best feeling I've ever had. Don't ever leave me again." The words are a plea and the softness of them makes me tilt his head up and my breath catches in my throat when I see the love in his stormy blue grays.

"Never again," I vow, lacing my fingers within his on either side of my head.

Then, he begins to move. We move with a desperation that I've never felt before and when he reaches the end of me one last time, I tighten my inner muscles around him and I simply cannot hold the pleasure inside anymore.

"Come, baby."

And with one last cry of his name upon my mouth, I do.

Gavin wakes me with a tender kiss to my temple and I feel his hands spreading against my lower back. The feel of his hands on me is heavenly.

"Sleepy," I whisper, refusing to open my eyes for another few precious seconds. I hear the deep rumble of Gavin's chuckle beside me.

"Come on, Beautiful. Open your eyes." He brushes his fingers over my cheek just under my eye.

"What do I get if I do?" I tease, reaching up to his *thank Jesus* bare chest. I think I moan at the feel of it under my fingers.

"This." The promise in his voice makes me slowly peek one eye open and when I see the platter of blueberry waffles, my favorite cinnamon raisin toast and more eggs than I can possible eat, I most definitely moan at the sight of it.

"You shouldn't have," I say as I sit up against the pillows and reach for a large piece of toast.

"It was our deal, remember? And I haven't been able to do this for you lately so..."

He scoops some scrambled eggs onto a spoon and I moan when they reach my mouth. The mischievous look in those stormy eyes of his is worth the soreness in my muscles.

"Hmm, you're right about that. But you could have popped a stitch running around like that, Gavin. You should be taking it easy."

He shakes his head slightly and the look of amusement in his eyes doesn't waver.

"I was standing in front of the oven, Aria. And I wanted to do this for you. You deserve to be pampered and adored and I'm going to do that and more."

My heart melts at his honest words and I nod at him, smiling softly.

"Thank you, baby." I lift my mouth to his and rub my lips over his in a light kiss.

Gavin helps me finish the rest of the food and then sets the tray to the side to place a steaming cup of coffee in front of me. When I look down I'm happily surprised he remembered how I like my coffee.

Light with cream.

"You remembered." I take a sip and smile at him.

"I remember everything about you, Aria. I couldn't forget if I tried."

"Stay home with me today. I don't want to give you up to the rest of the world yet."

"I actually have..." The words die in my throat when I remember how long it's been since we had a full day to spend together. We need that. And I can reschedule the meeting this afternoon. The person I am supposed to be meeting with is supposed to help me get back out into the dance world now that Grayson is off the table. They specialize in helping women of the art professions find opportunities for growth. Kel had set it up for me after I told her about losing the spot with the company. I need to take that meeting. As I look at the man I could have lost only a few short weeks ago, I know it can wait. Gavin is the important one right now. Only him.

"Okay."

I reach forward and press my cheek to his, embracing him in my favorite way. I can feel the tension come off him and I know he must have been worried I would say no. But honestly, I need this time with him. Our time.

"Let me get dressed and we can figure out what we want to do today," I say, pulling away and giving him a smile when our eyes meet again.

"Hell no."

Before I know it I'm pulled back to the bed and he's hovering over me, that sexy-as-sin grin across his face. That face that I fell in love with so many weeks ago is all I can see.

"Where do you think you're going, Ms. Morgan?"

"Um, the shower?" The shake of his head is all I get before Gavin's mouth comes down to mine.

Immediately, my thighs clench around his hips and my lips part for him. I'm lost in the kiss and the man and the weight of him between my legs.

Abruptly, Gavin stands and scoops me into his arms.

"Now, we shower."

I giggle and burrow my face into his chest while I'm carried to the bathroom and he sets me gently down on my feet.

"Make it hot," I say huskily as Gavin adjusts the dials on his floor to ceiling shower.

"You make it hot, baby. In you go."

I'm placed under the hot, hot spray of water and immediately I'm sated by the soothing sensation of the water gliding down my back and the backs of my legs. The blues of Gavin's eyes are lit up with desire as he reaches between our bodies to lift my hands to his mouth where he kisses each fingertip gently.

"Turn around." As I do, I feel his hands reach around me for the loofah and a small bottle of body wash I left the last time we were here. I feel my need for him unfurl in my belly and I can't help thinking how the last time he made love to me in here feels like ages ago even though only a little over a week has gone by.

"Oh, Gavin," I say as his smooth hands begin to slide down the small slope of my neck, over my nape and to my shoulders. His fingers rub and massage the muscles there, soothing away days of tension and angst. I lean into his hands and rest my head back on his chest as Gavin continues to adore my body with his touch and the scrub of the pink loofah he must have bought for me.

"I love your skin." he whispers next to my ear just before his teeth come down to catch my earlobe.

"Ahh." I turn and reach for the body wash I know he uses and begin my own torture on his lean and amazingly toned body. I'm careful on his ribs and lower stomach and especially over the patch covering part of his right forearm.

"Does it still hurt?" I ask, blinking up at him once he's rinsed both shampoo and my favorite Aloe and Chamomile conditioner out of my hair. Being adored by this man in this way is heavenly and I know I could get used to it; I could want it for the rest of my life. Somehow, I do want that and it doesn't scare the ever living crap out of me.

"No, and these don't either. The pain medication did its job. Please stop worrying, baby. I'm OK."

He dips his forehead to mine and rests it there for long seconds.

"Can we go to the Chateau?" I ask, referring to the small but absolutely stunning Italian chateau Gavin's cousin owns. His eyes light up as he grasps my hand in his to interlace our fingers.

When he leads me out of the shower, it's the first time in these past few days that I'm free of worry.

I'm just looking forward to the rest of the day.

Twenty Three

My eyes open after a long and restful sleep and I reach out for Gavin's warmth next to me, but when my hand touches cold sheets, I look over to see the empty space beside me. Where is he? I wrap the sheets around me and my feet shuffle down the hallway to where I hear Gavin speaking on the phone. He must be in his office, I think to myself. I was hoping that he didn't have to go back to work so quickly, but I know his work is important, vital to the man I love and I wouldn't want to ever change that. So, I settle in to make some coffee and skim my fingers over the bookshelves lining the walls in the spacious living room.

I've never seen Gavin with a book in his hand and it surprises me that he has such a large collection. Charles Dickens, Ray Donovan, Marie Barnes, Nicholas Sparks, the authors range from one genre to another and somehow I know that most of these couldn't be Gavin's. I couldn't imagine him reading a full length novel like *Great Expectations*. He thrives on action, solving problems, making strides in whatever he is focused on at the present. Sitting with a book for any length of time would be a rarity for him.

"There she is," Gavin says as he wraps an arm around my waist and kisses the side of my head.

His warm hands make tingles spread over my bare skin. I point to a Nicholas Sparks novel, *The Notebook*.

"Are you hiding a romantic side of you? Or is that Callie's?"

My voice is teasing and when he doesn't answer me right away I turn in his arms and skim my fingers down his firm arms to where he's holding me around the middle.

"My grandmother's. She loved to read. She always told me that whenever she was feeling down, she'd lose herself in a different world. It was her escape." His voice is wistful and I can hear how much he still misses her. I want to say so many things. *I'm sorry. She sounds so wonderful. You miss her, don't you?* But I don't say any of those things, I wrap my arms around his back and press my face into his bare chest. For a beat, I just hold him. But then Gavin sighs and presses his cheek against the top of my head. He holds me gently, but fiercely.

"She would have loved you."

"I would have loved her." I lift my eyes to his and I smile shyly.

"I know, baby." He takes my hand and tugs me into his arms so he can kiss me. I nibble his bottom lip and it ignites a moan from his parted mouth.

"Bed." He growls, making my core tighten in anticipation. But I know it's time to get back to the real world, work and my inevitable problem of a career. It's time.

"I'd love to, but I have that meeting this morning. You know the one I put off yesterday to spend the day in your bed?"

Gavin pushes a strand of my hair behind my ear and grins, his eyes on mine.

"It's time, huh?"

"I guess so. Shower with me?" I wrap my arms around his neck and gaze up in those smiling eyes of his.

"Yes, Beautiful. "

A little while later, Farah meets me outside King's Bar and Grill with a big ole smile on her face.

"Hey, sweets! You look happy." She comes over to me and I link arms with her as we walk towards the entrance. It feels good to spend some time with my best friend after all that's happened in the last three days. I tell her about Gavin and Jasmine and the call from Mr. Pearson while we wait for our waiter. She leans over and gives me a tight hug.

"I'm so happy for you; I honestly think that boy is crazy about you."

Commented [LD46]: ..you;

My heart leaps, remembering the pain of seeing Jasmine lock lips with the man I love so fresh in my mind. I couldn't breathe at the sight of them. But now that I know the truth, I can't help but blame myself for all that time we were apart and inevitably – the accident.

"Yes, he is. I feel so stupid knowing all that time – the truth? She kissed him, and I didn't know because I didn't let him explain the night I saw them kiss." I'm still mad at myself for that.

We sit in a corner booth by the bay windows facing the far side of East End and she looks at me, understanding.

"It wasn't your fault, you know that right?"

I fold my hands in my lap and tell myself that she's right.

"Yeah, I know. I was so scared, Fay."

"How - do you know what happened?"

"I guess a loader truck ran through a red light on I-22 and hit the driver's side of Gavin's Lexus.

Then a jeep hit him head on, the doctors said if it wasn't for the airbags... he could be...." I can't bring myself to say the rest. The outcome is so unthinkable to me. Farah clasps my hand across the table, her wide eyes filled with worry.

"Don't think about that. He's okay, right?" I nod, remembering his bright smile and heated eyes this morning. He's okay and we're stronger than ever. We're together.

"Very much so, he's catching up on work today."

"Have you talked to him about Jasmine? About what you saw?"

"I did. He told me that she kissed him and that's what I saw. I know he has no feelings for that girl." That's one thing I am absolutely sure of.

She eyes me speculatively, strumming a hand across the wooden table. I know she wants to say something. I sigh and tilt my head to the side.

"What?" I ask, knowing she has to speak her mind.

"You should make it clear to her who he belongs to, Aria. Girls like that don't care if he's taken. She might not stop unless she knows that you're not letting Gavin go."

Oh, my. I didn't think about this before, but I do know I trust him. If she becomes a problem, then I'll have words with her. That's for sure.

"I'll think about it. I just want to focus on Gavin right now. If I'd lost him-I don't know if I could have gone on." The devastation of that is still so raw for me.

Farah's eyes immediately soften and she nods, squeezing my hand.

"Don't think about it, he's okay now. Do you want to order? I'm just going to run to the bathroom real quick."

"Sure, you want a Pepsi? Or something stronger?"

She winks at me and slides out of the booth.

"A Blue Moon, please."

I watch her go and close my eyes briefly, reminding myself to breathe with the memory of Gavin in that hospital bed so fresh in my mind. My phone begins to ring in my jean's pocket and I pull it out, seeing Gavin's name flashing upon the screen. My heart lifts.

"Hi, handsome," I say, hoping he doesn't hear the thread of uneasiness in my voice.

"Hey, baby. How's your lunch?"

"Good, Farah's got some big news to tell me. I told her about everything. She's been pulling for you all this time."

He chuckles, enticing me to bite my lip when I remember our shower this morning.

"Happy to hear that." He laughs again, and I swear I could listen to that sound for the rest of my life. *God*, I love his carefree laugh. I love that it comes from deep in his chest, it's never forced. I love the sound of it against my ear when I'm resting my head against him at night.

"I love your laugh," I whisper. I can practically feel his smile on the other side of the line.

"Is that all you love about me, Aria?" His voice is gravelly with that southern charm that always makes me weak in the knees.

"Among many more, Gavin."

In the background I hear his office phone ring and he sighs. He must be at Thomas because I hear the hustle of motion around the phone.

"I have a call, see you soon."

"Okay."

I hang up just as a blonde waitress with amber colored eyes approaches, smiling warmly.

"I'm Daniela, I'll be your server today. Can I get you something to drink?"

"Yes, can I get a Blue Moon and a diet Pepsi?"

"Sure, here's your menu. Take your time, I'll be back with your drinks shortly."

I smile and take the two menus she hands me as she heads towards the kitchen. Farah comes back and flicks through the menu with me, laughing about the lovey-dovey couple sitting behind us.

"So what's this news you have?" I ask, filled with curiosity.

She beams up at me and sets her menu down, her eyes bright and full of joy suddenly.

"Well..." She takes a sip of her Blue Moon and her eyes are filled with happiness. There is no doubt or uncertainty that I've seen since she's met Jaden. He's so good to her and I know she is happy but I also know that it's hard for her to believe in happily ever afters and forever's. She's never been that kind of girl.

She deserves it, though. A happy ending, just like the rest of us.

"I'm moving in with Jaden. He asked me last night."

My jaw drops open and I immediately reach over and squeeze her hand.

"Oh my God, and you waited all this time to tell me?" She grins brightly and I can see how happy she is, now I know why.

"Well, I figured I'd let you be curious for a bit. Anticipation is the best part isn't it?"

"Not on this! How did he ask you?" She tells me how Jaden put a key on her key ring and told her that he didn't want to be away from her anymore.

"I'm so happy for you, Farah," I say into a bite of my food only moments later.

"I know, sweets. It's a good thing."

After a delicious BLT and over-sized portion of French fries and a smoothie to split, we head over to Gold's Gym to meet with Kel. My meeting with the recruiter is at three so I'll have time for a workout with my two best girls.

"So what are you going to do about Grayson?"

I look over to Farah who's driving my KIA. I shrug, knowing there's not much I can do.

"Not much I can do. I lost the spot, Farah. I can't expect another opportunity like that. I did schedule an appointment with that recruiter you mentioned. It's at three so hopefully he'll have some suggestions for me."

"You'll find something, Ari. You live to dance, after all."

A surge of pride comes through me, knowing that my best friend sees how much dancing, my passion, means to me. I honestly don't know what I would do without it.

By the time I come out of the locker room, dressed in yoga pants and a stretch top I'd bought last month, I see that Kel is going double time on the treadmill. She looks up as I approach with Farah on my heels.

"Hey! What took you so long?"

"Have you eaten at that new pub in the center? It's hard to say no to food that good!"

I go over to her as she stands on the sides of the machine, wrapping me in a tight hug before leaning back and winking at me and then she waves over to Farah who's already working on her stretches across the gym.

"How's the man?" Kel asks through breaths as she runs.

I look over to her, starting the treadmill beside her. I set it to walk for a while so I can warm up.

"Wonderful, as always. How's Luke?"

"Good. He's working on his thesis for school today. I swear that man is smarter than me any day of the week," she says on a laugh, her voice going soft with affection when she talks about him.

I laugh, happy to see my sister so carefree again.

"That's only because you waste all your brain cells with little kids at that daycare."

She scoffs, waving her hand in the air playfully. I set the treadmill to jog and start in on a run. It feels good to stretch my muscles and feel the burn of exertion after spending so much time sitting in that hospital waiting for Gavin to wake up. I don't ever want to do that again.

"You're one to talk. You graduated with a 3.6 GPA from Julliard yet you spend all your time at a dance studio, Ms. Morgan! And it's a preschool, by the way."

I stick my tongue out and set the speed even faster as I pop my headphones into my ears. I tease her about being a preschool teacher, but inwardly I'm so proud of her. She loves those kids like her own.

They are so lucky to have such a deeply caring person to teach them.

"You're just jealous you can't dance." I flick my eyes over to her and she's pretending to ignore me.

She really can't dance. My sister is good at so many things but that. She turns to me and narrows her eyes.

"But I can face-paint like a pro!" Her snarky response makes me burst into laughter and soon Kel stops her running to catch her breath and I hear her laughing, too.

After a long workout, I'm filled with energy for my meeting in only an hour. We make our way to the locker rooms and chat a little about the wedding while we change. I brought a knee length white skirt and simple collared shirt to wear for my meeting this afternoon.

"I thought we could go over the guest list for a bit. Do you want to go back to my place or yours?"

Kel asks, already veering me towards her Jeep. I'm searching for my sunglasses in the depths of my too-large purse when I stop short and realize I haven't told her about my meeting.

"I have the meeting with the career adviser today. I can meet you after if you want?"

She looks at me then, her face spread into a proud smile.

"Oh, of course! Come on, I'll drive and wait for you, OK?"

I nod, a little relieved to have the support. It means the world to me that she believes in me.

We pull up to the address that Kel texted me and Innovative Solutions is on the third floor of an office building just outside of downtown. My stomach tightens and knots with nerves. What are they going to say? Maybe I really have lost my dream forever and they'll send me packing. I bunch my fingers together and tell myself that it's all going to be OK.

"Hey." Kel grasps my hand and squeezes gently. I look up and see her brown eyes are filled with understanding.

"You've got this, Ari." Three words and she boosts my spirits. I nod and smile at her, knowing how much she worries after everything that's happened over this past year.

I peck my sister's cheek and smooth the flow skirt I'm wearing down my thighs as I walk to the front doors of the building. As I make my way into the elevator, I feel my phone buzz with a text message.

Warmth spreads through me when I see it's from Gavin.

Good luck, baby.

His message brings a smile to my face. He could say so many things, but I know it's his way of telling me that no matter what, he's here for me. I think I knew that in my heart already, but having the reminder gives me even more determination when I come to the third floor and I'm met with a large sign with simple cursive words written over what looks like a crescent moon. Before getting off the elevator, I type a quick reply to Gavin.

I've got this

Soon, I come to a reception desk in a well-lit room. It's open on either side, hallways going one way to numerous offices while the other side leads to a large seating area for clients, I'm guessing.

"What can I do for you, Miss?" A young man, maybe twenty-one or so, wearing a checkered shirt and a deep green tie asks me, smiling friendly.

"Hi, yes. My name is Aria. I'm here to see Scott."

He nods and picks up a phone to make a call.

"Mr. Hayes? Ms. Aria Morgan is here"

I wait patiently while he speaks lowly into the phone and then he nods and tells me to go to the fourth office on the right. I smile and thank him, then head off towards Scott's office.

I knock twice then open the door to see a blond haired man with hazel eyes intently focused on a stack of papers in front of him.

"Oh! I didn't see you come in. Please sit, Ms. Morgan. It's great to finally meet you." He clasps my hand and shakes it as I come toward his desk.

I take a seat across from him and answer a few questions, mostly about my time at Julliard, what I'm looking for in the future, what my dream job would be. It's so easy to talk about what I love, but the whole time I'm speaking with him, I'm trying to pinpoint why Scott or Mr. Hayes looks so familiar. I can't think of anything in particular, but I know I recognize him from somewhere. An eerie awareness settles in me, but I try to shake it off as he begins to jot things down the more I talk. Then he leans back in his chair and nods.

"I'll obviously have to make some calls, but there is an up and coming ballet that is looking for some new talent. It's called *Alas the Night*. Is that something you'd be interested in?"

I'm immediately thrilled. I've done recreational dancing, professional dancing with a troupe I'd joined back when I was studying, but it was always my dream to dance in the spotlight. The ballet. I hastily nod my head and beam with a smile so wide it hurts.

"That's the dream," I say simply and with the nod of Scott's head, I know he understands.

The moment I get back in my sister's car, she sees my wide, happy smile.

"Things go okay?" She asks as she starts the car. Her eyes are trained on me and I bet she knows already that the meeting went well.

"Things are looking up," I say and wink at her so she can see my smile. I feel hopeful that I haven't lost my only opportunity in the dance world after-all.

I lead us up the steps toward Gavin's penthouse, ours actually.

"Why would you hesitate to move in here? This is so..."

Kel stops talking as we make it to the top level of the hallway and can see through the glass doors and into the penthouse. All you can see is hardwood floors and a too big leather couch that sits in the center of the living room.

"Oh my God, can I live here?" She's gushing over how amazing it is and I have to agree with her.

The idea of making this home with the man I love thrills me. Though, I'm still getting used to the idea that this penthouse is home. One thing that has always felt like home is being with Gavin. Wherever he is, that's home.

"Holy shit, this is nice. Can I get a tour?" She's practically salivating by the time we walk through the sparse living room and kitchen.

I grab my gym bag back from her hand and I'm nodding. How could I say no?

"Come on."

I lead her into each room and notice Kel's eyes light up when she sees the windows and fireplace along the far walls of the large living area Gavin insisted on when he found this place.

"He really likes the cherry wood, huh?" She asks, running her hand over the railing between the dining room and living area. The style of this place surprised me, too, when I first set foot here. But now, I couldn't think of one thing I'd want to change.

"It's modern. I like it too, Kel."

She nods, setting our bags down by the couch and following me towards the kitchen.

"I love it. Where is my favorite Billionaire?"

I giggle, tossing her a FUSE water from the fridge and I let her sit after such a vigorous workout.

"In his office I think. Make yourself at home. I'll be right back," I say, making my way down the hallway towards his study.

I hear the faint strains of Yellow by Coldplay echoing from inside. I knock twice, softly, and open the door to see Gavin sitting at his desk, his office phone pressed to his ear. His eyes flick up to mine and his face transforms from guarded businessman to the loving man I've come to know. Hanging up the phone, he smiles, and outstretches his hand to me.

"Hi, baby," he murmurs and pulls me onto his lap, wrapping an arm around my waist. I grin, leaning down to capture his ruggedly handsome face in my hands, reveling in the smooth skin of his cheeks and jaw now that he's shaved.

"You still working?" I ask, sinking my hands into his mussed up hair. He shakes his head, running his lips against mine achingly slow. Oh, he loves to tease.

"All finished. Did I hear Kel come in with you?" I nod and kiss the corner of his mouth just because I can't help wanting to touch him when we're this close. Gavin smiles wider and stands with me in his arms. He takes my hand in his again and leads me out of his office.

"You like Cold play? I thought you were more of a Counting Crows man."

He grins, kissing my lips softly as we walk towards the kitchen.

"I have many favorites. How was your lunch?"

I blink up at him and I'm smiling. Gavin dips his lips to mine once more and I feel him smiling, too.

"Good" Is all he says as we make our way out of his office.

Kel sits at the kitchen island, sipping her water when we enter.

She lights up seeing us together. She's always rooted for Gavin, from the beginning.

"Feeling okay?" She asks as she gets up and kisses Gavin on the cheek. *Oh, wow. Why does that make me feel just a tad jealous? Weird.*

"Good as new. You like the apartment?"

She nods, grabbing her bag and pulling out three binders filled with samples from her wedding planner. *Uh, oh. This might take a while.*

"It's very homey, much unexpected. Care to help with some wedding planning?"

Gavin chuckles, winking down at me. He whispers in my ear, letting his breath fall across my face.

"Do we have a choice?"

"Uh, no."

T'll get some beers, then. Aria, a Blue Moon?"

I smile, taking two binders from Kel. This is going to take a while; we might as well get comfortable.

My eyes don't leave Gavin's as I bite my lip in an effort to goad him.

Commented [LD47]: Blue Moon?

Commented [LD48]: ..while;

"With lime, please."

Gruffly running a hand down his neck, I see he's affected just before he heads towards the fridge where he grabs three beers.

"Does it really matter, Kel?" I ask, taking a swig of beer as she flicks through samples of ballads for the bride and groom's first dance. She's spent fifteen minutes on the same page.

"Of course it matters! Gavin back me up here, Isn't the first slow dance the most important?"

He sits behind me on the carpeted floor, his legs around mine, his arm wrapped around my middle and his chin resting upon my shoulder. I feel his grin beside me, amused by my sister's bridezilla-like persona.

"It is, but it should be a song that tells exactly the way you two feel about each other. A ballad, maybe."

I'm surprised by his sincere words and I lean into his embrace even more. He's actually thought about this? But then it occurs to me, he's been engaged before.

"Oh my God! I can't believe I didn't think of this before, of course. It's the perfect song." She exclaims, practically bouncing up and down with excitement.

"What song?" I ask, giggling when Gavin nips down on my earlobe, invoking my core to tighten deliciously.

Just with that small tease, I'm breathy and wanton for him again.

"You and Me by Lifehouse. It was playing at my senior prom when we danced for the first time.

Do you think Lucas will like it?" Her voice is filled with excitement.

I smile, remembering how happy she was that night. She came home on cloud nine after Lucas told her he loved her for the first time.

"Honey, that is perfect. He'll love it."

Gavin's lips running along the side of my neck are so distracting that I have to bite my lip to stop the moan that almost slips out of my mouth. Meanwhile Kel flicks through her last binder, filled with centerpieces.

Commented [LD49]: ...ore

"I just have to choose the centerpieces, take a look."

She hands me the blue binder, opened to one of the last pages. It's full of pictures of centerpieces, some with flowers in the middle and there's one toward the bottom of the page with an open heart, plated in gold with roses surrounding the circular base of the piece. It's gorgeous.

"I like this one, you could even get your initials attached at the bottom of the tail. What do you think?" I move the binder to my lap so Gavin can see it over my shoulder.

Gavin and Kel look down at where I'm pointing and my sister's face lights up, slightly blushing.

She loves it, I can tell.

"Perfect! Thank you Aria!" She kisses my cheek and then looks behind my shoulder to Gavin, my eyes flick up to his also. They're stormy blue, filled with amusement and that soft gaze I love so much.

"I like it, it's thoughtful yet romantic. Definitely the piece I like best. Good choice, baby." His voice is filled with praise and I press a kiss to his palm as Kel hastily packs up her stuff and jams it into her pocketbook.

"I have to go meet Lucas. You want to meet up tomorrow?"

I get up and hug her, then walk her towards the entrance.

"I'll call you."

She smiles then hugs Gavin quickly before closing the door behind her, leaving me and my man alone once again. I grin, it's so nice seeing her so happy. She deserves it.

"Now what should we do with ourselves, hmm?" Gavin's husky voice whispers in my ear as he kisses my knuckles from beside me. My eyes flick to his and I bite my lip, a whole range of ideas going through my head.

"I can think of a few things, I'm sure."

I take his hand and watch as his eyes heat with longing. It's crazy how just being in the same room as him elicits such a reaction in my body.

"We only have forty five minutes until we have to leave for dinner, baby."

I lead him into the bedroom, my eyes never leaving his and I lock the door behind me, leaning up against the solid wood frame.

"That's plenty of time."

And before I know it, he drops to his knees in front of me and slips two fingers into the belt loops of my jeans. *Oh!* My legs feel like jelly as I take a step towards him and see the desire in his blue-gray eyes.

He undoes the button and slides the zipper down ever-so-slowly until the band of my jeans is opened, hanging loosely from my hips.

"I've wanted you all day, Beautiful. I love undressing you."

His voice is deep with hunger and everything south of my belly tightens in want.

"Gavin, take them off" I whisper, my hands settling on his shoulders as he glides the fabric over my hips, past my upper thighs and down my calves. The slow way he takes them off makes me breathless.

"Let me take your sneakers off."

I step out of them and he guides each of my red colored converses out of the jeans, then tosses them to the side. When his hands close over the edge of my black boy-short panties, his mouth runs along my lower belly. I moan loudly, feeling my desire for him between my

partially parted legs. I clench my core, feeling my need to feel him inside me again. His tongue runs up my stomach and he slips my panties over my hips, letting them fall to the floor effortlessly.

"Take your shirt off and then go to the bed and lie down for me, Beautiful."

I graze my teeth over my bottom lip, hearing his voice filled with hunger as he gazes up at me. I look down at him, reaching for the hem of my blouse. His eyes watch me hungrily as I lift the fabric easily and slip it over my head. *God, I want him so bad.*

"Okay..."

I push off from the door and undo my bra before climbing across the made bed, lying down with my head pressed to the pillows.

"I love looking at you." he says, crawling over me and grazing his mouth against mine.

"I want you, Gavin."

He grins, running his hands down my sides until they rest on my upper thighs.

"You. Are. Mine." The words are said in between kisses as he parts my legs until I feel the ache so present between them that I moan, my eyes closing in pleasure. His lips suck along my neck, over my collarbone and keep wandering until they adore my breasts, sucking one of my nipples into his mouth.

I groan, tangling my hands into his hair as he unleashes his tongue and moves lower, towards my belly. My legs part wider, my hips lifting up towards his in invitation. He bites down on my earlobe, making me open my eyes as he presses his mouth to mine once more. I bind myself to him, my hands deftly undoing his pants and he chuckles, grazing his lips over mine as he pushes his slacks down his legs, kicks them off, and presses himself against my aching entrance.

Oh, my. I've never felt this way before, as if I'm drawn to this man with every fiber of my being. As if he's my reason for existing, but maybe he is.

"You feel so good..." I whisper, wrapping my legs around his and grasping onto his shoulders when he hovers over me, his mouth pressed to my temple.

"I know, baby. Here."

Suddenly, he's inside me, slipping deep into my sex and gliding out easily with how wet I am for him. He groans when he's seated fully inside, tilts my head back with a hand on the side of my face and dips his head as he takes my mouth hungrily, cradling my face with his hands as he pushes in and out, back and forward. He's creating a steady rhythm, a heavenly rhythm that has me climbing higher and higher, my core tightening and my limbs grasping onto him in such need. His tongue slips into my mouth and he moans deep in his throat, his breath reverberating through my parted lips as he slips out and pushes into me once more. Feeling him so deep inside me, with his hot minty breaths along my collarbone - it's intoxicating and teeth clenching good.

"Oh God, Gavin!" I call out, my mouth parting and my body tightening cathartically as I find my release, a quick forceful orgasm that makes my toes curl and my stomach flip in such

pleasure. It goes on, my eyes flicking up to Gavin's as he rears up over me, his mouth forming an O as he comes, calling out my name over and over again until he collapses on top of me. He covers my upturned face with butterfly kisses, tenderly, and doesn't let go.

"Have I ever told you that you amaze me, Aria?" he whispers, pressing his head to my stomach as he hugs me tight and holds on. My hands tangle in his hair while my other arm wraps around his middle.

I drag precious air into my lungs, tears piercing my eyes at his heartfelt words.

"You have, baby," I giggle, breathlessly.

And then, with his arms wrapped around me and his mouth pressing to my belly, I'm sated.

I hear his deep voice against my heated skin.

"I love you, Aria. Please don't ever forget that."

I cup his cheeks in my hands and smile *his* smile.

"I won't."

Twenty Four

It's a sunny Saturday morning and Farah and I go in and out of shops on Central Avenue in downtown Chicago, searching for the bridesmaids dresses Kel described to us. Lavender with a cup neck, strapless and length coming to just under our knees with black heeled sandals to match. The more time goes by, the more my feet hurt from all this walking. Crap, I forgot just how much I hate shopping. I remember, when my mom used to take Kel and me, it was torture.

Commented [LD50]: ...me; it was torture.

"Seriously, are we done yet?" I whine, grinning when Farah gives me what can only be explained as the *fuck-off* look. From experience, I know that when she's on a mission, which she is now, there's no stopping her.

"No, we have two more stores to go. Come on honey."

I begrudgingly follow her inside Neiman Marcus, promising myself a pint of Ben & Jerry's Rocky Road ice cream after this.

After searching high and low, I hear Farah squeal in delight and hold up yet another sleeveless dress, this one with a black embroidered sash at the waist that ties in the back and I sigh in relief, knowing just how perfect it is. Kel will love it.

"That's the one, Farah. I'd bet my life on it," I say, going around the sales rack to find my size. There it is, size five. Thank God.

"Kel is going to absolutely love these. Wait, you're a five? Holy crap, Ari!"

I look up at her and shrug, not really seeing the big deal about being a five.

I set my stuff down in the over-sized dressing room and take the fabric off the hanger. I see Farah grin over at me like a fool. What is going on with her?

"What's so funny? I have a small frame, isn't that a good thing?"

Farah shrugs, hoisting her sundress up and slipping it over her head. She's maybe three sizes bigger than me, slim but not skinny with a slightly wider frame than mine. But she's gorgeous and I've always been envious of her curves.

"Yeah, but I guess I didn't realize how small you were. No wonder Gavin was all smiles today, you're gorgeous!" I know she's joking, but I hear the insecurity in her amused voice. I undress and unzip the lavender dress before sliding it over my head and shoulders.

"Don't be like that, you're beautiful Farah. You know I've always been jealous of those curves of yours. Jaden loves them, doesn't he?"

She nods, straightening out her own dress and turning towards the mirror as she tightens the sash behind her back. Her hips fill up the dress perfectly and her long as sin legs are a dead knock out in the heels we found this morning. They're thin, maybe three inches tall and expose her freshly pedicured toe nails.

"He does, but you know how I am. Maybe he's just saying that because our relationship is so new, does he really want a curvy girlfriend with a less than perfect body for the long haul? I don't know." She bites her thumb and looks away from me. I hate to think she doesn't love herself like I always thought she did. The spunky attitude is part of her charm, her personality

and emanates confidence while she looks so put together as she does. I don't say anything as I go to her, standing beside her and see my reflection in the mirror next to hers. I don't see much difference between us, physically at least.

"You're gorgeous, honey. He'd be a fool to not see that, right?"

Farah runs her hand through her hair and nods, but I still feel her judging her body in the mirror.

I clasp my best friend's shoulders and turn her to face me.

"There is nothing wrong with you, Fay. Jaden sees that. I see that. But if you don't see that, there will always be those doubts in your head. You have to believe in yourself, first."

I see the moisture in her eyes and it tears at my heart.
"I'll try to see that, Ari," she finally says, softly. I hear the vulnerability in her voice.

Commented [LD51]: ...tears

I pull her into a hug, probably wrinkling the designer wear we're sporting and not caring if we do.

She's my best friend and I'd hate to think she's insecure wearing these dresses on Saturday.

"Same here, sweetie. You look awesome, do you like the dress?"

She nods, stepping back and clapping her hands as I turn in my heels.

"You so should have been a model, Ari. You have the body for it!"

I scoff, remembering how mad my mother was when I decided not to follow in her footsteps. The thought makes me laugh out loud.

"What?" Farah asks as she undresses again and tosses me my sweater and white capris.

"You remember how mad my mom was when I went into dancing?"

My mom is a beautiful and talented model and when I was growing up, I always looked up to her.

But once I started dancing, I knew that was what I'm meant to do. When I'd told her, it was the day of my high school prom. She went ballistic, said I could never make a career out of professional dancing. Now all that's in the past and I can't help but laugh at it all. Farah laughs along with me, slipping her flats back on her feet as I sit to put on my thick heeled boots once more. I'm still laughing when we open the dressing room door and bring the dresses with us.

"See, now that was hilarious, she was crazy-mad!" Farah exclaims in her dramatic fashion.

We giggle like school girls and then my phone rings, it's Gavin. I send Farah a smirk and she takes my dress, heading to the register.
"Hey, Handsome."

Commented [LD52]: dress, heading

"Where are you, baby? This bed is too cold without you," he whispers, his voice teasing. My heart leaps. Even though it's only been a matter of hours, I miss him.

"We're still in the plaza; I'll be home soon though. Just paying for these ridiculously expensive bridesmaids dresses. How was your morning?"

"Hectic, as always. You know you won't have to worry about checking prices anymore. I like spoiling you, Beautiful."

I get butterflies, biting down on my lip to hide my smile as Farah meets me by the Neiman Marcus entrance to Central Avenue.

"I know, but I'm not used to spending this kind of money, it's just different for me."

He's silent for a moment and I start to think I've lost him. Did I say something wrong?

"Does it bother you? My lifestyle? You can be honest."

Does it bother me? I mean, my mother always had money so it's not new to me but still, I like earning my way. I decide to go with my heart, knowing that Gavin likes to spoil me because he loves and cares for me, not for any other misguided reason.

"No, it's just different for me, Gavin. I'd tell you if it truly bothered me."

He exhales, obviously calmer now.

"That's good to hear, baby. When will you be home?"

"Soon. Just have to drop these off at Kel's apartment and drive Farah back to North-end, then I'll be home."

"You have Aaron with you, right? He's following you."

I look behind where my KIA is parked to see Aaron from his security team looking straight ahead.

I'm a little impressed by the Audi A3 he's driving.

"Yes, he's here. We'll be safe."

"See you soon, Beautiful"

His voice is low and full of promise, making me want him again. How does he do that?

"Bye, babe."

Once Farah is in her place, waving happily over her shoulder, I pull out and head towards East End again. I'm eagerly looking forward to seeing my man after a long day of shopping, shopping and more shopping. The butterflies start again as I think about how amazing the last few weeks have been. Gavin has either taken me out to eat or made something for me every night since our wedding-planning session with Kel. He's been so good to me, it sometimes feels too good to be true.

When I'm stopped at a red light, I spot a gray Lincoln Aviator behind me. It's directly behind me, as if it's tailing me. The windows are tinted and an unfamiliar sense of dread seeps through my veins as it follows me down I-22 all the way until the next light and I turn right, watching the rear view mirror as it goes out of my sight. I know Aaron is in the next lane and nothing will happen to me, but *God*, was I just being followed?

I keep a steady speed towards the penthouse, but by the time I arrive in the parking lot towards the back of the building, my hands are shaking.

I force myself out of the car, grab my bag, cell phone, and keys.

Maybe I'm just imagining it. Was the Lincoln really that close to me? I'm not sure.

I take a breath, holding it for a few seconds before slowly letting it out. I'm still trying to shake off the uneasiness seeping through my veins when I make my way into the apartment and see Gavin standing in front of the stove in the kitchen, a white button down shirt hugging his torso and upper arms, a pair of dark jeans hanging deliciously loose from his hips and he's barefoot. *Oh, my.*

I slip my jacket off my shoulders, putting it on one of the kitchen stools. It smells of garlic bread and lasagna, and my mouth waters.

"Smells good, baby."

Gavin turns and smiles wide, making my knees weaken as he pulls me into his arms and kisses my temple. I grasp his wrists, needing him close for a little longer. Oh, he feels so good.

"Thought we could have a dinner on the balcony tonight, what do you think?"

I press my face to his neck and graze my hands up his back, reveling in the feel of him. The feelings of dread I had only five minutes ago slowly evaporates, replaced with the butterflies I always get when I'm this close to him.

"I'd love to. How was your day?"

He stirs the linguine with the hand that isn't wrapped around me and his eyes flick down to mine, clear and so beautifully blue.

"Busy, I might have to take a trip to Los Angeles for a few meetings."

I lean back in surprise. Only now does it occur to me that he must travel with the work that he does. How would I feel about being away from him? *I would hate it. I'd miss him like crazy.*

"Hey, don't worry. It's not for a few weeks and if I can get out of it, I will," Gavin says as he takes the pot off the burner and lays the spoon beside the cooling plate. He turns into me, running a hand along my cheek and I feel the skin tingle underneath his touch.

"Is that lasagna I smell?"

That smile I love spreads across his face and he nods as he cups my cheeks and gazes down at me, such care in his blue-gray eyes.

"Yes, and garlic bread. I'll save dessert for later." His voice is full of unspoken promises, and I smile, loving the feel of his arms wrapped tight around me again.

I press my face to his neck and inhale.

"Smells good."

I hear Gavin's chuckle before he takes my face in his hands and looks at me with a devilish grin.

"The food?"

I press a kiss to his jaw and shake my head.

"Oh, no. You."

His eyes heat and he cups my chin, lifting my mouth to his until his lips brush against mine ever so lightly.

"You are addicting, Beautiful."

I smile against his urgent mouth, wrapping my arms around his neck and sinking my fingers into his silky smooth hair. His hot breath surrounds my face and it's intoxicating.

"Am I?" I tease.

Gavin takes my mouth, parting my lips easily with his tongue and adores my mouth with suggestive licks, his breath mingling with mine, stealing the air from my lungs as he kisses me with such ardent passion.

In seconds, I'm breathless. When he takes my bottom lip into his mouth, sucking voraciously, I moan low in my throat in response.

"Hmm, do you want to take a shower?" he whispers, pulling back from my lips and tucking a stray strand of my curly hair behind my ear.

"If you insist," I whisper and then Gavin is scooping me into his arms and carrying me to the bathroom without another word.

Gavin slides his hands down my back in a massaging motion as I sit on his lap. We're at Lucas' apartment having dinner. Kel and I are enthralled in a game of cards while the boys talk about the football game they are watching. Gavin is pulling for the Colts while Lucas is an adamant Patriots fan.

"Aria. Earth to Aria Georgia..." Kel is snapping her fingers in a waving motion in front of me and I must have spaced out because she's trying to get my attention.

"What?" I tilt my face up to see her grinning.

"You're daydreaming again! It's your turn." She gives me a wink and I feel Gavin stiffen behind me at the idea that I'm daydreaming. *About his hands skating along my skin; my back, my thighs, my shoulders.*

Oh, how I want them south. To where I'm aching for him so much.

"And who are you daydreaming about, baby?" I turn my face into the hollow just above Gavin's ear.

"You. I want you, now." My voice sounds close to a growl of desire as I whisper in his ear.

Immediately he's hard and I giggle in anticipation.

"I'm sorry, Luke, but I think I've been neglecting my sweet girl, here. We'll see you at the church."

Gavin stands with me against his chest and nods toward Lucas and Kel who are both smiling. They know exactly why we're leaving and with that realization, my cheeks heat.

"Have fun." My sister practically sings and I can't help but laugh as she hugs me and whispers in my ear.

"It's good to see you so happy, Ari. See you soon."

Gavin takes my hand and tugs me out into the cool Chicago night air and immediately pushes me against the hood of his car. He dips his head and begins to run kisses down my throat and neck.

"Oh, please take me home Gavin," I beg and pull his head back with my hands so I can see the depths of his brilliant blue gray eyes.

"Home," he drawls, skating fingers down my face to grasp my chin. Those eyes of his fill with tenderness and it melts me into a puddle before him. I nod and smile shyly.

"Take me home."

It feels like it takes hours to get back to the penthouse and then also for the short ride up the elevator. Gavin keeps his arm around my waist the entire way and as soon as I close the front door behind us I crash my body into his and kiss him. Deep. Hard. Hungry. I feel wetness flood my core and Gavin's desire for me press against my lower stomach.

"Beautiful." He groans against my mouth, grasps the hem of my skirt and pushes the silky fabric off my hips and legs. The next to go is his t-shirt, the buckle of his loose fitting jeans and finally my blouse.

It takes a matter of seconds for my bra and pink laced panties to join our clothes on the hardwood floor.

When I'm standing naked before him, Gavin's eyes take me in as if he's never seen my body before.

He doesn't move to touch me, he just looks at me with hungry eyes.

"You are so sweet, Aria. I love that you're mine." Gavin pierces me with the intensity in his eyes and his words reverberate through my skin like sunlight.

I clutch onto his shoulders as he carries me into our bedroom and straight to the bed.

"Need you." I tangle my fingers through his hair and feel in my soul that Gavin is the only one I'll ever need.

As if he knows the depth of my need for him, he brings his mouth down to mine and whispers against my lips.

"I'm yours, Aria. But we only have an hour." Despite his reminder, I push my body into his. I moan cathartic ally when I feel his hardness against the very core of me. I can't think through the haze of pleasure that I find myself in. All I can do is lose myself in the sensation. I wrap my legs tightly around his hips and with one fluid thrust, Gavin buries himself within my aching center. He rubs my aching clit over and over and I feel my core flood in response.

"Oh God." I spasm around him and join him each time he thrusts inside me. Gavin dips his tongue to my breasts and begins to drive me crazy with that glorious mouth of his. He licks and nips one areola before bringing the nipple into his mouth. I'm climbing higher and higher and my body is on fire from his touch, his mouth, his body pressing onto mine. Gavin slides out and thrusts one more time so deep inside me that I'm sure I can't hold the pleasure inside any more.

"Gavin... Oh, God -" I beg, clenching my muscles around him each time he joins me and I can feel the waves of pleasure hit a crescendo.

"I'm right here, baby. Let go for me."

He nips my collarbone, soothes the skin with his tongue and mouth and I cannot hold off any longer. I bite my lip and cry out his name as I shatter beneath him. Gavin whispers my name roughly and finds his own sweet, sweet release within my flooded center. I feel his weight press against every line of my body and he frames my face, peppering my cheeks and nose with light kisses and then rolls so that I'm on top of him.

"Amazing," he whispers.

Gavin

I lay there and watch my sweet girl sleep soundly for an endless amount of time. I slept so well beside her and I know the reason why I couldn't sleep when we were apart. Having her in my arms as I fall asleep is one of the best things I've ever felt. Peace. I feel peace and contentment when I sleep next to Aria and there is never going to be a time that I won't want her beside me. She *is* it for me. No one else, just her.

My girl. My present and my future. I'll never let go. I know that in my heart.

I ever so carefully skim my fingers down her cheek and brush the pad of her bottom lip with my thumb. I whisper in her ear.

"I have to make some calls. Sleep, Aria baby."

She reaches out for me in her sleep and her hand lands on the center of my chest where my heart is pounding with love for her.

"Love you..." The words escape her mouth and the softness of them could bring me to my knees if I wasn't sitting on the bed next to her. I am not sure if she is awake or if she is dreaming of me, but I still whisper the words I'd only said to one other woman before her.

"I love you, Beautiful." then I slip out of bed and pad my way to my office where I know a conference call is waiting for me. It has been about two weeks since I came home from that accident and I've spent every possible second with Aria. But Thomas Corporations is thriving and I take great pride in that – even if the business takes me away from *her* side.

"Mr. Thomas?" The line to my office phone lights up the moment I am sitting. I press the retrieve call button and the rough voice of an older man, a man I've done business with more than a few times comes over the line.

"Ah, Gavin Thomas, it's good to get in touch with you. You were out of sync for a bit there.

Everything OK lately?"

I press the phone to my ear and boot up the computer while I speak with him.

"Good to hear from you, Keith. Yes, an emergency came up, but I am back now and looking to know exactly how the Hellman deal went. I'm surprised no one has filled me in on the status, but since you were with me from the beginning of this deal, you'd surely loop me in, right?"

Since coming into the business only six or so years ago, I've learned that people rarely keep their promises or word. But, write them into a contract and clients have no choice but to be upfront and straight with you. So, when I had an opportunity to purchase and turn over a small but thriving mobile technology company called My Touch, I jumped into it. The Hellman brothers were the main shareholders and since coming back to work, I had yet to hear one word from either them or their representative. I figured that was a bad thing. I hear Keith clear his throat and then the rustle of papers.

"I'm sorry, Gavin. I was sure that Daniel would have set you up with the full reports regarding that deal. We gained their shares and the contracts were annotated. All we need to do now is turn them over to legal to finalize everything."

Daniel Ray is my assistant and technical adviser. He went to ITT and has got to be the most tech-savvy person I've ever had the pleasure of working with. But it isn't truly his job to fill me in on this. Being that Keith was my partner in this deal, it's his responsibility.

"Quite honestly, Mr. Clay, I'm appalled that neither of you thought to give me a report while I've been gone. I know my mother has stepped in during my absence, but you'll do good to remember who guarantees your paychecks."

"Gavin-"

"It's Mr. Thomas, now. I am still your boss." My voice has an edge to it now that I've learned how loyalties have fallen through in my brief absence.

"Mr. Thomas, I assure you that-" When the door to my office opens slightly and Aria stands, resting her back against the door frame, her body wrapped in satin sheets that match the true green of her eyes, I stop listening to Keith's pathetic apologies. Her eyes take me in slowly, and she begins to bite her cheek.

She only does that when she is trying to stifle a moan from coming out of her mouth.

"Don't let it happen again, Mr. Clay." With that last remark I hang up, spin my chair away from my desk and reach out my hand to Aria.

"Come here, Beautiful," I say and she walks towards me, that soft smile across her face. Warmth spreads through me at the sight of her.

"Hi." She crawls into my lap and face plants into my neck, her favorite place to rest her head whenever I'm holding her.

"Good morning." I lift her chin with a tug to the back of her ponytail and settle my mouth on hers.

I breathe in the lilac and vanilla smell she always has to her and the soft moan she gives me

allows my tongue to push into her mouth. Pressing my palms against her cheeks, I lap into her, tasting her. Then I suck her bottom lip into my mouth and tug gently.

"Baby," she moans against my mouth and her fingers tangle into my hair.

"You have to work?" She asks, looking up at me with emerald green eyes filled with desire.

"I do. Why don't you spend some time with Farah? I'll clear my schedule for this afternoon."

She tips her head to the side, thinking.

"But don't you have meetings? I don't want you canceling them for me."

Christ, could she be any more perfect?

"I have two meetings. The last one ends at seven. I'll come home as soon as I can, baby."

She smiles wide then, content with my answer. She puts her small hands on my face and her gentle touch makes my heart start pounding faster.

"Just us, tonight?"

I nod, kissing her thumb that is closest to my mouth. Her beautiful eyes heat in response.

"Just us, Aria"

By the middle of my work day, I've felt my phone go off at least a dozen times. I know it isn't Aria because I always have her calls set to loud. I never want to miss her if she is trying to get in touch with me.

But I know it has to be important if someone is calling five, six times in a half an hour. I look over to Riley who is sitting across from me and point my head towards the door.

"Let's take a break, boys. We'll come back and revise the contract in fifteen."

The head of Alcatel Technologies, a few of my business partners in Thomas, and two of my assistants leave the room, leaving just two of us.

"I need to make a call, can you...?" Daniel is standing and pacing towards the door before I have to ask.

"Take your time, Gavin." He nods once before closing the wooden door behind him and without wasting any time, I pull out my cell phone and am surprised to find thirteen missed calls and four voice mail messages from Spencer Callaghan, my security head and trusted friend.

What the fuck? Why would he be chasing me down at this time of day? Unless...

A pit forms in the bottom of my stomach and I know this has to be about Williams. We haven't caught sight of him since well before the accident. I am not stupid though. That man wants Aria, wants her back. There is no way I'll let him near her ever again. *Ever.*

"Spencer. Tell me what's happened." My tone is rough, but thankfully Spencer has known me long enough to know why.

"I've been trying to reach you all day, Mr. Thomas. Are you available to meet?"

Shit. This can't be good.

"Absolutely. Let's meet at Thomas in twenty."

"See you then." And he hangs up without another word.

Immediately, I pull my assistant into the room and tell him to cancel the rest of my meetings. Aria's safety is my only priority and I have no intention of attending meetings and conference calls while Bryce Williams could be in the Chicago area. It will drive me crazy with worry to know that man is in the same vicinity as my girl.

"Are you sure. This deal with –"

I cut him off with a hand raised. It doesn't matter how important this contract is. Aria will always be my priority.

"Cancel them. I have a personal matter I have to attend to. Give my apologies and see when they can possibly reschedule. Tell Clay to go ahead with the contract after I'm gone. I have no reservations on that."

He quickly nods and writes something into his tablet.

"All clear?"

"Yes, of course. I hope everything turns out OK for you, Gavin."

Inwardly I am hoping the same thing. I just have to keep Aria safe.

Spencer shakes my hand and sits across from my desk the moment he enters. The grim set of his mouth tells me this is just as bad as I initially thought.

"Mr. Williams was spotted just outside of the Garment district this morning. He was seen at a hardware store buying cable ties, duct tape, and rope. He was also seen in the lot of Ms. Morgan's dance studio. I was tailing him for a good three hours before we lost the tail."

I force myself to take deep breaths and not panic. I start stating facts in my head: Aria is with Farah at her apartment today, she texted me earlier and said how bad Jaden's cooking skills are. She's spending time with her friends. Bryce didn't get close to her.

But all I can imagine is her laying in a hospital bed, bloodied and broken only four months ago.

I'd seen the file Daniel was able to find for me. I'd seen the pictures. I can't fathom seeing her like that ever again. I won't allow it.

I rest my face in my hands and clench my eyes shut in an effort to keep calm.

"Where did you last see him, Spencer?"

He leans forward and looks me in the eye, obviously seeing my state of mind.

"Heading out of the city. He got no more than a mile away from where Ms. Morgan and Ms. James were this afternoon." He hands me a USB drive and I look down at it before giving him

a glare. What the hell is this?

"We found where Mr. Williams has been staying. A hidden suite at the Drake. I thought my team went through each and every hotel or motel in search of him, but he booked under an alias. I found this in his computer. I thought you'd want to see it."

Fuck. Why would he have a hard drive on his computer? The only reason I can think of makes a knot form in my stomach and my mouth go dry to cold, dead fear.

"Show me."

I pull back from my desk so Spencer has room to pull a chair next to mine and place the drive on the side panel. My nerves are thrumming and my head is pounding as I wait. I'm almost sure what I'm going to see on that drive. Pictures, or possibly videos. And lots of them. One thing I've learned about Aria's ex-fiance is that he's determined and patient. His temper drives him and he doesn't care who he hurts or who is in the path of his rage. And he wants Aria. I feel the fire of anger in my veins, boiling my blood at the image of my girl in the clutches of that man again.

"Here it is," Spencer says and what I see in front of me stops my heart altogether. Aria is sitting across our bed at the penthouse, writing in a journal. I know the video has to be live because I see the blinking light at the corner of the screen reading recording. She's wearing a tank top and sleep shorts, the ones she was wearing that first night I spent with her months ago.

Rage, red hot rage boils inside me knowing that *he* has seen this. He's probably watching it right now. That monster is watching Aria and probably Farah and Kel's place, too. Every time I've made love to her in that bed, he's been watching. *He's seen her. She's mine-Finally mine and he's seen her.*

Before I know what I'm doing, I stand and fly into the opposing wall. My fist rams through it, my whole body blind with rage. I can't see. I can't think. All I feel is anger and sheer violence as every minute I've spent with Aria in that bedroom resurfaces. Us sitting across from each other, reaffirming our love.

Her standing beside my bed and trying to convince me that waiting two whole weeks to be together is the right thing. Aria's black hair curled around the pillows this morning when I kissed her forehead and slipped out of bed. It's all supposed to be for me only. *My eyes only.* Not his!

"Gavin. Shit, Gavin! Calm down." Spencer takes a hold of my wrists and stops me from lashing out at the hard concrete wall or anything else surrounding me, including him. I've never been an angry man, even after we lost my father. I hated it. I hated the emptiness of this world without him and the betrayal of finding Jasmine with that college student in her apartment. I hated all of it. But I never lost control. Like now. My entire body is shaking with the force of everything and the only thing I know is that I have to protect Aria.

"I'm fine. I'm good. Sorry, Spencer." Begrudgingly he lets go of me and I begin to pace with my hands still shaking. What does this mean? Has Bryce been in our home?

Shit.

"He must have had a key or broke the locks somehow to get into your penthouse. Though, he may have sent someone to do his work for him. Have you or Ms. Morgan seen anyone suspicious around the property?"

No. I haven't seen anyone. But I'd also been in the hospital for almost a week. So had Aria. Jaden and Lucas told me how she refused to leave my side, not even to eat. Kel was able to make sure she changed clothes and ate something from the cafeteria, but other than that, she hadn't gone home.

"There was an entire week we weren't home. Anyone could have breached security during that time." I say more to myself than to Spencer. He nods and begins dialing a number in his cellular phone.

We are in agreement – security has to be the number one priority. He follows me briskly out of the office and to the underground parking garage. We take his Escalade and I tuck the flash drive Spencer gave me deep into my right pocket. All I can focus on is keeping my eyes on the road as I speed through the midday traffic, each mile bringing me closer to Aria and to our home. I've always felt safe there and I know my girl does, too. But how can she now? The man that haunted her past and sometimes her dreams has been watching her for almost two weeks now. Just the thought at what that monster has seen makes my knuckles clench around the steering wheel like a vise grip. I repeat a vow to myself over and over.

I'll protect her. I won't let him or anyone else hurt even one hair on her head. Not ever again.

Twenty Five

Aria

By the time I look up from my notebook, it's almost six at night. I sit up in bed and worry my lower lip with my teeth as I look down at what I wrote to Jeremy. When dad brought me and Kel home from the hospital, my mom had already left for some grand photo shoot in Milan and I was still reeling from the sense of emptiness I'd felt when my world bottomed out. I couldn't eat, I couldn't even sleep because every time I closed my eyes I saw Jeremy's face. His aqua blue eyes that used to always soften when I needed a hug or smiled when he told me a joke. His face when he mouthed *I love you, Squirt* just before he was wheeled into surgery. Dad was at his lowest point, seeing both his daughters hurting and having no way of stopping the pain we were feeling. But then, he gave me this journal.

"I know it's not the same but if you write to him, tell him how you're feeling and share with him, it might take some of this away. Just try, pumpkin. Please."

In that moment, sitting next to my dad who was looking at me as if I meant the world to him – I knew Kel and I did mean so much to him. I promised to try.

So, I wrote to Jeremy. Every night, sometimes twice a day I would lie across my twin sized bed and tell my darling brother about everything he was missing. Sometimes, it felt like I could feel him smiling down at me from above. When I finally brought myself to tell him about Bryce and what had truly happened to me, I'd felt the gentle breeze of his memory surround me. As if he was in my room with me giving me one of those warm, toothy smiles that lifted my spirits all through high school and college. Ever since I woke up this morning, I began to ask myself questions. Had I lost sight of Jeremy's memory? Had I slowly begun forgetting my brother? With everything that's happened since meeting Gavin, I'd had this journal stuck between my two Julliard Alumni sweatshirts and I dug it out this afternoon while I was cleaning the bedroom, needing something to do now that I didn't have anywhere to go during my days. God, it felt good to write him again. It made me feel even more closer to him than I remembered.

My thoughts, or more like my memories, are halted when I hear the ring of my phone. Gavin's name flashes on the screen and a smile spreads my face when I see that.

Commented [LD53]: ...who

Commented [LD54]: ...morning, I began

Commented [LD55]: ...closer

"Miss me, already?" I purr into the phone, sitting myself down next to a piping hot cup of tea at the island. I hear a car engine and the rustling of a man's voice on the other end and I figure he must be on his way to yet another meeting.

"Where are you? I'm on my way home." Gavin's tense voice immediately has my heart hammering. Had something happened? It would take a lot to rattle this man, what had happened?

"I'm at home, Gavin. What-what's wrong?"

"Thank God." I hear him say under his breath as if a prayer instead of a statement. But before I can urge him to talk to me I hear the lock turn at the back entrance and Spencer lets himself in. Wearing the same white button down shirt and black slacks, I worry something has happened for the head of Thomas security team to be here at six-fifteen on a Saturday night.

"Ms. Morgan, I need you to step out of the penthouse for now. Gavin is waiting for you."

"I – is everything alright? Is he OK?" I ask, the pit in my stomach growing with worry the more time goes on.

"You need to go, Ms. Morgan. I promise you'll have your answers once you're outside."

The pleading tone in Spencer's voice makes me hurry to slip my gray flip-flops on my feet and wrap myself in the sweatshirt I'd left hanging near the bathroom door.

"Thank you, Miss."

I let him lead me out the door and the moment I set foot on the sidewalk, I'm locked out of the penthouse. *What the hell?* What the hell is going on? Confusion makes my nerves spiral as I stand looking at the door for the longest time, trying to understand why I've just been kicked out and then I feel *him* behind me. He doesn't touch me, but I can feel every fragment of his presence within me.

I turn and am immediately struck by the stormy intensity of Gavin's blue gray eyes.

"Gavin, what's going on?" I ask lifting my hand to lace through his between our bodies. He looks at me as if I'm about to disappear and without another word, I'm swept into his arms and one hand soothes down the back of my head, pressing my face to my favorite place. His warm, smooth skin urges me to wrap my arms around his shoulders and feel the taut muscles I know I'll find. So, I do.

"I'll tell you everything as soon as I know it's safe for us to stay here tonight. Can I just hold you for now?" Gavin places his palm on my cheek and the worry I see in his gorgeous face is palpable.

I wrap my arms around his waist and nuzzle my face into the crook of his shoulder.

"Okay"

Gavin wraps an arm around both my shoulders when Spencer lets us into the penthouse once again. As I look around, I don't see anything out of place, but the hardened look the two men exchange tells me that something isn't right. Confused, I back away from both of them.

"What is going on? I deserve to know if something has happened." My voice is strong with conviction, but that doesn't seem to sway either of them to answer me. Gavin gazes down at me and I can see the obvious concern and possibly fear in his eyes.

"Spencer, thank you for everything. I need to talk with Ms. Morgan, now."

Gavin shakes his hand and leads him to the door before shutting it with a silent *click* and turns to face me.

"Talk to me, Gavin," I whisper, taking his hand in mine when he's standing in front of me.

"Come with me," He says, tugging me with him towards our bedroom. I feel as though I'm being kept in the dark about something and whatever it is that Gavin is trying to protect me from must be bad. I hate feeling like I'm being kept in the dark, but I'm also afraid to know the new danger I can see is imminent from Spencer's visit.

Gavin guides me to sit on his lap and as I straddle him, I press my hand to his chest.

"Just tell me. I deserve to know.

I feel his slow exhale and then he starts to trail a lazy finger down the slope of my shoulder.

"Spencer has been keeping tabs on Bryce ever since he was seen last fall across the city. I had to keep you safe and this was the only way I know how. Knowing where he is and what he's doing is the only way I can know he won't get near you, Aria. Baby, he can't get near you.

I – I need you safe." The vulnerability in his voice tears through my heart and I nod, the horrid fear and confusion and love for this man overwhelming me.

"I know you'll keep me safe. Why was Spencer here? Did you think he'd come here?"

Gavin leans down ever so slightly and kisses the top of my head.

"No. He-Shit, I don't want to have to tell you this. I don't want any of this touching you, but Aria, he's been watching you. I saw the feed live and I can tell you he's probably been watching you, me, *and us* for at least the last two weeks."

Suddenly it feels as if I can't breathe and my heart is pounding so fast that I'm sure I'll pass out from the exertion of it. Bryce-God, the man that has haunted my nights and dreams for months now has been *watching* me. I clutch onto Gavin's hands steadily holding mine and I see the mixture of concern and fear in the blue-gray eyes staring back at me.

"How?"

Gavin must see the panic in my eyes because he leans forward and cups my cheeks with his hands.

His warmth chases away the cold suddenly skating along my skin.

"Spencer found two hidden cameras, in the bedroom and just above the front door. They're gone now, Aria. You're safe here." I see the fierce love and I believe with everything I am that he'll do everything to keep me safe. I believe him.

"Gavin." I wrap my arms around his neck and lift my mouth to his without another word. I taste the minty taste of this man and when he wraps his arms around me, with one hand holding the back of my head I part my lips for him, taking all he has to give and giving the same in return.

Gavin sucks my bottom lip into his mouth and tugs in that way that I love before he pulls away and cradles my face in his hands.

"I won't let him take you, Aria. I don't care what I have to do but I promise you, you'll be safe.

Please, believe me." The shake in his voice makes me wrap my arms around him tighter and I press my lips to his throat in a kiss.

"I trust you, Gavin. As long as we're together, I know you'll keep me safe."

A gentle smile spreads over his mouth and he nods, then dips his head to kiss my temple.

"Can I take you somewhere, baby?"

I nod and kiss him once more instead of answering him.

Twenty Six

The sand warms my feet as Gavin leads me toward a small cliff just south of the lake below. I recognize the set in the land as where we had a picnic only weeks ago.

"I love that you brought me here, Gavin. It feels like this is our beach, our spot away from everything and everyone," I say, catching his hand in mine as we walk.

Gavin looks down at me and he smiles gently.

"Just ours, Aria. I brought some food and that wine you love. I thought we could have a picnic before the sun sets."

I wrap my hands around the back of his neck and draw his mouth to mine for a light kiss.

"I think that sounds wonderful."

I watch as Gavin sets a sky-blue blanket across the flattest spot along the ridged cliff and sets a basket down by his feet. Then, he reaches for my hand.

"When did you prepare all this? We left so quickly," I ask, sitting beside him and leaning back on my hands. He sets two plates of fettuccine Alfredo with basil and I gasp in surprise.

"Oh, Gavin. You remembered."

I can still smell the flowers from our first date at Gavin's cousin's restaurant. It was the first time we had dinner formally and I had this meal that night.

"Of course, baby. It's your favorite." Gavin's eyes spark with softness and mischief and a joyous smile spreads over my mouth. Love surges inside of me for him and I lean forward to kiss his cheek.

"Thank you," I whisper, meeting his deep eyes with my own. Even with the mixture of fear and confusion still coursing through me, I'm thankful to have this man.

I set into the mouth-watering meal and with a moan, the flavors hit my tongue.

"Good?"

I take another bite and see him watching me eat with such intensity.

"Oh, yes. Aren't you going to eat?" I take a spoonful of pasta and bring it to Gavin's mouth. He opens to me and when he tastes it, he groans in satisfaction.

"See? It's delicious."

I see his eyes become hooded as he traces a line down my throat.

"You are, Beautiful."

My food and the fearful thoughts in my mind are all forgotten when his full mouth closes over mine and warm hands cup the back of my head. His kiss has a tenderness and desperate edge to it that makes pulling away from him impossible. He *needs* me.

"Gavin, the food-" I say between heated kisses and I'm quieted with a searing and hungry kiss across my lips. A moan tumbles from my throat when our tongues meet and tangle, explore and memorize this moment in time. My arms clutch to his shoulders as Gavin's deft fingers untie the back of my skirt, then pulls down my tank to reveal my uncovered breasts. A small part of my mind thinks how someone, anyone could see us but somehow, that thought doesn't stay with me long.

Commented [LD56]: ..then pulls down...

"God, Aria. I need you."

In two seconds, he has me cradled in his arms, lowers me so my back lays flat against the surprisingly smooth blanket. With a flick of his fingers, my panties are gone from underneath me and I feel the cooled air hit my core. I moan against his mouth and wrap my hands around his neck to find his lax jaw. Cupping it, I look up at him with all the love I can muster.

"Please don't worry, I'm safe with you. I know that's true."

His lips part and briefly closing his eyes, I feel his breath whoosh out of him in relief at my words.

Gavin presses every line of his upper body to mine and when he opens his eyes, the darkness and worry are gone.

When he kisses me again, it's the gentlest of kisses. He slides the fabric of my tank top back over my head, leaving me confused all of a sudden.

"Let me take you home to our bed. I want to make love to you so badly."

I press a kiss to his chin and nod, letting him pull me up to stand with him.

My thoughts wander to the shadows of my past as Gavin drives us back in the Jaguar. I love this car, this car that is so much like the man himself that I could laugh. It's sexy and sleek, knows just how fast to go and just how smooth to turn when it's time. But even thoughts of this car or really-anything else don't stop my mind from remembering the sense of fear that gripped me when Gavin told me about the *cameras*. God, what kind of crazy sort of person does that? Puts actual cameras in someone's home in order to spy on them!

I let out a shaky breath at the thought of what he must have seen. Gavin, me, our bedroom...

"Fuck, Aria, you're shaking!" Gavin's panicked voice treads through my mind just as he parks and hurriedly unbuckles his seat belt, turning towards me.

"H-he was in our bedroom," I whisper, more to myself than to him. I don't know why I'm just reacting to this fact now. I've known this these last two hours and just now I find my hands shaking with the gripping panic at the image of Bryce Williams standing in the sanctuary of our bedroom. The place that I gave myself to Gavin for the very first time. Will all of our happiness be tainted by his presence and threat now that he's disturbed it? Will I never be rid of my haunting past? Will I ever be able to forget?

Tremors wrack my body as Gavin takes my face in gentle hands, caressing underneath my eyes where I'm sure wetness is building. His deep, concerned eyes are all I focus on as he tells me to breathe. In and out, one... two... three. By the third, I feel the panic ebb away from my mind and I close my eyes.

"Would it make you feel better if we go somewhere tonight, baby? I don't want you to ever be reminded of that man when you're with me. Just tell me what you want to do and I'll make it

happen. Your safety and peace of mind is all I care about."

His voice is filled with concern and his own fear. I can't stand to think that our time together will be haunted with the pain and loss I've endured at the hands of that man.

Somewhere deep inside, one word comes to my mind. *No*. For so long I was afraid and unable to move on, to move forward in fear that I couldn't overcome the abuse I'd suffered. But I am stronger. I am strong. Through dancing and my sister, my friends and the love Gavin has freely given me, I've built a life for myself and I won't allow Bryce to take that away from me.

"No. Gavin, take me inside. I know as long as I'm with you, I'm safe. I won't let this change our life together." I lay my hands over his that are still holding my face. His blue gray eyes dart between both of mine, searching.

"Are you sure? This is your home, Aria. If you're at all afraid here, I want you to tell me."

I nod and look up into his steely eyes.

"You'll keep me safe."

As he tugs me into the bedroom with him and puts the bedside light on, Gavin presses a kiss to the top of my head.

"With my every breath, baby."

Sleep eludes me as Gavin holds me right against him in bed only minutes later. I press my face to his neck and inhale his musky minty scent that immediately soothes me.

"You're safe. Sleep now."

I close my eyes and feel the press of his lips against my cheek before I fall into the deepest of sleep.

Fear grips me when I smell the overwhelming cologne that I remember from so long ago. I immediately try to move but I'm trapped against the headboard of a four poster bed that I know is not the one I share with Gavin at our home. My body is completely still, but everything else feels on fire with the need to move, to struggle, something to get away. I force a deep breath out of strained lungs and lose every particle of air when I hear the low, hollow sound of his laugh.

"You've changed, Princess."

My whole body goes rigid as Bryce nears the bed and his hands come down to the ropes binding me to the end of the bed. Fight, Aria. Move! My entire being screams at me but for some reason, no matter how hard I try I cannot move even one finger.

"W-why can't I move? Let me go" I strain to say those few words and they come out as a cry for mercy. I vowed I would never be a victim again, but how can I do anything? I can't move, I can't scream. God I can't even breathe.

"Why would I do that? You are my captive. And trust me, I fully intend to appreciate it,

Princess."

My skin crawls when he slides a finger around my ankle, which is numbed just like every other limb I possess.

I open my mouth to scream, but all that comes out is a strangled whimper. His singular finger moves around the ankle, to the clammed skin of my calf. I jerk helplessly, rolling my face to the side of the bed so I don't have to look at the smugness in his darkened features.

"You forgot, Ari. You're mine."

Those words. Those words are the stone that breaks the damn on my mobility and emotions. I start to scream.

"No! Don't touch me! I'm not yours! I'm not yours!"

Fear grips me, swallows my screams and I feel the press of his hands against my sides.

Miraculously, I hear another anguished voice calling my name in such worry. Aria! Aria, baby you're safe. You're safe here in our bed. You're mine, come back to me. Come back, baby. I struggle to hear more, but my eyes close and I seem to lift from the weight of dread I'm overwhelmed by.

"Aria? Open your eyes, now. You're safe now."

Gavin's deep and anxious voice lifts me out of the horrible blackness.

"Oh, no, no, no..." I whisper, shaking as my eyes open and I find myself back in the comfort of our bed. Our room. Our home. My home.

Warm, too gentle hands come up to my damp cheeks and Gavin slowly lifts my chin to meet his soft gaze. I see love and adoration and fear. Fear that still grips my body and heart. I can still feel the grimy fingers of Bryce's hands and the perfumed air that surrounded me. Gavin takes my hands in his and kisses each fingertip before pulling into his lap and grasping the back of my head as I bury my wet face in the crook of his neck. My chest heaves erratically, my body and hands shaking as I let the warmth of his body seep into mine.

"He-he said I was his. He wouldn't let me go. Please, please don't let me go."

"You were never his. A man like him could never know the treasure he held in his grasp. Aria, baby you are safe with me. I won't let go. Not ever."

I draw my face away and look up into his blue gray eyes filled with worry and tenderness.

"You promise?"

He nods, drawing his mouth down to mine in the slowest of kisses.

"I promise." Even as he says that, the fierce and tender look in his eyes is his promise. His vow.

Twenty Seven

Somehow, I wake easily from an untroubled sleep that feels as if I've slept a full twelve hours since the last time I woke last night. Out of habit and need, I reach out for Gavin's warmth, but instead I hear his voice out on the terrace overlooking downtown Chicago. It has been one of my favorite parts of Gavin's home. I never would have dreamed that I would feel so comforted here, but I do. My pleasant thoughts are interrupted when I hear the aggravation in my man's voice.

"I know the contract is huge, Carly. I know. But this is of priority. Cancel all of my meetings today and that is final."

He pauses, bracing both his hands on the banister in front of him. He flexes his neck side to side and I can tell he's been on this call for longer than he'd like.

"Thank you. I'm sorry to snap at you, I just need this done. OK, I will see you tomorrow."

As he lowers the phone from his ear, I wrap the sheets around my torso and shuffle my feet towards the open door of the terrace. Gavin lets out a breath and leans his elbows on the banister as I near him from behind and easily wrap my arms around his waist to hold him.

"Hey, Beautiful."

Gavin turns and embraces me, tucks my head under his chin and soothes his hand down my back.

In this moment, I feel completely safe in his arms.

"Did you sleep?" he asks, drawing away and clasping one of my hands in his. I nod and reach up to move a thick strand of sandy brown hair from his eyes.

"Somehow, I did. I don't know why I had such dreams like those. I've moved on from all of it. My past. Why is it coming back to haunt me now?"

Gavin caresses my face with one hand and I could cry with the understanding I see in his eyes.

"You're afraid. I completely understand that. And I'm going to do everything in my power to help you feel safe and secure again." He urges me to rest my head on his chest and I do, wrapping my arms around his waist as tightly as I can.

"What do you want to do today, baby?" Gavin asks as we eat breakfast just inside at the kitchen island that I love so much.

"I just want to be with you. No drama, no questions. Just us."

"Just us," he murmurs and when I look up from my food, I see the promise in his eyes.

"Savor it, Aria. What do you feel?" Gavin asks, each word blowing a bit of air across the hyper sensitive folds of my center. He has me spread over the bed, my thighs parted and my arms

bent behind my head. I've lost count of how many mind numbing beautiful orgasms he's coaxed out of me and I know I can again, with just the slightest pressure of my clit. But still, Gavin spreads me wider and blows against my tingling walls, waiting for my answer. *God, what did he ask me?*

"I feel... close. I feel like every molecule in my body craves your mouth on me again. Please, don't tease me."

Gavin's eyes light up with reward and he settles back into me, lapping up my juices as if I'm a succulent fruit and he's been thirsting for days.

"Gavin!" I scream cathartic ally, mounting the peak once again. Even faster he laps, sucks and then nips ever so gently at my clit. The gathering of nerves elicit heightened cries from me and I'm falling.

Falling, falling, falling into the haze of pleasure and need that has been sated even more so by Gavin's attention. He's made love to me and it creates a tingling sense of joy all through me.

"My God, Aria. You're it for me."

Gavin cradles me against him and I sway into the warmth he gives me. Small, tender kisses cover my neck and throat and then his mouth engulfs mine in a heartrending kiss that steals my breath all over again. When he draws away, I wrap my arms around him even tighter and gaze up.

"Me? You're the one for me, Gavin. I didn't think I'd ever find-Baby, I found it with you"

I cup his smooth face in my hands and know my eyes are filled with all the love inside me.

"I found you."

Three Months Later

I'm filled with a mix of excitement and nerves as I make my way onto the stage where I'll find my passion again. It's only been a week since Mr. Hayes called me with the opportunity to audition for the part of Lena in *Alas the Night*, a new and up and coming ballet production. I never dreamed I could find an opportunity so quickly after the one that I lost only months ago. Kel drove me in, but I insisted I do this myself. This is my dream, after all.

I come to a three seated table with what I can only guess are the audition coordinators. The man seated in the middle of the table gives me a welcoming smile and asks me to fill out the checkin sheet with my name and credentials.

My hand shakes as I write my name and everything else the sheet entails and then I hastily find a seat next to at least forty others that must be auditioning for my role, also.

Anxiety creeps into my mind while I look around at each and every girl and lanky male dancer around the waiting area. I start to worry about whether I can really do this. Am I a better dancer and performer than all of these women? Do I really measure up?

As if she sensed my nervousness, a girl next to me leans forward and looks at me with kind dark blue eyes.

"Don't worry about everyone else. Just focus on your talent. You've got to believe in yourself, Sweetie."

She reaches over and pats my knee and I do my best to smile at her.

"Nerves get the best of me, I think. Is this your first audition?"

She grins and shakes her head hastily.

"Oh, no. I lost count." She chuckles and then from the left of where I'm sitting I hear my name called.

"Here goes nothing," I whisper, more to myself than the girl next to me.

"Hey, my name is Jessica. Come find me when we're all done. You want to grab lunch?"

She has the kindest eyes I've seen and I could really use a friend through all of this.

"I have plans, actually. How about we exchange numbers, though? I'm Aria."

We shake hands, giving each others numbers and names before parting ways. I turn to see the smiling man I met at the desk only a few minutes ago.

"I'm Leo. One of the directors. Come on in, Ms. Morgan"

I turn left away from the auditoriums with the smile that I've had on since I walked out of the audition room. *I did it.* I aced my audition, for the first time in *God*, weeks, I feel like myself again. My phone buzzes in my pocket as I walk to the small bakery me and Kel agreed to meet at. She raves about the pastries at this place that just opened and finally talked me into indulging in some sweets after my auditions. I reach into the pocket of my sundress and don't bother to look before answering.

"Hey."

"How did it go? I've been on my toes all morning!" I can practically feel the excitement Farah has.

I laugh softly and wind a finger through my hair as I tell her.

"I aced it! I mean, of course there's a chance they won't give me a call back, but I aced my routine.

The scene I had to repeat for them was easy enough and even the director I spoke to said I exude the spirit of Lena. I can't believe I was so nervous."

"I knew you'd get it! Were there others auditioning with you or was it just you?"

I wish it was just me. I wouldn't have been so darn nervous while I'd been waiting.

"Farah, you should have seen the girls there! All skinny blondes and no curves-made me even more nervous than I already was."

"You've got the talent. You just have to believe in yourself."

Well if that doesn't sound familiar...

"I know. I have to go, I'm meeting Kel in a bit."

She's quiet for a moment and I'm not sure why.

"OK, see you later."

I click off and open the glass doors to a small bakery and pastry shop called Hidden Sweets. There are several wooden tables set in the front when I walk in and I don't see Kel or Lucas right away. The white marble counter top draws me deeper into the bakery and then I see Kel, her blonde hair wound up in a messy bun and Lucas pressing his nose in her neck as they stand with another girl behind the counter.

"Hey." I walk over and feel a surge of warmth seeing such love and affection between these two.

I'm so happy for their happiness.

"Hey! This is Jenna, she owns the bakery!" Kel practically bursts in excitement.

I laugh and outreach my hand to the petite brunette who looks at me. She has pale blue eyes and a soft smile on her face.

"I'm part owner, Kel. Remember?"

My sister waves her hand in dismissal. Luke laughs behind her.

"Sweetheart, she's right. Her mom does own half of this shop"

"And she lets me know whenever she can," Jenna says, casting her eyes down for a moment. I can tell she feels ashamed that her mother's been brought up and she seems like such a sweet girl. She can't be a day over twenty.

"I know the feeling." I place my hand on her shoulder and squeeze gently. She looks at me again and a smile lifts her mouth.

"Let's get some pastries and we can sit," Lucas offers, leading Jenna to the display case as Kel comes around the counter, wraps an arm around my shoulders and looks over to me with happy eyes. I'm so glad I have good news for her, too.

"So, I'm guessing you found a bakery to cater the rehearsal tonight?"

"Oh, yes! Don't you love this place? I had no idea this bakery was even here until I tried Jenna's lemon danish! It's to die for, Ari. To. Die. For."

Uh, huh. I just let her spiel on and on about the baked goods while I think about how wonderful this morning was. I had to be at Fell's Auditorium at noon so I got to sleep in with Gavin for a few extra hours. He woke up before me, which has come to be the norm since I haven't been working. I felt his touch before I was even awake and he tongued me to an amazing climax while I was still in my sleep-like euphoria. The best part? I woke up and the sexy man from my dreams was still there. I let him keep going and when he found out I'd been awake the whole time, Gavin smiled and started all over again. I'm beginning to think sleep sex is my favorite.

"And then he reached into his pocket and pulled this out! Isn't it absolutely gorgeous?"

Kel nudges me with her shoulder and I'm pulled out of my daydream.

"Wait, what? What is that?"

I take a hold of her left hand and my jaw drops open when I see the much larger stone set in the middle of her gold banded engagement ring. But, it's not a diamond. It's a ruby stone set with small diamonds encompassing it. It's... breathtaking.

"Another ring?" I look up to see what I think are happy tears in my sister's eyes.

"It was his mother's." She sniffs and I go to her and hug her gently in my arms.

"You make him happy. Of course he would give you something so dear to his heart."

She laughs through her tears and I lean back to wipe them away.

"Jesus, Kelly baby, what's wrong? Are you OK?!"

I look up to see Lucas come into the bakery heading straight toward my sister. His steps are quick and his face a mask of worry. His voice is filled with panic and I can hear the tremor in it as he speaks. I let Kel go and when she sits in the closest chair, Lucas drops to his knees in front of her. The devastation in his eyes surprises me. I reach down and press my hand to his blond head. He must have seen her tears. My sister is a lot of things but a crier is not one of them. She's the strongest woman I know.

"She just got emotional for a minute. She's alright, Luke."

He nods, but I can tell he is concerned about my sister. His hands come up to grasp hers, eyes pleading with hers.

"Talk to me," his voice pleads and Kel reaches up and soothes the stray hair that fell in his eyes away. Her eyes dip to the ring on her left hand and then slowly lift back to her fiance.

"This is the only thing you have left of her. What if I lose it or..."

He shushes her quietly and wraps his arms around her waist.

"Then I'll get you another, Kel. It symbolizes my love to you, my promise. That's what matters OK?"

I watch as the sadness lifts from my sister's face and she grins shyly.

"I love you, crazy boy," she whispers just loud enough so I can hear.

Lucas smiles wider and kisses her, effectively banishing my worries about seeing my sister cry. I don't even remember the last time I saw her really cry. It had to be when Jeremy was hurt. She was a mess that night. God, we all were.

In the span of a minute, Kel is back to her cheery self.

"Hey, stop pouting. I'm good. Let's eat!" she says, looping her arm through mine.

We sit at a nearby table and she dishes out over large cupcakes with vanilla, lemon, and chocolate frosting on them. My stomach growls in appreciation.

"Oh, yes," I say then bite into the nearest one.

TwentyEight

I lean against the door jam and listen while Gavin talks on the phone with his sister. Not that I'm eavesdropping, but the sweet affection in his voice melts my heart.

"You sure about him, Cal? First he stands you up and now he's moving? Is this boy even worth it?" He pauses to listen and in that moment I see the concern in his eyes that I hadn't heard in his voice.

He's truly worried about Callie and this boy she's seeing. I can't say I blame him, but if he's worth it to her, that's what counts.

"Yeah, I know he's had a rough life. I promise, Cal."

His eyes flick up to mine then and the blue grays immediately fill with softness.

I can tell his sister says something else and it makes him smile.

"You too."

"You look beautiful." Gavin murmurs when he reaches me, grabbing my waist to pull me into his body.

"Thank you, I got it," I whisper into his chest as he holds me. I feel his smile against my hair and before I know what he's doing, I'm being spun around in a circle.

"I knew you would, baby. Congratulations."

When he stops spinning me, I tangle my fingers in his hair and press my mouth to his for a kiss. I feel his joy and hunger for me immediately.

"It felt so good to dance again, Gavin. You have no idea."

His hand tugs me to follow him and as I'm laid out on the bed, Gavin hovers over me and cups my chin gently. He urges me to look at him.

"Trust me, I do have an idea. When you dance, *Christ* it's nothing like I've seen before. Your free spirit, your innocence comes out and you shine. You shine."

God, when he says that to me, all I want to do is get up and dance for him right here and now. But my feet hurt and I really want to do something else.

"You really love me, huh?" I ask, running my hand down his chest toward his belt buckle. When I come in contact with his shaft he sucks in a rough breath.

"Unconditionally."

When I wake, I'm still buzzing with contentment from Gavin's love making. I hear the shower running in the bathroom across the hall and before I can go there, my phone buzzes with a text. When I open it, the number is blocked.

I can still see you, Princess.

My blood runs cold reading those five words. There isn't a doubt in my mind who it is. Who it could be. My eyes dart around the bedroom as if Bryce will bust down the door at any second. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to talk my nerves down from the brink. I'm OK. I'm here with Gavin in our home and Bryce is in the past. He is in the past. Most likely the text is just to scare me. He wants to know he still has that power to yield over me. I refuse to be powerless again. I refuse to be scared. I take a deep breath and step into a pair of worn yoga pants then pull on my favorite of Gavin's tees, determined to forget about the text and focus on my day.

Once in the kitchen, I set in to make breakfast and let the text slide to the back of my mind for the rest of my morning.

The air seems to shift around me when I hear the bedroom door open and light footsteps approach from the hallway. Gavin comes up behind me and gives my behind a little squeeze.

"Sexy girl. Are you cooking? I thought that was dangerous."

I laugh softly and lean up to kiss his cheek.

"Morning, Gavin." I turn in his arms and wrap a hand around his neck.

"I can handle it, I think. Go have some coffee and I'll bring this out when it's done."

Gavin smiles warmly and plants a hard kiss on my mouth before sauntering out to find coffee.

While eating my only offering of cooking I can muster, I remember I promised Kel we'd go dress shopping today. Her friend Melody is coming too, I think.

"I forgot to tell you, Kel wants to dress shop today. The rehearsal is tonight."

Gavin looks up from his plate and nods, taking my hand that sits across my lap.

"Do you want to have dinner with Callie and her boyfriend tonight before the rehearsal? She's been asking." I leave my half empty plate and climb onto his lap.

"Sure. We have an hour to waste, though."

Gavin tips his head down and kisses along my jaw. It elicits a low moan of arousal out of me.

"I'm sure we'll find something to occupy us."

Twenty Nine

"So?" Jenna asks as I just about devour the sampling of red velvet cheesecake she gave me. Kel sits next to me nibbling away at the lemon topped cupcake she had her sights on the very moment we set foot in here. I take another bite and fail at hiding my groan of satisfaction.

"This is a definite yes. What about you Kel?" My sister bites her bottom lip and nods between bites of her second cupcake.

"Um, I'm not sure..."

I throw Jenna a wink and finish off the cheesecake frosting on my favorite treat yet.

"Awesome! Two down, three to go."

She pushes a tray of assorted cupcakes in front of us and I see Vanilla-Oreo, Apple-Crust, and Boston Creme topped cakes that are begging for me to devour them. *God, give me strength.* Any more sweets in my body will not be a good thing. We've only been here an hour and my belly is already full.

I throw my torso down on the love seat we are sitting on in the closed bakery and hide my face in one hand. Giggling, I shake my head when Kel nudges my hand with what must be another treat.

"I'm going to get sick from all these cupcakes, Kel! Just pick three out of the thirteen flavors we've tried."

I can hear Jenna laughing and open my eyes to see my sister well into her *third* Lemon cake.

We are going to be here awhile, I am guessing.

Once we leave Hidden Sweets, Kel's car is filled with assorted cupcakes, treats and pastries that Jenna insisted on offering us for the reception. It's almost one by this time and I know we're seriously stressed for time with having the rehearsal dinner starting at five.

"Stop stressing out, girl. I'll drop you off so you can get your dress, change and head over before four. We have everything set for tonight. Hell, Luke took care of most of it."

I see her eyes twinkle when she talks about Luke, the man I know she's dreamed of marrying for so long. She's finally going to get her happy ending. The wedding is tomorrow, after all.

"Yeah, sorry. My mind is on overdrive today. You doing okay, Kel? Any jitters?"

My sister shakes her head and laughs softly.

"Hell to the no. I've wanted to be Luke's wife since I was seventeen. I'm so excited."

I reach over and grab her free hand in mine. Squeezing gently, I nod.

"I know."

We turn into the parking lot beside the penthouse only five minutes later and I hug my sister tightly before getting out of the car and waving her off. I can hardly wait to see her walk down the aisle tomorrow.

She's going to be such a beautiful bride. With that thought still causing a smile on my face, my cell phone rings with Farah's ring tone, Wild One's by Flo Rida. I reach in my purse and press the phone to my ear.

"Hey, what's up?"

"Where are you? We're about to go pick up Kel's dress at the boutique!"

I would laugh at the haste in her voice if she didn't sound so stressed right now.

"Kel just dropped me off. We've got time."

I run up the steps and fumble my hand into my purse again, searching for the familiar rattle of the key Gavin gave me for the back door.

"Oh, OK. I was worried you hadn't left the bakery yet. How did it go, anyways?"

"She spent two hours trying every flavor before she could make a decision. I swear I was going to kill that sister of mine!"

I hear Farah laughing hysterically, knowing just how indecisive my sister can be.

"You home now?" She asks after her giggles stop.

"I had to stop at home to grab my dress and change out of these sweats. I won't be longer than an hour or so." Longer if Gavin is home, already.

"Okay, you want to pick us up at three?"

I make it to the back door and pause before opening it when I see a bouquet of white roses with a pink envelope attached to the basket holding them. I freeze completely.

"Sure, I have to go." I say in a monotone voice.

I hear someone laugh in the background, probably Jaden.

"OK, you OK?"

"Yeah I'm fine. See you soon."

I hang up, and try to move my legs, to go inside or to run back to my car, but I can't. I stand there, frozen while my eyes are transfixed on the oak-wood basket and the upturned white petals along with the square note sticking out from the center of the arrangement. Gavin has always given me red roses, lilies and daisies, lilacs, but never, *never* white roses. There is only one thought in my head. These flowers are from Bryce. I know that in every fiber of my being. First that text this morning and now, these flowers.

God, does he want me back? Is he here? I want to turn and run back to my car, but I can't seem to move from this spot. I'm frozen.

In some far away part in my psyche, I know I should run or I should at least look at the note,

knowing I could be completely overreacting. But, I can't do anything. I struggle to breathe, my hands shake with panic and an overwhelming feeling of dread covers my skin. I've been so submersed in my happy little bubble Gavin and I have created, have I been oblivious to everything else? The Lincoln following me two days ago, I just let that go after my night with Gavin. It was so amazing being with him again and I just... forgot, but what if there's more? Has Bryce been here this whole time? Oh my God, has he?

Then, my phone vibrates in my hand, and I suck in a breath, using all my strength to lift it into my sight and gasp when I see Gavin's name cross the screen.

"Gavin?" I whisper, steadying myself with a hand on the wooden banister at my right. *Why can't I move my legs?*

"Baby, what's wrong? I can hear it in your voice."

Relief floods through me at the sound of his soft voice and I force myself to lean against the banister and form words in my mind.

"I...I don't know, I might be overreacting but-"

He gasps, hearing the fear in my voice and I hear a loud noise that sounds like a door slamming shut.

"Where are you?" he asks, his voice soft with concern.

He sounds worried, and I realize I need him here with me more than anything.

"I-I'm at home. I just got home, I'm at the back entrance."

He exhales and I hear faint voices in the background.

"Stay there. I'm coming."

How does he know exactly what I need? What would I do without this man? I honestly don't know.

"Gavin, you don't have to-" I start to protest, but he cuts me off in the middle.

"Yes I do, you need me I can hear it in your voice. Don't go inside, I'll see you soon, baby."

The certainty and concern in his voice thaws my nerves and I nod, even though he can't see me.

"OK."

He hangs up and I take a deep breath, not being able to look away from the seemingly new arrangement sitting three feet away from me. They couldn't have left them more than an hour or so ago.

While I wait, I try to wrangle all my inner strength by keeping all my thoughts on Gavin. His eyes, which are always so expressive. His mouth, oh, he's made me feel so good with his mouth, his lips, and his tongue. Then his hands, I've never been touched the way Gavin touches me. Whether it's the way he cups my cheeks, holds my hands in his or makes such tender love to me. With just one touch, I'm breathless.

He's conveyed his desire, his need and more than anything, his love for me through his touch. I thought I'd loved a man before, but now, as I curl my fingers across my legs and close my eyes, I know that these feelings are completely new and oh so amazing with Gavin.

After a few more minutes, I suck in a breath and get up off the banister and lean against it. I gasp in shock when I see a purple ribbon wrapped around the center of the flower arrangement in front of the door. What-shit, no. it can't be. I hadn't noticed that minor detail before, but now realization clears my thoughts.

Bryce. It's Bryce, there isn't a doubt in my mind now. That very first morning after he hit me, he brought me white roses in a glass vase and there was a purple colored ribbon wrapped around the stems of the roses, I could see it through the glass. I remember thinking how beautiful they were, the ribbon shined in the faint light perfectly.

Such fear pools deep inside me and I open my eyes, tears building quickly. He was here, oh my God... he was here at my home.

My legs fall out from beneath me at the realization . *If he's already been here, at our penthouse, has he been following me too? Does he want me back after all this time?* A sob erupts from my chest as my eyes close and I struggle for breathe. This can't be happening...

When I hear a car door slam shut and footsteps, my eyes fly open to see Gavin looking disheveled, his face stretched with worry and possibly panic as he runs towards me.

"Aria?"

He drops to his knees in front of me, his eyebrows drawn together in worry and his eyes filled with uncertainty.

My eyes are filled with unshed tears. but when he grabs my face in his hands and searches my features for any sign of injury, the tears fall to my cheeks. With shaking hands, I press my fingers to his chest and feel a sense of relief, feeling his toned muscles underneath my touch. Thank God, he's here.

"Gavin," I whisper and clutch onto him, burying my face in his neck and inhaling his skin as his arms enfold me against him. He holds me close, with no air between us and kisses my forehead repeatedly.

"What happened, baby?" he whispers, pulling back and grazing his hands over my face, wiping my cheeks clear from tears. His gentle touch ignites my skin as it always does. I point to the doorway in explanation as I speak.

"Those were here when I got home. I might be overreacting but..." He stops me with a tender kiss to my temple and pulls me deeper into his arms, holding me close while still gazing down into my eyes, his full of love, confusion, fear, panic, so many emotions and I'm sure my green eyes mirror his.

"Don't doubt yourself, Aria. I'm going to read the note. You haven't read it?"

I shake my head, leaning back so he can disentangle himself from me, his lips grazing my forehead before he stands and goes over to the arrangement, picks it up in one hand and retrieves the square note paper with the other.

"Fuck." He curses, and immediately, my skin crawls and I know who sent the flowers and wrote the note. Bryce. My body shakes violently, and I force myself to stand and go over to Gavin's side as he keeps his eyes trained on the paper.

"W-what does it say?" I ask when he takes my hand and squeezes it with his own.

He exhales with blatant worry in his eyes as he shakes his head and I feel his body tense when he slips the note out of my reach.

"Gavin!" I say, reaching for the note he withholds from me.

Gavin's eyes meet mine and I see the blazing fire behind them, that same anger I saw when I told him about Bryce. I know he wants to protect me, and my fear worsens that he doesn't want me to read whatever that man wrote to me.

"Please, trust me Aria. You don't need to read it. How did you know who sent these?"

He caresses my cheek, banishing the fear away, replacing it with a worry I just can't shake.

"Bryce used to always bring me white roses when he wanted to be forgiven, and they always had a purple ribbon wrapped around the stems. I just... froze, I'm sorry-"

Before I know it, his soft lips press to mine and he cradles my face in his hands ever so gently. I moan, in desire, in relief, in such want for this man, into his mouth when his tongue slips between my parted lips. He kisses me with such reverent passion and beneath that is a relief and desire for me that matches my own.

"I'm sorry..." He's apologizing for the note, the situation he doesn't want me to have to go through-all of it.

His ardent words tear at my heart and I lean back, seeing his blazing blue-gray eyes staring back at me.

"Let me read the note, Gavin. Please."

Gavin presses my body to his, as if he can protect me by doing so and he hands me the small square piece of paper.

With shaking hands, I turn it over and see the slanted writing that I'd recognize anywhere.

You forget, Ari.

You're mine.

My skin prickles and trembles with dread and I immediately drop it, taking a step back as if it burned me. God, why can't he just stay in the past where the man belongs?

Panic sets into my veins at the thought of Bryce getting to me, *taking* me and I gaze up at Gavin, feeling so many emotions I have no idea how to handle them.

"What do you need, baby?" he whispers, stepping forward and taking me in his arms again, his hand soothes my hair off my forehead as I press my face to his chest and clutch onto his shirt in need. I need him.

"You, Gavin. I need you. Just please don't let me go."

Gavin clutches my hand with his own and with the flowers in tow, unlocks the door and ushers me inside without another word. As we ride up in the elevator, I can see the tense muscles in his shoulders and forearms, he's on edge and the fact is, so am I. I thought that the past was in the past and I could move on as I have moved on with Gavin. But somehow, Bryce has made his way back into the present. He almost broke me before and as I lean against Gavin's shoulder and let him lead me into the penthouse, I pray that I'm strong enough to handle the idea of seeing that man again.

"Baby, are you hungry? I can make us some lunch and you can go lay down for a while."

His hands settle on the sides of my face as he tilts my eyes up to his with one finger under my chin.

I lean into his warmth, needing the support in my frazzled state. My legs feel like jelly and the fear is still dully shaking within my body.

"Will you lay down with me? We can eat in a few hours." My voice is shaky and I know he can hear it. His eyes are soft and loving as he takes my hand, lifts it to his lips and wraps his arm around my waist.

"Of course"

Once Gavin lays me down on the bed, my head is rested on two pillows and the comforter beneath me, he wraps both his arms around me and pulls me into his warm body. His warmth is welcome and calming. I close my eyes and focus on breathing in and out as my body succumbs to the emotions raging inside. His nose is in my hair and he inhales, seeking and finding comfort in me just as I am for him.

"How did he..." my words are silenced when he leans back and frames my face with both of his hands. His eyes are intense and full of worry with warring emotions, but I still see the ever-present love he has for me in them.

"I have no idea, but I promise you I will find out."

I exhale, trusting his words as I begin running my hands up and down his chest in an effort to release his tensed muscles.

"My security team has been tailing him and as far as I know, he hasn't been within a 10 mile radius of Chicago in the last three months. When he was in this area, he went from working at Jones and Harrison Law Firm in the north-end of the city and then to his home in Kennedy Park. I don't know how he got past us, but I promise, baby, I'll find out."

His words are firm and determined and I nod, pressing my forehead against his as I sag against him. The fear, the panic, everything dulls in comparison to the love I have for this man. It's the only thing that matters.

"Gavin, I'm scared," I whisper as a lone tear falls from my cheek. I feel stronger than I've felt in four long months and I don't want to lose myself again if the man from my past finds me. I know, if he does, he might just break me.

Gavin's hands tense momentarily in their journey down my back before they continue soothing my skin.

"Aria, I promise you I won't let him hurt you ever again. Please, trust me to keep you safe." I look up to see his eyes, a stormy blue color. I latch onto his waist and nod, trusting him with my whole heart.

He will keep me safe. I know he will.

"I trust you, Gavin."

He envelopes me in his arms again, kissing my temple and laying us back on the bed so that I am on top of him and my face is resting against his chest as he holds me tight.

"I'm sorry you had to leave work, Gavin." I whisper. His work, his business that was his father's legacy is so dear to him and I hate to disrupt that.

In one motion Gavin swiftly moves me beneath him so that my hair is splayed out onto the pillow and his eyes are soft and endearing as he says

"You needed me, where else would I be?"

I smile for the first time since coming out of my car today and hook my hands around the back of his neck.

"Thank you, I didn't know what to think when I saw those flowers but you're right about one thing. I needed you."

The smile that spreads across his face almost makes the last hour worth it and as he presses his body to mine with his knees on either side of my thighs, it causes desire to spark low and deep in my core.

Slowly he dips his head until his lips are hovering over mine, his minty breath whispering against my parted mouth.

"Let's forget, baby. We'll talk it over with Spencer in a few hours, but for now, I want to savor you."

I know I should push for us to go to the rehearsal. I promised Kel I'd be there. *Shit. Why do I always feel like I'm letting her down?*

"I'll give Lucas a call so they know we won't be there. They will understand. We need this time. You and me, Aria"

I nod and then moan when his teeth graze my earlobe and all thoughts of the past or the flowers or anything else evaporate from my mind. I wrap my hand around the back of his neck to sink my fingers into his messy hair. I need to feel him right now. I don't need anything other than this.

"Gavin."

I lie in the cocoon of Gavin's arms, sated and relaxed after such passionate lovemaking. My head is resting on his bare shoulder while he sleeps, his chest rising and falling easily and in a steady rhythm.

One of his arms is wrapped around my waist while his other rests at his side. My legs are entangled with his and his breath at the base of my neck stirs my soul in longing. *How can I want him, again? Will these feelings ever go away or fade in time?* God, I hope not.

Hesitantly, I lift my head and prop my elbow at his side as I look down at his ruggedly handsome face. Locks of his brown hair cover his forehead and his lips are slightly parted, making me remember all the wonderful ways he pleased me with that skilled mouth. Gavin covered every inch of my tingling skin with his mouth, his hands, and his glorious tongue. And slowly, he made me forget every scar Bryce had ever given me. He....healed me. Body, heart, soul, Gavin healed me.

I'm running my hands up his softened length under his boxers when he stirs, his eyes opening and his length hardening in my grasp. I smile, biting my lip in desire and when his hand comes down to my bottom, squeezing teasingly, I gasp. *Oh, goodness.*

"I could get used to waking up like this, baby," he whispers in my ear, trailing his lips up my neck and then down to my exposed shoulder where he nips gently. Oh! My sex clenches deliciously in response.

Oh God I want him.

"I want you, Gavin," I say, moving on top of him and straddling his hips before he can stop me. I run my tongue along his collarbone, poising him at my entrance as he strips off his boxers and takes a hold of my hips.

"Oh, baby. You're insatiable, and so goddamn sexy." Gavin takes a hold of my hips, guiding my aching center toward him. His words make me want him even more, knowing that I don't have to feel insecure with him because he loves and accepts me completely. Normally, I would shy away from being so bold with my actions, but with Gavin, I don't seem to be able to stop myself. I want him.

"And you take my breath away, you're perfect for me, Aria."

I lean forward, seeking and finding his lips with my own and immediately, slip my tongue along his. The minty flavor of his mouth and the scent of him drive me to him. I kiss him deeply then catch his lower lip between my teeth and tug gently. He groans against my mouth, tasting me eagerly and I feel the pads of his thumbs open my center to him just before the exquisite feeling of Gavin pushing full inside me.

I moan in relief at the full feeling, my head falling back in complete awe as pleasure rocks through me.

"Oh, God!"

Before I know it, he flips us and hovers over me, pulling out of me and pushing into me deeper than ever. Gavin moves, really *moves* creating a rhythm as I clutch onto his biceps and meet him in time, rocking into his warmth and strength to center me as my mouth opens to his. When he sucks my bottom lip into his mouth and tugs teasingly, hitting that perfect spot inside me, I scream out his name in need. I'm climbing, waves of such intense pleasure coursing through me as I press my mouth over and over again into his neck, his shoulder, and his parted lips.

"Christ, yes," Gavin whispers roughly, lunging into me one last time as I moan, loudly, cathartically as I find my release, exhausting myself around him until I lie trembling in aftershock of the most intense orgasm of my life. He pours himself into me, kissing me with such tender love as he eases out of me and wraps me tight into his chest, never letting go of me.

Commented [LD57]: Just saw this again....do you mean cathartically? It's separating the word.

"I love you, Beautiful. Unconditionally, I always will. I refuse to let you go ever again."

His soft, heartfelt words murmur in my ear and make my heart constrict with love for him. I know despite everything else happening that he is my everything. None of this matters if I don't have his love. I have to remember that. No matter what the past causes to happen in the near future, I won't let what I have with this man slip from my fingers.

"Always," I vow, kissing his mouth and soon, I'm lost to him again.

The slow, soothing path Gavin's hand traces along my arms stirs me and I find myself having a much clearer head now. I can't let the fear get the best of me. I know Gavin will keep me safe.

"Hey, baby," he whispers when my eyes lift to his, a soft blue-gray that melts to my emerald greens.

I don't know how he did it, but he washed away the fear, the panic I'd felt only hours ago and now, all I feel is such calm and sated pleasure after our love making.

"Hi," I whisper, leaning up to capture his mouth in a slow, sweet kiss that leaves whispers of it on my tingling lips. He wraps me in his arms and murmurs against my parted lips.

"It's almost four, I'm going to give Spencer a call and have him come as soon as he can."

I lean back, my eyes widening at his tone. It's domineering and I can hear the underlying worry in his voice.

"What are you going to do? I don't want to live in fear, Gavin."

He takes a hold of my hands and massages them gently before he speaks again.

"We're going to talk with Spencer. I usually only use the security team which includes him and two other guards, Daniel and Aaron, for public events and company uses, but I'm not going to take any risks with your safety. I have to know you are safe; I won't be able to leave this bedroom with you unless I know that you'll be safe out there. I'm going to move them into the upstairs apartment, for the time being. If you're not at home, one of them won't be far, Aria."

I'm taken aback and I immediately pull fractionally away from him, running a hand through bed-head hair as my thoughts return to the note Bryce left me.

You forget, Ari. You're Mine. A chill races up my spine at the thought of those words.

A cold, unwelcome shiver goes through me and I clutch his hand in mine, silently letting him know I'm still with him. I'd never liked having security guards growing up, but with the constant media influence on my mother, my sister, and me, I had no choice in the matter. But this is so much different. Back then, my mother used to always say "I know you don't like it, but they're here to protect you, my sweet girl. If you ever found yourself in a swarm of reporters, they'll be the ones to guide you through it. It won't be forever, just for now."

I know this is what has to be done for Gavin to protect me, but a part of me wonders that no matter how many guards I have, could Bryce still find a way to get to me?

"Do you really think he's going to try and find me?" I whisper after long seconds of silence. Gavin's blue-gray eyes widen, seeing my fear and he scoots forward, cupping both my cheeks and presses his forehead to mine.

"Yes, I do, and I'm not taking any risks with your safety, baby. You are my life now; you're the air I breathe. I love you, Aria."

Gavin's deep voice is raw with emotion and I lean back, nestling my fingers into his hair and kissing his lips gently, tenderly, trying to convey the love I have for him. It consumes me and even though right now I'm scared of the inevitable, Bryce finding me and taking me away from this man, I'm not running. I will not run.

"I'm so afraid that he's going to find a way to take me away from you." My voice breaks on the last few words, the truth of my fears and I squeeze my eyes shut to stop the tears from building. I have to be strong. This time, I'm not alone.

"Shh, Beautiful. You're safe and I'm not going anywhere, I promise."

Thirty

I wake to see sunlight pouring in through the tall windows in our bedroom; the light casts shadows along the side of Gavin's face where it's turned facing me while he sleeps. I reach over and skate one finger down the side of his cheek, over the coarse stubble he's grown since the last time he shaved. The hair under my fingers tickles my skin and I feel the tug of his mouth when he wakes.

"You're staring, Beautiful."

His voice is groggy with sleep and slides over my ears like velvet. Lying here with the man I love, I know that I'm safe with him. I trust him to keep me safe, no matter what happens. I smile softly and lean closer to him to catch the smell of his minty musky man smell and it smells of home.

"Good morning." I whisper against his lips and have to stifle a moan when he licks the seam of my lips, laying soft lips over mine. Sighing into his kiss, I open to him.

"Definitely a good morning so far," Gavin whispers against my mouth and I can feel his smile. His hand slides from my hair to my bare breasts and he flicks his thumb over each one, creating a desire deep inside.

"Gavin..." I warn, knowing that I missed the rehearsal dinner last night though with everything that's happened I know my sister and our friends will understand. But Kel has always been there for me, beside me through everything that's happened in this last year and I should have been there last night to cheer her on. What kind of horrible sister am I that I couldn't show up on the night before her wedding?

"Hey, what's wrong, baby?" Gavin lowers one hand to my waist and he takes hold of my hip to pull me closer.

I blink up into his eyes and see concern there.

"The rehearsal, I missed it. Kel must be so pissed."

I see the understanding register in his eyes and he squeezes my hip to comfort me.

"Let's head over to the church early and you can tell her what's happened. I'm sure she'll understand. Your safety comes first, Aria."

Pressing a gentle kiss to my forehead, Gavin leads me out of bed and toward the kitchen once we've changed into casual clothes.

"I'll order from the bakery so we don't have to cook. Sound good?"

I nod, take a hold of Gavin's hand and press it to my lips.

"I'll give her a call now. When do you want to speak with Spencer?"

"He can come down after you've eaten. You know you don't have to go through all of this with him if you don't want to. But it could help to better protect you if he knows the kind of man

they're looking for."

A shudder runs through me, knowing exactly what kind of man he was. Is
"I want to."

Commented [LD58]: A shudder

I'm still working on the last of my cinnamon raisin bagel when Spencer knocks three times on the front door. Gavin squeezes my hand gently across the table before he goes over to answer the door. The two men shake hands and I see that he is dressed in faded jeans and a blue Dolphins tee, much different from his usual attire. But, it is a Friday afternoon and he must have a personal life of his own. His piercing green eyes meet mine and one side of his mouth lifts in an almost smile.

"Good to see you, Ms. Morgan. Are you doing OK?"

There is genuine concern in his voice and I nod. Gavin pulls me into his side and looks down at me as he speaks to Spencer.

"We need to go over everything we're going to do to keep her safe. He should have never gotten close to the front door, Spencer. How did that happen?"

I hear the strain in his voice when he asks this and I also see the crease in his eyebrows that tells me he's trying to reign in his temper.

"I believe he either had the flowers delivered or used an alias on the car he drove into the complex.

The security camera footage I saw was clear. There is no way Williams himself delivered them."

Gavin nods, registering the information and leads me to sit on the couch with him snugly next to me. Spencer instead sits on the ottoman angled towards us and continues to go over each and every detail he's obtained from the security footage of both the front lobby in our complex and the back parking lot.

He'd have to enter through one of them and there was no sighting of Bryce at all. That fact lightens the fear weighing in my chest that he was in our home. But he was still able to get those flowers and the note to me and that is scary all on its own. If he could have gotten into the penthouse, what could have happened? As that thought registers in my mind, a chill covers my skin.

"Aria, are you OK? Do you need to stop?"

Gavin urges me to look at him with a finger under my chin and when I do, I shake my head quickly.

"I'm good. Don't stop on my account. What can we do to make sure he doesn't get close again?" I aim my question to Spencer though I don't take my eyes away from Gavin's. The intensity in them steals my breath.

"Well, both Mr. Thomas and I agree that making sure you are never – for any reason-left by yourself is a must. We already have Aaron following you, but I also want to bring on two more guards to stay in the penthouse when you're here on your own. There will be at least one of

us, sometimes two if needs fit."

Is it really needed to have two men with me? Even when Gavin is with me? My mind is working on overdrive trying to process our current situation.

"But, there is another option. One I think would work much better," Gavin whispers the words near my ear and I turn towards him, looking up.

"What?"

Gavin takes my hands gently in his and soothes his thumbs over my knuckles. He looks at me solemnly; his blue gray eyes the only thing I can focus on.

"Come away with me."

His wide, unblinking eyes are pleading with me and the determination in them stops my breath altogether. He is serious. He wants us to run away.

"Gavin, you can't-"

He presses one finger to my lips and stops me.

"I am serious. This man is not going to stop until he is caught and the fact is-this situation has to get worse before it is better. The minute he gets too close, we can call in the authorities and bring him in once and for all. But for that to happen, baby, he's going to get desperate. He wants you. If you think I'm going to let him come near you, you don't know me very well."

I clasp his face in my hands, knowing where his mind is and knowing that he is so afraid to lose me. But running? No way. I've spent the last months running from what that horrible man did to me and I refuse to run ever again. Not from him.

"I love you for wanting to take me away but Gavin, I won't run. This is my life, our life. I won't let him dictate it. We will catch him. I'll do everything you tell me to in regards to my safety. You'll keep me safe."

I see the struggle in his eyes as he stands and begins to pace. I feel empty without his touch, but I let him continue to pace a hole in the carpet.

"We can go to Paris. See the sights, find some small village to live and we can make love every day.

Just us. Please, run away with me."

His footsteps become faster he goes on and tells me everything we'd do in Paris, Milan and even Venice. My heart yearns to do so many of those things with him by my side. Travel. See the most beautiful sights, places I can only dream of. And someday, maybe we will. But not because we're running away. Gavin turns, his blue gray eyes looking at me, locking me in and holding me captive. A mix of desperation, love and such fear clouds them. He gets down on his knees then and takes a hold of my waist. I blink through the moisture in my eyes and see the love and desperation in his eyes. This man, *my man*, is afraid.

Commented [LD59]: ..faster as he goes on....

"I can't. Gavin, I spent this last year running. First from my grief and then from Bryce. I won't let him think I'm afraid anymore. You have helped me find my strength and I know I'll be safe with you. We can get through this. Together."

I get up from my seat and slide to my knees in front of him. Wrapping my arms around him, I press my face into his neck and when his arms come around me, his mouth presses to my forehead.

"I hate that I can't protect you from this. You deserve the world, Aria. I promise I'll give it all to you, but first we have to ensure you are safe."

His voice is filled with the raw emotion we both feel in this moment. I can hear everything he's feeling, even the things he doesn't want me to, in his voice.

Lifting my face, I press my mouth to his for a hard, desperate kiss.

"Thank you."

It's almost five by the time Gavin walks Spencer to the door and they shake hands. I hear the door click closed and sigh in relief that *that* part of the day is over.

"How would you feel about a bath? And then I'll let you be to get dressed."

Gavin helps me up, and when I stand I feel just a bit dizzy. I close my eyes, and sway into a warm, firm chest.

"Aria? Are you feeling alright?"

I nod and smile gently.

"Let's get you in that bath."

Gavin picks me up in his arms and carries me towards the bathroom, kissing me the whole way.

Though I know he's still worried, I feel the tension slip from him in a matter of seconds in our closeness.

I'm settled in a perfectly warm bath with bubbles and fragrances of lilac, my favorite. When Gavin goes to move away, I clasp his hand.

"I thought you were coming in with me?"

He dips his forehead to mine and presses teasing kisses down my cheek and then my jaw.

"If I go in there with you, we won't make it to Kel's wedding."

His words make my blood heat and lower parts heat up as well. I bite my lip and nod.

"Well..." I go to grasp the end of his shirt, but Gavin laughs softly and pulls away.

"Take your time, baby. I'll meet you in the living room."

And with that, he kisses my cheek and leaves me with my lust filled thoughts.

I smooth the lavender satin dress down my sides and step back to look at the full length mirror in front of me. I decided to leave my hair down, curled in subtle waves instead of my unruly hair that I usually pull back from my face. My ivory skin seems like it's glowing next to the light shades of gray I used for eye shadow. I'm pretty sure I'm being such a girl since I know Gavin loves how I look without any cover at all.

Why would he mind what dress I'm wearing?

"Christ, you are so beautiful."

The moment I see Gavin at the entrance of our bedroom, dressed to the nines in a freshly pressed black suit jacket, along with a navy blue button down shirt and a matching tie, my heart stops in my chest.

Oh, he's gorgeous. He looks like he's stepped off the pages of Vogue, and I'm naturally drawn to him. I meet his intense eyes that are grayer than I've ever seen them.

"So beautiful," he murmurs, coming to me as I secure a black sash around the waist of my lavender dress that fits in the best way. He tucks a strand of my wavy hair behind my ear. His hand wanders down my back while I secure my last earring, a pair of emerald green pendants that my dad gave me for my eighteenth birthday. I've always treasured them.

"You're not so bad yourself," I whisper, reveling in the feel of his hand along my cheek, then his lips descend on mine. They devour me, destroy my every thought so that I almost miss his hand going to his front breast pocket of the jacket he wears and pulls out something. My hands delve into his hair as he pulls his lips fractionally away from mine as he speaks slowly.

"I have something for you, Beautiful."

I lean back, my heart beating fast in my chest at the idea of him getting me a gift. He's given me so much, how much can he possibly give before he tires of me? I push my stupid insecurity to the back of my mind, my eyes widening when he places a rectangular box with dark blue velvet trim around it. It's a jewelry box.

"What's this?" I whisper as I gaze down at it and then back up to his deep soul-baring eyes.

"This was my grandmother's, she gave it to me before she died. My grandfather gave it to her when he proposed to her and she told me to save it for the woman I fell in love with and baby, that's you. I'm in love with you, Aria."

Oh my God. My heart starts to beat faster and tears prick at the backs of my eyes. Is he...

"Hey, relax please, baby. I'm not proposing to you now, not until I know for sure you'll say yes.

But, this-

He opens the box, displaying a beautiful gold chain, with a singular emerald green pendant in the center of it. Surrounding the stone are two heart shaped diamonds and two letters. On the left side is a cursive A, and to the right is a mirrored letter G. It takes my breath away and a lone tear falls to my cheek as I feel the love in his blue-gray eyes that penetrate mine.

"This is an heirloom of hers and now, it's yours baby."

Oh, my. He wants to marry me, he's going to propose and *God*. Is this a dream?

"Gavin, it's so beautiful. Thank you, I love you," I whisper, pressing a kiss to his neck just below his Adam's apple.

"Our initials?" I whisper, joyful tears pooling in my eyes.

"I had them put in yesterday morning. I wanted to make this special to us."

"You amaze me," I whisper, leaning forward and pressing my mouth to his for a soft yet passionate kiss that creates pooling desire in my core again. I feel like this never-ending need to have him inside me will never cease, and I pray that it never will. He smiles against my lips and chuckles as he pulls away, his eyes heating when I catch his bottom lip in my mouth, nipping softly until he moans from the contact.

"If we don't leave soon, I'm afraid we might be terribly late for your sister's wedding," he teases and begrudgingly, I release him and turn to face the mirror as his arms wrap around me, pressing a hot open-mouthed kiss to the base of my neck.

"Will you put it on me, Gavin?"

He removes the necklace from its box and lays it on my collarbone, doing the clasp effortlessly and pressing a kiss to my temple in the next second.

I gaze in the mirror and stare in awe at the beautiful gem around my neck.

"Thank you. This is so special to me," I tell him, smiling as he turns me and picks me up into his arms. Again, he meets my mouth with ardent, adoring lips. His tongue slips into my mouth, and I moan, loving the feel of him when he pulls away too soon for my liking.

"Come on, Beautiful. You're tempting me," he murmurs in my ear, his warm breath grazing my cheek causing my teeth to go down onto my lip in order to stop the loud moan that threatens to slip out.

"Tempting you to what?"

His answering smirk is a promise and it spurs my desire more.

"You," he leans down to press a hot kiss to my throat as he speaks, "are tempting me to lock you in the bedroom and forget about this wedding you're so eager to attend, Ms. Morgan."

A delicious shiver runs up my spine and I wrap my arms around his neck and my legs around his slender hips as he carries me through the bedroom and towards the back entrance, his lips whispering against mine all the way.

I'm so gone over this man.

Kel is near tears as I make my way into the bridal room on the second level of St. Mary's Lutheran Church, the church where seventeen years ago, my dad married my mom. It's also where I was christened as a baby, and that thought warms my heart.

"Aria! Thank God you're here!" She squeals, shimmying in her floor length wedding dress, and I gasp at the subtle beauty of the piece. I'd been shopping with Farah the day she found her dress and now, I just stand there with clutch in hand, taking it in. It's a low cut neckline, an ivory colored fabric that looks to be made of silky threads that hug her curves perfectly. The waist is tied at the back and as she turns I see the corset styled dress back, showing off her spine and an inked design I've not seen before. Holy crap! My jaw drops open and I just gape at her, walking closer to see the tattoo better. It's beautiful, an intricate design of cursive writing and a singular red rose underneath the words, *and I love him*. I run my hand over it. When she turns towards me, her eyes are filled with joy and immediately, tears pierce the backs of my

eyes. She's so happy.

"When did you get this?" I ask, kissing her cheek as she pulls me over to the vanity and Farah gives me a look, telling me she has to talk to me. Oh, no.

"I wanted to give Lucas a wedding gift he'd never forget. Do you think he'll like it?"

She sits in front of the large oak wood vanity, painted white. Her makeup is light and Farah steps behind her, primping her curly blonde hair into a clip at the back of her head so that a few strands fall out, framing her face easily.

"He's going to love it, honey. You look beautiful. Are you nervous?"

I ask as I sit next to her and squeeze her hand when it begins to thrum against the wooden tabletop.

She shakes her head, her tear filled eyes flicking up to mine.

"No, he's everything I've ever wanted."

Still, I can see the nervousness exude off my beautiful sister.

"That man loves you so much, Kel."

She looks at me hesitantly for a moment and when I squeeze her hand, her lips curve up into a smile once more.

"I know."

She wraps her arms around me and we hug, both savoring this moment. This is her day and joy courses through me knowing that this is the beginning of her new life, her happily ever after.

"Love you" I whisper. She leans away and we stand, a knock sounding at the door once we've both wiped our tears away and she slips her white sandals on, with her something blue across her neck. Her something old, a diamond plated bracelet across her right wrist which dad gave to her. It was our grandmother's. And of course, her something new dangling from her ears, ruby earrings that Lucas gave her this morning. She looks like a princess.

Dad comes in through the door, stopping when he takes a look at the three of us huddled by the vanity. His green eyes are filled with tears, and he's dressed in the same black David Scott tuxedo that he wore to my graduation almost a year ago. Kel comes up to him and he smiles, the proud father exuding from within him.

"Oh, sweetheart. You look beautiful. Are you ready?"

She kisses his cheek, giving us both a smile as she hooks her arm through his and they make their way out of the room, closing the door quietly behind them. I sigh, a part of me wondering if one day, I'll be the one dressed in white walking towards Gavin.

God, I hope so.

Farah and I descend the church stairs leading to the main floor arm in arm and I see that the

chapel doors are already open. As I peer into the chapel, I see that each pew is filled, familiar faces lit up with laughter as they talk among themselves. My eyes scan over the top three rows of seats and then, a pair of blue gray eyes meet mine. Gavin. He gives me a warm smile, his eyes filled with adoration. I feel my mouth spread in a smile, my eyes taking him in as if it's the first time. *God, I have it bad.*

"Ready?" Farah whispers, as we all line up to go down the aisle and a little girl with blonde curly hair and bright blue eyes begins her walk, tossing lilac petals as she goes. She's Lily, our cousin from mom's side. I turn and smooth my hands down the front of my dress, feeling the soft material beneath my fingers.

"Ready."

Farah goes before me holding her bouquet as she walks slowly, her smile vibrant as she goes. My eyes move to Lucas, looking happy and ready to start his new life.

I take a deep breath and step out onto the aisle. I clutch the bouquet of lilies and as I make my way down towards the altar, I have to make sure to keep my walk slow as I smile at our families surrounding us. My eyes land on Gavin's back and I feel the electric current of his presence. God, looking at him-he's so handsome. Turning his head, his eyes capture mine. I see his features changing. They become softer, his eyes burning heat and love and lust all at once. It's cathartic and all I can seem to do is smile back at him and take my place beside Farah as desire pools low in my core from that one connection tethering me to Gavin. I listen as my sister exchanges her vows with Lucas.

"I take you, Lucas Mathew Jones as mine. I will love you through good times and bad times. I will hold you up when you cannot stand. I will be your strength when you're weak, and I'll support you for always; withholding all others, for as long as I shall live. I love you"

And as I watch them sweep across the dance floor only minutes later, I long to have this dream with Gavin, taking him as mine, for always.

"What are you thinking about, baby?" Gavin whispers in my ear as he wraps an arm around my waist and kisses my temple gently. I turn in his arms and see the love and desire in his eyes.

"You, always you." I whisper, lifting up on my tiptoes to brush my lips against his. His hands come up to my cheeks, his mouth opening as he claims my mouth, adoring me, consuming me. I wrap my arms around his neck, moaning when he bites down gently on my lower lip. His minty breath encases my senses as he cups the back of my head and licks ardently into my mouth, stealing my breath and creating pooling desire deep and low in my belly as his fingers dip into the silky strands of my hair.

"A dance, Aria?" he whispers, his eyes soft and filled with want as he gazes down at me. I nod as he leads me onto the floor and once we've reached the perfect spot underneath the chandeliers, he brings me to him for a soft, tender kiss that renders me breathless. His strong arms wrap around my waist and my hands glide up his chest to his neck. My lower lip trembles as he slows the kiss until his lips are just barely brushing against mine.

"One day, I want this, Beautiful." His mouth dips to my shoulder then he leans back to meet my eyes. Mine widen, my mouth parting as I realize what he's saying. He wants to marry me...oh,

my. My breath hitches in my throat as I gasp, and press my face to his neck, just above his collar and inhale him as I memorize this moment. I want to be his wife, I want this. Oh, God I want it so much. But a small part of me hesitates, not knowing if I'm ready.

"Gavin.... I want to marry you," I say, lifting my head to meet his eyes filled with wondrous love.

They fill with such joy as he clasps my face and places such a tender kiss to my lips. It makes my heart soar.

"I know you're not ready, Aria. We aren't there yet. I just want you to know, that one day, this dream-this day, will be ours. And when that time comes, with all my heart I promise you, baby. I'll give you the world."

Tears fall from my eyes as I gaze up at him, gasping at his beautiful words. Is this real?

"Oh, Gavin. I love you, so very much" I whisper and he wraps his arms around my waist tighter, lifting me and when his lips press to mine I feel his love in every fiber of my being. He slips his tongue into my mouth and licks along mine, adoring me with such tender care. Gavin's body presses to me and I wrap my arms around his neck, moaning and burying my hands in his hair without hesitation.

He ever so slowly lowers me till my feet reach the floor again and as he kisses me, his hands cradle my face. Gavin sweeps us into an easy slow dance, never taking his mouth off mine. And somehow, all I can feel is this man, my love.

"I love you, Beautiful. I promise you that when I ask you to be my wife, there won't be a doubt in your mind. Do you trust me?"

He pulls his lips from mine and gazes lovingly down at me. I do, I trust him with my whole heart.

"Always," I whisper, then reach up and grasp his neck once more, lowering his mouth for another delectable kiss.

Thirty One

By the time night sets, my feet are aching for relief from the heels I'm wearing. I sit beside Kel and Lucas along with the rest of the bridal party. Gavin is standing by the D J's table, and I wonder vaguely what he's up to. I don't think I can take another dance tonight, my feet are so sore. His stormy eyes shift to mine and he grins, giving me a wink as he approaches me, his eyes dancing between mine. My heart beats fast in my chest and when he stops in front of me, I find myself placing my hand in his once more.

"One more dance and then we can take off, okay baby?" He helps me stand, leading me back towards the thinning crowds of the lit dance floor, his lips brushing over my knuckles before he sweeps me back into his arms. Every fine toned line of his body presses to mine. I press my head to his chest, just like I did at that party the very first time he held me. I listen to the steady thrum of his heartbeat and the way he holds me and sweeps us across the floor makes me love him even more.

Then, the song begins. It's a slow, romantic beat and the words are sung softly as a ballad. Gavin begins to whisper the words in my ear, holding me close. A tear slips down my cheek at his raw voice, so full of love for me:

All of me, loves all of you. Love your curves and all your edges, all your perfect Imperfections. Give your all to me, I'll give my all to you.

By the time the song comes to an end, joyful tears stream down my face and Gavin cradles my face in his hands, so gentle, so tender. He closes his mouth softly over mine, and once again I'm lost in the love I feel for this man.

And I know, there is no end to his love or mine, I love all of him and he loves all of me.

"All of me, baby. I'll never give you anything less."

I look up at him and smile softly.

"Me, too. Take me home, Gavin."

He smiles against my lips and bends his knees as he scoops me into his arms and kisses me once more.

"My pleasure, baby."

My head rests against Gavin's shoulder as we ascend up the floors in the empty elevator car and my eyes start to drift shut when the doors ping and open.

"Sleepy girl," he murmurs, wrapping me in his arms as he guides me towards the penthouse doors and unlocks them, sweeping me inside and giving Spencer, who's standing diligently at the door, a nod before closing the door and tucking strands of my hair behind my ear. Gavin's touch is soft and his eyes are filled with such love, it warms my heart.

"Turn around, Aria," he whispers and suddenly, it feels as if every surface of my skin is on fire for his touch and I turn around, my gaze never leaving his. His eyes heat a stormy blue-gray.

Gavin slips his suit jacket off my shoulders and I hear him lay it across the closest surface. Then, his hands glide down my arms and go to my hips, enticing a low moan from my lips. He deftly undoes the tie at the back of my dress and loosens each corset string until I feel the satiated relief of the tight fabric around my stomach and ribs. Then, with achingly slow fingers, he glides the straps off my shoulders and runs his hand over the back of my hair, reveling in the smoothness of the locks. His touch has me wanton and aching and so needy for him, I bite down on my lip when another moan threatens to slip out of my mouth.

Commented [LD60]: His

Commented [LD61]: ...hands glide

"You're so goddamn beautiful. When I saw you walking towards me in this dress, you took my breath away."

I moan, pressing against his firm chest from behind in silent invitation to continue. I want it fast, for him to press me to the closest wall and claim me as his. But when he releases my dress and lets it pool to my feet, then takes my hand and lets me step out of the fabric, I realize he wants to take his time. He can cherish me with just one touch, and I know completely, irrevocably I am his.

When Gavin kisses me, it isn't the gentle kiss like before. Passionate, desperate, loving and all consuming, his lips treasure my mouth for long seconds before I'm lifted up with his strong arms, hitching both my legs around his slender hips. In his kiss, he claims me. Lowering me onto the king sized mattress of our bedroom, my hands knot in his hair in silent pleas for more.

"Gavin..." I whisper when he pulls away, his eyes taking me in as I lie beneath him in nothing but a purple laced bra and panties, the necklace and earrings I'd put on before the wedding and the pair of three inch black heels that Farah insisted I buy last week. His eyes wander down and I see his arousal, appreciation for me when he bites his lower lip and trails his hands up my thighs to the lacy fabric of my panties. A moan slips out, my eyes closing as desire pools in between my legs and my sex clenches in hot anticipation for him. Gavin lifts my hands to the headboard, holding them there.

"I want this slowly, I want to savor you, Beautiful," he murmurs and I nod, my eyes never leaving his as he releases my hands and lifts one finger, telling me to wait.

Warmth spreads through me as he tongues his way down my navel and towards my hot and ready sex. *Oh, yes.*

But then, his mouth leaves me and when I open my eyes, my entire body humming with desire for him, he is gloriously naked in front of me and has that breathtakingly beautiful smile across his face.

"I'm going to adore you, pleasure you, and love you. All night long. How does that sound?" he says, his voice husky and filled with carnal desire for me. And as his hands close around mine again, I feel beautiful and I don't hesitate when I answer with a simple whispered word.

"Amazing."

He chuckles, then uses his knees to spread my legs wider and kneels between them. Taking both my hands in his and kissing them softly, he surprises me with the loving act. His eyes are fierce upon mine and it makes my heart skip a beat, knowing he is making sure I am okay before making love to me however he wants.

"Please, I want you, Gavin."

As he slowly, teasingly, makes love to me, tasting and pleasuring every part of my exposed skin, I fall even more in love with him. Knowing I never want to leave the high of such

passionate lovemaking ever again.

"Mhm, is it morning?" I ask, as my eyes opened to see Gavin hovering over me with that smile I love so much upon his face.

"Yes, it is. Kel called and said she wants to go get cupcakes before they leave to New Orleans."

I sit up in bed and start to laugh. My sister is most definitely addicted to Jenna's cupcakes. But then I think about the rest of what he said.

"He's taking her to New Orleans?"

Gavin grins and kisses the top of my head.

"Yep. Lucas said Kel always wanted to go there."

"She has. She almost went while we were in college but had a bad case of the flu and had to cancel.

She's going to love it!"

I can just picture Kel's face when Lucas tells her. She'll be ecstatic.

"I guess I better get dressed."

I push against Gavin's bare chest to get up, but he doesn't budge.

"I was hoping I could convince you to stay in bed."

He begins to kiss down my jaw to my throat and heading south. Desire pools inside me immediately.

"Gavin... I have to go see her off. She'll be so excited."

I hear Gavin's low groan and then he gets up and takes me with him.

"Let me at least talk you into making me breakfast. I love watching you in our kitchen."

I wrap my hands around the back of his neck and bite his lower lip gently.

"If you insist."

"You look so happy," I say, embracing my sister in both arms.

"I am" she whispers against my shoulder and the levity of those words make me pull back and see her teary smile.

"Are you excited?"

She nods and I reach up to her cheek, wipe away a stray tear that's leaked out.

Then she smiles wider than I've ever seen and a glow covers her face.

"He's taking me to New Orleans, Ari. I've always wanted to go there!" She starts to jump up

and down and like the little girls we used to be, I join her in a happy dance of celebration. We are both laughing like children and it's been so long since I've let myself laugh like this, it's therapeutic in a way.

"I knew he'd be happy. That man is crazy about you. I knew it the moment I met him in that dive bar." I sip a vodka tonic at our favorite bar, The Tavern. We came here for one last hooray before the honeymoon. I look over and grin to see Kel is on her fourth martini and well on her way to being buzzed.

"And have you looked at him? My man is hot. Like hot tamale hot!"

She sputters through a laugh and I turn around when the door to the bar swings open. Lucas saunters in, wearing dirty slacks from his workday and a rolling stones tee I've seen quite a few times.

"He's certainly something," I murmur just as Kel jumps in surprise and Lucas tugs his new wife against his chest and off the stool she's sitting on.

"Oh! I'm married, you know." She pretends to try to get away from him, but she's all smiles. Lucas puts his mouth to her ear and whispers something.

"Yes, you are crazy boy. Let's get out of here."

Kel downs her martini and stumbles to stand. I reach for her arm and help Lucas guide her outside.

She's giggling the whole way.

"How much did you drink, Kel? You're drunk, sweetheart."

Giggling, she looks up at him and tries to look serious with a pout of her mouth.

"Am not! I only had-wait, how many did I have, Ari?"

"No idea. I think at least three. You should go home and rest it off. I can get home with my car." I kiss my sister's cheek and help her towards the car door with Lucas holding most of her weight. I watch him help her in the passenger seat of his truck and kiss her forehead before he closes the door.

Walking back from the truck, Lucas stops in front of me and I can tell he doesn't want to leave me on my own. Ever since he and Kel started dating, he's been like a brother to me. Looking out for me. Being an ear to my worries and fears throughout this ordeal ever since I met Gavin and how my past has kept us from truly living out of the darkness. I wish he wouldn't worry so much about me. Kel, too. They deserve happiness.

"I'll be fine. It's only a five minute drive. Go take care of her, Luke."

Lucas draws his eyebrows together and looks at me for a while, almost like he's trying to penetrate my thoughts. Finally he relents and leans in to kiss my head.

"I'll have her call you in the morning before we leave. Be safe."

Lucas gives me a small, concerned smile and ducks into the car, waving before peeling out of the parking lot and leaving me standing there.

I blow out a breath, shaking my head to forget the concerned look on Lucas' face just a minute ago. I hate that everyone around me is concerned for me now that Bryce has come back. As I'm heading towards the street, I feel my phone ding in my pocket. I don't get a chance to check the message before my phone starts to ring and I see Gavin calling. A smile crosses my lips as I answer.

Commented [LD62]: Lucas' ??

"Miss me?" I press the button to cross the street as I speak.

"More than you know, baby. You heading home yet?"

His gravelly voice makes the best kind of goosebumps cover my arms and I bite my lower lip as I wait for the lights to change, thinking about the shower we had this morning. A mixture of steam, heat, and Gavin left me wanton for more.

"I'll be there soon, I promise. I was thinking we should try a shower again. I don't think I got very clean."

I can almost feel the heated gaze I know Gavin has right in this moment.

"I can get you clean, but it might take two or three tries. How far away are you, baby?"

I see the light change and I move towards the street, walking across.

"Five minutes tops."

"I can't wait to see you," Gavin whispers in my ear. I look up from the street in front of me when I hear the roar of an engine while the light is still red. All the breath leaves me as I see a black SUV driving straight down the street I'm standing on and the vehicle is not slowing down.

Commented [LD63]: I look up...

"Gavin!" I scream, my voice dying in my throat as the vehicle gets closer by the millisecond. Terror sets in, but I'm frozen in my effort to move. A small part of me knows exactly who is behind the wheel. It has to be Bryce. He's found me.

I see Gavin's smile in my mind just as shooting pain through my legs stop me from breathing. His face is all I see before my eyes close.

I slowly regain consciousness and my mind feels foggy, as if I've been dreaming. My arms and legs feel heavy, weighted down and as I try to move and stretch my limbs, I can't seem to move them. It's almost as if they're restrained, tied down in some way. How is that possible? Unease begins to lace my thoughts and my heart beats a mile a minute as I hear footsteps far away from me. It takes every ounce of my strength to force my eyes open and keep them open. I scan the room I'm in, the bedroom in Gavin's and my penthouse, but somehow it doesn't feel like I've ever placed foot in the decadently furnished space before.

A sense of such dread runs through my veins when I smell the musky scent of Old Spice cologne close to me and the overwhelming smell of coffee in the air. *What is going on?* Oh God, no. *Bryce.*

"Ah, she's awake. Hello, Princess," A deep voice says and when darkened brown eyes meet mine, filled with no emotion whatsoever, my world stops. My whole body is screaming *No!* I try to be reasonable.

This is a nightmare; this has to be a nightmare. Somehow, with the pain emanating from my right ankle up my leg and ending in the pit of my stomach – I know this is reality. I'm tied to the bed by cutting rope, by my hands and my feet and I know there's no way I can untie them myself. I'm trapped.

My skin crawls with such dread and my heart races with panic as my tormentor stalks toward me with a mug from the kitchen. It's black with a Chicago Bears logo across the front of it. Somehow, focusing on something so trivial makes it easier for me to suck precious air into my lungs. My hands shake when I see Bryce's unchanged face and as he reaches me, his eyes scan over my body slowly, his mouth parts as he blatantly stares at my breasts.

I shake uncontrollably, pricks of dread covering my skin. A black sheet is wrapped around my body and I thank God for that, though the sheet only covers the bottom half of my body. As I watch him approach me, I struggle against the rope binding me and open my mouth to scream, but no sound comes out. Bryce stalks closer and stares down at me with lifeless eyes. I remember seeing a spark of mischief in them when I first met him in high school, how handsome and mysterious I thought he was. Now, I realize that all that was an act he showed me to reel me close. This man staring at me is nothing but a heartless person that strives on controlling others. I try to take deep breaths; try to pretend his staring isn't making me want to run as fast as I can. I'll get away from him, but first I have to convince him to let me go. God, how did he get in here? Surely, someone will hear me if I scream...

"Bryce, w-what are you doing here? Please, please let me go!" I almost scream, struggling in vain against the restraints. Panic and fear consume me and the pain of the rope cutting my skin and the sting of broken flesh on my wrists is nothing compared to my fear of what's to come now that he has me all alone, unprotected.

I fought my way back. I climbed and suffered and finally found such happiness again. This can't be happening!

"Scream all you want, Ari. I told you, you're mine. No one can hear you now," Bryce says, opening the bedside drawer and producing a thick roll of duct tape. It's the darkest shade of green, almost perfectly matching his tie.

"I will keep you quiet if I need to, but for what I have in mind, I want to hear you, Princess. You got away from me before, but now, you're mine. Forever." He growls, and my stomach burns with the need to empty its contents as I force myself to swallow. Gavin will find me; he has to find me...

I watch as Bryce gets up and holds the tape in front of my eyes, then his hand forcefully, painfully grasps my chin and he forces my eyes on his.

"Will you stay quiet until I say so? Or do I need to tape your mouth shut?"

Hastily, fearfully, I nod my head in an up-down motion and tears fall from my cheeks as I stop struggling. I'm helpless. There is no way he will stop this time. My only hope is Gavin. He will find me. He promised to keep me safe. I remember his words so vividly in my mind. *"I won't let him take you, Aria. I don't care what I have to do, but I promise you, you'll be safe. Please, believe me"*

"Good girl, Ari."

The man who's tormented my nights for so long stands in front of me and unbuttons his suit jacket, his dress shirt underneath and then before I know it, he's naked from the waist up and he climbs on top of me, his hand going on top of my mouth to stop my scream of terror.
No! Gavin! Gavin, help me! I scream inwardly but as the sheet is torn away from me and he takes his hand off my mouth, I know I have no power to stop him.

Commented [LD64]: ...from the waist up.

Commented [LD65]: He climbs on...

"Please, Bryce. I don't want this, you almost broke me before. Please let me go. I promise I

won't tell anyone-"

Suddenly, a large hand goes down harshly across my face, slapping me with such force that I cry out in pain, and he hits me again, again, again. One blow blends into another and the spread of pain is too much to bear. I try to turn my face away, to curl into myself like I used to when his anger got the best of him in the very beginning. Back then I thought the beatings were my fault. Back then I was naive and young.

The blows don't stop and the pain is almost too much to take as he grips my hips, hurting me and I hear the loud zipper of his pants. Oh, God, no! I will myself to stop him, to kick and scream and I do. I scream against every attempt to move my legs open. I kick against his hands gripping my thighs.

"No! God, let me go! Let me go!"

I finally manage to scream vocally, hot tears stream down my face as I cry silently; willing Gavin to come and save me from this monster and then the darkness consumes me, silencing the paralyzing pain.

Commented [LD66]: ...silently;

Thirty Two

I hear voices as the weight of darkness starts to ebb away from my mind and body, replaced with such pain in my face, hands, and stomach that I struggle to pull one small breath of air into my lungs.

"Is she going to be okay?" I know it is Gavin's voice with all my heart. I would recognize his voice anywhere. His voice is laced with such fear that I want to reach out and comfort him, hold him. But, I can't.

My eyelids are too heavy to open and my limbs are impossible to move with such pain ratcheting my body.

My mind is foggy and all I feel is Gavin's hand holding mine, squeezing tight and keeping me from falling back under the darkness.

"She's been beaten badly, but thankfully we got to her before anything worse could happen to her.

She has broken ribs, cuts and bruises, but they will heal. It could be hours until she wakes up and then we'll be able to tell if she's suffered any emotional or mental damage. We'll do some tests to make sure she hasn't lost any blood we're not aware of and that there hasn't been head trauma." I recognize the voice, Nurse Maggie whom I met at Memorial the night of Gavin's accident. My entire body wants to sleep, my eyelids heavier by the second and though I yearn to stay awake and squeeze Gavin's hand in mine or to hear his voice again, I drift.

The sound of monotone beeping wakes me from the heavy fog covering my body, and when I hear his voice again, I struggle with every ounce of strength I have inside me to open my eyes.

"This is all my fault, Mom. I left her alone and now, Fuck, what if he-" I hear the anguish in his voice when it breaks. When I hear his muffled sobs, I can't take the sound. It tears at my heart to hear him so upset.

I struggle and I fight the dark cloud of unconsciousness even more so I can find a way back to him.

"Shh, honey. She's going to wake up, I promise you."

With the last shred of strength I have, I lift my heavy eyelids and the blindingly bright light makes my head pound in agony. But then everything clears and I see Gavin, dressed in a white button down dress shirt and a dark pair of denim jeans, his brown hair tousled and messy and his face is pressed into his mother's brown hair as she holds him tight by the doorway. I try to clear my thoughts. A million questions come to the front of my mind. Where am I? How did I get here? What's happening?

My throat feels as if I've been starved of water for at least a week. I open my mouth, willing myself to say something, but all that comes out is a choking cough that makes my stomach flip and my head to pound even more as my eyes adjust to the lit room I'm in. I'm lying face up on a singular bed surrounded by two stools and machines, wires, needles, an I.V. draw connected to my hand and another one to the inside of my left forearm. I must be at the hospital. I try to remember why or how I got here, but my head is foggy from whatever is in the I.V.

Commented [LD67]: ..willing myself..

I see Gavin's mother whisper something in his ear and then he lifts his head and turns around

to face me in the next second. His blue-gray eyes that are filled with so many conflicting emotions-love, fear, guilt, worry, sadness-meet mine and it feels like coming home. Love is so evident in his steely gaze; it banishes all thoughts from my mind as we stare at each other for long moments. Inwardly, I rejoice. He's really here with me.

He runs straight toward me, then drops to his knees right next to me, his eyes fierce upon mine as he grasps my hand in both of his and kisses my palm gratefully. The contact makes my pulse thrum faster and I barely feel the pain when he strokes my face with gentle fingers.

"Aria, baby, thank God, you're awake." I gaze up at him and I see tears running down his ruggedly handsome face. I yearn to reach out to him, but both my hands are captured in his. I open my mouth, wanting to say something, but all I can do is squeeze his hand in mine infinitesimally and mouth "water"

to him. Gavin nods, his hands leaving mine for a matter of seconds as he goes to the foot of the bed and pours me a glass of water from a navy blue pitcher on a table. I see the wrinkled shirt he's wearing and realize what he must have gone through. God, how long have I been out of it? What Gavin must have gone through, my body shakes in such dread at the thought of it.

"Here, baby. Take it slow, your throat might be a little dry after the pain medication you've had over the last few days," he says, his voice laced with such happiness and such fear at the same time. He lifts the tip of the cup to my lips and I drink, almost moaning at the relief of the cool replenishing water down my dry throat. When he pulls it away and puts it down on the table once more, he grasps my hand again and tears build in my eyes at the relief of his touch.

"G-Gavin" is all I can get out before a sob slips out of my mouth and I feel the dam start to burst open at the overwhelming feelings threatening to consume me. He looks absolutely shaken, but the love in his eyes is stronger than ever.

"Beautiful, no."

He leans forward and presses a soft kiss to my temple, wiping away my tears as I take a deep breath, trying to grasp reality.

"Shh, please don't cry. I'm here, and I love you so goddamn much. Please baby, don't cry."

I clutch onto him as he gently wraps his arms around me and presses his nose to my hair. He breathes me in and a shudder goes through his body.

"I am so sorry, baby," Gavin says and pulls back to gently cup my cheek. The concern in his eyes makes me want to close my eyes to hide from it.

"What happened, Gavin? Why am I here?"

His eyes blink as if he's surprised and he looks back to his mother before answering me. She steps forward and comes to the side of the bed next to him.

"You don't remember what happened?" she asks, her voice soft as if she's talking to a child. I look between both of them and shake my head. Confusion starts to cloud my thoughts as I realize I'm missing something big about whatever happened to put me here. I try to decipher what I do remember. I remember standing on the street and I was so excited to go home to Gavin. I remember saying goodbye to Kel only moments before. But after that? Nothing.

Commented [LD68]: ..what

Gavin looks up to the ceiling for a moment, as if saying a silent prayer and then dips his head

to kiss the top of my head.

"It's going to be OK. I promise you, Beautiful."

Gavin

I watch silently as Dr. Lee, the very same doctor who treated me only a few short months ago, checks my girl over. When he lifts her chin to examine the yellowing bruises across her cheek bone and eyes, I want to jump out of my skin knowing she's in pain from that fucker. Bryce Williams. When we found the abandoned cabin where he was hiding Aria, all I was focused on was getting her out of there alive. But Spencer knew to be prepared. I see Aria's eyes close as she flinches away from the doctor and I know if Spencer hadn't shot the man responsible – I would have. I would have killed him.

Blowing out a breath, I start to pace up and down the hospital corridor, impatient to go back in there with her. Being away from her after the torture of these last twenty four hours is almost too much to take. Christ, I could have *lost* her.

"Mr. Thomas?" I hear the doctor's voice and turn to face him. Shadows cover his face and somehow I know the news he has for me will be worse than I can imagine. Wringing his hands together, he clears his throat and steps forward.

"I wish I didn't have to tell you this, Mr. Thomas but your girlfriend-"

"Aria. Her name is Aria," I say, not liking that the only term he uses is girlfriend. She means much more to me than just a girlfriend. She's my entire world.

Dr. Lee nods and a small smile, though grave, crosses his pale face.

Commented [LD69]: I would remove "to"

Commented [LD70]: ..just a girlfriend

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Thomas. Aria-she lost her baby. With the trauma of the accident, there is no way to know when-"

Suddenly, it feels like my mind is splintering apart in an effort to un-hear what he is saying. His words are like a foreign language and I struggle to piece them together to make any sense. *Aria lost the baby...the baby... God, please don't let this be happening...*

I drop to my knees and feel as if my entire world has been taken from me before I captured it. My heart stops for a few beats in an effort to protect itself from the pain of what I am trying to come to grips with. Aria, Christ she was pregnant. *Pregnant*. She'd been carrying our child and that monster caused her to lose it. Blinding, unrelenting rage overwhelms me, strips me.

"Fuck!" I yell and slam my hands to the wall for support. My shoulders shake violently as I sob for the gift that was stolen from me, from Aria.

I don't know how much time passes before the doctor places a hand on my shoulder and squeezes it gently. As if to tell me everything will be OK. But how could anything be OK again? I let this fucking happen. I'd vowed to protect her and *I had failed*.

"I take it you didn't know?"

I look over at him with water filled eyes and barely shake my head. I can't remember the last time I truly cried, but finding out that we'd lost our child brings the worst kind of pain. The weight in my chest has a vise grip around my heart and keeps squeezing. It is unbearable.

I will get her through this, I'll get us through this and then I'll give her as many babies as she wants. No matter how long it takes, I won't ever let go.

My hands shake as I open the door and walk straight to where Aria is sitting up on her uninjured side. Her hair is pulled back into a bun, the way she always wears it after a shower or the rare mornings she indulges in a bath. The memories of those times give me strength for what's to come.

"How are you feeling, baby? Any pain?" I lean down and kiss the soft skin of her forehead and she reaches up to slide her fingers through my hair. They massage the back of my scalp as she sighs in contentment.

"No, they gave me something for the pain. Gavin-"

She pulls my face back and cups my cheeks in her hands. The tenderness of the way she does this gets to me right in my chest. This girl is so beautiful, inside and out. Knowing what I have to say will break her heart; it brings tears to my eyes.

"Gavin," she whispers and I can't stop the kiss that she gives me. As her mouth meets mine, we are a tangle of love and need, yearning and relief. The kiss sweeps into my bones with the depth of it. My tongue sweeps along hers as I drink her in, gently and reverently but still with the need I can't hide from her.

"I love you so much, Aria. I thought I was happy before I met you but – *you*, you are my happy.

My life. Please don't ever forget that." My voice cracks at the end and when her eyes widen, her hands tightening in mine, I hate that she is reliving what that monster put her through.

"Oh God, Gavin... h-how did you find me? Were we at the penthouse?" Her emerald green eyes fill with a mix of fear and worry and the fact that she's worried for me in all of this makes me love her even more.

"He replicated our bedroom in the cabin he'd found. We found you there. Aria, I'm so sorry I didn't protect you the way I promised. I should have known it was unsafe-"

She presses two fingers to my lips and gives me a teary smile. She's so fucking beautiful and so very strong. I don't think she realizes how strong she is.

"You did everything you could possibly do to protect me, Gavin. Don't you dare blame yourself for this."

Her words are like a balm to my soul. I know the events that happened are my fault, I caused them.

But her undying faith in me makes my heart soar with the force of it. Slowly, she takes her hand off my mouth and her eyes fill with the fiercest love for me. I envelope her in the gentlest embrace I can muster.

"I love you," I hear her murmur in my ear and it gives me everything I need knowing she still loves me after all that has happened.

"Forever," I whisper back and bury my nose in her hair, never wanting to let her go.

Thirty Three

Aria

The ocean waves crash in and out of the shore of the lake and I watch them rip in and out in time with the setting sun behind me. I can hear Gavin approaching from behind me as well, and the warmth his presence brings me covers my unheated skin. I only wear a shawl over my slender shoulders and the light sundress I wear tonight isn't warding off the chill the wind brings in as the sun sets.

"Hey, Beautiful. I was looking for you." I hear his voice first, smooth as velvet to my ears.

Gavin pulls me gently into his chest and into his warm embrace. I sag against him and tip my face up to see the stormy blue gray eyes I've come to memorize since I've known him.

"I missed you. Are you feeling okay?"

I turn fully into his embrace and rest my chin on his collarbone as I blink up at him.

"Yes. Where were you?"

His eyes narrow and just now do I realize he is shirtless and there is a small inked design across his right shoulder. I move a step back and read it carefully.

Never Forget,

Tessa Lynn Morgan

Tessa. Who is Tessa? I look back into his eyes and see such understanding staring back at me. He takes my hand and begins leading me towards a ranch styled house seated right over the water's edge. It seems familiar to me, as if I've been here before, but I'm too focused on the one name set on repeat in the recesses of my mind to try to remember when I've been here.

"Gavin, where are we?" I ask, tugging slightly on his hand so he'll stop and look at me.

A small smile forms on his lips as he opens the front door for me and I step inside.

"We're home."

Home. Is this where we live? As I look at my surroundings, I'm filled with excitement that we have found happiness here. As my eyes scan the living room, I'm surprised to see small toys littering the carpeted floors. Barbie dolls and hairbrushes, pencils and notebooks with pink covers covered in doodled words I can't read. Like a little girl has just come tearing through here during playtime.

Commented [LD72]: ..playtime

Gavin places one hand on the side of my face and gives me the most loving smile I've ever seen from him. His lips brush to my ear and he whispers gently to me.

"I haven't taught her to pick those up after she's done. She's a messy little one, just like her mother." I frantically look up into his eyes, not knowing what he's saying though a huge part of my soul already knows what he's telling me. We have a daughter.

"Look" He turns me to the right and wraps his arms around my waist, almost as if to protect me

from what I'll see.

"Tessa" I whisper.

I wake in a cold sweat, my eyes shut tightly in an effort to try to remember the sight of *her*. Tessa.

I can still see her light brown hair just like Gavin's that I love running my fingers through while we're making love. Her emerald green eyes were identical to mine and all I can think is *our daughter*. Our little girl. Without opening my eyes, I let my hands drop to my belly and then lower to cup my lower stomach where I feel a sense of such emptiness. I never imagined myself pregnant, having a child with Gavin, my love. But the dream, that dream – I know it wasn't just a dream. It was my body telling me something I didn't or wouldn't let myself think about. After coming home from the hospital, had I missed a period?

Would I have even noticed after the events leading up to what felt like the end for Gavin and me? No, I hadn't and I can't honestly remember the last one I'd had. Silently, I count the weeks since my last cycle and when I come to the conclusion-twelve weeks, my heart soars knowing I'd been pregnant with a child created from both of us, Gavin and me. Then, I open my eyes and my heart along with my soul plummets to the floor. The car that I was sure Bryce was driving hit me. Knocked me down onto the street. That alone could have hurt the baby growing inside my stomach. But what came after?

Though I can't remember some parts of the time Bryce had me alone, I remember vividly what happened after I refused to go along with his sick and twisted game. He wanted to have me. He wanted me to surrender to him. I wouldn't. The beating that came after left me with such pain in my stomach, ribs, and head that even almost thirty hours later, I am still feeling the effects. I choke on the breath in my throat when the truth lands a blow on my heart that I'm not sure I'll ever recover from.

I had lost our baby.

I sit up in bed until I hear Gavin's quiet three knocks at the door and then his eyes meet mine when he comes in. His hair looks like he's pulled it in every which way, his eyes rimmed with dark circles from not sleeping. I can hardly look into his eyes because I am afraid to see the image of our baby staring back at me. He comes next to me and takes my hand so tightly I suck in a breath at the strength I feel in his hold.

"I wish to God I didn't have to tell you this, baby. I wish to God I could just take you in my arms and promise you that everything is okay now that Bryce is gone. I want that more than anything, but I can't because I have to tell you this."

Finally, I summon the strength to lift my eyes to his and when I do, I see tears filling the blue grays.

I bite my lip in an effort to be strong for the words and the truth Gavin will tell me in just a few short seconds. I want to cover his mouth with my own and beg him to help me forget this ever truly happened.

I want to pretend that I can live with the emptiness I've felt ever since waking up from that

dream. But I tighten my hand in his and nod.

His voice shakes so badly I think it will break when he speaks.

"Aria, baby, the doctor told me-you were pregnant when you were struck by the car. There's no way to know when-"

I struggle to contain the sob that pushes its way through my rib cage and out of my chest, but it's pointless. I stutter the words to finish for him.

"When I lost our baby."

My eyes fill with all of the sadness and emptiness I have bottled up inside me in the last two hours of knowing the truth and the last twelve weeks that our baby girl was growing inside me. How could I have not known? How could I have lost something so precious before I ever had the chance to love it?

"I-I'm so sorry I lost her, Gavin. I wish I knew, I wish I had listened to my body, but I lost her. I lost our baby."

Tears cover my burning cheeks and I cover them with my hands as the pain in my chest becomes too much to bear. It feels as if someone reached inside my chest and ripped my heart from my body-that would hurt less.

"Aria, baby."

Gavin is on the bed with me now and reaches his hands out to pull me to him and I struggle. I don't want to look at him because I'll see what we lost. I don't want to hear his voice because I'll imagine what he would have said to her. I don't want to let him hold me because I am afraid I'll never stop mourning the loss of what we could have had. So, I fight. I struggle. I push at his hands and scream for him to let me go. I cry harder than I ever have and beg him to let me go.

Let me go.

Let me go.

Please, Gavin let me go.

Let me be swallowed up in this pain.

Let me drown in it.

Maybe then I'll understand how I could have lost our baby girl who had yet to take her first breath in this world.

Let me go...

"Listen to me, Aria. This is not your fault. We didn't know. We didn't know. I'm so sorry I ever let you out of my sight. I'm so sorry the events that I let happen took away our baby. But if you let me, I'll give you the world. Please baby, let me."

I don't have any strength left to fight him so I lay my head on his chest and close my eyes. His arms wrap around me tightly and I feel his body shudder as he weeps softly.

"I don't deserve any of that because I lost our baby."

The one truth that slips out of my mouth is straight from my heart. I don't deserve his love or his care or his comfort after this. I don't.

When I drift to sleep, I pray I'll see our baby girl again.

"Tessa," I whisper and her head pops up from where she is lining up wooden blocks in what looks like a square pattern on the floor in front of her. When she locks eyes with me, she smiles shyly. The same smile I have when I feel shy or unsure of myself. Warmth spreads through my skin and my soul, the connection to this little girl so strong and so unfamiliar it would knock me off my feet if Gavin wasn't holding me up with his arms around my shoulders.

"Go to her, baby," he whispers, urging me with a gentle nudge against my hair.

I don't make the choice to go to her. I'm pulled to her, my feet moving before I even tell them to do so. It's like she is a flame and I am a moth. She is a magnet and I am a paperclip. I go to her willingly because how can I stop gravity?

Tessa watches me quietly with the brightest green eyes I've ever seen.

"Mama?" she whispers, reaching out for me to pick her up. My chest fills with love and joy and awe at the beautifully perfect girl we created and I gently scoop her into my arms.

"Mama's here, Tessa Lynn."

She reaches her hands up and puts them on my cheeks.

"Mama."

That word is everything to me. It is home.

I wake just like before except now I feel Gavin's smooth hand along my back and his muffled voice telling me I'm safe now. What he doesn't know is that I'm not afraid because of Bryce or what he put me through. I'm afraid that I'll never get the chance to love a child the way I know I would have loved our baby. I move my head to the crook of his neck and inhale his musky smell. I love his smell and if I close my eyes, I can remember every time he's held me like this. I wish to God it was enough to fill the gaping hole inside of me.

"I dreamed of her," I whisper. It feels as if a secret is told through those words, but I have to say it.

He deserves the whole truth of what I'm feeling. No less.

Gavin leans away slightly at my words and I see the stark pain in his stormy eyes.

"I would have named her Tessa Lynn. After your grandmother. She had your brown hair and my green eyes and she was so beautiful, Gavin. She was our baby."

Thick tears fill his eyes as he nods. My breath leaves me, my hands curling into his and squeezing.

I can see his pain, his anguish. The sight of it shreds me and I move to pull my hands from his just as Gavin lifts my hands with his and lifts them to his mouth. Gently kissing them, he allows me to continue.

I reach up and hold his beautifully rugged face in my hands as I say the rest.

"When I look at you, I see so much, Gavin. I see the man that brought me to life again. The man that saves me each and every time he tells me he loves me."

He sucks in a breath and presses his lips to my forehead in a kiss.

"I do love you, Aria. I don't think I'll ever stop."

"But I also see her. I see what we lost, our little girl. Every time I look in your eyes, I'll see that. I can't see the good because the pain inside me is too much and it hurts. God, it hurts so much. I can't, baby. I can't be with you right now. Not now. It hurts too much and I have no idea how or if that will ever stop. Being with you is just too painful right now. It's all I can feel and you deserve better."

Commented [LD73]: God, it hurts so much.

Abruptly he stands and covers his face with his hands. I hear a low sob come from him and it tears at my heart in the worst way. Gavin's blue gray eyes meet mine again and I suck in a breath when I see the desperation in his darkened gaze. The panic I see in them makes my mouth open to say something, take his pain away somehow, but no words come out.

"I can't let you go like this, Aria. We need each other if we're going to survive losing her. Please, don't do this to us." he begs, his eyes plead with me, the grays in them darkened in pain. Gavin reaches his hand out to me, but with a low sob caught in my throat, I force myself to turn over onto my belly and cover my chest with my hands in order to not reach out for him. *My love.*

Sighing, Gavin slips beside me, covers my arms with his own and squeezes me gently against his chest. After a moment of silence, he turns my face to his.

"Is this what you truly want?" His blue gray eyes implore me and I want more than anything to be able to say no and to just hold onto him despite this pain searing me from the inside out. But it would ruin what we've shared all these months and I couldn't fathom that.

I nod through clouded vision and clasp his hand tightly, the only contact we have.

"Yes."

Kissing my cheek, Gavin gives me a sad smile.

"Only for now. Beautiful, I will only let you go for now. But this, this is forever. I won't ever give up on us."

The pain ceases for an immeasurable amount of time as I feel the love in his gaze and his touch.

"Me either," I vow. No matter what or how long it takes, I'll find my way back to him.

Gavin's hand comes up to my neck and I close my eyes in a plea when his lips meet mine. The sensations of his touch explode behind my eyelids.

"Aria, baby."

I surrender to the love that Gavin puts into his kiss and I give him as much of me as I can.

Tugging my fingers into his hair, I moan when his tongue dips along mine and his lips consume my own. In his kiss I almost believe I can survive this pain, but somehow I know I would be lying to myself. I pull back and shake my head as his mouth falls to my collarbone.

"I want to give you something. Then I'll find Kel for you, if that's what you want." There is such regret and a tinge of fear in his voice, but my mind automatically latches on to the positive part of his words.

"What is it?"

I sit up and watch as Gavin saunters over to a drawer connected to the lounge chair across the room. He comes back to me just as quickly and places the necklace they must have taken off me when I was brought in. It's the one he gave me right before Kel and Lucas' wedding. He looked so handsome that night. It's hard to believe it was only days ago. It feels like a lifetime.

I clasp the stone in my hand against my neck and smile for the first time since having the first dream.

"Thank you, baby"

Then, he leans forward and kisses me so gently I begin to shake.

"I love you so much, Aria. I always will."

A single tear falls from my eye as I watch him walk out of the hospital room, never once turning back.

Thirty Four

I lie in the hospital bed and will myself to go outside of this room and beg Gavin to come back. To hold me. To be with me. But in my heart, even with how painful it is, I know if I do that, I'll only hurt him. I have to find a way to heal on my own and then maybe, just maybe, we can be what we used to be. When I can look at his face and see the love and contentment he's brought out in me. When I won't see everything we've lost. Everything I lost. One thing I'm thankful for is that it seems I've cried all the tears I can muster and maybe that's a good thing. I curl into the lumpy mattress beneath me and close my eyes to sleep. I lie there, eyes closed, feet burrowed into the sheets and will a deep sleep to find me. But I can't seem to fall back into the darkness. I hear a faint knock on the door and see the young and tired looking face of Nurse Maggie pop inside my room. She smiles gently, for sure she must know what happened and the sympathy or pity on her face is almost too much to see.

Commented [LD74]: ..Jay

"There are a few people that want to see you, Ms. Morgan. Would it be okay if I let them in one at a time?" She comes over to my bedside and checks my vitals.

Once she's done, I nod to her. I know Kel, Lucas, and Farah must be out there and they must be worried sick. I may not want to see anyone right now, but I owe it to the ones that care about me to show them I'm okay.

"Could you possibly send my sister and her husband in, first?" I ask her.

The kind nurse nods and heads back out the way she came. I sit for a few minutes and when I see Kel step inside the room with Lucas beside her, I immediately feel a little less lonely. Her golden blonde hair is swept back into a high ponytail and she's wearing Lucas' U.S. Marines sweatshirt. I give her a small smile, and reach out my hand to her.

"Oh, Aria we were so worried. Are you OK, are you feeling OK?"

She sits on the side of my bed and kisses my forehead gently.

"Physically I'm OK, Kel. Please don't worry about me, you have to worry about not just you, but that little one too. I'm fine." My voice breaks a little when I refer to her and Lucas' bundle of joy. When I heard she was expecting, I was filled with joy for her and for Lucas. They've been through so much and they deserve the happy ending that she dreamed about when we were kids. But it feels like a knife twisting inside of me, knowing that we would have given birth together if only I hadn't lost my baby girl. Somehow, my eyes begin to burn with emotion and hastily I turn my head away so my sister won't see. Her hand reaches out to my shoulder and I feel Lucas' concerned gaze on me even though I'm looking at the wall beside me.

"Aria, honey I'm so sorry. The doctor told us. I can't begin to imagine the pain you're feeling right now. I'm here for you, so is Lucas and Farah, Jaden, Dad and mom showed up last night. We're all here to help you through this."

I gasp audibly at the news that my mother is here at the hospital. *God*. The last time I spoke to her was more than a year ago. The night my dear brother, Jeremy got into an accident and lost so much blood in the emergency room of this very hospital. It was the worst night in my family's lives. The night we lost him.

I turn towards her and tell her to help me sit up. A shooting pain goes from my head to my stomach, but I bite my lip and breathe through it. Once I'm sitting up in bed with the pillows propping my back up, I take a slow sip of the water Lucas hands me. The smooth clear liquid slides down my throat like honey and it soothes my aching muscles to have something inside me.

"When did she get here?"

Kel takes my hand and gently squeezes.

"Last night around midnight. She begged us to let her see you, but you were still in critical condition and you weren't allowed visitors. Honestly, I didn't want her here, but Dad insisted we let her stay."

I don't know how I feel about seeing my mother after over a year, but now more than ever, I need her. I have my family and friends here to help me get through this, but I know nothing will compare to making things right with my mother again.

"I want to see her, Kel."

Her honey brown eyes sear into mine and then she sighs and nods at me. She leans over and kisses my cheek.

"You're going to be OK again, Aria."

As she leaves the room with Lucas trailing behind her, I doubt that.

The sedative the nurse gave me begins to set in as I wait for Kel to find our mother. My hands curl in the bed sheets as a mixture of sadness and longing finds its way to the surface. The emptiness hasn't left me since I woke up and now it's only accompanied with a sheer longing to see my mom again. It's been a year since we've been face to face, why would she choose now to come back?

A small knock followed by the sound of the door opening slowly lets me know either my sister came back or...

"Ariana? Can I come in?" Her soft voice makes warmth spread along with a pinch of apprehension.

If she still blames me for Jeremy's death how could I handle that?

I couldn't. It would make the pain inside me so much worse knowing my mother hates me for something that was never my fault.

"Yes," I say, turning to lie on my back so that I can face her. Andrea Morgan, my mother and a well-known model, looks worse than I've ever seen her. Her dark brown hair is cut to just below her shoulders and is much shorter than I remember. Deep, set in circles are under her amber eyes and a faint smile crosses her face as she steps inside the room and walks towards me. I can see the worry lines etched above her perfect brow and I reach out my hand to take hers. When she enfolds her fingers over mine in acceptance, I feel just a little less empty.

Commented [LD75]: ..lie

"I can't believe you're here, Mom. Why?" I search her face and she sits on the bed beside me. Her eyes are warm and sultry with the loving light I remember from every day growing up with her. She loved modeling and the brief stage acting she'd done, but her heart was at home with us. That's why when Jeremy died, her world fell apart. Somewhere deep inside me I'm asking the same question she probably asked herself back over a year ago. *Is the loss, the pain all I can feel now? Or can I still let love into my heart from those around me?*

"I came as soon as I got off the plane, Sweetheart. How are you feeling?"

She sits beside me and wraps an arm around my back, supporting my weight.

"I feel so lost, Mom. I lost... I was pregnant." The words seem inadequate to describe the enormity of what I, what Gavin and I lost and I have to force myself to breathe once I've said the painful truth I still can't fathom. My mom's wide eyes fill with understanding as she nods and before I know it, I'm engulfed in her warm arms. The tears come and this time I don't stop them. My cries are muffled into her black and gray blouse and she coos reassuring words like *it'll be okay* and *I'm here for you*. Somehow, I hope she's right.

The emotion erupts from the deepest parts inside me and my mother's arms feel like the only thing holding me up.

"Shh, I'm here now, Sweetheart. I've got you. I've got you."

She repeats those three words over and over and lets me cry out all the pain, the agony centered in my heart with the loss I still can't wrap my mind around. How can I? I didn't even know I was pregnant and now it feels like a vise grips my heart and keeps squeezing. I remember dreaming about having children with Gavin. About a little girl that would be half of me and half of him. I want that so much and now, will that ever happen?

I think my mom feels me shudder against her so she pulls back and looks at me.

"I'm so sorry I haven't been here, Ariana. When Jeremy left us, I couldn't deal with the loss. Your father told me to hold on to you girls. To not push us away when we were all hurting so much. But it was like I couldn't stop myself. None of what happened has ever been your fault, not this and not Jeremy's accident. Life sucks, but you are so strong, Sweetheart. I'm just so sorry I left you girls to fend for yourselves all this time."

Light spreads through my chest at her honest words. She never blamed me. A part of me always longed to know that it wasn't my fault and my mother didn't truly blame me for his death and now my heart is a little lighter from that burden.

I nod and kiss my mom's cheek in relief. After a moment, the question tumbling around my head tumbles out.

"I lost her, Mom. How could I not have known?"

Sighing, she wipes my wet cheeks clear and presses a kiss to my forehead.

"Sometimes the mind blocks out pain to protect the heart from it. You had no way of knowing unless you'd taken an early pregnancy test, but with everything going on, there was no way you could have known. This is not your fault."

My hair is swept from my face and the warmth in my mother's amber gaze makes a sad smile cover my lips.

"I love you, Mom," I say into her embrace and when her arms tighten gently around my shoulders, I know she's smiling.

"I love you, Ariana. I'll never leave you girls again, I promise."

I pull back and nod, knowing she will keep her word.

"Everything is going to be okay. We'll get you through this."

I sigh, partly in sadness and partly in acceptance of her words.

"I know"

When Lucas opens the door to my old apartment that Kel and I shared, it feels so weird to be standing here with my luggage in hand, which only consists of two bags and my purse. Some clothes, toiletries and keepsakes were mysteriously found in the doorway of my hospital room this morning and when I saw the handwritten note taped to the front of one of the bags, I knew it must have been Gavin. He hates this in every way possible, but he won't let me go without the things I need. The written words from him made my heart beat just a little faster despite the state I was in.

Don't think for a moment that this is me giving up. I told you once and I'll tell you again. I won't let go. I won't give up on us. We haven't even scratched the surface of our lives together. I love you.

-Gavin

Now, as I step inside the place I'd lived and been happy with my sister before meeting Gavin, it feels like another lifetime ago. Just after getting home from their honeymoon, Lucas and Kel moved out of here and into a quaint home in Waverly Springs just outside of the city so I know this place has hardly been lived in. I set my bags down just as a strong pair of hands squeeze my shoulders from behind me.

"I made an appointment for this afternoon with the therapist the doctor suggested. I can drive you if you want," Lucas says and everything inside me wants to revolt against the idea of going to another therapist. After landing in the hospital about six months ago, I had to see a regular mandated therapist twice a week and even though at first it made the depression and anxiety I was feeling that much worse, it did help. I know I have to do whatever it takes to help myself through this, if not for me or for Gavin and the life we've planned, for Tessa. I owe it to her to keep trying no matter how hard the future ahead of me seems. I nod and turn to give him a weak smile.

"Thanks, what time is the appointment?"

He looks briefly at his phone and then back up at me.

"Four. I have to go pick up Kel from the school, but I'll see you at three thirty?"

I'd completely forgotten that Kel had a training class this morning. She wanted to do elementary school teaching now that her future with Lucas was flourishing. She'd always wanted to do it but now seemed like time for her.

"Of course! I'm just going to unpack and make some lunch. Say hi to Kel for me."

He nods and presses a kiss on my forehead before heading out the way he came in.

I turn and rub my hand over the center of my chest where I ache to be in Gavin's-our home, instead of here. Even after only two days of being away from him, I miss him.

"Hey, Ari?" Lucas calls from the doorway and I turn.

"You've got this." The note of confidence that I wouldn't give up at the lowest time in my life makes me smile genuinely for the first time in what feels like a very long time.

"I knew my sister was right for keeping you around, Luke. I really needed to hear that, thank you."

He grins and I see both understanding and pride in his green eyes.

"Anytime."

When he finally closes the door behind him, I go to the lock and lock both the chain and the doorknob. Out of habit, I guess. There is truly no threat now but I still feel safer with the door locked.

Looking around me, I sigh. What if this is what my life consists of now? If I can't heal, if it isn't possible, can I truly force myself to stay away from the one man I love more than anything? A few weeks, maybe even a few months I can withstand, but longer? God, I don't know if I can do that. I guess I just have to have faith that time will heal both my grief from losing such a precious gift and my sadness now that our lives may never be the same.

Thirty Five

Three Months Later

Gavin

I close the door softly to my bedroom and walk towards the bed to see my younger sister curled up like a cat in the middle of it. She has started coming over more and more ever since Aria was let out of the hospital, almost as if she thinks that if she isn't here to watch me I'll run over to Kel and Lucas' and beg her to see me. Has it crossed my mind, yes but she asked me for time. I'd hoped that after a few days, I could convince her to come home so we could work on us. So we could be what we were only a few short months ago. Happy. In love. Free from the weight of the past, both hers and mine. But except for three chance meetings where I got to see my Aria, she's refused to see me. Lucas told me she is putting all her focus into the ballet show she'd auditioned for back in June. I'm so happy she's found a way to fill her passion that drew me right to her when we first met, but it feels worse knowing that I can't be there to see her perform, to see her fall and then get back up and try and try and try until she lands her routines perfectly. To see her curtsy after each show, to see the pride and elation in her eyes. *Christ.* I dig my hands in the back of my scalp and rub out the pressure that I feel there. It feels as if I'm going out of my mind without her. Before I met Aria Georgia Morgan, my life was complete. I had my family and my colleagues and my work. I had all the money and things I could ask for and I'd thought I was content. Damn, was I wrong about that? True happiness was Aria and the love she's given me. I won't survive losing her and that is the only thing keeping me from running to her and pushing until she takes me back. I promised her time. I have to give her that, at least for now.

"You miss her," Callie's sleep slurred voice wakes me from my constant thoughts of Aria and I turn my head to see her resting up on her elbows and her eyes narrowing at me.

"What?"

She laughs under her breath, shaking her head at me.

"I said you miss her, big brother. You're like a shell of the man you were when you were with her.

Why don't you call her?"

I blink a few times in surprise at that. She's said numerous times how I should give Aria space and that if I push too hard, too fast I could force her away for good.

"I'm not saying go over there and profess your undying love, I'm saying call her. It might help to talk without any pressure to make decisions. Just let her know you're here for her, no matter what she needs. Trust me, it might help."

Callie sits up and kisses my cheek before heading out of my bedroom door. I barely hear the door close when all I can think about is her. It will help. I know that more than anything, the chance to talk to her and have the chance to hear her voice again is all I want and it will help. I rub at my chest where the ache that hasn't gone away since I left Aria in that hospital room three months ago gets worse at the thought that she may reject to hear from me. As I pull my phone out of my pocket and see her picture on the contact information, I press call with a shaking hand.

Commented [LD76]: ...close when all I can...

"Hello?" Her voice is soft and I can tell she either just woke up or she saw my name before

answering and was unsure of herself. I hate the thought.

"Aria," I say her name and it feels like coming home. Three long, torturous months missing her and I can finally hear her voice again. I hate myself for calling her when I know she asked me for time after we'd lost our daughter. But three months feels like an eternity and I can't stop myself. As I hear her exhale as if in relief, I inwardly thank my nosy sister for telling me to do the one thing I should have done every day since I left her. But it was the right thing to do, to wait for her. It hurt like hell, though.

"Are you OK?" She whispers and I want to laugh at the thought of me being OK without her.

"No, Beautiful. How are you? I know I shouldn't have called you..."

My voice trails off, unsure what to say first. Am I sorry? No. I miss her more than anything and I am done wishing and wanting the one girl who's turned my world upside down. She is mine and I won't give up on her now.

"Gavin, I'm so happy you called. I – I miss you."

My chest warms at those words and I can hear the sorrow and the longing in her beautiful voice.

"Christ, Aria. I feel like I'm going crazy without you."

She sighs softly and I can hear the conflict in her voice. She's not there yet. Maybe I'm not either, but I want her with me.

"I know I'm asking a lot for you to wait for me Gavin, I'm so sorry."

She has no reason to be sorry. None.

"Aria, I'll wait forever for you. You have nothing to be sorry for."

"It won't be forever. Just a little longer?"

There is hope in her voice and it stirs my soul to hear it.

"I'll be waiting," I vow, then I let her go for what I hope is the last time.

Aria

The final curtain falls in front of where we all stand in a line, curtsying and bowing to the enormous applause from what has to be hundreds of people. I'm filled with elation that we pulled off such a seamless production, without the common glitches that new crews find themselves with. *Alas The Night* was a perfect success and I'm proud to be part of it. The moment the second curtain goes down we all erupt in cheers. A few girls that I've practiced with and gotten to know these past three weeks enfold me in a hug so tight I start to laugh with them. The weight in my chest feels a lot lighter today and I'm so grateful for that.

"You were amazing, Aria!" Becca exclaims and we all turn back and smile at each other. While she is a more refined dancer than most of us, she has such a bright way to her that I truly have no room to be jealous of her talents. Dance has been my life for so long and I love being

able to share it with all of these talented and beautiful dancers.

Leo, the stage director and a mentor to all of us, claps his hands and I can see how excited he is about what just happened. All faces turn towards him, we are all buzzing with excitement.

"Thank you so much to all of you, that was magic out there. Let's get out of here, shall we?" He smiles proudly and gives each of us a hug as we pass him towards the exit. We all cheer once we're outside and I follow Becca and her friend Livy out of the backstage area of the auditorium. As the adrenaline I felt from the show starts to recede, I remember the sound of Gavin's voice when he called me this morning. He sounded so... I don't know. Sad. He misses me. I could hear it in his voice.

I feel like I'm going crazy without you...

I hate making him wait for me, but what else can I do? The past three months have been a long and pain filled process of rebuilding my cracked relationship with my mother who's come home for good and faithfully attending group therapy and individual sessions with Dr. Madison. Gavin gave me her number before he'd left and I called her that same night. It's made me realize that nothing could have prevented what happened to Tessa. Maybe it just wasn't meant to be. I may never know why I lost our baby girl before I even got the chance to feel her kick or to hear her tiny heartbeat. I went through immeasurable pain in those sessions that followed my first call to her and finally I feel like I can breathe again. Talking to Gavin again felt like the best sign of fate telling me that I am as ready as I can be to face him after all that's happened. I owe it to him to try.

I make my way out to my KIA and see a note taped to my front window. Curious, I walk faster and I see my mom's perfect handwriting from feet away.

I'm sorry I had to leave before I could see you, but you were exquisite and I am so proud of you for following your dreams, Sweetheart. I'll see you tomorrow for breakfast.

Love, Mom.

I smile at her note and tuck it under my arm before carefully sitting down in the front seat. The white flow dress I wore for Lena's last scene is made of a mixture of loose satin material for the skirt and thin lace covering my torso. It's gorgeous and if I tear it I'm sure the theater will have my neck. It must cost more than my paycheck is worth. Once I'm sure it won't tear from how I'm sitting, I put the car into drive.

I am ready to take back my life. I'm ready to heal. As that thought sticks in my mind, I turn around towards the east end of the city, knowing there is one thing I have to do.

I pull up to Marley's Cove and pull the key from the ignition. I don't know how I found myself here, but here I am. I remember when Gavin brought me, it was technically our first date

we met, I wasn't sure if I even wanted him to come to the party my sister sneakily invited him to. But he showed up and afterwards he brought me here. I remember this place being the first place after I lost myself that I felt peace. Calm. Like maybe I would be OK. I never thought that I would fall in love with Gavin Thomas and be completely happy for the first time in my life. But I don't regret even one moment of that, even though it led me to losing myself for a second time.

Commented [LD77]: ...that I felt peace.

because the day

I get out of the car and lean my hip against the hood. I close my eyes and just stand there. I don't think, I don't feel, I don't worry. I just *be*.

Behind my eyelids, I picture Tessa. Her messy brown hair like Gavin's and her emerald green

eyes like mine, so bright that they look almost yellow. Her first steps. Her first words. How would it sound when she said Mom for the first time? Would she have Gavin's husky laugh that I love so much? Would she be like him or me or completely different from either of us?

I don't know if it's this place, the sunset I know is there before my eyes or the sense of peace I feel in this moment but my heart squeezes painfully in my chest and I open my mouth and I scream. I empty my lungs with every ounce of strength inside me. I scream. For every lost moment. For every sad thought that has made it impossible to sleep at night. For the daughter I could have raised with the only man I've ever loved. I open my eyes and don't realize they are welling with tears until they spill over my cheeks and down to my chin. I let them come. I let the emotions take over me for this moment in time. I sink to the ground and let it smother me. Swallow me whole. And then, after an immeasurable amount of time grieving for the loss I can finally accept, I let her go. I take the necklace from around my neck where I had her initials engraved and step to the grass covered ground. There is a stone where I rest my knees and it reads;

Commented [LD78]: ..heaheartf

Tessa Lynn Morgan, may you rest in peace. You were loved.

There was nothing that could be brought to rest in this place but when Lucas showed me the stone he and Kel bought for my daughter, it was the best gift I've ever been given. She has a place now. She is at peace now and as I stand up and press a kiss to my hand, press it to the stone, I feel at peace with my heart and know I may have not forgotten the loss I'd suffered, but I've healed from it. It still hurts, it will always hurt but I know she's at peace now. That's all I can ever ask for.

"I love you baby girl. You're free now," I whisper before heading back the way I came and vowing to live each day knowing that she is not lost, but in a better place. She'll live on through me and through whatever the future holds for us. I back out of the cove and head straight towards the only place I've ever called home, hoping I'm not too late.

My hands are shaking as I knock three times on the front door to the penthouse. It's just after dusk and I know he should be home, but I didn't bother to call him to check. Determination settles within me. I have to see him. I don't care how long I have to wait to ask him this question.

I hear footsteps from the other side of the door and I suck in a breath as the door swings open in front of me, where Gavin stands. He's dressed in a blue sweater with black buttons across his torso, dark jeans and bare feet. His eyes widen as we stare at each other, the blues and grays of his eyes are all I see.

Joy and relief and such love for this man tumble through me and I don't know who moves first, me or him.

Does it really matter? All I know is we draw together like gravity. I'm pulled into his chest and my hands find their way into his messy brown hair that is long again. His head falls against my neck where he takes a deep breath and I wrap my arms around his back so tightly that I'm sure we'll become one person in this embrace.

"Baby," he whispers, kissing the skin along my collarbone so gently it feels like a feather against me. "I missed you so goddamn much, Aria. So much."

I lift my head from his shoulder just as he lifts his and our mouths meet. We meld together in desperation, my mouth parts and I am completely consumed by him.

"Gavin...Gavin... God, Gavin," I murmur against his kiss, his tongue dancing perfectly with mine, his hands holding my face in between them as if I'll slip away at any moment.

I pull away just enough to meet his eyes and smile *his* smile for him, I see the affection and wonder in his expressive eyes that I fell for so many months ago. Warmth spreads through my chest where all my missing pieces seem to fit together and I lift my hands to touch his dear face. I ask the one question I came here for.

"Is it too late to ask you to spend forever loving me?"

Thirty Six

Gavin

"Is it too late to ask you to spend forever loving me, Gavin? Will you make breakfast for me every day for the rest of our lives? Will you love me again?"

Her goddamn beautiful emerald green eyes are like two stones of the finest riches. They cloud with love and fear and hope and it fills my heart to hear her say those words.

I never stopped loving you, Aria Georgia Morgan. I never will.

I drop to my knees in front of her and clasp her waist tightly in my hands as I look up in the brightest green eyes I've ever seen. This is the moment I've waited so long for. Why is she here? Are we truly healed? Christ, is it even possible to heal from this? I don't know the answer to any of that, but this, right here, *her*, she is here. That's all that matters to me. Her and the love shining through her eyes.

"You never have to ask me to love you, Beautiful. You are my everything and I don't want to eat breakfast without you again. I don't want to wake up before dawn without you. I don't want to spend this life without you for another second. Aria, baby will you marry me?"

Christ, I had planned to wait for the perfect moment to ask her, but seeing the fear of rejection in her eyes and seeing the unyielding love in those eyes of hers brings to home how close we came to losing each other. I could have missed the chance to taste her French toast again. I could have missed the chance to love her, to cherish and treasure her for the rest of our days.

Aria gasps audibly and her beautiful eyes fill with joy and doubt. I reach up and take her hand in mine. Bringing it down to my mouth, I kiss her gently before reaching into the side pocket of the sweater I'm wearing for the small box I've saved for this exact moment. It's been with me, either in a pocket or my desk ever since I walked away from her three frustratingly long months ago. I bought it that day, as if it was a promise to her that I wasn't letting her go. I was simply giving her the time she asked of me. As Aria stands in front of me, I feel her begin to shake with hope of what I'm taking out of my pocket and when I look up into her face again, the smile she gives me is filled with affection and I can see how happy she is. I open the box and rest it in the palm of her hand.

"Aria Georgia Morgan, will you let me make you breakfast for the rest of our lives? Will you love me again?"

Those bright, lightened eyes that I fell for on a summer day in downtown Chicago fill with what I know are tears of joy and she nods fervently.

"Gavin." She pulls me up to stand with her and throws her slender arms around my neck as she wraps her legs around my waist, not letting me move a muscle.

"I never stopped loving you. You are everything to me, too, and I would be honored to be your wife." Fuck, those have to be the best words I've ever heard come from her lips. I press my hands to her lower back, pushing her even closer to me and kiss her.

On a soft sigh, her lips part and I slip my tongue into her mouth just as hers sneaks into mine and we pour every ounce of love and regret and relief into our kiss that we can muster. I kiss her as if she has the last breath on earth and I have to take it from her. She kisses me as if we were never apart. I take her lower lip in between both of mine and suck, knowing the response it'll elicit when a soft, desire filled moan comes from her lips and into my mouth. It's only when she pulls away with a soft laugh and presses her forehead against mine that I realize we're missing something.

"Wait, baby. I forgot one thing."

I gently set her feet on the floor again and dip to my knees once more. I am going to do this right; this beautiful girl deserves it to be perfect.

"You are mine, Beautiful," I whisper just as I slip the princess cut diamond on the ring finger of her left hand. Aria laughs softly again, one filled with joy and slides her fingers into my hair like so many times before.

"Forever?" She asks, her voice breathy from our kiss as I stand and smile wide, so filled with happiness I think I may burst.

"This is forever, Beautiful."

Then, I scoop her up in my arms and carry her into our bedroom to show her just how much I've missed her these past months.

The moment I set her down in the doorway of our bedroom I see the surprise flicker in her wide eyes. Turning her towards me, I take her hand and squeeze gently.

"I don't want you to live in fear ever again. He replicated our bedroom and I can't change that no matter how hard I try. So I had my interior designer come in. Her name is Ivy and she's very talented. Now we can make new memories in a new room, this room. Do you like it, baby?"

Her mouth drops open and then closes, when a wide smile lightens up her face, I know her answer already.

"It's amazing, Gavin. Thank you so much."

I lift her hand to my lips and kiss her palm. As I lead my girl to our bed, I lean forward and whisper in her ear, sending my breath up her neck.

"Wait here."

She nods and I swiftly go to retrieve a small note I saved for the moment I would ask her to marry me. I want to make it special for her. For both of us. As I place the card of paper in her hand, Aria smiles for me, then crawls off my lap and on to the bed. I watch her and see the happy tears fill her emerald green eyes as she reads my words to her.

Aria,

I feel like my love for you grows each and every day. From now on, this is my promise. No more tears for us, only happy memories, baby. I'm going to give you my whole world, and then some. So, tonight is for you, I hope to always make you as happy as you make me every single day.

Always Yours,
Gavin

She looks over at me and bites her lip before lying back against the covers that are almost the same blue color of the cotton blouse she is wearing.

The lights are dimmed, lighting up her wide eyes even more and when she outstretches her hand to me, I put my hand in hers and go to her. She reaches up when I'm seated above her and caresses my cheeks achingly slow. There is such softness in her eyes as she presses a kiss to my forehead and then down to the dimple in my cheek.

Commented [LD79]: ..lying

Commented [LD80]: ..same blue color of the cotton blouse she is wearing.

"Gavin, I love you so much." The words are music to my ears and the light that was gone from her eyes these last months is back in the shining emerald greens that stare up at me. I part her ivory white thighs and clasp her face gently with my hands.

"Forever," I vow. And as I make love to my beautiful girl, I thank God for bringing her back to me.

My girl.

My love.

My everything.

Aria

I slide my eyes open the very moment I feel strong arms tighten around my back, warm breath against my cheek and a contented sigh coming from my lips. I am momentarily confused, wondering where the hell I am. But then I catch the scent of mint and musky man that can only be mistaken for one man. The memories, sweet, sweet memories of last night come flooding back and I can't stop myself from turning into Gavin's strong embrace and burying my face into my favorite spot, just below his jaw. I feel his heartbeat under my lips as I kiss his neck and that makes this morning feel much less like a dream. God, how many times had I dreamed of waking up in our bed, seeing Gavin lying across the pillows with one arm slung over his head? I'd noticed it was how he would sleep most nights. Damn, even that turned me on about him. I feel his body stiffen a bit next to me and then he wraps one hand around my nape and pulls me fractionally closer.

Commented [LD81]: ..lying

"You're here."

I smile, though his eyes are still closed.

"I'm here," I whisper.

After a few minutes, I realize he must still be asleep because he doesn't respond after those few words. So, I rest my head next to his and drift once again into a deep sleep.

"Mom? Mom?" I hear a sweet voice call me and know who it must be. I stop chopping vegetables at the kitchen counter, vaguely finding my surroundings weird as the kitchen in our home never had ceramic counter tops.

I shake the thought off as I enter a small room off the kitchen, it is painted a soft pink color and Tessa Lynn, looking much more like a teenager than a child, is sitting up in her bed as I enter.

"It's OK, Mom," she whispers and I take a step closer to her, confused at her words. What was OK?

"It's OK, Mom. You don't have to miss me anymore."

I sit down next to her and kiss her on the forehead.

"I don't miss you, Sweetie. You're here with me."

Her eyes seem to lighten somehow as she gets up from the bed and goes towards her bedroom door. Opening it slowly, her face shows such love and sadness, it confuses me completely. What is going on? Is she going somewhere?

"I had to leave you and Daddy, Mom. But it's OK. I'll be with you in your heart and I'll see you be happy like I know you are with Daddy. He told me he loves you so much. He misses you. You don't have to stay anymore, you can be happy, Mom."

Suddenly it feels like everything is out of focus and I struggle to gain my balance.

"What do you mean? I want to stay with you."

Tessa walks over to me and crawls into my lap, resting one hand across my chest to feel my heart. All I can remember is-God, I love her more than anything.

"Daddy needs you, they all need you. Go, Mom. It's OK to be happy again."

Her words are fierce with hope and sorrow and I hear the truth in them.

We'd lost her. I'd lost myself, but living again was the one thing I could do to honor our daughter. I had to, for her at least.

"I love you, Tessa."

I whisper, kissing her for the last time and watch as her beautiful face disappears before me.

"Aria? Wake up, I think you're having a nightmare."

Gavin's smooth voice breaks through my haze of unconsciousness and I reach out my hand to him to calm him. My eyes slide open and they immediately catch Gavin's worried face above mine. I bring my hand up to his cheek and the corners of my mouth lift to reassure him.

"Not a nightmare, baby. I dreamed about *her*. She told me it was OK to be happy again." As I say that, I know in my heart it truly is OK. It still hurts. God, it will probably always hurt, the loss we've suffered, but the fact was that we had each other. Gavin had me and I had him and someday, maybe we'll have children and when that time comes, I'll want them to know about Tessa and how much she meant to both of us.

Gavin skims his hand down my shoulder and to my chest where my heart is beating.

"We'll miss her every day and some days, it may be too much to cope with and when those days come, you'll have me. Our daughter will stay in our hearts always. We won't forget, baby. We can't." As his blue gray eyes melt into mine, I wonder how I ever got so lucky to have a man like him fall in love with me. I pushed him away when he needed me most and though I know it was what I *had* to do, I regret ever causing him more pain than we'd already suffered. I never meant to hurt him.

"Thank you so much for never giving up on me-on us, Gavin."

I whisper, cradling the side of his face in my hand. My touch was tender, my love for him so transparent in my eyes. I see his blue gray's heat with promise and the ever present love clouds the blue in them.

"I never gave you up. I won't ever let you go, baby."

The fierceness in his voice makes me remember a part of my dream and it warms my still healing heart. I watch as the man I love pauses, clasps my left hand and kisses the ring on my third finger, the beautiful princess styled diamond that still takes my breath away. His eyes are tender upon mine as he speaks again.

"Please come home."

I smile wide, joy at those words courses through me. As if I want to be anywhere else?

"Happily."

Thirty Seven

As I unpack the two small suitcases Gavin brought back here for me, I realize this place has become home to me and I hadn't realized that until I woke up without the warmth of Gavin's embrace as we slept.

My phone chimes with a text message and I place the last items in the bathroom cabinet before walking back through the bedroom to retrieve it.

Come find me when you're done unpacking. I want to take you somewhere.

I'm smiling as I make my way to his office that's connected to the hallway that connects the bedroom, half bath and a small room Gavin uses for his business away from the business. If he can, I know he'd rather work from home. I peek my head in the door to see him looking down at his cell phone. I knock twice and his eyes sweep to mine.

"That was fast," he says, coming around the desk and wrapping me up in his arms. A contented sigh passes my lips at the feeling.

"I didn't have much to unpack, actually. Most of my stuff was left here."

"Hmm," Gavin hums under his breath and places a kiss to the top of my head.

"Are you ready, Beautiful?" he whispers against my head and I nod, eager for his surprise.

Gavin puts my fleece jacket around my shoulders to ward from the harsh winds outside and leads me out to the garage. I expect to find the Lexus parked in its natural spot but instead, Jasmine is there. The sight of the sleek car with a blue pinstripe down the side of it elicits wonderful memories for me. The ride we took just before our first date, how the engine felt like slow and passionate sex underneath me.

"I love this car."

Gavin takes my hand and I see the teasing smile he's trying to hide.

I sit on the passenger side and leave the door open as Gavin looks down at me with heat filled eyes.

"What?"

"You're turned on by this car, baby. Aren't you?" His gravelly voice is the sexiest thing I've ever heard and I feel the blush come to my face at his words.

Hell yes, I'm turned on. Have you seen this car?

"I don't know what you're talking about."

I hear the rich chuckle come from my man standing over me and I hastily close the door before I admit he's right. The moment I feel the engine come to life underneath our seats, my insides become curled in excitement. Yes, I love the hum and roll of this car, the smooth, unaltered shift as Gavin takes a turn. The leather seats feel perfect as I sit here and toy with the strands of my hair. But none of that is why I'm filled with anticipation right now. I know wherever he is taking me will be special and I'm filled with curiosity as to what it could be.

Commented [LD82]: ...feel

"See? I knew it. You're blushing. Your cheeks have the most beautiful glow to them right now, Aria," Gavin murmurs, reaching over to take one of my hands in his. He grins knowingly and

kisses my knuckles as he drives.

"Well, I saw this car first you know. When we met."

I smooth my other hands over his and trace the lines in his palm.

"Oh, really? You love this car more, don't you?"

I pretend to think about it for a minute and then moved forward and kissed the dimple on his left cheek.

"I like this car, I'm not sure if I love it, quite yet."

His blue gray eyes take me in for a moment before they fill with amusement and he emits a small laugh. God, I love his laugh.

"There's one thing I want you to do before we get to the place I'm taking you. I want it to be a true surprise," Gavin says and he tells me to close my eyes. As I do, I see the slight shake in his hand against the wheel that tells me he's nervous, too.

"I have a surprise for you, Aria. Turn around," he whispers low in my ear and I comply, biting my lip and closing my eyes as I hear him take something out of his pocket and then I feel smooth fabric-maybe a scarf?- cover my eyes and he ties it loosely behind my head. He kisses my temple and then turns me to him. I smile happily and wonder how he could possibly top last night.

"Gavin, I can't see!" I squeal as he takes my hands and guides me a few steps and then stops short.

He's silent and all I can feel is his hand holding mine while his arm is secured around my shoulders as he guides me. He chuckles and then lifts me into his arms before sitting me on a plush leather seat, oh, I must be in the truck.

"Patience, Beautiful. You'll love it, I promise," he whispers, kisses my cheek gently and then closes the door before I can say anything else. I sit back and sigh, wondering how I ever deserved a man like Gavin Thomas.

"How much longer?" I ask for the third time in twenty minutes. I feel Gavin squeeze my hand and then finally, the engine cuts off and he lifts me out of the car. He holds me tight for a few seconds, kissing the breath out of me and then lets me down, wrapping his arm around my waist as we walk onto what I'm guessing is either a meadow or a yard from the grass and leaves I hear under my shoes. Gavin guides me maybe halfway down the area, twenty five steps, and then stops, turns me to face him and cups my cheeks gently. He skims my jaw with his thumbs and my skin tingles at his touch. It's my undoing. And, it only excites me more.

"Can I look now?" I whisper. I can almost see the smile on his face through the silky fabric.

"Yes, but just keep in mind that this isn't all there is to see. This is just the beginning, baby."

I nod and then he reaches behind my head and undoes the blindfold, allowing it to fall to the floor.

A gasp escapes me as my eyes take in what's around me. A seemingly endless meadow of freshly cut grass where we stand, an old oak tree stands beside us maybe 10 feet away and in front of us is a beautiful gazebo made of Chester wood painted white. It's breathtaking. There are four steps going up to the floor of it and it's the largest one I've ever seen. I can't help thinking that it would be perfect for a wedding and as I turn around and see the endless yards of grass and land for a home. I see that picture from my dream last night. Gavin standing beside a white house with green shutters, a wraparound porch and endless grass as far as the eye can see on one side of it and on the other is the most breathtaking view of Lake Michigan. The clear blue waters turning reddish gold with the sunset. A beautiful little girl with brown hair and blue-gray eyes is holding out a single red rose for me and she smiles up at me, wearing a yellow sundress with white sandals like mine. I turn back towards Gavin and picture a little boy with his messy brown hair and my emerald green eyes running alongside him. Oh my God, a family. This, is ours.

Tears stream down my face and immediately Gavin reaches for me and lifts my chin until I meet his blue gray eyes filled with such unbridled love. He gazes down at me trying to read my expression and I smile, out of happiness and sheer joy knowing the dream now. Us. Gavin, he's my dream.

"It's so beautiful, Gavin. Is it ours?"

He grins, kissing my nose and then my lips softly before pulling away and nodding.

"I told you I'm going to give you my whole world, and then some. When I saw this property, the oak tree, the land, the meadow, the beautiful views of the Lake I grew up with, I knew this was perfect for us. I want to treasure you, to make all your dreams come true, this is just the beginning, baby."

He wipes my tears away and then kisses me, covering my mouth with his and as I grasp locks of his hair and he parts my lips with his glorious tongue, I know this is forever.

"Gavin, when did you do all of this?" I whisper seconds later as we walk up to the gazebo and Gavin stands beside it before taking my hands and kissing each of my knuckles in turn.

"Yesterday. I've been waiting and waiting to do this ever since I laid my eyes on yours, baby. But now, the time is right."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see people approaching from the far edge of the meadow and I turn towards them with curiosity. What is going on?

Gavin wraps strong arms around me from behind, brushes a strand of my hair away from my neck and puts his lips to my ear.

"I want you to know that we don't have to do this now. We can wait for as long as you want. We can have a big wedding with all the bells and whistles, but I didn't think that would be what you'd want.

We've missed so much time with each other and I think this is the perfect winter day for me to ask you to marry me. Right here, Beautiful. Marry me in front of all your family and our friends. My mom, your parents, Farah and her family are coming and isn't that all the people we need?"

His firm but tender voice trails off as he releases his arms from around my waist and lets me process all he's said. I begin to recognize people that are approaching. My dad, dressed to the nines in a black suit and tie. My mom, Kel, Farah, her sister Melanie and even Jenna with her younger brother, Damon are walking towards us. They are all coming. Joy and uncertainty fill my chest as the possibility of truly getting married today unravels in my mind. Did I want this? Even with the lingering questions in my head about how Gavin arranged this without me knowing, had my dad given him his blessing and who would officiate – all those questions seem to disappear the moment I turn around and meet Gavin's hope-filled eyes.

"Oh, Gavin. We're getting married, here? What about a big affair or a reception? Your family and –" Abruptly my outbursts are halted by the crash of his lips on mine, his tongue seeking passage into my mouth and the suppressed groan he gives me through our kiss. His hands come up to hold my head and I feel his smile against my mouth.

"My mom is here and so is Callie. You are here. I want to do this, to fully take you to be my wife in every sense of the word so that everyone here, in our lives, will know with complete certainty that you are mine. I will love you for the rest of our lives and if it's possible, I'll love you past forever, Aria. Just say yes."

The sincerity in his voice and the unbridled, unhindered affection in his gaze disintegrates all my doubts and questions, except for one.

"Did you ask my dad for his blessing? I know it might sound traditional, but respect is very important to him and for you to ask me without his consent, I – "

Gavin's face splits into a warm smile and he lifts me into his arms again.

"I did. He said all he asked was that I never lie to you or hurt you intentionally. He also said that if I ever hurt you in any way, made you feel inadequate or as if you're not enough, he would kill me with his bare hands."

My mouth drops open in surprise, though truly I know how protective my dad has been since last year and even before that, he's always protected me to the best of his ability.

I'm not all that surprised that he would threaten my future husband in his efforts.

Tears prick at my eyes and I lace my fingers around his neck and press my head to his chest. I love him so much.

"I love you," I whisper and I feel his smile against my hair.

"Is that a yes, baby?"

I nod eagerly and he gathers my mouth to his and kisses me breathless.

"I love you so much, Beautiful."

ThirtyEight

Kel pulls me away from the arms of my man moments before I see Elizabeth wrap her arms around him and speak softly to him. I know they deserve some time and I know I have to thank my sister and truly, everyone for helping make this wonderful day happen.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Honey? You can always change your mind. I know how much you guys have been through and we all just wanted to help make this day as special as possible. I hope you're not mad at me for keeping the secret from you."

My sister's big brown eyes fill with worry and I shake my head hastily.

"No! Please, Kel this is so wonderful for you to do for us. But how? Buying this land, getting an officiant and everyone to be here, today. How did you all do it?"

I watch as she worries her lower lip between her teeth before she grins knowingly and shrugs her shoulders.

"Honestly, Mom set a lot of it up. I helped schedule everyone's flights back home and ordered the dresses for us all. I picked one out that I think you'll love, come take a look."

I let her lead me over to the opposite side of the gazebo and when I see the white tent in the center of the land, I know she must have set these up for me. Gavin and the groomsmen can easily change into a shirt and tie without a tent or enclosed space but a bride needs her own space to dress and feel beautiful before she walks down the aisle. Will there even be an aisle? Somehow, with everything Gavin made happen to surprise me, to give me the world as he's said a hundred times over, I know there will be. I'm really getting married today. Joy and nervousness curl in my stomach and I have no doubts at all. I know this is the day I'll become Gavin's wife. The thought of that fills me with overwhelming happiness.

"Oh!" I gasp, Kel opens the tent for me and the first thing I see is an ivory white wedding dress hanging on a hook in front of where we stand. It has a laced bust and no sleeves. The fabric has to be either satin or something close to it, the details in the stitching are exquisite and I know that if we had gone to the bridal store ourselves, I would have chosen this exact dress. My sister kisses my cheek and her vibrant smile brightens her face. She's happy for me.

"I'll see you out there. Daddy will come soon, OK? Any doubts?"

I pull her into a hug and kiss her cheek gratefully for making this day happen.

"Not one. Thank you so much, Sis. I love you."

She grabs her purse and gives me one last squeeze.

"Love you back."

Daddy takes my hand and begins to lead me to a slow walk as my body begins to hum with excitement. The aisle is covered with red rose petals and each row of pews across the land is decorated with white silk and baskets of roses and lilacs. My dad secures his hand around my

waist and I place my hand in the crook of his elbow. He wears the same black suit with gray tie that he wore to my sister's wedding. He looks so handsome.

"Thanks for coming, daddy."

He smiles warmly down at me as we start down the aisle towards the love of my life.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world, pumpkin. You look beautiful today."

I kiss his cheek and then dart my gaze to Gavin's smoldering blue grays. He's wearing a gray suit jacket over a white button down shirt that showcases every line of the perfectly toned muscles of his chest and arms. His messy light brown hair is slicked back away from his face and his lips turn up into a wide smile the moment his eyes meet mine. Simmering heat fills the grays in his eyes and I know mine reflect the same love I see. My dad kisses the hand he's holding as we stop only a foot away from the steps leading to the gazebo where a beautifully decorated trellis adorned with lilacs and lilies is placed to make a breathtaking altar. It's dusk now, and the sunset reflects in Gavin's eyes offsetting his blueish gray with hues of deep oranges and reds.

"Be happy, pumpkin. I love you to the moon and back," My dad murmurs. Tears build in his eyes and I can't help the moisture that threatens in mine. I grasp his hand and kiss his cheek.

"I'll always be your little girl. I love you back, daddy."

He sniffs and wipes his eyes before leading me up the three steps painted a sheer white and places a firm hand on Gavin's shoulder.

"Remember what I said, Gavin. Take care of her."

My handsome man takes my hands in his and lifts them to his lips.

"I will, Mr. Morgan."

The moment my dad places my hand in Gavin's, electricity shoots through me. His eyes capture mine as he takes me in his arms and whispers into my hair.

"You are so beautiful, baby. You take my breath away."

I smile and lean back, squeezing his hands in mine. I mouth *I love you* and his answering smile would make my knees give out on me if it wasn't for my dad's strong arm secured around my middle. I smile up at him and kiss his cheek.

My dad smiles and retreats back to his seat as I step under the trellis with Gavin and stand before Reverend Jones, Farah's dad and the pastor who married Kel and Lucas. He also married my parents and I'm so happy that he's marrying us now. I look up into Gavin's deep blue eyes and see such love in them.

"I love you," he mouths to me and I feel his hand tighten in mine. A tear falls down my cheek as I mouth my love back to him. God. How is it possible to love someone so completely like this?

His smoldering blue gray eyes meet mine then as we stand before the pastor and all our family and friends. Somehow Kel and my mom were able to get seating for everyone to enjoy

the ceremony.

I take a deep breath just as the pastor begins speaking.

"We are all gathered here today to celebrate the blessed union of Gavin Andrew Thomas and Aria Georgia Morgan. Everyone, please take your seats."

I hear the bustle of about sixty people taking their seats and then the pastor asks for the rings. He blesses them and then tells Gavin to say the vows he wrote. His answering smile is ruggedly handsome, just like the first time we met. I wanted him then, maybe I even loved him and now, I love him even more.

I can't imagine my life without him.

"I Gavin Andrew Thomas take you Aria Georgia Morgan to be my lawfully wedded wife. To have and to hold from this day forward. To love and to cherish, through joys and through sorrows, in sickness and in health, for as long as I shall live. I will love you unconditionally, I will laugh with you and I will cry with you. I'll support you in all things and I'll never stray from our love. Aria, I'll be your world as long as you'll be mine."

He lays a hand on the side of my face and it feels as if his love is pouring into me in this moment.

As he finishes his vows, I grip his hands in mine and squeeze tightly as he gazes down at me with such love I could burst with it.

"Please place this ring on her finger and repeat after me," the pastor says, placing the golden wedding band in Gavin's palm. My breath catches in my throat when I see it. Emeralds encompass the band and its design is hued with golden swirls, all intersecting around to become one. It takes my breath away. Gavin smiles warmly down at me, never taking his eyes off mine as he speaks to me only.

"I give you this ring as a symbol of my love and fidelity."

He murmurs and slips it on my ring finger right behind the engagement ring he'd placed there only three weeks ago. Tears course down my cheeks as I squeeze his hand. It's my turn. I speak from my heart as I gaze up at the only man I've ever truly loved.

"Gavin. I think I loved you from the very moment I saw you. I tried again and again to put you off, but you saw right through my defenses. You always have. And now as I stand before you and our families, I pledge my heart to you. I vow to honor you and to keep you. Through happiness and through sorrows. In sickness and in health, for richer and poorer. Through the rough times and through the good. I will love you, cherish you, and I will never stray from the love you've given me. I promise to keep my heart open to your love, no matter what trials are thrown our way. And I'll love you unconditionally, along with any children we may have for as long as I shall live."

Commented [LD83]: ...as I stand

Tears fall down Gavin's face and he mouths "forever" to me. God, I love him more than I ever thought possible. I lift one of his hands to my lips and kiss his knuckles.

Pastor Jones hands me his ring. It's a solid gold band with a special engraving I'm sure my mom knew to get for us. It is one phrase we have repeated over and over through this journey we've had together.

Unconditionally. On the front of his ring, our initials are done beautifully. And as I slip it on his ring finger, I say the words with as much love and joy that I can.

"I give you this ring as a symbol of my love and fidelity."

Gavin takes a deep breath and then leans forward, cups my cheeks gently and leans his forehead against mine.

"Forever," he vows and I whisper it back to him, knowing I'm only seconds away from being his wife. *Wife. Mrs. Thomas*, God I love the sound of that.

"So with the power vested in me, I hereby pronounce you husband and wife."

Joy bursts through me, out of me. I wrap my arms around Gavin's neck and see his smile, the same one that cut through every wall I built around my heart all those months ago. Gavin's eyes fill with pure affection for me as he dips his head to capture my mouth in a slow, binding, heartwarming kiss that I feel all the way down to my toes. I'm his. Forever.

"Mine, wife," he murmurs, holding my face in his hands and I tighten my arms around his waist as I whisper back to him.

"Forever."

The breathtaking kiss he gives me is his promise.

Epilogue

One year later

Gavin

I slide the glass door open and lean my back against the doorway as I watch my beautiful wife work in the garden she insisted on planting herself. Between her dance school for girls and my striving business at Thomas, there really is no reason for her to have to spend countless hours planting and tending to a garden in the harsh sunlight of the morning. But soon after her mother came to see our new house, Aria had this idea of a large, complex garden that she could tend to as the years went on. It was something to do now that most of her summer classes were done at the school and the weather was getting cool enough to spend outside. Her determination amazed me and there was no way I was crushing her dream of this beautiful, colorful garden I see now. I watch as her long black hair sways into the wind behind her as she presses soil into the ground beneath her. Her skin is flushed from her time in the sun and she wears a sky blue sundress with a pair of dark sunglasses on the top of her head.

"I can see you watching me, Handsome."

She calls to me and I chuckle, surprised to be found out as I come towards her with a glass of sweet iced tea. Aria drops her shovel and gloves, stands and smiles warmly when she sees me approaching.

"Good morning." I hand her the cold glass and press a kiss to her forehead. I hear her soft sigh as she wraps her arms around my waist and leans her chin on my chest to look up at me.

"What's wrong, Beautiful?" I ask, seeing the cloud of sadness in her usually vibrant emerald eyes.

I know these last few weeks have been weighing on her and though I try to lift her spirits as much as I can, it's hard because I can't control what happens when we go to Dr. Hines, her gynecologist's office today.

It's been a long and joy filled year since we married in the gazebo only a few yards from this very house and only six months since we decided to start trying for a baby. But after months and months of failed pregnancy tests and seeing that disappointed look in my beautiful Aria's face, I insisted we make an appointment to find out what is going on. We needed answers.

"It's all going to be okay, baby. The doctor will tell us what we're doing wrong and then we can try again."

A small, sexy smile crosses her face as she lifts her hands to tangle in my too long hair and she bites her lip before she speaks.

"And try and try and try again?"

"Oh, yes. Maybe we're not doing it right."

I tease, though with all of the places and ways we've made love this past year, I highly doubt that.

"I'm pretty sure we are, what if something's wrong, Gavin? What if..."

Her voice starts to shake with her fear being spoken and I press her to my chest and dip my mouth and press a kiss to the top of her head as she rests her face in her favorite place.

"We'll find a way. I promise you."

I feel her nod against my neck and I squeeze her tighter, suddenly afraid myself.

Aria

I place Gavin's hand in mine across the arm rest of the Lexus and smile while I listen to him arguing with his younger sister on the phone. The minute she told me her plan to move in with her boyfriend instead of living in an off campus apartment like her parents wanted, I knew Gavin would have something to say about it. He is very protective of her and he doesn't really know Jude very well. Hell, none of us do.

"Look, I know you care for him Cal, but to move in with him? I just don't think..."

His voice trails off as it feels like my ears close up and suddenly my stomach turns in pain and I wince as I try to shift to my side in order to alieve the stomach ache I'm suddenly having.

"Aria? You okay?" His voice penetrates my ears again and my eyes shoot to his. The worry clouds the grays in them and I know he can probably see the discomfort in my face.

"I... God, I think I'm going to be sick. Gavin..."

My voice trails off as my throat begins to close up with the need to purge myself and I wrack my brain for anything I've eaten that could make me sick. I don't think of anything in the two minutes it takes him to swerve into the breakdown lane and off to the side of the road. My stomach begins to convulse, and shakes take over my body as I try to swallow the discomfort rising within me.

"Wait, let me get your door, baby. Hang on," he says, his deep toned voice filled with concern. I nod through blurry eyes and hold my stomach and breathe through my nose as Gavin comes across the cab and pulls me gently out of the seat to stand to the side of the road, near some bushes and greens. I momentarily feel bad that I'm about to be sick all over these beautiful plants but can't do anything about it before I heave and lurch forward toward the bushes.

Commented [LD84]: ...nod through...

Gavin's hand soothes up my back and to my hair where he holds it away from my face as I get violently sick for more than a few minutes. I cough and struggle to breathe even after the heaving stops and I feel his hand capture my nape in support.

"Breathe through your nose, baby. In and out, okay?"

I do as he says and soon the pain in my stomach starts to subside and I rest my arms against my kneecaps in an effort to catch my breath. God, *what is happening to me?*

"I'm taking you to the doctor." Gavin says as he helps me back into the passenger seat and I nod, knowing where we'd been headed before I asked to stop. His arms secure to my waist "I know, I hope we won't be late..."

Gavin abruptly shakes his head and I still see the worry in his blueish gray eyes.

"You were just sick for about ten minutes straight, baby. I'll worry even more if we don't at least let them check you out."

I meet his eyes and nod, though it's most likely a wasted trip. I could have gotten ill for any number of reasons; we probably have nothing to worry about.

"I really don't think that's necessary. But if it would ease your mind..."

Commented [LD85]: ..reasons;

"It will, Aria. Please, humor me."

A surprised laugh at his last comment bursts from my mouth and I nod. Letting him help me up, my lips tip up to a smile when I feel his mouth press to my knuckles.

"I always do, Mr. Thomas."

"Thank you, Mrs. Thomas."

Even after a year of being married, I still love the sound of that.

The on call doctor isn't Dr. Hines when we arrive at the hospital, but I'm still ushered in to a room and after a few tests of my vitals, blood pressure, and a blood test, the nurse leaves me to change. I pull my eyes from Gavin as he sits in the armchair across from the bed, scanning his eyes over me as if I have a physical injury he can see.

"What?"

He grins slowly and comes to stand in front of me as I lift the blue sundress I'd been wearing over my head and set it beside me. Holding up the flimsy hospital gown, he helps me put it on and secures his strong arms around my waist instead of tying it behind my back.

"You feeling okay, now?"

I nod and curl my arms around him, pressing my palm to the base of his neck and pulling his head down to meet my waiting lips. My mouth melds to his, his tongue escapes into mine and I try to show him how much I appreciate him in my kiss. A faint knock on the door makes a low groan emit from Gavin and he rests his forehead on mine.

"I'll wait outside for you. Or I can stay, baby. Whatever you need."

I hastily shake my head and gently push him towards the door as I tie the hospital gown closed. I see Gavin's eyes heat at the possibilities of taking it off me and I laugh as he opens the door for a tall, older looking woman who must be the doctor.

"I'll be fine. See you in a bit," I say just before closing the door behind him and turning to face the on call doctor. I'd much prefer my own doctor, but she must have been called away.

"Hello, Aria. I'm Dr. Lione. Let's see if we can figure out what's going on. I have your blood test results here. Why don't you take a seat?"

Her voice is soft and inviting, but a little spiral of worry, unease starts its way through me as I sit down on the bed and the doctor sits in a chair right in front of me.

"I can tell you that you are perfectly healthy, Aria. There is no sign of any sickness in your blood stream. Your vitals are good and you don't have any kind of fever. But, as a precaution I took the liberty to give you a pregnancy test. It came back positive."

Wait, what? That's not possible. At least I don't think it's possible. How many times have I gotten a negative reading on a pregnancy test?

"I can see this is a shock, just take a deep breath. Do you know when your last period was?" She asks, reaching out to take one of my hands in an effort to calm me. I think back the weeks since the last test I took which was... two and a half months ago. I haven't had a cycle since two weeks after that. Oh my God, it's possible. Hesitant joy courses through me at the thought of being pregnant.

"It was more than two months ago, two weeks after the last false test I took. My husband and I have been trying for this past six months and actually, we were on our way for a consultation with Dr.

Hines when I started to feel ill. Gavin insisted on bringing me in to be looked at."

"Well, I'd say that was a good idea. Mrs. Thomas, you're pregnant."

A smile bursts across my face at that news and my eyes begin to water.

"You're... you're sure? I don't think I could take another let down..."

Doctor Lione squeezes my hand and sets the test results on my lap to read for myself. There it is in bold print. *Positive*.

I don't think I've ever been this happy, but seeing those words in front of me banishes all my doubts from the last six months of trying and failing so very many times.

I'm pregnant. I'm pregnant with Gavin's baby. I'm having our baby...

"Thank you so much. I can't wait to tell him." Joy fills me as I hug the kind doctor and walk out toward the waiting room where I see my worried husband wringing his hands together as he paces up and down the small carpeted floor. His hair is mussed every which way where I know he's been running his hands through it as he does when he's worried for me. When he's worried, period.

"Baby, I'm fine. Let's go home."

At the sound of my voice Gavin comes right to me and pulls me against his chest, kissing my hair gently. His warm embrace makes the joy even stronger knowing I'm carrying his child, now.

"What did the doctor say?" he asks, pulling back from me to cradle my head in his hands the way he only does when he's worried about something happening to me. It's the same fear I saw flicker through his eyes that horrible day we lost Tessa and the idea of that, going through that again, it's my one true fear in all of this.

What if I lose this baby, too?

No, I tell myself. This is a gift, a blessing and I want to tell Gavin at the perfect time. I want him to be overjoyed and I know he will be. I take his hands and try to comfort him.

"She thinks it was a stomach bug. I'm feeling OK now. Take me home."

He nods and begins to lead me outside with his warm hand at the small of my back.

We have dinner at home with me seated between his legs as we eat Thai food that I'm hoping won't bother my stomach after this afternoon's episode. The moment Gavin excuses himself to

take a phone call, I hide behind the covers and slip my hands down to my nonexistent baby bump. It's crazy that I feel a sense of closeness the moment I touch the area where I know our baby will begin to grow.

"Hi, baby. I'm so happy you're in there. I love you so very much, already," I whisper, rubbing my belly tenderly, enjoying this new foreign feeling. I only come out of the covers when I hear my man on the phone with his mom. She's been so supportive of both of us this past year and I'm so thankful for that.

"I don't know, Mom. Maybe, Christ, maybe this isn't the right time. I mean, I'm in over my head at Thomas and she's still building the school up from the roots, maybe it's not the right time to have a baby."

Hearing him say that makes my heart drop into my stomach and stupid tears to well in my wide eyes. *Maybe it's not the right time to have a baby.*

I don't know what to do or how to feel after hearing that so I close my eyes and will myself to sleep.

I twist my fork over and over near the scrambled eggs, pancakes and grits that Gavin made me for breakfast this morning and even though I know I should be eating, especially after yesterday's news, I don't have an appetite.

"You're not eating, Beautiful," Gavin says as he pushes a curl of my hair behind my ear. I nod, not really meeting his eyes and it's not the first time this morning I've done this.

The loud clattering of silverware makes my eyes shoot to Gavin's angry ones and I don't get a word out of my mouth before he wraps his arm around my back and one under my knees and picks me up in a nanosecond.

"W-what are you doing, Gavin?"

He doesn't say anything as he strides into our bedroom, kicks the door shut and sits down against the headboard where he arranges me so I'm facing him. I cross my legs in front of me and fiddle with my hands as I look down at them. The look in his eyes says enough. He wants to know what's going on, but what am I supposed to say?

Hey, baby guess what? I'm pregnant and I know you don't want to have a baby with me anymore. That would go down really well. A part of me knows he'll be thrilled, but the whole time, I know I'll be wondering if he has doubts about this. About us. About having a family with me. Also, I'm pretty sure my hormones are getting the best of me.

"You tell me what's going on right now, Aria. We don't have secrets between us."

I stay quiet, hoping he'll let it go.

Nudging my face up with his finger underneath my chin, I see the concern in Gavin's blue gray eyes. I take one of his hands in mine and rub my thumb along his smooth skin.

"I heard you last night."

He tilts his head to the side and I can see he has no idea what I'm talking about.

"Last night, you were on the phone."

The blue gray eyes I've memorized ever since I laid eyes on them for the first time clear with understanding and then with sadness.

"Christ, I didn't mean for you to hear that, Aria, baby. Please let me explain."

I tug my hand from his and nod, though it sounded pretty clear to me with what he said last night.

"I want a family with you more than anything in this world. I dream of a little girl just like you or a little boy with your eyes and your smile. They would be perfect because they'd be ours. But watching you go through a never ending cycle of hope and disappointment these past few months is breaking my heart, baby. I want you to be happy; I want you to have everything you've ever wanted..."

A warm smile parts my mouth at the truth I see in his eyes. He never meant that he doesn't want kids with me. He wants them so much, but he is willing to put off having a family to give me back our life together. I catapult myself into his arms and kiss him with everything inside me. For a few seconds he just lies there, surprised, but then his hands grasp the hem of my sweatpants and pulls them down just enough so he can slip a hand inside my black laced panties and feel how aroused I am for him. God, I always am.

With a suppressed groan, Gavin pulls my bottom lip into his mouth and tugs, causing an ache in my core.

"You thought I didn't want a baby with you? You thought I would give up on our dream, Beautiful?" Gavin asks, his voice gravelly against my ear as he plunges two fingers into my opening just as I tighten my inner muscles in an effort to ease the ache there. I call out in pleasure and fervently shake my head.

"I don't know what I thought, Gavin. I was afraid maybe things had changed."

"Never," Gavin grits out, circling his hand in a way that reaches that one spot that makes me scream his name cathartically. "I'm giving you the world. This is only the beginning."

"You're right," I whisper, taking his hand from my core and pulling it to rest on my lower belly. Gavin's heated eyes shoot to mine and I see a cautious hope in them. "This is just the beginning. Our beginning."

Commented [LD86]: ..taking

Commented [LD87]: ..pulling

His eyes widen and he shakes his head subtly as he struggles to speak.

"Please tell me what you're telling me, baby. I don't want to jump to anything..."

I smile wide, happily at sharing this news with him and nod through tears of unfettered joy.

"Yes, Gavin. I think it's going to be a boy."

His deep blueish gray eyes fill with tears as he pushes forward and drops his face to my neck as he kisses me gratefully. His lips skim from my neck to my collarbone and lower still until his lips press so very tenderly to my lower stomach where our baby is growing.

"I love you, so fucking much Aria Georgia Thomas. And I love our baby already."

I run my hands lovingly through his messy brown hair and say it back to him.

He repeats my name over and over as if it's a prayer as he makes love to me and I know he is filled with as much joy as I am.

As I lie in the afterglow of the most passionate lovemaking I've ever experienced, I am crazily, blissfully happy.

Nine Months Later

"Aria, baby wake up."

Gavin whispers in my ear, waking me from what feels like the deepest sleep I've ever had. As I lift myself onto my elbows to look at him, I feel a shooting pain in my sides and lower stomach that makes my eyes fly open and my chest heave up and down quickly.

It's too soon.

Oh, God. It's happening.

"Gavin, I-"

I don't get any more words out as he is hovering over me and it's only then that I feel the sheets wet underneath me.

"I need to get you to the hospital, Beautiful. Your water broke."

Panic, joy, elation-it all floods through me and I let him help me out of bed and to my feet. He grazes his thumbs over my cheeks and his blue gray eyes melt to my green ones.

"Are you okay? How do you feel?"

I see the worry and concern and love in his steely gaze. I grasp his hands and place them on my belly, our little bear begins to hiccup and I press a soft kiss to his mouth.

"It's time. Are you ready for this?"

He smiles and nods, kissing me breathless before he kisses my forehead and wraps his arms around me.

"I can't wait to meet him, baby. I love you so much."

I lift my hands to his face, memorizing the joy in his beautiful eyes.

"I love you too."

Gavin rests his head beside mine on the hospital bed and I run my fingers through his hair. It shouldn't be long now and I treasure these last moments of quiet before we meet our baby boy for the first time.

When I feel another contraction coming on, I grasp his hand in mine and squeeze it through the pain. He wipes my tears away and presses a kiss to my forehead.

"What can I do, Aria? I hate seeing you in pain."

I lean my forehead against his and shake my head.

"Just having you here is enough, Gavin. Thank you."

He grazes his knuckles down my cheek and lifts one of my hands to his lips to kiss my knuckles.

"For what baby?"

"For loving me, having your love is everything I've ever wanted, Gavin."

He kisses me then, long and sweet and slow, pouring his love into our connection until I'm breathless.

"Always, baby. I'll never stop"

It seems like hours until Dr. Hines comes in and sits at the end of my bed. She smiles and another doctor brings in the epidural. Why I couldn't have it three hours ago, I'll never know. I insisted on it because I know I couldn't give birth without one.

"Okay, Aria. Sit up and grab the railing at the edge of the bed. It might sting a little." I nod, do as I'm told and Gavin kneels beside me, squeezing my hand in his.

"Breathe, baby."

I do and after a stinging sensation in my back, everything south of my waist numbs. Oh, that's better.

"Better?" he whispers. I nod and he kisses my forehead as he lays me back onto the bed. The doctors leave along with the two nurses.

I don't know how much time goes by as Gavin reads my favorite book to me, *Pride and Prejudice* and I breathe through the pain that builds up in my center every eight minutes. Gavin squeezes my hand and tells me how strong I am. I wish he knew that he's the one that makes me strong. His love.

When the contractions become much closer apart than before, Dr. Hines is called.

Gavin cups my cheeks and I know how much he wishes he could feel my pain for me. He loves me more than anything. He always had.

"I've got you, baby."

I nodded, pressed my mouth to his and reveled in the taste, the feel, everything about this moment. It was time to bring our baby into this world.

"Okay, Mrs. Thomas. Time to push. I want you to focus on Gavin as much as you can. Don't be afraid to squeeze his hand. You won't feel the pain, just pressure and you'll want to sleep. But you have to listen to your body and push when it tells you to. He's already crowning, are you ready, Aria?"

Gavin grasps my hand in his and his blue gray eyes fill with emotion.

"I'm ready"

I pull Gavin's head down to my lips and kiss him softly before whispering against his lips.

"Don't let go"

I hear the need in my voice and when he kisses my forehead, sits beside me and squeezes my hand tightly in his, it's his promise.

After much pushing, my body is wrung out. Physically exhausted and pushed past its limit, all I want to do is sleep. Gavin presses my fingertips to his lips and kisses them. He anchors me to him and when Dr. Hines tells me to push again, I feel the weighted pressure in my middle and I don't think I have the strength in me.

Commented [LD88]: Please don't take this the wrong way....but would they really let her push for four and a half hours? Just wondering...lol

"No.... I can't. I'm tired, I can't..."

I whimper taking in breath after breath, my tear filled eyes meeting his tortured ones. He presses his forehead to mine. I can feel the tremors in his body, his breaths. He is in just as much pain.

"One more push, Aria. And you can rest, I promise you," the doctor says, holding my legs.

I groan; pounding my free hand against the handrail.

"You can do it, baby. I'm right here. Squeeze my hand, take my strength. Push for me, Beautiful."

His voice is filled with concern, worry, love, excitement. I can hear it all inside of him and it gives me profound strength. I breathe in and squeeze his hand as tightly as I can as I push with all the strength inside of me. I push and I push, yelling out in agony as the fight leaves me and I collapse back onto the bed. When I hear the loud cries of our baby boy, they are the most beautiful sounds I've ever heard.

Oh.

My.

God.

Tears course down my cheeks and I begin to sob in joy and relief, clutching onto Gavin's hand as I let the tears flow unrestrained.

"He's beautiful, my sweet baby," he whispers, that endearment so tender in his voice. I look up at him to see his eyes filled with so many emotions.

"I love you with all my heart, baby. Thank you."

I smile through my tears and he kisses my lips gently, then my cheeks, my nose, my forehead, my eyes. He cherishes me.

"Would you like to meet him?"

A nurse asks, holding our little boy wrapped in a blue blanket. God, he's so small.

"Oh my God..." I whisper, a sob escaping me as she places him in Gavin's arms.

"6 pounds, 3 ounces, 21 inches. Perfectly healthy." I watch Gavin peer down to his son, grasping his hand where little bear grabs his thumb in his fist, holding tight and I swear my heart bursts with such joy.

"He's so beautiful." He's enthralled by our son, counting ten fingers and ten toes and kissing each of them. Our son begins to move around and cry, but Gavin rocks him gently in his arms, holding him to his chest and supporting his head with his hand, whispering to him.

"Shhh, daddy's here. I've got you."

I wipe at my tears and sit up, where Gavin sits beside me and lays our baby boy in my arms. He looks so much like Gavin that my heart bursts with love.

"Mommy's here, my sweet baby boy. I love you so much." I cradle him to my chest and kiss his forehead gently. Bright, unyielding love bursts from my heart and my very soul. He's just perfect.

"Welcome to the world, Gage Charles Thomas. We love you."

We talked about names for weeks, but when it came down to it, we named him after Jeremy and my father for his middle name. It fits him perfectly.

The nurses leave the room and we sit together on the bed just gazing down at our beautiful son.

"Are you happy?"

I whisper an hour later as Gavin holds Gage to his chest and rocks him to sleep. He looks down at me and smiles, leaning forward to kiss me.

"Yes, more than I ever thought possible, baby. I'll love you both forever."

I smile, feeling the same way as I grasp our baby boy's hand in mine.

And as I gaze down into the face of our beautiful baby boy, I know, this is home. I know this is true. This is real. This is our happy ending. It may not have been filled with as much happiness as it was sorrow, pain and loss, but we got here. And it was worth every second to have this moment right here, right now. It was worth it all to fall in love with this man over and over again, every single day from this point on.

The End

Play list

Angel ~ Martina McBride

Aria remembers her baby girl at Marley's Cove

I Won't Give Up ~ Jason Mraz

Dance after Aria and Gavin's wedding

500 Miles ~ Sleeping At Last

Gavin's heartache being away from Aria.

A Thousand Years ~ Christina Perry

Aria's love for Gavin as they're separated

Say You Do ~ Dierks Bentley

Proposal at the gazebo on the land Gavin bought for his beautiful Aria

Give Me Love ~ Ed Sheeran

Aria's vows to Gavin

Stay With Me ~ Sam Smith

Gavin's vows to Aria

I Will Always Love You ~ Whitney Houston

Aria's dream of Tessa Lynn after losing her.

Love Me Like You Do ~ Ellie Goulding

Aria asks Gavin to love her again after three months of being away from him

All of Me ~ John Legend

Slow dance at Kel and Lucas' wedding where Gavin tells Aria he wants to marry her someday.

Tonight (Best You Ever Had) ~ John Legend

Gavin makes love to Aria after his accident

Forever and Always ~ Parachute

Aria waiting for Gavin to wake up after his accident

Gravity ~ Sara Bareilles

Aria's struggle to believe in Gavin after her seeing him with Jasmine

She is Love ~ Parachute

Gavin thanks God for Aria's love after he almost lost her

Magic ~ Coldplay

Aria and Gavin in the car after his accident

The Scientist ~ Cold play

Aria's struggle to make her way back to Gavin after her miscarriage

A Note from the Author

Amanda Kaitlyn is a new and up and coming author of contemporary romance. Finding Beautiful is her first work. If she isn't writing or developing her characters, you can find her in front of her kindle or spending time with her family and friends. When she's not writing, she is a coffee loving barista and a good listener to her friends. Writing has always been her passion.

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