

“The Wedding”

an Ava & Chase short story

*

AVA

*

“I'm not going to freak out. *I. Am. Not. Going. To. Freak. Out.*”

Okay.

I was freaking out.

As in, my stomach had wedged itself somehow into my esophagus and I felt perpetually sweaty and cold at the same time. Oh, and that stomach in the throat thing? Yeah, well, it was making it really hard to breathe. Meaning... I couldn't.

It wasn't that I didn't want it. Oh, my god, how I wanted it. I wanted it more than anything else in the world.

To be married to Dr. Chase Hudson?

Hell freaking yes.

You'd have to be, well, a lesbian or asexual or something to not want that.

I wasn't a lesbian.

And I wasn't asexual.

So, yeah, I wanted to marry him.

In fact, it had been the only thing on my mind since he had asked me eight months before. Eight months of thinking about him watching me walk down an aisle, of him lifting my veil, of him slipping his ring on my finger while making me promises I knew

he would keep, of him pulling me up against his chest, my safest place in the world, and kissing me to seal the deal.

But, well, somehow I had managed to *not* think about the fact that it wouldn't just be him watching me walk down the aisle. No. There was going to be an entire room full of people who would watch me walk down the aisle. And, knowing me, I would probably trip and make an idiot of myself. I would likely stutter and stammer my way through my vows. Or, *oh god*, go mute. Jesus. That could totally happen. Granted, it hadn't happened in almost two years. But still, it was a possibility.

“Shit. Oh, shit shit shit,” I groaned, pacing the floor in Shay and Jake's apartment, careful not to step on any of the eleven-million toys that belonged to a very recently mobile sixteen month old Ranger.

“Girl, you need a drink,” Shay said, watching me as she leaned against my old bedroom door that now belonged to Ranger, her arms crossed over her chest.

“It's ten o'clock in the morning,” I protested, stepping on a stuffed dinosaur that let out a high-pitched squeal. I winced, turning back to Shay. “Sorry,” I said, knowing it just took her twenty minutes, three bedtime stories, and two songs to get Ranger to finally settle down.

Shay waved a hand. “He starts crying, he's his father's problem,” she said, moving across the living room to the locked liquor cabinet. “And, sure, it's ten in the morning. But it is ten in the morning on your wedding day. You're allowed to have a shot of tequila to calm your nerves.”

“I think I need an elephant tranquilizer to calm my nerves,” I said, but accepted the shot and threw it back, letting it burn its way down and settle with a warm feeling in my stomach.

“You love Dr. Sex,” Shay said.

“Yes.”

“He loves you.”

“Yes.”

He did. Oh, god he did. It still felt wondrous to realize that, to know that the sweetest, sexiest, and well... *yummiest* man I had ever met actually loved shy, stumbling, bumbling me.

“He wants you to put on a white dress, walk down an aisle, and promise to be his forever.”

“Yes.” Damn her and her rationality.

“He wants to put another ring on your finger and he wants to give you his last name.”

Ava Hudson.

Mrs. Hudson.

Okay. I felt like a middle schooler scribbling her name and her crush's name on her notebook. But, damn, Ava Hudson did sound good.

“Yes.”

“Then he wants to lay a big wet one on you- staking his claim in front of everyone you know.”

Everyone you know.

Oh, god.

I made a weird croaking sound, sitting down on the couch and cradling my head in my hands.

“Jesus, Shay, what the fuck did you do?” Jake asked, coming out from the shower with a towel slung low on his hips.

It had been so long since I lived with him. I forgot how comfortable he was with his own near (or full) nudity. Not that he didn't have the body for it, he totally did. But still. It was weird. For three years, the only man I had seen nearly (and fully) naked was Chase.

I felt a blush creep up on my cheeks as I glanced away from him.

“What are you talking about? I didn't do anything,” Shay objected, raising a brow.

“She's more freaked out than she was when I went into the shower,” Jake pressed, moving over and sitting down next to me (I repeat... sitting down on the couch next to me. In a towel. Still glistening from the shower).

“That ain't my fault. People gettin' married get jitters. Ava, being Ava, gets full on fucking end of the world panic attacks.”

“Fuck, Shay, she's sitting right here,” Jake said, big-eyeing her to try to get his point across.

“What? She knows she's a mess. Right?” she asked, addressing me.

“Right,” I agreed because, well, I was a mess.

“Should we call Chase?” Jake asked.

“What? No!” I screeched, my voice reaching hysterical proportions.

They couldn't call Chase. They couldn't tell him that I was freaking out about marrying him. I didn't want him getting the wrong idea. I totally, absolutely wanted to marry him.

Just... you know... in private. With like just the two of us. And a preacher. Hell, the preacher was even negotiable. Why couldn't people just marry themselves?

“Ava,” Jake said, snapping me out of my own little internal freak out.

“Yeah?” I asked, deep breathing.

“Let me call Chase. He can talk you down.”

So Jake had a bit of a man-crush on Chase. Most days, I found it kind of endearing. Jake had this whole looking up to Chase like a big brother thing going on and it was sweet. But Jake also sort of believed that Chase could fix everything. That, apparently, included his anxiety-ridden fiance on their wedding day.

But this was one thing I couldn't let Chase fix.

I needed to get myself together.

“No,” I said, making my voice even. “No. I've got this. I'll be fine.”

“See? She says she's fine. Now go get your suit on and get over there and take care of the groom. I got the bride,” Shay said, nodding for emphasis.

Jake stood, shrugging. “I'll bring Ranger so you two hens can cluck and talk about wedding night lingerie, or blow job tips, or whatever the fuck chicks talk about.”

“His suit is hanging on the back of the door,” Shay said, completely breezing past the lingerie and blow job comment, as was her nature.

“You know, I think now that he's walking, he can totally be the ring bearer.”

“He'd swallow or drop the rings,” Shay said, rolling her eyes.

“So we put them on a chain around his neck or something.”

“Like those freaks do when they have their dogs be the ring bearers?” Shay asked, eyes bugging and I could feel an argument brewing. “Our son is not a fucking dog.”

“Oh for fuck's sake, woman. It was just an idea. There's already no flower girl. I thought...”

I blocked out the rest of the good-natured bickering because, well, the blood was rushing through my ears. But I did notice Jake smiling behind Shay's back as she flung her hands out, pacing around the kitchen, getting herself nice and worked up. He liked her worked up because the make-up sex was off the charts. I knew that because Shay told me. It was the reason she didn't mind all the arguing either. When she told me, I half wanted to pick a fight with Chase just to see if it worked for us too, but I never got up the courage.

I walked through my old apartment, familiar but somehow not as well, making my way to the bathroom and taking a long, scalding hot shower which in no way lessened my nerves. But I was hellbent on going through the motions as if I wasn't inwardly wondering how pissed Chase would be if he got a call from me from, say, Bora Bora, lounging on the beach and drinking myself silly on whatever local drink the Bora Borians (was that what they were called?) drank.

I figured he wouldn't be pissed at all, just worried. That only made me feel guilty for even thinking it as I carefully blew my hair straight and slipped into the gaudy hot pink tracksuit that Shay got specially made with “Property of Chase” written across the ass. I had every plan of tying the zip-up shirt across the hips. Granted, it had the same

phrase across the boobs of the t-shirt I had to wear underneath, but I figured that was slightly less embarrassing than having it on my butt.

“Girl, let me in,” Shay said, knocking on the door. I opened it to find her holding out a drink to me, already sipping from her own. “More jitter juice,” she said, not looking away until I took a long swig.

When Shay said 'juice', she meant a splash of cranberry and about a cup and a half of vodka. It burned in all the wrong ways, but after a few minutes, I felt myself calming marginally.

“We doing your makeup here or at the hall?”

“Hall,” I decided, thinking it would probably be a good idea to get my ass there before I started taking the Bora Bora idea seriously. Once I got to the hall, there was no way I could sneak out without creating a huge scene which was almost (but not quite) as terrifying as the idea of the ceremony.

“Aight,” Shay said, finishing her drink and grabbing her makeup bag (and by 'bag' I meant 'suitcase') off the counter. “Let's get a move on. Our dresses should be there. Let's go get you married to Dr. Sex already.”

*

CHASE

*

“She's freaking out, isn't she?” I asked as Jake made a grab for Ranger who thought my record collection looked like Frisbees.

“Ah,” Jake said, looking torn.

“She's freaking out,” I concluded, knowing he didn't want to break Ava's trust (or get on Shay's shit list).

I wasn't surprised. If anything, I was surprised it took her so long to start spiraling. All night last night she had been calm as a cucumber, prattling on about scuba diving and wind surfing. I had no fucking plans on scuba diving or wind surfing, planning instead on spending every waking moment buried deep inside her- on the beach, in the

pool, in the hot tub, on the pier, so I kept my mouth shut and let her talk. She woke up early, gave me a pre- tooth brushing close-mouthed kiss, and told me she had to get to Shay's.

Not a hint of anxiety.

I should have known.

But even if I had, there's no way she would have talked to me about it. She would think that I would think that she didn't want to marry me. Which was ridiculous. She did. I knew she did. She would just prefer if we could do it at the Justice of the Peace.

I could have given that to her. It would have been the kinder, more understanding thing to do. But the fact of the matter was, I didn't want small and private. I wanted the whole fucking world to know that I was marrying her. I wanted everyone I knew and cared about to see her in a white dress, giving herself to me. It was selfish, but it was something I wasn't willing to give in on. Not that Ava would have fought me on it.

“Is is bad?” I asked.

“Depends on your definition of bad,” Jake said, shrugging. He was one of the few people who understood her scale of panic as well as I did, having lived with her for so long himself. While I had written him off at first as a clueless roommate, he had actually paid a fair amount of attention to her. “Is it as bad as that first night you two slept together or how bad she was when your sessions were over? No. She's somewhere around when she first figured out she had feelings for you. I dunno... a six or seven.”

Six or seven wasn't bad. It wasn't good, but at least she wasn't a flight risk.

“Alright,” I said, checking my pocket for the rings for the fifth time.

“Shay texted that they were on their way to the hall like fifteen minutes ago. Figure that's a step in the right direction.” He hefted Ranger up onto one of his shoulders, a hand at his belly and a hand at his back. “Think she's gonna walk into the room, see all those people, and dart?”

Leave it to Jake to be blunt.

“Well,” I said, grabbing my keys, “only one way to find out.”

*

AVA

*

Okay. It was okay.

I sat down at the vanity as Shay flounced (yes, flounced) around me, mascara wand at the ready. “I really think we should revisit the fake eyelash idea. Just a couple individuals even.”

“Chase doesn't like fake eyelashes,” I said, thinking of the time he took me to a club while we were still doctor/patient and I had worn them. He had accused me of not looking like me. As much as I maybe didn't want to *be* me right then and there, getting ready for my ceremony, I certainly wanted to look like me. For Chase.

“Men don't notice shit like fake eyelashes,” Shay insisted, tucking the mascara away and reaching for something that was apparently going to give me a 'dewy' look.

“Chase does.”

Chase noticed everything. One morning, two months into dating, I had gotten my period, but hadn't said anything because, well, ick, but I had pressed my hand to my crampy belly as I sipped my much-needed coffee. He noticed. He noticed and then he came home with a selection of chocolate bars and a huge greasy delicious pizza. Then, later that night, he had snuggled me as I curled up with my heating pad.

God, but I did want to marry him.

The door swung open and my eyes landed on Jake who was shaking his head. “Your mother is here,” he said in the tone he reserved for situations he was trying to ease me into. “She wants to come in and see *the bride*. Her words, not mine,” he said, shaking his head at me.

“Oh god,” I groaned. Okay. I loved my mom. I did. That being said, my mother was a bit, well, *much*. As in, I needed to move two states away from her to keep her from dropping in every other day and lecturing me about needing to shake off the anxiety, find myself a man, and settle down. It went without saying that she was beyond happy that I had landed myself a guy ('a doctor, no less!') and might give her some much hinted at (read: badgered me about) grand babies.

I looked up to Shay with my big eyes and she gave me a shrug. “She's your mom.

It's your wedding day. You have to let her in.”

Damn it.

She was right.

“Am I done?” I asked, gesturing toward my face.

Shay stepped back, head tilted to the side, giving me a serious inspection. “Yeah, you're done.”

I attempted a deep breath, but it got caught a bit on the end. “Alright. Send her in,” I said, nodding at Jake as Shay followed him to the door.

Ready or not...

“I never thought I'd see the day when little Anxious Ava walked down an aisle!” my mom said, bursting in, arms spread, smile huge.

Yeah, um, definitely *not ready*.

The stomach in the throat thing came back, stronger, feeling like it was completely cutting off my airway. My hand moved up to my throat as my mother rushed toward me, kissing my cheeks, and pulling an ottoman over to sit on in front of me. She was talking, but I wasn't listening over the whooshing sound in my ears and the suddenly quite alarming slamming of my pulse in my throat, temples, and wrists.

Bora Bora.

I needed to freaking get to Bora Bora. Right that minute.

*

CHASE

*

Mae walked up to me, a huge smile on her face. “You look nice,” she said, reaching out and squeezing my arm. It was the closest to a hug she would ever get. I learned, after Ava kept pressing the issue, to stop trying to convince Mae that she should give dating a try. If she said she was content, fulfilled, happy, then who was I to say otherwise?

“Thanks for coming Mae,” I said, giving her a small smile.

“Of course. I would never miss this. I love Ava. And I love you two together. You're good for each other.”

Yeah we were.

“I'm sorry Eddie isn't around to see this,” she said, making me visibly start. It wasn't that he hadn't been on my mind on and off all day, he had, but hearing someone else call it, it made the dull ache suddenly sharpen. “He would have been so proud to stand up with you.”

He would have, but there were simply some things that could never be.

“I have someone standing up with me,” I said, nodding over her shoulder at Jake who was making a beeline toward me, a slight tightness around his eyes that didn't belong there.

I'd made the decision to have Jake be my best man for several reasons: One, because while I was close with a few of my other foster brothers, no one came close to how tight I was with Eddie. Two, Jake was Ava's friend. As such, we spent a lot of time together, getting to know one another, sharing a part of our lives. Three, well, I figured Ava would be less spooked to walk up to me if I didn't have a virtual stranger standing with me.

“What's up, Jake?” I asked as he rounded on Mae, giving her a small smile.

“Just figured I'd let you know that Ava's mom has her cornered in her dressing room. She's, ah, not exactly happy about it.”

More like she was on the verge of bolting. “Jake, can you show Mae to her seat?” I asked, watching as he nodded, gave her one of his old playboy smiles, and offered her his arm. I felt myself straighten as I watched Mae do the same. She didn't do physical contact with men. She hardly allowed my hand on her arm. She almost never reached out to touch me. That wasn't her. She simply didn't do that. And she had known me since she was eighteen. But then the strangest thing happened, after only the briefest of hesitations, Mae wrapped her hand around Jake's arm and let him lead her away.

I paused to watch for a minute before shaking it off to be thought about at another time as I made my way toward Ava's dressing room.

I liked Ava's mom. She was sweet and welcoming and always had Ava's best interest at heart. That being said, she was very in-your-face and emphatic, always making Ava tuck herself back inside her shell like a little girl. Knowing that Ava was already struggling, having her mom cornering her and saying god-knew what, well that was simply a recipe for disaster... and me standing alone at the altar.

I knocked softly but went in without waiting for a response.

“Oh, Chase!” her mother said, hopping up off her ottoman and walking toward me, all smiles.

“Hey, Cathy,” I said, letting her rub her cheek against mine. “Mind if I have a minute with Ava?”

“Isn't it bad luck?” she asked, lowering her eyes at me.

“Not if she's not in her dress,” I said, leading her none-too-subtly toward the door.

“Oh, alright,” she said as I stood in the doorway.

“Have Jake lead you to your seat,” I suggested.

“Oh, that boy,” she said with a motherly smile before touching my cheek and moving away.

I closed the door, twisting the lock, before turning back to look at Ava. Her hand was at her throat, fingers digging into the delicate flesh. My ring was on that hand, the diamond flashing brilliantly. I moved over toward her, taking up the ottoman her mother had vacated.

“Ava, baby,” I said, reaching for her hand and pulling it away from her throat, seeing the little crescent-shaped indentations in her skin. “Breathe, okay?”

Her brown eyes found my face, but they were wide and panicked. “I want to marry you!” she said, almost hysterically.

“I know you do, sweetheart,” I said, squeezing her hand.

“But I really, *really* want to be in Bora Bora right now.”

I felt my brows draw together as I fought the twitching of my lips. “Bora Bora?”

“With a *lot* of alcohol,” she clarified, sucking in a shallow breath.

I let the smile spread on my face as I reached my free hand out to stroke her cheek. “Tomorrow at this time, baby, we will be on a beach and you can have all the alcohol you want.”

“That doesn't help me in this moment, though, does it?” she asked, rolling her eyes at me.

I chuckled, shaking my head. “Alright, enough of that,” I said, reached out for her and hauling her toward me until her knees landed on either side of my hips.

“Chase, what are you...” she started to object when there was a loud banging on the door.

“Not now,” I growled, feeling Ava squirm around on top of me, trying to move away, a blush creeping up on her cheeks.

“Chase?” Shay's voice called, sounding a mix of surprised and amused.

“Give us half an hour, Shay,” I called back. A half an hour was not nearly enough time for what I had planned, but it was going to have to do.

“You need to be at the altar in twenty. I need to get her dressed in fifteen.”

“Fine. Fifteen,” I said through gritted teeth.

I could hear Shay laugh. “That's one way to calm her down,” she said and I heard her retreat.

“Calm me down?” Ava asked, brows drawing together.

“Mmmhmm,” I murmured, reaching out to stroke her hair off her neck and letting my lips land there.

“Oh,” she murmured, already sounding breathless.

“Yeah,” I said, smiling against her neck, “*oh.*”

*

AVA

*

His hands moved to my hips, pressing them down to his lap so I could feel his cock straining against his slacks. My hips moved of their own volition, rubbing against his hardness.

It didn't take much. With Chase, it was always easy. All he had to do was chuckle, look at me with those soft eyes, call me pet names, breathe... *exist.*

I was always ready for him.

There were times, quiet moments here and there, when I still marveled at how far I had come, how different I was. Not fixed. There were more miracles in mental illness. But I was better. I was calmer, more confident. I didn't just suffer through physical contact, I reveled in it. I couldn't get enough.

Chase gave that to me.

I took it. Happily.

Frequently.

And, apparently, that also meant in my dressing room in my wedding hall on my wedding day. In fact, twenty minutes before I was meant to walk down an aisle.

Old Anxious Ava wouldn't have been able to even think that thought, let alone let her head fall back on a sigh as Chase's tongue slid down the side of her neck.

New, improved, though not perfect Ava? Yeah, she was loving it.

“You wet for me, baby?” he asked, tilting his head to look up at me.

“Always,” I said honestly, my hand running over the scruff on his cheek, the scruff I had expressly asked him not to shave for the ceremony. I gave him no fake eye-lashes Ava- his Ava. He gave me no shave for three days Chase – my Chase.

“Thank Christ,” he said, pushing me up until I stood. His hands wasted no time, going to the waistband of my pants and pulling them and my panties down. “I have fifteen minutes to make you come hard enough to forget that anything in this world exists besides me and my cock.”

Well then.

Okay.

His hand grabbed my knee, pulled it up on the ottoman, cocked to the side, and used his other hand to grab my ass and pull me forward toward him. Toward his *mouth*. His tongue slipped up my cleft, finding my clit quickly and working over it in small circular swipes until my thighs started shaking so hard that I had to put my hands down on his shoulders and *press* to hold up my own weight.

His hand moved up between us and slipped inside, curling, stroking over my g-spot with practiced perfection.

“Oh my god,” I groaned, my fingers digging into his shoulders. Close. I was so close. “No!” I shrieked when he pulled away, a devilish smile playing at his lips as he suddenly knifed up, grabbed me, and pushed me down onto the ottoman. My forearms hit it as I let out a quiet 'humph' at the impact.

Chase's hands sank into my hipbones hollows, using them to drag my ass upward toward him. I was released, heard a zip, felt a rush of wetness pool between my legs in anticipation.

“Touch yourself for me, baby,” he commanded and my hand moved between my thighs without hesitation. He made a growling sound and I knew he was watching me work my clit like he had just done with his tongue. “Good girl,” he said, the palm of his hand kneading my ass for a moment as he watched. “Better hold on, baby,” he warned and my hands moved out to grab the edge of the ottoman. Chase could (and did) give it to me a lot of ways. We made love. We teased. We had kinky, inventive sex. But when Chase wanted to fuck, he meant hard. When he told me to hold on, he meant I would be off the ottoman and on the floor if I didn't. So I held the hell on. “Give it to me, Ava,” he said and I could feel as he shifted his cock toward me.

I arched my ass up to him like he wanted and his cock slid up my cleft to my clit, pressing hard, before moving down to the entrance, pausing, then slamming inside to the hilt.

Nothing, nothing in the world would ever feel as good as he felt inside me.

“Fucking perfect,” he growled, his hand snaking up my back to slip into my hair, twisting close to the root and pulling. It didn't even occur to me to tell him not to ruin my hair for the wedding pictures. All I could think was *harder*.

Then, as if reading my thoughts, he pulled harder.

His cock slammed into me over and over, hitting deep, arching up, giving me that delicious pinch that drove me closer and closer to the edge.

“That's it,” he said, his voice gravely, “come for me.”

I bit into my lip, trying to keep myself from screaming out his name (I will add that I failed miserably at this) as my orgasm ripped violently through my system, a fast, deep pulsating sensation that felt never ending. Chase thrust through until my body felt languid, spent. The hand not in my hair clamped down on my shoulder, pulling me backward as he slammed forward, buried deep, and growled out my name.

“Fuck baby,” he said a moment later, moving away from me and I fell full-body onto the ottoman. I heard a zip and the sound of water running before he came back to me, rolled me onto my back, and cleaned me up. He moved away again and I finally had the presence of mind to yank up my panties and pants before he came back to sit next to my body, looking down at me. “Next time I'm inside you,” he said, his eyes going soft and I felt my heart skip, “you're going to be my wife.” His hand moved to my cheek, stroking across it lovingly. “So I am going to send Shay in here to get you in your dress and you are going to walk down the aisle to me, looking at me how you're looking at me right now...”

“How am I looking at you?” I asked, not able to help myself.

His lips turned up slightly as his thumb stroked over my lips. “Like I'm the only fucking man in the world.”

My heart swelled in my chest as my hand wrapped itself around his wrist, squeezing. “You look at me like I'm the only woman in the world,” I said, because it was true.

“Baby, you are,” he said simply, moving to stand up. “I'll see you in fifteen minutes, yeah?”

I tilted my head to watch him stand in the doorway and, just like that, the anxiety slipped away. “Yeah,” I agreed on a meaningful whisper.

“Fuck me,” he said, giving me a lip twitch and then he was gone.

I barely got two minutes before the door flew open and Shay slammed it shut, locking it, while somehow simultaneously whipping her shirt off. She was halfway out of her pants as she grabbed her bridesmaid dress (black, tight, tasteful with a hint of slut. Shay had picked it, obviously). “Thank god he can give it to you fast because now we have to fix whatever damage he did to your makeup and,” she said, snapping the strap

into place on her shoulder as she finally looked down at me, “your hair,” she said, with a head shake and a knowing smile. “Guess you ain't done with all that sex therapy,” she mused, laughing.

I looked up at the ceiling, my hand going to my heart that felt a little too big for my chest, and I smiled. Huge.

*

CHASE

*

Ava had planned things perfectly. Well, perhaps it was more accurate to say that Shay did, seeing as those two worked out the arrangements together and when Shay was involved, 'together' usually meant that Ava sat somewhere nearby, shell shocked by the aggressive certainty Shay approached everything in life. Whoever did it, it was perfect, simple, elegant.

The formal white material draped chairs had been removed and replaced with rustic wooden ones. The ones lining the aisle had simple white bows attached to the side with a few white flowers sticking out. The alter was draped with white curtains tied with the same bows and flowers as the chairs.

Nothing crazy. Nothing overstated. But beautiful.

Shay may have planned it, but it had Ava written all over it.

Jake walked up behind me, clamping a reassuring hand on my shoulder for a moment as the music slowly started to play and Shay appeared in the doorway. Ava insisted on not having a typical wedding party. She wanted Shay, I wanted Jake, so that was all we had.

Shay looked gorgeous as always, her black dress hugging her in all the right places and it was obvious she had been the one to pick it out. She kept her makeup simple and held simply three of the flowers that matched all the others in the room, tied with a white bow. She winked at me as she got close, gave Jake a rare soft look, and

moved to her position across from me, half turned to watch the aisle.

I turned as well as the music changed. It wasn't The Wedding March like Shay had tried to insist because Ava had surprisingly (and quite stubbornly) stood her ground about it. It was a classical version of the song that had played when I first made love to her. When I found that out, I had spent the entire fucking night showing her how much I appreciated her remembering things like that.

I didn't know how most grooms felt waiting for their fiances to step into that doorway, but I knew how I felt. I felt an overwhelming sense of comfort. I felt my heart pick up its pace, but in excitement, not anxiety. Everything felt so fucking *right*.

Then a visibly shaking Ava stepped into the doorway, hands clenched so tight around her flowers that her skin had went white.

All I could think was: perfect.

She was fucking perfect.

Her gown was simple, as I would have expected. It had small straps and a low but tame cut over the bust, tight, then flaring out in some kind of wispy material that seemed to float around her as she took her first two tentative steps into the room.

Her eyes were on me, wide, panicked, but she was moving.

She was halfway down the aisle when I lost her eyes. Her gaze moved from me to Shay, then Jake, then away toward the crowd. And she froze. As in *froze*. She stopped dead in the center of the aisle, looking around, her breath catching and she made no effort to try to suck in any air.

Fuck.

I knew I was supposed to stand there, wait for her to come to me. That was how it worked. But I also knew that there was no way in fucking hell I could watch her struggling and do nothing.

I didn't even register the odd looks from our audience as I moved off the altar and made my way up the aisle toward her. Her eyes were glued to her mother who was giving her huge, disbelieving eyes.

"Baby," I said, my hand moving to the side of her neck and her gaze snapped to mine at the contact. "Breathe," I reminded her. Her hands fell to her sides as she flung herself at my chest, her face resting against her safest place in the world as my arms went around her and squeezed her tight.

"I'm so so so so sorry," she murmured against my suit, her voice shaky.

"For what?" I asked, my hands moving up and down her spine. "You're here, marrying me."

"You're not supposed to have to come and pull me down the aisle," she said, quietly enough for only me to hear.

Around us, the music paused then started again and I knew that was Shay's doing. She was giving us our moment without things getting too awkward.

"I'm not dragging you down the aisle," I murmured against the side of her hair. "I am hugging my beautiful fiance before I slip my ring on her finger." Her arms squeezed me tighter as she finally took a deep breath. I waited for her to take another before I loosened my hold enough to be able to look down at her. "You gonna come and marry me?" I asked, giving her a small smile.

Her cheeks went a little pink as she gave me a shy, slightly wobbly smile. "I love you," she said simply, but the words were heavy. They always were when she said them.

"I love you too, baby," I said and my words were heavy too, like they always were.

Her arms fell from around me and I let mine fall as well, clasping her hand and leading her the last few feet to the altar. She offered the minister a tight smile before her eyes fell on me and never looked away, like I was the only man in the world, because to her, I was. And now I always would be.

*

AVA

*

"You may now kiss the bride."

A slow, devilish smile spread across Chase's face and I knew I was in for it: a big, wet, whopper of a kiss, right in front of everyone the two of us knew. And, strangely, with the weight of his band on my finger, I couldn't care less about our audience. He reached for me slowly, one of his hands snaking across my hips, the other moving to grab the side of my neck. As soon as he had a hold, he hauled me against his body, my hands slamming into his shoulders as he held me plastered to him, looking down at me with soft eyes a moment before they heated and he crushed his lips down to mine.

It was a kiss that seared, that made me forget where I ended and he started, that made time stand still, that made me forget anything else existed in the entire universe. It was a kiss that made me his, forever, and made him mine, forever.

He led me back down the aisle, people cheering and clapping and wishing us well. I heard none of it. I had eyes and ears and body only for Chase.

He pulled me back to our dressing room and slid inside me, soft and sweet, as my husband. He made meaningful love to his wife for the first time and it was sweet enough that I felt the tears stream down my cheeks after I came and his lips kissed them away as he came.

Then Shay had to be called in to, yet again, fix my makeup... and my hair.

“Girl, I'd be bitching if I didn't just get some myself,” she said, wiggling her eyebrows. “Thank god these halls are full of coat and cleaning closets. And after that fucking wedding, girl,” she said, wiping at my smudged mascara, “trust me, Jake and I weren't the only ones getting our romance on.”

Freshened up, Chase led me down to the reception where we danced to a song he picked and it was the first song from the first playlist I ever put on. Coffeehouse music. But it was a soft and sweet, crooning singer-songwriter love song and it just... fit.

We were making our rounds at the tables, Chase with a possessive arm around my hips, half hauling my body against his as he did most of the talking, when the minister caught us.

“You know, I never got a chance to ask,” he started, face animated and open, “how did you two meet?”

I turned slightly, looking up at Chase as he looked down at me, light in both of our eyes before we threw our heads back and laughed.

It was right in that moment that the photographer snapped a picture of us.

It was the picture we had framed and hung over our fireplace.

It was the picture I stared at every morning, sometimes with Chase wrapped around me from behind, sometimes with our daughter on my hip, sometimes with our grandbabies at my feet.

Always, *always* with love swelling my heart so full it was a wonder it didn't explode.