

# Careless and Reckless

Author not credited

STORYPDF

Complete English text · US Letter reading edition

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# About this edition

This StoryPDF reading edition contains the complete English text, with its original paragraph and section order preserved.

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# Chapter 1

1 year ago

It was their one year anniversary today. James and Aurora, the school's 'it' couple were celebrating it with a surprise date planned by James.

She was flustered and nervous. The boy she loved would be knocking on her front door any moment.

Love. She really did love him but hadn't figured out how to tell him. She'd known for a few months but could never find the right words to say.

She was worried he wouldn't take it seriously and think she just meant love like how a twelve-year-old says it. No, she meant it for real; she was in love with James. She was completely in love with him and wanted to spend the rest of her life with him. He was the one. She just knew it.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

"Shit," Aurora cursed, jumping in fright. She smoothened out her dress before walking towards the mahogany door that separated her and James.

She carefully opened it to reveal her handsome boyfriend with a bouquet of roses in his hands. He was just as dashing as ever, with his ash brown hair that could never be fully tamed and warm brown eyes that always lit up at the sight of her.

He smiled when he saw his gorgeous girlfriend, his features overcome with joy. "You look stunning, princess," James said in awe.

She blushed at his compliment. She always did but that didn't stop the smile on her face.

You could tell just by looking at the two that they were in love, both always smiled their biggest smiles around one another and always seemed to glow whenever they were together.

He had not told her he loved her as he too was worried that she wouldn't think he meant it but he did. He meant it with all his heart; she was his one and only and he wanted to be with her forever. Today was the day, the day he would finally man up and tell the stunning girl before him just how much he loved her.

Sure they were only sixteen but that didn't mean that they didn't know that they wanted to spend the rest of their lives together.

Age was just a number and these two didn't care that they were young because they were in love.

~\*~\*~

Now

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Fuck me. It's the first day of school.

Just one more year of torture and I'm free. Just one more year.

With this thought in mind, I force my eyes open only to be welcomed by never-ending rays of sunlight, meaning I must have forgotten to close my curtains last night, great.

Begrudgingly, I lift my sheets off of me and place my feet on my carpeted floor. You can do this, Ari, just one more year.

"Aurora, breakfast's ready sweetie, come downstairs," my mother calls.

"Coming," I reply, groggily making my way to the kitchen.

"What's for breakfast?" I ask sitting opposite my younger brother and sister, Hugo and Alice; they're fraternal twins.

If you haven't noticed, my parents are slightly obsessed with Disney, naming me after Princess Aurora from Sleeping Beauty; my sister after Alice from Alice in Wonderland and my brother after the gargoyle from the Hunchback of Notre Dame. Now although my name is the most flamboyant out of the three it is Hugo's that I find funny, I mean he was named after a gargoyle for god's sake. Who does that? My parents that's who.

"Pancakes," my mum says grinning. "Seeing as it's your first day back I thought I'd give you all a little treat."

I squeal in excitement, kissing my mum on the cheek. "Thanks, you're the best."

"I know. Now hurry up you need to leave in the next thirty minutes and you're not even dressed."

I swallow my food in just a few bites so I can get ready on time, I don't want to be late on my first day.

I need to look somewhat decent so I start rummaging through my wardrobe. I find a cute olive green crop top and some faded high waisted skinny jeans. I let my hair fall naturally and apply minimal makeup. I don't like to wear too much on a daily basis, just some mascara and concealer.

By the time I trudge down the stairs and slip into my black converse I hear my ride outside so I grab my backpack from next to the door and rush outside. "Bye mum, see you later."

"Bye sweetie enjoy your first day." Not a chance.

The car continues to honk. "I'm coming, I'm coming, sheesh woman," I snap at my best friend, Ava.

She just laughs. "Come on, Ari, we don't want to be late."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," I mutter as I slam the car door behind me and we immediately we zoom off, only mere minutes away from hell's gates.

"From the way you're driving it seems like you actually want to go to school."

Ava looks at me weirdly from the corner of her eye, tapping her fingers impatiently on the steering wheel as she waits for the traffic light to change colour. "What? Nah. I just want to get my schedule before the line gets massive."

"Oh yeah, I forgot about that. I hope we have some classes together this year, last year we only had one."

"I know, can you believe it but we did have classes with Max and Mason."

Max and Mason are the two others that make up our tight knit friendship group. We're actually all part of a bigger group but, in particular, us four are very close. We were all thrown into the same form room when I moved here year in nine and have been inseparable ever since.

"True. Speaking of which, have you spoken to either of them today?" I ask.

"Nope but we'll see them at lunch though so we can catch up then."

Since we're a little early Ava managed to get a parking spot near the front which means less walking, hell yeah.

The line wasn't too long, thank god, only about fifteen people in front of us but there's still no sign of the boys but after about ten minutes the aforementioned devils finally appear. "Hey girls," they say in unison in a way that's almost creepy.

"Hey," I grin at them. "How were your summers? I feel like haven't spoken to either of you since before I went on holiday."

I went to Barcelona for two weeks at the end of August so I haven't spoken to the boys since then and I only caught up with Ava yesterday.

"Great," they both say in unison yet again.

"You guys need to stop doing that it's plain weird," Ava says, voicing my thoughts.

Neither of them bother to reply and instead pull us both into a tight hug. "I missed you both. We haven't all got together as a group since the beginning of August," Mason says, breaking the silence as he pulls away from the hug.

Mason is the more academic of the two boys. He has chestnut brown hair with amber eyes. I know, it's quite unusual. It's not every day you meet someone with such a different eye colour. He's the smartest in our group, only by a little bit but he never lets us forget it. As well as being smart, Mason is also athletic but nowhere near as athletic as Max.

Max is the sportiest in our group. He has dark brown hair and mesmerising grey eyes. He's still smart but he spends most of his time focused on sports instead of books. Being a sports player comes with perks and for Max, it's his body. It's very well toned and as a result he has most of the girls and a few guys in our school fawning over him. To top it all off, he's let all the attention go to his head and by that I mean he has an enormous ego. Although that can be very annoying I know he means well and most of the time he's just kidding around.

You already know Ava. She has honey blonde hair and warm brown eyes. She's the most social and outgoing out of all us, closely rivalled by Max and is also an amazing cheerleader with gymnastics skills and flexibility second to none.

Finally, there's me. I'm a brunette with green eyes — I know, nothing like princess Aurora, my parents probably should've thought that through better. I don't know what I'd be classed as in my group of friends. I'm the second smartest and quite athletic; you'd have to ask them.

I'm not the most social person out there, I know that. I've always been a bit shy. I don't have crippling anxiety or anything but I'm not the most comfortable around new people. If I know someone I'm myself but if I don't I'm a bit closed off. It's not intentional but I can't help it., it's just the way I am I suppose.

"Yeah, this is not acceptable," Max pipes in. "We're having a movie night at Ari's tonight, no excuses."

"Why my house?"

"Because you're the reason we haven't all hung out in ages," Ava points out. Curse logic.

"Fine," I grumble, giving in.

"Awesome," all three of them say together.

By the time our conversation is over it's our turn to get our timetables.

"Ava Williams, Aurora Kelly, Maxwell Rivers and Mason Lewis," Ava chirps to the lady behind the desk who merely grunts in response.

She hands us our schedules and then barks at us to move, rude bitch.

After moving my eyes scan my schedule but as I'm studying it, Ava snatches it from my hands.

"Hey, what was that for?"

She doesn't respond and instead glances from my timetable to hers. "We only have religious studies and biology together," she pouts.

"It's still one more than last year," I point out, trying to lighten her mood.

"I guess."

"Mase, Max what about you guys?"

Before they can reply Ava grabs their schedules too.

"Let's see, I've got maths with you Mase and I've got English with you Max," I tell them both as I look over Ava's shoulder to see their timetables.

On top of my four subjects, I also do art after school but only recreationally because there was no room in my timetable for it and five subjects would have killed me but I still love it to bits. It is one of my favourite subjects because you can just relax and de-stress and it's very therapeutic.

I finally get my timetable back from Ava's clutches and we're about to start walking to RS together when I hear a familiar voice speak from behind me. "Hey Ari, can I speak to you?"

I snap my head around to see the soft brown eyes of my boyfriend, James. I haven't seen him for two weeks, due to me being on holiday, but he's just as handsome as ever. His eyes have this stunning shine to them that just makes me melt and I can happily say I've fallen in love with those eyes as well as the rest of him.

I know it's crazy to say that you love someone so young but it's true. I've known since I was sixteen and I'll never forget the day I told him. It was our one year anniversary, I knew I had to tell him, I'd been putting it off for months because I was scared of his reaction but I did it and I can honestly say it was one of the best decisions of my life.

\*FLASHBACK\*

The two were having a lovely candlelit dinner together in a secluded area of Aurora's favourite restaurant.

The night had gone perfectly, every aspect of it was just magical but the most important part about it for both of them was the fact that the person they loved was sitting in front of them, eyes shining and smiling like there was no tomorrow.

Nothing could ruin this night. WW3 could have started right then and they'd still be smiling, that's how perfect everything was for these two.

The only problem was neither of them had the courage to tell the other just how they felt about them. They wanted to desperately but fear had taken over, stopping them from speaking those three words that they meant with every fibre of their beings.

Enough was enough, they'd hidden how they felt for too long. No matter what they were going to tell each other the feelings that were screaming to be displayed.

"Princess, there's something I need to tell you," James said in his softest voice. He always called her princess, it was his special name just for her, considering she was named after a princess it just fit.

Aurora smiled when she heard the nickname she loved hearing from his lips. "And there's something I need to tell you, James," she said, her voice also soft and gentle.

Both were terrified of this moment but held themselves together, the presence of each other seemed to calm them down greatly.

"How about we both say it together on the count of three?" James suggested.

She nodded so they counted down together.

"1"

"2"

"3"

"I love you," they both said in unison.

Nothing in the entire world could even begin to describe the happiness those two felt in that moment. Everything was just perfect and nothing could change that.

\*FLASHBACK OVER\*

(Play song now)

I smile at him. "I'll catch up with you guys later," I tell my friends.

They nod and begin to walk off and I hear Ava say "see you in RS" before she goes out of earshot.

James motions me over to follow him down the corridor.

"Hey you," I say as we begin walking.

"Hi Ari," he replies, stiffly. He's being quite quiet and a little hostile and that's pretty unusual for him.

"So it's our two year anniversary two weeks today," I remind him, trying to start a conversation.

He scratches the back of his neck, avoiding eye contact. "Yeah."

"Are you alright? You're not being your bubbly self. Did something happen, oh my god s-"

"Nothing happened," he starts quickly, effectively cutting me off as he carries on walking down the narrow corridor, his pace quickening.

"James," my voice is sharp, gaining his attention, making him slow down. "What's wrong, why are you barely talking and not looking at me?" Usually, he's one of the most outgoing and chatty people I know, he never shuts up. He's also not stealing glances at me, he always does that; he thinks that I don't notice but I do.

He's normally so lively and energetic, it's something I really admire about him. He can always brighten my mood or just make me feel better because he just has that positive aura. But right now I don't feel happy like I usually do when he's around, instead, I feel anxious and worried, something's up.

He sighs. "I've been debating how to tell you something Ari but I'm not sure how," he confesses. Something about the way he says that makes my stomach twist uncomfortably but I try to ignore it; I'm sure it's nothing.

"Just come out and say it."

He pauses to think for a moment. "Alright. I want to break up."

Huh?

What?

No... I must've heard wrong but my stomach continues to flip violently, almost as if telling me that I didn't.

A nervous laugh escapes my lips. "Sorry, James, could you repeat that. I think I misheard you." Please say I did.

He runs his fingers through his ash brown locks, "Ari, I'm afraid to say you didn't. I'm breaking up with you."

So it wasn't me being deaf, he did say that.

It felt as though I forgot how to function for a few moments, like my world just flipped — and not in a good way. I knew something was wrong but I could have never imagined this.

James, someone I care about so deeply just shattered my heart. Someone I let get close to me after building my walls so high just destroyed a part of me.

I broke my golden rule for him: never let people close enough to hurt you. I should have listened to my head not my heart. I was so stupid, how could I let feelings cloud my better judgment?

However, one question ringed throughout my mind, "Why?" I reply meekly.

"Well," he starts, continuing to avoid eye contact, "It's just... you're a bit boring." Ouch.

Boring.

He doesn't stop there "Things don't feel the same as they used to. There's no passion between us anymore; I feel too safe. It's like we're old and stale. I'm too young for that. I need adventure and fun. I'm so sorry Aurora but you're just not daring and reckless enough for me." Way to rub salt into open wounds.

Is that how he feels? I'm too safe? Too boring? Not fun?

"Why did you take so long to realise this? Why couldn't you tell me sooner? It's been almost two years for god's sake," I say, unintentionally raising my voice. That bastard. He let himself get close to me when he knew he wasn't happy with me!

His face holds a pained expression. "I don't know. I guess I've been thinking about this for a while but I thought that I could get over it, turns out I can't. You don't understand how awful I feel, Ari, but I can't be with you. I hope you can understand." After saying this he begins to walk away but before he can I grab onto his wrist.

"So that's it. Did I really mean so little to you?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper as I concentrate on keeping the tears from falling. I will not cry in front of him. I'm stronger than that.

He turns to face me. "No Aurora," he tells me, sounding deadly serious. "Don't you dare even think that. You meant more to me than you'll ever know. I loved you and a part of me always will. You were and always will be my first love. I cared about you so much, I still do, but you just don't make me happy anymore. I'm sorry," his voice cracks a little at the end as he jerks his wrist out of my hold and walks away.

I just got dumped by my boyfriend for being too plain and boring.

James just broke up with me.

I'm not in a relationship anymore.

I keep repeating similar phrases to help it sink in. Once it finally does my heart sinks before shattering into a million pieces.

Without caring about being late for class, I hurry to the girls' toilets to cry my eyes out. I cry and cry and cry...

## Chapter 2

I know it's pathetic to cry but I don't care. James just broke up with me. Two years of my life wasted on him. Sure it was only a high school romance but it felt like so much more. I truly believed that I had fallen for him and I thought that he felt the same way. I guess I was wrong.

He never cared about me. If he did this wouldn't have happened. He probably didn't even like me, I mean he did describe me as:

Boring.

Safe.

Stale.

No fun.

Not daring.

Not reckless.

These were his words. He said these harsh things.

He doesn't think I know how to enjoy myself and I guess he felt as though I couldn't give him what he wanted. I can't blame him for that. As much as it pains me, if I don't make him happy I don't make him happy, simple as that. It doesn't stop it hurting like a bitch though.

They say that if you love someone you should let them go. Whoever came up with that is an idiot. It's nowhere near as easy as it sounds. It's almost like saying if you're happy, give up what makes you happy. It doesn't really make sense in the grand scheme of things.

How am I supposed to give up the love of my life? How am I supposed to just move on? How am I supposed to be that selfless?

Sure, I want him to be happy, in fact, his happiness is more important to me than my own but I don't think I can let him go.

I value him above myself and I thought he felt the same.

I would have taken a bullet for him, I still would, and I thought he felt the same.

I would have done anything in my power just to see him smile and I thought he felt the same.

It turns out I was wrong. He didn't feel the same.

I guess that to make him smile I need to let him be with someone who can make him that happy. That person is not me. No matter how much I wish it was, it's not.

James. I really cared about him, I still do, but my feelings aren't going to be reciprocated. Face it Aurora, he's not going to suddenly turn around and say 'gotcha' is he? He's gone and I need to look past him. I need to move on. I know I need to but I don't think I can.

Many people have said that everyone only has one true love. James was mine, I'm sure if it. I hope that one day I'll find another but I doubt it. If I was only meant to ever have one love I've already experienced mine.

I hope fate is kind. I hope I'm given a second chance. Love is a crazy thing with no determined direction; it could suddenly change path or just stop completely. The scary thing is we have no control over it.

After a few more minutes of letting the tears stream down my cheeks, I walk over to one of the sinks and splash some cold water onto my face so it doesn't look like I've been crying. I look up at my reflection to see that my eyes are still red and puffy but my cheeks don't look tear stained anymore so I think I'll be okay.

As I walk through the empty corridors to religious studies class I try to clear my mind. Breathe Ari, you've got this. Using all the courage I possess, I open the door only for it to creak violently, causing everyone's attention to be drawn to me, fantastic.

"And what sort of timing do you call this, Miss Kelly?" my teacher, Mr Johnson, asks irritably.

"Sorry sir, girl problems," I reply. That shuts him up. Learn from this — if you're ever late for class or want to leave early and you have a male teacher just remind them of a certain female thing and they'll let you do whatever without further discussion. It works every time.

His cheeks visibly redden and he looks slightly flustered. Clearing his throat he says, "Right, yes, just don't let it happen again."

The whole class sniggers at his obvious discomfort as I smugly make my way to my seat next to Ava.

"Why the fuck are you late?" Ava hisses at me while Mr Johnson continues with the lesson.

Shit, what do I say? I need to tell her but do I really want to tell her right now when she'll most likely flip out in front of the whole class?

"Wait, have you been crying? Ari, tell me, what's wrong," she demands softly, her voice laced with concern.

Well it looks like the cat's out of the bag, besides she'll keep pestering me until I tell her anyway.

"Jamesbrokeupwithme," I say, too quickly for her to understand.

"Huh?"

"Um, well, James and I sorta broke up," I whisper.

"WHAT!" she screams, scraping her chair back as she stands up, gaining everyone's attention.

"Miss Williams, what do you think you're doing?" Mr Johnson snaps, glaring at Ava.

"Sorry sir, girl problems," Ava says, mimicking my previous statement, while grabbing my wrist and yanking me out of the classroom door.

Before I can protest, Ava begins sprinting through corridors and downstairs, holding my wrist all the while, until we're in the same toilets I was crying in earlier.

Once we've finally stopped, Ava turns to me and begins to glare, "Alright missy, explain."

I take a huge breath and tell her everything, from our conversation to me crying in the toilets.

Once I've finished I look at Ava dead in the eye, waiting for her reaction. At first, her face holds a blank expression but it soon turns to one full of sympathy.

"Oh, Ari, I'm so sorry, come here," she says softly, pulling me into a tight hug.

"Don't apologise. It's not your fault," I murmur, trying to contain my emotions but as soon as she wraps her arms around me I place my head in the crook of her neck and let the tears fall once again. This feels better than before. Having my best friend here makes this so much easier. I may still feel like shit but just having someone you care about there to comfort you makes all the difference.

We stay like this for a while, me crying and Ava just letting the mascara-stained tears drip onto her blouse, holding me in a comforting manner. This is one of the many great things about my best friend, she's always there for me no matter what, through thick and thin I can count on her.

Once I finally finish, I wipe away the remaining tears with the back of my hand and look up at her.

"Are you okay now, Ari?"

I nod at her. "Yeah, I feel better now. Thank you, Ava."

She smiles at me. "Anytime. Ari, don't waste any more tears on him, he's not worth it." But he is.

I wish it was that easy. I wish I could just not feel anything for him anymore. I wish I could just move on. But it isn't and I can't.

"Ari, I know it's supposed to be movie night tonight but I'm sure the guys would understand if you didn't want to do it."

I shake my head. "No Ava. I'm not letting him dictate my life. Sure I'm still hurt, I'm hurting a lot but sitting around and moping isn't going to do shit. Besides a movie night will be a welcome distraction from the whole ordeal," I tell her firmly.

~\*~\*~

The rest of the day flew by. I promised myself I'd pay attention in the rest of my classes to make up for basically ditching all of religious studies.

Now school is over but I'm staying behind for art, my guilty pleasure. It doesn't count as one of my A levels, I just do it because I want to but I still love it all the same.

"Alright everyone since this is our first session of the year and I want everyone to do a free paint so I can see how you're all doing," Mrs Clark, the art teacher, says.

I can feel a grin spreading across my face, finally, I'll be able to express my feelings without any restrictions. I've had so much on my mind and I can finally let it all out and express myself through the paint. It sounds crazy, I know, but honestly, it's actually extremely therapeutic.

"Any questions? No? Good. Chop, chop, get to work."

Without any protest, I grab an apron and tie my hair back so I can get started.

I pick up my pallet and brush and I feel myself begin to relax so I sigh in contempt. Art has always made me feel better, it's my coping mechanism for my problems, just letting your mind run free and do what it wishes is an exhilarating feeling.

In each stroke of the brush, I'm letting out my feelings. You think I'm boring? Stroke. You think I'm no fun? Stroke. You can't be with me anymore? Stroke.

I carry on like this for a while, freeing myself from my emotions, letting them run wild and do their own thing.

"Okay everyone, time is up so we'll carry on with these tomorrow," Mrs Clark says, awakening me from my trance.

I carefully place my canvas in the drying area and wash off my brushes. I take my hair out of the ponytail and begin to exit the classroom but not before saying, "Thank you, Mrs Clark, I really needed this."

She smiles a warm smile at me. "Of course dear, you're welcome."

I grab my books from my locker and head over to Ava's car, only to be met with a very pissed off looking blonde, looking at her designer watch in annoyance, her arms crossed.

"How long does it take," she snaps irritably when she spots me.

I just shrug my shoulders in response.

Without speaking any further we both get into her car and I hear Ava huff in annoyance when she does.

After driving in silence for five minutes she finally snaps. "Damn it, I can't stay pissed at you, it's too boring. Let's forget that I'm mad but don't do this again, it's really annoying. Anyway-"

Boring, that's what James said, maybe I really am boring. I can't be boring, I don't want to be. I'll show him and everyone else, I'm super adventurous and outgoing, he'll see, they'll all see.

"Hello, earth to Ari," Ava says, taking one of her hands off of the steering wheel and waving it in my face to gain my attention.

"Sorry Ava, what were you saying?"

She sighs. "I was just asking how your day was."

"You know, same old same old. I did have art though and that made me feel so much better after everything that's happened."

"Ah yes, how could I ever forget about your obsession with art," she chuckles and our small talk continues for the rest of the short drive so before I know it we're back at my house. "Ari, all three of us will be here at eight okay?"

I nod my head. "Yeah, eight is good."

"You sure you're okay? I mean, who am I kidding? I know you're not but are you coping well enough? I tell you what, let's have a sleepover tonight after the boys leave. I'll do the ex-boyfriend ritual thing with you, I've never had the chance before, it's always been you doing it to me but-"

"Ava," I say, stopping her rambling. "Calm down. Sure. Let's have a sleepover, to be honest, I could really do with it, besides I kinda need you at the moment."

She gives me a sad smile. "You got it, Ari, girls night after the boys leave." Her voice is cheerful now as she tries to lift the depressing atmosphere. She's quite considerate and sweet like that.

"See you at eight."

"Eight," I say, nodding as she drives off.

What a day.

I walk into my house and am met with the smell of my mum's delicious cooking.

"Aurora sweetie, is that you?" my mother calls from the kitchen.

"Yeah," I reply, following the beautiful aroma of food.

"How was school, sweetheart?"

How do I explain this? Here goes...

## Chapter 3

Let me tell you something, mum was not happy. She said that if she ever saw James again that he'd no longer have his manhood. My mum's scary, I know.

On the plus side she's making a chocolate cake for me to make me feel better — she really is the best.

I didn't get any homework today, hallelujah, so I just relaxed until eight. By that I mean I slept, don't judge me today was emotionally draining so I deserved that sleep.

"Aurora," I hear my mother call, "your friends are here, come down sweetie."

Groaning to myself, I hop out of bed and fix my hair before making my way to the living room.

"Hey guys," I say to my friends, who have already made themselves comfortable on the sofas, Max even has a bowl of popcorn.

"Hey."

"Hi."

"What's up."

I plonk myself down on the sofa with Max and place my head on his lap while snatching the popcorn out of his grasp.

"Oi," Max whines. "That was mine."

I stick my tongue out at him. "Stop acting like a little kid and share."

Max grumbles to himself but doesn't reply.

"So what movie are we watching?" Ava asks.

"Dunno, it's Ari's turn to choose," Mason says.

"Yay!" I squeal, grabbing the remote. "It's Disney time bitches."

All three of them groan in unison and Mason gives me a dirty look. I just smirk at their displeasure as I get up to look through my immense collection of Disney movies.

You can't blame me for loving Disney. I mean I named after a freaking Disney princess for crying out loud. I grew up watching everything Disney countless times — thanks to my mum, who shares my passion — so naturally I love it.

My eyes scan the endless number of DVD's in front of me until they land on one that catches my eye. I pick up the case, relishing in the fond memories that came with it, it's probably one of my all time favourites and that's saying something.

After putting the disk in I jump back onto the sofa, making Max to bounce on it and glare at me. I gave him a sheepish smile as I press play.

Once it starts, all three of them groan again. "Oh come on. You can't hate this one, especially the beginning, it has one of the strongest openings ever! CinemaSins even removed five sins right off the bat for the opening," I tell them.

Mason sighs, scratching the back of his head. "It's not that it's not a good movie Ari-"

"Yes, it is," I heard Max mutter so I whack his arm, causing him to go silent.

"-it's the fact that you've made us watch it too many times, more than I can count on both of my hands and feet."

I guess that's a fair point but it's such a good movie. Besides, it's my choice so we will watch it, there's no way he's winning this argument.

"Does it look like I care? It's my turn so we're watching it. I have to put up with all of your dumb movies so I'd appreciate it if you extended me the same courtesy — I'm not saying Disney movies are dumb just to clarify."

Mase is about to protest but I notice Ava nudge him with her elbow and shoot him a look, probably because she knows what I was going through and thinks Disney will cheer me up.

Mason sighs but put his hands up in defeat and I give Ava a grateful smile.

Happily, I rest my head on Max's lap and we watch the whole movie. I sing along to every song, obviously. Even Max and Ava sing to a few of them as well and Mason, let's just say he belted out all of 'I just can't wait to be king' like there was no tomorrow — see, no one can hate Disney. (If you haven't guessed we're watching the Lion King.)

After the movie was over I smiled widely at the three people in the room with me who I call my friends. "I knew you guys secretly loved this movie, I mean it's a classic how could you not?"

Max glares playfully at me as he messes up my hair by rubbing my head. I roll my eyes in return but he just grins back at me. He then gets up, dusts his jeans and says, "I'm going to take a piss," and leaves the room.

A look of disgust crosses Ava's face as she yells "TMI!" But Max just laughs from another room.

"Ari, can I ask you something?" Mason says, getting up from the other sofa. I nod and he studies my face carefully before continuing. "What's wrong? And don't give me that bullshit answer of 'I'm fine' or 'nothing' because I can tell that something happened, I can see it on your face."

Mason. Always so observant, can't get anything past him plus I guess the look Ava gave him earlier made it kind of obvious.

I sigh and run my fingers through my dark hair a couple of times, making it even messier than it already is. "I just had a shit day today because James broke up with me."

I can't recognise all the emotions that cross his face but I manage to pick out two: sympathy and anger. Anger being the dominant expression by far.

To be honest, anger was an understatement, he looks absolutely furious, to the point where you could imagine smoke coming out of his ears. His jaw clenches and from the corner of my eye, I see him bawling his hands into fists. To be clear, Mason isn't a violent person, not in the slightest and there are very few things that can set him off, but like everyone he has his limits — things that just make him snap — and, I guess, this is one of them.

His eyes are fixated on me and it feels like they are piercing through my very soul. "What did you say?" he asks, surprising softly for his mood set but the anger behind his soft words is obvious, giving them a threatening edge. I'd never admit this to him but Mason can be a hell of a scary guy when he wants to be.

I feel myself shrinking into a corner as he gives me that look that says 'don't you dare lie to me'. "I said that James broke up with me."

He takes deep breaths, trying to calm himself but it doesn't seem to be working very well. He very slowly turns to Ava. "You knew about this and didn't tell me?" It was more like a statement than a question.

Ava just shrugs, she's a lot better at dealing with Mason than me — to be honest, she's a lot better at dealing with people than me in general — she's very headstrong so doesn't get intimidated anywhere near as easily as I do.

"Why the fuck didn't you tell me?!" he screams, letting out some of his frustration.

"Because it wasn't my place to tell, it was Ari's," she responds calmly. Damn if I were her I'd be shouting at him for screaming, how does she do this?

His anger dies down slightly at her words. He stares at her intensely and she returns his look with equal force, they stay like that for a while, it's almost like they're having a silent conversation with just their eyes.

After a few minutes he turns to me again and runs his fingers through his very tightly curled hair. "Ari, I get why you might not have wanted to tell us but I want you to know that you shouldn't feel that way. I'm here for you no matter what because you're my friend and I care about you. Hell, even Max cares about you in his own... special way."

I give him a small smile. "I know, Mase, and trust me when I say I was going to tell you soon but just not right away. I guess it hasn't really sunk in yet. Two years is a long time and I was just processing it all. If I say it out loud it's confirming that it's true and that's difficult, it's really fucking difficult."

Mason's eyes don't stray from mine throughout my entire speech like he was holding onto every word I said and every emotion that came with each sound.

Without warning, he steps towards me and hugs me and I immediately relax into the embrace. It feels so comforting and puts me at ease, like no matter what happens Mason will be there and I need that, I really do.

Once we pull apart I see something pass over Ava's eyes but I can't decipher it as it's only there momentarily so I dismiss it. Before I know it I'm being pulled into another embrace, this time by Ava, and again I relax immediately. "We'll always be here Ari, remember that," she whispers soothingly.

"I will," I reply as we pull apart.

Behind me, I suddenly hear a ninja cry. Wait. What?

Before I can even turn around, something hard collides with my back and strong arms wrap around my waist tightly, engulfing me.

"Max," I whine as his grip gets tighter. "You're squeezing me too tight," I choke. "Can't-breath-let-go"

His hold loosens slightly and I gasp for air. I yank his arms off of me with difficulty and turn to glare at him. He gives me a sheepish smile in return.

"Sorry Ari," he scratches the back of his neck "I saw Ava hugging you so I thought I would too, ninja style." So almost crushing someone's lungs to the point where they can't breathe is considered a hug?

I roll my eyes at him as his face scrunches in confusion. "Wait, why were we hugging?"

"Don't ask me, you're the one who hugged me," I say, exasperated.

"No, I don't mean that," Max says irritably, "I mean why was Ava hugging you in the first place?"

At that, I freeze. Mason getting mad is one thing, Max is on a whole other level. If you think Mason was bad you haven't seen anything yet. Imagine the Hulk on a bad day and that's about half as mad as he can get.

Ava opens her mouth to reply, seeing as I wasn't going to, but I shoot her a glare and she shuts up instantly. I am not about to let her tell Max, especially since we were in my house — I don't want anything broken.

"Mase can tell you later," I reply, dismissing the topic.

Mason instantly rejects the idea. "No way. I'm not going to tell him. Ari, this something you have to say, or Ava if you don't want to. If I say it he'll kill me and I happen to like my life but he'd never hurt a girl so you or Ava can do it."

I look at Ava and she backs up, shaking her head and holding up her hands in defence. That little bitch. She was more than willing three seconds ago.

"Fine," I sigh in defeat. "But I'm telling you outside. I don't want you breaking anything."

Max gives us all a look. "What could possibly get me so mad guys? Have a little faith in me."

We all shake our heads at him, he pouts like a child and begins to follow me to the back garden.

Here goes, deep breaths Aurora.

"Mind telling me what the hell is going on?" Max asks, frustration clear in his voice. Great, he's already in a bad mood.

"Um-well-you see-m-m-I-yo-you-"

Max gives me a look that says 'just get to the point' but at the same time says 'I'm worried about you, let me help you'. He must have noticed something was wrong as well. He's actually a big softie beneath his cocky, goofy and annoying exterior. Believe it or not, deep down he cares and a lot at that.

I sigh, running my hands through my hair for the umpteenth time today, knowing there is no way out of this. Besides Max is one of my best friends, he has the right to know.

"James and I broke up."

## Chapter 4

"James and I broke up."

Max just looks at me, his expression calm. Is he okay? "Max, say something, you're freaking me out," I confess.

He doesn't say anything for too long. "Wait. Let me get this straight. You were so scared to tell me that you and James broke up?"

I nod. He's taking this well, too well. Where's the Hulk transformation I was preparing for?

His eyes lock onto mine, searching through them, looking for any signs that I was joking, when my face remains serious he looks away, his gaze fixating on a tree behind me.

His calmness is unnerving. If Mason took it badly Max should be acting like Godzilla. I look at my nails, chipping at my dark blue nail polish, trying to distract myself while waiting for his response, not wanting to meet his eyes.

After a few minutes of silence, Max finally speaks. "Ari, look at me." When I don't he speaks again, this time with more force. "Aurora Jasmine Kelly look at me."

I grimace. He used the full name card, he must be serious so, reluctantly, I look up to meet his intense gaze.

His eyes are no longer impassive, they hold a variety of emotions, all of which I can't decipher. He takes in a deep breath, visibly calming himself.

"Ma-" I begin but he me cuts off with a loud scream. He finally cracked. I knew his calm demeanour was just a façade.

His next few actions are a blur. After smashing his fist into my poor oak tree, denting it, he looks up to the sky, screaming so loud that I have to cover my ears to protect them but I still wince. Soon he is grabbing onto my shoulders, seething, trying to hold himself back. "Max, calm down, breathe."

He's visibly shaking, gripping onto my shoulders like his life depends on it before he rips himself away and throws a potted plant into my garden shed, hard. Fuck, that was one of the flowers I've been growing, months of hard work down the drain.

He looks at me his eyes full of rage. "How the fuck do you expect me to calm down? I feel like he used you Ari and he will pay for that, I promise you."

This is what I was afraid of, Max injuring James. Sure I'm upset — to be honest, upset doesn't even begin to cover it — but that doesn't mean I want James to be hurt. I detest violence, always have, the thought of people fighting makes me sick to my stomach, even more so if it's because of me. I'd rather move on and forgive. I won't ever forget, I've never been good at that part, but I can forgive. Revenge and violence just aren't answers in my book and they never will be.

"Max," I say sternly, "Don't hurt him. I don't want you to."

"Ari don't be ridiculous, he deserves it. HE USED YOU FOR FUCKS SAKE!"

Did he use me? It's a possibility but I don't think so. He wouldn't have wasted two years if all he wanted to do was sleep with me, he could have easily found someone who would do that after just one day. Instead, he was patient and understanding and waited until I was ready and wanted to, that doesn't sound like I was used to me. He cared about me, I know he did. He might not anymore but I'm sure he did at one point, I felt it; I doubt anyone's acting skills are that good.

"Max it doesn't matter whether he did or not. We're over and that's that," the words are painful to vocalise but being blunt is the only way to get through to Max sometimes. "There's no need to drag this out for any longer, I just want to look past this and I don't want J-," I stop myself from saying his name when I see Max's jaw clench and fists tighten "-him injured in the process, please."

Again Max searches my eyes and begrudgingly sighs. "If that's what you want I won't hurt him but remember just say the word and he'll be in a hospital... but for now, he's safe. The things I do for you Ari," he mutters the last part to himself but I still hear it.

"Aww Maxi you're the best," I coo, pulling him into a hug.

"Don't call me Maxi," he groans but I can see a faint blush on his cheeks.

"Come on," I grab his hand, "Let's go back inside so Ava and Mason don't think you've killed me."

He just rolls his eyes but follows me nonetheless.

Soon after the boys find out about the whole fiasco and I've filled them in on everything they leave. Now it's just Ava and I and to be honest I'm glad. She knows just what to do when I'm feeling down and right now I need her more than ever.

I'm not going to cry again. I promised myself that because I'm not weak but the mere thought of him makes my heart pang and over the course of the night the tears threatened to escape more than once. I held them back though, I've had enough of crying; it doesn't do anything to soothe the pain so I do really understand the point in forgoing with it. The phrase Ava said earlier rang throughout my mind 'he's not worth it' but I can't help but disagree with her. I don't tell her this though even though she mentioned that phrase countless times throughout the night.

Crying is a weird thing for me. I've never been in that many situations where I've felt the need to. Sure my life hasn't been all sunshine and rainbows but it hasn't been bad either. I've had a wonderful upbringing and so many reasons to be grateful so sadness wasn't a common thing for me.

I've always been the positive one but right now I doubt I'll be able to keep that up.

With the way I'm feeling, I think positivity will be hard to come by.

~\*~\*~

My night was great. Ava was surprisingly good at helping me heal, especially considering she's never had to do this before.

We ate Ben and Jerry's ice cream to my heart's content; listened to countless songs about moving on; watched even more Disney (because Disney is downright amazing and always cheers me up) and Ava had me delete all my pictures of him and rid him from my social media accounts. I don't have the heart to block him on anything — I know, pathetic but don't judge me — but he is no longer anywhere on any social media platform I have.

She even brought a dartboard with her today (a little extra, I know) and stuck a picture of his face on it. Even though I hate violence it was pretty fun, not going to lie.

All in all, it was a great evening even with school looming in the morning.

Speaking of school, annoyingly, I've already had several people ask me about if we actually broke up and why but I chose to ignore it all. What happens in my life shouldn't concern the whole school, I mean it's not like my life is some movie or book for everyone to view at their own leisure.

~\*~\*~

Good moments can't last forever and before I knew it it was morning. Ava and I had both fallen asleep on the couches last night so I didn't have the best sleep in the world.

Ignoring the back pain that was inevitable from my awkward sleeping position, I get up to the smell of bacon and eggs.

As I walk into the kitchen I see Ava, Hugo and Alice all already pigging out while my mum is just drinking some coffee. "Morning sweetie, how did you sleep?"

Thankfully she knows not to ask about James, I'm so fed up of the topic and just want to forget it for now. "Terrible. Remind me to never sleep on the sofa again."

She just chuckles as I sit down and start wolfing down my breakfast. I love food like most people so excuse me for enjoying it.

"I don't get it," Ava says. "You eat so much yet you're so skinny."

I shrug. "High metabolism."

Hugo and Alice snort. "Even a high metabolism can't burn off the amount of junk you stuff your face with," my little brother says.

I narrow my eyes at him but he just laughs. Hugo, Alice and I are actually quite close, them being fifteen and I seventeen, we just like to take the mick out of each other a lot — it's part of our sibling bond. We tell one another almost everything and have helped each other through so much. Honestly, I don't know what I'd do without them, though I'd never tell them that.

"Plus don't forget I run," I add after Hugo's remark. That's another thing I picked up a few years ago. As well as painting, running is a great way to clear your mind, I have a feeling I'll be doing a lot more if that now, I mean it's healthy too, so it's a win win.

After I finish eating at a monstrous pace, I go upstairs to have a shower and get ready.

I rummage through my closet and decide on a pair of black high waisted skinny jeans, a t-shirt and a maroon jumper.

"Ari, can I borrow some clothes?" Ava asks as I dry my hair and let it fall in its natural wavy state over my shoulders.

"Sure, knock yourself out," I reply. As she's choosing an outfit, I start to apply my makeup, as usual, it's minimal.

Once we're both ready, we head downstairs and I give my mum a hug before we leave. "Have a good day sweetie," she calls as I'm closing the door. Like that's ever going to happen; last time she said that James broke up with me.

I ignore the sad feeling that's starting to appear at the thought of him and focus on the day ahead. It's just school, surely it can't be that bad. Right?

## Chapter 5

As predicted most of the school already knows about mine and James' breakup. Gossip really does travel fast; it's not even been twenty-four hours yet.

I ignore everyone's questioning glances as well as the people who vocalise their questions. The reason so many people are curious about the whole ordeal is because James and I were sort of the 'it' couple at school. This is because of how long we'd been together and us both being popular, him more so than me, helped too.

I force myself to pay attention in lessons and not on everyone who is making theories about the reason for our breakup. Honestly, why can't everyone mind their own goddamn business and leave me alone?

Luckily because my mind is so preoccupied, time flies by quickly and before I know it it's lunchtime. Thank heavens, I'm starving.

I get there early so I get some pasta before the line gets long and make my way to my usual lunch table, situated in the nice part of the cafeteria away from all the bins.

Max is already at the table, sitting with the some of our friendship group. As well as him, Mason and Ava our group includes: Chase and Oliver, the twins. They are identical in every way, the only differences that I've noticed are that Oliver has a small beauty spot on right side of his jaw and his dimples are slightly deeper than his brothers. They both have ash brown hair and blue eyes and they do that twin thing that Mase and Max sometimes do only worse.

Let's not forget about Jessica. She's a wild one, I tell you, always out partying and having fun. She has crazy red hair and bright blue eyes that compliment her personality perfectly. She's also quite the daredevil and I believe has never turned down a challenge or dare in her entire life.

Finally, there's Jordan, he's a bit of a man whore. He has dirty blonde hair and grey eyes. He's obsessed with his appearance and you could say his personality is skin deep. However, even though he's a narcissistic asshole, he is decent enough as a friend and a good laugh to be around, especially with all his stupid remarks.

When I sit down everyone is already in deep conversation so none of them notice. I'm grateful that not a single one of them has asked me about the breakup over text or today, probably because they know better. I'm sitting beside Max and decide to listen in on his discussion with Jessica.

"No, absolutely not I refuse to believe it," Max says, shaking his head in disbelief.

"It's true. I don't understand why this is so difficult for you, it's not a big deal."

"Not a big deal?! Are you on drugs woman? This is a serious life or death problem."

Jessica sighs in exasperation and snaps her head towards me, acknowledging my presence.

"Thank god Ari, can you please tell this idiot that Leonardo da Vinci painted the Mona Lisa, not Leonardo DiCaprio, he's throwing a fit."

Seriously. We've already had this conversation.

I'm not even kidding, we have actually had this conversation before. Max says stupid things sometimes and is always adamant about being correct even if he's clearly wrong. He'll argue for the sake of arguing, even if he actually knows he's wrong he refuses admit it. Take this as an example, one time we had a four hour argument about what weighs more: a kg of bricks or feathers. He couldn't seem to wrap his mind around the fact that they weigh the fucking same because they both weigh a kg. I tried everything but he wouldn't fucking listen. He was adamant that the bricks weighed more. By the end I think he realised I was right but refused to admit it. He wouldn't talk to me for two days after that, I'm not even joking.

"Max, didn't I already tell you that Leonardo da Vinci painted the Mona Lisa, not Leonardo DiCaprio? As much as you probably hate to hear this, Jessica is right. Leonardo DiCaprio is an actor not a painter. I'm sorry that you had to find out this way but I had no choice," I say, my voice layered with irritation, fake sorrow and sarcasm.

He glares at me and turns his head in the other direction and joins in Chase and Jordan's conversation. I just roll my eyes at his foolish antics.

"Hey guys," Ava says as she sits down with Mason. She has a cheerful look on her face but I've no idea why usually she's downright miserable at school.

Her chirpy attitude continues throughout lunch but I don't question it, maybe she's just had a good day or something.

Mason, on the other hand, looks antsy, like he's worried about something but I'm not going to ask him about it in front of everyone. Something's definitely wrong though, he's usually so laid back but right now he's on edge and I need to talk to him about it later.

It was nice just to talk to my friends about nothing in particular and take my mind off of current affairs. I'm not just talking about the whole James thing, my future is another thing on my mind. What college or university am I going to go to? What am I going to study? I've no clue what I want to do with my life and they want me to have made a kind of decision by now; It's ridiculous.

"Ari, you're coming to the party tomorrow night, right?" Jessica asks me, snapping me out of my internal rant.

"What party?"

She gives me a shocked look. "Have you seriously not heard about it? It's at Jordan's house for goodness sakes."

I give her a sheepish smile so she rolls her eyes and continues. "Well our dear friend Jordan is having a party tomorrow night and you're coming," she states, leaving me no room to argue.

"But—"

"No buts. You are finally a free bird and no longer have a man tying you down. Embrace it. Tonight I'm teaching you to have fun."

"Sorry, Jess but I'm not really up for it at the moment."

"Are you really going to be that boring? Why can't you loosen up and be reckless for once?"

Boring. Now Jessica has said it too. I can't be boring. Not happening. I need to prove James wrong, not just for him but for myself. I'll show everyone, I can have a good time and step out of my comfort zone. "Alright, I'll go."

"Really?" Everyone — yes everyone, they must have all been listening — at the table says in unison.

"Why is that so hard to believe?" I ask, a little offended.

"Because you never want to go parties, you'd rather have nights in and watch Disney or read," Oliver points out.

I huff in frustration. "Maybe I want to try new things and spend time with my friends."

"Bullshit," Oliver and Chase scoff.

I shoot them both a glare but they just give me an innocent look back, those cheeky buggers.

"Whatever, can't a girl go to a party without being interrogated these days, jeez."

"It's not that, it's just very unlike you is all, Ari," Ava says softly.

"Well, I'm glad you're coming," Jess says, enthusiastically and I give her a smile in return.

"If you're going I'm going," Ava says, putting her arm around my shoulder.

"You were going anyway," I point out.

"Pshhh po-tay-to po-tah-to." My best friend ladies and gentlemen.

"I guess everyone is coming, that's a first," Jordan points out. Now that I think about it, he's right, ever since year nine (when I moved here), I don't think there has ever been a time when all of us

were at a house party together. Sure we've all been on outings together but never a house party — huh, I never realised that before.

"We'll see you there Jordan," I say. "You should feel blessed that we're all coming."

"Sure. I feel honoured and privileged. I thank you all profusely," he says his voice laced with sarcasm.

Everyone rolls their eyes as the bell rings and we go to class.

I'm now in English, the worst lesson ever, no exaggeration needed. The lesson feels like an eternity. I don't know why I chose it in the first place, I hate this subject, so many words, maths is more my thing. Numbers are just easier than letters in my opinion.

After tirelessly tapping my pen for almost an hour, the bell finally rings, signalling the end of the lesson, finally. I hastily leave the classroom ready for my next lesson, anything — and I mean anything — is better than English.

It's finally the end of the day so I head for Ava's car and home I go.

~\*~\*~

The next day passes in a blur. I block out all of the people asking me questions and focus on my work. However, my mind can't pay full attention to it because I'm too worried about the party tonight. Let's just say I've never had a good experience when it comes to parties so I'm not looking forward to tonight.

I go home with Ava as per usual but as I'm leaving the car she calls after me. "Ari, make sure you're at mine for half six so we can get ready together, I doubt you have an appropriate outfit so you're borrowing one of mine."

"Sure," I reply as I walk inside and hear Ava drive away.

"How was school sweetie?" I hear my mother ask as she's shuffling about in the kitchen.

"Fine," I reply, shrugging. "I'm going to a party with my friends tonight, is that okay?"

Suddenly all the noises stop and I hear mum scurry from the kitchen until she's right in front of me, her eyes wide. "Did I hear you right? You're actually going to a party?" I nod. "Oh my baby is finally acting like a normal teenager, I'm so proud."

I playfully glare at her. "Why is it so hard for everyone to believe that I want to go to a party?"

"It's just a bit out of character for you. Anyway, I'm encouraging you to go, so go. I want you to experience these things." My mother ladies and gentlemen. Most would be opposed to their child

going out late at night, getting drunk, possibly getting high, and being around horny teenagers but not my mum. My mum wants me to be a part of that.

"I'm going to Ava's around six thirty to get ready."

"That's fine sweetie, just be safe. I already had that talk with you a while ago so I don't need to again. Just have fun." After saying that she hurries back to the kitchen.

I'm not sure if you've noticed but my mum loves cooking, it's her passion. She's actually an amazing chef who owns her own restaurant with several chains all over the country. However, she doesn't like to show off money too much so we live in a nice house that isn't too extravagant, just a decent size in a nice area. My mum has never been the flamboyant type, she's quite humble and modest and it's one of the many traits I admire about her. She wanted Hugo, Alice and I to have a normal upbringing, not surrounded by money even though we have it. She wanted us to be a regular family; it's quite incredible really.

I run upstairs to do my homework. I only got some maths today so it is pretty easy. As I've previously stated I find maths quite easy so I sail through the work in no time.

Once I finish, I go downstairs and find that my mum has yet again cooked an incredible dish. She likes us to eat as a family so I have to wait for Hugo and Alice before I can dig in.

After finishing, I go back upstairs and grab my stuff before grabbing my car keys from my bedside table and exiting the house. "Bye mum, bye Hugo, bye Alice," I call.

"Bye sweetie."

"Bye Ari."

"See you."

Yes, I can drive. It's just easier to let Ava. Driving is a chore so why not get a ride from her instead. My house is on the way to school anyway so she's fine with it.

I hop into the car, start the engine and begin to drive to her house. God, I'm actually going to a house party voluntarily, this never happens. Usually one of the guys drags me to a party and I leave within an hour or two claiming it's boring, which it usually is.

Maybe if I let loose it will be fun. I can do this. No backing out now. You're going to be reckless and have fun, Ari. No one will be able to call you boring anymore.

Here goes nothing.

## Chapter 6

"Ava are you sure about this?" I ask as we're about to exit her car and go to Jordan's house.

"Ari you've asked me a million times already, you look amazing, stop being so self-conscious and enjoy yourself."

Getting ready was a nightmare. Ava was adamant on me wearing a revealing dress but that's just not my thing. I've always been body conscious, even though I've been told by several people that my body's fine I can't help it. Everyone has insecurities so, naturally, I do as well.

In the end, she won but I managed to get her to dial it down a bit. I'm wearing a tight, royal blue dress, with a low but not too low neckline, that goes to my mid-thigh. If Ava had it her way I'd be wearing an even tighter dress with a lower neckline and the bottom would barely cover my privates.

I think she just wants me to meet a new guy to get my mind off of James and have fun for one night but that's just not me. Yes, I'm trying new things but I'm only willing to go so far. I'm not going to change who I am.

As we get out of the car the stench of alcohol immediately hits my nose; it's extremely pungent and can be smelt from a mile away. In the garden some people have passed out on the grass, others are climbing trees half naked and one person has stripped to their birthday suit and is running around singing 'Hakuna Matata'. People do stupid things whilst drunk.

We step over the bodies — classy I know — and make our way to the already open door. We could hear the music from down the street so now that we're outside the open door it's deafeningly loud.

"You ready?" I hear Ava ask over all the noise.

I gulp. "As ready as I'll ever be." With that we both step over the threshold. Here I go, pray for me.

~\*~\*~

The night was kind of hazy. When we got inside Ava immediately got us some drinks. I don't really know how it happened because I'm usually responsible but one drink led to another and another and now here I am, drunk off my arse in a stuffy room full of horny teenagers. Smart I know but what can I say, I'm not perfect.

I know I'm drunk but to be honest I don't give a damn because it's making me feel better and easing the pain. What people say is true, you can drink away the pain, so that's what I did, all night long.

I gulp down another beer and I've never felt more alive, I should come to these things more often. With each sip, I feel myself slipping away from reality and all my troubles, it's almost like they don't matter anymore — let me tell you that's a great feeling.

Right now, I don't care about tomorrow, all I care about is the now and I'm going to make the most of it. Drinking really does make you feel like a whole new person, I feel like doing things I'd never do while sober.

With a red solo cup in my hand, I make my way to the middle of the dance floor and start to dance with everyone else. I can feel a few guys getting a little too close but I pay them no attention and just carry on doing my thing, letting the alcohol control my movements. No one — I repeat, no one — is going to ruin my night.

As the night presses on, my body is still buzzing from the alcohol and I don't intend to stop drinking any time soon. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Oliver and his girlfriend, Rebekah, motioning me to join them so I start to walk over to them.

"He-ey gu-yys," I slur.

They both give me a weird look. "Ari, how much have you had to drink?" Oliver asks, concern evident in his tone. Oliver has always been a very caring person; he always puts others before himself and I admire that about him. Rebekah is extremely lucky to have him but if I'm honest they're not a good couple. Don't get me wrong she's a lovely person but they just seem to clash horribly.

She's the only person who can ever piss Oliver off and he's usually in a bad mood after hanging out with her. They've been dating for two and a half years but I've no idea how they've lasted. Their relationship is toxic if you ask me. They're always arguing and shouting at one another and it seems as though they hate each other. I guess love and hate is a fine line that these two cross constantly.

They're great people on their own but when they're together all hell breaks loose, that's the best way I can describe it. I bet you they'll have had at least four different fights by the end of tonight, who knows how they're still together. Actually, I'm putting fifty on it right now, they're going to have at least four fights before the party is over.

"Not m- mu- much," I lie.

He gives me a stern look. It's like the look that your mum gives you — you know, that one look that makes you want to shit your pants and do whatever they say.

As well as 'the look', he also crosses his arms across his chest and says "Aurora Jasmine Kelly don't you dare lie to me," in a stern tone. He can be so scary when he wants to be and if you didn't know

him you wouldn't suspect a thing because he seems so sweet and innocent. Sweet and innocent my arse.

"A lot," I give in.

He sighs in frustration. "Ari why? You're never one to be irresponsible, what happened?" The disappointment in his voice is impossible to ignore.

Great, just what I want, an expectation. It's like I can't do anything without people expecting more from me. Maybe I don't want to be responsible, maybe I just want to have fun. Why do I have to act a certain way? I feel so restricted all the time. That stops right now. I'm going to do what I want and right now what I want to to have fun at a party while being crazy drunk.

"None of your business," I snap a bit too harshly and storm off. I know he's just looking out for me but at the moment I don't want that. I just want to experience new things. I'll make mistakes and deal with the consequences accordingly. I'm living right now, so I'm going to enjoy it, I won't be seventeen forever.

As I'm storming through the house, I see some people beginning to form a circle, so, because I'm drunk off my arse, I join in.

I place myself between Chase and some girl from my year, I think her name is Kristie. Jordan has an empty beer bottle in his hands and proceeds to place it in the middle and spin it. It lands on Jessica — this should be interesting because as I've said she's a crazy party animal and has never turned down a dare. A sly smile forms on his face as he speaks. "You have one minute to turn someone on using just your lips."

Jess is immediately in action, she turns to the guy next to her, Brent I think, and proceeds to leave a trail of kisses and hickeys down his neck. She then carries on by bringing her mouth upwards, back up to his jaw before she smashes her lips to his in a fiery kiss. I try not to pay too much attention because I don't particularly want to see my friend making out with a guy she hardly knows.

Everyone starts the countdown, "Ten! Nine! Eight! Seven! Six! Fi—"

Jess pulls away, raising her hands in victory. She's good. She then sends Jordan a smirk and spins the bottle before grabbing Brent's wrist and leading him upstairs. I'm not even going to think about what they're going to do.

I notice Jordan frown but he quickly covers it by paying attention to the bottle which is slowing down. I'm not too sure about all the details but I do know something has been going on between those two for years. Jordan was probably expecting her to choose him but alas that didn't happen. They have this weird relationship, sometimes they're arguing and bickering, the next they're

chatting like normal friends and then they're touching each other like there's no tomorrow. I think it's some sort of friends with benefits relationship but I don't know if it's anything more than that.

The bottle lands on Kristie — the girl next to me — and she's dared to strip to her underwear and lather her body in whipped cream. Yep, I'm not joking, glad I didn't get that one.

The game continues in this fashion and let me tell you, it was downright hilarious. Jordan ended up swapping clothes — including underwear — with this girl called Hannah, who's about a foot shorter than him, not to mention the fact that she was wearing an extremely tight and short hot pink dress.

Max had to hump the floor for five minutes straight, in his underwear, whilst making erotic noises. Chase got his chest waxed — I know, that one was just plain horrid. I girl I knew vaguely, Jenny, did a striptease for everyone before actually shedding all of her clothes — she's probably even more drunk than me — and dragging Max away, let's not imagine what happened there. A lot more has happened and the games not even over yet, luckily I haven't had a turn yet.

The bottle lands on me. Fuck. I jinxed it.

"Finally Ari," Jessica smirks — yes she's back, that's how long we've been playing for. I hope she goes easy on me because I'm new to all of this. "I won't make this too bad," thank heavens. "I dare you to make out with the next person who walks past for five minutes." FIVE FUCKING MINUTES?!?! I can't do that.

"Um, well-" I begin, trying to come up with an excuse.

"Come on Ari, don't tell us you're going to be boring and not do it," a random person from the game speaks out.

There it was again boring. I'm not boring. I'll do this. I'll show them, I'm the most fun and reckless person out there.

I stand up, dusting off the non-existent dust from my dress. "Let's make it ten," I smirk at Jess, before turning my head, waiting for someone to walk past. It doesn't take long before someone does.

I walk up to them, confidence oozing from my figure, strange I never usually have any confidence especially in a situation like this. Thank the lord for alcohol.

I tap the guy on the shoulder, he has dark hair and would be about a foot taller than me if it weren't for my heels. When he turns around I don't waste a second, I immediately smash my lips to his and kiss him with such force and passion. It takes him a few moments to realise what happening but when he does he returns my kiss with equal vigour.

His tongue slides inside my mouth, exploring every inch of it. His hands find themselves on my waist as he pulls me closer. He's clearly a fuck boy I mean why else would you kiss a random girl that you've never met before.

His hands drop down to my thighs and he hoists me up so my legs circle his waist. We move backwards until my back is pressed against a wall and when it is he deepens the kiss even more if that's possible.

I can't believe I'm saying this but he's a better kisser than James, like a lot better. I guess that's a good thing, it means that I'll find someone better than him. Wait, why am I thinking about him? The whole point of this was to let loose and have fun.

I push my thoughts to one side and focus all of my attention back into the kiss. I've been counting the minutes and I know it has been ten but I don't want to stop. I like this feeling of doing random and spontaneous things. I'm doing what I want and right now that's making out with this guy—even though I haven't a clue what he looks.

He starts to lead me to a closet, not once breaking our lips. A rush of excitement blasts through my body. I want this.

Ari, you can stop now, a voice in my head tells me gently but almost in alarm, snapping me out of my daze.

Wait. What am I doing? Why am I making out with a random guy? This is not me, I never do things like this. Alcohol can really mess with your senses, I know that's bad but I kind of like it — just acting on impulse without thought of consequence, it's exhilarating. However, I know this isn't right, I abruptly pull away from the guy and run away, refusing to look back or make eye contact.

I make my way back to the circle and everyone cheers my name. "Wow Ari, I never thought you'd have it in you, nice one," Jess says and a few others murmur in agreement. To be honest, I don't know what came over me. I wasn't thinking straight and the alcohol must really be affecting me.

We carry on with the game and some time later — I've no clue how long — we finally stop. I have to admit I had a lot of fun, I should come to parties more often.

## Chapter 7

I get up but as soon as I do a wave of nausea hits me, forcing me to run to the nearest available bathroom to throw up for the first time tonight. I wash my mouth out thoroughly and exit the bathroom that is currently covered in urine, alcohol and vomit — the latter being caused by myself. Since the air is quite stuffy inside, I begin to make my way outside to cool down and to hopefully not throw up again.

I step outside, the cold air nipping at my exposed skin. I already feel better, fresh air really helps. I feel a shiver run down my spine but I pay it no heed as I continue to walk down the patio, tripping now and then due to the amount of alcohol I've consumed, until I walk into a hard wall. Ouch. Since when does Jordan have a random wall in the middle of his garden anyway? Who does that? Is an artistic statement or something?

Suddenly, the wall moves, huh? Strong arms wrap around my waist, steadying me. So it's not a wall, it's a person.

Duh Ari, you really are stupid when you're drunk. Shut up. Even when I'm intoxicated my conscience still manages to make jabs at me. What has my world come to?

I slowly lift my head upwards only to be met with the most gorgeous electric blue eyes I've ever seen in my entire life. They are so vivid and intense yet for some reason, I find comfort in just staring at them. They're like deep ocean pools that I could just get lost in for hours on end. There is something else though, they seemed to be hiding something like there's a storm waiting to destroy the calm waters. I ignore the thought and begin to study the person's face.

That's when I recognise him. This is none other than Wyatt King, the bad boy — for lack of a better term — at my high school. Oh hell no.

I can't get involved with this boy, he only leads to trouble. He's supposedly extremely dangerous and always getting into trouble, not someone I should be around, even in my drunken state I know that. From what I've heard he's also a fuck boy, I don't want him to take advantage of me, I've no idea if he'd do something like that but it's best not to chance it. I need to get away from him as soon as possible.

I immediately jump away from his touch and take a big step back. He seems a little shocked by my sudden movement — most likely expecting me to thank him — but is quick to cover it with a blank expression.

I'm about to walk away but my big mouth decides that I have to make some sort of comment. I blame it on the alcohol because let's be real, if I wasn't intoxicated there's not a chance in hell that I

would even dare to open my mouth and speak to someone I don't know, especially someone like Wyatt King. "Watch where you're going," I hiss at him.

His blank look quickly morphs into one of confusion followed closely by irritation. "Me? You're the one who walked into me!"

"What? No, I didn't," I lie. Now I'm lying just to prove a point, god I've no clue what I'm doing anymore.

"Yes you did," he counters, anger rising in his voice. Is it just me or is his voice sexy even when he's angry?

What? I did not just think that. The alcohol must really be affecting me. Stupid alcohol. Stupid subconscious.

I throw my hands up in exasperation. "Whatever. Just look where you're going from now on," I snap at him rather harshly and try to walk off.

'Try' being the keyword. Me being the drunk idiot I stumble during my sassy exit, ruining the whole effect. I look more like a stupid, drunk, lonely teenage girl than anything else — it's true that that's what I am but it sounds kind of pathetic when you put it that way. Stupid alcohol.

I'm ready for my face to hit the freshly cut grass but the impact never comes, instead, arms circle my waist, hoisting me upwards. Okay then?

"Careful there clumsy," Wyatt chuckles, his mood instantly changing. Our faces are now inches apart, him holding me by my waist tightly, preventing me from moving, our chests pressed together.

He brushes a strand of hair out of my face, placing it behind my ear. My breath hitches as he moves his head down until his mouth is right by my ear. "Next time, watch your step," he whispers to me in a husky voice before letting go of my waist, twirling me and walking off. I feel slightly cold now that his touch is gone but I shrug off the feeling. Stupid subconscious.

I shake my head to clear my thoughts and begin to make my way back inside, my steps careful so I don't trip.

I can't see any of my friends currently so where better to go than the kitchen? Once I'm in said room I go straight to the island that is currently covered in bottles of liquor. I'm already drunk so I'm sure a few more glasses won't hurt and by a few I mean a lot.

Even though this stuff tastes horrific it's really addicting, maybe it's the euphoric feeling I get or maybe someone's put something in it. Either way, I don't care, I carry on like there's no tomorrow.

It's almost as if it's a drug, using my mind against me and making me continue against my better judgement.

As I'm about to place the umpteenth cup to my lips it's quickly snatched out of my grasp. I snap my head to the left to see none other than Wyatt throwing my cup away. He has the nerve to snatch my cup?! MY FUCKING CUP?!?!

"Hey that was mine," I snap in a very harsh and irritated voice.

"Yeah, 'was' being the keyword. Now it's the bins." He smirks after saying that, cheeky bastard.

"Why'd y-you do th-that," I hiccup a bit while speaking.

"Because it's clear that you're drunk off your arse and it didn't look like you had any intention to stop on your own. I did you a favour green eyes."

Green eyes? Oh right, that's my eye colour. Duh, Ari, you idiot.

"Puh-lease, I can handle myself thank you very much." He just shakes his head in response. "You're infur-iating d-do you know t-that? Why can't you j-just mind your own goddamn b-business" I snap, getting more angry by the second but my hiccuping rids my words of any seriousness. Stupid fucking alcohol, no one takes you seriously when you drink it.

He looks pissed off now. "I'm trying to do a good thing and how do you thank me? By getting mad. I'm sorry for trying to be a nice person," Wyatt snarls, clearly annoyed by my reaction. Bitch please, what did you expect? Me to come running into your arms, thank you and call you 'my knight in shining armour' or something? Cause that's not happening EVER, you need to get that through that thick skull of yours.

No one dares to speak to me like that. Letting the alcohol take away my better judgement for the umpteenth time tonight, I walk up to him and jab my finger at his chest. "Don't you dare speak to me like that. I w-w-" I stop midway through my sentence as my eyelids start to feel heavy. The ground starts to shake and wobble, then the movements become more violent, making my legs turn to jelly. A yawn escapes my lips and because I'm unable to control my legs, I start to plummet forward towards the floor. Just as I'm mere centimetres from the tiled ground I feel something catch me, saving me from a painful fall.

"Fuck." I hear him curse under his breath in my half-conscious state as his arms wrap even more tightly around me, cradling me to himself.

There was definitely something else in that alcohol or I could have just had too much, maybe it was both. If I was going to pass out anyway I wish I could've had more though because I'm already losing the buzz due to my drowsiness.

I feel myself being lifted up and my head is now next to a hard chest. I nuzzle myself closer to the warm body and block out the outside world. This is surprisingly very comfortable. I feel something rumble close beside me; it's probably the person asking me something but I'm too far gone to make out what's been said let alone to reply.

I wish I could stay like this forever. The warmth feels so comforting and reassuring. I let myself fall asleep in this person's arms, I don't know why but I feel safe in doing so, somehow I know no harm will come to me. I feel protected you could say. For the first time in what feels like forever I don't think about the consequences of my actions, I just go with the flow and let my eyes close, leaving my problems for a later date.

Just before I'm at the point of no return I let out a sigh of contempt as the darkness takes over. I haven't felt this peaceful in a long time.

## Chapter 8

I feel something vibrating beside me nonstop and it's making my head is pound in my skull at an alarming rate.

I blindly fling my arm across my bed trying to find the cause of the disturbance. My hand clamps around my phone and I answer it without checking the caller ID because I can't open my eyes just yet.

"Hello?"

"Thank god, Ari what the hell happened and where are you?" I hear Ava snap, worry and frustration in her tone.

"What are you talking about?"

She lets an irritated groan escape her lips. "I'm talking about how you just disappeared last night, I was so worried. What happened and where are you?"

Did I disappear last night? Wait, what happened last night?

I can't remember much but as I start to wake up I get flashes from the previous night. I remember drinking a lot and the colour blue. That's not a lot to go on.

My eyes flutter open after my internal confusion but what I see makes me pale. I'm not in my room. I don't know where I am.

"Ava I'm going to have to call you back."

"No. Don't y—" she starts but I hang up.

Please tell me I didn't have sex last night, for the love of god, please. I look down to my attire and thank heavens I'm still wearing my dress from last night.

Now onto my dilemma where the hell am I? My eyes scan the room, it's quite nice. The bed is king sized with floral patterned sheets; the walls are painted a cream colour; the carpet is lush and beige; there are a few stunning art pieces on the walls and there's even a little sitting area accompanied by a television. All in all, you can tell the room is expensive but at the same time it is of a simplistic nature.

The door begins to creak open and my head immediately snaps to it, however, the noise grates in my ears, amplifying my already-painful-headache. Fan-fucking-tactic.

My eyes zone in on the person who walks over the threshold and into the room. It takes me a few moments before I can place his face but when I do my heart begins to race and the intensity of my headache increases once again.

It's none other than Wyatt-fucking-King. Oh, hell no.

I'm glad even drunk me wasn't dumb enough to sleep with him but I'm praying that I didn't do or say anything stupid, knowing me I probably did.

"Where am I?" I voice the first of many questions forming in my mind.

He quirks an eyebrow at me. "No greeting? Just where am I."

I give him a deadpan glare and he puts his hands up in mock surrender. "Chill, green eyes, I was only teasing."

A small smile starts to form on my lips at his attempt at lifting the atmosphere but I'm quick to push it away. If Wyatt notices this he doesn't show it. "I'm going to ask you again, where am I?" I try to make my tone firm but it comes out shaky, perfect. In my defence, he's very intimidating in the way he carries himself and just in general.

"Where do you think you are?" he replies coyly. What sort of a reply is that?!

"I don't know, why do you think I'm asking," I say in a 'duh' tone.

When he doesn't respond I shoot him a glare, demanding an answer with my eyes.

"So green eyes is feisty," he smirks. Since I don't answer he sighs. "If you must know you're at my house... You're no fun," he mutters to himself, thinking I can't hear him but I can, however, I pay his words no attention.

"Care to elaborate?"

"What's with all the questions? I saved you last night so you should be grateful, not rude and demanding."

Saved me? What the hell happened yesterday? I sigh, god this is going to be embarrassing to say but if I don't tell him I won't get answers. "Okay, so I'm blanking on what happened yesterday. Care to explain?"

He chuckles to himself, shaking his head. "Figured as much, you did drink a crap ton. Speaking of which why did you drink so much? I haven't seen anyone get that hammered in a long time and they did it for a reason, I'm assuming you did too."

That's a question I don't want to answer. I don't need pity. I hate it and if I tell him he's either going to pity me or think I'm a stupid teenage girl who needs to get over herself, neither seem like appealing options. "That's a bit personal don't you think?"

He regards me silently for a few moments, just staring at me, looking for something. When he finds it he sighs and scratches the back of his neck.

"I get it. You probably don't want to talk to a total stranger about your problems but sometimes that's actually the best thing to do. I can't prejudge you because I don't know what you're like or what your situation is. Sometimes just having someone to talk to can really help and if that's what you want I'm here to listen." His words are so sincere, I can't detect a single bit of sarcasm in them. This is nothing like how I presumed Wyatt to be, I probably shouldn't prejudge people. He actually wants to help me, he can tell something is wrong. Most people can't because I'm very good at hiding my emotions but he can.

"Thanks for the offer and all but I'm fine, really," I say, lying through my teeth. I'm anything but fine.

You probably think it's stupid that I'm this hurt over a guy but this guy meant more to me than words can even begin to explain. Imagine that the person that you loved with all your heart and soul suddenly didn't care about you anymore. The person who owned your heart tore it in half and then proceeded to shred it into pieces in front of your very eyes. That's but a fraction of how I feel.

Heartbreak isn't an easy thing to describe, the best way I can describe it is a numb feeling. A feeling of hopelessness, the worry that you'll never be the same. It's a constant ache in your soul, a wound that will never heal.

So, yes, I'm this torn up over James because he was someone I loved with my whole being. I don't expect anyone to fully understand the extent of the pain I'm feeling. I don't want pity from anyone; I just want them to understand and leave the subject to rest, that's all. Alas, no one will and I accept that so it's better if I avoid the subject altogether.

The strange thing is it doesn't look like he believes me. It's almost like he can tell that I'm hiding something. No one has ever figured that out before. There have never been many people in my life that can tell when I'm lying or hiding something. I even manage to deceive my own mother most of the time but this boy, someone I hardly know, can tell. How does that work? A stranger can figure things out that some of the people closest to me can't. That says something, even the ones who we think know us so well don't know us anywhere near enough.

Even though it's obvious he doesn't believe me, he lets the matter drop, sensing my discomfort in engaging with him about it.

"To answer your question, last night you got ridiculously drunk. You walked into me and claimed it was my fault and later on I found you in the kitchen drinking even more. When I took the drink off of you, you got mad at me. You got in my personal space to have a go at me and midway through your rant you passed out but I caught you before you could fall. I didn't want to just leave you at a party because I am a decent human being, despite what people think," he mutters the last bit, sounding rather bitter.

"The only problem was I didn't know where you lived so I had to bring you here. I don't know about anything else you did whilst you were there but it was probably quite embarrassing or entertaining, whatever it was," he chuckles to himself at the end, as if he knows something that I don't.

That bastard, he's hiding something I just know it. However, I don't pursue the topic because I already know I won't get any answers.

"Alright. Thanks for helping me, I guess," I start. "Wait what time is it?"

"About eleven, why?"

"Shit school," I say in a worried tone. I jump out of the comfy bed hastily and brush off my dress to remove some of the wrinkles. I notice my shoes by the bed so I slip them on and snatch my phone from the covers. I speed to the door but Wyatt stands there, blocking my path, looking amused for some reason.

"Hold it there green eyes. First, slow down, you're going to crash into something, I know first hand how clumsy you are," he smirks. Twat. "Second you haven't eaten yet and I'm not letting you leave without having breakfast."

"But I'm not hungry," I say in protest. Wyatt gives me a look, basically saying he doesn't believe me. I stand there, arms crossed across my chest in defiance. Guess what happens at that exact moment, my stomach growls. Yep, just my luck.

Wyatt smirks for the who-knows-what-number time. "Looks like your stomach agrees with me."

I sigh in defeat, about to follow him to the kitchen but he stops me. "Stay here," he says before walking off.

I wait there for a few minutes just staring into space. He comes back holding some clothes as well as a bottle of water and some aspirin. "Here, take this, you'll probably need it."

I take it eagerly and swallow with some water. Hopefully, the effects will kick in soon, hangovers suck.

"Put these on, they're my sisters. She's a bit younger than you but you're small so it should be fine."

"Sorry but not all of us can be six foot something giants."

He laughs a genuine laugh. When he does his eyes light up, making the already gorgeous colour even more striking. Shit, I never thought that, snap out of it Ari.

"Whatever, how tall are you anyway? Five foot?"

"Five two and a half actually."

"Yep, can't forget that half," he says mockingly.

"Shut up," I say whilst glaring.

"Chill green eyes, it's cute that you're small." I blush a little at that — okay a lot. Fuck. He can totally see that I'm blushing. He grins teasingly at me but doesn't comment on my ever reddening cheeks, thank god. "Anyway, get changed and come down to the kitchen once you're ready." With that, he walks away.

Once I'm changed I exit the guest room, then it dawns on me, I have absolutely no clue where the kitchen is and it doesn't help that this house is like a mansion. I'm not even kidding, it's massive.

I start to walk around aimlessly, hoping to find my way around. After ten minutes I finally find the stairs—don't judge me, it's a huge house.

Once I'm downstairs the hunt for the kitchen continues. Left. Left. Straight ahead. Left. I'm now in a games room. Fuck. I'm never going to find my way around.

I'm turning to walk away but a voice stops me. "Hey, who are you?" I quickly turn around to be met with the grey eyes of a guy who looks to be in his early twenties. Can I just say he's very good looking, not as much so as Wyatt but still hot. Ari, shut up and get a grip. "Are you going to answer or are you just going to stand there gawking?" The boy asks cockily and I blush.

I was not gawking but I don't say this as I'm uncomfortable snapping at a complete stranger. "Oh, sorry," I mumble. "The name's Aurora but everyone calls me Ari," I say with a little more confidence.

"Nice to meet you, Ari, I'm Nathaniel but you can call me Nathan or the man of your dreams. Now if you don't mind me asking what's a beautiful girl like you doing in my house?"

My cheeks redden further at his compliment but I brush it off and reply. "Oh right, I was looking for the kitchen but I got lost."

He chuckles at that. "That doesn't answer my question as to why you're here in the first place but I'll let it slide. Which kitchen are you looking for?"

"You have more than one?" I ask, taken aback. Who needs more than one kitchen? My mum's a freaking famous chef and even we don't have more than one.

He nods and waits for me to tell him. "I'm not sure which one, which one do you use the most?"

"Ah, that would be the main kitchen. Four doors down to your right. You can't miss it, it's all open plan."

I nod, mumbling a thank you before walking away.

Is he Wyatt's brother? They do share a few features. But their eyes and hair are different, while Nathan has grey eyes and light brown hair, Wyatt has his gorgeous blue ones and chocolate brown hair.

They must be siblings. Why else would they both be so attractive, that kind of thing has to be genetic. Plus they both have that sort of aura about them, I can't explain it but I just get this vibe off of them.

I finally find the kitchen and no surprise it's gigantic, like the rest of the house. I walk over to the island and sit down on one of the bar stools. The smell of pancakes hits my nose and I grin involuntarily.

So Mr bad boy can cook, who would have thought.

He turns to face me, placing a plate of pancakes in front of me before sitting down himself with his own serving, this should be an interesting breakfast.

## Chapter 9

"So tell me about yourself," Wyatt says, trying to make small talk to fill the deafening silence.

It's my fault that we're not talking, my shyness has kicked in. Now that I'm over the initial shock of the situation I can't help but hide away. I don't know him and that makes me uncomfortable. I don't know what to say or how to act, god I hate this. Stupid shy me, I'm making things awkward as hell.

I don't reply and Wyatt sighs. "I get it, you're probably not that comfortable around someone you don't know but it's not like I'm interrogating you or anything. It's quite strange actually, when you're drunk you're definitely not shy, in fact, you're the opposite. Now though you're as quiet as a mouse." He laughs a little and I glare at him. It's not like I can help it, shyness doesn't have an on and off switch.

"Whatever," I mumble.

"She speaks!"

I give him a hard look and he smirks. Fucking smirks! The nerve of this guy. "Calm down green eyes, I'm only teasing."

"How about this," Wyatt starts after a few more minutes of silence "let's play twenty questions. I'll get to know you better and vice versa. Maybe you'll be more comfortable around me after."

I deliberate over this for a few moments. Why not? He's right, it might help me be less awkward. "Alright."

"I'll start. What's your name?"

I stare at him incredulously for a moment before I realise that he's never actually called me by my real name; he always calls me green eyes. "It's Aurora but everyone calls me Ari."

"As in the princess?" I nod and he gives me a flat look "You do realise you look nothing like her."

"I know that," I snap. I've had this discussion with people far too many times. "My mum just loves Disney so she named me after one of her favourite characters, blame her not me."

"I never said it was a bad thing, it makes you unique."

I didn't know how to respond to that so, instead, I just asked my question; it has been bugging me actually. "Is Nathan your brother?"

He scoffs but it's not directed at me. "When did you meet that idiot?"

"When I was looking for the kitchen he gave me directions," I answer sheepishly.

Wyatt looks amused by my reply and doesn't even try to hide it, stupid idiot. "Unfortunately he is, he's a real pain I tell you, a right idiot." You can tell that he cares about his brother from his tone, although what he's saying is negative, there's a warmth and humour behind it as if he's recalling some funny memories.

I smile at that. It's great to have strong relationships with your siblings, sure they can be annoying as heck but they can also be great friends.

"What about you any siblings?"

"Yeah, brother and sister, they're twins."

He gives me a look, almost as if saying 'I understand your pain'. "God I know what that's like but worse."

"How so?" I muse. "Do you have a lot of siblings?"

"Yep, my family's massive. There's my mum and dad. Then there's Nathan, he's the oldest, followed by Zack, Harper, me, Hunter and Aria — they're twins — Daniel, and then Noah, Carter and Brooklyn — they're triplets. And that's just my siblings don't even get me started on the rest of them."

My jaw drops slightly; he has one big family. I guess having a gigantic house kind of makes sense now but even if they had a family double that size they wouldn't need a house this big.

"Wow, alright, that's a lot of people. I've kind already forgotten their names," I admit sheepishly.

He chuckles at that and waves his hand in dismissal. "Don't worry about it. If you ever meet any of them they can introduce themselves then, for now just remember that I've got a big family."

The game continues in this fashion and as time goes on I notice that I'm getting more comfortable around him. There's no longer any awkward pauses or silences, the conversation just seems to flow. It's really nice to be able to talk to someone without it feeling forced, especially after knowing them for such a short amount of time; we just seem to click.

Unfortunately, life never seems to go my way and we've somehow stumbled across my sorest subject, James.

I was asking him about past relationships and I found out that he's not as much of a fuck boy as people say he is. Yes, he's slept with people but no where near as many as I expected. From the rumours, it sounded like he would have sex with anything that breathes but it turns out that's not the case. It goes to show that rumours are not something to believe. They're just lies that people have made up because they've nothing better to do with their lives.

After me finding out about his past relationships, he ended up asking me similar things. I guess I should've seen it coming. I'm not going to blatantly lie because he'll most likely find out as soon as he steps foot into school plus he's been honest with me so I feel like I need to return the favour.

"Uh, well, if we're talking serious relationships I've just had the one. I dated a guy named James for about two years, we just broke up recently actually," the words were almost impossible to utter, just thinking about what I had said has sent my mind into a frenzy about him, about everything that must be wrong with me for him to dump me.

Wyatt takes a few moments to respond and when he does his words come out slowly and carefully. "If you don't mind my asking, why did you break up?"

One word circles in my mind when he asks this, boring. It's because I'm apparently too boring. I haven't told anyone this except for Ava but for some reason, I feel like I can tell him. I feel inclined to. It's almost like I know he won't push too far and won't say a word to anyone on the subject.

"He said I was too boring for him, that he couldn't be with me anymore," I mumble barely above a whisper. I can feel the tears threatening to spill as I do so.

One must've slipped down my cheek because Wyatt lifts his hand to my face and wipes it away. Something about that gesture feels so comforting, so reassuring.

"You really cared about this guy, didn't you?"

I nod my head, unable to speak for fear of it just coming out in a sob. After a few moments, I whisper the words, "I loved him with all my heart."

At my words — if you could call them that — Wyatt's expression visibly hardened.

"Well if it's anything I don't think you're boring, not in the slightest," he says reassuringly, with a warm smile on his face.

It's really sweet that he said that but I don't believe him, not for one second. I mean, James literally said that to my face so it must be true. I'm boring, I'm no fun, I'm not worth it.

"Look, I'm just going to beat around the bush, it's obvious that you're sad and you shouldn't be."

I give him an incredulous look. "Let me finish." I sigh and motion with my hands for him to carry on. "What happened sounds horrible, I'm not going to deny that. It sounds like the love of your life just broke your heart."

"This really isn't help—"

"I'm not done yet," he pauses, making sure that I'm not going to interrupt again. "What I'm saying is you need to do something to help you get over him."

"Such as?"

"I don't know just something to get your mind off of him and help you move on."

Get my mind off of him? Help me move on? That's never going to happen. Although he does have a point, I do need to do something to help occupy my mind from my depressing thoughts.

James said that I'm boring. I have to prove him wrong if it's the last thing I do.

Then it hit me.

"I know. Teach me to be reckless and daring then no one can call me boring again," I say, my eyes bright with excitement.

He pauses, deliberating on that for a moment. "Sorry no can do green eyes, I don't think that's a good idea, it just seems too far out of your comfort zone. It doesn't sound like you. Plus that's going to take up way too much of my time. Although I might want to help you I'm not going to put my life on hold for it."

I let out a huff of frustration. "You know nothing about me," I state. "I want to try things that are out of my comfort zone. I want to be a whole new person, to not be afraid, to be reckless, to just not care anymore" How else could James ever love me again? Maybe if I change he'll want to be with me again.

"What's in it for me?"

Good question. Then it hit me, "Didn't you say you were failing maths?" I ask, recalling our game of twenty questions. He nods. "Then how about this, I'll tutor you in maths if you teach me how to let loose and be reckless."

He thinks it over for a moment, a questioning look on his face. After a few minutes, he nods his head and a smirk is plastered on his features. "You've got yourself a deal, green eyes. You tutor me in maths and I'll teach you how to be reckless, fearless and careless," he says, sticking out his hand for me to shake.

I place my hand in his firm grip and shake it with force.

This is what I want. This is what I need.

## Chapter 10

After I finished eating, I had seconds so it took a while, I thanked Wyatt for his hospitality and made my way to leave. It was more of an attempt because before I got more than a few steps away I felt him grab onto my arm, stopping me in my tracks.

"Where do you think you're going?" He queries.

"To school. I know I'm late but I still don't want to miss all of my classes," I reply, trying to yank my arm out of his vice grip and failing miserably. He chuckles and shakes his head at my attempts to remove myself from him.

"No can do green eyes. I need to hold up my end of the bargain and one of the most important things you need to learn is to not give a shit. So today you're skipping school with me."

Hell no. "Not a fucking chance in hell. Just because I want to let loose doesn't mean I want to risk my grades. I still want to pass all of my classes."

"Language! Calm yourself. One day isn't going to kill you, come on it will be fun, just trust me." With that, he leads me out of his front door and to his car. There's no point in protesting because he's a lot stronger than me and he does have a point so I comply with his demands. I hop into the passenger seat and off we go.

As Wyatt was driving he began to pick up speed a lot, too much. "What the fuck are you doing?! Are you trying to kill us both?! Slow the hell down!" I shouted, fearing for both of our lives. He ignores me and the dial continues to go up: 95mph, 110mph, 140mph! At this point I'm absolutely terrified, I'm at the point of nearly fainting out of terror. I close my eyes and just pray that this is all some crazy dream, that I'm not going more than eighty miles over the speed limit.

After what seems like an eternity the car begins to slow and I ever so carefully open my eyes and am welcomed by countless trees and forest. "You drive like a maniac. What the hell is wrong with you!?"

He turns his head to me and—you guessed it—smirks. "I'm just living a little, green eyes, you should try it some time." The nerve of this guy!

I don't say anything and instead get out of the car, slamming the door behind me. Wyatt then jumps out too, turns to see where I am, jerks his head to the right and starts to walk through the masses of trees, myself closely in tow. We walk in silence as I'm still furious with him and refuse to speak.

We trudge through the forest for what feels like an eternity and my feet feel as though they are bleeding. I love walking and all but I do have my limits and Wyatt has greatly exceeded them. I don't exactly want my feet to be in excruciating pain but it seems as though Wyatt has other plans.

A while later he finally stops on the other side of some shrubbery but by this point I'm quite a distance behind him so I've no idea what he appears to be staring at. "Hurry up green eyes!" He calls.

I begin to sprint towards him, ignoring the searing pain in my feet. It isn't until I reach him that I snap my head up and take in the view before me. It's absolutely breathtaking and I'm momentarily immobilised by its beauty. We're at a cliff's edge and there is a gorgeous waterfall cascading down onto the rocks below. Sitting to the side of this is a stunning cherry blossom tree, large enough for a few people to sit beneath, pink flowers in bloom. The whole area is surrounded by tasteful plants and bushes, hiding this perfect sight from view. Unless you were actively looking for it you'd never know it was here or be able to find it.

"Wow" is all I say as I gape at the beautiful sight.

"Wow indeed, now come on," he says as he grabs onto my arm and pulls me towards the edge of the cliff.

We're millimetres from the edge and my fear of heights begins to kick in. I start to wheeze in panic and scoot away from the edge but Wyatt's firm grip on me stops me getting very far. "What's up with you, green eyes?"

"I'm afraid of heights," I whisper as I continue to struggle in his hold.

He looks at me as if he's studying me, eyes boring into my very soul, not looking away for a second. After a few moments, he grins. "Perfect."

I give him an incredulous look. "Ah, you see we are going to be cliff diving today. You being afraid is a bonus because as well as helping you become reckless I'll also be helping you become fearless."

This is his fucking plan?! Is he trying to get me killed. First the driving now this. "Wyatt, don't you think this is a little extreme? I mean, can't we just cross a traffic light without waiting for it to turn red, that's pretty crazy if you ask me."

Now it's his turns to give me a look but I choose to ignore it. I'm just not a very crazy person so I've actually never crossed a road without waiting for the light to change colour, some call it stupid I call it safety.

"Next you'll be telling me that you've never pretended to be sick to miss a day of school." I give him a sheepish smile. "What!? That's crazy. Have you ever done anything you're not supposed to?"

"Actually once when I was in year three I used my friend's green crayon without telling her, accidentally snapped it and just put it back. To this day she has no clue."

"Wow, you truly are daring," he says, unappreciated sarcasm dripping from his words. "Now it's my job how to teach you to have real fun." I pout at him but he just ignores me and continues talking. "It's actually amazing just give it a chance. Trust me on this, you'll love it."

"Look, there's no way in hell that I'm going to jump off a cliff. I know it might be hard to believe but I do want to live to see tomorrow."

"Come on Aurora, it'll be fun," he protests. I shake my head at him. "Don't be so boring."

Boring. He thinks I'm boring, maybe James had a point. Nope, I have to prove him wrong. I will not be boring, I can't be if I ever want to win James back. He'll love me again if I can be fun, I just know it. I'll change for you James. I'll fix myself for you James. I'll be better for you James. You'll see, he'll see, everyone will see and James will love me again, I just know it.

"Okay, I'll do it."

Wyatt looks to be in thought for a moment but soon smiles and holds his hand out to me. I take it and we stand directly at the edge, not a hair separating us from the edge. "I'll jump with you," he says in a comforting manner. I smile at him gratefully, clutching his hand tightly in my own.

He counts to three and we jump. I freaking jump off of a cliff. I can honestly say that I'd never thought I'd do that, to be honest, I don't know why I did it.

As we're falling, I feel tingles erupt in my stomach and a smile spreads across my face. I've no idea why but I love this feeling, something about it just seems so calming and freeing, like I have no cares or worries, like nothing else matters at all. All that is happening in my mind is the present, there's no need to worry about the consequences of this decision, I just enjoy the current feelings as they come. Let me tell you, it's an exhilarating feeling, a euphoric one, an amazing one, an addictive one.

All too soon we hit the water below and my high begins to fade. I need to feel like that again, just once. We get out of the water and begin to climb back up, I'm too excited to even care about my wet clothes.

"I think I want to go on my own this time," I tell Wyatt.

"Are you sure?" He asks hesitantly.

I nod my head and make my way to the edge again. I collect my thoughts and using all of my willpower I step off of the ground. The feeling is even better this time, if that's possible, I can't

deny the fact that I love it. It's so unlike me but at the same time, I feel as though I couldn't be more like myself than I am right now.

Wyatt jumps in not long after he hears my splash and when his head pops up he shakes his hair, wetting me further in the process. Just like that, a full blown water fight begins. Neither of us holds back, splashing each other at full force. It almost looks as if a tidal wave has started from the amount of water we've thrown at one another. To an onlooker, we'd look extremely childish but I don't care.

After our war—which I won—we headed back up to the cliff and jumped several more times, even trying flips here and there. I think that it's safe to say that I love cliff diving now, the height no longer bugs me. I guess that that's one fear off of the list. Maybe this deal wasn't such a bad idea.

One thing is for certain, I can honestly say I haven't had such a good day in ages.

# Chapter 11

I spent the whole day with Wyatt, talking and having fun. I almost forgot what it was like to just feel free and not care for once. Sadly my carefree time is over and I have to face reality.

Wyatt was kind enough to drop me home but as I walk up the driveway I see something I was praying to avoid, Ava's car. Shit. Luckily, my mum is away for work, she left this morning, so I'm fine in that regard but Ava is another story. I hope Max and Mason have planned my funeral because I probably won't make it out of this alive.

I carefully walk up to the door and unlock it with the spare key that we keep under the doormat. Taking deep breaths, I open the mahogany door with a creaking noise. The lights are off and it's deathly silent; Alice and Hugo are probably both in their rooms on their phones but Ava is nowhere in sight.

Each footstep echoes throughout the house, the only noise to be heard, it's too quiet. As I'm searching I finally see the faint glow of a light in none other than my room. I cautiously open the door only to be welcomed with a stern and irritated looking Ava, just what I need.

I offer her a sheepish smile but she instantly shuts me down with a hard look, her arms crossed. I know I'm about to get a lecture so I make my way to sit on the sofa in my room and wait for her rant to start. As predicted it doesn't take long, seven seconds to be exact. "Where in God's name were you? I was so worried. How could you do that to me? I tried calling you a billion times and you didn't answer and when you finally picked up you just hung up on me. What the actual hell! Why? Why Aurora? It's just horrible to make someone worry like that. If you'd just told me that you were safe it would have been fine. Instead, you ignored me the whole day. Have you any idea how that feels? Who am I kidding, of course, you don't. You are ab—"

"Ava," I cut her off before she could go any further because I knew she was getting more flustered and agitated by the second. "Calm down, deep breaths. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that. If I were you I would've been worried sick, I see that now. So I'm deeply sorry, can you please forgive me," I say sincerely, giving her my best puppy dog eyes.

She just looks at me for a moment, contemplating her answer carefully. "Gah, alright. I forgive you, what are best friends for," she says and comes over to give me a hug which I return.

Once we've pulled away she goes and sits back on my bed and gives me a look that I can't place. "So tell me what happened. Where did you go? And also why did you ditch school? I can't recall you ever doing that before."

Shit. I knew this was coming but now it's here I'm not sure how to reply. Should I go for the honest approach or just lie. I can't lie to my best friend but I don't want to tell her everything. She doesn't need to know about our deal or how I'm changing myself for James. I know she'll just lecture me on the topic and tell me he's not worth it but to me he is. He's worth it and so much more. She's never been in love so she doesn't know what it's like. She can't relate to me on this topic so would give me advice from an outsiders point of view which is not what I need. So I'll tell her the truth but just leave out a few details, that's not technically lying.

"I can't remember much from the party if I'm honest but I do know I drank a lot. Turns out I got mad at someone and later passed out in their arms."

"Wait," Ava cut in, "let me get this straight, you got that drunk?"

I nod. You see, I have levels as to how drunk I get. Yes, I hardly drink but I have been dragged to parties before so I have drunk. The spectrum goes from where I'm a bit loopy and daft all the way to where I get extremely mad and irritated at everything. I was at the latter end of this scale last night, meaning I must've been extremely drunk.

"Anyway, the next morning I woke up in their house, don't worry they didn't try anything but obviously I was quite confused. This so happened to be the time that you called me and that's why I ended it so abruptly, I needed to figure out what was going on," I pause to look at her face, so far her expression is passive and doesn't give anything away. "So after I sorted everything out in my head and managed to soothe the killer headache I had it was too late to come into school." So maybe that was a bit of a lie, I only would've missed the first two or three periods but she doesn't need to know that.

"I talked with the person for a bit and came home to find you worried about me. Obviously, I felt terrible and realised how stupid I was for keeping you in the dark. And I believe that brings us up to now." Call me a suck up or whatever but in if you were in my situation you would've done the same, don't even try to lie, Ava is hella scary when she wants to be. Also, yes, I left out quite a few details but for some reason I don't feel like sharing that gorgeous location with her, it just doesn't feel right.

"And who is this mysterious person?" Ava asks.

I'm not going to tell her, she'll freak out and I'm not dealing with that. Plus she might accidentally blab, even if it's only to Max and Mason I can't risk it. "Now that, my dear Ava, is a secret," I tell her.

She pouts at me before opening her mouth to speak, she's going to push this I know but she won't win, I know how to hold my ground when I need to. "I'm your best friend, we're not supposed to

hide things from one another," she sounds genuinely hurt as she says this, making guilt begin to chip away at me but nevertheless I won't give in.

"Ava, for now, I'd like to keep this to myself. There are probably some things you've never told me, in fact, I'm sure of this. There are some things I'm still trying to process and therefore are not ready to tell you, please understand that."

Her face holds a guilty expression, meaning I was right. "So it's true, there is something you're not telling me and I think it's pretty important," I state.

She nods. "Yes Ari there is but I'm not ready to tell you yet."

"How about this, we both tell each other when we're ready and on this specific secret, no other, we don't push to find out information." I think that's fair. Don't get me wrong I'm dying to know what Ava is hiding but if not knowing means I can keep the whole Wyatt situation a secret then I can manage being kept in the dark.

She seems hesitant at first but nods nonetheless. "Alright just for this one secret and no other we will wait until we're ready to tell each other."

Okay now onto the topic I was worried about, school. What did I miss?

~\*~\*~

It's now Friday, the best weekday, obviously. As usual, Ava and I went to school together and went about our day as normal. I'm really pleased to say that gossip about James and I is finally lessening, everyone must've found something new to talk about. I'm glad. I don't think I could've dealt with rumours for much longer without going insane. However, I didn't find out what they new gossip was until lunch.

I'm sitting at my usual table with my friends and everyone is chattering away as per usual. Mason still has that look on his face, I haven't had a chance to confront him on what's troubling him yet but as soon as I find a moment alone with him I will.

"Ari have you heard the news yet?" Jessica asks from beside me, stopping my train of thought. I shake my head. "Really? The whole school has been going on about it since yesterday morning."

I take that moment to remind her that I wasn't in yesterday. I told everyone that I had a killer hangover, only Ava knows differently but she's kept her lips sealed like I asked her to.

"Oh, right I forgot. Anyway, the news is that the Kings are back at school. They were on holiday so didn't come back to school until yesterday. Except for Wyatt, he only came back today, no one knows why."

If you haven't noticed the Kings are a major talking point at school. Everyone knows about them, they're sort of famous. Oh, who am I kidding they are famous. Their mum owns her own designer clothing brand and their dad is some famous businessman but I've no idea what he actually does. All in all, everyone wants to be their friend.

Me, however, I'd rather not. You see I've never been one for the spotlight so I chose to always stay out of their way. I'm not saying that they're not nice people but they're just not my scene. That's partly why I don't want anyone finding out about Wyatt and me, it would just draw unnecessary attention to myself. I've just about managed to deal with all the stares I've been getting because of James, now that that's over I don't need anymore.

It's not just the fact that I'm hanging out with a King, it's the fact that I'm around Wyatt King. He's got a bad boy reputation and I don't want to get messed up in that. On top of that he is very attractive and since he is still in school every girl I know wants him, even if they try and hide it, except myself obviously.

Speak of the devil and he shall appear. At that moment Wyatt walks into the cafeteria, smirking as per usual. Most of the girls and a few guys in the room stop to stare at him or should I say gawk at him. Typical, I'm used to this by now. I've never bothered to stare because I've always had a boyfriend but now that I'm single I can't help but to turn around and look at him. He is gorgeous, there's no denying that but unlike every other girl I never have and never will fall for is charms. He's more trouble than he's worth.

As he's walking to his table his eyes meet mine for what feels like a long while but in reality is just a few seconds, blue eyes into green ones. Before he turns away he sends me another smirk but this one is directed at myself and no one else. Luckily, I don't think anyone noticed.

I turn back around and continue to chat with my friends but I can't help my mind wandering away from the topics we're discussing. In the back of my mind, I'm thinking about Wyatt and all the crazy stuff he has planned. Let me just say although I'm nervous I'm ready, nothing is going to get in my way so Wyatt King bring it on.

## Chapter 12

It's Saturday!

I'm literally happy dancing right now, no joke. This week felt like a lifetime and now it's finally the weekend, hallelujah!

For some reason even though this week was actual hell and it tired me to no end I woke up early this morning, strange I know. It's five thirty in the morning but I couldn't have more of energy. I can't make any noise though otherwise Alice and Hugo will murder me so I think I'm going to go for a run before breakfast.

That reminds me, mum is still away for work which means I'm not having one of her heavenly means, fucks sake.

I quickly put on my running clothes and quietly make my way down the stairs. If I wake up the twins I won't hear the end of it, trust me I've done it before. They made my life a living hell for a week, I've tried to suppress those memories but the mere thought makes me shudder involuntarily. Let's just say I've learnt my lesson and will never be doing that again.

A lot of people ask me why I bother with running. They say things like 'are you that obsessed with how you look' or 'you're not fat so why bother', stupid I know. They don't seem to understand that I run because I like it. Yes, it keeps me in shape but that's not why I do it. I run because it helps me. Whenever I have a lot on my mind or I'm stressed running helps me clear my head. It doesn't have to be about looks all the time, people just don't seem to understand that.

The days haven't gotten too much shorter yet because it's only September so the sun is out. Soon I'm going to have to rethink the times when I run because as we get closer to winter the sun comes out less and less.

I'm going to go around the park—which is about a fifteen-minute jog away—that takes about half an hour and come back. So in total about an hour jog, not too intensive but I'm not in the mood for that.

Because it's early there are not too many cars about which means I can jog in peace. I put in my headphones and bob my head to the music as I go down the all too familiar path.

The only problem with the park is when I get too close to any dogs. I wouldn't say I'm scared of them but I'm not exactly comfortable around them either. I can handle walking past a dog when their owner has them on a leash but when they are allowed to just run wild is when I get worried.

That's another good thing about going for a run at this time. It's about ten to six on a Saturday morning, no one in their right mind is up—I'm the exception, obviously—so there are a scarce number of dogs around.

Just as I say that I hear a barking noise. I fucking jinxed myself, great. I look around but see no dog in sight, maybe I'm just imagining things. Never mind, as I turn around I can see one in the distance running towards me.

Wait.

Hold up.

RUNNING TOWARDS ME?!?!

FUCK.

In this situation I did what any person with a working brain would do, I run, I run fast, I run very fast.

Stupid, stupid me. I'm never going to be able to outrun a freaking dog. What the hell was I thinking?!

As the seconds go by it starts to gain on me now it's just a few metres away. Oh, why? What did I do to deserve this? I've been good—mostly. Okay so maybe I took Alice's iPhone charger without telling her and claimed it as my own so she thought she lost hers and had to buy a new one. And maybe I painted Hugo's room hot pink and swapped everything in his room for the hot pink version as well—in my defence I had a good reason, he finished MY cereal one morning so I had to have stupid porridge for breakfast. And maybe I was driving mum's car and crashed it into a lamppost because I was cursing a driver for not indicating. But I'm a saint, honestly, I am.

Oh god, it's almost ca—ompf.

Shit. Shit. Shit. There's a dog on me. Holy fuck.

Okay, so obviously I act like any rational person and scream at the top of my lungs, thrashing underneath its weight. Side note, can I just say that it's bloody heavy, seriously what the hell does this thing eat.

It leans its head towards my face as it does so I gulp.

"Fuck," I curse as it starts to lick my face.

There's a dog licking my face. I think I'm going to faint. This cannot be happening. I try again to push the dog off of me but it won't budge. Note to self, start working out—okay so that's never going to happen but whatever.

I begin to hyperventilate. This might sound stupid but put yourself in my position. There's a random dog on top of me, that could have rabies might I add, and it's licking my face. Not to mention that I'm not the biggest fan of dogs.

I'm about to scream for the umpteenth time when for some reason the dog moves and is now no longer on top of me. I cautiously open my eyes that I've kept shut throughout this whole traumatising experience.

When I do I see that the dog now has a blue leash attached to its collar. Thank fuck. The bloody owner finally found their dog after letting it loose.

I get up onto my feet, dusting myself as I do but to no avail. I look up and let's just say that I'm not prepared to see the owner of this creature.

You guessed it, it's Wyatt fucking King. Seriously, why can't I seem to escape this guy? Oh and guess what, he's smirking big shocker there—not.

"Fancy seeing you here, green eyes," he says, trying to hold in his laugh, bastard.

"Have you been stalking me, King?" I ask with a raised eyebrow.

He chuckles at this "Nah I think you've got it the wrong way round."

I scoff. "Please, why would I want to see your horrid face more than absolutely necessary." Okay so obviously I was lying there, his face is the total opposite of horrid but I'm not about to tell him that.

Now it's his turn to scoff. "Let's be real here, you're dying to see me and my handsome face as much as possible so you've resorted to stalking me as I take my dog for a walk," he states in absolute confidence.

I give him a look, wondering if he's actually serious. When his face doesn't change I open my mouth but am quickly cut off by his barking laughter. Thank hell he was joking. He'd be a really good actor, I honestly thought he was being serious. How can anyone be that good at lying? Must come from years of practice. Now that I think of it it's not a good thing, I've no idea why I'm commending him for it.

"How come you can lie so well?" I blurt out without thinking. I slap my hand on my forehead in embarrassment. Why the hell did I say that, stupid Aurora. "What I mean is how come you can hold such a straight face? I mean you didn't even falter once."

"Years of practice."

I raise my eyebrow, "any reason you've been lying for years?" Okay, that's quite invasive, you're so dumb Ari, now he's going to be uncomfortable around you. I internally groan at myself for my idiocy.

He shrugs but smirks. "I can't be revealing all my secrets, can I?" Fair point. At least he's not mad at me.

Suddenly, his dog barks and I immediately jump away from it. Wyatt seems amused by my response and fails to hold in his laughter. "Afraid are we, green eyes?"

I scoff. "Puh-lease, why would I be afraid of a harmless little dog," I say, quite confidently might I add even though I'm lying my arse off.

He raises an eyebrow at me, "whatever you say," he says, sounding unconvinced. Maybe I'm not that good at lying.

I brush him off with a wave of my hands. "What's his name anyway?" I know for a fact it's a boy. Let's just say when he was on top of me there was definite evidence to support this.

He looks away from me and mumbles something but it's impossible to hear. "What did you say?" He mumbles slightly louder this time but I've still no clue what he said. "I still can't hear you, speak up."

"His name is Cat," he says just loud enough for my ears to pick out.

Cat. His dog is called Cat? I can't help myself, I burst out laughing. "Wait, let me get this straight," I say between tears, "you named your dog Cat?"

He scowls at me so I try to compose myself but fail miserably. After a few attempts I manage to stop laughing but the grin won't leave my face. "Firstly I didn't name him, my little sister did and secondly Cat is just for short," he says sounding slightly irritated but I can tell that he's not actually annoyed.

"So what's his real name?" I question, eyebrows raised.

He shakes his head at me and doesn't answer. Instead, he says "that's not important. Anyway since you're here I'd like to have my first tutoring session."

Tutoring?

Oh right, I promised to tutor him in maths. I completely forgot. Urgh! I guess I have to, a deal is a deal.

"Alright. When and where?"

"My place, now." He gives me a suggestive smile and it's only then I realise the double meaning of his words. Okay, I probably should have worded it better on my part, I kinda walked right into that one.

I ignore the side smirk he is giving me and nod. I'm not that sweaty anyway, seeing as I didn't get to finish my run.

I walk with him to his house, making conversation as I do. I'm not sure how I'm talking to him so easily, usually, I have a hard time talking with new people but with him the words just flow like water under a bridge, let me tell you that's an amazing feeling.

We get to his house and as soon as he opens the door I can hear voices. Shit. I forgot Wyatt has a family and a big one at that. I guess I'm meeting his family.

Deep breaths Aurora, you can do this.

## Chapter 13

"No it's mine!" Are the first words I hear as I step inside his house. A little blonde boy—no more than maybe eight or nine years of age—runs past me with a small auburn haired boy in tow. The blonde boy appears to be holding something and the auburn haired boy is chasing after him, his small fists raised, I'm not going to lie it's adorable.

There is a scuffling sound from behind them and soon an older looking woman comes into sight, her face is riddled with lines and her eyes have massive bags beneath them, showing her age and most likely a huge lack of sleep. Her salt and pepper hair is messily tied into a bun and she has a frustrated look on her face. She crosses her arms over her chest and speaks in a loud, firm tone, "Noah, Carter! What do you two think you're doing? Stop running this instant, you're going to ruin the house. I don't think you'll both want to have to clean it all up."

Both little boys immediately stop in their tracks and spin around. They both look scared of the woman, the tone she used clearly worked.

"But he stole my toy!" The auburn haired boy whined.

She gives him a stern look. "I don't want to hear it Carter. Both of you go to your rooms now," she says firmly, pointing towards a long corridor.

"Yes Anna," they both say in unison, their stares concentrated on their feet. The blonde boy, Noah I'm assuming, is first out closely followed by Carter.

Anna turns around to face us, her features softening when she does. "Ah Wyatt you're back. Did Cat enjoy his walk?" she asks warmly. I have a feeling she has a soft spot for the dog. As she says this Cat runs past Wyatt towards Anna, hopping around her in glee. Yep, I have a feeling she's his favourite as well.

Anna let's out a light laugh before her eyes finally settle on me. "And who's this young lady?" She questions, her tone indifferent. It's going to be hard to win her over, I'm sure.

Wyatt replies before I can. "This is Aurora, she's tutoring me in maths."

She gives me a once over before returning her full attention back to Cat and walking away with him, not bothering to respond. Okay, she's definitely not an easy one to please.

"Who was that?" I ask Wyatt as I follow him through his mansion.

"That's Anna, she's our nanny I guess you could say. Our parents aren't around much so they hired her to take care of us. She's been around since Nathan was born so she's like family," he replies with a shrug.

"Aww, the big bad boy needs a nanny?" I can't help but tease.

He shoots me a glare for that but doesn't respond, instead his face takes on a stony expression as he continues to lead me through the place until we get to a room that I can only assume to be his.

"Make yourself at home," he says, gesturing to his room as he walks to a corner, towards his school bag. I casually make my way towards his desk as he fishes out a textbook and some paper before walking over to me.

"Alright," he begins, "teach me your ways."

I chuckle at him before opening up his textbook and going through one of the topics.

~\*~\*~

When Wyatt said he was bad at maths I guess I never actually registered how bad he could be. Seriously, he barely had his mind wrapped around the concept of BIDMAS and that junior school level. God knows why he's taking it for A-level he's practically at the same stage as your average ten year old. All I'm saying is that I've definitely got my work cut out for me. I've got to teach him about seven years worth of material in the space of a few months. Pray for me.

After my atrocious findings and a failed tutoring session I can honestly say that I'm knackered and it's only about one in the afternoon. I never thought tutoring could be this exhausting. I've taught people in the past and they've never been this much effort. Believe it or not I actually did tutoring as my volunteering for my D of E. Call me a maths nerd but it was way better and easier than other things I could've done.

"Alright I think we're done for today," I say with a sigh.

Wyatt nods and begins to pack away his things. I'm about to leave his room when I hear him call out after me. "Wait, aren't you going to stay for lunch?"

As I'm in the process of shaking my head my stomach rumbles and Wyatt smirks a victorious smirk.

"Isn't this what happened last time you were here? I offer you food and even though for some reason you want to decline your stomach agrees with me and you end up staying."

Before I can reply to his comment he has grabbed my wrist and is tugging me out of his room and down the stairs. I guess I'm having lunch with the Kings. This should be fun—note the sarcasm.

"Daniel Percival King sit down this instant!" I hear Anna snap from atop the stairs.

I walk—more like am dragged—into the dining room and see a boy maybe twelve or thirteen with light brown hair, styled into a quiff, and deep-set light blue eyes smirking cheekily at Anna whilst she glares at him.

His smirk soon turns into a scowl, however, as he says, "I've told you so many times to not call me by my full name, you know I hate it. Just call me Dan like everyone else."

"Well if you stopped being such a brat I wouldn't have to call you that. Now sit down," Anna retorts, that woman has a strong backbone.

The scowl doesn't leave Dan's face but he complies and sits down without another word. Damn, Anna really knows how to control these kids, good on her.

Wyatt leads me to a chair next to him at the table and it is at this point that Anna turns her attention to us. "So you're staying for lunch?" she asks, her voice void of any emotion, it's always like that whenever she speaks to me. I nod. "I thought so, this one wouldn't understand maths if it smacked him across the head with a lead pipe."

Everyone at the table laughs at the comment except for Wyatt who merely scowls. I take this moment to look at everyone at the table. There is of course Dan; there's also the two young boys from earlier and they're accompanied by a small blond girl with curly honey blonde hair and doll-like sapphire blue eyes. She has a cute button nose, high cheekbones and a bright smile on her face, I think she's one of the cutest children I've ever seen.

Across from them are a boy and girl who look to be the same age as Hugo and Alice, most likely twins as well. They both have jet black hair, hazel eyes and slightly tanned skin. I think it's safe to say that they don't look much like the rest of their family but they still both carry the good-looking gene nevertheless.

As I finish scanning the people around me I hear Anna mutter, "Where in Gods name is Nathaniel," angrily under her breath. Just as she says this footsteps start to thunder towards the dining room. Soon two boys are at the entrance. Nathan and a boy I've never seen before but he looks to be about two or so years older than myself. He has pale blonde hair, grey eyes and strongly chiselled features, of course like everyone else in this family his is ridiculously good looking. It's so unfair how other worldly this family looks, it puts the rest of the world to shame.

"Nathaniel," Anna snaps, "what on earth took you so long, your food is getting cold and Zackary why didn't you tell me you were here? How long ago did you get back?"

They both gulp and visibly wince at her harsh tone but it's Nathan who answers. "Sorry Anna, we were playing this new game that I just got today and lost track of time. Zack only got here this morning and we just had to start the game right away, again we're so sorry," he says in such a polite

manner, kiss-arse. Anna seems to have everyone wrapped around her little finger, even the dog worships her.

She nods at them, clearly smug about how terrified they both were and motions them to sit down opposite Wyatt and I. Anna leaves the room and everyone begins to dig into their meals. Nathan immediately notices me and smiles. "Ari, nice to see you again. I'm surprised to be honest, usually my brother doesn't bring girls home but when he does it's just a one time thing." I blush at his statement and shake my head furiously at him.

"It's not like that at all," I say defensively "I'm—" I start but I suddenly freeze up when I notice that everyone's eyes are on me. Fuck. I hate being the centre of attention, make it stop, please make it stop.

Luckily, Wyatt notices my sudden quietness and steps in for me, thank heavens. "It's true Nathan, it's not like that. She's just tutoring me, we all know I suck at maths."

Nathan eyes us both sceptically but let's the matter drop and goes back to his food. I'm about to eat as well but stop when I hear another voice speak. I look up and find that the blonde boy is staring at me. "And who might you be?" He asks politely.

"I'm Aurora but everyone calls me Ari," I tell him shyly, considering I don't know him.

"Well Ari, it's lovely to meet you I'm Zack and may I just say that you look absolutely beautiful today," he smiles at me whilst saying this and his unexpected compliment makes my cheeks turn a deep shade of red.

"Thank you," I respond timidly, not knowing what else to say.

"Ignore my brother," Wyatt says loud enough for everyone to hear. "He flirts with anything that breathes, don't let him get to you."

Zack scowls at him but everyone else laughs, including me.

~\*~\*~

After lunch I finally make my way to leave. I bid everyone goodbye, quite quietly because I still don't know them, and head towards the front door. As I'm walking down the driveway a hand grabs onto my wrist, forcing me to stop before spinning me to face them. I'll give you three guesses as to who it is.

He leans down so he's breathing in my air. "No goodbye?" He asks.

"I-I didn't realise, I'm sorry," I say breathlessly, unable to speak properly this close to him.

"Don't apologise, it doesn't help with the whole 'I don't give a shit' persona that you're going for," he whispers, making me laugh quietly.

I nod in response, making a mental note not to apologise so much, he is right in the sense that I do it a lot.

"See you soon, green eyes," he whispers huskily into my ear before spinning me around once again so I'm facing the way I was before. I turn back to catch a glimpse of him but he's nowhere to be seen, odd. I shake off the weird feeling I'm getting and start the walk to the park before deciding that I should probably finish what I started and jogging home.

I don't pay much attention to my music as I jog, my mind is too preoccupied with today's events, especially what just happened as I was leaving. My body shivers slightly at the thought so I shrug away the memory and continue my journey home.

What a day.

## Chapter 14

Any guesses as to what I did with the rest of my weekend? I studied. Yep, exciting I know but I had a lot of homework to catch up on. Let's just say that I managed to write my entire RS essay so now I won't have to worry about it and do it next Sunday, which is the day before it's due. I usually do all of my work last minute but this year I've promised myself that I'd stay on top of things and that's exactly what I plan on doing. So far, so good.

Anyway, it's now Monday my favourite day of the week—note the sarcasm. I eat one of mums delicious breakfasts as per usual and then scurry out the door once I hear Ava's car.

"How come you didn't reply to my texts and calls at all on Saturday?" Ava asks as soon as she's started the car, preventing me from jumping out to avoid the conversation, curse her for planning ahead.

Ummm. What do I say? I don't want her knowing about Wyatt. I don't want anyone knowing about my involvement with the Kings in general, not even my best friend. If it gets out I'll be the centre of attention all over again and I can't deal with that.

"I kinda slept most of Saturday away if I'm honest. You know how draining last week was for me, I just needed to catch up on some well-deserved sleep, sorry." Lie.

Ava nods and changes the subject but not before sending me a sympathetic look. Huh, I guess I'm better at this whole lying thing than I thought. I'm not sure whether that's a good or a bad thing.

~\*~\*~

The next few days pass in a blur. They all consisted of me actually doing all of my work well before the deadline and not sleeping due to my obsession with reading at night. The usual, apart from the work stuff, that's new.

I haven't actually spoken to Wyatt since Saturday but I have caught his eye every now and then but it only lasts for a few seconds at a time. Nothing too obvious so no one has noticed, thank god.

It's finally Friday, last period might I add so the weekend is near and I can hear it calling.

The seconds tick by ever so slowly. I feel as though the more I will the hands on the clock to move the slower they go, typical.

Finally, after what feels like a lifetime, I hear that deafening bell and I run out of class like a mad woman.

I drive home with Ava as per usual but then I remember I completely forgot to find out about what has been troubling Mason. He's been acting weird for two weeks now but my minds been too preoccupied with other things recently to find out what has been going on.

Enough is enough, I'm going to see him tonight.

I quickly finish off the remaining homework I have and scarf down my dinner before grabbing the keys to the seventeenth birthday present that I hardly ever use.

Don't get me wrong, I love my car but I'm just not the best driver. I can drive, only last week I drove to Ava's, it's just that Mason's house is a bit further away and that can cause a few issues, totally minor ones though.

One time I completely wrecked mum's car, I'm talking beyond repair. I've also damaged it quite badly a few times in the past. That's why she was hesitant to get me my own in the first place but after realising I would keep destroying hers she finally gave in. Lord knows how I even managed to pass my test, sheer luck, that's all I've come up with.

I've never been the best with cars. Bikes are much more my thing but I haven't been one in years, not since a while before we moved actually. I've just never been able to bring myself around to do it again, I doubt I'll ever be able to if I'm being honest.

The drive to Mason's house was—shall we say—interesting but all in all not terrible. I only was in the middle of two lanes about seven times in total—a new personal record. I also only endangered the lives of two animals this time—both pigeons who wouldn't move off of the road no matter how much I honked at them, it was bloody annoying I tell you. And I didn't hit any cars, not even a scratch, I'm pretty chuffed about that actually. So overall I think it's safe to say it was quite a successful drive there.

After parking my car—again pretty successfully—I walk up the familiar drive to Mason's house, smelling the gorgeous pine trees and lavender bushes as I do. Once I make it to the door I ring the doorbell, knock thrice and then begin to fidget with my fingers as I wait. I do that sometimes, fidget I mean, usually it's when I'm nervous. I don't know why I'm nervous about this, it's probably nothing and I'm overreacting but for some reason, I just have this bad feeling. It's making my stomach do horrid flips and every second that ticks by with me just standing out here in the cold only adds to the uncomfortable feeling.

I've been standing outside for two minutes now and the bitter coldness of autumn is starting to kick in, I probably should've brought a coat with me. Getting impatient, I knock on the door again, much louder this time and proceed to ring the doorbell again. Nothing.

I'm pretty sure Mase is home so I decide to put my ear on the door. When I do I hear muffled shouts that I can't decipher. It doesn't sound like Mason though, or his parents. Strange. Maybe this was bad timing. I would go back but I actually drove here on my own, unscathed, so I'm determined to see this through to the end. I ring the bell three more times before I start my continuous knocking, if I were on the other side of the door I'd be extremely annoyed by now but it's his fault for not answering.

After another five minutes—yep, five freaking minutes of me standing in the freezing cold—I hear a loud crashing sound followed by some scuffling, then the door is finally opened, halle-fucking-lujah. I look up to see a breathless Mason, panting, a sheen of sweat on his forehead. But that's not what catches my attention, what does are the shouts in the background that sound ever so familiar.

"Ari?" Mason questions, bringing my attention back to him. "What are you—" he's cut off by another crashing noise. "You know what, never mind that, I need your help." After saying that he grabs my wrist and yanks me inside his house.

"What the hell Mas—" I stop when I hear shouting, now I'm inside I can actually hear what's being said.

"YOU'RE A COMPLETE A-CLASS BITCH JUST SHUT THE FUCK UP!"

"ABSOLUTELY NOT! YOU'RE BEING AN ABSOLUTE FUCKING COCK SUCKER YOU PRICK!"

"ARSEWIPE!"

"SHIT HEAD!"

"CUM DUMPSTER!"

"WANKER!"

"THUNDER CUNT"

"JIZZ-INHALING GERBIL FUCKER!"

That last one was pretty ingenious, not going to lie.

Wait, I recognise those voices. It's Oliver and Rebekah. God, not again. I've mentioned in the past that they're not the most functional or rational couple. This is the norm for them.

"Why the hell are they at your house Mason?" I whisper-yell at him.

"I haven't a bloody clue. They came here about half an hour ago, something about needing my opinion on something because I'm fair and unbiased then suddenly my house turned into a war

zone and Word War III started. I'm so glad my parents are away for the weekend but I've no clue how to shut them up, help me," he pleads.

I sigh and run my hands through my hair. "Mase, you and I both know the best way to handle these two is to let them shout for a bit, we both know they'll end up having make-up sex and then they'll be fine."

"I know that but I don't want that to happen in my house," he grumbles, putting his arms across his chest.

"I get that but trying to stop them now is suicide, they'll probably throw something at you, you've heard the crashes, and I bet you it'll be heavy."

Mason looks towards the hallway and winces at yet another object being broken before hanging his head in defeat. "I guess your right," he sighs.

"Of course I am. How about we go for a drive whilst we wait for them to calm down?" I suggest. It's the perfect way to find out what's been going on with him.

"Sure but I'm driving, I want to come home without having to visit the hospital."

I put my hand and my chest in mock hurt. "My driving isn't that bad."

He gives me an are-you-shitting-me look and I end up putting my hands up in defeat.

I hop into Mason's car, relaxing in the comfortable leather seats. Soon the engine hums to life and we begin to drive aimlessly around his neighbourhood. "Mase, I've been meaning to ask you something for a while now," I start, deciding it's best to get straight to the point.

He hums in response, waiting for me to continue, his eyes focused on the road ahead.

"What's been bothering you?" I ask.

"What do you mean?" He asks, keeping his composure.

"Well," I begin, "something has been on your mind for a while now, I can tell. Whatever it is, it's troubling you and I want to help. So tell me, what's wrong?"

He clears his throat. "Why'd you think this?" His voice is slightly strained now.

"Mase, don't be stupid, you've been one of my best friends for years. I can tell when you're acting off. Just like how you could tell that something was troubling me that day when James broke up with me." That last bit was hard to say, even after two weeks I'm still struggling to believe it.

He sighs. "It's nothing, Ari, don't worry about it.."

I give him a stern look, though I'm not sure he sees it considering he's driving. "Cut the bullshit, Mason. We both know that you're not fine. I'm here to listen, you know that. Just let me help you, please." I think the raw emotion in my voice did something because he pulls over and turns all of his attention to me.

"Promise you won't tell anybody?" I nod. "Not even Ava?" Again, I nod. I hate keeping things from here but this is Mason's secret, not mine. "Well, I've been seeing this girl," he starts but hesitates as my eyes light up. Not once in the entire time I've known Mason has he ever mentioned a girl. He's not like most guys I know in that regard. I don't think he's ever kissed a girl before, let alone dated one. Which is surprising because he's very good looking. He's just never seemed into all that. He's always been more focused on his work but that's what he wanted so I never asked him about it.

"Go on," I urge him.

He scratches the back of his neck, refusing to meet my eyes. "Well, she's brilliant, funny, kind and I really like her but she doesn't want anyone to know about us." I raise a brow at him. "She says that it's too early and that she'd rather we keep to ourselves, which I understand, but I hate sneaking around."

I nod in understanding, poor Mason. "Mase, this is making you unhappy so talk about it. The key to any relationship is communication. Come to a compromise or an agreement of some sort. Try that and go from there, things will work out in the end but if they don't then it wasn't meant to be."

Mason smiles at me before pulling me into a warm embrace. "Thanks, Ari," he whispers in my ear.

"Anytime."

## Chapter 15

I wake up the next morning to the sound of my phone ringing. Urgh. With my eyes still closed I answer the godforsaken device and hold it to my ear. Whoever this is better have a good reason for waking me up on a Saturday. "Hello?" I say in a groggy voice.

"Rise and shine green eyes!" Oh, Fuck no.

"How the hell did you get my number?" I demand, now fully awake.

"I can't be telling you all of my secrets, now hurry and get ready I'm waiting for you in your driveway."

"How the fuck did you find out where I live?!"

"Language, green eyes! As I've said, that's a secret, now hurry the fuck up, the day is being wasted." Then he hangs up. Great—note the sarcasm. Ignoring Wyatt completely, I go back to sleep.

A little while later I hear a knock on my bedroom door. "Come in!" I call, half asleep.

"Ari," I hear my sister, Alice, call but I'm too tired to reply so I grunt. "Ari!" She snaps this time, pulling the sheets off of me in the process. I jump into a sitting position and glare at her. If looks could kill she would be six feet under but so would I because she stares at me with equal vigour, her sea green eyes boring into me. We both have green eyes but hers are sea green whilst mine are much more vivid and bright, something I got from dad.

"What!?" I snap, ripping the sheets from her grasp and lying down again.

"Someone's here to see you, so hurry up and get out of bed."

Fucking hell! Can't a girl sleep in this day and age, guess not.

After Alice leaves, I quickly scramble out of bed and get ready because trust me when I say you do not want to get on the wrong side of her. Fifteen minutes later I walk downstairs and see Wyatt sitting at the breakfast bar. "Finally! What took so long, green eyes?"

I stick my tongue out at him but choose not to reply as I grab a cereal bar from the kitchen cupboards.

"I never knew Alice was your sister." Wyatt states.

I shrug. "I never knew you had so many siblings, what does it matter?"

"No, what I mean is, I know Alice. Her and Aria are friends, she's been over at our house a couple times. What surprises me is that you didn't know Aria. She's been here quite a bit as well, heck I've even dropped her off. "

"I mean, I don't really bother with checking up on Alice and Hugo when they have friends over and they do the same, it's a mutual agreement. That way none of us gets irritated with one another and no one gets embarrassed," I say and shrug whilst I do.

He nods. "Alright then. Anyway, it's time for another tutoring session," he starts, "but after we're going on another little outing to hold up my end of the bargain."

I internally groan at his statement for two reasons. One, he's absolutely horrible at maths. Two, this outing will be something dangerous, I'm sure. Yes, last time worked out fine, heck it was even enjoyable but it was still dangerous. This whole reckless fearless careless thing is pretty crazy if you ask me but for James, I'll do it.

~\*~\*~

As predicted the tutoring session went horribly but it could've gone worse. I decided that I should go back to much more basic questions to begin with so I dug out my old year nine textbook, sadly I think it was still a little too advanced. I've decided that I'm slowly going to work my way up from year seven work onwards if he can't do that there's no hope whatsoever.

"Okay, now that that's over," Wyatt starts, slamming my textbook closed, "let's go have some fun." Before I can even reply to what he's said I'm being pulled out of the house towards his car.

"Bye Hugo, bye Alice," I call just as the door slams shut.

Before I know it, I'm sat in Wyatt's comfortable car but I don't feel at ease. The last time I was in this thing he almost killed us with his insane driving, seriously, he drives like a maniac. When Wyatt gets in the car I turn to him. "Wyatt, promise me you won't drive over the speed limit this time," I beg.

He shakes his head at me. "No can do, green eyes. Just live a little and you'll enjoy the ride." Bastard. With that, we zoom off. I keep my eyes closed, maybe if I don't look it won't be as bad. "Come on, open your eyes, it's not that bad," Wyatt says but I ignore him and keep my eyes firmly shut. I hear him sigh but he doesn't say any more on the subject.

After what feels like a lifetime, the car finally begins to slow to a halt and the engine cuts off. I ever so carefully and slowly begin to pry my eyes open, giving them time to adjust to the light. We're nowhere in particular so I've no clue what's on this boys mind.

"Wyatt, where exactly are we?" I ask, after about a minute of walking.

"You'll see." Is his cryptic reply. I never get a straight answer when it comes to him.

After five more minutes, we finally reach a small shop on the corner of an old looking street. I can't see any signs on it but it looks quite run down. A bell chimes as we walk in. I look at my surroundings and I know exactly what kind of place this is.

A tattoo parlour.

"No. Nope. Absolutely not," are the first things I say once we're inside.

"Come on, green eyes, it will be fun. This is the kind of reckless and spontaneous thing you need to be doing."

"Hate to break it to you but I'm still seventeen so I can't even get a tattoo." Hah, there's no way I can get one now.

"That's fine. I've been coming here since I was sixteen. I know the guy who owns the place, he's cool, plus you're with me so we'll have no trouble getting you one."

I give him a strange look. "I didn't know you had any tattoos."

"There are a lot of things you don't know about me," he says with a smirk on his face. I swear, this boy is always smirking. "Come on, green eyes, don't be so boring."

Boring.

"How about this, I'll go first so you can see that it's not that bad," he says.

"Fine," I sigh, giving in. This will show him I'm not boring.

~\*~\*~

I did it. I got a freaking tattoo. Can I just say it hurt like a bitch. Seriously, why on earth would people constantly put themselves through pain like that voluntarily? It makes absolutely no sense.

Guess what, Wyatt barely winced when he got his. Honestly, is he half robot or something? How his face didn't contort in pain I will never know.

"See, it wasn't so bad," Wyatt says as we get back into his car.

I scoff. "For you. For me, that was pure pain. How the hell did you not feel any pain? Seriously, you had that smirk of yours on your face the entire time."

"Now that, green eyes, is a secret," he says whilst dusting off his jeans.

"You say that a lot," I point out.

"Well, I'm a man of many secrets." That he his. There isn't much I know about him, I did learn a bit the morning after Jordan's party but he's still such a mystery. I want to know more about him but for some reason, I just know that he won't open up to me, not yet anyway. Hopefully, one day he'll tell me the more personal stuff but for now, I know he's not ready and I can respect that.

Instead of pursuing the topic at hand I change it completely and we talk about trivial things whilst he drives. Guys brace yourselves, he's not driving like a maniac. I think my talking distracted him because we're actually driving under the speed limit, thank God.

Soon we arrive at my house but a small part of me wishes that we hadn't. I really enjoy Wyatt's company. Huh, never thought I'd say that. A small part of me wants to spend more time with him but I push the thoughts out of my mind and turn to the door handle.

"Green eyes," Wyatt calls, making me turn around. "This was fun." He smiles. I repeat, smiles, not smirks but smiles, a genuine smile and that makes me smile as well.

"Yeah, it was," I rasp out, suddenly losing my ability to talk properly.

Wyatt leans forwards so our noses are almost touching. I take a sharp breath, startled by the close proximity. "I'm glad you enjoyed yourself. I told you doing crazy things can be fun," he starts. "You know what, will you come to mine tomorrow?" He asks. "Let's face it, my maths is terrible and one session a week won't be enough plus I have something fun planned for tomorrow."

Without really thinking I nod. Guess I'll be spending my whole weekend with Wyatt.

"Great. Come around four?" I nod again because I can't seem to get any words out when I'm this close to him. "Make sure you wear black," he adds. "This is going to be so much fun." His eyes light up and when I'm this close I can see the shine the excitement brings to them. It's a breathtaking sight.

"And green eyes," he says. I hum in response. "Thank you."

"For what?" I ask, puzzled.

He moves so I can now feel his warm breath in my ear. "Just thank you," he whispers, the warm air causing goosebumps on my neck. He then pulls away but doesn't take his eyes off of me.

After a few minutes, I can't take his gaze anymore and get out of his car. "Bye," I say as I'm about to close the door.

"See you tomorrow, green eyes," I manage to hear him breathe out just before he drives off.

I walk up the driveway to my house, hugging my arms as I do. But I don't care about the cold, all I can think about is the day I've had.

Wait, what did I just do?! I got a fucking tattoo, underage might I add. Mum will kill me. Crap. Shit.

Oh well, I can't take it back now. At least I had fun.

## Chapter 16

My morning so far has consisted of homework, sounds fun I know. It's now twelve and I've done all of my work, a job well done if you ask me. I don't have to go over to Wyatt's until four so I've got some time to kill. So what better to do than read?

About half an hour later Hugo walks into my room. "Have you ever heard of knocking?" I ask, sarcastically as I turn the page.

I see him roll his eyes from over my book. "Nope. Is that a foreign concept because it sounds totally new to me?" he replies also very sarcastically, he learnt from the best.

"Ha ha, very funny."

"Oh, I know," he smirks. Oh come on, even my own brother does that now, what has the world come to? "Anyway, get your lazy arse up, you've got a visitor." After saying this he walks out without another word.

Strange. I'm not expecting anyone. I close my book and hop out of bed before going downstairs to the lounge. Low and behold sitting on the sofa is none other than one of my best friends, Maxwell Rivers.

I slowly tiptoe to where he is sitting and scream in his ear. He jolts in his seat and flips the bowl of popcorn and the glass of coke in his hands so it goes all over him. At his reaction, I burst out laughing. He clutches his chest in his hand before turning to glare at me. "What the hell, Ari?!" He screeches.

I just laugh in response, clutching my stomach from doing it so hard. "I couldn't resist," I choke out between laughs.

"Jeez, is this what I get for wanting to hang out with my friend?"

"Yep," I say, still smiling, at least I've managed to control my laughing.

He shakes his head at me, a grin forming on his face. "Damn, I can't stay mad at you, come here," he says just before he lunges at me and tackles me into a bear hug.

"No!" I scream whilst laughing. "You're covered in popcorn, butter and coke, stop!"

"Never!" He calls, rubbing his dirty clothes all over me. "This is payback."

"Fine, fine," I start, trying to squirm out of his hold, still laughing. "You win, I surrender."

"What was that?" He asks, rubbing his hair on my face.

"You win, I'm sorry," I say, still laughing from the whole situation.

"Good," he grins letting go of me. I sit up, gasping for air. I haven't hung out with Max in a while, I forgot how much fun it was. I miss this, I miss spending time with him.

"So what brings you here?" I ask, trying to dust down my clothes.

"Can't a guy want to see his friend for no reason?" He asks, widening his big grey eyes to emulate a puppy, it's very effective.

"I don't know," I say in a sing-song voice.

"Fine, I wanted to hang out. We haven't hung out as just the two of us in forever and I miss it. James always got in the way, he didn't like us hanging out alone so we barely got to do it. Now we can so I thought we could watch a movie, probably Disney because that's all you'll watch."

The mention of James makes me wince but I hide it and smile at Max. That's too sweet. "Well I'd love that Maxi," I say ruffling his hair as I do.

He groans but plops himself down on the sofa. "How many times have I told you not to call me that?" I shrug. "Urgh. Anyway, since it has to be Disney can I at least pick which one?" I nod.

"Great, let's watch Aladdin."

"Okay," I say, putting in the movie. I lie down on the sofa with Max and put my head on his lap, readying myself for the movie, god I love Disney.

~\*~\*~

After the movie, Max had to leave. He said he still had to do about two weeks worth of homework, honestly he's so unorganised, to be fair I was last year as well.

I jump into the shower to rid myself of the butter and coke before getting in the car to go to Wyatt's house. I hope I can remember the way. After roughly twelve wrong turns; three car scrapes; four uses of the wrong lane and one almost hospitalised civilian I make it to Wyatt's house. A pretty successful car ride if you ask me.

I knock on his door and Anna is the one who answers it, Cat by her feet. I'm still not over their dog's name by the way. I greet Anna but she completely ignores me and walks away, Cat hot on her heels. Thank god he left, I doubt I would've made it very far with him around.

Luckily, I've been here enough to be able to find Wyatt's room so I don't need to run after Anna and ask her, that would be embarrassing.

I walk up the stairs but as I turn the corner I feel something collide with my legs. I look down to see a little blonde girl with big doll-like blue eyes. It's Wyatt's sister. "Oh I'm sorry," I say, bending down to her height.

"Don't worry, it was my fault, I'm sorry," she replies in a small, soft voice.

"Okay. What's in your hand?" I ask, gesturing to the toy she's holding.

"It's Mr Caterpillar's chew toy, have you seen him?" She asks, her eyes wide.

"Mr Caterpillar?"

"Our dog," she tells me.

"Oh, is Cat short for Mr Caterpillar?"

She nods, smiling. "Yep, I named him. Do you like it?"

"Yes, it's a very...inventive name," I reply. Interesting. I can tease Wyatt about this later. "What's your name sweetheart?" I ask when I realise that I can't actually remember, I'm not the best with names.

"Brooklyn," she grins "but I like you so you can call me Brooke."

"Well I like you too Brooke," I say and tap her button nose. "And I did see Mr Caterpillar, he's downstairs with Anna," I tell her.

Suddenly, she's off running. "Thank you!" She calls, scurrying off in the direction of the stairs, fumbling slightly but she catches herself before she falls. If I'm honest it's absolutely adorable.

"No problem!" I call back, continuing my journey to Wyatt's room. I think she's my favourite King.

As I'm walking down the corridor I hear strange noises coming from one of the doors. I choose to ignore it, seeing as it's none of my business but as I'm about to turn the corner I hear crying. It sounds like a baby. Now that is something I can't ignore. It's strange though because I don't recall Wyatt mentioning any babies in his family.

I knock on the door but get no reply so I choose to slowly open it. When I do I see Nathan cradling a crying baby in his arms, trying to calm it down but it's not working. Now, this is a sight I never thought I'd see.

"Nathan?" I question softly when he doesn't notice I've entered.

He turns around and almost drops the baby in shock when he sees me, thank heavens he doesn't. "Jeez Aurora, you scared me half to death. What are you doing here?" He asks, a confused look on his face.

"I was coming over to tutor Wyatt when I heard crying and thought I should check it out," I answer truthfully.

"Right. Well," he pauses, thinking over his next choice of words. "I guess there's no point hiding this. Meet my daughter, Olivia."

Wait. Wait. Hold the phone. Nathan has a daughter!?!? Immature, childish Nathan. What the hell?!

"You have a child?" I ask flabbergasted.

"Yeah," he sighs. "I'm sure it's no surprise to you that I'm not a virgin. Word of advice use more than one form of protection unless you want your own little Olivia," he chuckles. "Her mum and I aren't together, just a drunken hookup but I ended up getting this adorable little thing out of it. Her mum and I both look after her because neither of us wanted to cut her out of our lives but looking after a baby is difficult. Don't get me wrong, I love this little angel and she's probably the best thing that's ever happened to me but I've no clue how to look after a child, heck I can barely look after myself."

Now I chuckle, I don't doubt that. This goes to show that not all parents chose to be parents even if they're fine with the outcome. At the end of the day, parents are just people who've had sex, nothing more.

"I see. Well, do you need a hand in getting her to sleep? I'd be happy to help," I offer.

He nods gratefully and hands Olivia over to me. "Thanks, Ari, I'm not the best with kids."

I gently rock her in my arms, walking around as I do. "No problem. How old is she?" I ask, genuinely curious.

"About five months," he tells me.

"Wow, no wonder she's so small. How come she hasn't been broadcasted in the media?" I ask yet another question. It's quite strange that she hasn't, the Kings are a well-known family so even though they aren't always front page news if something like this happened it would be bound to get headlined.

"Ah, well we've kept this on the down low. Only family knows and now you. It was just easier this way, mother and father didn't want a public scandal, especially considering I'll be taking over the family company soon." Oh yeah, Nathan is the oldest so, naturally, he'd take it over, it crazy to think someone as childish as him already has a kid and is next in line to a huge multinational company.

"I'm the only one you've told? I'm touched," I say in a mock voice.

"Yeah well you know, circumstance is a crazy thing. That reminds me, Ari, you can't tell anyone outside of this family about Olivia, not even one of your best friends."

That makes sense, I mean no one knows and besides, it's not my secret to tell anyway. "Don't worry, my lips are sealed," I tell him.

"Good," he smiles, gazing at his daughter who is now sound asleep in my arms. I lay her down in her crib and put a blanket over her. "She's so cute and sweet," I say softly, watching her move a little whilst she sleeps.

"Yeah she is," I hear Nathan whisper back whilst he too watches her, a peaceful and content look on his face. It must be so strange to be a parent, I can only imagine the feeling.

"Well, I best be off," I say, snapping out of my trance. "I shouldn't keep Wyatt waiting so long."

I get up and move to the door and as I'm about to leave I hear Nathan say, "right, see you and thanks, Ari, I owe you one."

I laugh. "I'll hold you to that, Nathan." After saying this I close the door quietly as to not wake the baby.

Now onto what I actually came here for, tutoring Wyatt.

As I'm walking down the now vacant corridor it dawns on me, I can't remember which room his. I have always been rather shitty with directions. I think I've narrowed it down to three doors. I open the first door but it's not his room, it's a private gym, I repeat, a freaking private gym. Seriously, how much money does this family have?

Onto door number two. I open it and let's just say that I should've knocked. Before me is a very shirtless Zackary King.

## Chapter 17

He turns around and sees me before I have the chance to close his door, well shit. "I'm so sorry," I say, looking away from him, my cheeks a deep shade of crimson.

"That's quite alright," I hear him chuckle, "no harm done." I hear some scuffling but I don't know if it's safe to look so I keep my head turned away. "You can look now," Zack says, chuckling to himself. I turn to him but I can't utter a word, this situation is too damn embarrassing. I just want to crawl in a hole and die, is that too much to ask?

"Cat got your tongue?" He jokes but I still can't reply. Every time I open my mouth no sound comes out. Oh god, I'm just making the situation ten times worse, you're such an idiot Ari. "Shy one I see," he says when I don't reply.

I shrug at him, not knowing what to say.

"Well I know I've already met you but I think it's best if I introduce myself again. We can start over and pretend this never happened, does that sound good?"

I nod.

"Well then, it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, I'm Zackary but you, my lady, can call me Zack," he says, bowing his head and sticking out his hand for me to shake.

I shake it, giggling at his antics and can't help laughing as I reply, "it's lovely to meet you Zack, I'm Aurora but you may me Ari." I curtsy after saying this to add to the effect. Now he laughs.

"Aurora as in the princess?" he questions. Here we go again. I nod. "But you look nothing like her."

I can't help but roll my eyes. "True, but my mum loves Disney so she decided to name me after one of her favourite characters even though I don't look like her," I answer.

"Right," he says, nodding. "Well, Ari, may I ask what it is you are doing in my house at this fine hour?" he asks, still upholding the charade.

"I'm here to tutor Wyatt but I forgot which door was his and wound up here," I tell him.

At this he laughs — of course my idiocy made someone laugh, just of course. "I see, well you were not far off, his room is the one next to mine." Damn, I was so close.

"Oh, right, thanks," I say, blushing a little.

"No problem. And Ari," he starts. I hum in response. "I hope you're not doing anything more than tutoring my brother."

I can't help my cheeks turning bright red at the accusation. "No, absolutely not. I'm not sure what kind of girl you think I am but I don't just randomly sleep with people I hardly know," I say, not actually offended — he probably just wanted a reaction out of me — but I pretend as though I am.

He seems taken aback by my fake attack. "No, I-I didn't mean-I didn't mean it like that," he stammers. I have to force myself to hold back a laugh and let him continue. "I was only joking, honest. I would never perceive you in such a way, or any woman for that matter — okay that last bit is a lie but I'm being honest when I say I didn't think of you like that, not in the slightest. You seem like a genuine girl who isn't only hanging out with my brother for popularity or sex. You don't—" I cut off his rambling with my laughter, I couldn't hold it back any longer.

He looked genuinely frightened of me for a moment and it was just hilarious. "Sorry," I start, "do continue," I smile mischievously whilst saying this.

He gapes at me, mouth opening and closing like a fish. "You-you were-you were joking?" He asks in an accusatory but flabbergasted manner.

"Yep," I say, popping the 'p'. "I knew you just wanted a reaction out of me. My brother does this to me from time to time so I've learnt not to get offended," I tell him. "I just thought it would be fun to try and work you up instead, low and behold it worked," I grin.

For a few long moments he doesn't say anything. Oh god, did I take that too far. Shit, I didn't think it was that bad.

My thoughts are cut off by his barking laughter. Wait, what?

"That," he starts, unable to stop laughing. "Was. Bloody. Brilliant," he wheezes out. "Never in my entire life has any girl ever done that to me before, well, except my sisters. I get why Wyatt likes you now, you're more than just a pretty face, you've got a good sense of humour as well," he grins. I blush at the compliments but attempt, unsuccessfully might I add, to hide that behind my hair.

"Thanks," I grin shyly at him, trying to ignore my red cheeks. "Well I should go now, I've already kept Wyatt waiting long enough, he'll probably kill me," I joke, heading towards the door.

"See you soon, Ari. I mean that, I like you." He says as I close the door behind me.

I guess the Kings aren't that bad, so far they've all been great company, nowhere near as pretentious and snobby as I thought they'd be. I really shouldn't prejudge people. I actually feel quite comfortable around the ones I've spoken to, can't say how I'll be around the rest though.

I push my thoughts to one side and knock on Wyatt's door. I've learnt my lesson, I won't be opening any doors at this house without knocking for now. "Come in," I hear from the other side of the mahogany.

I open the door to see Wyatt lying on his bed staring at the ceiling. "Finally green eyes!" He exclaims once I'm fully inside. "It's five o'clock now, how come you're so late?" He asks, eyebrows raised.

"Well, I got kinda lost on the way here and I'm not the best driver so there may have been a few mishaps on they way. Tiny ones though, nothing to worry about. Because of this it took a while to actually make it here. Then I had a run in, literally, with your sister Brooklyn, she's such a sweetie pie, honestly she's too adorable for words. Anyway, moving on, next I heard crying so I went to investigate. Long story short I found out Nathan had a daughter. Did you know that? Oh, what am I saying, of course you knew that, she's your niece for crying out loud. After that encounter I couldn't remember which door was yours and walked into Zack's room by accident so I had a short chat with him, he's actually quite easy to talk to. Who would've thought, I only felt super awkward at the beginning. Anyway then I found out which room was yours and came in here. And that brings up to the present, now you're all caught up," I breathe in heavily after recalling the past hour of my life. I said it all so quickly, I have a tendency to do that some times.

Wyatt looks at me, not moving for a few moments, most likely processing the mass amount of information I just fed him at lightening speed. "Never realised you were such a talker," he teases whilst grinning. I scowl at him but he just laughs. "What I gathered from that is that you're a shit driver with a horrible sense of direction and you met some of my siblings. Also, somehow you found out about my niece? How you managed that is beyond me."

I smile sheepishly at him but quickly change my tack and morph my expression to a neutral one. "Firstly, my driving and sense of direction aren't that bad," I lie. Wyatt doesn't look convinced. It's weird most people can't tell when I'm lying, I've been told I've got a good poker face but Wyatt, he sees straight through me, it's bloody annoying.

"Secondly, I'm a curious person with a knack for finding out things I'm not supposed to, what did you expect?" I tell him with a shrug.

"So what you're saying is that you're a nosy person who goes looking to find out things she's not supposed to," he says. He doesn't look irritated by his statement just amused.

"No," I correct him. "I don't go looking for anything. It all seems to find me," I tell him honestly.

Wyatt lifts his arms in frustration. "Whatever," he breathes. "Anyway, we better get started with the tutoring otherwise we won't get to do what I have planned. We're already an hour behind schedule." He gets up and moves over to his desk after saying this. He sure is motivated to work, I've no idea why, I mean who actually wants to do work? Not me, that's for sure.

"Right," I say, walking over to him. "Let's get this over with."

~\*~\*~

As usual the tutoring session was a piece of crap but I think I'm finally starting to get through to him. That's a good thing I suppose.

After Wyatt packs away his things he grabs a black duffel bag from under his bed and leads me down the stairs.

"What are we going to do?" I ask.

"You'll see," he replies with his signature smirk. As usual his answer is very cryptic. Fucking hell, am I ever going to get a straight answer from him?

He takes me to his garage that is filled with cars and a few motorbikes. "Why am I not surprised that you have this many cars?" I say in a sarcastic manner.

Wyatt rolls his eyes at me as he grabs a pair of keys from a hook and leads me over to the least luxurious car he owns. It's black and is still nice but is nowhere near as flamboyant as the others, it passes as a regular persons car if you can believe it.

Wait, if we're going in a normal car it's probably so we don't appear conspicuous. Shit. That means he wants to do something illegal or close to it.

"Wyatt," I start hesitantly, "please tell me we're not about to do something illegal," I say as I get inside the car and put my seatbelt on, with his driving I could probably do with four.

"We could be," is all he says as he starts the engine. The garage door opens and Wyatt zooms off, so we're back to the maniac driving, fantastic—note the sarcasm.

I gulp, not just from his driving but from what he said also. 'We could be' means yes and I wanted to keep my criminal record clean, let's just hope we don't get caught with whatever it is we're doing.

## Chapter 18

It's dark outside. We've been driving for about twenty minutes, not too long but the sun doesn't stay up past about five at this time of year. Yay for shitty weather.

After another five or so minutes Wyatt finally parks his car. We must've driven quite far away considering how fast he drives. I'm still not a fan of his speeding and I doubt I ever will be but he doesn't listen no matter how much I badger him. It's a lost cause I suppose.

"Where are we?" I ask as I take off my seatbelt.

"You'll see," he replies, a smirk on his face.

I roll my eyes at him but get out of the car nonetheless. My feet hit the wet tarmac beneath me, it must've rained in this area recently. I close the car door softly behind me, not wanting to damage it and let my eyes scan my surroundings.

The sun has completely set now, the only thing illuminating my surroundings are the scarcely placed lampposts that are next to useless because the bulbs within them are so dim almost no light is given off. We seem to be the only ones around and I'm not quite sure if that unnerves me or makes me more comfortable.

I turn on the balls of my feet to face Wyatt and give him a curious look as I cast a glance at the black duffel bag now on his shoulder. "What's in there?" I ask, gesturing to the bag.

"That's for me to know and for you to find out," he says, still smirking. This time I audibly groan in annoyance at his cryptic response. He merely chuckles at my discomfort before taking three strides towards me, walking past me and telling me to follow him.

I do so with little protest, considering I don't want to be left here all alone. We walk for about five minutes, not talking because I'm too anxious to speak. Hundreds of scenarios run through my head, none of them good. I take a deep breath and shake the thoughts from my head. I'm overthinking this. It will all be fine.

Wyatt soon comes to a halt in front of some old looking buildings. I give him a strange look when he turns to see me but he just wears an amused smile at my reaction.

He throws the bag he's been carrying onto the floor, unzips it and starts to rummage around the contents. I hear the clanking of metal as he does so. What could be in there? Weapons? That's stupid, why would he have weapons unless—

I'm cut off from my ludicrous imagination by Wyatt pulling out two cans of spray paint and handing one to me. That's when I realise what we're doing.

"You want me to graffiti?" I ask incredulously.

He nods a cheeky grin on his face as he further thrusts the can into my hands. I take hold of the cool metal but shake my head at him. "Wyatt that's illegal. I don't want to get arrested," I tell him even though I was pretty sure he was going to suggest we do something illegal before we left.

He waves me off. "It's a minor thing green eyes. It's not like I'm asking you to kill a man. Let loose. The whole point of this is for you to have fun, be reckless and not care about the consequences. It's going to take time but if you won't even do the small things we're never going to get anywhere."

He's right about that. Heck, it was my idea to do this in the first place but my conscience is telling me that this is wrong. "But—" I start but am cut off by Wyatt talking again.

"No buts. There's no point to this if you refuse the minor things. Have some fun and stop being so boring."

Boring.

I am NOT boring. "Fine," I sigh, giving in.

He grins at me. "That's more like it. Now, which colour do you want?"

~\*~\*~

A little while later I'm finally done with my masterpiece. I smile at it proudly as I put a can of black spray paint back into Wyatt's bag.

"What did you paint?" Wyatt asks as he walks up to me, disposing of his own cans as well.

"See for yourself," I say, grinning at him.

He walks over to where I've been painting and takes a few moments to study my work. "It's the same design as your tattoo right?" He asks, eyebrows furrowed.

I nod at him.

"If you don't mind me asking, why is it that you chose the same design?"

I shrug at him but choose not to answer. Wyatt gets the hint and changes the topic. "Well, you did a pretty good job of it. I never knew you were good at art," he says.

I smile at him. "Thanks. I actually take it as an after school thing. I didn't have enough space to take it as an A-level and I didn't want to take an extra subject and give myself more work so I just do it on the side as a hobby," I tell him.

He looks at me for a moment, almost as if studying me before he nods. He goes to pick up his duffel bag and it's at that moment that we hear police sirens.

"Fuck," he and I both curse simultaneously. I send Wyatt a look of panic as he snatches the duffel bag from the ground. Before you could even say 'Disney is life' he has grabbed my hand and started sprinting in the direction of the car. I match his pace without too much difficulty seeing as I run regularly and have a high stamina. Wyatt's stamina is pretty good too though, I've got to give him credit there.

We sprint like our lives depend on it, rather our criminal records, and make it to the inconspicuous black vehicle in a matter of minutes. I hop in the car and Wyatt chucks the bag in the back seat before jumping in himself and zooming off at lightning speed.

"Wyatt," I start uneasily after a few minutes, "don't drive so fast you're just drawing more attention to us."

He slows down a considerable amount at my words but is still going about fifteen over the speed limit, for him that's a miracle. We drive in tense silence, both of us still on alert. After ten or so minutes we hear police sirens again. Fuck.

Wyatt and I both know that there's no point in speeding away as we can already see the blue lights flashing in the rearview mirror so instead we pull up on the side of the road, waiting for the policeman to come up to us.

Within moments the sirens and flashing lights stop and a car door slams. Yep, we would've never gotten away. A man who's considerably tall, with neat black hair, stubble, chestnut brown eyes and a strong build knocks on Wyatt's window. He has a stern expression plastered onto his sharp features but upon seeing Wyatt's face it changes to a lighthearted one. I'm guessing that they know each other.

"Wyatt," the man begins in a teasing tone, "I hear you've been speeding again."

Wyatt shrugs but grins at him nonetheless, "you know me uncle Mitch, always up to something."

Uncle Mitch? I look between the two of them trying to notice the resemblance. Whilst it's true that they both have many attractive features I wouldn't have thought them to be related. Wyatt notices my confusion and says, "Aurora this is my uncle, Mitchell, he's my dad's half-brother. Uncle Mitch this is my friend Aurora," gesturing to the both of us with his hands. Okay, that makes much more sense.

"Pleasure to meet you," I say in a quiet voice, my shy-self kicking in as it does when I'm around new people, "I wish I could've been under better circumstances."

He waves me off with a chuckle, "lovely to meet you as well, it's not often I see my nephew out with a girl, especially doing something he actually enjoys like graffitiing."

I look at him in shock, he connected the dots quickly. "Didn't take you long to figure us out, huh?" Wyatt says.

"Nah, I had a feeling it was you to begin with plus I can see the cans poking out of that duffel bag in your backseat." Wyatt gives him a sheepish smile at that.

"And Aurora," he says, looking from Wyatt to me, "don't worry about this. I've seen Wyatt do much worse and let him off so this is nothing," he smiles.

I send him a small smile back and nod in thanks.

"Great. Now that that's all sorted I need to speak to my nephew quickly. Wyatt, come outside please."

He does as he's told with no protest and himself and his uncle walk in the direction of the police car. A few minutes later Wyatt comes back in the car, waving at his uncle as he starts the engine.

A few moments later were on the road again this time driving at the speed limit. Maybe his uncle told him not to speed anymore. I doubt it and even if he did I doubt it would work but regardless I'm just glad that he's driving at a normal pace for once.

"What did your uncle want to talk about?" I ask, trying my luck at finding out more about him.

"Nothing much," he says but doesn't elaborate so I choose to change the subject.

"He seems like a great guy," I say and when I do I know I've hit the jackpot because Wyatt's mesmerising blue eyes light up.

"He's great, honestly one of the best people I know," he tells me, a smile on his face.

"Tell me about him."

That was all I said for the rest of way back. I let Wyatt speak of his uncle without interrupting once. It was nice to see him so comfortable and happy. I'm glad his uncle does that to him. The whole way back Wyatt spoke of stories of his uncle and times they've shared. He sounds like a legend, I definitely like him after hearing all about him.

Who knew just listening to people's stories could be so interesting? I sure as hell didn't but I guess there's a first time for everything.

## Chapter 19

My Monday started off like every other, with my alarm blaring, forcing me to get up. Reluctantly, I pull the sheets off of me and start my morning routine.

Forty-five minutes late Ava's outside my house honking like no one's business. I bid farewell to my mum and siblings before slipping into my converse, grabbing my bag and heading towards her car. "Learn some patience woman," I snap at my best friend in a joking manner.

She shrugs off my comment and starts the drive to school. We make idle chitchat in the car, nothing important just how our weekends were, minus the Wyatt parts, obviously.

We're early so we get a space at the front, thank shit. Now we can get inside before the inevitable cold hits us like a ton of bricks. I dash inside silently laughing at Ava who's struggling to keep up with me because she chose to wear heels today.

"It's not funny," she hisses at me once we're inside.

"You know it is. Don't even try and deny it," I tell her in a singsong voice, starting the journey to my locker.

She huffs at my comment before changing the subject entirely, classic Ava. After getting our thing we meet up with Max and Mason and chat for a bit before we have to go to lessons.

All too soon the bell rings so we say bye to the boys before rushing off to RS. Mr Johnson isn't happy with either of us after my outburst on the first day back so we've been making sure not to piss him off further by not being late for class.

~\*~\*~

After what feels like four eternities the lunch bell finally rings. Halle-fucking-lujah.

I race to the canteen so I can get food before the line becomes thirty minutes long. Five minutes later, food in hand, I walk over to my usual table, everyone already there excluding Jessica, Ava and Mason, weird—not the Jessica part, she's probably off hooking up with someone knowing her. I shrug off my confusion and sit down beside Max who's already engrossed in his discussion with Chase.

"—yeah, Max, I gotta tell ya she was a proper banger. Eleven outta ten. She was wearing this sexy little—"

"Okay, that's enough," I cut Chase off before he can go into any more detail about yet another one of his rendezvouses.

"Ari, he was getting to the best part," Max whines like a child being robbed of his favourite candy.

"Does it look like I give a shit? I don't want to be hearing about Chase's sexual escapades, especially whilst I'm eating so I'd appreciate it if you'd refrain from talking about it until you're in a private place," I say in a sickly sweet manner to convey my point.

Chase rolls his eyes at me before turning his attention to Jordan and Oliver, most likely telling them instead, honestly.

"You're so unfair, Ari," Max complains, resting his head on my shoulder. I chuckle before digging into my food, letting him keep his head on my shoulder because I'm in a good mood.

A few minutes later Jessica joins us, sitting next to Jordan, opposite me, a big smile on her face.

"Look who decided to grace us with her presence," Jordan says sarcastically.

"Oh, haha," she replies dryly before digging into her ham sandwich. Jordan goes back to his previous conversation at her remark but not before rolling his eyes at her fondly? He's always had a soft spot for her and I'm pretty sure there was or maybe even still is something going on between them but who knows with those two.

"How come you were late this time?" I ask, genuinely curious even though I'm already pretty sure it was some hookup.

Jess blushes.

Wait. Hold the phone. I repeat, she BLUSHES. Jessica blushes. My confident, outgoing, crazy, daredevil of a friend just blushed. I've never seen her do that in my entire life. Now I'm definitely intrigued.

Max notices this too and does his best impression of Chloe Summers, the bitchy, stuck-up spoilt, gossip at school. "Oh my god," he starts in an overdramatic girly voice, "spill the deets girl. Who's the special someone?"

Jess's cheeks redden further as she says, "who? I don't know what you're going on about."

Max lifts his head from my shoulder as over dramatically puts his hand on his heart. "How could you lie to me, Jessica? I thought you thought more of me than that. Did our friendship mean nothing to you?" He even sheds a tear for effect. Such a drama queen, honestly.

Jess rolls her eyes at him, as do I. "No need for theatrics," I tell him.

"But it's so much fun," he complains.

"Just go back to your conversation with Chase, I'm sure you're dying to know the details," I tell him. His eyes light up and he turns his head in the opposite direction to catch the rest of the story. Max is something else I tell you.

"So Jess," I start, "Now we've gotten rid of that problem, tell me, who is this special someone?"

"We-they-sh-umm-basi-god this is so embarrassing," she whines putting her head in her hands.

"How about this, we go talk somewhere more private. Would that make you feel more comfortable?"

Jess nods, getting up, myself closely in tow. We walk until we find an empty classroom and both sit down on the desks. Jess takes a deep breath before turning to look at me. "So there's this girl," she starts.

My eyes light up. Never has Jess been this nervous to talk about anyone she likes before. This must be serious. "We met in the park actually. I was on an afternoon jog and she was sitting on a bench reading. She looked so beautiful just sitting there, wind blowing her hair slightly so it moved from her eyes," she pauses momentarily and shakes her head, clearing her thoughts.

"Anyway I don't know what came over me but I went up to her and we started talking. We talked for hours – until the sun started setting." A faint blush begins to cover her cheeks. "The time just flew by and she needed to head home so we exchanged numbers and agreed to meet up again. We've met up a few times since and that's where I was earlier. She doesn't go to school here but we both decided to skip the first half of the day and hang out together," she finishes.

"What's her name? Come on Jess, I need more details."

"Well, her name's Emma. She has short dark brown hair, the most stunning blue eyes and is quite tall," she shrugs. I urge her for more details and she sighs. "She has a little sister who's three years younger than her," she tells me.

"When did you meet?" I ask the most burning question.

Her eyebrows furrow. "Um, last Saturday. So just over a week ago, huh feels like I've known her for way longer than that," she tells me and I momentarily freeze but luckily I don't think she notices.

That's the same day Wyatt and I were in the park. Shit. I'm going to have to be more careful unless I want people finding out. Thank god I woke up so early that day.

"Well I'm happy for you Jess," I say getting up, thanking shit she didn't realise I froze. We go back to the canteen, walking at a steady pace.

As we're walking I see that Mason and Ava are now at the table. I'm about to go ask Ava where she was but Jess gasping beside me draws my attention to her instead. Her eyes are frozen looking to the right. I follow her line of sight and what I see makes completely shatter inside.

James is sitting at his lunch table. A girl on his lap but it's not just any girl, it's Chloe Summers. But that's not all, they're making out.

A lump starts to form in my throat and I quickly dash out the room before anyone can stop me. I go back to the classroom Jess and I were just in and sink down into the corner.

I feel the tears threatening to escape but I don't let them. I have no reason to cry. He's done nothing wrong. We've broken up so he can be with whoever he likes. But I just had to be Chloe, didn't it.

I mean the girl has never been too nasty to me. She did bully me for a bit when I joined the school but she stopped when she realised that people liked me and I wasn't a loner. She left me alone until James and I started dating. When that happened she came at me like a raging bull. I had to deal with her threats for a couple months but when she knew that we weren't breaking up anytime soon she left me alone again.

However, other people got it much worse than me. There are some people she's been bullying since kindergarten and believe me when I tell you it's not a pretty sight. She can be an absolute bitch when she wants and is generally not a nice person. That's why I always steer clear of her, you don't want to get on the wrong side of someone like that.

I guess that's why it hurts so much that James would kiss her. He knew what she did to me when we started dating and he knows how horrible she really is. I never thought James would stoop so low. I guess I was wrong.

A single tear slips down my cheek. I failed. I cried because of James. Knowing I've lost the battle I let the tears fall freely until my face is a wet, tear-stained mess.

I was so absorbed in thought that I didn't realise someone coming into the room and walking over to me. I only noticed when they lightly touched my chin to bring my eyes to theirs. I see a breathtaking electric blue and I immediately know who it is.

Wyatt.

"What are you doing here?" I ask but it comes out as a sob. I don't want him, or anyone for that matter, to see me like this. I'm a wreck. Wyatt doesn't seem to mind though.

He softly brushes the remaining tears from my face with his thumb. "I saw you run out of the canteen, green eyes. I couldn't just leave you here to cry that would go against the tutor code."

"Tutor code?" I ask puzzled.

"Yes, the tutor code. It states that a student must make sure his tutor is never upset or crying and if he does ever find her like this it's his job to make her smile at any cost," he tells me.

"You just made that up," I accuse.

"Maybe I did but that doesn't matter. Come on," he says, extending his hand out to me. I grab it and he hoists me up effortlessly and leads me through the school. No one's around, I guess lessons must've started and I didn't even notice. Luckily, no one needed the room I was in, that would've been so embarrassing.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"You'll see," Wyatt smirks as he opens his car door for me.

Shit. What's he got planned this time?

## Chapter 20

I still have no idea where we're going, it's always a mystery with Wyatt. Fifteen minutes go by before we pull up in front of Wyatt's house. I frown in confusion. Why would he bring me here?

I voice my thoughts and ask him just that as I get out of the car.

"You'll see green eyes," he smirks. Oh, I have a fun new drinking game. Take a shot every time Wyatt smirks. On second thought don't do that, you'll probably end up in the hospital due to alcohol poisoning.

I follow Wyatt into the house, curious to find out his plan. He leads me to a small room next to one of their kitchens, I'm still not over the fact they have more than one by the way. As soon as I step in I tense. This is their dog's room. Their dog has its own freaking room! I'm not surprised, their house is massive.

Cat, their dog, runs up to Wyatt when he sees him. Wyatt goes further into the room, petting and playing with the dog whilst I cower in the doorway. Wyatt turns to me and chuckles. Bastard.

"Come on green eyes, he won't hurt you."

I don't move from my spot and instead glare at Wyatt. He knows I don't like dogs. "You're an asshole. Why in hell's name did you think this would cheer me up?" I glower at him.

"Because Cat is super friendly and I thought I could help you get over your blatant fear of dogs," he reasons.

"I am not afraid of dogs," I lie.

He scoffs. "If that's true come and pet him, I promise he won't bite."

I take a hesitant step forward but immediately jump back when Cat moves towards me. "Nope. Not happening," I say.

Suddenly Cat starts running towards me, I shriek and run in the opposite direction. I'm getting a sense of déjà vu. I sprint to the nearest room and slam the door behind me, stopping Cat from getting any closer.

A few minutes later Wyatt calls to me from the other side of the door. "It's alright, green eyes, I've put Cat back in his room. You're safe."

"I don't believe you," I call back. Wyatt loves to play pranks it wouldn't surprise me.

"You wound me, green eyes," he says and I can imagine him putting his hand to his chest in an overdramatic manner. I roll my eyes. "But I promise he's not here and I never break my promises," he tells me firmly. I'm not sure if it was the conviction in his voice or the sincerity I could hear but I sighed and opened the door. Low and behold Cat wasn't there, I guess he doesn't break his promises.

"So tell me," I start, "what did you originally have planned for today?"

"Well, I was going to get us to take Cat for a walk in hopes of ridding you of your fear but I guess that plan just went down the drain," he sighs, scratching the back of his neck. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

I give him a soft smile. "It's alright, your intentions were pure but do that again and I won't hesitate to rip your intestines out and hang you with them," I warn him.

He chuckles at my threat. "No promises. You're going to have to get over that fear eventually but for now I think we will work on some other things," he tells me and I nod.

"Hang on a sec," I say, "How were you planning to get Cat out of the house without Anna noticing? She loves him and if she found out she'd kill you for skipping school."

"Anna? She has the week off because my mother is back and my father will be here in about a week. She was going to get her to stay but knew she needed time off. My siblings can be a handful."

"What about you?"

"Me?" He puts his hand on his heart, drama queen, "I'm a saint green eyes, you of all people should know that."

I scoff. "Sure."

He rolls his eyes at me as we hear a loud voice screech, "What in God's name was all that noise? I swear to god Zackary-" the voice stops just as a woman comes into view. She is absolutely stunning, I'm assuming this is Wyatt's mother, it would explain the families otherworldly looks. She has voluminous blonde hair, blue eyes—not as striking as Wyatt's but still lovely—and is on the shorter side. She's still taller than me but Wyatt must definitely get his height from his father.

"Wyatt? What are you doing home from school? And who's this young lady?" She asks, no emotion displayed on her face so I've no idea what she's thinking.

"Relax mum," he starts, "This is Aurora, my ma-friend and I'm home early because there was a situation at school and she needed to calm down." Odd, he was about to call me his tutor and stopped himself, I guess he doesn't want his mum knowing.

His mother gives me a once over before smiling. "Alright. Don't worry I won't pry into business that isn't mine but I hope you're alright dear and might I say that you are stunning, my boy has chosen well," she grins.

My face holds an expression of shock. "No, it's nothing like that Mrs King, I'm just a friend," I tell her desperately, making sure not to mention the whole tutor thing because it seems like Wyatt doesn't want me to.

"Please, call me Camilla, sweetheart," she says with a bright smile just as her phone rings. She glances at the ID before turning back to us. "Excuse me, I have to take this," she says before walking out.

"Your mother seems nice," I say to Wyatt.

He jaw clenches. "There's more to people than meets the eye," he tells me stiffly.

I frown at him. "What's that supposed to mean?" I ask.

He shakes his head and runs his hand through his dark brown locks. "Don't worry about it, green eyes. I'll tell you another time," he says dismissively.

I want to know what he's going on about but I don't pry, knowing it's not my place.

"Do you want to play a game," Wyatt says, changing the subject and gesturing to the large flatscreen TV with numerous counsels surrounding it. In all my haste to get away from Cat, I didn't realise that I had ended up in the games room, the place where I met Nathan for the first time.

I nod so Wyatt goes to set up a game and I go and plonk myself on one of the sofas.

About twenty minutes later Wyatt and I are drawing. I didn't realise he was so good.

"How the hell do you know how to play this?" He asks.

I shrug but keep my attention on the screen. "I have a younger brother and Alice hates gaming so I always had to play with him. Over time it grew on me and here we are."

Wyatt groans in frustration, full attention now on the screen.

Suddenly the door slams open causing Wyatt to jump in his seat and his character to die. "Yes! Victory!" I cheer.

"That's not fair. You only won because of that stupid door," he argues.

"Too bad, a win is a win," I tell him, sticking my tongue out.

"I call a rematch."

A cough from behind stops our dispute. "Sorry to interrupt but that's going to have to wait until a later date," Camilla says in her warm voice. "I need your help Aurora."

I freeze when I hear my name and Wyatt does also. "Mum I don't think that's a good idea. I know what you're about to say but Aurora is very shy I don't think she'd be comfortable," he says.

I frown. What are they talking about?

"Nonsense," she waves him off. "What girl wouldn't dream of getting this opportunity? Aurora, sweetheart, I need you to fill in for one of my models at my photo shoot today. She just called to tell me she's unwell and I haven't the time to find a replacement because the shoot is in two hours. I was just about to leave when I got the call. Like I said, you're gorgeous and would fit right in at the shoot, I can just see you being a natural. So will you help me, sweetheart?"

Shit. Shit. I need to come up with an excuse, there's no way I'm modelling.

"Aren't I too short to be a model?" I ask pathetically, looking for any way out of this nightmare.

"Height isn't everything sweetheart. Sure you're not the tallest but I'm not either and I've modelled plenty of times plus it's not like you're walking a catwalk, just it's a photo shoot so your height doesn't matter that much," she tells me.

Well fuck. There goes my way out.

~\*~\*~

I chew on my lip nervously. Wyatt was right when he said I'd be uncomfortable. I don't like being around new people full stop and now I have to pose in front of them next to professionals who actually know what they're doing whilst I have no experience what so ever. This is going to be so embarrassing.

Why didn't I just say no? Believe me, I wanted to but then I would be letting Camilla down, I hardly know her but she needed help so it would be cruel of me to turn my back on her.

Wyatt pointed something out on the way over which made this situation slightly better in a sense. He said that this would be crossing another fear off the list. That's if I even manage to get past hair and makeup without fainting.

After twenty minutes, we arrive at the building. As we enter, I can feel my heart rate increase immensely and my palms become sweaty.

Breathe Aurora. Everything is fine. You'll be fine. You can do this. Just breathe.

"It's alright," Wyatt whispers into my ear softly. "I know you can do this, green eyes, just take deep breaths."

I nod at him gratefully and send him a soft smile which he returns.

Can we just take a minute to appreciate the fact that Wyatt smiled, not smirked. He must've been swapped with his evil alien counterpart, it's the only logical explanation I've come up with.

Once inside I was immediately forced into hair, makeup and wardrobe. I gave Wyatt one last pleading glance as I got dragged away.

Who knew hair and makeup could take so freaking long?! Seriously, I mean I know they're professionals and they know what they're doing and that this needs to look perfect because it's for a famous fashion brand but still.

Wait. I'm modelling for a famous fashion brand. Fuck.

I think I'm going to be sick.

## Chapter 21

I start to shake in my chair.

I can't do this. What was I thinking? I'm going to make a fool out of myself. I'm no model. Fucking hell, nothing can save me from this. Why the hell did I agree to this? What is wrong with me? I'm such an idiot.

The lady doing my hair notices my trembling and sends me a kind smile. "What's wrong with you?" She asks soothingly in her thick Irish accent.

"I'm just really nervous," I tell her, "I've never had to do anything like this before."

"Ah well don't worry I've seen plenty worry on their first time but they've all done great but if you're feeling nervous just imagine that you're not actually here, instead, pretend you're in your favourite place, that's what I do when I'm scared," she tells me.

"Thank you, that helps a lot," I say, sending her a shaky smile.

"Anytime dear, anytime."

I don't think of anything the whole time I'm getting ready, which is a while, this hair and makeup shit takes donkey's years I tell you. I know that if I think of anything it'll just lead to me worrying and panicking and I can't have that unless I want to start hyperventilating on set, now that would be really embarrassing.

Once everyone has finally finished touching me up, a girl with pin straight dirty blonde hair, dark brown eyes, a fancy earpiece and a clipboard sends me in the direction of the shoot, I'm assuming she's an assistant of some sort. I take small cautious steps and deep breaths as I walk.

I can do this. I can do this. I can do this.

I walk into a brightly lit room that only has a few people in it. I'm probably one of the first few that are ready. "There you are, Aurora!" Camilla exclaims when she sees me, she too, like the blonde lady from before, has a fancy earpiece in, clearly visible as her light blonde hair is tied into a neat bun, not a single strand out of place.

I nod and give her a nervous smile. My discomfort must've been obvious because she immediately frowns when I do this.

"Sweetheart, there's no need to be nervous," she tells me.

"That obvious?" I ask with a nervous laugh.

"Honey, I've been in this business a long time, trust me, I know when someone's scared."

I let out a few short, ragged breaths as I look at my feet, unable to meet her eyes.

"Sweetheart look at me," she says softly and I reluctantly comply, not wanting to cause a scene. "I know this must be difficult for you so if it makes you feel better I can get Wyatt in here, he seems to calm you down a lot. I did originally shoo him away so he didn't flirt with any of my models—I'm sure you know what he's like—but I think for you I can make an exception," she smiles.

I nod gratefully at her. "I'd really appreciated that," I tell her. I don't know why but the idea of Wyatt being here to comfort me makes me feel a thousand times better.

She nods and says something into her earpiece that I can't decipher, most likely asking for Wyatt. I don't know why she doesn't just call him on her phone but maybe this way is quicker?

A few minutes later Wyatt strolls in but he's not alone. The blonde assistant lady from before is with him—she goes to immediately talk to Camilla—as well as Nathan and Olivia. Why on earth are they here?

"Nathan?" I ask hesitantly, he snaps his head in my direction a confused look on his face as he cradles his sleeping daughter in his arms.

"What are you doing here?" We both ask simultaneously.

Immediately after saying this we both burst out laughing, I do like hanging out with Nathan he's just great to be around.

Olivia starts to stir in his arms at our noise levels so we quickly quieten down and Nathan speaks first, now in a much softer voice.

"To answer your question, Olivia was fussing a lot and car rides always calm her down. I needed to get her to sleep and I didn't see the point in going home immediately so I thought I'd check out the models at mum's shoot. Girls can't resist a cute baby," he tells me, smirking at the end.

I roll my eyes at him. "Of course you'd say that, all you Kings are the same."

He pulls Olivia close to his chest as he can't put his hand there. "You wound me, Ari, you really do," he gasps.

I, again, roll my eyes but this time a small smile plays on my lips. "Whatever. And to answer your question your mum asked me to fill in for one of her models who's sick," I tell him.

He does a double take when I say this and almost drops Olivia, the sleeping baby completely oblivious to her dopey father.

"Huh," he starts, "so I guess you're one of the models I'm supposed to be checking out. I'm sorry to say I'm going to have to pass, Ari. It's not that you're not attractive because you definitely are—shit, I'm not legally allowed to say that yet so forget I did—but you're a little on the young side, maybe when you turn eighteen."

I shake my head at him but I can't help the flush that covers my cheeks at his compliment.

I ignore the redness as I reply. "Sorry to say this, Nathan, but you're not my type," I lie to him. He is most definitely my type, I don't have one if I'm being honest but he's undeniably gorgeous. I mean, what girl wouldn't be attracted to him?

He looks slightly taken aback but soon recovers and scoffs. "Please, we both know you're lying, I'm everyone's type, no doubt about it," he says with a confirming nod. This guy is a dad ladies and gentlemen.

"I guess we've found the exception," I tease him. Even though he's right, he's everyone's type, I'd never give him the satisfaction of knowing that.

He scoffs again but this time it wakes Olivia. "Shit," he curses, a panicked look on his face. Before I can even offer to help, he has walked off in the opposite direction rocking Olivia in his arms whilst singing to her, it's an adorable sight to behold.

I don't get much of a chance to coo at their adorableness before Wyatt walks up to me. "How does it feel to be a model, green eyes?" He asks with a smirk.

I send him a glare. "You know I'm only doing this because your mum needed help, I feel like I'm going to piss myself," I tell him bluntly.

He makes a grossed out face. "Please don't do that."

I give him a dry look. "Of course I'm not going to. I said I feel like it not that I would."

"Whatever," he scoffs. "But on a more serious note, green eyes, you'll be fine. I know you can do this. You might be one of the shyest people I've ever met who hates the spotlight an infinite amount, heck you don't even want us seen at school together because it would draw attention to you, but that's all the more reason to crush this. Prove to yourself that this is something you can achieve. Grow some balls and do this," he concludes.

I nod at him and smile, my throat suddenly dry from nerves. He smiles back, an actual smile not a smirk and that only makes me smile wider. To an outsider, we'd look like two idiots grinning at each other so I'm glad no one can see this.

Click. Fuck I jinxed it. Luckily it's just Nathan and not an actual photographer.

I turn to look at him and glare but before I can demand for the picture to be deleted someone taps me on the shoulder. I turn to them and find the blonde assistant from earlier who was talking to Camilla. "You're up," she says, motioning to a backdrop with a photographer, Camilla and a few other random people beside it.

I gulp nervously and slowly walk over to them, looking back at Wyatt and Nathan who both send me encouraging looks.

I can do this. I can do this. I can do this.

"Aurora, there you are! Come on, chop chop," Camilla says brightly when she sees me. "This is Antonio, my head photographer," she tells me, gesturing to the man behind the expensive-looking camera. He had rich dark brown eyes, dark brown hair to match, chiselled features, strong eyebrows and was probably in his early to mid-thirties. All in all, he is a pretty decent looking guy.

He smiles at me, shakes my hand and kisses it lightly before positioning me where he wants me. "Now I want you to look off into the distance whilst being deep in thought," he tells me in a light Spanish accent.

I try to do just that but I already know I must look like an awkward mess. I'm pretty camera shy so I had a feeling this wouldn't work out.

"Um, not like that. Try again sweetheart," Camilla tells me her voice now hesitant. I guess she expected me to be a natural, damn was she so wrong.

Nevertheless, I try again, focusing extra hard on being chilled and relaxed whilst looking to be deep in thought. I don't think I ever gave models enough credit for what they do but from now on I will, this is fucking difficult. I hear Antonio sigh. "Let's take a five-minute break, okay? Try to...um...collect yourself Aurora," he tells me before grabbing a bottle of water and muttering to one of his assistants in rapid Spanish, probably about how much of an amateur and how shit I am. What a great first impression.

Modelling sucks.

Once everyone has walked away I put my head in my hands. Fuck my life.

I feel someone tap my shoulder but I ignore it and continue to wallow in self-pity. After a minute or so the person tries again but I shrug them off, not wanting to face anyone.

"For god's sake, green eyes," the person sighs and I immediately snap my head upwards, recognising the voice instantly. My eyes meet Wyatt's striking blue ones and we just stare at each other for a moment, unblinking.

Wyatt is the one to break off the staring contest by clearing his throat. I snap out of my trance, cheeks slightly flushed from embarrassment. Luckily, Wyatt chooses to ignore this and starts talking. "I'm just going to get straight to the point, green eyes, you did absolutely shit. I don't think I've ever seen worse modelling in my life," he tells me bluntly.

I huff at him. "Thanks for that captain obvious," I say dryly.

"Sarcasm isn't appreciated, green eyes," he tuts and I scoff. He ignores me and carries on. "You're acting too serious. The key to modelling is being relaxed. You're focusing way too much on trying to be calm and it just looks so unnatural. You can't try too hard you just have to do it," he tells me.

"Well, how the fuck do I do that?" I ask incredulously.

"Language," he scolds. "And I don't know. It's just something you do. It should come naturally," he shrugs.

I glare at him. "Well, clearly it doesn't work like that for me."

"You just need to loosen up and it will. Calm down and pretend that you're not at a photo shoot."

I send him a look and he sighs, running his hands through his hair. "God you're so difficult," he pauses, "oh I know."

Suddenly he launches himself at me and begins to tickle me. Oh, fuck no, anything but that.

I start to laugh involuntarily and try to tickle him back to no avail. Within a few minutes we're in a full-on tickle war which, annoyingly, Wyatt is winning.

Out of the blue, I hear a click and I freeze. "Yes! Yes! Yes! That's what I'm looking for!" Someone with a slight Spanish accent cries. Antonio.

"You," he points at Wyatt. "Go get into wardrobe. I want you modelling with her," he points to me now.

Wyatt's about to protest but Camilla sends him a deathly glare, daring him to argue. He huffs in defeat and follows the blonde assistant to the dressing rooms but not before sending me one final look.

Camilla comes up to me and puts her arm around my shoulder. "Now that was fantastic," she gushes. "You and Wyatt looked breathtaking together, this shoot will be amazing. Take a half an hour break, then it's show time," she tells me, sending me a smile then walking off.

I'm modelling with Wyatt.

Why the hell do I not get a say in any of this?!

I've said it once and I'll say it again, modelling sucks.

## Chapter 22

I've spent the last hour pacing around my temporary dressing room and it's safe to say that I might just puke. Camilla said it would only be a half hour break but it's taken way longer to get Wyatt ready, as I've said hair and makeup takes donkeys years.

Me modelling with Wyatt. Why on earth did anyone think that would be a good idea? Actually, why did anyone think me modelling full stop was a good idea?

I'm so camera shy, hate the spotlight and am just plain awkward around people I don't know. Who on earth thought those were good qualities for a model?!

I hear a soft knock on my door and it makes me jump back in surprise. The blonde assistant from before walks in and tells me to go to set before receiving a message on her earpiece and leaving.

Deep breaths. It's just Wyatt. If anything he should make this whole ordeal slightly better.

I slowly walk in the direction I was supposed to, calming myself all the while.

When I finally get there, after a good five minutes, let's just say I got a little lost, everyone was already there waiting for me. "There you are," Camilla smiled, calling me over to her.

I gave her a small smile but my attention wasn't on her or the photographer but the boy standing behind both of them. Taller than them both stands Wyatt, his hair styled effortlessly and his clothes pristine, he looks breathtaking, but of course I'd never tell him this. Wyatt looks right back at me with his electric blue eyes, a smirk playing on his lips. "Finally decide to show up, eh, green eyes," he teases.

I wring my hands in embarrassment. "I may have gotten a little lost," I admit sheepishly.

Wyatt chuckles at this. "Of course you did. Only you, green eyes, only you."

"Wha-" before I can finish my response the photographer, Antonio, cuts me off by clearing his throat.

"I hate to cut the chitchat," he starts in that Spanish accent of his, "but were already behind schedule so we need to get going. Chop, chop." He claps his hands and the blonde assistant—I really need to find out her name—puts us in position.

"Now I want you to both act natural and pretend I'm not here. Since you already know what you're supposed to do," he points to Wyatt, "you can explain it to her, I'll give you a few minutes," Antonio says.

Wyatt sighs. He turns to look at me. "Now, green eyes, just like he said, pretend the camera isn't here and that we're not in the middle of a photo shoot."

"Easier said than done," I mutter back, arms folded.

"I know but I'm not really sure what else to say," he admits. "I was hoping he'd explain it to you because I'm not sure how. I've been modelling for mum most of my life, it just comes naturally, I don't really have a technique," he shrugs.

I think over his words for a few moments. "Okay. So you literally just go for it?" I ask. He nods. "But that's so unlike me."

"I know, green eyes, and that's our dilemma. But besides, it's slightly different now. We're modelling as a pair, not separately, so whatever we do has to coordinate and there has to be a chemistry of some sort."

I visibly shudder before groaning and placing my head in my hands. "I don't know how to do this. I don't know what to do, Wyatt," I whisper to him. "This kind of thing is so new to me. I know I told you that I wanted to be reckless, fearless and careless but it's really hard. I want to do this, to prove to myself I can. The whole point of this was to come out of my shell but I'm scared, Wyatt, I'm terrified," I admit to him in a low whisper so no one around us can hear, not that they're paying attention, they gave us a few minutes of privacy to talk.

Wyatt grabs my wrists gently and pulls my hands away from my face. He lifts my chin up with his thumb and index finger and looks me dead in the eye. "Aurora," he starts softly, his complete attention on me. "I know this must be difficult for you, especially considering how shy you are. Coming out of your shell can't be easy, I don't doubt that but I think you of all people can do it because you have the willpower and sheer determination. Others would give up but you, you're a fighter, you're also damn stubborn. I know I've not known you for too long but over the past few weeks, this is something I've learnt. You have your weak moments but so does everyone. What matters is that you pick yourself back up. What I'm trying to say is that I know you can do this, maybe not on your own but you have me to help you and let's face it, with me on your side you can't fail," he tells me, smirking at the end.

Of course, he had to ruin that with a smirk, just of course. But ignoring that I think over what he said, not moving a muscle. Wyatt doesn't move either, waiting for my response.

When I'm finally about to answer I hear a few clicking noises followed by Antonio's cries of praise. "Yes! Yes! Yes! Now that's what I'm looking for," he cries.

Upon hearing him talk I jump away from Wyatt in fright.

Wyatt sighs but chuckles at me. "One pose down, green eyes."

"And a million to go," I mutter back, scowling, making Wyatt laugh harder.

~\*~\*~

Three hours later—yep, three fucking hours—we're finally finished. Antonio was determined to get hundreds of shots with numerous different poses so he wouldn't let us stop.

After the whole ordeal, Wyatt wanted a rematch at our game from earlier so insisted on me coming back to his house. I tried to protest, considering how knackered I am, but he was adamant so I gave in, I guess he's a bit of a sore loser.

Once we finally reach his house I sprint for the bathroom, I've needed to go for the last two hours but Antonio wouldn't let me leave the shoot.

It's not until after I wash my hands and exit the bathroom that I realise my grave mistake. I have no clue where the games room is. Fucks sake, I swear this kind of thing always happens to me. It's a wonder how I found the toilet in the first place.

I sigh and begin to guess the way to the games room. After about fifteen minutes I find it, pretty good if you ask me.

I walk in to see Wyatt sitting on one of the sofas talking to a guy who looks vaguely familiar. When the door shuts behind me both boys turn their heads in my direction. "There you are, green eyes," Wyatt says. "What took so long?"

"I got lost," I mumble back, uncomfortable around this new person. I've met so many new people in the last few weeks and I don't think I like that very much.

"Of course you did," Wyatt says, rolling his eyes.

The boy next to Wyatt clears his throat causing Wyatt to remember his presence. "Right, sorry I almost forgot. Aurora this is Eli. Eli meet Aurora," he says, gesturing between the two of us.

I finally bring my eyes to meet Eli's and take a proper look at him. He is wearing a slight smirk and his lip ring is jutting out because of this. His golden blonde hair has been styled to one side but is still voluminous and it almost covers one of his gorgeous hazel eyes. He has a double helix piercing in his left ear along with a left eyebrow piercing. I can also see the ends of a tattoo poking out of this right sleeve and the top of his shirt. I can't, however, get a proper look at his build because he is sitting down.

Eli gives me a once over, his eyes lingering longer than necessary before deciding to speak. "Lovely to meet you, Aurora," he says, reaching over the plush faux leather to grasp my dainty hand in his much larger one and give it a light kiss.

"Just Ari is fine," I tell him in a quiet voice. It's not my fault, I never used to meet so many good looking guys in such a short time span, a girl can only handle so much attractiveness.

"Ari it is then," he says, nodding to himself.

"I feel like I've seen you somewhere before," I blurt out without thinking.

"In your dreams perhaps?" He asks. Cheesy.

When I don't respond Wyatt decides to speak instead. "He goes to our school, green eyes, I'm surprised you didn't know him already."

I shrug in response. "Well he did look familiar, I just couldn't place him."

"Oh, that's where I know you from," Eli cuts in. "I thought you looked familiar too and I never forget a pretty face. You're the girl who James broke up with, right?"

My throat tightens at the mention of James and my stomach starts to flip. Why the hell did he have to mention him, just why? I nod stiffly in response. Eli notices my unwillingness to engage in the subject so changes the topic, smart move. "So tell me, what's a pretty little thing like you doing at this idiots house?" Eli asks, motioning to Wyatt.

Wyatt scoffs and replies before I can. "She's a friend, dude. So don't hit on her, I'd actually rather she stay around than be thrown away like another one of your playthings."

Eli rolls his eyes at this. "Come on man, you know I'd never do something like that."

Wyatt snorts. "Sure, just like you've never hooked up with three girls in one night."

"I can't help it if the ladies want me. It would be downright cruel to refuse them," he defends lamely. So he's definitely a man whore, shame.

I block out the rest of their conversation, not wanting to hear anymore and saunter to an armchair, grabbing a controller on my way. Once I'm comfortable I cut off Wyatt by talking. "So are we having this rematch or what?" I ask.

He smirks at me. "You're going down, green eyes."

Eli snorts. "No offence sweet cheeks but there's no way in hell that you're going to beat him," Eli says.

"Is that a challenge," I raise my brow at him, my previous shyness forgotten because my determination to crush both of them is much stronger. He shrugs. "Then I guess you should play as well," I say with a glimmer in my eyes.

He smirks at me before picking up a controller. "I hope you're ready to lose, sweet cheeks," he sings.

I send him a dry laugh. "Right back at you."

## Chapter 23

After completely thrashing both Wyatt and Eli—five times in a row because Eli thought it was a fluke and demanded several rematches making him look even more stupid—I got Wyatt to take me home. Eli decided to come with us so I got stuck in the back seat, totally unfair if you ask me.

"You comin' with Wyatt to the track on Wednesday, sweet cheeks?" Eli asks me after nattering with Wyatt for about five minutes.

"The track?" I ask, a confused expression on my face.

Before Eli can respond Wyatt cuts him off. "No she's not Eli, she's not ready for that."

I scowl at Wyatt even though he can't see me. "That's for me to decide, not you," I snap, now rather irritated. Who the fuck does he think he is making decisions for me?

"Actually, green eyes, I'd be the one taking you so it is my decision," he replies in a cocky tone.

I scoff at him. "The smart arse comments aren't appreciated," I say dryly.

"Neither is your tone."

"Arsehole."

"Bitch."

"Cunt."

"Cocksucker."

"Really man, that's the best y' got," Eli says with a roll of his eyes, butting into our argument.

"Shut the fuck up," Wyatt snarls back at him. "This doesn't concern you. Stay out of it."

Eli doesn't seem to take offence by this, he just scoffs.

"Fine what do you suggest, oh great insult master," Wyatt says in the most sarcastic voice I've ever heard him use.

"Well," Eli starts, completely ignoring the sarcasm, "I'd choose something a bit more classy like...oh I don't know... a cum guzzling demon slut."

Wyatt and I both stop to give him dry looks. "Really," we both say in unison.

"Geez, tough crowd," Eli mutters.

"Anyway, would one of you be so kind as to tell me what the track is?" I say in the fakest polite manner imaginable.

Again, Eli is about to reply but Wyatt cuts him off. "Nope," he says, popping the 'p'.

"Come on," I whine, "that's so unfair."

"Well too bad," Wyatt says in a clipped tone, I must've pissed him off more than I thought. Oops.

The rest of the drive is done in silence. Wyatt's too pissed to speak, I'm busy sulking and Eli can probably sense the tension and is actually being smart by not saying something stupid right now.

Once we reach my house, it doesn't take long since Wyatt speeds even more than normal when he's angry, no one makes any moves to leave the car. After a few minutes of silence, Eli is the first to speak. "I'm going to go have a smoke," he grunts before slipping out of the front seat and walking away, leaving Wyatt and me alone, cheeky bugger.

Neither of us makes a move to speak, both too stubborn to give in. After a few minutes of tense silence, I finally speak. "You're an asshole, you know that?"

He scoffs. "So I've been told," he spits out bitterly.

"Okay, something is clearly bothering you. Just spit it out already!" I demand, my anger coming across loud and clear.

He lets out a humourless, dry laugh. "You think something is bothering me? Well, you're fucking right, something is bothering me. You! You're being so stubborn. I made a decision with your best interests in mind. I do want to take you to the track but not yet. You're not ready for that, it'll freak you out."

Anger is radiating off me but it calms a little at his last few words. Either way, I refuse to let him have the last word. "I'm too stubborn?! Well, you're not exactly perfect either! You've got such a short fuse, I mean I said one thing you didn't agree with and you get mad. You need to learn to calm down," I growl at him, standing my ground. I'm glad Eli left when he did, I doubt I would've been able to do this with a stranger in earshot.

He scoffs. "Whatever," he takes a deep breath as though he's calming himself down. "Look, I don't mean to get mad but you're just not listening. I'm doing this for you, just trust me on this."

I let out a groan. I'm not giving into what he said. He was being a complete arse. Yes, I trust him but he should let me decide things for myself. "Are you going to tell me what the track is or not?" I snap, completely fed up with this conversation.

"You're a smart girl, why don't you figure it out yourself," he says in a condescending tone, clearly irritated with me.

The scowl on my face deepens and I audibly growl. Letting out a frustrated grunt, I rip open the car door and slam it harshly behind me, stomping away from the car towards my house, refusing to look back.

My vision is blurred by tears of anger so I don't notice something in front of me until I've already walked into it, typical. Large hands quickly grab onto my forearms and steady me to stop me falling. Blinking up at the person, I see Eli looking down at me, a look of concern etched into his features instead of his usually happy-go-luckily expression.

"What's up with you, sweet cheeks?"

I sigh, knowing it's pointless to take out my anger on him. This isn't Eli's fault. "Wyatt is a complete arse, that's what," I state, seeing no point in lying and saying 'nothing'.

He lets out a low chuckle. "He usually is, don't worry about it, that's just Wyatt for you. He's a royal pain in the arse," he smiles, making me let out a light laugh.

"You look so much better when you smile," Eli says to me, making me blush, my shyness starting to surface again.

"Thanks," I utter awkwardly.

"No problem," he laughs. "Huh," Eli starts, thinking out loud, "it's kinda weird, now that you're not all mad you've gone quiet and shy, nothing like how you were earlier."

I shrug at him, not knowing how to reply.

"Whatever," he dismisses. "Anyway, I can tell you about the track if you want, I'm assuming Wyatt wouldn't." I nod at him. "It's nothing special, just where we race, it's in the name I guess. Wyatt's killer on a motorbike, he's never lost and me, cars are more my thing," Eli tells me.

"Wait, is that even legal? And isn't it super dangerous?" I ask, sudden worry and concern flooding through me. Pathetic, even though I'm angry at Wyatt I'm worrying about him. Pull yourself together, Ari.

"No and yes but it's fine, don't stress. We've both been racing since we turned seventeen and neither of us have had any injuries," he reassures me.

I nod. "Okay," I breathe out. "So would I be able to come and watch?" I ask. I know it's stupid, dangerous and illegal but it's just the kind of reckless thing I should do. I wonder what James would think if he knew I went to an illegal race track.

Eli scratches the back of his neck. "I don't know about that one, Ari, you'll have to convince Wyatt," he tells me just before we hear a loud car horn. "That's Wyatt, I better get going before he drives off without me, see y' Ari," he says and runs off.

I let out a huge sigh and walk down the path to my house. Once I'm inside, I run to my room and immediately flop down onto my bed, letting sleep consume me, not even bothering to change into my pyjamas.

~\*~\*~

I haven't spoken to Wyatt for almost a week, it's currently Sunday. I know he went racing on Wednesday, I remember Eli mentioning it but I couldn't bring myself to ask him about it again, my pride getting in the way. It feels kind of weird being on bad terms with Wyatt and I don't like it, I hate the thought of him being mad at me but then again he was a jerk so he had it coming.

I think I need to go for a run to clear my mind, Wyatt is driving me nuts.

I quickly get changed into some leggings, a tank top and my running jacket—it's way too cold not to have one—before running downstairs, slipping into my trainers and grabbing an apple. Alice and Hugo are both out with friends so the only one I say bye to is my mum, giving her a kiss on the cheek. I scarf down my apple whilst heading for the door. I shut it carefully behind me and start the familiar route to the park, the mild nine o'clock weather nipping at my skin.

Twenty minutes in and I'm at a comfortable pace, jogging around the park, bobbing my head to the music in my earphones. I'm so focused on the music that I don't notice someone in front of me until it's too late. I run into them and almost fall back but luckily they grip my forearms, stopping me from tumbling backwards.

"I'm so sorr—" I cut myself off mid-sentence when I look up to see who caught me.

Wyatt.

A look I can't decipher is plastered onto his face. "Green eyes?" He breathes out before pulling me into a tight embrace. Utter shock washes over me and it takes me a moment to compose myself. When I do I hug him back, enjoying the warmth and comfort he radiates.

Our intimate moment doesn't last long. I hear someone clear their throat behind me so I pull back from Wyatt. When I do I think I can feel all the colour drain from my face. In front of me stands Jessica, a smirk plastered on a face, her eyes alight with mischief.

"Well, well, well what do we have here?"

## Chapter 24

"Well, well, well what do we have here?" Jess says, smirking at me, her eyebrows raised.

I audibly gulp, my eyes wide as I look at her. "Jess...um...hi. What are you doing here?" I stammer, completely taken aback by shock and fear. Usually, I'm a decent liar but I've been caught so off guard.

"I could ask you the same question," she coyly replies.

"Um... well I was going for my weekend run," I tell her, trying to avoid the elephant in the room.

"Alright and..."

"And what?" I ask, playing dumb.

"You weren't doing anything else?" Jess prompts.

"Sorry, I think I've lost you," I say apologetically.

"Urgh. Aurora Jasmine Kelly," she starts firmly, crossing her arms. I wince at the use of my full name, ready for an onslaught of authority. "Cut the bullshit. If you don't want to go into detail about this then that's fine but I don't appreciate you acting dumb."

I sigh. "I'm sorry Jess," I say, instantly feeling bad. I mean, Jess told me about Emma without much hesitation, knowing I wouldn't tell anyone, yet she doesn't even push me to do the same. I shouldn't have trouble entrusting this to her, I've no idea why I do in the first place. Jess has never slipped a secret in her life, not even when being highly intoxicated.

I hear Wyatt clear his throat beside me, clearly feeling uncomfortable. Immediately, I snap into action. "Where are my manners? Jess this is Wyatt, Wyatt this is Jess," I say motioning with my hands to each of them.

Jess gives Wyatt a smile which he returns with a smirk. "Don't I know you from somewhere?" Wyatt asks.

Jess shrugs. "Maybe you've seen me at a party? People tell me I get a little out of hand," she laughs with a shrug. "Now, how do you two know each other?" She asks with a grin.

I'm about to reply but Wyatt beats me to it. "We met at party actually," he chuckles. This little one was a bit drunk and I helped her out. One thing lead to another and now here we are," he concludes.

I mull over his words for a few moments. I guess he didn't want Jess to know about the tutoring, maybe he's a bit embarrassed by it.

Wait. Pause. The bitch called me 'little', how dare he. "Excuse me Mr Giant but I'm not that small," I say to him crossing my arms and puffing out my chest, a frown on my face.

"You kind of are, green eyes, I'm only staying the truth."

I huff at him.

"Don't pout at me," he says. "I never said it was a bad thing that you're small. I'm pretty sure I've already told you that I find it cute," he concludes with a tap of my nose. I feel my cheeks flushing a deep shade of red at his reply.

Jess taps my shoulder to get my attention and I send her an apologetic smile to which she only smirks at, cheeky bugger.

"Anyway," she starts, changing the topic. "Was that the party at Jordan's a couple weeks ago where you got so drunk you couldn't come into school the next day?" Jess asks me.

I feel a wave of guilt washed over me at her mentioning a previous lie I've told but I nod at her all the same.

The three of us converse in conversation for a few minutes before Jess excuses herself, saying she needs to go meet with Emma.

Once she's walked away, Wyatt turns to me. "Who's Emma?"

"Her girlfriend? I'm not sure, it's complicated."

He nods. "Right. Anyway, green eyes, I believe you owe me a tutoring session," he says with a grin.

I groan. "Must you always interrupt my weekend runs with your tutoring," I complain.

He shrugs at me. "I guess this is just the way it's supposed to be" he tells me before leading me in the direction of his house.

I've no idea what he means by that but I shrug it off and follow him, all hopes of my run now left behind.

~\*~\*~

Four hours of tutoring later I bellyflop onto Wyatt's bed in exhaustion, letting out a groan as I do.

He's getting slightly better but we're currently on year 9 work so we've still got a long way to go.

I feel the bed sink beside me and a hand start to nudge at me. "Green eyes, get up, the day won't wait for you."

"I don't care, let me sleep," I grumble back.

"Fine," Wyatt sighs. "At least lie down properly with the sheets covering you."

I ignore him as the darkness gets closer, sleep welcoming me.

"You're impossible, green eyes," Wyatt complains, scooping me into his arms.

I thrash about, pounding my fists on his back. "Hey, put me back on the bed! I want to sleep!" I whine.

Wyatt lets out a low chuckle. "You don't punch very hard and relax, I'm just making sure you won't get a twisted back when you sleep."

"That's because I'm half asleep," I retort as a yawn escapes me.

"I can see that," he laughs, putting me down on the bed again, the covers now on top of me.

"How about this, green eyes, once you're all rested up, show me how you really punch," he suggest but I only just about hear him as sleep begins to take over.

Without thinking much about my answer, I mumble "sure, night Wyatt."

"Night, green eyes, sweet dreams," are the last words I hear before drifting into a deep sleep.

~\*~\*~

I feel something grabbing onto my hand but I swat it away, turning my head into the comfy pillow.

"Go away, Hugo, let me sleep," I mumble into the pillow.

The hand doesn't listen. "Hugo, leave me alone, just five more minutes," I whine, my voice slightly louder as I start to wake up.

The hand disappears and I sigh in relief, snuggling into the pillow.

Suddenly, something starts tickling my neck. "No!" I screech, immediately getting up to get away from my brother. "Hugo, you little shit, you asked for it," I say, launching myself at the figure, only now opening my eyes to the harsh artificial light.

I'm on top of him, tickling his stomach but he's not reacting like Hugo normally does. Usually, Hugo would be squirming, trying to push me off, instead he just lies there not trying to move me.

"Hugo?" I question trying to get a closer look at my brother, my eyes now adjusted to the light. It's a this moment that I realise it's not Hugo I'm on top of, it's Wyatt.

I feel the blood rush to my cheeks. "Shit, Wyatt. What the hell are you doing in my room?" I ask.

He gives me an incredulous look. "Seriously? Look around, green eyes, you're in my room."

That's when the day's events hit me and I remember why I'm here. "Shit," I curse. "Jess knows I know you," I say, panic rising in my voice.

"So?"

"So?! I don't want anyone to know, you know I hate attention," I tell him.

"Yes I know that but don't you trust her? I thought you two were good friends, I always see you hanging around together at school along with that blonde girl—what's her name?"

"That would be Ava and I guess you're right, I do trust Jess."

"Then you've nothing to worry about," he assures me. "But, green eyes, why don't you want anyone to know we're friends? I get the attention thing but that would die down after a while plus most people know who you are anyway."

I sigh, getting off of him and away from our compromising position and sit next to him. "True but when the whole James thing broke out people would constantly ask questions and gossip about me and it seemed like everyone was looking at me wherever I went, waiting for something to happen, and I hated it. I hated it so much," I tell him.

Wyatt puts his arm around me to bring me into a side hug. "But they got over it, that's my point. You need to be able to deal with people. You told me you wanted to be careless and fearless. So the best way is to not care what they say and not be afraid of what might happen."

He's right. If I want to prove to myself that I can do this and show James just how wrong he was I need to do this. The problem is that the mere thought terrifies me.

"Can you at least give me a bit of time before we jump into making any crazy decisions?" I ask him.

"Sure, green eyes, we can wait but let's not wait too long because we've still got a lot to do before I've met my end of the deal."

I nod at him. I know I don't need long just a bit of time to clear my head and ready myself.

"Right, now that that's sorted, get up," Wyatt says, sliding off of the bed.

I give him a puzzled look.

"Right before you went to sleep you agreed to show me how you punch," he tells me. "It's time you learned how to fight, green eyes," he concludes with a smirk.

Fuck.

I really shouldn't be making decisions whilst half asleep.

"Hell no, I wasn't thinking when I told you that."

"Too bad, you agreed now let's go, the gym is only two doors down."

I shake my head at him. "Wyatt there's no way I'm going to doing this."

"You do realise I'm not asking you to become a macho boxer right? I know this is going to take time but if you have the patience to deal with my shitty maths then I have the patience to deal with your shitty fighting."

Shitty fighting, huh? I guess he's in for a slight surprise.

"Come on, green eyes, live a little, don't be so boring."

Boring.

I sigh but nod as I too get off the bed, following Wyatt out of his room, luckily I'm already in somewhat athletic attire.

I can't believe I'm doing this. I'll show you James, I'm not boring, not at all.

## Chapter 25

Their gym isn't your standard home gym, then again I didn't expect it to be, we are talking about the Kings after all. It has got almost every facility you could imagine, way too many to name.

In the centre of the large room there is a clear space that is more padded than the rest of the floor, I'm assuming it's a sparring area.

"Okay, green eyes," Wyatt starts. "Because I did interrupt your run, why do you go on the treadmill first to warm up."

I nod at him in response, walking over to one of four treadmills. I start on a light jog, working my way up to a faster pace.

"That's good, keep it up," Wyatt calls from his position by the door. "Carry on, I'll be back in a few minutes. I just have a couple things to take care of." Without another word he exits the room swiftly, closing the door loudly behind him.

About thirty minutes later, Wyatt enters the room, a scowl on his face. With concern rushing through me, I hop off the treadmill and walk over to him.

"You alright?" I ask, slightly out of breath from running.

"Fine," he responds in a clipped tone.

I sigh in frustration. I wish he would open up to me. "You're clearly not okay, what happened?"

"Nothing," he says sharply, seemingly getting more aggravated by the second.

I cross my arms over my chest and give him a stern look. "Wyatt — whatever your middle name is — King, why are you in such a foul mood?"

Usually I would've given up by now and not pressed him to answer but I'm tired of him being so closed off with me. He knows all about James and my fucked up head but he doesn't tell me anything about him. He helped me when I was upset and I want to return the favour. I want to help him but his stubborn arse isn't letting me.

He glares at me. "Aurora, drop it," he says in a low growl.

I shake off the tremors I get from his tone of voice and stand my ground. "If you won't tell me what's going on the least you can do is let out some of that pent up aggression."

He furrows his brows at me. "You were going to teach me to fight," I prompt.

He sighs. "I was, wasn't I? Alright, since you're all warmed up I want you to show me what you've got," he says with a clasp of his hands, some of his anger seeming to fade. "Hit me."

I freeze momentarily. "What?" I sputter out, seemingly confused and worried.

"Chill, green eyes. I'm not going to hurt you. In fact I'm probably not going to fight back for the next couple of months, not until I think you're ready."

"So let me get this straight, you want me to fight you but you're not going to fight back?"

He nods.

I shake my head. "That's stupid."

He chuckles, more of his anger seeming to dissipate. If he won't tell everyone what's bothering the least I can do is help calm him down. "You think you can take me?" Wyatt asks with a raised eyebrow.

"No," I say shaking my head, "I know I can."

He seems surprised by my sudden cockiness but shakes it off, getting into a low crouch. "Alright, green eyes, show me what you've got."

He doesn't need to tell me twice. I start with a quick right hook to the jaw. Wyatt doesn't dodge in time, clearly too shocked.

Using his frozen stature to my advantage, I lunge forward with multiple punches to his abdomen. He stumbles before regaining his balance and resuming his crouch position, his face now focused.

I attempt a kick to the shin but, now that Wyatt seems to be over his shock, he dodges with ease.

He goes for a punch to the face but I see it in time and duck, sending a low sweep kick as I do directly to his shin, it doesn't seem to have much of an effect though.

Before I even have a chance to compose myself, Wyatt lunges at me, making me fall to the ground but not before I grab onto his t-shirt, meaning he falls as well.

After a small ruckus from the both of us, I end up flat on the floor, my hands pinned above my head and Wyatt hovering above me. "Looks like I win, green eyes," he says with a smirk.

I stare at him defiantly, my green eyes boring into his electric blue ones, doing my best to ignore our second compromising position of the day.

Our faces are inches apart and I can feel the blood rushing to my cheeks. My eyes dart to his lips but I quickly look back into his eyes, refusing to entertain the possibility of ideas forming in my mind. Pull yourself together Ari, you're doing all this to prove James wrong. You need to focus.

After a while of just staring at one another, I sigh in defeat. "Fine, you win, now get off me," I grumble, squirming beneath him.

"What was that?" Wyatt asks mockingly.

I glare at him and he chuckles lowly, getting to his feet and reaching his hand down to hoist me up.

"What happened to you not fighting back?" I ask with a smirk on my face. Shit, now I'm smirking, Wyatt is starting to rub off on me.

"Well I didn't think you actually even knew how to throw a proper punch, let alone be able to fight properly. You're actually pretty good, green eyes. Where did you learn to fight like that?"

"My dad," I say, not elaborating on the subject. I've nothing against my dad but I'm not ready to talk about him just yet, not even Ava knows much about him.

"Right," he nods, not pushing me to continue, thankfully. "Now, let's get onto some training."

I stare at him in disbelief. "But you just saw that I can fight, there's no need," I say, not wanting to do anymore exercise.

"True, you can fight but there's always room for improvement."

I huff at him.

"Don't give me that look. Now come on, we've got work to do."

I groan but comply, ignoring the fact that he's treating me like a child because, in fairness, I am acting like one.

~\*~\*~

Four hours later, I collapse onto the padded ground, all my limbs sore and aching.

"I'm never ever doing that again." I let out a dramatic sigh and close my eyes, ready to take my second nap of the day.

"Is this your way of saying that you give up and that you'll never beat me?" Wyatt asks coyly.

I immediately shake my head. "Not at all. How do you know I wasn't holding back because I didn't want to hurt you?" I ask, obviously not being truthful. I hear Wyatt chuckle before lying down beside me, our bodies mere inches apart.

He flicks my nose. "Because I know you didn't, but you are a lot better than I thought you'd ever be. I mean you're cute and small, no one would ever suspect you to fight like that," Wyatt says, lost in thought, rambling about whatever comes to mind.

I decide to take what he said as a compliment, ignoring the part about me being small, I'm too tired to even go there.

He talks about the last few hours in greater detail and goes over some of the key concepts he tried to teach me but since I already knew them all I didn't pay much attention and instead was trying to block him out so I could sleep.

I don't bother to reply to him instead I let out a small yawn, turning onto my side, sleep consuming me.

"Green eyes, we can't go to sleep here, it's not good for your back."

I let out a muffled groan as a reply, my way of telling him to fuck off without having to move my lips.

I hear him sigh and stand up. Before I know it I'm being effortlessly scooped up into his arms.

"Come on, green eyes, let's get you to bed," he murmurs in my ear as he starts walking, his footsteps echoing as he does so.

I'm too exhausted to reply and instead snuggle into his chest, all rational thoughts having left my brain, consumed by sleep. Soon I'm placed onto a comfy mattress and the sheets are on top of me. I get a small sense of déjà vu, remembering Wyatt doing this only a few hours ago.

However, last time I didn't feel the mattress sink beside me. I pay the thought no attention, too tired to let my mind over analyse every little thing. If I start to think about it I'll never get any sleep.

I hear Wyatt yawn next to me and this causes me to yawn too. As I'm on the brink of unconsciousness I feel something warm wrap itself around me and moments later I'm being pulled into a mass of warmth and coziness.

Before I know it, the whole world blackens around me but there's soothing tingles running through my body and an undeniable sense of comfort in the atmosphere that I've never felt before. I let out a sigh of contempt, snuggling closer to the warmth, wishing that I could stay like this forever.

## Chapter 26

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Stupid fucking alarm clock. I reach to my right to turn the damn thing off but as I do I realise I can't move very much. At this point I decide to open my eyes and when I do I realise I'm not in my room, I'm in Wyatt's.

Fuck.

I immediately remember the previous days events, each moment replying in my mind at a high speed.

I hear a soft groan coming from next to me and it's at this point I realise I'm not in the bed alone. Wyatt is lying next to me with his arm draped over my waist, so that's why I couldn't move properly.

Why the hell was I okay sleeping in the same bed as him?! Stupid sleepy Ari, I should never be allowed to make decisions whilst tired.

"Green eyes?" I hear the person next to me say in a slightly husky morning voice. "Why are you up so early?" Wyatt yawns.

I turn to the alarm clock to see it reads quarter past seven, shit. I immediately attempt to jump out of bed, attempt being the key word as Wyatt's arm keeps me firmly in place. "Wyatt," I groan. "Get your arm off me, I'm running so late. How the hell am I supposed to get home and get ready in time for school?"

I've decided not to think too much about us snuggling in our sleep, it's easier for my brain that way. Plus, I've slept in the same bed as Max before so it's not that big a deal.

"Green eyes, I'll take you to school, chill. You can borrow some of Aria's clothes like that time you got really drunk," he says chuckling and smirking at the end as he sits up, stretching his arms.

I groan and shake my head, trying to rid myself of the embarrassment before I playfully hit Wyatt's arm which he has finally moved off my waist.

"Okay, thanks," I reply, choosing to ignore the sly comment about my drunken self. "Do you have a spare toothbrush I can use as well?"

"Yep. You can use the same one you did last time, it's still in the guest bathroom. Go there and have a shower and everything, I'll leave Aria's clothes outside the door."

I nod gratefully at him and slip out of the bed. As I'm about to turn the door handle I realise I've no idea where the guest room is, I just can't remember, god I'm horrible with directions. I sheepishly turn around to face Wyatt and he immediately catches onto what I'm about to say.

"Let me guess, you can't remember where the guest room is?"

I nod and scratch the back of my neck in embarrassment.

He sighs. "Of course you can't. You're absolutely horrible with directions, I'd never let you navigate me anywhere," he chuckles as I scowl at him. "No need for the face, green eyes, I'm only telling you the truth," he teases. This causes me to huff at him and cross my arms but this just makes him laugh further.

"You look cute when you're mad," he says, still laughing.

After finally sobering up, Wyatt tells me where the guest room is, twice because he doesn't trust I'll remember, and also says to be ready and in the dining room in half an hour — he reminds me where it is twice as well — because Anna will be mad if we go to breakfast any later than that.

I hurry off to the guest bathroom, not getting lost for once, thanks to Wyatt's overly thorough directions, brush my teeth and have a quick shower, using whatever shower gel is at my disposal, it just so happened to be strawberry scented so I was pretty happy.

By the time I'm done and have wrapped a towel around myself, there is clothes outside the door like Wyatt promised. It's nothing fancy, just a plum coloured long-sleeve top, faded boyfriend jeans and a tan belt. The clothes fit fine, albeit the jeans are slightly too long, meaning I had to roll the ends so they cut at my ankles and the top is a bit tight in the chest area but overall they're a pretty decent fit.

Obviously, I don't have any makeup with me so I'll just have to go without but, luckily, I don't have any spots at the moment so that's okay, I'm actually kind of glad because I'm really not in the mood to bother with makeup in the first place.

I blast my hair with the hairdryer already present in the bathroom and decide to put it in a messy bun, using the hair bobble I keep around my wrist.

Once I'm ready — it took me just under thirty minutes so I hopefully I shouldn't make Anna mad — I head for the massive staircase that even my directionless self can't miss. Again, thanks to Wyatt's overly thorough instructions I find my way there without too much hassle.

I step into the room to find everyone already seated so I quickly make my way over to the empty seat next to Wyatt. Once seated I let my eyes scan the room, all Wyatt's siblings are here as well as Camilla and a stern looking man with sharp features who has a striking resemblance to Wyatt. The

main similarity being their eyes, he's the only other person I've seen with eyes remotely as strikingly blue and electric, I'm assuming he's Wyatt's father. His hair is dark but lighter than Wyatt's, it's slicked back into a neat and tidy style that just screams 'business'. He also has stubble on his jaw but it's well maintained, overall you can tell he likes to keep tidy and grooms himself regularly — or has someone who does that for him, I wouldn't put it past the Kings. He's definitely not bad looking for a man of his age. I guess this confirms why the King children are all so good looking, it's in their genetics.

Everyone's already eating so I help myself to a slice of toast and a cup of tea but I can't help feeling a stare burning into the side of my head, almost as if it's scrutinising my every move, let me be the first to say that I hate it.

I subtly nudge Wyatt in the side. "Is that your dad?" I ask under my breath.

He nods stiffly. "Yes, he got back yesterday. It's the first time everyone — well except Harper, she's still traveling all over the place — has been in the same house in almost a year so Anna was adamant on us all sitting together at every meal whilst everyone is in once place, she's knows it won't last long."

I nod. "Why is he staring at me?" I ask, growing more uncomfortable by the minute, I hate any sort of attention, especially if it comes from someone so intimidating.

Wyatt sighs and shrugs. "I'm not sure, I'll never understand that man. Probably just because he doesn't know you. I don't think he's intentionally glowering at you, he's just always got that sort of look on his face," Wyatt explains in a low whisper.

There's not much talking like there usually is when I'm dining with the Kings. Instead, everyone seems on edge, just like myself, as if they too are finding this just as uncomfortable.

Wyatt's dad clears his throat from the head of the table and immediately everyone's heads snap to him. "Well, who might you be, young lady?" He asks, looking directly at me, his expression hard, making me gulp.

I desperately want to look away from his cold stare but I force myself to keep eye contact, not wanting to appear as scared as I'm feeling. Wyatt said I need to be fearless so here goes. I push my discomfort and fear aside as I reply. "I'm Aurora, Wyatt's friend," I say politely, my voice surprisingly clear and calm for the number of nerves rushing through my body. I make sure not to mention the whole tutor thing because I remember Wyatt not wanting his mother to know so he most likely doesn't want his father to either.

He nods. "Well Aurora I'm Alastair and might I ask why are you here so early in the morning? Did you spend the night?" I'm not sure if the tone he's using is accusatory or just his way of finding out more about me.

I'm at a loss for words. How am I supposed to reply? I can't mention the tutor thing and I most certainly don't want to mention the deal I made with Wyatt. Luckily, Wyatt speaks up, saving me from immense embarrassment.

"Relax father," he says in a slightly bitter tone, almost as if he's trying not to spit out the word, I'm sure I'm just imagining things though. "It's not like that. Aurora is just a friend. We were partnered for an maths assignment and lost track of time last night," he lies smoothly. Wyatt's lying abilities never cease to amaze me, he's just so convincing, I definitely want him to teach me. Wait, can you even teach someone how to lie? I sure hope so.

"Right," he says and takes a bite of his food. His expression remains stoic so I'm not sure if he believes Wyatt but I get the feeling he does.

"Aurora, lovely to see you again sweetheart, ignore my husband, he's always a bit grumpy, that's just him," Camilla says from where she's sitting to Alastair's right. I give her a small smile as Mr King grumbles under his breath and I sip my tea, glad at least one of Wyatt's parents is welcoming and nice. However, I can't help but remember what Wyatt said regarding his mother and how there's more to her than what meets the eye. I can only hope that it was said with positive intentions but I know that's not the case.

I refuse to let a frown of confusion take over my features as Camilla continues to speak. "The photos you posed for looked stunning, Aurora. I'm so excited to release them, especially the ones of you and Wyatt. They're probably some of my favourite modelling pictures, the clothes looked perfect on you both and when you were together the pictures looked absolutely breathtaking. I'd love it if you'd model for me again in the future, sweetheart, perhaps as a full time career. With a few lessons from myself you'd be unstoppable but I'm getting ahead of myself, best to wait until you've unfinished school or at least until exams are over," she concludes with a smile.

It takes me a minute to process what she's said but when I do I can feel myself paling. It never occurred to me that my photos with Wyatt would go public. I'm such an idiot. What if people from school see them? How the hell am I supposed to deal with this?! And on top of that Camilla wants me to take up modelling as a full time career. What the actual hell!? I was absolutely shit when Wyatt wasn't with me, how did she ever think I could model as a profession?!

Wyatt seems to notice my sudden panic as he scrapes his chair back from the table, the sound created making me wince. "Well we best be off," he starts in a rush. "Don't want to be late for

school, come on Aurora." He tugs my arm trying to get me out of the room quickly before I start to panic even more.

The use of my full name surprises me, he never uses it. Seeing as he must be serious, I get up as well but make sure my chair doesn't make that same horrible scraping noise Wyatt's did. "It was lovely to see you all again," I say politely as I make my way to leave. I cast Nathan and Zack a smile each and they both return my smile with grins much bigger than my own.

As we walk I feel the panic in my chest rising. This can't be happening. It just can't. But I can't stop Camilla releasing the photos, she has to, it's for her job.

"Green eyes, calm down," Wyatt says calmly. "We can sort this out but right now I need you to take deep breaths. Can you do that?"

I nod and do as he says.

"Good," he says soothingly. "Just like that, green eyes, everything will be fine, I promise."

## Chapter 27

I hurriedly follow Wyatt to the front door, grab my shoes and shove them on. "How can you be so sure? Everyone will see photos of me modelling, Wyatt, and since it's with you I'll get even more attention, you know I can't stand that," I tell him as we walk to his car, my breathing rate increasing. "I never even considered that they'd go public. God I'm such an idiot," I groan.

He pauses when we reach the car and turns around to face me. "Green eyes," he starts, placing his hand on my shoulder and looking me dead in the eyes. "It's okay. Screw everyone and screw the attention. If they want to stare, let them. Just be yourself and ignore them. If they're starting it's only because they've nothing better to do with their own lives than talk about you, take it as a compliment."

"But... but," I stammer as I think of what to say. I mean, he's right. Why should I care if others are staring at me? Because they'll be judging you. I try to ignore the voice in the back of my head as I start to speak again. "I guess you're right," I breathe out. "But I hate the attention. Sure it doesn't do anything per say but the thought of it just frightens me," I admit.

He sighs and takes his hand off my shoulder. "Come on, let's go, I know you don't want to be late for school," he says opening his car door. I comply and slip into the passenger's seat, closing the car door softly behind me. After starting the drive to school he continues the conversation.

"Didn't you get attention when you started dating James?"

"Well, yes b-" I start but Wyatt cuts me off.

"And you knew that would happen but you did it anyway. Why? Because you wanted to. You can't put your life on hold out of fear of judgment or whatever it is that makes you so shy. You have to live your life, even if that means standing out," he concludes.

I sigh. He's right and I know that. "I'm a shy person, Wyatt, I can't do much about that, it's who I am."

"But being so shy is holding you back. Try being confident, put yourself out there and if people don't like it screw them, they're not worth it."

I give him a hesitant look which I'm sure he sees out of the corner of his eyes. "But that's not who I am."

"I know, green eyes, but you have to try new things. I said to you that you will be fearless and careless. If you can't do this that'll never happen."

I know I'm going to regret this. "Alright, I'll try."

I see Wyatt smile out of the corner of my eye and it doesn't leave his face for the rest of the ride to school.

~\*~\*~

Due to the family meal we were slightly late for school which, honestly, was a good thing. It meant no one saw Wyatt and me come into school together, I don't want people getting the wrong idea.

Luckily, I made it into the classroom just before the teacher so my attendance record wasn't damaged. I've never skipped a day of school in my life — if you don't count that one time when I did with Wyatt — the only time I've ever been off is when I'm sick and even then I still try to come in.

The day flew by quickly and before I knew it lunch rolled around. Annoyingly, I was let out of my last class late so had to wait in the queue for fifteen minutes before I could finally go and sit down and of course I was the the last one there.

"Hey guys," I say as I sit down between Ava and Jess.

They all greet me back and continue with their idle chitchat. Jess and Ava decided to catch me up on all the latest gossip, they always do that — Ava in particular — I've never been one to immerse myself in such hobbies but it can be quite humorous to hear some of the things they come out with. One time they told be that Maria Sanchez made out with someone else's shoe for ten full minutes at a party — she was definitely shitface drunk.

Apparently, gossip has been spread about Wyatt showing up to school with a girl but no one knows who — thank hell for that. People have been speculating that it could be Chloe Summers — as if — but apparently she came to school with James so that throws that theory out of the window. The thought of James getting close with Chloe sends an uncomfortable feeling to my stomach but I do my best to ignore it — he's moved on, I need to respect that even if it is with a she-devil like Chloe.

When they asked me who I thought it was I just shrugged, not really knowing what to say, I didn't want to directly lie to them.

"Ari," Jordan calls from the other side of the table a few minutes before the bell rings.

I hum in response, turning my attention to him.

"We've collectively decided that we're all hanging at your place tonight. Me, Jess, Chase, Oliver, Max, Mason and Ava."

"Don't forget about Rebekah," Oliver chimes in.

"Yeah and Rebekah," Jordan grumbles, clearly not wanting her there. It's not that he doesn't like Rebekah, we all do, it's just that her and Oliver always fight and everyone hates it.

"Don't I get a say in this?" I ask, already knowing I've lost.

"Nope. Your house is the closest to everyone's so it's only fair we hang out there. Last time was at mine but that was a party, this time it's just us lot but I'm still bringing some alcohol, always livens us all up," Jordan concludes.

I sigh in defeat. "Fine. See you guys there at half six."

~\*~\*~

After school I had art class so I headed up to the art department and grabbed an apron. I'm so glad it was today, after finding out about James and Chloe this is exactly what I needed. It's not even the fact that she's a bitch and bully it's because James knew all of this but chose to ignore it. Is that the kind of girl he likes? Nah, James isn't like that.

Ava has cheerleading at the same time as I have art so it works out really nicely and she drops me home and decides to stay because she'd have to leave her home as soon as she got there in order to come to mine.

I quickly change my clothes so I can give Wyatt Aria's clothes back tomorrow. I throw the clothes in the washing machine and by this time Max, Mason, Jordan and Jessica are here.

As he said he would, Jordan has brought lots of alcohol: beer, vodka, gin, tequila and brandy. Luckily, mum doesn't mind this kind of thing, sure we're underage but we're doing it under her roof and she's the one who wanted my to go to more house parties and live my teenage life — basically, she's a pretty cool mum.

About twenty minutes later, Chase, Oliver and Rebekah arrive.

"Great, now we're late. I told you this would happen, why did you take so long getting ready? It's only Ari's house," Oliver exasperates as they walk inside.

"Well I'm sorry. I don't like showing up to places like I've just gotten out of bed after being hit by three hurricanes and dragged through the pits of hell," Rebekah bites back.

"Yo-" Oliver starts but Chase cuts him off.

"Can you guys just go one evening without fighting? It's bad enough that Rebekah's been staying over for the last few days. It's constant fighting coupled with extremely loud noises from something I don't want to think about my twin brother doing. I'm sick of it."

Oliver sighs in defeat and Rebekah looks down at her feet.

"You're right, sorry," they both say at the same time. They smile at each other after realising what they did and give each other a quick peck on the lips. They're such a hot and cold couple I tell you.

"We won't fight, sorry bro," Oliver says and him and Chase do that man-hug thing.

"Right now that everyone is here," Jordan starts with a clasp so if his hand. "Time for some drinking games."

"Slow down Jordan, it's not even seven o'clock yet. Let's watch a movie first," Ava suggests.

Jordan groans but complies. "Fine but I'm not watch any of Ari's Disney crap."

I gasp at his words and put my hand on my chest in an over dramatic fashion—these boys have been rubbing off on me too much. "I'm wounded, Jordan. I truly am."

He scoffs and gets up from his position on the sofa to choose a movie.

After much debate and some blackmail we end up choosing a random action movie. I decided to sit next to Max so I can lie down on his lap for most of it and hopefully get a nap in.

I'm woken from my peaceful slumber by both Max and Jordan yelling at the TV. I groan but get up, guess my sleep is over.

A little while later I hear a knock on the door. Since I haven't been paying much attention to the film I decide it's best if I go answer it. I'm not sure who it would be though. Mum left about ten minutes after everyone got here and said she wouldn't be back until three in the morning or something ridiculous and Alice and Hugo are upstairs.

I open the door to reveal four faces looking directly at me: Aria, Hunter, Eli and, of course, Wyatt.

"What are you guys doing here at," I pause to look at the clock on the wall beside me, "half eight in the evening?"

"The twins said they were having a sleepover with Alice and Hugo tonight and Anna made me drop them off," Wyatt answers.

"And I was already over and didn't want to be left alone with Anna," Eli shudders.

I nod, letting them all in. Aria and Hunter rush up the stairs to the twins rooms after sending me a polite 'hello'. There's something about those two that's undeniably different from the rest of their siblings but I still can't put my finger on it.

"Well, green eyes, since we're already here do you want to go out and do something?" Wyatt asks.

"Sorry, no can do, I've got friends over."

"Whatcha doing?" Eli asks.

Before I can answer I hear two people walk up behind me. One speaks up from where she's standing and the other puts a hand on my shoulder — Max.

"Ari where have y-" Ava cuts herself off when she sees the two boys in front of me. "Eli? Wyatt? What are you two doing here? Ari since when are you guys friends?"

I'm about to say that he was just dropping off his siblings but Wyatt speaks before I can and there's a smugness about his features I don't like. "Oh, I was just dropping by to say hi to my girlfriend."

## Chapter 28

Max's POV

"Oh, I was just dropping by to say hi to my girlfriend."

I feel myself tense from where I'm standing and I'm sure Ari does as well because she takes hold of my hand that's not on her shoulder and gives it a gentle squeeze.

I know he's kidding because Ari is still upset about James, I can tell. It's the subtle things she does, she's been slightly off since their break up but pretends she's fine. I've been wanting to mention it to her but I know that'll make it worse, she's one of those people that hates opening up and asking for help.

She lets out a deep sigh before glaring at Wyatt. He's actually a pretty cool guy but I never knew he and Ari were friends which surprises me because she tells me almost everything, things she hasn't even told Ava. Not to sound smug or anything but she says Ava is her best friend but anyone close to her knows it's actually me. I'm the one she comes to when she's upset, even if she doesn't like opening up I'm still always there for her.

I heard about her crying after breaking up with James. It hurt me that she didn't come to me but I guess she had a slight vendetta against the male gender at the time and I guess Ava might be better at dealing with that heartbreak shit than me, usually I'm the one causing that. I'm not annoyed about it though.

"Really Wyatt, that's what you chose to say? You could've done something so much more creative than that," she says with an eye roll.

They must be closer than I thought. Ari would never be this sarcastic and herself around a stranger or someone she wasn't close with, she's much too shy for that.

"As I was saying," the blonde boy starts, I know I've seen him at school a few times but I can't place his name. "What are you guys doing."

Ava is about to say something but the sound of footsteps and Jordan's voice cuts her off. "What's taking y'guys so — Eli, Wyatt?"

Wyatt nods at him in recognition.

"Hey man," I'm assuming, Eli says and he and Jordan do a bro hug.

"We were about to play some drinking games, y'guys in?" Jordan asks, addressing both Eli and Wyatt.

Wyatt smirks — I don't think I like it. "You know it."

~\*~\*~

I could tell Ari was anxious when Wyatt and Eli walked further into the house, it looked like alarm bells were going off in her head. Her breathing rate was increasing a significant amount so without a second thought I grabbed onto her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze, just like she did for me earlier.

She seemed to calm down slightly at my touch which made me smile. I'm always glad when I can help her.

Everyone sent curious glances towards us when they saw the two new people but Jordan spoke up before they could ask anything. "Guys these are my friends Eli and Wyatt, I'm sure you already know that though. Anyway, they wanted to join so here they are."

Everyone acknowledges them with a nod and we get started with the game upon Jordan's request.

"So we're going to start with some would you rather, then never have I ever and then, my personal favourite, paranoia," Jordan concludes, handing everyone a bottle of beer.

Would you rather is pretty simple. Someone poses a scenario and however many people choose the least popular have to drink. We decided that you only have to have a bit of alcohol each time, otherwise we'll never make it through three games.

I decided to start. "Let's start easy. Would you rather all your shirts be two sizes too big or one size too small?"

The girls said small and all the boys chose big so Jess, Ava, Ari and Rebekah had to drink. I know Ari isn't the biggest fan of alcohol but she seems fine today. When she wants to that girl can drink for England but that side of her doesn't come out very often.

The game continues in this fashion and everyone ends up at least tipsy by the end. I've never been the biggest fan of this game so when it's time for 'never have I ever' I get a rush of adrenaline.

This time Jordan starts. "Never have I ever had sex in a siblings room."

Oliver is the only one who drinks and you can see Chase's eyes widen. "Really bro, that's just gross," he groans but Oliver just shrugs in return, pulling Rebekah closer to his side and giving her a peck on the cheek.

"Ah, my turn!" Rebekah squeals. "Never have I ever slept with two or more people in the same night."

This time Eli—I could predict that one, from what I've found out so far he's a fuck boy— Jess, Chase, myself, Jordan and Ava all drink. Most of those were quite obvious but Ava surprised me, I never took her for that sort of person.

Next Wyatt decides to ask a question. "Never have I ever forgotten the name of a person I've slept with."

This time Eli — surprise surprise — and Jess both drink. The fact that Jessica has forgotten doesn't surprise me in the slightest. It's not because she sleeps around a lot — well, she does but that's beside the point — it's because she's an insane party animal. She gets shit face drunk and then seems to black out on the rest of the night so often forgets what has gone on and sometimes who with.

The game carries on for a little bit and I'm starting to feel slightly dizzy but I'm fine. Ari seems okay as well, she can actually drink a decent amount before she's gone. I lace my fingers between hers to get her attention so I can check she's alright. She looks up to me and smiles, showing all of her teeth and lets out a small giggle before returning her attention to the game. She's definitely starting to get drunk but she's not too bad yet, luckily.

I look over to see how everyone else is doing, everyone is clearly a bit drunk but Wyatt seems to be staying strong. I mean, I knew that guy could drink a lot but damn.

Now it's Ari's turn. "Never have I ever had my parents, siblings or friends walk in on me having sex."

Oliver drinks, so do Rebekah and Chase. I think we can guess what happened there.

"My go!" Ava giggles and then hiccups and then giggles at her hiccups — this continues for a while — the alcohol has clearly gotten to her — out of all of us she's the biggest lightweight, with Rebekah not too far behind. "Never have I ever slept with or wanted to sleep with someone in this room."

Surprisingly, everyone drinks except for Chase. To be honest, I could never imagine Chase being into anyone in this room, he's never been the type to like complications and liking a close friend is full of complications.

After a few more rounds Jordan speaks up. "Okay let's move onto 'paranoia' otherwise we won't be able to play it."

'Paranoia' is a pretty simple game. Someone whispers a question into your ear and the answer has to be someone who's in the room. You say the answer out loud and if anyone wants to know what the question was they have to drink.

I personally quite like this game but I'm not sure if I'll be able to remember all of it later, hopefully I can. Plus, I don't want to get completely smashed, I need to make sure I can keep an eye on Aurora.

Jordan starts by whispering something into Jess's ear. "Mason, duh," she says loudly, making Jordan pout.

"What was the question?" Mason asks, taking a drink.

"Who would be the best boyfriend material," she says with a shrug. She hit the nail on the head with that one. Mason hasn't actually slept with anyone yet and he's also a sweet and kind person who thinks with his head and doesn't make rash decisions or jump to conclusions, he's a great guy to have as a best friend.

Mase smiles when he hears the answer and gives Ava a subtle nudge that I almost miss due to my current state.

Oliver whispers something to Eli and he instantly replies by saying 'Ava' quite loudly. This makes Oliver's eyes widen in surprise but he masks it quickly with a blank expression. Even though Ava is completely wasted, I can see a flicker of worry cross her face before she falls into a fit of giggles.

I'm guessing she knew what that question was about but luckily for her no asked what the question was.

Next Rebekah whispers something to Oliver and he says 'Jess'.

Rebekah gasps at his answer. "How could you say that? You were supposed to say no one!"

"Babe, I had to say someone, that's the point of the game," Oliver tries to reason.

Rebekah gets up and dashes out of the room in fury and so Oliver gets up, begrudgingly, and follows her, the two of them disappearing into another room. I think I can guess what Rebekah asked and by the smirk on Jess's face she can as well.

Ari then says something to Wyatt and he says 'Max'. This makes her smile so I'm assuming it was something good. I'm very curious to find out the question but I know I can't drink anymore, not if I want to keep an eye on her.

The game continues and you can tell by this point everyone is shit face drunk. I've managed to maintain some what sober — okay not really — but everyone else is gone except Wyatt who only seems a bit tipsy, I'm pretty sure he can handle way more alcohol than is humanly possible.

When we're about to call it a night Jess stops us. "Just one more question, please," she says. "I've been dying to ask this all night but I forgot."

Some people grumble in protest, Jordan and Chase even leave to go to the bathroom, stumbling as they do, helping each other get there in one piece.

Now it's just myself, Ari, Jess, Wyatt, Eli, Ava and Mason.

When everyone left agrees she clasps her hand in joy and gets up. She stumbles as she walks towards Ari but makes it there unharmed. After the question is asked Ari says 'Max', giggling like a madwoman.

Jess seems completely taken aback by the answer, as if she was expecting her to say someone else.

After a few moments Ari seems to come to a realisation. "W-Wait I me-mean no one. Y-eah I me-an no-nobody," she hiccups.

Jess eyes her with a shocked expression but she doesn't hold the face for long, the alcohol seeming to take away her initial thoughts. "Really?" She laughs. "Wow."

She's about to say something else but she suddenly stops and makes a gagging noise. "I think I'm going to puke," is the last thing she says before staggering out of the room towards the bathroom that Chase and Jordan went to, poor Ari she's going to have to clean that up in the morning.

Wyatt seems suddenly intrigued to find out the answer but before he can ask, Ari lets out a massive yawn. "Night guys," she mumbles before getting up and stumbling up the stairs to her room. I go to help her at the same time as Wyatt but she waves us both off and says she's fine — basically her stubborn, drunk self refuses to be helped.

I decide it's best if I get some sleep too so I go to lie down on one of the sofas. Just before my mind went completely black, one thing was on my mind. When she tried to cover up what she said I got an uncomfortable feeling in my stomach. I think I know what the question was, let's just hope no one remembers any of this in the morning.

## Chapter 29

### Aurora's POV

When I woke up the next morning my head was pounding, not to mention I wasn't even in my bed. I was lying in the doorway of my ensuite and the entire room smelt of puke — I really don't want to have to clean that and who knows if there's puke anywhere else, I freaking hope not.

It was just before five in the morning — yes, ridiculously early but my splitting headache made it impossible to sleep. After brushing my teeth about five times and rinsing with copious amounts of mouthwash, I had a quick shower, got changed and went to see if anyone else was awake. We do have school today, it is a Tuesday, so I hope everyone can get up.

When I enter the living room the stench of alcohol hits me like a ton of bricks — mum is so going to make me deal with all this, urgh! Eli, Wyatt, Ava and Mason are all passed out on the sofas and carpet. If my memory serves me correctly, Chase and Jordan went to the bathroom and never came back; Rebekah and Oliver had a fight — like they always do — and disappeared into another room and Jess, um, if I'm honest, I can't remember what happened to her.

Wait, where's Max?

Just as I think this, I see his broad shouldered figure waltz into the living room, an apple in his right hand. It looks as if he's had a shower too, he has a few spare clothes at my house because he used to sleep over a lot. "Ari, thank god, glad to see someone is up," he says, walking over to me and taking a bite out of the apple.

I smile at him. "Yeah, my head hurt too much to sleep any longer," I tell him as I walk towards the kitchen with Max following closely behind.

"Yeah, hangovers are a bitch, you alright?" Max asks, a frown of concern on his face.

"I'm sure I'll be fine after I have some paracetamol," I tell him as I open the cupboard to grab some.

"Could you grab me a glass of water please?"

"Sure," he says.

After swallowing the pill with some water I ask him, "what about you, how come you're up so early?"

"The sofa isn't the most comfortable place to sleep," he shrugs. "I think I twisted my back," he says with a pout.

"Aw, you poor baby," I say with mock concern lacing my voice.

He rolls his eyes at me. "At least I can handle my alcohol better than 'some people' so I don't have a massive hangover," he says, sticking his tongue out at me.

I wasn't sure what to say to that because he's sort of right so being the mature person I am I copied his action and stuck my tongue out at him and rolled my eyes.

After a few minutes of talking I started to think about everyone else still at my house. I don't want to wake them up until absolutely necessary but at the same time if I don't they won't have time to go back to their houses and get ready. "Max, do you think we should get everyone up so they can go home and get ready for school?"

He looks off into the distance with a look of thought on his face and after a few moments of contemplation he replies, "nah, I don't think we should. We'll have to deal with a grumpy Jordan otherwise and he's a right git when he's hungover. How about we go get them all some coffee from Starbucks instead?"

That's probably a way better idea — I don't want to have to deal with a hungover Jordan, I'll tell you that much. "Sure," I tell Max as I grab a pair of shoes and follow him outside to his car — it's a mutual agreement with most of my friends that they drive instead of me because, as I'm sure you're aware by now, I'm not the best driver out there.

Most of the journey there we discussed random things. Max had asked me another one of his stupid questions. 'If an orange is called an orange, why isn't a lime called a green or a lemon called a yellow?' I mean, what kind of question is that?! An absolutely and completely idiotic one.

We argue about this for ten full minutes before I can get Max to finally drop the subject. "Ari," Max says after a few moments of silence but there's something different about his tone of voice.

I hum in response, silently praying he's not about to ask another stupid question.

"Do you remember much of last night?"

I have to think about this. To be honest, last night is a bit hazy but I do remember most of it, unlike last time I got drunk. "Yeah, most of it. Why?"

"Well," Max starts unsteadily and then decides not to continue.

"Well what?" I ask, impatient to know what he's getting at.

"Do you remember the very last question Jessica asked you?" Max asks, his voice now filled with dread and worry.

What's wrong with him? What could possibly be s—

Shit.

"Fuck. Crap. Bollocks," I curse.

"I'm assuming that means you do."

I groan and let my head fall into my hands. "Max, how could I be so stupid? How could I tell her? Even drunk me should know better than that. Crap, Max what should we do?" I say in panic, fear bubbling in my chest.

"Ari, calm down. She probably doesn't even remember."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I can't," he tells me honestly. "But I damn well hope so and if I'm wrong we'll just have to deal with it."

I sigh. "You're right. Let's just hope it doesn't come to that."

~\*~\*~

By the time we're back with coffee everyone is awake, even Jordan. My mum, being the wonderful woman that she is, has made everyone pancakes — hell yes.

"Hey guys," I say as Max and I walk into the dining room. "We brought coffee."

Everyone cheers as we hand out the drinks.

Once everyone is finished, there's no time for them to go home and get changed. All the girls had to borrow some of my clothes and Oliver managed to fit into some of Hugo's clothes but everyone else is just wearing what they wore the day before.

When we're all ready to leave for school and I'm about to get into Ava's car a large hand on my shoulder stops me. I turn to see Wyatt looking at me. "Come with me instead, green eyes."

I'm about to protest but Ava not so subtly nudges me in his direction, winks, quickly gets into her car and drives off before I can even open my mouth — sly little bitch.

"What about all the people who'll see us?" I ask as I walk with him to his car, I feel like a broken record by this point. I know it's useless to keep asking the same question but I can't seem to stop myself.

He sighs. "We talked about this, green eyes. Screw the attention and be confident."

I'm about to argue but something in the back of my head stops me, urging me to agree. "Alright."

Wyatt smiles a gentle smile as we reach his car and he starts the engine.

"Isn't Eli coming with us?" I ask.

"Nah, didn't you see him slide into your blonde friend's car just before she drove off?"

"Ava?"

"That's the one."

"How? I didn't even see him."

"That's Eli for you. He's a cunning little bastard."

The drive is pleasant. We talk about trivial things but the entire time the same thoughts are eating away at the back of my mind. However, I've promised myself and Wyatt that I'd ignore them. I can't let fear consume me. As difficult as it is, I'm the one who wanted to change so I have to do this, not just for James but for myself as well.

Once we're at school I take a deep breathe to calm myself. I feel Wyatt's hand clasp my own and give it a comforting squeeze. "You can do this green eyes. I promise, soon you'll look back at this and be so glad you've done it. You can finally be yourself, just ignore them all."

I nod at him and send him a grateful smile before sliding my hand out of his much larger one. Wyatt exits first. A few people glance at him as he does, people always stare at him, he's probably used to it by now. People sometimes stare at me too, no where near as much as Wyatt but if he can do it so can I.

With one final deep breath I slide out of the passenger side of the car. I can feel stares burning into the side of my head but I pay them no attention as begin to walk with Wyatt towards the school.

I can do this.

I can do this.

I can do this.

~\*~\*~

"I can't do this," I tell Wyatt in the corridor, on my way to third period. Ever since Wyatt and I parted ways to go to class, people have been bombarding me with questions. Some of these people I've hardly even spoken to before. I've even been threatened by some random year eleven girls to 'stay away from Wyatt or else'.

Don't get me wrong, it's not the threats that bother me, I know they're empty ones. It's the constant questioning and the numerous stares. People suddenly go quite when I walk past and I know it's because they were just talking about me. This is all too much.

"Yes you can," he tells me gently. "You can do this because I believe you can do this but, more importantly, you yourself have to believe you can do this."

"But—"

"No buts," he starts, cutting me off. "Believe in yourself."

I'm about to protest but the thought of James in the back of my mind stops me. He dumped me for being too boring. I was always reserved, even around him. Wyatt is right. If I ever want to prove James wrong I have to believe in myself and not care what others think.

"Okay. I believe in myself," I say, looking at him directly in the eyes.

He smiles, making the breathtaking blue colour of his eyes glimmer in the light.

The bell rings, signalling the start of period three. Wyatt and I go our separate ways but this time I'm determined.

I can do this.

I will do this.

## Chapter 30

By the end of the day I was exhausted but I did it. I held my head high and just ignored everyone's questioning stares. I walked tall — as tall as a five foot two and a half person can — and proud. It's quite funny really, most people already knew who I was because of James but after this morning it seems everyone knows who I am and for some reason that doesn't make me too uncomfortable, maybe I am changing.

Even James was staring at me today. It's bad but a part of me hopes he was jealous, I know he had no reason to be since we have broken up but I couldn't help but wish so.

Wyatt had asked me to tutor him after school so I did but, like the day had been, it was exhausting, seriously that boy may be good at many things but maths isn't one of them. I've been going through the basics with him and I think he's finally starting to get it but let's just say we've got a long way to go.

Wyatt slams his textbook closed with a loud thud. "God, that took ages," he complains.

"You're telling me."

"Well, now that that's over and done with, I have a surprise."

"What?" I raise my right eyebrow skeptically at him.

"If I tell you it won't be a surprise," he says with a roll of his eyes. "Now come on."

He leads me out of his room and towards the stairs. On the way we end up bumping into his adorable little sister, Brooklyn.

"Hey Brooke," I say to her with a smile.

She grins back at me. "Hi Ari! What are you doing here?"

"I was just hanging out with your brother," I say to her, motioning to Wyatt.

She scrunches up her face in confusion. "Why would you want to spend time with him? He's so annoying and—"

"That's enough, Brooke," Wyatt says with a chuckle.

Brooklyn pouts and I see Wyatt's composure break momentarily, a sad frown crosses his features for a passing moment. He suddenly launches himself at her, grabs her and starts spinning her in a circle. She giggles like a maniac and Wyatt smiles, you can tell he cares a lot for her.

After a few minutes he puts her down. "Again! Again!" Brooke cries, clapping her small hands together.

"Sorry, Brooky-bear, no can do. I have to take green eyes somewhere," he tells her, gesturing towards me.

She frowns but it only lasts a few seconds before her bright doll-like blue eyes light up in excitement. "Can I come with you?"

Wyatt scratches the back of his neck. "Um, I don't know Broo—"

"Please," she says, making a puppy face, embodying cuteness itself, which I know Wyatt won't be able to ignore.

He lets out a sigh. "Fine but you have to be on your best behaviour. Promise?"

"I promise," she grins, interlocking her pinky finger with Wyatt's.

~\*~\*~

Brooklyn was bouncing in anticipation the entire car ride. I noticed that because she was in the car Wyatt drove a lot slower than usual — I'm talking below the speed limit — he must care for his little sister a lot.

It was so adorable to see Wyatt have a conversation with her, he's such a cute big brother. He talked to her about all the things she enjoys and even had a full five minute conversation about her favourite dolls, I never thought I'd see him voluntarily do that.

"We're here," Wyatt says as he parks the car.

Brooke immediately jumps out of the car, excitement written on her face. I give Wyatt a look.

"What are we doing here?" I ask, gesturing to the shopping centre we're currently outside of. He shrugs and sends me a quick smirk before getting out of the car and making sure Brooklyn doesn't wander off on her own.

I let out a sigh as I follow him out and let him lead us towards the shopping centre.

"Can we get ice cream please?" Brooke asks, jumping about in anticipation.

"If you're good," Wyatt says, ruffling her hair. She pouts but he looks away before it can affect him.

He leads us into a clothing shop and Brooke squeals in delight. "There's so many pretty things. Can I go try stuff on Wyatt, pretty please?" She asks with wide eyes.

He shakes his head at her. "Not today Brooky-bear. Today we're here for green eyes."

I raise my brow at this but Brooke doesn't seem to notice as she starts jumping in excitement. "Can I help pick the clothes?"

"Of course you can," Wyatt tells her, ruffling her hair again. "I need to talk to green eyes for a minute so do you want to start picking?"

She nods her head furiously and runs off, looking for the perfect outfit.

"Aren't you worried about her getting lost?" I ask. This is a three floor department store.

Wyatt shakes his head. "Nah, Brooke knows this place quite well. Mums friend, Julie, owns the place so she comes here quite a lot and I know that she'll keep an eye out, I told her we were coming."

I nod. "So tell me, why are we buying me clothes?"

"Ah, you see," he starts. "I know that you wanted to go to the track and your wardrobe isn't exactly appropriate so we needed to come here. Also there is another reason. Regarding this whole plan we have on making you reckless, fearless and careless, you need to give off this 'couldn't care less' vibe so I think it's time you started dressing like a bit of a bad girl."

I only processed the first half of his words. "Wait, you're letting me go to the track?" I ask, a grin on my face.

He nods and sighs. "Yeah. I realised there's no point in putting off the inevitable plus Eli told me that he explained what the track was to you so I'd like it if you went to one of my races."

I did my best not to look too excited but the grin wouldn't leave my face. It finally did when the rest of his words sunk in. "Wait, you want me to completely change my dress sense?"

"Not exactly. I think it's time you reinvent yourself. Become the you that has nothing to do with your past or James."

James. The name still stings to hear. Especially, after seeing him with Chloe. I shouldn't be upset about that but I am. A small part of me wants to punch her but I know that's wrong. I've always said violence isn't the answer but that doesn't change anything in my mind — I'm such a hypocrite. Besides, we've broken up so I've no reason to be mad at her. Technically she's done nothing wrong.

Maybe change will be good. I can show James that I'm not the pathetic girl who still cares about him so much — even if I am I can at least pretend I don't.

"Alright. I'll give it a try."

~\*~\*~

A few hours later we're almost done. Brooklyn helped, she has a keen eye and surprisingly good taste for an eight year old. I don't think the clothes are my style but Wyatt said that these were the kind of clothes people at the track wore and they fit the whole 'bad girl' vibe. We went to so many different shops and I think I might've burned a hole through my debit card. Luckily, mum doesn't tend to mind what I spend money on as long as it's useful, which clothes obviously are.

Wyatt offered to pay considering that this was all his idea but I refused. He was adamant but after much debate I managed to convince him. However, he said that he's paying whenever we go out from now on and I reluctantly agreed. I guess I'll be getting free food out of all this so that's a bonus.

"Can we go for ice cream now please? I've been good." Brooke asks.

Wyatt ruffles her hair. "Sure," he says with a grin.

There's an ice cream parlour in the shopping centre so we didn't have to go very far.

"What flavour do you want Brooke?" Wyatt asks his little sister as we step inside shop.

Her face scrunches up in thought for a moment. "Bubblegum please."

He nods. "And you, green eyes?"

I already know what I want. "Mint chocolate chip, thanks."

"Alright why don't you two go find somewhere to sit while I go get the ice cream," Wyatt suggests.

Before I can even nod Brooklyn has grabbed ahold of my hand and started pulling me towards a booth. I can hear Wyatt chuckling as I'm being dragged away — idiot.

Brooke knows how to keep a conversation going. She has seriously good social skills. I mean she's eight, how she has this much confidence I'll never know.

After a few minutes Brooke excuses herself to go to the bathroom. I offered to go with her but she said 'I'm eight, Ari, I can handle going to that bathroom alone' so I let her go on her own.

A few moments later a head of dark hair slips into the booth, sitting opposite me, but it's not Wyatt. He looks to be about my age and has lovely chestnut eyes, defined features, a strong jawline, is well built and has a tattoo poking out of his right sleeve. He's definitely a rather attractive guy.

"Hi, can I help you?" I ask, unsure of what to say.

"Sorry to invite myself here over but it's just that you are absolutely stunning and I had to come and speak to you," he says in a deep and slightly husky voice.

I blush at his words but, luckily, I think my hair covered that for the most part. I'm about to reply but no words come out, as usual I'm rather shy around new people.

"Cat got your tongue?" He jokes. "Shy? No worries I get that. I wouldn't have bothered you but I knew I'd kick myself later if I passed up the opportunity to potentially go on a date with a beautiful girl such as yourself."

Did he just ask me out? Smooth. Knowing that this guy seems quite nice and calm relaxes me. He also seems interested in me and I don't want to scare him off and embarrass myself so I clear my throat, gaining confidence in myself. "A date? But I don't even know your name."

"Where are my manners? The name is River, and yours?"

"Aurora but everyone calls me Ari."

"Then I guess I'll call you Aurora. Since no one else does it can be especially for me. Aurora. A lovely name for a lovely girl."

I smile at his words. He really knows what to say to make a girl blush.

"So can I have your phone number so we can arrange that date?"

Before I can even think of a reply someone clears their throat and sits down next to me, putting an arm around my shoulders.

Wyatt.

## Chapter 31

"What are you doing here, River?" Wyatt asks in a slightly hostile tone.

How does he know River's name? "Wait, do you two know each other?" I ask.

Wyatt nods but before he can explain River speaks up. "Ah, I had no idea you two knew each other. Small world, eh? Wyatt and I have known each other for a couple of years now but for some reason the guy has never particularly liked me."

Wyatt lets out a humourless chuckle. "Some reason? We both know there's more to it than that and let's not forget the part about you being an asshole who cheats when racing."

"I've never cheated. You just can't stand that I'm better than you at it," River smirks.

"Better? Please, I'm a much greater racer than you'll ever be. The last time we raced I won, remember?"

"That was over a year ago, besides I wasn't feeling good that day. I know I'd beat you if we raced now."

"Is that a challenge?" Wyatt asks with a raised brow.

"Nah," River says, brushing him off. "I'm not in the mood if I'm honest."

"Or are you just scared to loose," Wyatt taunts. I've never seen him like this. I've seen him angry but there's something different about this. He's definitely mad but there's something else I can't quite place my finger on.

"Think what you want but I just came here to talk to Aurora not argue with you."

At the mention of my name Wyatt's arm tightens around my shoulders, pulling me closer to his side in a protective manner, our bodies now much closer together.

"Leave her out of this River. She doesn't need someone like you in her life. We both know that you don't want an actual relationship just some fun. She deserves so much more than that."

My heart warms at Wyatt's words. I never realised he actually cared for me but he clearly does.

"You know nothing," River snarls. "I actually really like her and would love to get to know her so don't act like you know shit about me." Although he's talking about me I can tell that his words hold deeper meaning. There's obviously something else going on between the two that I don't know about.

The two are glaring at each other, a battle of egos taking place but it's at this point that Brooklyn chooses to walk back over. "Wyatt, who's this," she asks in a confused voice, motioning towards River.

Knowing that they shouldn't fight in front of a child River sighs and gets out of the booth. "The name is River little lady but you don't need to worry about me I was just leaving," he tells her, a friendly smile on his face.

It's so strange how quickly his personality just flipped. I guess he's actually a really nice person, it's just Wyatt he doesn't seem to get along with.

Now he turns to me. "It was lovely to meet you Aurora. I still want to schedule that date," he winks, handing me a piece of paper. "Call me." With that, he walks off.

I can feel a faint blush cover my cheeks but I ignore it as I slip the paper into my pocket. I turn to Wyatt as Brooke sits down, eyeing her ice cream in delight. His face is contoured in anger. "Wyatt, calm down, he's gone."

He lets out a deep breath. "I know I just really don't like that guy," he tells me.

"Why?"

I think he's about to tell me but his eyes dart to Brooke who's gobbling down her ice cream, oblivious to our conversation. "Later," he says and I nod in understanding.

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"Or are you just scared to loose," Wyatt taunts. I've never seen him like this. I've seen him angry but there's something different about this. He's definitely mad but there's something else I can't quite place my finger on.

"Think what you want but I just came here to talk to Aurora not argue with you."

At the mention of my name Wyatt's arm tightens around my shoulders, pulling me closer to his side in a protective manner, our bodies now much closer together.

"Leave her out of this River. She doesn't need someone like you in her life. We both know that you don't want an actual relationship just some fun. She deserves so much more than that."

My heart warms at Wyatt's words. I never realised he actually cared for me but he clearly does.

"You know nothing," River snarls. "I actually really like her and would love to get to know her so don't act like you know shit about me." Although he's talking about me I can tell that his words hold deeper meaning. There's obviously something else going on between the two that I don't know about.

The two are glaring at each other, a battle of egos taking place but it's at this point that Brooklyn chooses to walk back over. "Wyatt, who's this," she asks in a confused voice, motioning towards River.

Knowing that they shouldn't fight in front of a child River sighs and gets out of the booth. "The name is River little lady but you don't need to worry about me I was just leaving," he tells her, a friendly smile on his face.

It's so strange how quickly his personality just flipped. I guess he's actually a really nice person, it's just Wyatt he doesn't seem to get along with.

Now he turns to me. "It was lovely to meet you Aurora. I still want to schedule that date," he winks, handing me a piece of paper. "Call me." With that, he walks off.

I can feel a faint blush cover my cheeks but I ignore it as I slip the paper into my pocket. I turn to Wyatt as Brooke sits down, eyeing her ice cream in delight. His face is contoured in anger. "Wyatt, calm down, he's gone."

He lets out a deep breath. "I know I just really don't like that guy," he tells me.

"Why?"

I think he's about to tell me but his eyes dart to Brooke who's gobbling down her ice cream, oblivious to our conversation. "Later," he says and I nod in understanding.

"What are you doing here, River?" Wyatt asks in a slightly hostile tone.

How does he know River's name? "Wait, do you two know each other?" I ask.

Wyatt nods but before he can explain River speaks up. "Ah, I had no idea you two knew each other. Small world, eh? Wyatt and I have known each other for a couple of years now but for some reason the guy has never particularly liked me."

Wyatt lets out a humourless chuckle. "Some reason? We both know there's more to it than that and let's not forget the part about you being an asshole who cheats when racing."

"I've never cheated. You just can't stand that I'm better than you at it," River smirks.

"Better? Please, I'm a much greater racer than you'll ever be. The last time we raced I won, remember?"

"That was over a year ago, besides I wasn't feeling good that day. I know I'd beat you if we raced now."

"Is that a challenge?" Wyatt asks with a raised brow.

"Nah," River says, brushing him off. "I'm not in the mood if I'm honest."

"Or are you just scared to loose," Wyatt taunts. I've never seen him like this. I've seen him angry but there's something different about this. He's definitely mad but there's something else I can't quite place my finger on.

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## Chapter 32

Before long we arrive at school and I can feel my heartbeat start to return to its normal pace.

It's over. I did it.

I release Wyatt from my deathly tight hold on his torso and get off the vehicle. He kills the engine and does the same. "How was that, green eyes?" Wyatt asks as he takes his helmet off.

To be honest it went better than I thought it would and I have a feeling that Wyatt had something to do with that. If I was on that thing with anyone else I probably wouldn't have made it the whole way. There's just something about Wyatt that seems to calm me and make me feel comforted even in the worst situations.

But of course I can't tell him this. I shrug. "Not too bad," I say as I, too, remove my helmet.

I can feel multiple stares burning into the back of my head once I remove the helmet but I pay them no attention. I'm not going to bother with people who stare. I'm just going to live my life, at least this is what I'm aiming for — I hope I can do this.

I take in a deep breath to calm my nerves and turn to look at Wyatt who is also staring at me, his eyes taking in my entire body. "What?" I ask.

He shakes his head slightly. "Nothing. Don't worry about it," he tells me.

I nod in confusion and we both walk into school together, side by side, ignoring the blatant looks everyone is giving us as we do so.

~\*~\*~

Like last time I was with Wyatt, people were staring and gossiping about me all throughout my lessons but this time it wasn't just because of Wyatt, it was because of my new look as well.

When I stepped into my RS class Ava did a double take when she saw me. She was a bit confused as to why I changed my style but I shrugged and told her that I needed a change, not wanting to mention anything to do with Wyatt. After that she was totally cool and told me that she really liked this style and that I looked really good which was nice to hear.

When lunch finally rolled around I knew I'd have to face the mass gossiping beast that is the cafeteria. However, luckily, when I walked in not too many people noticed — maybe this won't be so bad.

All of my friends seemed to like the new look and supported me in my decision to make a change which I'm very grateful for. Max even gave me one of his stupid flirtatious winks when he saw me coupled with a smug smile — that boy is something else.

~\*~\*~

The next few days past in a blur and before I knew it it was the end of the day on Friday. I was still going with the whole 'bad girl' vibe and I have to admit it was kind of growing on me. Something about it is just so freeing.

Wyatt had agreed to take me to the track today and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't ecstatic. We were going to go to his house and then head out at about eight.

As I was exiting school through the large double doors someone called my name. I spun on my heels and my eyes connected with a pair of brown eyes but not just any brown eyes. I'd seen these eyes so many times and they used to stare at me with love and affection and I used to mirror that look with my green ones.

Now, I'm not sure how they're looking at me, it feels like a lifetime since we last made eye contact for so long.

"What do you want, James?" The name feels like acid on my tongue. It's not that I still don't care for him because I do immensely but this is the first time he's so much as looked at me in ages and a part of me is still so angry with him that I could almost punch him but I won't, violence has never been an answer for me.

He takes a step towards me so we're now only a few metres apart. No one else is around, most having left about two hours ago when school ended (I had art to do after school). He gives me a look that I can't quite decipher and takes another step forward.

Now we're just a few steps from one another. He takes in a ragged breath, thinking over his words whilst I stand stock still, paralysed by the current situation.

"I wanted to see you, Ari."

I gulp, not sure of what to say.

When I don't speak he chooses to carry on. "Ari, I don't really know what to say. For what it's worth, I'm an absolute idiot. I should have never said what I did to you. I know I'll never be able to take it back but can you forgive me?"

I'm stunned into complete silence. Any words forming in my mouth quickly vanished at what he said.

James feels bad? He possibly wants me back?

James wants me.

I can feel my insides warm at the idea. This is what I was aiming for, winning the love of my life over but something about this whole conversation is unsettling. My gut is telling me that something is wrong.

I'm pretty sure he's being sincere, I can tell from his eyes but it's something within my self that's demanding me not to go back to him.

You can't, he left you a mess. You can't let him just waltz back into your life and take him back without a second thought. That is pathetic.

My subconscious is right. It would be pathetic to welcome him back with open arms.

But this is James.

Suddenly, Wyatt flashes through my mind. Why am I thinking of him at a time like this?

Because he would tell you that you're being an idiot. You can't just forgive James with no consequences. He broke you and you can't give him the power to do it again.

I take in a sharp breath. Yet again my subconscious is correct. I have to stay strong. Maybe I'll forgive James eventually and we can return to the perfect couple we once were, full of nothing but love for one another but I can't run blind into that dream. That's just stupid and I know I'll just end up getting hurt even more.

No matter how much I still love James I can't just run back to him, that would make me weak and pathetic, everything I've been striving not to be.

"James, I'm not sure if that's possible at the moment. You hurt me a lot. I trusted you. I loved you. And you threw it all back in my face like it meant nothing to you," my voice is raw and hoarse, barely coping with the situation.

He looks at me straight in the eye as he steps forward once again so we're mere inches apart. I suck in a deep breath as he brings his hand to my face and caresses my cheek.

"I miss you, princess. Please, give me a second chance," his tone is pleading and laced with raw emotion.

Princess. Something about that word makes me flip. The nickname I used to adore hearing from his lips now seems to burn in my ears.

Princess. He has the audacity to call me that after everything he's done? That bastard.

I don't know what came over me but in that moment I did something I never thought I'd do, I resorted to violence unnecessarily. All I saw was red. I was just so angry. Everything had been

building up inside of me and that word seemed to trigger all of my emotions, causing the damn to break and the water to come rushing out in a raging frenzy. Every single memory we shared flashed before my eyes at rapid speed and with each passing image I grew angrier and angrier.

I clasped his wrist in a vice grip and yanked it from my face before I punched him in the face — hard.

He stumbled backwards at contact and I could see he had a bloody nose and hopefully a forming black eye. I couldn't help but smirk in satisfaction.

"Don't you ever call me princess again," I spit at him before turning on my heel and storming off to the the car park where I see Wyatt waiting for me on his motorcycle.

"What took so long, green eyes?" Wyatt asks, handing me a helmet.

I shrug him off, not wanting to talk about it. "Just get me out of here," I tell him, not even fazed by the fact I'm on a motorcycle again due to my blinding rage.

I'm not sure why I'm so angry but I am and I don't think my anger is going to die down anytime soon.

James, that fucking bastard. Words can't even begin to describe how enraged I am at him for suddenly claiming he wants me back when he's been snogging Chloe for weeks. Not to mention he shattered my heart into a million pieces without a decent explanation; just that I'm 'too boring'.

I'll show him who's 'too boring'.

James, you better watch out because princess is coming for you.

## Chapter 33

We just drove around wordlessly for a while, the hum of Wyatt's motorcycle engine the only sound to be heard.

He knew something happened that I didn't want to talk about just yet and he respected that which I couldn't be more grateful for; he always knew when not to push for answers.

What seemed like seconds later it was quarter to eight so Wyatt started driving in the direction of the track but not before asking me if I still wanted to go.

Of course I had said yes, I needed something to distract me. I needed to be somewhere where I could let off some steam and the track sounded like the perfect place.

Before long we arrive but as I'm about to hop off the vehicle Wyatt stops me by grabbing onto my arms, which were encircling his waist, gently.

He starts speaking to me in a low whisper. It's hard to decipher what he's saying because we're both wearing helmets but I just about manage it. "Green eyes, listen closely. This place is dangerous and full of dangerous people. I want you to stay close to me or Eli at all times. He'll be here soon but until then please don't leave my side. I don't want anything to happen to you."

His words send warmth through my entire body, seeming to slightly put out the raging fire with me but, unfortunately, it's nowhere near enough to even begin to ebb my anger.

I nod and he lets go of my arms so I can now get off the motorcycle. I do so, swinging my right leg over and standing up. Wyatt does this at the same time as me but takes off his helmet before me. Everyone turns to him as he does so, loud whispers carrying through the air. He must be quite a big shot here too, no different from normal.

I, too, take my helmet off and shake my hair out once it's off to help ensure I don't have helmet hair. The volume and magnitude of the whispers increase once I've done this, most of the attention now on me.

However, I can't find it within me to care, the anger I hold towards James forcing all my other emotions to one side. All I can think about is how much I just want to scream and punch something which involuntarily sends a shiver down my spine because it's so unlike myself, I've always been rather reserved and, obviously, until today violence has never been something I voluntarily partook in.

Wyatt moves towards me and puts a protective arm around my waist before he starts guiding us in, what I assume to be, the direction of the track.

Within moments of us walking a man calls out Wyatt's name and moves over to where we are. They do this weird handshake thing and begin to fall into conversation.

The man is very big, maybe 6 foot 7, and beefy. His neck looks to be the size of five of mine combined and his hands seem to be five times the size of mine as well. He has a scar running down the side of his neck and several tribal tattoos dotted across his exposed forearms. He has a buzz cut of dark hair and unruly stubble on his face and from my estimate is in his late twenties to early thirties.

"Green eyes," Wyatt says, drawing my attention from the man. "This is T, he's the main man around here. He runs the place and deals with all the bets and things."

T has to bend his neck down a fair amount to look at me but when he does he sends me a small smile which I return along with a nod. "I'm Ari, nice to meet you," I say to him, surprising myself because I wouldn't normally be one to initiate conversation.

"Nice to meet you too," he says in a low voice.

"Finally land yourself a girlfriend, Wyatt?" T teases, now focusing back on Wyatt.

I can feel myself heat up a bit at the insinuation but instead of becoming a blundering mess like I normally would I decided to take charge of the situation. I don't know what's come over me but I think I like it.

I scoff. "He wishes," I say, making Wyatt's eyes widen in surprise.

"Feisty one I see," T chuckles. "I'll leave you both to it. Oh and Wyatt good luck on your race later, you're the fan favourite as always." Before Wyatt even has the chance to comment, T walks away and has disappeared into the crowds of people.

We start walking again but before long we're stopped but this time by a girl. She's a tall, blonde girl with a horribly orange fake tan that gives her a striking resemblance to an orangutan. She's definitely a pretty girl but the way she carries herself makes her seem cheap and easy which is a real shame. She's wearing too much makeup and almost showing enough skin to be in a porno, I think it's probably because she's quite insecure and is trying to cover it up the best way she knows how.

Looking at her outfit as well as most of the girls here, I can see that I do, in deed, fit in. Although her outfit is much more on the slutty side than others they all have the same general vibe to them so at least I don't stick out here.

"Hey Wyatt," the girl giggles in an annoyingly high pitch voice. "Good luck for today, I know you'll do great," she says, now stroking his left bicep, pushing her average sized chest into him, still having not even acknowledged my presence, bitch. I've never been one to judge so quickly but I

already don't like this girl. Even though she probably has some deep rooted insecurities it doesn't give her, or anyone for that matter, the right to act rudely.

He clears his throat uncomfortably. "Yeah, um thanks," he says, removing the girl from himself with difficulty.

"I mean I know you'll do great anyway but I thought I'd just share a bit of my luck with you," she says with a wink. "Of course, if you ever want to experience some of my luck firsthand I'd be more than willing to oblige." She twirls a strand of her hair as she tries to look at him in a sexy manner but it just comes across as needy and desperate to be honest.

She now has her hands on his chest and Wyatt looks extremely uncomfortable. He sends me a pleading look and I let out a sigh. Normally, I'd be much too scared to approach this situation but with my new found anger fuelling my every move I have the confidence and courage to do what I do next.

I clear my throat rather loudly but the girl takes no notice. Plan B it is then. "Excuse me, could you get your hands off my boyfriend, you're making him uncomfortable."

Wyatt looks stunned by what I've said and I am as well but he quickly covers it up with a smug smirk. I don't know why I said that but it seemed to get blondies attention.

"Boyfriend," she snarls, moving away from Wyatt, much to his relief, and stalking over to me. She gives me a once over, a look of disgust on her face. "Isn't he a little out of your league?"

Wyatt is about to step in but I motion with my hand for him not to. I have to do this myself otherwise I'll never become the reckless, fearless and careless girl I want to be.

I let out a scoff, eyeing her entire appearance with a similar look of distaste on my face. "I think you've got that a bit twisted. He's out of your league, not mine. I mean, nobody would want to date an orangutan, that would be an act of bestiality."

Her face goes bright red. "You bitch!" She screeches before trying to slap me. I manage to dodge in time thanks to my endless hours of training with my dad but I'm pissed. My expression turns murderous and even blonde looks frightened.

She starts to take a hesitant step backwards but before she can I grab onto her right wrist and clamp my fingers around it in a vice grip which is sure to leave bruises. She looks slightly scared but tries, unconvincingly, to cover this up with a confident smirk.

I yank her closer to me and take ahold of her other wrist as well. She gulps and her confident facade begins to fade away. I lean towards her and when my mouth is by her ear whisper something so softly yet harshly that it surprises even myself. "Listen hear you bitch. Don't ever try that again. I

think it's clear who's stronger so I'd be careful who I pick fights with if I were you because next time you might end up with more than a few bruises."

I release my hold on her wrists and she immediately begins to start nursing them. Before she even has time to think, I draw my fist back and punch her in the face, hard, not enough to break bone but definitely hard enough to leave a good few bruises; that should teach this bitch not to mess with me.

She lets out a scream as she stumbles back, her hands shooting to her face in order to prevent further damage.

"That was just a warning blonde. I'd watch my back if I were you," I call over my shoulder as I walk towards Wyatt whose expression holds a mixture of surprise, shock, pride and something else I can't decipher.

"Didn't know you had it in you, green eyes," Wyatt says as he puts his arm around my waist and we continue walking.

I smirk at him. "Wyatt, this is just the beginning."

## Chapter 34

We made it the rest of the way with only a few minor disturbances which I was grateful for, another blondie was not something I needed right now. Although, she did help me let out some pent up aggression so maybe a few more of them would be welcome.

Just as we arrive at the actual track two cars race past us at incredible speed. Unfortunately, I don't know what makes they are because I don't know much about cars — motorcycles are much more my thing — but I do know that they're expensive models, anyone with eyes would know that.

After a few more tricky manoeuvres the sleek black car passes the finish line almost nine seconds before the red one — for racing that's actually quite a lot.

I start to make my way over to the finish line, tugging Wyatt by my side, eager to see who the person in the black car was. He merely sighs as I force him to follow me with a vice grip on his arm.

The racer steps out of the car but I can't see their face because of the black helmet they're wearing. It's definitely a guy, I can tell from the build; I can also see some strands of blonde hair poking out of their helmet.

As I get closer to the guy I keep thinking that he looks familiar but I can't place him.

"Hey," I start, grabbing the guys attention from one of the people he was talking to. "That was really cool. Where did you learn to race like that?"

He faces me and I can see him smirk slightly at my question. Great, he's one of those cocky bastards.

He takes his helmet off and shakes out his hair. I immediately recognise the person and as I look into his eyes and I can see amusement dancing in them.

Eli?!

"Eli — I — um — what!?" I stutter out, completely shocked. I remember him saying he was a good racer but I never would have imagined this.

"Cat got your tongue, sweet cheeks?"

I quickly regain my composure, refusing to let my cheeks flush in embarrassment. I've managed to stay confident and careless all day, I'm not about to ruin that.

I shrug at him. "Nah. I just never thought you of all people would be able to race like that," I tell him, enjoying the fact that I managed to come up with a backhanded compliment.

It takes him a few moments before he registers the true meaning of my words. "Hey, what's that supposed to mean, 'me of all people'?"

I let out a light chuckle. "I'm only joking, Eli. That was actually really impressive," I tell him honestly.

He lets out a small laugh as well, scratching the back of his neck. "That's, Ari. Wait until you see him race," he says, motioning to Wyatt with a grin on his face.

Wyatt grins in response but it's only a moment before he quickly turns it into a smirk.

When all three of us are about to go sit down so we can watch the next race, the guy from earlier, T, comes up to us, a clipboard in his hand. He looks a bit more serious than he did earlier, he must be in work mode now. "Wyatt you're up in about fifteen minutes, better start getting ready," he says, nodding to all three of us in recognition and then walking away rather quickly.

"Well that's my cue. Green eyes, please stick with Eli, don't wander off anywhere alone. And Eli make sure you look after her. She is your number one priority, alright?" His demeanour turned serious whilst he was talking so I knew I should probably listen. Wyatt's usually quite laid back so when he's not I know it's important.

Eli nods, his expression matching Wyatt's. "Sure thing, don't stress. Just win your race."

Wyatt nods and turns on his heel about to walk away but I stop him by grabbing onto his wrist. He looks over his shoulder and straight into my eyes, the intensity of his blue ones almost too much to bare. "Good luck," I say to him with a smile.

He grins in return and gives me a quick peck on the cheek before disappearing into the crowds of people.

Before I even have a chance to process what just happened Eli is tugging me to where we were originally going to watch the next race, which now is Wyatt's.

Once we're sitting my hand subconsciously goes to where Wyatt's lips lingered for less than a second. Why he did that is beyond me but for some reason I didn't mind it. In fact, I kind of liked it.

Stupid.

What am I saying? Anyway, it's probably best if I don't look too far into this. It was most likely just a spur of the moment gesture and even if it was meant to be something more that's not something I want to deal with right now, I've got enough on my plate as it is.

I've decided for my own good not to overthink things like I normally do. Right now I should just focus on my goals and what I've planned to do. The only problem is I'm not sure what that is anymore.

Do I want to win James back? Of course I do but after what he just did I can't help but hold this burning anger towards him. I love him but I feel like something within me is trying to hold me back from pursuing him.

He hurt you once he'll do it again.

Shit, I'm overthinking again. I think for now it might be best to focus on my deal with Wyatt and see where I want to go from there.

I will be reckless, fearless and careless and nothing will stand in my way. That is a promise.

With a new found purpose and determination I lift my head up from its lowered position and turn to face Eli who was giving me a quizzical look. I pretend I don't notice it and instead ask him when Wyatt's race starts and he tells me to look at the track.

I do, and I can see Wyatt getting on his bike, meaning his race is about to commence.

He's wearing his signature leather jacket and a black racer helmet. He revs his engine and I can hear the machine roar to life. Part of me yearns to jump for the vehicle and drive it myself — it's been so long — but the more reasonable part of my brain forces me to refrain. I can't go on that thing more than necessary. I've already broken my promise but I can't completely abandon it even if that means giving up something I love.

I sigh in longing as I watch Wyatt and his competition zoom off from the starting line. They both move at lightening speed but it's clear to see who the better racer is. Wyatt's moves are seamless, each turn precise and calculated, his body in a low, streamlined position.

Everyone watches the race intently, their eyes not wandering for even a second. It appears this must have been a heavily anticipated match. The person Wyatt is racing isn't far behind, in fact they're almost neck and neck with each other, Wyatt just a few inches ahead.

It's clear this person is good but they just don't seem to have that racing edge that Wyatt has. Unfortunately for them, that's not something that can be learned or taught, either you have it or you don't and I can tell it will forever be their downfall. No matter how much they love racing you can tell something is holding them back. You have to become one with your bike. You have to believe in it as much as you do in yourself. It becomes a part of you, an extension of your very being.

Fear is your enemy on a bike and even the slightest hint of it can throw you completely off balance. Until that person can realise and overcome this they'll never be a true racer.

Sadly, this is my problem as well. Ever since it happened I've always had a small fear myself and unless I can get over that I'll never be the same on a bike or in life in general. Although I'm young, riding has been a part of my life since I was a child and it crushed me to my core when it was 'taken' from me so to speak. Part of my promise was that I could never ride a bike again until I got over what happened and the worst part is I don't think I ever will.

At least I can enjoy racing through other people I guess. It's not the same but at least it's not completely gone from my life.

The crowd is shouting in anticipation, all at the edge of their seats. Wyatt flies by us, completing his second of three laps. He is winning but only just but for some reason I can't see even a trace of worry in his posture. He seems to be completely at ease, confident he'll win.

Both of them are nearing the end of the final lap but by this point his competition has caught up and they're now racing side by side, not a millimetre between the two.

My left hand grips onto Eli's arm unintentionally. He looks at me and sends me a relaxed smile. "Chill, he'll win, just watch," he tells me, his attention now back on Wyatt.

I watch with baited breath as Wyatt turns the last corner, the sharpest turn in the whole track. He leans so low his elbow grazes the gravel but the momentum keeps him sturdy as he passes the tight corner with ease. His tricky manoeuvre gives him the advantage of a slight speed boost and he's now in front.

His opponent is hot on his heels but they know it's over. Within moments the race is over and Wyatt has won.

Most of the crowd cheers in joy, myself and Eli included.

I can feel my throat beginning to go hoarse with the amount of cheering I've done but I don't care because after seeing that race I can feel that I'm one step closer to finally riding again.

## Chapter 35

Myself and Eli head towards Wyatt and I can feel the grin on my face. I had no idea he was such a good racer. Everyone said he was amazing but damn his skills are on a whole new level.

Maybe one day I'll ask him to help me. One day.

By the time I reach him there are several people surrounding him, all gushing over his racing abilities and offering congratulations.

He wears his signature smirk as he thanks them but when he notices Eli and I he brushes them out of the way and walks over to us.

Him and Eli high five and exchange a few words before he turns to me and Eli disappears somewhere.

"That was actually pretty impressive," I tell him, not letting on how awesome I actually found that as to not inflate his already massive ego.

He quirks an eyebrow at me. "Only 'pretty impressive'? I'm sure it was a lot better than that."

I scoff at him. "You wish."

He rolls his eyes at me in a playful manner. "Do I at least get a congratulations hug?" Wyatt asks with a fake pout that makes me want to laugh.

I refrain but do give him a hug. His arms are large and strong and they envelop my tiny frame with ease. After a few seconds I know I'm supposed to let go but I don't want to; the whole situation is just so comforting and inviting. I feel protected and a warmth was being to grow inside of me.

I do, unfortunately, let go at the same time Wyatt does but it wasn't without hesitation.

Stupid.

Focus Ari.

I shake my head to clear my thoughts, refusing to let them stray any further off path. "I need to know where you learned to race like that," I say.

He smirks. "Now that, green eyes, is a secret."

~\*~\*~

We hung around for a couple more hours before deciding it was time to go. However, we couldn't find Eli anywhere and he was supposed to be giving us a lift home because T had taken Wyatt's motorcycle in for servicing.

After about ten minutes of searching I could tell Wyatt just wanted to hijack Eli's car — I bet he knows how to do that — and leave him stranded and go home himself. He didn't though which made me smile a little on the inside, he must care for Eli a lot more than he lets on.

"I swear to god if he's disappeared because he's hooking up with someone..." Wyatt trails off, irritation laced in his tone.

I stifle a laugh at his clear aggravation, causing Wyatt to send me an unamused eye-roll which just makes me laugh harder.

If I'm honest I'm in no rush to go home. I'm enjoying the thrill of being at the track and all the danger that comes with it. You get this sort of rush from doing something you're not supposed to and I'm living for it. This sudden spell that has taken over my mind and body is exhilarating; I hope it doesn't end because I haven't felt this way in a while.

After a few more minutes of useless searching, Wyatt gets a text. As he reads it I can see his face contort into one of annoyance and he then groans. "It's Eli," he tells me. "He says he's going to need another half hour or so. So I guess that means we're stuck here."

"Do you know what is taking him so long?"

He sends me a knowing look and the lightbulb goes off in my mind. He's with a girl just like Wyatt said would happen, guess I shouldn't have expected any less from him.

We decide to just go on a walk because we haven't really got anything better to do and I do want to see the rest of the track. I guess you could say Wyatt is acting as my unpaid tour guide.

About five minutes into our walk I hear someone call out my name and the voice sounds vaguely familiar so, naturally, I turn around but I'm shocked to see none other than River, the guy I met not too long ago at that ice cream shop.

He walks up to us with confidence, a smirk on his face — in that way I suppose he's similar to Wyatt. "Hey Aurora," he beams at me. "Wyatt," his voice is a bit more strained now but at least he's being polite.

"River," Wyatt returns in a hostile manner.

"Hey River," I grin, trying to diffuse the tension between the pair but to no avail.

"Wyatt would you mind if I spoke to Aurora alone for a few minutes? It won't take long."

Wyatt noticeably tenses beside me and puts a protective arm over my shoulder. "I would mind," he grits out.

River lets out an exasperated sigh. "I get that you don't like me but you act like I'm going to hurt the girl which we both know won't happen."

Wyatt scoffs. "Not physically but who knows what kind of convoluted ideas you'll try and put in her mind," he spits, venom lacing each syllable.

"For fucks sake Wyatt I just want to talk to her. You don't own Aurora so stop with the tight leash."

Wyatt was about to step forward and lunge for River but luckily I managed to grab him in time and stop his advance.

"Calm down," I mutter to him softly, my hand holding his tightly. "It'll only be a few minutes. I'll be fine, I promise."

Wyatt is about to argue but I send him a look that tells him not to bother and that I want to talk to River so reluctantly he sighs. "Fine, I'll be over there," he whispers to me and walks off after giving my hand a quick tight squeeze.

I let out a sigh. I don't understand why Wyatt flipped so quickly. I get that him and River don't get along and I know that I don't know the full backstory but River managed to keep the conversation civil. I wish Wyatt did the same.

"What's up?" I ask him.

"Well you never called me about that date so I was wondering if you still wanted to go on one."

Shit. I forgot about that.

"Um... I don't know River. You seem like a nice guy but Wyatt really doesn't like you and there must be a reason for that." I know I'm being blunt but it's always better to be honest.

I know Wyatt has a reason for disliking River and if he feels this strongly about me staying away from him maybe I should listen.

He looks at me for a moment before scratching the back of his neck and sighing. "Yes, Wyatt and myself don't get along but that's between me and him. Is it really fair of you to judge me based on other people's opinions when you haven't gotten to know me yourself?"

I go to to retort but I can't think of what to say. In a way he's right but at the same time I trust Wyatt and his opinion. Friends give you advice for a reason and I know Wyatt is only saying what

he is because he cares for me. Or maybe it could also be his way of getting back at River? No, I shouldn't think lowly of Wyatt and his reasons but River seems so nice.

Argh. I don't know. Don't think too hard about this, Ari.

"All I'm asking for is one date. If you don't want to go out again after that I understand but I think you should at least give us a chance. You never know what could happen."

When I don't say anything he lets out one final sigh. "Okay if you don't want to that's fine but I like you Aurora, there's this fire about you that I can't explain. And I do love a bit of a bad girl — you definitely seem like the type, especially after punching that blonde girl earlier. That was badass."

"Anyway, Wyatt's giving me a death glare so I'll leave you two alone but at least think about it. You've got my number so call me. I know we'd have a lot of fun together," he says with a wink before walking away with just as much confidence as he came with.

I mean he is a good looking guy and he seems really nice so maybe I should give it a go. Maybe he's exactly who I need to get over James with and maybe he's something even more — who knows.

I'm not going to think about this right now. I promised myself I wouldn't overthink things so I'll see how I feel later.

I walk over to Wyatt just as he gets a message. "It's Eli," he tells me as I make the last step to where he stands. "The git is finally ready to go home. He said to meet him by his car."

As we're walking things don't feel like they normally do. There's a tense silence between us, not our usual comfortable one. It's obvious why and I know that if I tell Wyatt what River said that he'll get even more mad. I should tell him though, he'll find out one way or another anyway.

When we make it to Eli the idiot has a stupid smirk on his face and is wearing his t-shirt inside out.

"Had fun?" I ask sarcastically as we near him.

He blows a wisp of blonde hair from his eyes and sends me a knowing look. "Y' know it."

"You might want to wash your trousers mate. There's a few stains on them," Wyatt says with a look of annoyance and disgust.

Eli just rolls his eyes. "And here I thought I'd be greeted with open arms and a congratulations," he mutters sarcastically.

"Not when you keep us waiting for so long that we end up bumping into a shit bag," he says in distaste which makes me roll my eyes as I get into the car.

Eli frowns as he and Wyatt both get in the car too. "Wait did y' step in dog shit or something?"

Wyatt and I both send him incredulous looks. "It's a good thing you're good looking," I mutter.

"Wow, I expect that from Wyatt but not you, Ari, I thought we were friends," Eli whines in mock hurt. "But y' know what, I'm taking that as a compliment," he says with a satisfied smile. Idiot.

I scoff. "Well Einstein, we bumped into River."

It looks like a lightbulb goes off in his mind. "Shit. Wyatt y' didn't kill him did you? I mean I guess I'll help you hide the body, it's what best friends are for. But you're the one who's going to have to do all the dirty work cause I'm not getting my fingerprints on everything. I guess operation #265 is ago. We'll need bin liners, ha—"

"Eli," Wyatt cuts him off. And he says I talk too much. "Relax I didn't kill him. Just drive you moron."

Eli lets out a sigh of relief as he starts the engine and there's a ghost of a smile on Wyatt's face despite that fact that he's clearly still mad.

"So what did he want?" Eli asks as we leave the track.

Wyatt tenses up but keeps his cool as he replies. "You have to ask green eyes about that one."

I gulp but start to talk nonetheless.

I mean there's nothing wrong with what happened but then again there's a small chance Wyatt might actually kill River and now I know Eli would help hide the body. Let's hope it doesn't come to that.

Calm down. I'm obviously being over dramatic.

## Chapter 36

I'll just be blunt and straight to the point, that's the best way to go about this. "Um... he just wanted to know if I was still up for going on a date with him."

After I finished speaking the car went deathly silent, you'd even hear a pin drop from a mile away. Eli regained his composure quickly though so luckily the overbearing silence didn't last too long.

"Wait still? He's asked you out before?" Eli asks in a puzzled voice.

"Yeah, when I was at an ice cream parlour with Wyatt and Brooke. Didn't you know? I assumed Wyatt would've told you about bumping into him."

"Yeah he did," Eli tells me. "But not about the date part. Mr Shitty Explanation over here must've left that part out," he finishes, glaring at Wyatt from the corner of his eye when the traffic light turns red.

Wyatt lets out an annoyed grunt. "I just didn't think it was very important," he mumbles.

"Not important!" Eli exclaims, jerking the car ever so slightly due to his outburst. "It's not important that the girl you so clearly have a fucking crush on got asked out by the guy you probably hate the most in the world? No wonder you were so pissed off when you were explaining it to me, well more so than usual when you talk about River."

I don't really get a chance to process Eli's words before Wyatt grits out his retort. "Yes it wasn't important to the fucking story. Why would you give a shit about her dating life? She's one of the few girls who you've realised won't fuck you so you have no reason to care!"

I can see Eli's hands twitching as he holds the steering wheel — not good. "Not cool. You know not everything is about sex to me, right? Just because I have a sex life doesn't mean that that's all I think about. Yes, I might act like a fuck boy but that doesn't mean that all I want to do is shag people. Ari is my friend and so are you. Believe it or not, somewhere in this fuck boy heart I care and I'm sorry for actually giving a damn about my best friend."

Wow. I've never seen Eli like that. Usually he's so carefree and chilled out. He doesn't normally mind if people joke about him being a man whore so what's different this time? Wyatt must've hit a nerve but how?

Eli takes a few calming breaths, keeping his eyes on the road, his face becoming impassive as he does so.

Wyatt's jaw clenches. "You know I don't mean it like that," he sighs in slight defeat but his anger is still clear as day. "But it wasn't fucking important, alright? Can we leave it at that?"

Eli sends him a strained look. "Mate, we both know you're lying to yourself as well as me and Ari but I'll let it drop for now. It's best not to talk about this whilst I'm driving, none of us want an accident."

Wyatt nods and I let out a sigh of relief. Thank fucking heavens.

After a few more minutes of uncomfortable silence, Eli decides to speak again. "So, Ari, are y' going on that date with River?" Eli asks casually, all traces of his previous argument seemingly lost from his tone.

I have to think about that. Wyatt doesn't want me to and I value his opinion but he's never told me the reason for his grudge with River and the boy has been nothing but sweet to me so I feel like I have to give him a chance. Urgh, I'm just not sure so that's exactly what I tell Eli with a shrug.

Wyatt is quick to dart his head to me. "What do you mean you're not sure? I've told you that guy is bad news. You need to stay away from him."

"Why?" I challenge. "Tell me what's so bad about him." There's a daring glint in my eye and I'm not going to back down. No one backs Aurora Jasmine Kelly into a corner.

Wyatt's left eye twitches and I can tell he's trying very hard not to shout. "Now is not the time. I don't want to talk about it," he grits out, his words almost impossible to hear due to the sheer force he's clamping his teeth together with — not a good look if I'm honest.

"Well if you won't tell me why I shouldn't go out with him then why should I listen? You can't just order me around without so much as an explanation. That's stupid and you know it," I say, my voice clear and composed despite how irritated I'm starting to feel.

"You don't get it."

"Well duh, you won't explain anything to me. Until you do that we'll never be on the same page." It takes everything in me not to scream this and instead say it with only a slight raise of voice.

"I can't talk about this," his voice cracks a little as he practically screams the words.

I almost feel a bit bad because there's obviously a reason he's not telling me. Maybe he's not ready because it's too personal just like I've not really told him about dad.

But the key word is almost. As I'm so irritated I push my conscience aside and instead channel all my rage at him. "Then boo-fucking-hoo," I spit out.

I can see Wyatt falter for a split second before pure anger takes over his features. "Eli, stop the car," he says in a deadly calm voice.

"Wyatt, that's not a good idea I'm on a motorway for Christ's sake," he tries to reason but Wyatt isn't taking any of it.

"Pull over and stop the fucking car."

Eli sighs but complies by pulling over into the hard shoulder but before he can even cut the engine, Wyatt rips his door open, storms out of the car and jumps over the small metal pole that is separating the road from a vast field.

I sigh in annoyance as Eli takes out a cigarette from his pocket.

"Really, in the car?" I complain, making a face of disgust.

He just shrugs. "I'm stressed and we're probably going to be here a while so we might as well get comfortable," he says, taking a drag from his cigarette and putting his feet up onto the dashboard.

"Fuck this," I mutter, getting out of the car and going the way Wyatt went, leaving Eli and his nasty cigarette behind.

I take my time finding Wyatt, enjoying the peaceful quite of the night, the only sound to be heard are the cars which are so far from where I currently stand. As I walk I breathe in the clean air but after about fifteen minutes or so the air gains this strange, uncomfortable quality to it.

I open my eyes and see Wyatt sitting in the grass with a cigarette between his fingers — not him too.

"Since when do you smoke?" I ask as I approach him.

"I don't," he tells me. "Well I normally don't, only when I'm very stressed or annoyed, it helps calm me down."

I send him a puzzled look. "Then where did you get it?"

He sends me a knowing look as he takes another drag. "Swiped it from Eli before I got out the car," he says, his voice distant as he looks up into the starry sky.

Although I hate smoking I know he won't stop if I ask him, not when he's like this, so I don't bother and ignore my discomfort. I'm almost positive that if I tell him I don't like it he'll do it more just to piss me off.

I sigh as I take a seat next to him on the ground. Don't get me wrong, I'm still angry but the tranquil night sky is calming me a bit. "Wyatt please tell me why I should stay away from River," I say, curiosity getting the best of me.

He turns his face towards me, his eyes hard. "Green eyes, I don't want to talk about it," he says in a curt voice.

There's no point pushing anymore, I should respect his privacy. I mean, he's always respected mine. "Fine," I give in. "But I want to go on a date with River, he seems sweet."

"I've told you before, not everyone is who they seem to be," he tells me his jaw tightening.

"Yep, that makes perfect sense, thanks for the clarification," I state dryly.

He rolls his eyes, getting up off the floor and dusting off his jeans. "This conversation never happened and it's over, green eyes, clear? Let's get back to Eli," he says, completely dismissing me as he starts to walk away.

No he fucking didn't.

"You know you're a right bastard, Wyatt. Getting all angry then pretending it never happened and completely dismissing the topic at hand. At least when I get mad I own it and don't walk away like a coward," I taunt, my voice sharp and deadly calm.

He stops dead in his tracks, his eyes meeting mine with a challenging look. "Coward?" Wyatt almost laughs.

"Yep, you're a coward. It's fine if you don't want to talk about something but pretending the topic doesn't exist is a completely different matter. What's even worse is you brushing me off to hide from your problems. Pathetic." There's such venom to my words that I almost shudder at them.

Wyatt's expression changes from vague amusement to utter outrage in a matter of seconds. "I'm pathetic? Says the girl who's still pining over her ex-boyfriend and is willing to completely change herself in a vain attempt to win him back. That's pathetic."

His words hit too close to home and in a raging frenzy I move to slap him but before my hand can make contact he catches it millimetres from his face. "Too slow, maybe next time," he says in his most patronising voice before puffing a ring of smoke in my face.

I yank my hand from his grip and storm away from him in anger back to Eli's car. I can feel my whole body trembling but I ignore it as best as I can, taking calming breaths with each stride.

Of course, my welcomed solitude is short lived as Wyatt has to head back that way as well. He's walking a few metres behind me and I never thought I'd despise his lurking presence as much as I do right now. I wish he hadn't caught my hand, he could do with a red handprint on his cheek.

When Eli sees that we're both in no state for chitchat he silently begins the drive back home. Let's just say it was the most tense and awkward journey I've ever experienced and I've been stuck between a creepy sixty something year old man who wouldn't stop hitting on me and getting

uncomfortably close and touchy and woman who had gone into labour mid flight on a trip back from Paris — that wasn't a fun experience I'll tell you that much.

~\*~\*~

When Eli arrived at my home I mutter a thanks to him before I slip out of the car, quick as lightening, completely ignoring Wyatt.

The bastard has another thing coming. How could he act like that? I mean, I guess I wasn't the best behaved either but this was his fault.

I slam each door behind me with a loud bang as I go up to my room, not even muttering a 'hello' to mum, very out of character for myself.

Once inside my room I flop onto my bed and scream into my pillow for a good twenty minutes. It felt good but didn't do a good job at dissipating my anger — I still felt like punching Wyatt senseless. I shudder at my violent thoughts but the matter quickly leaves my mind when I spy something on my bedside table.

My phone.

I snatch it up quickly and type a single message.

'A date sounds fantastic.'

## Chapter 37

You know what the cherry on the I'm-mad-at-Wyatt-and-am-trying-to-avoid-him sunday is? Camilla releasing the pictures on Monday morning a few hours before school starts.

Mine and Wyatt's faces were on posters and billboards everywhere and it made me want to scream. Don't get me wrong Camilla's new line is stunning — I actually got a couple of the pieces for free which is freaking sick — but I don't think the timing could be any worse.

How am I supposed to avoid Wyatt and not think about him when every single person I meet is bombarding me with questions about him, about us. It's fucking exhausting, I'm already sick of it and first period hasn't even started yet.

Even my close friends were attacking me with questions but luckily they understood that I wasn't in the mood to talk about it so dropped the subject very quickly.

Chase was going on about another one of his hookups at the table and I wrinkled my nose in disgust. At this point, I wasn't sure who was more of a fuck boy: Eli or Chase. Either way, I just didn't understand what they got out of sleeping with so many people, it was just gross if you asked me but at the end of the day it's up to them what they do with their lives. It's not fair of me to judge.

I decided to talk to Mason instead as he wasn't weighing in on Chase's story. He normally sits with Ava — since this year of school anyway — but she had a last minute cheer practice at lunch because of the rugby match that was happening on Friday. Max is playing in that match, that's why he's not here either, his coach scheduled a practice for the team every lunch and after school for the week leading up to the game — a bit excessive if you ask me.

Max is fine with it though. He's hoping to do something sports related at university but his parents aren't so keen on the idea, they don't think it's a stable career choice and what him to pick something more academic focused. But that's just not Max, he's always excelled more in sports than anything else, being the star player of every sports team he's on, especially rugby and football.

"So Mase," I start as I grab a fork full of pasta. "How are you and that mystery girl doing?"

I can see a faint blush creep onto his cheeks but he hides it quickly. "Good," he mumbles looking anywhere but at me.

"Mason, what's the problem? Did it not work out?" I ask in concern. It would break my heart for it not to work out for him because Mason has never had a girlfriend before, he's too shy and always

doubts himself. He could easily get a girl if he wanted too — I mean look at him, the guy is hot — but he's never bothered.

"I don't know," he sighs. "We're still seeing each other, I guess, but I don't think she's as into the relationship as I am. And I'm tired of keeping it a secret, it's draining the life out of me and I don't think I can do it anymore," he tells me, sadness clear in his eyes.

"Mase," I say softly. "Look you have to tell her this. Tell her exactly what you told me and see what she says. If she still doesn't want to go public then end it because no relationship is worth the mental exhaustion it's putting you through. You'll end up resenting her and I know you don't want that."

He looks at me almost as if he's calculating me and everything I said. After a few moments, he looks away in defeat. "You're right," he murmurs. "I know you are but it's hard. I like her, Ari, I like her a lot."

I give him a comforting side hug which he returns.

I hope they can work it out. For both their sakes, especially Masons. If this goes wrong it could crush him.

~\*~\*~

The rest of the day went by in a blur. I don't understand how people can be so nosey. It's none of their damn business about what's going on between me and Wyatt so why can't they just leave it at that? I mean all that's happened is that I've modelled for one of the most sought-after brands with the most popular boy in school and now my face is all over the country on billboards. Nothing big.

Either way, let's just say I'm not in the best mood when I get home and immediately proceed to flop onto my bed in exhaustion. Dealing with people can be hard work.

I left my phone at home this morning after noticing that Camilla released the photos because I didn't want to deal with anyone but now that I'm spying it laying there on my dresser I have to pick it up.

My socials have blown up and I've gained quite a few followers but that's not what draws my attention. River texted me.

Great. How about 7pm Friday at the ice cream parlour where we met?

I can feel the blush on my cheeks as I read his message. I'm actually going on a date with someone. I type back a quick response saying that that's fine before I put my phone to the side, leaving all means of human contact behind for the next few hours. Right now I just need to alone time if I'm honest.

But all I can think about as I'm sitting on my bed reading my new book is Wyatt, River and James.

Will Wyatt hate me for going out with River?

Does River actually like me?

What about James? Am I ready to move on?

Thoughts swirl around in my mind in a raging frenzy, leaving me not a single peaceful moment.

Boys — they're all so annoying. Why do they have to invade my mind so often? Can't I just have a day to myself without one of them popping into my head at random? Stupid boys.

~\*~\*~

Each day of the week goes by painfully slowly. Hearing about Wyatt and seeing him but not talking to him is weird and uncomfortable in a way, it just leaves this unfulfilled feeling within me.

The pointless chatter people have directed towards me in an attempt to now get to know me better leaves a sour taste in my mouth. They never bothered with me before except for the few hellos when I was with James but now they're all bending over backwards trying to be friendly. Please.

By the time Friday comes around, I couldn't be more glad, I don't think it's ever taken this long to get through a week. But of course, as I'm finally about to leave the dreaded building and make my way home someone has to call my name and stop me.

But this isn't just any person, I'd recognise this voice from a mile away and, right now, I'm glad to hear it. It always fills me with warmth.

"What's got you in such a hurry to leave?" He asks as I turn around to face him.

I shrug, my heeled ankle boots clicking against the floor as I walk closer. I've decided to still keep up the bad girl look, even if I'm mad at Wyatt that doesn't mean I want to give up on the plan and to be honest I kind of like the clothes, albeit I don't really ever pick the ones that are too revealing, they make me feel like the new me and help me aspire to be the person I want to become: reckless, fearless and careless.

"Just had a shit week," I tell him.

"You and me both, coach has had us practicing nonstop and he's driving me crazy," he whines like a child, causing a small laugh to escape my lips for the first time this week.

"So are you coming to the game? Your favourite person in the entire world is playing and I know you don't want to miss that."

I sigh. "Sorry, Maxi, but I've already got plans," I tell him.

He grumbles as he replies, his arms crossed over his chest. "How many times have I told you not to call me that?"

I send him a mischievous smile. "Not enough, besides I know you secretly love my nicknames."

He lets out a disbelieving scoff. "Sure, Ari, whatever you say," the sarcasm in his voice is impossible to miss but I pretend to anyway just to annoy him like I'm supposed to do.

"Good, I'm glad we're on the same page," I grin.

He just rolls his eyes at me, changing the subject. "So what plans are so important you won't come to see the most amazing person you've ever had the pleasure of meeting kick arse tonight?"

Oh right, I never told him, I actually haven't told anyone now I come to think of it but I thought I would've told Max, I tell him everything, I'm probably secretly closer to him than Ava. It's probably because he's been so busy this week that I haven't had the chance.

"Oh right, I'm going on a date tonight."

He frowns in confusion. "Wait, since when do you go on dates? I thought you were scrapping the whole idea of romance after what happened."

"I don't know, I thought it would be good for me. I need to move on, Maxi."

He's too concerned to bother correcting me on his name as he pulls me in for a hug. "You're right, it'll probably be good for you. Who's the guy?"

"Just someone I met at an ice cream parlour, his name is River," I say, not mentioning the track. Although I tell Max basically everything there's no need to worry him unnecessarily, especially when he has a match that he needs to be focusing on.

"You sure he's not some creepy weirdo?"

"I'm sure," I laugh.

His face holds uncertainty but it's mixed with something else I can't decipher which is strange because I can always tell what Max is thinking. "Just be safe, Ari. I care about you a lot, you know that. If something were to ha—"

"I'll be fine," I stop him before he can even finish. "I'm a big girl now and can take care of myself. Don't worry about me just focus on winning your match."

He scoffs. "You know I'll win no problem."

"I know," I smile, giving him a quick peck on the cheek for good luck before I turn away and start walking to my car. I know, me driving who would've thought but Ava is busy with the game

tonight; I can't exactly ask Wyatt and everyone else went home ages ago but I stayed behind in the art department.

"And, Ari," Max calls, as I'm by the doors.

I hum in response, not turning around.

"You know I'll always worry."

## Chapter 38

After getting ready for my date I call Jess to ask her for a lift. I don't really want to drive if I can avoid it and I remembered her saying that she was going to a club near there anyway so it, hopefully, wouldn't be a problem.

I did have to tell her about my date which she was slightly shocked about but she agreed nonetheless and at around twenty to seven I heard her car horn from outside and bid farewell to mum and the twins.

"Hey," I say as I slip into her silver Volkswagen and put on my seatbelt.

"Hey to you girl. Ready for your date?" Jess asks, starting her car and pulling out of my driveway.

I'm actually really excited. There's something about River that intrigues me but at the same time I'm nervous to be putting myself out there. It's only been a few months since James and I broke up and I don't think I'm ready to move on.

"As ready as I'll ever be."

~\*~\*~

Within moments of us arriving, Jess had already disappeared from view, claiming that she was late, for what I'm not sure but you never really know with her.

I take calming breaths as I walk into the ice cream parlour, preparing myself for the evening ahead.

It's just a date, Ari, you'll be fine. Don't stress and don't overthink.

Once I step inside, my eyes scan the quaint area, searching for River. It takes mere seconds before I spot him sitting in the corner, his eyes on his phone as he seems to be messaging some.

My heeled thigh high boots make a slight noise as I walk across the tiled floor towards him. He must hear me coming as he slides his phone into his left pocket and greets me as I sit down opposite him.

"Hey Aurora, you look stunning," he compliments smoothly, his eyes having given my body a quick once over before I sat down.

I smile in return, refusing to blush and instead compliment him back. "Thanks, you don't look too bad yourself," I say with a wink to which he smirks.

Our conversation continues in a light and cheerful manner and, surprisingly, there have been no awkward pauses. As the night progresses, it starts to become more flirty and let's just say River has a rather big flirty side but I haven't decided whether or not that's a good thing yet.

"So Aurora," he starts, eyes bright with mischief as he leans across the table to hold my left hand which is resting contently on the wooden surface. "Do you want to play a game of dares?"

"Depends what you had in mind," I tell him, feigning innocence at the request.

The pad of his thumb begins to trace circles on my hand as he looks up into my eyes. "I dare you to kiss me."

My words are momentarily caught in my throat as I take in his words but I recover quickly and smoothly. "So soon? There's no need to rush such things."

I made my reply polite and sweet but in truth it's because I don't think River and I have that spark. I don't know why but it just doesn't feel the way it should so I'm not going to lead him on with a kiss that would mean nothing. I carefully slide my left hand into my lap, causing his hand to fall limp on the table, no longer in contact with my own.

He's definitely an attractive boy and I'm sure any girl would be lucky to have him but I'm not that girl — it just doesn't feel right.

He doesn't seem to take the hint as his other hand finds my knee under the table and rests itself there, stroking my exposed skin every once in a while.

"How can it be rushing things if I think I've found the right girl?"

His words got to me a bit and I almost felt kind of bad for not reciprocating his feelings but then his fingers started to move ever so slightly up my skin and I was jolted out of my trance. Going off what he's doing I'm sure he's done this many times before and I'm surely no different.

Taking a deep breath to calm my thoughts, I look up to meet his eyes. They look so sincere, maybe he is being honest. Either way, this isn't something I want but I need to let him off gently and kindly. "You hardly know me," I reason. "There's no way you could think that."

He lets out a sigh. His molten brown eyes bore into my own as he replies. "Do you believe in fate?"

"I've never really given it much thought," I tell him honestly.

"Well I do and, Aurora, I think there's a reason I met you and want the chance to explore it."

"I'm sorry, River, but I don't think we have that connection. What you're saying seems so lovely but — well — I — I —" I trail off, not sure how to finish my sentence. How can I say anything

without sounding like a complete bitch? He's being lovely and I must come off as a rude, arrogant asshole.

Maybe I should just give it another go. He's so charming and if he feels this strongly I could just be wrong.

He runs his fingers through his hair as he looks at me in confusion and sadness.

Urgh, I really do seem like a bitch.

"So you won't even give us a chance?" River asks in a quiet whisper, making my insides twist in guilt.

Is it wrong of me to not like him back? Surely not but then again...

"I... I..." I stutter, still unable to fathom a reply.

"I get it, Aurora," he sighs in defeat. "You don't want to try something new or step out of your comfort zone and I know this because if I were in your situation I'd give it a go. I wouldn't knock anything until I'd tried it."

"River, it's not like that," I tell him desperately, wanting him to understand.

"It's not like I'm asking you to be my girlfriend or anything. I just want us to hang out a few more times to see if there's something there. It's too early to be shutting us down completely."

He's right. It's wrong of me to be so definitive so early.

"Well, where do you have in mind," I sigh out.

His gorgeous smile returns to his face at my words, making the guilt vanish from my stomach.

"Well, my friend is throwing a party tomorrow night."

"Um, I don't think that's the best idea, River." I'm really not in the mood to get drunk again.

"Oh come on. I thought this might be better because it's a less intimate setting. It's nowhere near as intense as just two people sitting together alone. Parties are fun and relaxing. I think it'll help loosen us both up," he explains.

I look at him hesitantly. "Parties aren't really my thing."

"I'll be there for you every step of the way," he tells me with an earnest look in his eyes which succeeds in giving me minor comfort.

He seems so sure and confident. It'll probably be fine but there's a voice in the back of my head that's telling me that this'll be a bad idea. I want to listen to it but at the same time I want to step

out of my comfort zone and maybe River can help me do that. Maybe he can help me where Wyatt couldn't.

Wyatt. By spending time with River I feel like I'm severing my ties with him and that makes the knots in my stomach tighten in discomfort. But Wyatt can't hold me back. That's not right either.

I care about Wyatt — a lot — but I don't see why I can't spend time with River as well. Until he or River gives me a definitive reason to not to spend time with River I'm going to. He seems so lovely and charming and just maybe he's right. Maybe there is a future for us and maybe it's fate.

I might not feel the connection yet but that can build over time. For now, I think I'm going to go with the flow and just trust him and see where that takes me.

I hope I'm making the right choice but who cares if I'm not. I'm human after all.

But I hope I'm right in trusting River and I hope this doesn't all come and bite me in the arse later.

"Alright, let's do it," I say in my most confident voice. This is the right decision.

He grins at me as he takes my hand in his. "There's my bad girl. I hope you're ready for one wild ride."

I gulp but smile excitedly in return. This is exactly what I need: adventure and fun.

This is the right decision.

## Chapter 39

The next day I woke up at five in the morning thanks to the last of the chirping birds still here despite the nearing winter and since I couldn't get back to sleep I decided it would be best to go for a run as I'm not sure how much longer the weather will allow me to do so.

After getting ready and throwing on a jumper to help lessen the chill of the bitter wind I was out the door, deciding it was best to wait until I get back to have breakfast.

My jog was rather pleasant as I watched the sun rise. I did, however, make sure to avoid the park so I'd have no chance of bumping into Wyatt, I doubt he'd be there but there was still the smallest possibility.

I was going to that party with River tonight and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous. However, I'm not going to let a few nerves stop me from having a good time. I'm hoping that I'll be able to let loose and just enjoy myself so I can be that girl I've been aspiring towards. I feel like River is the right guy to help me change but at the same time a small part of me wishes that it was Wyatt. I shake away those ideas quickly, refusing to let a certain blue-eyed devil penetrate my thoughts yet again.

When I got home I decided to call Max and ask him how his match went. Not surprisingly, he won but I could hear the excitement in his voice as he gave me a play by play of the game, clearly exaggerating parts but nevertheless it was still great to listen to, especially because of the passion in Max's voice. I'm so glad he's doing what he loves and I can only hope that in time his parents come to understand this is what he wants more than anything.

He asked me if I was free to go out tonight (after every win the team and close friends go out to celebrate. They do something different every time so you never know what to expect) but I told him I was busy. He was a bit bummed by this but said that we'd just have to hang out later, no excuses, to which I agreed. I was extremely tempted to tell him about me going out with River tonight but I didn't want him to worry.

Max would no doubt drop everything and stay with me if I asked but I wanted him to enjoy himself. Besides, I need to do this on my own. I need to be independent and follow through with my decisions, regardless of the consequences. So I didn't mention it and instead told him to have fun and tell me all about it later.

Before I knew it, evening came and I was dressed and ready to go to this party with River. At around eight o'clock I heard his car outside and said goodbye to mum (the twins are at a sleepover).

She, for some bizarre reason, loves it when I go out to parties and things, saying that I'm finally acting like a normal teenager whatever that means.

The car ride is pleasant. We chat about trivial things, just getting to know one another but I still don't feel that connection with River and I'm not sure if I ever will and guilt pools in my stomach because of this. I should like River but I don't — maybe it'll come with time.

We park a couple of streets away from the house but I can already hear the music, it's faint but as we near it just gets louder and louder until it's almost deafening.

River sends me a charming smile and clasps my hand in his as we approach the rather large house. "Who's party is this anyway?"

He shrugs nonchalantly. "Just a friend of mine. He always throws the best parties."

We step inside and within seconds I can already tell that this party is in full swing; drunk, horny teenagers spottable everywhere in sight.

The night starts off smoothly. I meet some of River's friends, have a bit of a laugh and only have a small amount to drink — just to give me a bit of a buzz, it's nowhere near enough for me to get drunk.

A little while later River suggests that we play beer pong. My initial response would've been to refuse but thanks to the slight amount of alcohol I've drank calming my mind I agree.

As the game goes on I can feel my sobriety begin to fade but I couldn't find it in me to care. With each drink down my throat, I was having more and more fun, I felt light and carefree.

Whenever I got a ball in I felt giddy with excitement. "Well done baby," River says when I get my third ball in, giving me a lingering kiss on my cheek. I felt the grin on my face as the game continued and River proceeded to give me a light peck every time I got one in. I didn't feel like stopping him so I didn't, I just wanted to have fun.

"Let's dance baby," River whispers into my ear once the game is over.

I send him an excited smile as we make our way to the large crowd of drunk teenagers dancing — actually dry humping seems more accurate.

I start jumping about to the music, River's hands on my waist as he stands behind me, following my lead and doing the same.

The loud atmosphere coupled with limitless alcohol was actually quite enjoyable. I can see why Jess loves coming to these things. Speaking of Jess, I wonder how her and Emma are doing. As far as I'm aware they're still together but Jess never really mentions her so I'm not sure. I remember

asking her about Emma yesterday when we were in the car but she kept changing the subject. There's definitely something fishy going on there but I wonder what.

Detective Ari will find out. Oh, imagine how fun It'd be to be a detective with a cool hat and a magnifying glass. Oh my god, what if I became the next Sherlock Holmes. I could get a funny sidekick and-

I let my mind wonder for a bit longer before coming back to reality.

I hadn't realised but with each song our bodies must've been moving closer together because now my back is flush against River's chest. I just shrugged off the slightly uncomfortable feeling I got and continued to dance without a care, my hair probably a mess by now.

His hands ran down the sides of my body for a while before resting on my exposed thighs. Before long they were moving upwards again, but this time under my dress.

My mind was screaming at me to tell him to stop, that I wasn't comfortable with this level of intimacy so soon.

I didn't say anything for a long while, enjoying the music and the atmosphere around me. It wasn't until he reached my underwear that I finally made a move to stop him, only just now processing the situation I was in and what my mind was telling me.

I step away from him, claiming I was tired of dancing and wanting to go outside. I'm hoping some fresh air will help clear my mind. So we walk to the back door, River's hand on the small of my back. I'm still not sure if I like him but I'm feeling slightly more open to his touch at the moment — hopefully it's because I'm developing feelings and not just the alcohol.

There's a few people outside but not too many; it's nowhere near as crowded as it is indoors. As I was breathing in the fresh air a horrible smell hit my nose. I looked to my right to see River smoking — just great (note the sarcasm).

"You want one babe?" River asks, referring to the cigarette in his hands.

I politely shake my head, knowing it's not the best idea.

You should try it. It could be fun. A voice in the back of my minds says but I ignore it.

"Ah come on, I think you'll love it," he tempts.

Even in my state I know it's a bad idea yet the thought is tempting. I'm not sure what it is but I almost want to try it, my insides are giddy with anticipation.

You should try new things, Ari. What's the harm? The voice tries again, making my resolve begin to fade.

What am I thinking? I can't be thinking straight.

"I don't think I should, River," I tell him, trying to sound confident.

Boring. The voice taunts. Where's your sense of fun?

It takes everything I have in my not-so-sober state to ignore the voice. It's just in my head, what does it know?

"Don't be so boring, Aurora. Live a little."

Son of a b-

Okay, maybe the voice does know what it's talking about. "Okay. Fine," I give in and River grins, handing me a cigarette and a lighter.

## Chapter 40

Smoking was a strange experience. I'm not sure if I enjoyed it but I for some reason I'm almost itching to do it again but I shake off the feeling as I stamp out the cigarette butt with my heel. River hands me a beer as I do so which I gladly accept, needing something to wash away my thoughts.

"You know you look hot as fuck when you smoke," he tells me with a smirk.

I send him an uneasy smile back before gulping down my beer, hoping to ease my nerves.

"Thanks," I say between sips, still feeling slightly on edge but with each drop that goes down my throat I'm more and more comfortable.

River takes a stride towards me, his hand moving to caress my cheek. "So perfect," he whispers so quietly under his breath I almost don't hear it.

I match his stride until my back is pressed against the brick exterior of the house and I can feel my muscles tense.

He's now only inches from me, a kind smile on his face but there's something about it that puts me on edge — what that is, however, I've no idea. Breathe, Ari. Calm down. You're just overthinking.

"You know you look even more gorgeous under the moonlight," River breathes out, his lips millimetres from my own and hands on either side of my body, trapping me in place.

Before I even have time to think of a response his lips are on mine in a gentle kiss. Too shocked to respond, I just stand there, stock still.

When I don't reciprocate the kiss River's lips become more hungry against my own, now being more forceful and dominant. I let out a gasp of surprise at his sudden attitude change and he takes the opportunity to slip his tongue into my mouth.

Part of me wants to push him away and tell him to stop but I don't. Instead, I let him kiss me and hesitantly do the same. Why — I've no idea.

The kiss is aggressive and rough — not something I'm at all used to or like very much. River and I are both panting from lack of breath and his hands move from the wall to the sides of my body. They trail my curves, lingering for much too long but I don't have much time to think about his hands because of his lips — rough and possessive but not in a way I like.

Luckily, he doesn't take it any further as our lips part and he sends me one of his charming smiles. It helps to calm my nerves and ease the tension in my muscles but only slightly. If he had tried to go further a part of me feels like I would've let him and that terrifies me.

I don't know why but I feel like I don't want to say no to him. I shudder at the thought and push it to the back of my mind, focusing on the situation at hand.

"Now that was amazing," he smiles.

I send him a small one back, doing my best to cover up the uncomfortableness I was feeling. "How about we go back inside," I suggest, wanting desperately for the two of us not to be alone for much longer.

After that kiss I'm almost certain I don't like him but I just can't tell him that. He's right, it's wrong of me to shoot him down so early. So maybe I should just go along with this and wait for the feelings to follow — it doesn't sound like a good idea but my gut twists violently at the thought of rejecting him when he's been nothing but lovely and kind to me, always so sincere.

"Sure, Aurora," he says with a grin, grabbing my left hand and interlocking our fingers together.

Once we're back inside River goes to talk to a friend and I hastily make my way to the kitchen, more specifically the alcohol.

I've been overthinking everything tonight and it's pissing me off. I promised myself I wouldn't do that anymore because I need to let loose. River even said I was boring which means I really do need to step up my game. James can't be right, I refuse to let that be true.

So I gulp down the dark liquid, that burns as it runs down my throat, with a satisfied smile.

With my mind now much calmer I waltz over to River and his friend, clasping his hand in my own. He turns and gives me a quick peck on the side of my head before continuing his conversation which I, too, weigh in on occasionally.

When we both decide to leave a few hours later I skip over to River's car but it isn't until he starts the engine that the thought begins to dawn on me. "Wait, you can't drive. You've been drinking," I point out with slight worry in my tone despite my lax state.

He idly shrugs as we move onto the road. "Relax babe. We're young and stupid. Let's just have some fun," he grins.

I would protest but I can't find it within me to care. Recently all these dumb and crazy things have been sounding so exciting and I need to be a part of them. So, enjoying the thrill I get from the possible danger, I show River a wide smirk and tell him to go faster.

We reach my home in no time and I lean in to give River a kiss before I leave. A few minutes later when I'm about to get out he stops me by latching onto my wrist. "I'll meet you here at five o'clock on Wednesday. Be ready, I've got something amazing planned."

I send him a nod and get out the car, a blissful day at its end. I certainly wouldn't have expected to enjoy myself but once I let go and just went along with it all I had a great time, maybe too good a time.

~\*~\*~

Wednesday came rather quickly. I had immersed myself in my work for the past couple days, catching up on everything I'd missed so I hadn't even realised that I'd be going out with River tonight until I received a text at lunchtime.

'Can't wait to see you, babe.'

By the time it reached five I was all ready to go, dressed in my now usual attire which consisted of black, leather and studs.

River looked dashing handsome as I got into his car, wearing a leather jacket and a devilish grin.

After a few minutes of chitchat, I ask the question that's been on my mind since lunch. "So where are we go exactly?"

Annoyingly, I didn't get a direct reply. "You'll see."

With a roll of my eyes, I begrudgingly accept the fact that I'm not going to get anything more out of him.

About twenty minutes later we're parked on a random field and I already know that my face is voicing the confusion I feel but before I can even ask, River has taken hold of my hand, intertwined our fingers and begun walking in the direction of nowhere. At least he seems to know where he's going.

I'm about to ask but he cuts me off with a shake of his head. "All in due time, baby, all in due time," he tells me before starting up a brand new conversation as though we're not walking aimlessly in the middle of nowhere.

Sirens should be going off in my head at this point. This would look dodgy and suspicious to anyone with a brain but I feel fine. Ever since Saturday I've been taking things a lot less seriously and just going with the flow. It does wonders for stress and actually makes me feel way more alive.

Another twenty minutes later and River finally decides it's time to stop. It's getting dark out because winter is basically here and I can feel a chill run down my spine at the biting weather.

It takes me a few moments before I realise we're by a train track.

"River," I ask, "what are we doing here?"

A lump is starting to form in the back of my throat but I push away my nerves and take a deep breath. Just go along with it, Ari. You don't even know what you're doing yet. Chill, it'll all be fine.

"We're going to do something exciting," he says with his deep brown eyes glistening. "But first let's eat," he grins and reaches for some things from his backpack.

He lays out a classic red and white checkered picnic blanket and some sandwiches. Along with what I think is beer and vodka.

We both dig in and by the end I'm pretty sure I'm slightly tipsy, not drunk by any means but definitely more calm and giggly than before.

He reaches for his phone and starts to play some soft, slow music. "Shall we dance," he says bowing and grabbing my hand.

I let out a light laugh as I let him twirl me in the moonlight. We slowly end up making our way over to the train tracks and before I know it we're dancing down them. Inside, I know this is a dangerous idea but I don't care in the slightest.

We dance for a good thirty minutes and I can feel my legs starting to get tired but that doesn't stop me as I lean into his chest and dance in time with the music.

Faintly, I can hear a noise in the distance but I pay it no attention, my sole focus on River and the music that's humming in my ears.

The noise is getting louder and it's starting to irritate me. I think River can hear it too because he's stopped the music. "Do you hear that?" He asks.

As I'm nodding it dawns on me and that's when I open my eyes and see it. Shit.

I push River out of the way and jump back myself, both of us avoiding the train by inches. I release a breath I didn't know I was holding as the train whizzes past us both, loud and fast. How did I not realise sooner? Both of us almost died just then.

Instead of frowning I was actually smiling at the thought. Not because I was going to die but because that was probably the most thrilling thing I've done in ages.

# Chapter 41

\*3 months later\*

Wyatt's POV

Is it dramatic to say that the last three months of my life have been horrible?

It's one thing to start losing contact with someone you care about but it's completely different when they're doing something you know is only going to hurt but you can't even help them.

She wouldn't listen to me. River is terrible for her. He's already starting to make her crack, I can tell. What they have isn't healthy.

I can't blame her for it though, no matter how much I want to. I pushed her away by not giving her the answers she deserved. She doesn't know what he's really like and it's not fair of me to place the blame on her when I'm the one who forced her down that route.

If I hadn't gotten angry and I'd just told her the truth none of this would've happened but it's too late now. I've lost her and I think she's losing herself as well.

~\*~\*~

I sullenly twirl my spoon in the last of my cereal, the metal clanking against the ceramic dish.

I saw her yesterday at the track — cheering him on.

There's no use in me sulking, I know that. But it hurts too see her having fun with him of all people because I know it won't end well. I wish she would just see that.

"Wyatt," I hear my little sister, Brooke, call, snapping me out of my trance.

"What's up Brookey-bear?" I ask, with the best smile I can muster plastered on my face.

She walks over to me and plops down onto my lap, looking up into my eyes as though what she's about to say is the most important thing in the world. "Have you seen Dan anywhere? He's hidden my favourite doll and I want it back."

I can't help the small laugh that escapes my lips at her seriousness, it's honestly adorable — I wish she didn't ever have to grow up.

"I'm pretty sure I saw him in the games room earlier," I tell her and a look of determination spreads across her face.

She grins and gives me a quick peck on the cheek before jumping out of my lap and running towards the direction of the games room. "Thanks, Wyatt," I faintly hear her call over her shoulder just before she goes out of earshot.

I let out a low chuckle before finishing off my cereal and getting ready for school.

School — urgh. Let's just say it's not been the best place in the world recently but as of late I've hated it even more than usual. I'm failing maths again, without her amazing tutoring I'm back at square one and my pride won't let me tell anyone I need help, let alone that I'm failing.

Let's not forget the fact that I have to see River there. He's already graduated but he usually comes to see her and it pisses me off to say the least.

I clench my hands around my steering wheel at the thought.

Sheesh, I sound like a jealous boyfriend or something. Get a grip, Wyatt.

I shake off the anger that's threatening to surface and park my car. I quickly find Eli and we make our way to class together. Just your average day in hell.

~\*~\*~

By the time lunch rolled around I was already fed up with this place and itching to go on my bike but annoyingly I didn't bring it with me today.

I sit down with Eli and a couple of my other friends, waiting for the day to be over so I could hop on my bike and get lost in its wonders.

"Wyatt," Eli calls, waving his hand in front of my face. My attention snaps to him and out of my daydream. "Y' alright mate? I called your name like five times."

I nod, brushing off the fact that I've been so unaware of my surroundings recently which is so unlike myself.

"Right..." he says sceptically before continuing like nothing ever happened. "Anyways I was asking if y' wanted to come to Connor Hill's party tonight. The whole school has been buzzin' 'bout it."

I scratch the back of my neck before shaking my head no. "Sorry man but I'm not really up for it."

Eli makes a noise that's somewhat similar to a groan but not quite there. "Cut the bullshit. You've been off the radar for months now. I get that you're all heartbroken about yuh girl moving on or whatever but fuck that shit. When the last time y' got laid, mate? I'm going to wingman you and you're getting back out there."

I let out a long sigh. We've had this conversation before. It always goes the same. "Eli she was never 'my girl' it wasn't like that. We were just friends — I'm not heartbroken or any of that shit. I'm just tired. This has nothing to do with her."

He scoffs and lets out a dry laugh. "Y' can fool a lotta people, Wyatt, but not me. We've been mates for donkey's years and I can see right through all yuh bullshit and lies. Accept it. I know it's hard that she chose the dick bag over you but that's fucking life."

I can feel my hands clenching into fists under the table. "Eli, drop it," I warn in a low tone.

But of course, the idiot doesn't heed my warning. "Y' don't scare me mate. Just calm the hell down. What I'm saying is harsh but it's the truth and someone's gotta tell y' how it is otherwise, you'll be stuck moping for the rest of your life."

Deep breaths, Wyatt. Deep breaths. He's your best friend, you don't want to punch him.

"If I go to this stupid party will you stop banging on about all this and drop it?" I sigh, giving in to his persistence. Well, sort of — I'm not actually going to go, I'll make up some excuse last minute.

He grins, making his lip ring reflect the artificial canteen lights. I'm still not sure how he managed to get away with having all his piercings when it goes completely against the dress code but that's Eli — he always gets what he wants. I have a feeling he's been sleeping with the headmistress or something like that. I mean he's never outright told me but otherwise he surely would've been expelled years ago — his record isn't exactly clean (his school or criminal one).

The rest of the day goes by painfully slow but, finally, it does end.

I'm walking to my car, dying to get home so I can ride my motorcycle, when I accidentally bump into someone.

"Sorry," I say absentmindedly, still lost in thought.

"Ah no worries mate," the guy replies. I recognise that voice. I finally look at him and realise it's green eyes' friend — Max. He's a good guy, I'm glad she's friends with someone like him.

I'm about to walk on but I realise there's something off about him. He looks tired and worn out — well more so than most teenagers would anyway.

"Is everything alright?" I ask — a dumb question because no one would tell someone they barely know what's wrong.

He sighs and rubs the back of his neck. "Yeah, just school stress. Nothing you need to worry about," he grins but I can tell it's forced. Over the years I've gotten good at reading people and knowing when they're lying otherwise I wouldn't be good at it myself.

I breathe out slowly, thinking of how to word my reply. Why do I care about this? Easy because she'd want me to.

"Look, I know you don't know me that well but you're friends with Aurora so if something is wrong I'd like to help."

He looks a little stunned at my reply but quickly shakes it off, moving his gym bag from his right to left shoulder and swaying on his feet — a sure sign he's slightly uncomfortable about the topic at hand.

Nevertheless, he takes in a breath, hopefully meaning he's going to tell me what's wrong. "Funny you should mention her because she's the reason I'm so worried."

I can feel my heart rate quicken momentarily and an anxious feeling begin to form in my gut. "Is she okay?" I ask slowly, making sure to emphasise each syllable.

"Honestly? I don't think so. Look, I normally wouldn't say anything but I know you two were close so you have a right to know. It's this guy she's been seeing, River. There's something off about him but I can't put my finger on what. Anyway, Ari's been acting differently since she met him. I'm sure you've heard all the rumours and frankly I think most of them are true."

I take in a breath. I have heard them but I never believed them to be true. Everyone has been saying that the schools 'golden girl' has flown off the handles. That's she's gone crazy.

She's been going to parties and getting completely smashed day in and day out without rest. I heard she started smoking, something I know she was completely against. Apparently, she's been vandalising private property and doing drugs. Let's not forget that she's supposedly robbed small shops and been hooking up with guys left, right and centre.

Obviously, there's no way all this is true. "Surely that's not the case and everything has been exaggerated," I say, desperation clear in my tone.

Max shakes his head. "I don't think so mate. I mean a couple things probably have been but I know it's all true to some extent. I've witnessed a lot of it myself," he tells me solemnly.

"Then why I didn't you stop her!?" I all but shout at him, smashing my fist into a nearby locker to ebb my sudden anger.

He lets out a humourless laugh. "Don't you think I fucking tried," he tells me, each word laced with venom and anger but I don't think it's directed at me. "She won't listen. I don't know what's happened but it's liked someone has flipped a switch in her brain, she's no longer herself. The worst part is she doesn't even look happy anymore, just empty and doing anything that will give her a thrill."

I shake my head in disbelief. She couldn't have changed so much in only a few months. I know she wanted to reinvent herself but not like this. She wouldn't go this far.

"If you don't believe me go see for yourself. She'll be at Connor Hill's party tonight. I know you've been off the radar but you might want to see this."

I run my fingers through my hair in frustration. Looks like I have no choice.

I'm going to that party.

## Chapter 42

\*Wyatt's POV\*

The pungent smell of alcohol hits my nose immediately as I walk into the house, already littered with drunken teenagers.

Believe it or not, I don't go to parties that often. I still go every now and then but I'm not a crazy party animal like the redhead green eyes hangs out with — she told me all about her and from here that girl sounds crazy but in a good way if that makes sense.

I just don't find that much enjoyment in getting drunk and sleeping with random people I barely know. I've done it a couple times but that sort of life just isn't for me. To be fair it takes a lot for me to get drunk which is a blessing and a curse. It's good when I need to stay sober like when I was playing drinking games at her house but bad when I just want to drown my sorrows in alcohol and forget everything for a little while.

But it's fine because tonight isn't about getting drunk, it's about finding her and seeing for myself what's been going on. I'm hoping everything I've heard is false but I just know that's not the case.

Eli wandered off as soon as we got here but about twenty minutes later he found me again, this time with a red solo cup in his hands. "So any chicks here sparkin' your dick?" Eli asks, swinging his left arm over my shoulder, his drink sloshing in its cup but luckily not spilling over.

I send him a bewildered look at his choice of words but don't mention it. I shrug. "You know I'm not here for that," I deadpan.

He sighs through his nose and pats my back hard before looking me directly in the eyes, a challenge written on his face. He quirks an eyebrow at me as he speaks. "Mate, are y' scared that no one wants to fuck you?"

I slowly shake my head in surprise but Eli just lets out a low chuckle.

"That's it, isn't it? All these years you've barely been with any girls and I finally get it. Yuh scared." I go to cut him off but he stops me by raising his palm. "Mate s'alright, I can help if you want. Y' should've just told me sooner. We could've fixed this insecurity ages ago."

I'm baffled so it takes me a couple seconds to come up with a reply. "No, that's not it," I tell him slowly, hoping to get him to understand. "I just don't want to. End of story."

"Uh huh sure..." he trails off as though he doesn't believe me. "If you're not ready to admit it that's fine. I'll be ready to help whenever you're ready for it."

I let out a deep sigh. I can't be bothered to deal with this right now. How do I get Eli off my back so I can go find her?

"Damn, mate look," I say with a fake wolf whistle, gesturing to a group of girls. "Bet you can't get the girl in red to fuck you within the hour."

His eyes find the girl I'm gesturing to and he scans her body for much too long. "Challenge accepted," he smirks, walking over in an overconfident and cocky manner.

That's Eli out of the way. Now, where would she be?

I spent the next twenty minutes looking for her. She wasn't dancing; she wasn't drinking in the kitchen; she wasn't upstairs in any of the bedrooms — although I did see Eli up there which means he did it and in record time too; she wasn't even in any of the bathrooms, vomiting or whatever else.

With a sigh I make my way outside — the only place I've not yet checked. It takes a couple of minutes before I spot her in the corner snogging a guy but I don't think it's River.

I don't really know how to feel about it if I'm honest. Part of me feels smug because she's going behind his back but then again it's not like her to do that — so why? And I didn't particularly enjoy seeing her make out with a random guy. I might have to wash my eyes out after this.

It does tick off one of the rumours though because she is hooking up with a guy and it doesn't seem like it's the first time she's done it over the last couple of months.

As the guy's hands move down to her arse I can't help but turn away in disgust. I really didn't want nor need to see that.

Deciding to head back inside, I go straight for the alcohol. Change of plans — I am getting wasted tonight.

~\*~\*~

Hours later the music is blaring in my ears as I stand among everyone else, dancing. A few girls surround me, much too close but I don't brush them off like normal. In fact, I urge them on as I reciprocate their actions, casting smiles and winks, letting my charisma shine through.

And Eli said I wouldn't get girls — please, they've always thrown themselves at me.

A blonde girl with a ridiculously short, dark blue dress gets too handsy even for my liking so I carefully push her off without it being obvious. I've never liked blondes that much, brunettes are much more my type.

I choose to instead focus my attention on one of the brunettes near me, letting the other girls go and find someone else.

Her eyes are green but just not quite right. She's short but not as short. As she's definitely hot but just not as hot. I brush it aside though because she's close enough.

My hands run down her body as I guide her to the side of the room. My lips meet her neck and she lets out a moan of pleasure.

I press her against a wall, causing a gasp of surprise to escape her lips and I use the chance to slide my tongue into her mouth, claiming dominance immediately.

Her hands graze up my back before she decides to tug on my hair, pulling me closer if that's possible. She wants me desperately, I can feel it.

"Wyatt," she moans, leading us in the direction of a nearby cupboard.

Wait, what's her name? It doesn't really matter.

I take the lead, moving us towards the cupboard, my mouth now traveling down her neck.

The alcohol in her breath is prominent but I don't care as I crash my lips back onto hers, slipping into the small room.

She's already tearing off her dress but something doesn't feel right. As I go to close the door with my foot, I halt, jerking away from her, my mind starting to take control again.

What the hell am I doing?! This isn't me.

She sends me a confused look but I just shake my head, mumbling a sorry before walking away with quick, large strides.

I can't do this, no matter how much I want to just forget, I can't. Damn it!

Why is she still on my mind and why did I pick someone so similar to her — so similar yet completely off? I just can't get her out of my head. Fucking hell.

I run my hands through my hair in a distressed manner as I scan the house for Eli because I have to get out of here. When I'm unable to find him, I can't find it within me to wait. He can figure out how to get home himself.

As I'm about to leave this whole nightmare behind a voice stops me dead in my tracks. It's that same soft and melodic voice but she sounds angry, she's shouting, still only barely audible over the deafening music.

I spot her immediately after turning around. She's in the corner of the room having a heated argument with River. They're going upstairs, probably for some privacy.

I know I should leave them alone. She's not my business anymore. But I can't so I stealthily follow behind them, making sure to stay out of sight.

They go up two flights of stairs before making their way into the bedroom at the end of the corridor. It's much quieter up here and luckily for me they don't close the door, thinking no one is around.

"How could you fucking do that?" River growls, almost sounding animalistic due to his anger. "It's not like it's the first time either. Just why Aurora?"

She heaves out an angry sigh. "Don't act like the victim. We both know you've been fucking girls as well. I saw you slip off with that redhead earlier," she says in a deadly low tone.

"Only because you did it first!"

A humourless laugh escapes her lips. "Did I? I'm pretty sure that was you. This is an endless cycle River. It's ridiculous."

"Do you not care about me, Aurora? I thought you wanted to make us work," he says in what seems like a delicate and raw tone but I can see right through it.

He's manipulating her. Is this what has been going on the whole time? My fists clench at the thought but I let them continue, wanting to hear the rest of their argument.

Her sigh is much softer this time and sounds defeated. "Of course I care, River, but I don't think we work. We don't communicate well and neither of us can seem to commit. Hell, I'm not even sure that we're in a relationship. We've got together and broken up so many times that I've lost track."

"You're the only one for me, baby girl, you know that. All of these one night stands... we can both stop them. It'll just be me and you," his tone is so gentle that it surprises me. He tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and looks at her with such false sincerity.

I know he's lying. He'll go back to sleeping with other girls within a week. Why can't she understand this?

She looks hesitant. "River, I don't think I can." Her voice is so quiet I almost don't catch it.

"Come on, baby doll," he urges. "We have so much fun together. We do crazy, stupid and reckless things. You don't want to go back to being boring do you?"

That bastard. He worked out her trigger word and he's using it to manipulate her. Fuck no. Not if I've got anything to say about it.

Without a second thought, I barge into the room and punch River square in the jaw. He falls back and his head hits the side of the oak bed, causing him to fall unconscious. Good.

No one is allowed to manipulate her. Not my Aurora.

## Chapter 43

\*Aurora's POV\*

I stare in shock at Wyatt's sudden appearance. I haven't spoken to the boy in months and now he's miraculously decided to show up out of nowhere and punch my kind-of-boyfriend.

"What the hell, Wyatt!?" I seethe at him.

His breathing is heavy like he's trying to calm himself down. I wait impatiently for a response as his chest rises and falls — he seems shocked by his own actions.

He shakes his head, regaining his composure. "I've been wanting to do that for ages," he says with a light laugh.

I give him an incredulous look.

That's all he has to say!? No, sorry for not talking to you for three months Ari or how have you been or I'm sorry I was such a rude bastard?

To be fair it was my fault as well but that's the first thing he says. Typical.

"Sorry about just barging in out of nowhere, green eyes, but I couldn't listen to him spew bullshit any longer. His lies were giving me a migraine," he tells me with an adorable pout on his lips. They look so plump and—

Shit. I'm sidetracking. Moving on...

"Lies?" I ask in confusion. River never lied to me. He's always been so sincere.

Wyatt sighs softly before cupping my hands in his much larger ones and looking me directly in the eyes, his facial expression gentle and honest. "Yeah. I'm not sure if you realised but he's a pretty good liar. He's been doing it for years."

Huh? That's not true. He's been upfront with me from the start. He told me how he felt right away, no games and certainly no lies.

"Maybe with others but, Wyatt, he doesn't lie to me. He's been honest and upfront since I first met him," I defend. There's no way Wyatt is right. I just can't believe it. Not possible.

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear tenderly before continuing. "That's what he wants you to think, green eyes. Trust me, I've known him for years. He's a bastard who loves to manipulate people," he grits his teeth as he finishes. That must have something to do with why Wyatt hates him so much.

"Did he do that to you? Is that why you hate him?" I pry in a soft but curious voice.

He shakes his head. "Not to me but someone I care about a lot."

"Who?" I ask with slight hesitation. Who would he care about so much? An ex girlfriend or a long lost love? Hopefully neither.

He goes to reply but stops himself last minute much to my annoyance. "Look, I know you deserve answers, green eyes, especially after I just punched the guy but it's not my place to talk about it, I'm sorry," he says in defeat.

I'm itching to finally find out the truth. If I'm honest, I've been wondering about it for months but it wasn't something I could ask River about and I don't think anyone else would know. I did try asking Eli but the boy wouldn't tell me a thing, staying loyal to his best friend. It really pissed me off at the time but I get it, I'd do the same for my friends.

"It's alright but I do want the truth sometime soon," I say, knowing it's useless to dig further at the current time. "Anyway, so you really mean it when you say he's been lying to me?"

He runs his hands through his already messy hair which still somehow looks incredible, his arm muscles flexing as he does so. What's wrong with me today? Focus Ari. "Yeah, I do. I know it's shitty, green eyes, but just from the one conversation I could tell he was trying to manipulate you." His voice is raw and it almost sounds like it's painful for him to say that.

Has he been manipulating me? I mean I have changed a lot in the past few months but that's all been my choice. Sure River lead me in that direction but ultimately I agreed to it all. It's not fair to completely blame him. "Wyatt you know it was my choice to act the way I have. You can't blame him."

His hold on my hand tightens as I'm talking to the point where it's almost painful. "Why are you defending him? He's a bastard and a liar," his voice is deadly calm and it sends tremors up my spine.

"Wyatt you might hate him but I don't. Until I know the full story I'll never even be able to understand why you hate him the way you do. I'm going to treat him how I would anyone else, with kindness and empathy."

He seems aggravated by my answer but drops the subject, knowing I've got a fair point.

"Whatever. Let's just get out of here before the cunt wakes up," he says, glaring at River in his unconscious state on the carpeted floor. I look over at my kind-of-boyfriend with a frown.

I believe Wyatt, I know for a fact that he wouldn't lie to me so I think I'm going to break up with him once and for all but, obviously, now isn't the time.

There's a small gash on his forehead but for the most part he looks unharmed. Despite our endless arguing, I've grown rather fond of the boy over the last few months so I can't just leave him lying there no matter how much I know Wyatt wants me to.

"Wyatt we can't leave him sprawled out on the floor like that. Help me put him on the bed."

Wyatt gives me an are-you-crazy look as he shakes his head, making me groan in frustration.

"Wyatt I'm not going to leave him like this. For the love of alcohol just help me out." The irritation is clear in my tone and, thankfully, Wyatt picks up on it and begrudgingly gets River onto the bed but not in a graceful or caring manner. He throws River onto the bed rather roughly before leaving the room grumpily, stomping his feet like a child — guess I should have expected that.

I tuck River in and then follow Wyatt out, closing the door softly behind me. He's waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs and, from what I can see in the dim lighting, he's sending someone a text.

By the time I reach Wyatt he has already pocketed his phone and is tapping his fingers mindlessly on his leg. He clasps my hand in his as he leads me outside and I welcome the tingling feeling I get from his touch. I've missed spending time with him more than I care to admit but I think it's obvious because of how much his presence is affecting me.

As we leave the house I spot the boy I was hooking up with earlier; he sends me a quick wink and then returns to his conversation.

I feel the blush creeping up onto my cheeks but I shake it off before Wyatt can notice. I've been putting myself out there recently and in more ways than one. I'm not ashamed of it nor am I embarrassed. It was fun and it was nice to have a breather and escape reality for a few months by doing all these crazy things.

But for some reason when Wyatt is this close to me my stomach churns at my actions — reprimanding me? No, I don't think that's it. Maybe my conscience is uncomfortable at my actions? Maybe it's saying not to do that anymore? I've no clue, to be honest. Either way, it doesn't matter because I'm not in the right mindset to think about any of this right now.

I'm clearly out of it. Even though my alcohol tolerance has increased significantly I must still be at least somewhat tipsy otherwise I wouldn't have been focusing on Wyatt or his lips, muscles, eyes or even that small dimple on his left cheek — shit, I'm doing it again. How much did I drink?

Before we are even halfway down the patio I halt, realising something. "Hold it right there, Wyatt," I start, crossing my arms over my chest.

He looks back at me with amusement clear in his eyes at my sudden change in demeanour but urges me to continue nonetheless. "Don't think I didn't smell that alcohol in your breath. There's

no way in hell I'm letting you drive." My voice is confident and firm and I stare him down when he tries to challenge me.

With River I probably would've given in; something about that boy made me act stupidly but Wyatt is different. I feel this protectiveness over him that I can't explain and it would hurt too much if something were to happen to him, something so easily avoidable. With River I didn't care as much, I didn't feel like myself around him — I was someone completely different, someone without a care in the world and nothing to lose.

But with Wyatt I have everything to lose. His presence seems to ground me and although I might still act crazy sometimes with him I know where the line is and right now drunk driving is definitely crossing that line.

After I win I stare down he sighs in defeat. "Fine, I'll call a taxi but just so you know I'm not even slightly tipsy. You know drinking doesn't have much of an effect on me."

It's true, I don't think it's possible for him to get drunk but I'm not chancing it so I shrug at him and smirk in victory as he pulls out his phone.

Around fifteen minutes later our taxi arrives and we both welcome the warm air of the car which was such a contrast from the nipping winter breeze. "We're going to have to come back to grab my car tomorrow," Wyatt grumbles as he closes the taxi door behind him.

Not too long later we arrive at the King household. I was going to just go home but Wyatt insisted on me staying the night and I was too tired to argue.

Although it's late the house is still lively when we step through the threshold. Distant chatter can be heard from all over the place as well as crashes and the occasional 'bang'.

Within minutes of us being inside, I see a blonde head of hair rush past us before coming to a quick halt and backtracking. Brooke looks at me closely as though she's inspecting me but a few moments later that calculated look turns to a grin.

"Ari! It's great to see you," she smiles, jumping at me for a hug. "It's been so long since you were last here. You shouldn't let Wyatt hog you like that, it's not fair."

I smile at her conclusion but don't have a chance to reply before she speaks up again. "Anyway, I've got to go. Anna is looking for me but I don't want to go to sleep yet. Bye!"

Just like that she's disappeared as though she was never here in the first place. I laugh to myself as I go upstairs with Wyatt. Brooke is something else but I love that about her — so full of energy and life.

We reach Wyatt's room a few minutes later and I immediately crash onto the bed, exhaustion hitting me like a ton of bricks.

"Are you not going to even bother to change? I can grab some of Aria's pyjamas for you," he offers but I groan 'no' in response, kicking off my shoes and sinking further into his soft mattress.

I hear him let out a throaty chuckle as he gets changed. Soon after he switches off the light but instead of the bed sinking beside me I feel his strong and muscular arms scoop me up and tuck me into bed, this time with the duvet covering me to keep warm.

"Night, green eyes," he murmurs as he gives me a soft kiss on the forehead which fills me with a comforting warmth, helping lull me to sleep in an instant.

The bed sinks beside me and he wraps his arm around my waist. I don't push him off like I normally would've done because I didn't want to. I felt protected in his arms, loved even.

Just when I'm on the brink of unconsciousness I think I hear him mumble something so soft and quietly that I might have imagined it.

"I missed you."

## Chapter 44

When I woke up the next morning Wyatt was nowhere in sight but I didn't let the thought trouble me and decided to, instead, go back to sleep until he showed up. I mean, it's a Saturday, I deserve a lie in every once in a while.

A little while later, the door slamming open jolted me awake from my peaceful slumber. "Wyatt?" I question in a hoarse voice, rubbing my eyes to help adjust to the light.

I don't get a reply but instead he flops onto the bed with an annoyed groan, his posture rigid and tense.

I softly nudge his shoulder to gain his attention. I could feel his muscles from under his shirt but I ignored the butterflies in my stomach, needing to pay attention to the task at hand. "Wyatt, what's wrong?" I ask gently.

He doesn't answer but I know he heard me because he tensed further at my question. I take in a deep breath before trying again, now fully awake. "Wyatt don't shut yourself off from me and don't hide things, please. That worked out really shitty last time and I don't want it to happen again."

It's true, although I've had a blast the last few months by doing all these stupid reckless things I have missed Wyatt, a lot if I'm honest.

I missed the way he smiles; how he always knows exactly what to say; his carefree attitude; his constant care for me; our playful banter; the way he looks at me and so much more. Every interaction we've had big and small meant more to me than I ever realised and our time apart showed me that.

I just hope that he feels the same because I don't want to lose this friendship, it's much too precious for that.

He rolls onto his side so he can face me. When he does, I can see the vulnerability in his eyes. Usually, he's pretty good at hiding his emotions or just putting on a confident front but right now he's being real with me; he's being himself without any barriers.

He sits up slowly, dragging his hand through his hair and biting his lip in a way that gives me goosebumps. He doesn't look at me as he opens his mouth, his eyes concentrated on his lap. "It's mum."

I can immediately feel a sense of dread wash over my body. "Did something happen to her?" I croak out, fear clear in my tone.

He shakes his head and laughs bitterly. "Not in the way you're thinking of," he says with a twisted and sarcastic smile. "Remember a while back when I told you not everyone is who they seem to be?"

—flashback—"Your mother seems nice," I say to Wyatt.

He jaw clenches. "There's more to people than meets the eye," he tells me stiffly.

I frown at him. "What's that supposed to mean?" I ask.

He shakes his head and runs his hand through his dark brown locks. "Don't worry about it, green eyes. I'll tell you another time," he says dismissively.

I want to know what he's going on about but I don't pry, knowing it's not my place.—over—

I nod in confusion. What the hell is he going on about?

"Well, let's just say mum hides a lot of things."

Okay now I'm really confused. "Wyatt, what the fuck are you talking about? What's with these cryptic riddles?"

His fists clench the soft sheets tightly as he replies, his knuckles white. "Look, mum has been cheating on my father for years. I think since before I was born if you can believe it. He found out about it a while back and was heartbroken, he loved her a lot and still does for some fucked up reason even though she still does this.

He was always a busy man, not home as often as you'd want and that's what mum blames it on. Says he's never home so she had to find comfort in other people. Bullshit if you ask me. She's away almost just as often and they usually went on trips together so I don't get how she expects anyone to believe that crap.

Anyway, my father threw himself even further into his work once he found out. Now he's almost never home and after a few years he took a leaf out of mum's book and did the same. Now they both cheat on each other but still stay together because of some bullshit reason.

I know this is normal now and I shouldn't get mad anymore but I do. Every single fucking time I find out one of them has done it I get so angry — I — I — I saw mum with a hickey on her neck in the kitchen that wasn't from my father because he's been in Malaysia for the last two weeks and I lost it. I started shouting at her which I know I shouldn't have done. At the end of the day, she's my mum and although I don't agree with her, she can make her own decisions." He's shaking in anger as he finishes his story, clearly on the edge of losing it again.

I instinctively reach over to his lap and clasp his hands in my own, rubbing comforting circles with the pad of my thumb.

I'm having trouble comprehending what he has just told me. I'd never guess that his family had so many issues, they seem so perfect from the outside but I guess everyone has their secrets.

"Wyatt, it's alright to be angry sometimes, you shouldn't beat yourself up over it. What your parents do doesn't sound great, I won't lie, but at the end of the day no matter what you say they'll still do it," I say softly, trying my best to calm him down.

He takes a few deep breaths before nuzzling his head into the crook of my neck. "I just can't deal with it, green eyes," he says but his words come out muffled due to him talking into my skin.

I gently rub his back with my palm. "You shouldn't have to, Wyatt, but the world isn't fair. So all I can say is don't let it get to you. I know that's hard but it's going to keep on happening so if you choose not to react to it and come to terms with it it'll be so much easier in the long run, I promise you that," I tell him with conviction in my voice.

His breaths are ragged and I can tell that he's desperately trying to calm down. He squeezes my hands tightly in his own in attempt to comfort himself and I think it works as bit by bit his breathing becomes more even and his body trembles less and less.

Wyatt slowly lifts his head from my neck and brings his eyes to meet mine. Our faces are inches apart and I can feel his breath tickle my skin as he reaches to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, his fingertips brushing against my skin, sending tingles up my spine.

I suck in a sharp breath as he moves even closer so our noses are practically touching and our legs are a tangled mess. "Thank you," he whispers in a low husky tone, his eyes darting to my lips and mine do the same, they look so warm and inviting.

I close my eyes instinctively as I feel him leaning in but the moment is shattered by Wyatt's door slamming open. Fucking hell.

We both jump apart and I can feel the blush warming my cheeks; I'm probably bright red right now. I swear I can see the faintest flush to his cheeks as Wyatt scratches the back of his neck, not making eye contact with me and instead turning to the cause of our embarrassment: Nathan and Olivia.

Luckily, he seems oblivious to what he just ruined, instead focused on the squirming baby in his arms. He looks up, rocking her gently and seems startled by my presence. "Ari? How's it going? Haven't seen you in a while. I thought Wyatt had fucked it up or something considering that you've not been around and he's been so grumpy recently. If you ask me I think his dick is in need of some real loving from—"

"What do you want?" Wyatt sighs, interrupting his brother, sounding slightly annoyed.

"Well, mum has just left for Milan even though she was supposed to be getting Harper from the airport and wasn't supposed to be leaving for a couple of more days. She seemed pretty upset too so I decided not to push it with her," he says and from the corner of my eye I can see a fleeting guilty look pass across Wyatt's face before he masks it with one of vague interest. "Anyway, because mum wanted to get her personally no one arranged for a limo driver so I've got to go get her but since Anna has taken the triplets to the park there's no one to look after Olivia so I need you to do it."

If I remember correctly, Harper is Wyatt's older sister but she's hardly ever home. I pretty sure she travels around the world modelling for her mum as well as other very well known brands like Victoria Secret and Louis Vuitton.

Wyatt groans loudly, a frown on his face. "What about Zack?"

Nathan sends him a pointed look. "Really? He still thinks zucchini is a made up vegetable. You'd trust that idiot with a baby, your niece nonetheless?"

"Okay, I guess not."

"To be honest, I didn't really want to leave her with you either but I feel a lot better about it now I know that Ari is here," Nathan says with a smirk much to Wyatt's annoyance.

I let out a light laugh as I take Olivia from Nathan and cradle her to my chest, bobbing her up and down as I walk around the room to get her to fall asleep. Thankfully, she seems to like me a lot as she doesn't cry about being separated from her dad.

"Why don't you ever leave her with her mum anymore?" Wyatt grumbles, grabbing the milk bottle that was tucked into the crook of Nathan's elbow.

His expression turns slightly uncomfortable as he replies. "Well, a couple of weeks back she decided that she didn't want to deal with having a baby anymore and left Olivia solely to me. So I'm just filling out the final papers and in a few weeks time I'm going to have full custody of her," he tells us, upset and first but brightening up towards the end.

I feel really bad for Nathan, he's a single parent now. Even though they weren't ever technically dating at least he wasn't alone, now he is. Well, I guess he's not completely alone, he's got his family to help him which is pretty good but it's never going to be the same for Olivia. It must be horrible that she'll have to grow up without a mum but she's got a great family who I know already love her unconditionally.

Wyatt sighs from beside me, patting Nathan on the back. "It's alright, don't worry about her, Nathan, just go get Harper, she's in good hands," he smiles looking at me.

"Thanks," he grins, dashing out of the room when he looks at his watch, realising the time.

~\*~\*~

After Nathan has left, Wyatt feeds Olivia and I get her to sleep a little while later, pretty good teamwork if you ask me.

"Wyatt, what's Harper like?" I ask quietly, lying Olivia down in her cot.

He gets up from the bed he was sitting on and strides towards me, a look of thought on his face.

"Um, I don't really know how to describe her. I barely see her anymore so I'm not sure how much she will have changed. We still talk on the phone and things but it's not the same but from what I know she's always been kind and caring, albeit more daring than most. She became a lot more quiet the year before she finished school though and since then has been more reserved and cautious than she used to be. Regardless, she's still great company. I miss her a lot," he finishes with a fond smile and I can tell that he loves her a lot which makes me smile as well.

A few hours later, I can hear the front door open and the sound of distant voices. Wyatt hears this too, dashing down the large staircase, desperate to see his sister. I let out a light laugh as I follow him but at a much more leisurely pace.

By the time I reach them, Wyatt has already engulfed her in a hug and I hear her let out an elated laugh as she returns the gesture.

When they pull apart I can finally get a look at her and put a face to the name I've been hearing about. She's stunning to say the least. Like all the Kings (well, except for Aria and Hunter) she has gorgeous blue eyes which compliment her complexion beautifully. Her hair is an auburn-red colour and is styled casually into a messy bun. I don't think she's wearing any makeup, probably because she was travelling, yet she still somehow looks flawless. She's on the shorter side, like a lot of the King women, but is still a good two maybe three inches taller than me. Her figure is also perfect and I'm pretty sure she's worked hard for it but I guess that's one of the necessities when being a model.

"Hi, Harper, it's nice to finally meet you," I say, grabbing her attention and causing her to face me.

She smiles as she turns around and I can tell it's genuine. "Wyatt has told me so much about you. You must be—" she cuts herself off mid sentence as she fully takes in my appearance, her eyes wide in shock.

Is there something wrong with how I'm dressed? Am I not what she was expecting? Shit, what did I do?

"Belle?" She chokes out before she suddenly faints.

~\*~\*~

## Chapter 45

"Belle?" She chokes out before she suddenly faints. Luckily, Nathan reacts quickly and catches her before she can hit the floor.

There's looks of both worry and confusion on the boy's faces and I'm sure my own expression is very similar. Wyatt looks as though he's piecing everything together in his mind and Nathan has already picked Harper up and is laying her on a nearby sofa in the lounge.

Belle. That's a name I haven't heard in years but it still pains me to this day. Why did Harper call me that? And what am I missing here?

Around twenty minutes later she, thankfully, begins to wake up, a sheen of sweat on her forehead. "Drink this," Nathan murmurs to his sister, handing her a glass of water which she gladly accepts, gulping it down like her life depends on it.

I'm sitting in the corner of the room because I don't want to startle her again and because I'm feeling anxious after what she said. It makes my stomach tie itself in knots to think that Harper is somehow involved. It confuses and scares me at the same time.

"Nathan, what happened?" Harper asks her brother in a quiet voice. "The last thing I remember was hugging Wyatt, then—" she cuts herself off and gulps. "There's no way. I thought I saw Belle but that can't be sh—she—she's dead. I don't understand..." she trails off, sounding distressed.

There's no way...

Could she be talking about...

I suck in a deep breath and slowly walk over to Harper. Calm down, Ari. Just breathe. "Hi," I say quietly, kneeling down beside her. Her eyes go wide as saucers and it looks as if she's about to pass out again. "I'm not Belle," I tell her hastily, not wanting her to faint again. "But I am her sister."

Recognition seems to pass across her eyes and before I know it she's embracing me in a tight hug, crying into my shoulder. "You're her sister? Oh my god. I — I — well — I —" she stutters between sobs, clutching me tightly as though I'll disappear if she lets go.

I let her cry, knowing that she needs it and that it's better to wait until she's more composed before I ask any questions.

Nathan looks uncomfortable, unsure of what to do and I can see Wyatt whisper something into his ear. Nathan gives him an unsure look before nodding and leaving the room. Wyatt, on the other

hand, looks conflicted. For some reason, I think he understands what's going on but not fully, either way, he seems to be the only person who somewhat has their shit together.

"Harper," Wyatt mumbles quietly into her ear after she stops crying. "I think it's best if we explain to green eyes what's going on, she's surely very confused."

Harper lifts her head from my shoulder, her eyes puffy and red-rimmed. "Right," she laughs through her last few sobs. "Your mind must be so muddled. I'm so sorry, where are my manners? My name's Harper and you must be Aurora, Wyatt's told me so much about you and it's a pleasure to finally meet you. I'm deeply sorry about my outburst but I just couldn't control myself, you see, Belle was my best friend at school and seeing you just opened a floodgate of pent up grief because you two look so much alike," she explains, trying to sound cheerful but the sadness is evident in her voice.

"You knew my sister?" I croak out in surprise.

She nods. "Yeah, that girl was the most incredible person I've ever met and the best friend I could've ever asked for." She's looking her her lap now, wringing her hands together uncomfortably and it's obvious that this is a sensitive topic for us both.

None of us say anything and it's Wyatt who ends up breaking the silence. "Green eyes," he starts cautiously, making me tense. "There's something I think you should know. Harper is the one River messed with and I'm afraid your sister was caught up in that too. It has never been my place to tell but I think Harper and I can both agree that you deserve to know what happened between the three of them."

Harper nods along to her brother's words but I can tell she's nervous. "Right, Wyatt told me about you and River and I think you deserve the truth," she pauses, thinking over her next words. "You never really saw her much, did you?"

I shake my head. "No, my parents divorced when I was only six and Belle moved out with dad to a different city so I rarely got to see them," I tell her, feeling tears starting to well in my eyes at the thought of my sister and father.

Wyatt must notice as he wipes away a stray tear that must've fallen down my cheek without me realising. He kisses my hair softly and he clutches my hands soothingly to comfort me. I lean into his chest for support but urge Harper to continue.

"Well, Belle and I had been friends since she moved here, the two of us were inseparable, always doing everything together and that never changed. Boys came and went but the two of us were forever, no matter what. But just before year 12 started I got a new boyfriend, River."

I heart drops at the mention of his name. And I can feel my body beginning to shake. Wyatt is quick to calm me, bringing me closer to his chest in a comforting and protective manner, essentially telling me that he was right there with me every step of the way.

I take a few deep breaths to ease my nerves and Harper continues. "In the beginning, he was the perfect boyfriend, always making me smile and treating me like I was the only girl in the world, like I was his everything. Things were going great and I couldn't have been happier. Belle was ecstatic for me, glad that I'd found the right guy but, as time went on, her attitude towards River changed.

River had never really liked Belle very much and didn't like it when we spent time together so, gradually, I started hanging out with her less and spent more time with him but, oddly enough, that's not what upset her. She said that she thought River was manipulative and bad for me but I ignored her. She said that he was changing me for the worse and that he was a deceitful bastard who lied to me all the time.

I actually laughed at her when she told me this. I was so blinded by my love for River that completely dismissed what she said without a second thought. River told me that she was trying to break us up because she was jealous of how much time we spent together and I believed him.

I listened to him over my best friend. So little by little I started shutting her out of my life, until we barely spoke anymore. Months later, River and I got into a huge fight and his true colours started peaking through and slowly but surely I started to realise what type of person he was — a lying bastard.

He got me to do all types of things I shouldn't; most being dangerous and stupid but there were a few illegal things sprinkled in the mix as well. It was small things at first but overtime it got more and more serious until I just couldn't do it anymore and that's when we had that big fight. As time went on, I started to understand just how he manipulated me. He would use my emotions against me.

When things didn't go his way or I didn't want to do something he'd say that I didn't love him anymore or that I didn't care. He was an emotional manipulator but I couldn't see it. Our relationship was toxic and unhealthy but I didn't realise, Belle did and I ignored her.

It took a while but I eventually managed to break up with River. Every time I had tried in the past he coerced me into staying with him but that day I had gotten a text message from Belle. It was the first time I'd heard from her in months and I knew then that if my best friend hadn't given up on me, despite how much of a bitch I was being, I needed to do the right thing. So I did it and I finally broke up with him.

As soon as I had done it, I rushed over to Belle's house to tell her everything and apologise, begging in my mind that she'd forgive me. However, when I got there no one was home so I left, deciding to try again the next day.

Three hours later, mum got a call and I found out that both her and her dad had died in a motorcycle accident. My heart was crushed to say the least but not just because I never got the chance to apologise to my best friend but because of what was in her bag.

It was a birthday card addressed to me that she was on her way to post. Inside, she wrote that she had forgiven me for everything and despite all that had happened she still cared for me. She talked about how much she missed me but understood if I didn't want her in my life anymore. She even went as far as to say that if River truly did make me happy she'd be okay with it, regardless of what she thought and felt; she just wanted me to be happy.

She was always such a good person and I guess it was my fault she died. If I had just listened to her in the first place she never would've went to post that letter and she never would've been hit.

I'll never forgive myself for what happened, Ari, but I want you to know that your sister was the best person I've ever met. She had a beautiful and kind soul and was taken much too soon.

All I can say is that I'm so so sorry."

I was speechless. I couldn't think and I couldn't move. I just sat there for what felt like an eternity, processing Harper's words.

I didn't blame her, there's no way she could've known that would happen. Besides, I came to terms with my sister's death a long time ago.

It took a few long moments but once I finally had control of my limbs again, I sprung up from my seat, releasing myself from Wyatt's comforting hold. I dashed to their garage and grabbed the keys for Wyatt's motorcycle — the vehicle I knew would be the easiest for me to ride.

Snatching a midnight black helmet, I hopped onto the bike, ignoring the fact that my mind was screaming that this was a bad idea and that I was breaking my promise to Belle and dad.

I raced off the property with determination and a clear goal in mind, noticing Wyatt standing in the garage, a gobsmacked look on his face. But I didn't have time to explain to him what was going on or my sudden change in attitude because I only had one thought on my mind.

After what Harper said, I knew what had to be done: it was time to confront River and break up with him once and for all.

## Chapter 46

The wind whipped through my hair as I drove down familiar roads, turning each sharp corner with ease. It has been years since I'd last ridden a motorcycle but it still felt so natural. Yes, I technically wasn't supposed to have been driving one but dad had taught me, even if I wasn't strong enough to hold it up myself at the time. He just sat on the back for support and let me do my thing.

He lived and breathed them, they were his favourite thing. It's quite poetic, I think, that the thing he loved most in the world caused his end.

It hurts whenever I think of dad or Belle. I might have come to terms with their deaths but that doesn't mean it doesn't rip my soul apart to think of them. I was always a daddy's girl, even though I lived with mum and I had always looked up to Belle, she was my role model and I still aspire to be even half as good as she was. So, it destroyed me to lose two of the closest people to me at the same time.

That's why we moved, to be closer to them. Not longer after the accident we all wanted to feel more connected so we packed our bags and moved into their house, it was left to mum in the will anyway.

To this day, I'm still not quite sure why my parents divorced. I know they still loved each other, it was written on their faces in black and white but at the same time things just kept going wrong for them. Maybe they grew apart or just weren't compatible enough anymore. I could never ask mum about it because it was the one subject that was much too sensitive for her so I've always just had to guess.

There's probably a better answer than what I've come up with but since I'm so young I doubt I'd understand the ins and outs of marriage and divorce, the latter of which I hope will always be the case.

The roaring engine seemed to calm my nerves and erratic heart beat as I continued down the winding road, just minutes from my destination.

I parked outside the house, mansion would probably be a better word to describe it, hopped off of Wyatt's motorcycle and started the short walk to the front door, my hands clammy as I fidgeted with the hem of my top, picking at a loose thread. I rang the doorbell and hugged my leather jacket tighter around my petite figure to help stop the chill of the winter air and the tremors it was sending down my spine.

The door was opened by Jon, an man in his mid sixties. He was tall and frail with a bald spot in the middle of his grey hair but he still carried himself with class and elegance, his formal work attire spotless "Ah miss Kelly. I assume your looking for the young master?"

I nod my head, giving Jon a slight smile.

"He's in his bedroom probably playing on his electronic games or something of the sort," he says with a roll of his eyes but you could see the fondness within them. Jon has been the family butler since before I was born so he'll always have a soft spot for him, he practically raised the guy. "You can go right up."

I grin at Jon before racing through the grand hallway and up the stairs, thankful to finally be out every the weathers clutches.

I don't bother knocking before opening the door and, as Jon predicted, he's sitting on his plush, cushioned sofa playing Xbox, so immersed in his game that he doesn't even hear me walk in.

I clear my throat with a smile on my face which causes him to jolt in surprise. He looks at me with a confused expression before pausing his game and turning his full attention to me. "Ari?"

"Hi Maxi," I say with a sheepish smile.

He groans at the use of my nickname like he always has but nevertheless taps the spot next to him on the sofa, gesturing for me to sit down. "What's up? Why didn't you tell me you were coming?" Max asks casually, scooting over to make room for me to sit down.

I sigh, running my hands through my hair, slightly detangling the wavy mess it became in the wind.

That's a good question which I don't actually have an answer to if I'm honest.

"I — I — I don't know Maxi," I breathe out. "I just, well, I really needed a hug," I say in a weak whisper before I burst out crying, mascara stained tears running down my cheeks.

Max is quick to react, pulling me into a tight embrace, rubbing my back soothingly as he lets me sob into his shoulder. I don't really know what's come over me but I just keep crying, needing to let everything out.

So much has happened with Wyatt, James, River and now my sister. It's all just too much.

I pride myself in being someone who doesn't cry very often, always having my emotions in check but right now I can't help but let the tears fall, letting them stain Max's warm, grey hoodie. His arms are strong and comforting as he holds me, like he's the last thing keeping me together so I don't break apart.

I don't know how long we sat like this, me balling my eyes out whilst Max held me, whispering words of comfort into my ears but I do know I needed it — a lot.

When I finally pull away, wiping away the last few tears with my sleeve, it takes me a few moments before I can look Max in the eyes. I haven't spoken to him properly since I went a bit crazy but I know I can still count on him. We have one of those friendships where we can not talk for ages but when we speak again it's like no time has past at all and I love that so very much.

He's always been the one I've confided in; he's seen me at my best and he's seen me at my worst but for some reason I can't help but squirm in my seat as he looks at me.

But, eventually, I do look up at him and I can feel my heart twisting in knots. He looks so worried and concerned, like I'm all that matters to him, as he plays with his fingers, trying to think of what to say. "Ari," he starts hesitantly after a long moment of silence. "What happened?"

With those two simple words, both holding such much raw emotion and concern, I can feel my walls beginning to break so I tell him everything — well a lot anyway, I leave out the deal I struck with Wyatt and the track.

I tell him about my friendship with Wyatt and how that lead me to meet River. I talk of my time in my on-off relationship with him and admit to some if the stupid shit I did. Max gives me a slight disapproving look at this point but I shake it off, knowing I deserve it. I tell him about how Wyatt found us and knocked River out and me meeting Harper.

At this point I get a little emotional but push back my feelings so I can continue my story. Max already knows about Belle and dad but I don't ever talk about them so he's shocked to say the least when I mention them and tell him Harper's story and her involvement.

When I finish, I rest my head on his shoulder, unable to see his reaction, too worried of what he'll think.

"Ari," he says softly, lifting my chin so I meet his eyes. "Everything will work itself out and you'll be alright."

"How can you be so sure?" I ask in a weak whisper.

He tenderly tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. "Because you're brave and you're strong. In fact, you're the the bravest person I have ever met. You've had to deal with so much yet you still continue to smile and laugh. I know it'll all be okay because I believe in you, Ari, I always have," he tells me with an earnest look in his cool grey eyes.

I don't know what to say. All I can think to do is hug him so that's what I do. I pull him in for a warm embrace and hold onto him for what feels like an eternity.

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An hour or so later, evening starts to near which means I need to leave here and go speak to River. I can't put this off any longer because I know I'll never do it otherwise.

Max walks me outside and with me to Wyatt's motorcycle but does a double take when he sees it. "Ari," he splutters. "You're — you're riding that?"

I nod as I swing my leg over it and grab my helmet.

"But — but I thought — I thought — you weren't ever going on one again because of what happened."

I sigh as I put on my helmet, sending Max a final look, hoping he'll understand. "Yeah but I have to do this Max. I'm going to confront everything head on."

He hesitantly nods, knowing that he won't be able to change my mind. "Just be careful, Ari, and call me after you've spoken to him, promise me."

I nod as I rev the engine and speed off in the direction of River's house.

This is it. No more shying away.

I will do this.

## Chapter 47

It's pretty dark out by the time I reach River's house but it doesn't bother me. I walk up to his door with calm and confident strides, psyching myself up as I do.

I roll my shoulders a few times before knocking loudly and taking in his house once more. It's a reasonable size with clean, exposed brickwork and a dark stone tiled roof. The windows are spotless as they gleam in the moonlight, even the doorknob is sparkling — I remember River telling me that his family like to keep things clean and it also helps that this house is quite new, considering it's one of those new, modern builds that happens every so often.

After a few minutes the door is finally opened by a someone with a tall, built frame, dark, messy hair and even darker smouldering eyes, Levi — River's older brother. He has a cigarette sandwiched between his index and middle finger, the lit end giving his charcoal eyes a menacing glow.

I can feel my fingers quiver at the sight of it, wanting to snatch it out of his grasp for myself. I don't but it's very difficult.

His lips twitch into a sinister smirk as he looks at me, leaning against the tall doorframe, sending an involuntary shiver down my spine. I've only met him twice before but Levi has given me the creeps since I first laid eyes on him. Yes, he's ridiculously handsome but something about him makes my stomach twist and clench.

"To what do I owe the pleaser, Ari?" Levi drawls out, his eyes staring through my very being.

Although this guy makes me uncomfortable to an immeasurable extent, I refuse to be intimidated by him. If I can't get past him there's no way I'll have the courage to end things with River for good.

"Just wanted to see River," I state casually as I walk inside, my face impassive. There's a certain way to act around people like Levi and I think I've gotten the hang of it over the last few months. River took me to some pretty shady places so I had to learn to adapt pretty quick.

"Last I heard you two were fighting," he comments, puffing out a ring of smoke. I rub my thumb and index finger together behind my back in anticipation of grabbing a cigarette from the packet I spy on the counter. Levi sees me eyeing it and sighs before offering me one which I gladly accept.

They calm me down and I'm nervous beyond belief at the moment so I could really do with it.

"When aren't we fighting," I reply with a shrug, taking a drag from the cigarette, my whole body relaxing in contentment.

Levi lets out a throaty chuckle as he begins to walk into another room. "He's in his room, good luck," he calls over his shoulder as he kicks the door shut behind him.

I finish my smoke and grab a piece of gum before going up to see River, using the time to ready myself for the argument ahead. Deep breaths, Ari. In and out. Breathe in and out.

I knock softly on his door and wait until I hear him say to come in before I do. I peep through the door and spy him sitting at his desk, typing away on his computer and hesitantly open the door the rest of the way, stepping fully inside and shutting the door behind me for privacy.

I've never met River's parents — he says they both work late all the time so I doubt they're home — but I don't want Levi to hear this either. "Hey," I say in a confident voice. I know if I start off sheepish I won't do it. I have to be confident or he will say something and I know I won't go through with this.

"Aurora?" River asks in a startled tone when he hears my voice, turning away from his computer and giving me his full attention. "To what do I owe the pleaser, babe?"

I shrug nonchalantly as I stride across his room and sit down on his bed, my eyes never leaving his. "Just wanted to talk is all."

River swivels around in his desk chair so he's facing me, a smirk on his face. "Shoot," he tells me, eyeing me up and down.

Should I be blunt or beat around the bush? I guess it's always better to be honest and upfront but I should still ease my way into the conversation so I'm not just springing it on him out of nowhere.

"Well how are you feeling? I know you hit your head pretty hard at that party last night," I say, making sure not reveal too much in case he can't remember. He doesn't need to know Wyatt punched him and have another reason to hate him.

He runs his hand down his exposed left arm as he replies. "Oh right. I'm fine now, thanks for the concern babe," he smirks with a wink, getting up from his chair. "But I can't remember much, I knocked my head pretty hard. I remember us going upstairs together but everything else is a blur. Next thing I know, I'm waking up tucked in all cosy into a random lad's bed."

Good. He doesn't remember but does that mean he doesn't remember our argument either?

"Ah alright. Well you banged your head on the bed frame when we were talking, probably because you were mad from the argument we were having," I tell him, not a total lie because he did hit his head. "And, well, that's what I wanted to talk to you about."

He sighs, running his hands through his hair as he moves to lean against his bedroom wall, facing me with a lax look on his face and his arms crossed. "Alright, what were we arguing about?" River asks with a look of disinterest plastered on his face yet he still gives me his full attention.

"About us."

He raises an amused eyebrow. "I'm going to need a little more than that, babe."

I can feel my nerves rising but I pay them no attention as I look River directly in the eyes. I have to stay strong. "Us just not working together anymore," I start, pausing to think of how to phrase my next sentence. "I think it's time we end things once and for all, River."

I hear his sharp intake of breath as he scrunches his eyes together for a few seconds. It looks like he's murmuring something to himself — counting to ten maybe.

When he opens his eyes they're filled with hurt and sorrow, making my heart clench.

Nope. I can't give into this. Wyatt told me he's a good actor and manipulator — I can't trust him, I just can't.

"What's brought on the sudden change of heart, baby girl?"

I can feel my palms beginning to sweat as I clench the black bedsheets beneath my fingers so harshly that my knuckles turn whiter than paper.

Hoping he doesn't notice my unease, I shrug, my face impassive, showing no emotion. "It's been a long time coming, River. You know as well as I do that we're not good for each other. We can't let this continue for both our sakes," I say in a composed voice despite the anxiousness I feel.

I notice his hands balling into fists and the tightening of his strong jaw as he tries to calm himself, thinking of how to respond. "Baby, this is stupid," he starts, his voice sounds raw and full of genuine emotion but I know I can't trust that that's true. "We're perfect for each other. Who fed you these crazy ideas and why would you listen to them over me?"

Keeping my face void of emotion, I reply, knowing I have to keep Wyatt out of this. This was my mistake. My fuckup. I have to fight my own battles. Wyatt doesn't need to get involved. "No one, River. I can think for myself. It's clear that we're not right for one another, anyone could see that."

He pushes himself off from the wall and moves until he's right in front of me and kneels down so our eyes are at the same level (since I'm sitting down), cupping my cheeks in his large hands. I want to lean into him but I refrain, knowing that he's not the right guy to take comfort in.

He looks deeply into my eyes as he readies himself to speak, his molten brown eyes melting in the yellow lights, looking warm and sweet like honey. "Aurora, please, listen to yourself. Don't do this, baby. Don't pull the plug on us. Don't say you don't care anymore because my heart beats for you

and only you," he tells me in a soft voice, reaching for my hand and placing it over his heart — it's thumping at an erratic pace, showing me his desperation.

Taking deep breaths, I pull my hand away but it's shaking and it's obvious that his words effected me deeply. "River, I'm sorry but I just can't do this anymore," I say, trying to sound confident but there's a slight crack to my voice at the end and that's when I know I've fucked up.

He knows he affects me and he'll use it to his advantage. I just care too damn much.

"Yes you can, baby doll. We need each other, can't you see that?"

I shake my head as I force back the tears that are threatening to escape, instead letting out a humourless laugh. I can't get sucked in, not again. "No, River, that's where you're wrong. We need to stay away from each other."

The frown on his face is genuine as he asks his next question so quietly I almost don't catch it. "Why?"

I can feel my stomach flip as I think back to when James broke up with me and I asked the exact same thing — so weak and dejected.

Should I tell him? The truth crushed me but he has the right to know and not be kept in the dark. "River," I sigh. "I know about you being involved with Harper and Belle."

I can feel him tense slightly at the name but he brushes it off all too quickly. "What's it to you? Harper is an ex girlfriend, nothing more and I'm not sure why you're bringing her friend into this."

"Because Belle was my sister."

He lets out a breath of surprise, his eyes widening as he scans over my face in recognition. "I knew there was something familiar about you," he says in understanding. "But what does any of this have to do with us?"

I rake my fingers through my hair as I reply. "River, you're the reason they stopped being friends. You manipulated Harper into listening to you over Belle. You were a lying bastard and I know you've been manipulating me too and I can't let that happen anymore."

He scoffs. "What happened between those two wasn't my fault, friends fall apart all the time. I was merely a bystander, dating one if the involved parties. And I'd never manipulate you, Aurora, because, well, I think I love you," he says in a soft tone but I can't believe it.

There's no way. It's only been a few months. He's lying but would he really go this far to get his way?

I shake my head in disbelief, standing up to move further away from him. "Don't do this, River. Don't try and fuck up my head. Not anymore. I know that you've been manipulating me. It may have not been intentional but using my emotions to your advantage so I do as you please is wrong and I can't stay with someone like that," I say firmly, slight anger starting to show in my words.

"Wyatt got to you didn't he? He put these ludicrous thoughts in your head. The bastard," he grits out, anger clear in his tone as he takes a forceful step towards me.

"Don't talk about Wyatt like that," I spit, my emotions flipping. "This is between you and me."

He barks a humourless laugh. "It never was just me and you was it, Aurora? That's why we won't work. You care about him too much."

"That's not true."

"But it is. If it weren't for him we'd be happy together and you wouldn't want to throw away everything that we have."

I can feel my eyes blazing with anger. "We don't have anything," I growl. "You lied to me. You tricked me. And you're the one who started this cycle of unfaithfulness by sleeping with Ava."

It shatters me to think of my best friend doing that but now isn't the time to get upset so I push my feelings aside and glare at River, channeling all my anger towards him.

"Back to this again? I didn't know she was your best mate — she must be a pretty crappy one to do that though."

I force back a scream as I stare at him in utter disbelief. "That's what you took from that? Let's forget the fact that she was my best friend. You still slept with someone else the night after you asked me to be your girlfriend. No guy who loved me would do that," I spit with venom lacing each word, throwing his previous statement back at him.

"I'm sorry, I fucked up but you weren't exactly innocent either. You were a right slut sleeping with all those guys behind my back," he growls and I can feel my face going red.

It takes everything within me not to slap him. Violence isn't the answer I keep reminding myself although I'm very close to ignoring my conscience. "Slut shaming — that's what you're reducing yourself to? I was hurt after what you did, River, and coping with it best as I could because I cared about you," I all but shout at him. "But don't you dare try and act innocent. You were doing the exact same thing, don't play the victim. What I did was wrong but you started it. Don't try to pin the blame on me," my tone is low and full of warning.

He's about to respond but I cut him off by raising my hand and shaking my head. "Save it, River. We're over."

Before he has the chance to respond and I do something I'll regret, I storm out of his room and slam the door behind me. I rush out of his house and to Wyatt's motorcycle, putting on my helmet and getting out of there as fast as humanly possible, my mind burning in anger and my head throbbing in fury.

When I get to a red light I quickly dial Max's number.

"Ari?" Max asks after a few rings, sounding breathless.

"Hey, Maxi," I say, revving the engine as the light turns green.

"How many times—" he cuts himself off mid sentence. "Wait, are you on that death trap right now, as you're calling me?" Max shouts over the phone but I pay no attention to his worry.

"Yeah but don't stress about that. I did it. I broke up with him."

He sighs. "That's great, Ari, how you feeling?"

"Honestly? Furious. That bastard has another thing coming with the way he spoke to me. I swe—" I'm cut off by the sound of a loud horn, cursing I try to swerve out of the way but it's too late.

The lorry gets closer and closer until it's all I can see. My eyes go wide as saucers as I let out a blood curdling scream, my life flashing before my eyes.

My phone clatters to the floor at the same time I do, the world around me going black.

The cold, wet road scratching my skin is the last thing I notice until I can't feel anything. My breathing slows as I let out one final breath before everything finally disappears and I'm shrouded in darkness.

## Chapter 48

\*Max's POV\*

My heart was hammering in my rib cage as I sped down the motorway, holding my steering wheel in a vice grip. I could feel my heavy breaths as I checked my phone, waiting for the cars in front of me to move.

Luckily, she has location turned on on her phone so I know where she is. Well, not exactly. The last location available is from a little under twenty minutes ago but it's my best bet.

I tap my thigh impatiently, willing the cars in front of me to move.

Her voice flashes through my mind. Her scream echoes in my ears. I've never heard her sound so terrified but our phone call cut off before I could find out what happened.

I'm not an idiot. I think it's pretty obvious that she got into an accident but every fibre of my being is praying that that's not the case.

It can't be true.

By the time I reach the little blue dot on my map, the area is already littered with police cars and an ambulance and it feels like time is slowing down.

My mind can't comprehend what's happening around me. The loud sirens blaring in my ears barely affect me. All I can do is stare as I see her body lying unconscious on a stretcher that's being wheeled to the ambulance.

Finally snapping out of my trance at the sight of her bruised body, I run to her as fast as humanly possible, ignoring all the people around me, my sole focus on her.

"What happened?" I ask the paramedic closest to me who's getting into the back of the ambulance.

"Got hit by a lorry while riding her motorcycle," he says with a solemn shake of his head and I think I can feel the pounding of my heart in my throat.

"You know her?" He asks, a look of understanding in his calming brown eyes.

All I can do is nod, unable to move my mouth.

"Want to come with us?" He asks very softly.

Again, I nod, this time as a wordless thank you.

As soon as I'm inside we speed off in the direction of the hospital. I take this as my chance to finally take in her state fully and I wince as I do.

Her face is bruised and scratched as is the rest of her exposed flesh. There are rips in her clothing, blood leaking through the tares. Her body is still and lifeless as she lays there like a statue, her chest not even moving up and down.

They've fixed her up as best as they can in the cramped space and after a few minutes, I'm told I can go up to her which I do gladly.

I squeeze her small, cold hand in my much larger and warmer one and close my eyes shut, taking in shallow breaths as I ready myself to talk to her in a low tone, refusing to let any tears fall.

Stay strong, Max, for her.

"Ari," I start in a mere whisper. "Please be alright. We both know I'm shit with words but I need you to be okay. You're my everything, Ari, and I don't know what I'd ever do without you. You have to pull through and you have to stay strong for me."

I feel a single tear roll down my cheek but I pay it no attention as I continue to pour my heart out to her, not caring if she can't hear me because I won't be able to live myself if I never tell her the truth.

"We've been on a massive journey together, eh? I remember when we first met, you were so different from anyone I'd ever seen before. You're eyes lit up a room whenever you walked inside and your smile brightened even the duller of my days.

I remember all of our sleepovers and my ridiculous jokes that made you laugh so melodically that the sound would soothe my ears even if I always pretended that you had a seal laugh," I reminisce with a light chuckle, my eyes foggy as I think back on our countless memories.

"Then that night happened, the summer before year eleven. We'd both gotten shit face drunk at some party and didn't know what we were doing — Ava and Mase had disappeared somewhere so it was just you and me."

The thought of Ava makes my tastebuds go sour in disgust. Mason and her had been dating since sometime around summer and he was head over heels for her, has been for as long as I can remember. They had been having some issues but Mase didn't care. He just cared too damn much about her to end it. That is until a couple weeks back when that bitch had the audacity to cheat on him and with River nonetheless — her supposed best friend's boyfriend.

Completely fucked up if you ask me. I haven't spoken to her since and I don't think I ever will again. She's not who I thought she was and Mason is torn up over the whole thing. He's not really

eating or sleeping and has barely left his house in weeks. Let's just say that not everyone is who they appear to be.

I shake off my anger and instead focus my attention back on the stunning girl before me and continue with my one-sided heartfelt moment. "I already knew how I felt by that point but then, thanks to the alcohol, we lost our virginity to each other and I was certain.

But you didn't see me like that and said the whole night was a mistake and basically stopped going to parties after that. Of course I understand and I'm okay with that, Ari. I just want you to be happy even if that's not with me which is why I never punched James in the throat, or other specific areas, no matter how much I wanted to.

I've come to terms with the fact we won't end up together and that's okay as long as you end up with someone who loves and appreciates you as much as I do I'll be happy," I suck in a sharp breath as I go to caress her cheek with the pad of my thumb.

"You may not feel the same, Aurora, but I love you with all my heart and soul so I need you to make it through this, please. Not just for yourself but for me as well."

~\*~\*~

It felt like I had been sitting in this waiting room for days when in reality it had only been a few hours. The white walls and floors were enclosing me in this small room, trapping me as I waited desperately for any information.

After a few more minutes of nervously tapping my fingers on my thigh, the door slams open with a thud, causing everyone in the vicinity to look up. There stands a distressed looking Wyatt. His clothes look wrinkled, his hair is messy and there are obvious bags under his eyes — it looks like he was woken up mid-slumber.

He quickly strides over to the lady at the reception desk and speaks to her in a low tone that I can't quite decipher but I do chuckle inwardly to myself when I notice her checking him out despite his questionable state.

He lets out an annoyed groan at her words and then stomps over to the waiting area where I'm currently sitting. It's not until he sits down that he notices me and his eyes go wide. "How is she?" Wyatt asks from his white, plastic chair placed opposite to mine, worry crystal clear in his voice.

I shrug. "I don't know. They've not said anything but she looked pretty beaten up when they rushed her in here," I tell him, running my hands through my hair.

He fiddles with a loose thread on his shirt and doesn't meet my eyes as he speaks. "Do you — do you think she's going to make it?" Wyatt stutters and I think he's close to breaking down. I never realised how much he cares for her.

I shake my head slowly as I look at the speckled floor. "I don't know but I hope so. She has to be alright," I say, the last part more to myself than to him.

He breathes in deeply through his nose as he nods, shifting slightly in his chair. Neither of us say anything more because there's no need. We both just sit there in a pained silence, our sole focuses on Ari and only her.

My grip on the armrest tightens as time goes on, the worry I have for her only increasing. It has been too long. What's taking so long?

Wyatt doesn't look any better than me. He's shaking slightly in his chair and his breaths are short and ragged. I observe him for a while to try to distract my mind and after some time I notice a tiny wet spot on the floor and a single tear stain on his left cheek.

I don't think anyone has ever seen him cry before and at that moment I realise that maybe he does care about her as much as I do. And maybe he's the one that she can find happiness with.

## Chapter 49

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

I groan inwardly at the annoying noise that doesn't seem to want to shut off. Begrudgingly, I go to lift the sheets to find the source of the disturbance but I can't. I almost scream in agony when I try to move my right arm, my limb violently protesting against me.

Huh?

I try to open my eyes to at least gauge where I am but they won't move, I'm stuck in this dark, blank space.

What's going on?

I can hear noises around me but they're faint and quiet, the previous beeping noise becoming more distant by the second. I'm begging my eyes to open, my fingers to twitch, my toes to wiggle but they won't. I'm stuck as this lifeless board, drifting from reality.

I don't know how long I lay there, fighting against this unknown force, desperately gripping to any hope of freedom but it was no use. Time just dragged on and on and on. Painfully. And slowly.

As the darkness consumes me, ready to swallow me whole, I know it's over. There's no way to fight this. My body is bound by invisible chains, my mouth and eyes sewn shut, making escape futile.

I stop my useless attempts to thrash about to loosen the binds, instead relaxing my body into a state of tranquility, ready for my struggle to finally end.

I can feel my life force being sucked away drop by drop, numbing the awareness to my nonexistent surroundings. I can no longer hear the thrum of voices or even the incessant beeping sound that was grating against my eardrums.

Everything is quiet.

Everything is still.

I welcome the peace with open arms, knowing this lonesome suffering is almost at a close. Soon I'll be free and away from this secluded limbo. Just a few more moments. My heart begins to slow, it's previous loud thumping now undetectable as each pump becomes further and further apart.

My mind begins to shut down, all thoughts escaping my brain, forgotten and unwanted as they're no longer of any use. It's over.

The veil of darkness is finally dropping to fully cover me when I suddenly feel a warmth spark at my fingertips, jolting my entire body, everything rushing back, and forcing it away.

I yearn for it to return, to envelop me once more but instead the chains which trap me choose to tighten and tighten to the point where it's excruciating, my body writhing in pain, a meek, pointless attempt at willing the binds to slacken somewhat.

Tighter.

Tighter.

Tighter.

I wish the darkness had come sooner. Anything is better than this. The numbness of my body is different to before. Instead of a comforting emptiness, harrowing, gruelling spasms rush up my spine, my entire being numb to everything except that antagonising feeling.

If I could move, I'm sure it would look like I'm having a seizure of some sort, my body jerking with unpredictable and aggressive movements. The thoughts pounding in my mind were full of distress and torment, further pushing me into a downward spiral of eternal affliction.

Would this ever end?

As if on cue, I stopped, all movement halted as I lay there motionless, surrounded by a euphoric silence, no longer hearing a white noise as blood pounded in my ears.

However, the serenity which I yearned for only lasted moments. Before long, I started to heat up, the chains now seeming to brand my skin and I could only imagine the menacing glow of them in my mind as if they really were there.

The temperature scorched me, heating me to my core. I felt as if I was on fire, invisible flames torching my flesh. It must have been a figment of my imagination though because I didn't smell cooked meat but it certainly felt like I was a spit roast.

I would've let go in that moment but something was stopping me. I could still feel the tingles in my left hand. They danced along my skin, licking at the flames to cool me. Whatever that feeling was, it was anchoring me, being my final tether before there really was no return.

I concentrated solely on it, trying my hardest to block my mind from the sheer agony my body was facing. It worked but only partially, the pain was still prominent but I'd managed to reduce it from vicious stabs to relentless throbs.

Hours passed and the pain wouldn't dull. I was still focusing on the tingles in my left hand but my energy was wearing thin, my willpower close to its tipping point.

I was done. It was over.

The darkness started to return once again but then the tingles in my left hand increased so they were rushing up my whole arm, pulling me back to reality — or whatever the hell this was.

They traveled through my body and loosened the binds as they went, not much but now I could wiggle around, giving me the smallest inkling of hope.

The movement sparked my body but in a warm and comforting way. Once it reached my ears, I could hear murmurs around me, soft and quiet but nevertheless, they were there. I strained to pick up what was being said but only managed to decipher a few words.

"...hold on..."

"...I need..."

"...please..."

"...crap..."

"...stop this..."

"...shit..."

"...fuck..."

"...save her..."

Words were starting to muddle together the more I tried to concentrate so I gave up but something about that voice made my mind race in wonder. I recognised it.

Despite the clear worry in the voice, it was deep, smooth and inviting. I wanted to open my eyes and see the person so I would know who it was but I couldn't.

No matter how much I tried, they wouldn't budge.

"...Aurora..."

Wyatt?

I've never heard him sound so desperate, so vulnerable. I want to hug and comfort him, tell him everything is alright but I'm not even sure what's wrong.

What could possibly cause him such distress? It doesn't matter. He's in trouble.

He needs me.

Instead of trying to open my eyes, I attempt to move my fingers instead, ignoring the torturous pain that relentlessly shoots through my body.

I have to do this, for Wyatt.

I want to scream and cry and give up all at the same time but I bite back everything I feel and concentrate on wiggling my fingertips.

Come on, Ari. You can do this.

After what feels like a lifetime, I manage the slightest twitch of my fingers. Using all my strength, I concentrate on my hand and try harder, this time to move my whole hand.

Slowly but surely I can regain some control of it and as I do I can feel the binds loosening further. I'm almost free. I've nearly done it. Just a little more.

Using my complete concentration, I focus on each limb one at a time, willing them to move. The movements are stiff and small but it's enough. The chains snap and I can finally open my eyes.

Carefully and slowly I do so, adjusting to the harsh, bright, artificial lighting. Everything is clean and white but it's too difficult to keep my eyes open fully for long so I choose to squint instead.

My ears prick at a familiar beeping noise, finding a strange comfort in the sound. I release a ragged breath as I try to fix my breathing, only now noticing that there's something covering my mouth and nose: a mask of some sort.

Where am I?

I go to move the mask slowly, as I can only move my left arm but as I reach for it a large hand wraps around my own, stopping me.

My eyes dart to the owner of the for mentioned hand and I release a breath I didn't know I was holding. Wyatt looks down at me, a look of utter relief on his face, his eyes shining with unshed tears. As he looks at me a few slip down his cheeks, dripping onto his top.

Watching him in confusion, I realise that this is the first time I've ever seen him cry.

## Chapter 50

He blinks back the few remaining tears as he smiles at me, looking blissfully happy. "Calm down, green eyes," he chuckles. "Let's let the doctors take that off."

Doctors? Oh, I must be in a hospital. That would explain the setting and the oxygen mask. But why?

I nod, not having the energy to raise my arm for any longer and letting it drop by my side. As Wyatt disappears to grab a chair, a nurse with mousy brown hair and soft brown eyes, removes the mask; checks my vitals; tells me a doctor will see me soon and walks away, giving me a kind smile as she does so.

Wyatt comes back moments later, a small plastic chair tucked under his right arm. "How are you feeling, green eyes?" He asks softly, sitting down.

I attempt a shrug but only with my left shoulder. "My right arm fucking kills and my head is pounding like crazy," I groan, causing him to let out a throaty chuckle.

He shakes his head at me. "Glad to see you've not lost your charm."

I stick my tongue out at him like a child which just makes him laugh harder. "God I've missed you, green eyes."

His words send a tingle rushing down my spine but after a few moments, I frown in confusion. "What do you mean? What happened?"

Everything is a blur for me if I'm honest. I remember going to River's house. What happened there is a little hazy but I'm pretty sure we broke up. Then I stormed out, vexed because of the whole situation.

Then everything goes black. I just can't remember.

A frown takes over his stunning features and in that moment I want nothing more than to turn up the corners of his mouth any way I know how.

He diverts his eyes from mine as he looks at the floor, wringing his hands together. "You got into an accident, green eyes."

Even though I guessed that much, I can feel my pulse increase, the unsteady beats of my heart drilling in my ears. I gulp but nod my head, encouraging him to continue.

"Well, you were riding my motorcycle back from River's house and you got hit by a lorry. Luckily, the paramedics got to you quickly otherwise you might not be here right now." His fists clench tightly as he speaks and he still won't meet my eyes.

"You — you've been out for a while. I was starting to worry that you wouldn't make it. Please, never do that to me again," he swallows hard at the end, the words causing his throat to go raw.

"How long?" I ask, hesitantly. He doesn't look any older, the only differences are the heavy bags under his eyes so it can't have been too long.

He breathes out a soft sigh. "Not too long so don't freak out. It just felt like forever from my end. Around three weeks. After your accident, you slipped into a coma. The doctors thought you'd get out of it in a couple days but with each passing day, they grew wearier.

Your heart even stopped beating at one point and that was the scariest moment of my whole life. You scared me fucking shitless, green eyes," he says, running his right hand through his messy, chocolate brown locks. "Who knew one person could make me worry so damn much," he finishes with a distant chuckle, his hand reaching to find mine and give it a tight, comforting squeeze.

A blush spreads across my cheeks but I shake it off quickly, instead focusing on the heavenly feeling of my hand intertwined with his own. Nothing else mattered at that moment, not my accident or even River.

He stands up from the uncomfortable looking plastic chair, still keeping ahold of my hand tightly in his own and takes the small step needed to reach me in my lying down position on the hospital bed. His electric blue eyes burn into my green ones as he leans down so he's centimetres from my face and tucks a stray strand of brunette hair behind my left ear.

His hot breaths send a shiver up my spine as he speaks in a low husky whisper, my whole body trembling in anticipation. "I'm so glad you're awake, green eyes. You have no idea how much you mean to me."

My breath catches in my throat as he leans further down to close the short distance between our lips. As usual, they're plump and pink and every time I look at them they become more and more inviting, convincing me to close the gap faster.

"Ah, Miss Kelly, glad to see you're awake," a loud voice chirps seconds before our lips meet, shattering the bubble of perfection Wyatt and I had created. Fucking hell, not again.

Wyatt jumps away from me so quickly that I'm surprised he doesn't fall backward. I stifle a laugh at his panicked expression as we both turn to face the kind looking doctor, oblivious to what she had just interrupted.

~\*~\*~

Almost an entire week passed before I was finally discharged from the hospital and I was feeling so much better. I was going to be stuck with my right arm in a cast for around six weeks but other than that I was practically as good as new.

So many people had come to visit me while I was stuck there, bored out of my mind.

Wyatt was there every day and Max came a lot as well. Mum had come basically every day with the twins and brought me a new sugary concoction each time without fail which I definitely wasn't complaining about.

Jordan, Chase, Oliver and Rebekah came and chatted for a while, telling me about all that I had missed in school — the amount of catch up work I have to do is utterly ridiculous if I'm honest.

Jess visited a couple times and I laughed every time she did. That redhead is so crazy and had so many interesting yet stupid stories about what she'd been up to.

Mason had stopped by a few times, chastising me about how stupid I was but in a way that just made me smile. Apparently, visiting me was the first time he'd left his home in weeks other than for school and this warmed my heart to hear.

I can't put into words how angry I am at Ava for what she did. Hurting me is one thing but destroying Mason is completely another. What's even worse is that she didn't bother to visit, not once.

Yes, we may not have spoken in a while but if roles were reversed I still would've come by to show I cared, it hurt a lot if I'm honest. Even James stopped by, he didn't speak to me in person because I think he knew that that'd be too much for me at the moment but he left me a bouquet of roses — my favourite flower — and some chocolates.

Ava couldn't even do that. Some best friend she turned out to be.

Ignoring all of that, it's my first day at school in about a month and to say I'm terrified is the understatement of the year. Last time most of these people saw me I was acting like a crazy person who'd lost all purpose in life — to be fair that's kind of true but I still don't need anyone speculating about it.

Max is taking me to school because none of us are really on speaking terms with Ava at the moment and as if on cue I hear his car horn from outside. I bid farewell to mum and the twins — they have some reading challenge thing or something so aren't going into school today, lucky shits.

"Hey Maxi," I greet as I hop into Max's gleaming red Ferrari (yep, the boy is loaded) and close the door softly behind me with my good arm.

He rolls his eyes at me and groans. "Come on, Ari, I thought we were passed this stupid nickname," he pouts, jutting out his lower lip.

"Never," I grin as he begins the drive to hell, shaking his head in amusement.

When we reach school, I hop out of Max's car, stumbling slightly because I tried closing the door with my bad arm, typical. Everyone turns when they see me, looks of pity, curiosity and judgement passing across their faces. I try my best to ignore them but I can't help the light pink colour that rises to my cheeks.

I sigh as I walk into school with Max, doing my best to avoid all their stares. I hate this. One month ago I wouldn't cower at the intrusive looks of those around me. I would match their stares with equal vigour and intimidate them instead.

People didn't mess with me, they minded their own business and left me alone. I miss that. Not in the sense that I want to do all of that stupid shit again but the peace was amazing.

Maybe I should take a leaf out of my own book. Even if I don't intimidate them I could at least ignore them all and hold my head up high. That was the reason all of this started and I'll be damned if I don't learn from my mistakes and follow through with my plans.

With this thought in mind, I lift my head up and walk to class with a new found confidence and a spring in my step, completely ignoring the looks of everyone around me. I've no reason to care about what they think. At the end of the day, they're strangers whose opinions don't affect me.

~\*~\*~

The gossip and stares didn't die down as the day progressed. It got to the point where people were openly gawking when I walked past so, me being the mature person I am, did the only logical thing I could think of: I flipped them the bird and carried on walking with a confident smirk.

Not giving a shit felt amazing and I can understand why Wyatt was adamant on me doing this, it's self-liberation.

Speaking of the devil, he's dropping me home today because Max has practice so at four o'clock I meet him by his car only to see a shit-eating grin on his face.

"What's put you in such a chipper mood?" I ask, sliding into the passenger seat.

His grin turns into his trademark smirk as he starts the engine, leaving this nightmarish place behind. "Nothing," he says with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes that ignites a curious fire in me.

"Wyatt, come on," I groan in fake annoyance as he stops at a red light, tapping his fingers rhythmically on the plush leather steering wheel.

He rolls his eyes dramatically, revving the engine as the light turns green, speeding much too fast like he usually does when he drives. I swear that this boy has no idea what a speed limit is. I subtly grip the sides of my seat as he replies. "Well, a little birdie may have told me that you have decided not to give a shit about everyone else's opinion and that you even flipped off the people who have been staring at you. You're finally growing some balls, green eyes."

I huff out a sigh of fake annoyance but the smile on my face at the showing of his pride is plain as day. "Yeah. Not caring and being an asshole is pretty addictive, I can see why you do it," I grin, smirking due to my backhanded compliment.

"You wound me, green eyes, truly but I'll let that one slide because you're injured," he comments, missing the turning for my house because he's driving like a toddler on crack.

"Slow down there, Mr. Fast-and-Furious, you were going so fast that you accidentally missed my house."

That glint in his eyes from earlier is back as he carries on in the same direction, choosing not to turn around despite what I've said. "On the contrary, green eyes, that wasn't an accident. Buckle up, I've got a surprise planned for us."

## Chapter 51

I squirm anxiously in my seat as Wyatt carries on speeding down the almost empty road. It's not that I am worried about the situation at hand because I've come to trust Wyatt a great deal but I don't like surprises, I never have.

When I was ten my mum tried to throw me a surprise party and it was one of the worst days of my life. I was so scared because when I walked into my house after school a clown jumped out of nowhere, honking his fake red nose and dancing like there were snakes in his trousers. I screamed and I actually pissed my pants. Needless to say, I've been terrified of clowns ever since.

We make idle chitchat in the car because Wyatt refuses to tell me where we're going despite my numerous attempts. After another five or so minutes he parks the car but since it's a regular outdoor car park it doesn't give me any clues about where we're going.

"Come on, Wyatt, just tell me," I whine like a child as we both get out of the car. He walks over to me and takes ahold of my hand so he can lead us in the right direction.

He shakes his head and laughs lightly. "No can do, green eyes, you'll find out in a few minutes anyway," he says, lacing our fingers together, protecting my non-gloved hand from the chilling wind.

Wyatt leads us through the mildly busy streets that hum with the buzz of light traffic. I recognise this place, it's near the outskirts of the city but I can't for the life of me pinpoint where we're going.

I'm sure it's obvious but I'm absolutely atrocious with directions and Wyatt knows this. I get lost basically everywhere I go so trying to wrack my brain for answers is utterly useless if I'm honest.

Once we start to near a much busier area, Wyatt covers my eyes with a soft yet rough hand. We walk like that for a few minutes, probably looking extremely strange to the rest of the public.

I notice when we enter a building, Wyatt taking extra care so that I don't knock myself or my injured right arm. "You can look now," he murmurs gently into my ears, removing his large hand.

It takes a few seconds for my eyes to adjust to the harsh artificial lighting but when they do I can feel excitement as well as terror wash over me.

"Ice skating?" I splutter out, shocked. He nods, a lopsided grin etched into his perfect features which makes my heart flutter and elephants stomp around in my stomach. "Isn't that a bad idea with my broken arm and all?" I ask, gesturing to the cast, doing my absolute best to hide my inner flustered self.

Wyatt leads us to the short queue of people as he shakes his head, that gorgeous grin not leaving his face. "Nah, I'm pretty good at ice skating, if I do say so myself, so I'll be able to keep your clumsy, directionless self out of trouble. Besides, it'll be fun."

The look of excitement shining in Wyatt's eyes makes my resolve crumble much too quickly. "Fine but just so you know, I've never been ice skating before," I tell him with a sigh as we reach the front of the queue and grab our skates.

"You'll love it," he assures me as we make our way down the stairs to the entrance of the rink and put our skates on.

Surprisingly, they're not too difficult to walk in but it's when we get on the ice that the real challenge will begin and having a broken arm doesn't make it much easier.

Wyatt clasps my hand firmly in his much larger one as we get on the ice and I can immediately feel my legs beginning to wobble so I instinctively clutch onto Wyatt harder who seems unfazed by the new medium we're on.

He guides us to the edge so I can hold onto the side and collect myself. "Relax, green eyes, I'll be with you every step of the way and by the end of today you'll love skating, I promise," he says in a warm tone, conviction in his voice.

I shakily nod my head, still anxious on the ice but wanting desperately to learn because everyone around me looks so happy and free as they move around without a care in the world.

"Great," he smiles. Wyatt carries on talking and explains to me what to do, just the basics: how to move and how to stop, it doesn't seem that difficult.

We start with me holding onto the edge of the rink, moving slowly, Wyatt by my side and after a while of doing this Wyatt takes my hand from the side and guides me slightly further away so it's just out of my reach. "It's way better to practice without the railing, you'll learn so much more quickly but if it makes you feel better I'll hold your hand so you don't fall."

His hand is warm and comforting as he guides me across the ice, holding on extra tight each time I stumble. "You're starting to get the hang of this, green eyes. Guess I'm a pretty good teacher," he smirks after we've been skating around for an hour or so but there's something charming about it this time, something I can't quite explain.

I playfully roll my eyes at his cockiness but, in all honesty, he's right. "Whatever helps you sleep at night, Mr. Big Head." That's the best you got? Come on, Ari, your insults are usually way better than that.

"Well, that's not the only thing that's big," Wyatt grins mischievously and I jokingly hit him on the shoulder.

Around two more hours pass and I can confidently say that I can ice skate — kind of. I mean, I'm not perfect but at least I can stand up and move around without falling or stumbling.

It's around half past eight by the time we leave and start the short walk to Wyatt's car, our hands clasped together, swaying back and forth.

"Thanks for making me do this, Wyatt, I had a lot of fun," I say in a cheery voice as I look at the beautiful, clear sky, twinkling stars shining through the thick blanket of darkness.

The patter of our feet can be heard as we walk down the almost bare pavement, spotting people here at this hour a rarity. "Anything for you, green eyes. I'm glad you had fun," he smiles, his striking blue eyes glimmering in the moonlight.

They're so captivating, I could spend hours getting lost in the deep pools of his eyes or running my fingers through his coffee coloured locks that appear slightly lighter in the moonlit sky. I don't know what has been going on but, lately, he's all that's been on my mind, consuming my thoughts and making it ridiculously hard to concentrate.

And tonight. How do I explain it? Each of our interactions has been making my heart flutter. Every time he smiles it skips a beat and every time he laughs my stomach flips. It's a foreign feeling that I've never experienced before. I know this isn't how you feel around a friend but I didn't feel like this around James either. Is it possible that this is more than that?

I thought I would never experience anything like this again but it's so much more than before. What James and I had can't hold a candle to this. It puts all my previous feeling to shame. It's this liberating and joyous sensation that I can't explain and I never want it to end.

Is it possible?

Could this be?

Do I like Wyatt? Or perhaps something even more?

By the time we reach his sleek, onyx car, I can feel my heart hammering in my rib cage as my mind swirls with countless conclusions, all of which make my head spin. Now isn't the time to worry about this. It's going to have to wait until later.

Wyatt walks me to my side of the car but instead of opening it he puts himself between me and the door so my back is pressed the cool brick of a nearby building. There's a look in his eyes that I've seen only a few times before. Every time I've noticed it in the past he has masked it quickly but this time he doesn't, it's glistening in his eyes plain as day.

He speaks to me in a low whisper, the tone alone sending shivers down my spine. "You know, you look absolutely breathtaking tonight."

His compliment warms me, sending a wave of goosebumps down my arms but it's also baffling. I don't look that nice today if I'm being honest. My hair is up in a haphazard ponytail; the concealer I put on this morning has probably all come off; my arm is in a freaking cast and I'm pretty sure I'm twitching every now and then because I've been trying to give up this goddamn smoking addiction my idiotic self managed to develop.

I think Wyatt can sense my confusion because he chuckles lightly, the sound rumbling in his chest which has been moving slightly closer to my own over the last few moments. "You don't have to dress up to look beautiful, green eyes, I thought you would've realised that by now. That adorable smile on your face when you laugh or are just happy is more stunning than anything else. Not to mention those bright green eyes of yours that put emeralds to shame or the cuteness of your short height which you always get super defensive about even though it's actually perfect," he trails off, seemingly lost in thought.

He shakes his head slightly, clearing his throat. "What I'm trying to say is, you looking happy with moon shining down on you and the stars twinkling in your eyes is the most captivating sight," he breathes, causing my heart to beat so hard and fast I can feel it in my throat.

The truth of the matter is that he looks a thousand times more perfect than I ever could and it's not just his looks that beguile me but his undeniable sense of charm and unique personality as well. This boy has so many layers to him, each more appealing and alluring than the last, making it impossible to look away for even a second.

I want to tell him this, to confess my feelings but the words are lodged tightly in my throat so, instead, I bring my eyes to his momentarily before dropping them to scan every inch of his face under the minimal lighting of a nearby lamppost. Without thinking, they fall to his lips, looking more inviting than ever before, their soft pink hue reminding me of a red velvet cupcake or strawberry ice cream.

Involuntarily, I bite my own to keep myself from licking them in anticipation. Slowly, I can feel him leaning in, bringing our bodies even closer together, our faces centimetres apart. His hot breath fans across my face as he pauses in his advance and meets my eyes to see if this is what I want.

It's more than that. This is what I need.

He must find what he's looking for because within moments his eyes drop to my lips and he's leaning in once again.

My mind flashes to before when we were in a similar situation at his house but Nathan interrupted us and when we were at the hospital and my doctor did the same thing. This time is so similar yet there are two key differences:

One. No one interrupts us

Two. Our lips meet.

Words can't begin to describe what I feel in that moment, the overwhelming feeling of bliss and euphoria taking over my body, making me pull Wyatt closer by tugging on his wavy locks.

His lips are gentle and soft as they caress mine passionately and lovingly in a way that has me longing for breath but not willing to let him go, needing him to carry on like he's my last lifeline. His lips are a drug and after just one taste I'm already addicted. I could definitely get used to this being a regular occurrence.

Much too soon, we part for air and Wyatt whispers huskily to me through short gasps of breath. "That was even better than I remember."

"What do you mean?"

He breathes out a quiet laugh as he tucks a stray strand of hair behind my ear and lifts my chin up with his thumb and index finger so I meet his eyes. "You probably don't remember but we actually kissed the night we met," he tells me and I can feel my eyes go wide in shock and confusion.

"It was all on you but you were pretty drunk to be fair. I don't really know what happened but you randomly came up to me and started snogging me like there was no tomorrow. Normally I wouldn't be comfortable with that kind of thing but something about you was different to other girls. Then, right when things were getting heated, you ran away. That was strange seeing as you instigated the whole thing but it only piqued my curiosity more.

I thought that would be the last I ever saw of this stunning girl but you ended up running into me later on that night, literally, and the rest is history," he smiles.

Flashes from that night come rushing back to me and I can't help the flush of my cheeks. "Wait, let me get this straight. We kissed and you never told me? Why didn't you mention that the next day?"

He has that adorable lopsided grin on his face as he replies which makes me melt on the inside, any previous annoyance vanishing instantly. Stupid Wyatt being able to stop me being mad. "Just didn't seem important," he shrugs. "Besides, I liked having my own little secret about you, green eyes."

I just roll my eyes, not sure what to say.

He leans in and kisses my forehead lightly, my whole face heating up even more than before. "You look cute when you blush," he comments and now I just want to die of embarrassment because my cheeks get impossibly pinker.

"Shut up," I say, hiding my face behind my hair as I step around him and get in the car.

"Only if you make me," he smirks, getting in as well.

My mind begins to race as he starts the engine because it's only just dawning on me.

I kissed Wyatt.

I made out with him.

And I liked it...

...a lot.

~\*~\*~

## Chapter 52

Things were different between Wyatt and I over the next few days but in a good way. We hadn't kissed since that evening but there was definitely a flirtier atmosphere between the two of us.

School dragged on as per usual but I was coping and I've finally decided to make a start on the mountain of catch up work I've got to do. I was making my way to the canteen when I heard an all too familiar voice chatting away in the corner.

Ava has been hanging out with Chloe and her minions since the whole fiasco arose and she hasn't spoken a word to me since. She, like them, does cheerleading but she was never the stereotypical type. She wasn't bitchy and didn't bully others to be popular.

She went through her fair share of guys but so many people did that so it wasn't that big of a deal until she decided to sleep with my then boyfriend. Ava has never been a very responsible drunk but that doesn't excuse what she did. River was completely wrong as well but nothing can excuse Ava's behaviour, she was supposed to be my best friend.

Since hanging out with Chloe, I've seen an even bigger change in her behaviour, she's becoming like them. She's been giving the younger years a horrible time and the other day in RS she stuck gum to the bottom of this guy's chair because he wouldn't give her test answers.

I don't know what has gotten into her. Maybe she was secretly like this all along, I've got no clue if I'm honest but, seeing her now, I'm glad we're not friends anymore. People like that aren't worth my time.

I sigh as I walk away from them, Ava and Chloe's obnoxious giggles can be heard from a mile away as they insult someone on Ava's phone.

I'm almost at the canteen doors when a voice calls out my name, effectively halting me in my tracks. I turn around slowly, already knowing who the owner of the voice is.

"Hey, Ari," he says, softly. "How's the arm?"

I shrug. "Not too bad, it could've been a lot worse, I suppose, so can't really complain," I say rigidly, wanting desperately to escape this conversation.

His molten brown seem to pin me to the spot as he talks. "Can we talk, please."

I want to say no, to run and leave this conversation but for some reason I find myself nodding slowly. "Sure, let's go some place more quiet," I say, in a small voice, refusing to meet his eyes as we walk silently to the garden around the back of the school that people hardly ever visit.

We both sit down on the only wooden bench in the garden. People don't come here because it's not well looked after and not many people know about it either so it's always a nice quiet spot to come to when you want to be alone.

"What's up?" I ask, threading my fingers together, my eyes concentrated on my lap.

He seems startled that I chose to break the silence and tries to hide his nervousness by clearing his throat — at least I'm not the only uncomfortable one here. "Well, I know I already said this but I'm sorry for what I said to you. It was cruel and wrong of me."

I reply with a shrug of my shoulders. "It's in the past. What's done is done." I sound calm and composed but I'm anything but. His words were a sharp knife stabbed into my side, twisting in the wound every so often so I couldn't forget.

"That doesn't make it okay though," he persists, a pleading look in his eyes.

"It might not but we can't change what's happened, James. I've forgiven you. It's over."

Forgiven? I never thought I'd say that about him but it's true. He might have caused me a pain second to none but if he hadn't I would've never met Wyatt. Sure, I also wouldn't have gone crazy and got hit by a lorry but I wouldn't trade what I've experienced this year for the world. I've always been a believer of everything happens for a reason, so although I'm still deeply scarred by what happened I wouldn't want it to have played out any other way.

It's slightly different with Ava in the sense that she actually did something which was just plain horrible.

What James said was mean but he wasn't doing anything wrong, per se, because he was only breaking up with me, he just went about it wrongly. So I can forgive him. Ava, on the other hand, hurt Mason and me in a way I doubt I'll ever be able to truly forgive.

He looks like a deer caught in headlights as he pushes his ash brown hair out of his eyes, checking me over to see if he heard correctly. "So we're okay?"

I nod. "Yeah. I'm still not your biggest fan but I think we can move on and bury this in the past. It's over between us once and for all. No bad blood?"

He smiles but there's something almost sad about it. "No bad blood," he agrees. "And for the record, I didn't mean what I said, not a word of it." With that, he dusts off his trousers and walks away and I can feel a massive weight being lifted off my shoulders.

~\*~\*~

The week, as usual, drags on painfully slow. It's not even spring yet and I'm already begging for the summer holidays to start and exams to be over. They're not for a few more months but I'm in no way ready for my A-levels, hell to the no. I wish school would just bugger off.

At least it's finally lunch on Friday which means the week is almost over, halle-fucking-lujah. I sit at my usual table, wedged between Jess and Oliver with Max opposite me.

Oliver looks too happy so I send him a suspicious look. "What's got you in such a chipper mood?" I ask, eating a handful of the chips on my plate.

He shrugs but the smile doesn't leave his face so Chase replies instead, sighing through his nose. "Him and Rebekah are going on a getaway thing this weekend, he's been overly happy all week and it's been driving me nuts," he grumbles.

"You're just jealous because you can't keep a girl for more than one night," Oliver smirks at his twin, blowing a strand of blond hair from his face.

Chase scoffs. "Please, I could if I wanted to but relationships are way too much work. No thanks," he says, with a roll of his eyes.

"You sure about that? I've heard horror stories about you being terrible in bed."

This time Chase growls at his twin, speaking in harsh whispers which just makes Oliver flick him on the side of the head as the two start bickering with one another like usual.

I chuckle at their antics as Jess groans from beside me, her hands pulling at her curly red locks as I turn to face her. "Ari, help me out, Max is being an idiot again," Jess complains loudly, knowing full well Max can hear her.

He glares at her but doesn't say anything, his arms crossed over his chest. "What did he say this time?" I ask slowly, already knowing that it's going to be something stupid.

"Apparently, candles that aren't scented have absolutely no purpose," she says dryly.

I send Max a bewildered look. "You do realise candles were used as a light source well before scented ones even existed, right?"

"Yes, I know that," he pouts. "But what's the point of having one that isn't scented in this day and age?"

"Because some people don't want to change the smell of a room but like the ambience a candle brings," Jess quips, clearly irritated.

Max is about to retort but someone appearing behind me and tapping me on the shoulder stops him. "Hey, green eyes, can I talk to you for a sec?" The voice asks, murmuring in my ear, causing goosebumps on the back of my neck because of the low husky tone.

I nod slowly, excusing myself from Jess and Max before things can get too out of control.

We walk out of the canteen and to a vacated corner by some nearby lockers. "Thanks for that. You just saved me from another one of Jess and Max's stupid arguments."

Wyatt grins, flashing his white teeth. "Anytime," he chuckles. "What were they arguing about?"

"Max thinks unscented candles are pointless," I say with a shake of my head.

Wyatt raises an eyebrow at me in surprise. "He does realise that people used to use them for light long before electricity was even invented, right?"

I raise my hands in the air for a quick moment and drop them back to my sides. "That's what I said," I say in a flabbergasted manner. "Apparently, now that we have electricity they're useless."

"What about a candlelit dinner?" Wyatt asks, his body now impossibly close to mine, his hot breath fanning across my face.

"What about one?" I ask, my voice low and breathy as my fingers trail up Wyatt's shirt.

I can feel the vibrations of his chest as he speaks, his voice deep and clear. "Tonight at eight, I'll pick you up from yours?"

His eyes evaluate me as I think of what to say and I can't help myself as I look to his lips, never becoming less inviting as they shine slightly thanks to Wyatt darting his tongue over them as he watches me.

I lean in, unable to handle the anticipation any longer and peck him quickly on the lips before I'm rudely interrupted by the school bell, indicating the end of lunch. "Sounds like a plan," I whisper quickly before we both disappear in the throng of people rushing to get to class.

~\*~\*~

## Chapter 53

I'm sitting in Wyatt's car, the midnight blue Tesla this time, and lightly tapping my fingers on my thigh in anticipation about where we're going. Like last time, he won't tell me no matter how much I pout and huff, typical.

Although my mind had been screaming at me to go over the top and dress fancy, I had a sneaking suspicion that an airy dress wouldn't be a good idea, besides I've never been one for dresses anyway. So, instead, I'm wearing a lacy black top and light washed blue jeans that are ripped at the knees, along with my favourite pair of black ankle boots; oh and let's not forget the leather jacket covering my otherwise bare shoulders — nice but not over the top.

Wyatt is dressed in a similar fashion, donning a nice shirt and some dark skinny jeans along with his signature black leather jacket, nothing too fancy but on him it looks mouthwatering — I swear this boy could make a bin bag look sexy.

His hair is roughly pushed back as though by accident but I have a feeling he styled it, no one's hair looks that good messy without effort. I watch as he concentrates on the road ahead of him, his electric blue eyes sparkling due to the lampposts illuminating the dark roads.

He catches me staring out of the corner of his eyes and his lips twitch into a smirk. "Like what you see, green eyes?" Wyatt teases.

"Maybe I do," I reply, winking. It's not often I outwardly compliment Wyatt because it would be weird if I randomly told him just how attractive he was every time I saw him but it felt right this time. His eyes seem to light up slightly at my words and I can't help the smile that takes over my features, loving how I seem to have an effect on him.

"Not driving like a maniac today," I note, realising he's actually driving at a leisurely pace for once.

He shrugs nonchalantly. "We've got all the time in the world, green eyes, no need to rush."

A peaceful silence consumes the car after that and after another half hour or so Wyatt finally brings it to a stop. It's quite dark by the time we arrive so I can't see much. We appear to be in a forest, lush green trees as well as leafy brown ones surrounding us.

I follow Wyatt as he turns to the right and starts walking, latching his fingers around my hand, so I match his pace. Something about this place feels strikingly familiar but I can't place it and my mind swirls in a frenzy as I wrack my brain for answers. Alas, nothing — fucking hell, this is going to bug me so much.

Dry leaves crunch beneath our feet as we walk, the chill of the night air biting at our exposed flesh but it doesn't bother me because the heat radiating off Wyatt's hand interlocked with mine is enough to blanket me in warmth.

After what feels like a lifetime — I'm not kidding, my feet feel like they're throbbing from walking that far in heels — Wyatt leads us down a hill near a cliff ledge and memories start rushing back to me.

I've been here before.

This is where Wyatt took me cliff diving, our first ever outing together. Instead of making us jump this time though, he leads us down to the bottom using a steep winding dirt path, that mesmerising lake reflecting the moonlight in ripples waiting for us to reach it.

"I can't believe you brought us back here," I say with a light laugh as we walk, reminiscing in the memories.

Wyatt shrugs, a lazy grin on his face. "I was hoping that you'd recognise this place. I thought it'd be a nice spot for our first official date."

Date. The word rolls off his tongue so smoothly and perfectly it sends shivers down my spine. "So this is a date then?" I tease, a knowing smirk on my face that I learned from Wyatt himself.

He rolls his eyes playfully at me as we reach the end of the path. "I thought snogging you the other day made it pretty clear that I like you, green eyes."

I can feel the thumps of my heart beat in my chest quicken in pace at his words. "Well, I just might like you too, Wyatt," I smile as he leads us towards a stunning cherry blossom tree with a picnic blanket and basket laid out beneath it. I can see him smile broadly at my words from the corner of my eye and that only makes me smile harder, overjoyed that he feels the same.

"You really planned all of this?" I ask softly, staring in awe at the beautiful setting and the thought behind this date; he put so much effort into this. He actually thought back to the first time we went out together, remembered how much I loved this place and had to come here earlier to set up the picnic. My heart swells in my chest at the gesture as we sit down and I can't seem to wipe my already prominent smile from my face.

He shrugs, reaching into the woven basket. "It's nothing really," he dismisses. "But for you, green eyes, I'd do anything."

A light pink dusts my cheeks but I'm hoping it's not visible in the darkness.

"So tell me," I say after a while of light conversation, biting into a chocolate covered strawberry.

"What brought on the sudden change of heart about your feelings towards me?"

Wyatt seems slightly taken aback by my probing question, stopping his inspection of the toffee apple he was about to bite into. "There was never a change of heart, green eyes," he says after a long pause, clearly he's thinking over what he's about to say carefully.

"Something about you has captivated me since we first met. I can't really describe it but I feel drawn to you if that makes sense. I don't think I realised how much I cared until I lost you. Those three months where you disappeared with — River," he grits out the name, his jaw clenching. I reach to hold his hand, rubbing comforting circles with the pad of my thumb until he calms down.

"Sorry — anyway, I think it took losing you to realise how much you mean to me. And then, I lost you again because you were being a reckless idiot," he says, glaring playfully at me and I just roll my eyes, waiting for him to continue. "That happening got me thinking about how unpredictable and short life is. I don't know what's going to happen next year or even tomorrow for that matter but I do know that I want to spend it with you, Aurora."

The use of my actual name shocks me. He never uses it but I definitely love the way it sounds coming from him, his voice annunciating each syllable in a deep rumble.

He scratches the back of his neck, casting his eyes downward, something I've noticed he does when he's nervous. "What I'm trying to say is," he starts, bringing his striking blue eyes back upward to meet mine. "Aurora, will you be my girlfriend?"

I can't help the grin that takes over my features as I process his words, not needing even a second to think of a reply. "Yes," I smile. "I'll be your girlfriend, Wyatt."

The grin on his face matches mine as he leans over towards me and places his lips on mine in a soft kiss. "You've just made me the happiest guy in the world, green eyes."

My face scrunches up a little as we both pull away. "That's pretty corny, especially for the supposed 'bad boy'," I state, still smiling nonetheless.

He rolls his eyes playfully at me, something I think he's picked up from being around me too much. "Well, I think once in a while this 'bad boy'," he mocks, grinning, gesturing to himself. "Can be cheesy but only for you."

"Only for me, eh?" I tease, lifting my head up to peck him on the lips quickly.

Before I can pull away, Wyatt circles his arms around my waist, pulling me closer and onto his lap so I'm straddling him. "You're pretty bold, aren't you?" I state as we both pull away for air.

He smirks knowingly at me, his hands running down my arms, making my leather jacket fall from my shoulders. I shiver at the slight breeze and Wyatt's fingers move to the back of my shoulder blade, delicately running down the tattoo that lies there.

"I've been meaning to ask you," he says, looking at the artwork in thought. "Are your dad and sister the reason you chose this particular tattoo?"

My mind thinks back to when I got this tattoo with Wyatt whilst I was still underage and I chuckle lightly at the memory.

"Yeah, I never wanted to forget, you know? I kind of got it as a tribute to them," I say, smiling sadly at the thought of my family that are no longer with me. I'd thought about it a lot, getting a reminder of them both and nothing seemed more appropriate than a motorcycle, our families greatest passion despite it causing so much heartache.

He stares into my eyes for a few moments, my hand encased tightly in his own. "Yeah, I know what you mean," he says softly, undoing the top few buttons of his shirt. My eyes widen in surprise but before I can ask him what on earth he's doing I spot a tattoo on his chest, right above his heart.

"This was the first tattoo I ever got, to remind me of my family. Even though I haven't got the closest relationship with all of them they still mean the world to me," he tells me, letting me trace the ink with my fingers.

It's a crown, I guess because he's Wyatt King. "You know, that's pretty corny as well. You're more sappy than I thought, King," I tease lightly, easing the heavy atmosphere.

He scoffs at this. "There's so much more you don't know about me, green eyes."

"Is there?" I challenge with a raised brow and he nods. "Then I guess you'll have to show me," I say and he grins, bringing his soft lips to meet mine. We both smile into the kiss, my arms locked around his neck and his tangled in my hair.

"Only if you show me too."

~\*~\*~

# Epilogue

\*Unknown POV\*

Just as the clock strikes one she emerges through the squeaky double doors. She looks so alive, the happiest I've ever seen her, seemingly never not donning a wide smile; bright and joyous, her laughs ringing through the air like melodic bells.

I sigh as I stab the unappetising chicken with my fork, people babbling around me, enjoying having a break between classes. I can't concentrate on their words though, only able to look at the girl who has captivated me for many years as she flicks a strand of her brunette hair from her face.

She doesn't even glance in my direction as she walks across the room to her table and I'm not sure whether to feel hurt or relieved by that.

However, I know I don't have the right to be upset so I choose the latter, sighing out a strained breath as she sits down, immediately leaning her head on his shoulder and chatting animatedly.

I must come across very creepy, watching her, but it's almost impossible to look away. After a few moments, I turn my head with a frown and talk to my friends to distract myself but I can't help my eyes wandering back to her every so often.

~\*~\*~

The next day I do the same again. It's been this way for months now but having him next to her is a new addition. I heard that they started dating recently and I guess that's why she's so happy.

Did I ever make her feel like that?

I hope I did but that doesn't matter anymore because I threw it all away. I lost the centre of my world and it's completely my fault.

I sullenly twirl the spaghetti around my fork, rhythmically drumming my fingers on the table as I do.

I hurt her and now she's hurting me without even realising. I deserve this and I know that. What I did was wrong and it's only right that I pay for my actions but damn does this hurt, a nagging ache in my chest, a vice gripe clamping around my heart getting tighter and tighter.

I wish that I could take it all back, reverse time so she'd be mine again but I can't. I've lost her for good.

If I'd only told her the truth none of this would've happened; she'd be laughing, hand intertwined with mine, not his. She'd be whispering into my ear softly, not his and goosebumps would raise on my skin, not his.

But I couldn't. I was too cowardly to admit what happened, instead, I pushed her away and forced her out of my life. I'm still not over what happened but I realise now that it might've actually been easier if she was by my side. I could've dealt with this with her but, no, I just had to run away and ruin everything.

I know she would've stuck by my side and helped me through this but, I guess, I couldn't let her, or anyone for that matter, see me so vulnerable.

I was too selfish.

I drove her away.

When I saw her on the first day of the new school year, I knew I couldn't tell her what had happened. At the time, I pretended it was so she wouldn't get worried over me but deep down I know it was for my own selfish intentions and in protecting myself I hurt her even more.

I heard about how much she cried over me and that destroyed me beyond words. I never wanted that and I don't think I'll ever forgive myself for hurting the girl that I still love.

What made it even worse was when I kissed Chloe right in front of her. She found out about what had happened over summer somehow and threatened to tell everyone what happened if I didn't go out with her. She'd wanted to date me for a while, seeing as I was the football captain and she was the cheerleading one but I'd always been smitten by my princess and over the years this irked her more and more.

As far as I know, Chloe laid off her after not so long, seeing as she wouldn't give in to her torment, but I know that it must've hurt her more than anything because I kissed the girl who used to bully her because of me, add that to the list of things I can't ever forgive myself for.

When it happened, I saw her run out of the canteen, crying. I wanted so desperately to run after her but I couldn't because I'm still a selfish coward.

When I finally managed to break things off with Chloe it was too late. I tried to get her back. I even almost told her what had happened but I couldn't. It didn't matter though because she was much too angry to listen to me so anything I had tried to say had fallen on deaf ears anyway.

That's when I knew I had truly lost her. I had fucked up, big time.

I tried to approach her several times after that but every time I chickened out. I knew the only way I'd have a slight chance of getting her back was to tell her what happened but I just couldn't.

Every time I so much as thought about it, I had flashbacks to that night, my living nightmare. In the beginning, I would even freeze up whenever I saw a blonde head of hair, I was broken and I couldn't tell anyone, not even her.

I wanted to desperately but my mind wouldn't let me and, to this day, I've never been able to tell a soul.

(!!!Warning, this flashback contains mature and possibly triggering themes so read with caution!!!)

## FLASHBACK

It was summer break and my girlfriend was on holiday with her family so, instead of staying at home bored out of my mind, I went to Jake Holland's party that he was throwing later that evening.

He was a good mate of mine, both of us on the football team and he always threw wild parties, just what I needed to escape these walls of utter boredom.

The night started off great. I had a couple of drinks and had a laugh with my friends. I wished my princess was here because she always made things so much better, always brightening my world, but I had to manage without her.

She'd been sending me pictures every day, telling me about how much she was enjoying Barcelona and all the culture there. I was glad she was happy even if I couldn't be there with her but I knew it was stupid to sulk around just because she wasn't here, so I'd put my phone away for the night, ready to enjoy myself.

Things got a little hazy as the night went on. I drank a fair amount but I was no lightweight so it was fine. I had had a blast as I danced to the deafening music and let all matters leave my mind. As time went on, I started to feel dizzy which was odd. I knew I hadn't drunk enough for that to happen but decided to put my vodka down anyway, just in case.

The loud music was starting to pain my ears so I pushed passed the countless sweaty bodies to go upstairs and get some peace and quiet, away from all the noise to help prevent my oncoming headache.

My movements became sluggish as I walked up the stairs and into Jake's guest bedroom but I shook off the thought and decided to lie down. I was sure I'd be fine in a few hours so I closed my eyes, letting darkness consume my vision.

I didn't wake up when the door to the guest room creaked open, only when I felt cold fingertips on my skin did I force my eyes open. My vision was blurry and I couldn't make out who the other figure in the room was but I was sure it was a girl.

She slowly got onto the bed and swung her left leg over my hips so she was straddling me. I tried to push her off, getting worried about where this was going but I couldn't move my arms, they were like dead weights, limp by my sides.

She ran her manicured fingers up my chest, pushing my top upwards in the process. My eyes went wide as I thrashed about, doing my best to shake her off but she wouldn't budge, seeing as I could barely move my limbs.

"No! No!" I tried to shout but my voice came out slurred.

She tilted her head downwards and put her finger to my lips, her long blonde hair scratching my face. "Shhhhhh," she said in a low voice, almost growling. "I know you want this, just let it happen."

I shook my head furiously or at least tried to. My breathing was heavy and laboured as she ripped my shirt from my body, her eyes hungry.

They were a cold brown colour and something about them seemed eerily familiar but with my vision fogged over and the minimal lighting in the dark room, I couldn't place them.

I couldn't do anything. My body wouldn't move and my mind was going numb and by this point, I knew I had been drugged so any attempt to escape was futile.

She left wet 'kisses' down my chest until she reached my jeans and I could feel the tears in my eyes as she unbuttoned them and slid them down my thighs, leaving me in my boxers.

'Please, stop,' I begged with my eyes but she ignored me, her blonde hair obscuring her face from my view as she tore my last hope of modesty away.

By this point, the tears were burning as they ran down my cheeks in a never-ending waterfall, knowing all hope was lost.

It was over.

She peeled away her own clothing, revealing her naked body to me but I couldn't bear to look at it as she carried on with her mission, making my very being crumble away until there was nothing left but a pile of damaged fragments.

It felt like hours had passed before she left, leaving me stark naked in Jake's guest room and strutting away like nothing ever happened. Throughout the whole nightmare, my tears never stopped falling as I watched what was happening to me in horror, completely helpless and at her mercy.

When I finally began to regain control of my limbs, I rolled into a ball and clutched the bedsheets tightly around myself, wishing my princess was here to hold me forever but also internally flinching at the idea of anyone, even her, touching me ever again.

The dreaded memories flooded my mind and I couldn't help the tremors that went down my spine. I still don't know who did that to me but because of what happened I couldn't bear to be around my princess any longer. The idea of anyone getting close to me made me want to vomit.

The only way I could think to escape everyone was to lie and tell her the farthest things from the truth. I had to hurt her beyond everything because I just couldn't stand to be near her or girls in general anymore. Whenever any were near I would flinch and back away, the memories still fresh and painful.

That was wrong and I wish I'd dealt with it differently but it's much too late for that.

She would've understood and given me the space I needed to heal and although I doubt I'll ever be able to fully move on, I'm at a point where her touch would be fine, helpful even.

Sadly, things just didn't go right and I lost her completely of my own accord but, in a way, I guess I'm glad I did. It wouldn't have been fair to place that heavy emotional burden on her. I'd be hurting her more by doing that, flinching away whenever she got too close. I can only imagine the hurt that would've brought her.

Besides, she looks happy now, more so than I've ever seen before.

He makes her happier than I ever could've and, as much as it pains me, that's okay. I just want her to be happy, even if it's not with me.

If you love someone you have to let them go and after she forgave me for the lies I spewed her way, I knew that I had to move on, or at least leave her be. So even though I lost the love of my life, it's alright because she's happy now and that's all that matters.

I watch as he brushes some hair from her face with his fingers and she blushes, a dazzling grin on her face. Her friend then whispers something into her ear and she gasps before hitting him on the arm lightly and throwing a piece of broccoli at him. He laughs and throws a carrot right back.

There's a daring glint in her eyes as she flings her mash potato at him and their whole table breaks out into a food fight, followed closely by everyone in the room.

She laughs, dodging a pasta pot that is thrown her way, elated and carefree. Looking at her now, it's so obvious and I don't see how anyone could think differently because she's definitely not boring, not in the slightest.

THE END