

A SEATTLE MAVERICKS NOVEL

A Play For The Heart



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*for every person out there searching for love as true as that
between Westley and Buttercup*



CHAPTER 1

“I’ve been dying to tell ya, want you all to myself”

Wish on an Eyelash—Mallrat

Henry

There isn’t a single moment in my life where I’ve been more nervous than I am right now. Not the first time I started in a football game. Not my first kiss with a girl named Shannon in the 7th grade. Not even the time I was pulled over by a cop for speeding when I was sixteen. My palms are slick with sweat. My knee bounces up and down beneath the table. The movement is so powerful that scientists everywhere probably wonder why there’s a small earthquake in Chicago. My best friend gently rests her hand on my knee, halting the movement and thus saving the entire city of Chicago from Earthquake Henry. My heart rate begins to slow with the

physical contact, and pulling air into my lungs becomes an easier task.

“Are you alright?” Sawyer whispers under her breath.

I wouldn't describe how I'm feeling as 'alright,' more like one moment away from sweating through my expensive suit. It's easy to assume my jitters are from the lights, cameras, and uncertainty that tonight will bring. I've imagined myself sitting at a table, surrounded by my family at the NFL draft since I was little. But now that I'm here, it's difficult to enjoy it. My body is hyper-aware of Sawyer sitting beside me, who's not-so-subtly reminding me of her presence every time I get a whiff of her perfume.

Tonight is the night. I continue to remind myself of that as I swipe my palms against my trousers in an attempt to calm my nerves. Tonight, after I'm drafted—fingers crossed—the game plan is to finally tell my best friend that I've been in love with her for years. Actually, scratch that. I'm going to tell her I am moderately in *like* with her. The big L-O-V-E might scare her away.

“A bit nervous,” I reply, gulping down the rum and coke in front of me to help settle the churning feeling in my gut.

“There's nothing to be nervous about, Henry,” a bright smile breaks out across her face. “Any team would be lucky to have you. You're Mr. Never-drops-a-pass,” she jokes, nudging me with her shoulder.

My heart skips a beat in my chest with that smile, the same way it did when I picked her up tonight. The lights from the

theater shine against Sawyer's hair, glowing like a ray of sunshine in the early morning, and the silky, emerald dress she wears highlights the gold flecks in her irises. Peeling my eyes away from her, I glance around, absorbing the moment. Pocketing the memory. A tangible hum of excitement hangs in the air. The large theater overflows with athletes and their families, all hopefully waiting to hear their names called from the podium. It surprised me when my own parents said that they couldn't make the trip to Chicago for the draft, considering my dad's feelings about football. More specifically, his feelings about me playing football.

Suddenly, the room goes quiet, and the NFL commissioner walks out on stage. Leaning down toward the mic, he bellows, "Welcome to Chicago and the 2022 NFL Draft." With the opening remarks completed, the crowd roars in excitement and the tension in my chest tightens and twists.

As the first pick is revealed, Sawyer whisper yells, "This is incredible!"

Twelve picks later and my phone begins to vibrate against the cloth-covered table. Not recognizing the number and knowing coaches will call their draft picks before they're announced, I pick up hesitantly, press answer, and place the phone against my ear.

"Hello?"

"Hi Henry, this is Coach Barrett with the Seattle Mavericks. How are you doing?"

Suddenly, my heart rate skyrockets and my knee resumes moving up and down at a rapid pace. “I’m doing pretty good, sir. How are you?”

That’s a lie. I lost my cool about an hour ago, but there is no way that I’m admitting that to him. Frankly, I’m impressed my voice didn’t crack or shake. I can feel the anxiety clawing its way toward the surface, but I quickly glance down at my hand, smothering the feeling. Gazing down at the smiley face on the top of my left hand, the anxiety begins to dissolve, fading away as quickly as it came.

“Just great,” he responds, with a husky laugh. “How would you feel about playing for the Seattle Mavericks this season?”

I jolt upright in my seat, startling Sawyer. “That would be amazing, sir.”

“Well, alright then. I’ll see you soon. Enjoy the rest of your night, son.” He responds, then promptly hangs up, leaving no room for response.

I stare down at the screensaver on my phone, stunned, before a punch to my arm jolts me back into existence. If I didn’t have guns of steel, it may have stung.

“Well?” Sawyer asks me, expectantly, acting coy as if she didn’t just sucker punch me in the arm.

“I’m going to be a Seattle Maverick,” I say, still a bit awestruck.

Sawyer goes to open her mouth but before she can respond, the commissioner interrupts.

“With the thirteenth pick in the 2022 NFL draft, the Seattle Mavericks select... Henry Parker, wide receiver from the University of Notre Dame.”

I rise out of my seat, re-button my suit jacket, and start to head towards the stage. Before I make it a single step, Sawyer sweeps me up into a hug and whispers in my ear, “I’m so proud of you, Henry.”

Pulling back from the hug, she adjusts my tie and smooths out the shoulders of my jacket. The words send shivers down my spine, and her touch leaves trails of warmth as she adjusts my suit. My feelings attempt to bubble to the surface when I take a step back and move toward the stage. I take note of my mental to-do list while I walk onto the stage.

Get drafted. Check.

Get the girl. Working on it.

After shaking hands with the commissioner and taking photos on stage, I head back towards Sawyer confidently and ready to tell her how I feel. As I sit down, I notice the grin she has on her face, aimed down at her phone.

“What is it?” I ask, sliding into the seat beside her, a smile overtaking my face.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Sawyer responds hastily, nearly throwing her phone back into her purse. On a normal day, one without the uncertainty of the draft and the impending love confession, I would have noticed Sawyer is acting odd. In my current state, I’m too amped up. I’m riding both the current adrenaline

rush of getting drafted and the preemptive rush of when I tell Sawyer how I feel about her.

“If it has you smiling like an idiot at your phone, it’s clearly not nothing,” I say as I nudge her shoulder with mine. “C’mon, Sawyer, I’ll tell you a secret if you tell me,” I bribe her, knowing she won’t be able to resist. There’s nothing she loves more than secret-sharing.

“Ugh, fine. But only because it’s your big night,” Sawyer flips her hair behind her, the smell of citrus and flowers wafting toward me. I lean back in my chair, waiting for whatever silly thing she’s going to say so that I can finally confess my feelings. “Declan asked me out, and before you say anything about him, I said yes and I’m excited so please be excited for me too”.

My brain takes about ten seconds to process what she said, and when it does, my stomach drops. I feel as though I’m going to throw up.

You’re fucking kidding. I try to convince myself this isn’t happening. *There’s no way she would go out with Declan.* I look at her face, searching for a sign that she’s teasing. Except, I don’t see any. All I see is Sawyer looking back at me, features guarded, waiting for me to finally respond.

Completely oblivious to my internal turmoil and apparently tired of waiting for my response—which I still haven’t determined myself—Sawyer continues, “I told you my secret. Now you have to tell me yours; it’s only fair.”

My mind is reeling as she waits for me to share, scrambling to figure out what to say, how to salvage the situation.

There's no way I can tell her now. But If I don't tell her now, then it may be too late.

“Henry,” she chides, growing impatient as she waits for me to say something.

“I—I’m glad you were here with me tonight,” I manage to choke out. Even if my parents had been able to make the trip to Chicago for the draft, I wouldn’t trade Sawyer’s presence for the world. Not exactly the secret I had in mind, but not a lie either.

“That was your secret?” She looks at me incredulously.

“Yep,” I respond, plastering on the most convincing grin I can muster. Not my most impressive work.

She continues to search my face like she doesn’t believe a word I’ve said, but thankfully she lets it drop. And if I couldn’t love her more, Sawyer chooses to change the subject, rather than hound me, something I know she wants to do based on the curious gleam in her eyes.

Except she doesn't know you love her. With that very depressing thought, I edit my mental to-do list for the night.

Get drafted. Check.

~~*Get the girl.*~~

Make it through the night without crying.

That last one would take an honest-to-God miracle.

“Seattle is great!” Sawyer says, enthusiastically. “Can we go whale watching when I visit?”

“Of course, we can.” I smile at her, silently praying for the night to come to an end.



CHAPTER 2

“Take me to that place where you always go”

On + Off—Maggie Rogers

six months later

Sawyer

“I just moved to Seattle actually. My best friend moved here a few months ago and I decided that I should make the move too. Crazy, I know. I got a job at this great non-profit which is basically my dream job. I’m the event coordinator. I plan things to raise money.” My Uber driver glances in the rear-view mirror, shooting me a did-I-ask-for-your-life-story look and I can feel the embarrassment flood to my cheeks.

In my defense, the silence in this car is deafening. I just flew across the country by myself, and now I'm moving into an apartment with a random person whom I've never met. So, in all my anxious glory, I decided to overshare with my Uber driver.

Sue me.

"Sorry," I mumble, glancing down at my phone and reading the message that popped onto the screen.

Henry: Have you landed yet?

Me: In the Uber now.

I word-vomited my
entire life story to the driver.

Henry: Seems like you just
made a new best friend.
Don't need me anymore.

Me: Trust me, this man
is counting down the seconds
until I get out of his crappy Honda Civic.

You're safe.

Henry: His loss. Your ability to
overshare is one of my
favorite things about you.

Me: Some say
overshare, I say connect with
people through personal anecdotes.

Henry: Atta girl.

Way to spin it.

Spending the rest of the uncomfortable car ride scrolling on my phone, I gaze up from the screen right as the driver pulls up to my new apartment building. Muttering a thank you and crawling out from the back seat, I not-so-gracefully haul all my worldly possessions onto the curb without help from the unfriendly man in the driver's seat. The moment I pull the last suitcase from the trunk, he zooms off with a vengeance. Not even a goodbye.

Good riddance.

I drag my suitcases behind me through the dimly lit—slightly dilapidated—lobby. The lights occasionally flicker around me, and I haul my ass to the elevator. The rent is affordable, so I casually wipe the scary lobby from my memory. Stopping on the 17th floor, I step out of the elevator and haul my belongings in the direction of my new apartment. 1707 the door reads. I stare at the number for a breath longer than what would be considered normal. If staring at apartment doors surrounded by luggage could even be considered normal behavior in the first place.

You got this. Just knock on the door. Simple.

My pep talk does the job and I manage to muster up the courage to bang on the door.

Outside of the text messages I've exchanged with her about the apartment, I've never met my roommate. Normal Sawyer would never move across the country into an apartment with a roommate she's never met, but Normal Sawyer apparently took a long vacation to the Caribbean and left the slightly unhinged version of Sawyer behind to make decisions. I hope Vacation Sawyer is enjoying her fruity cocktail on the beach because when she comes back she and I are going to have words. Her lack of responsibility is how I ended up standing in front of the door to my new apartment. To say I'm only slightly nervous would be the understatement of the year. More like I'm close to vomiting up the crackers I ate on the plane.

What if she's messy? I think to myself. Worse, what if she's really into collecting antique Victorian dolls? The ones that look like they've been haunted for the last century. Tingles travel down my spine and I shudder at the thought right as the door swings open.

My eyes make contact with a whole lot of collarbone. Peering upwards, I get a good look at my new roommate. The only word that flutters through my mind is *giant*. I can't exactly explain what I had expected Maren Rivers to look like, but the person standing across from me is definitely not what I had imagined.

Wearing a “save our seas” t-shirt and ripped jeans, she must be nearly six feet tall and looks like she could have been an Amazon warrior in a past life. Wavy, brown hair falls to her shoulders and a pair of shark teeth earrings dangle from her ears. She looks badass.

Right before I can stare for a moment too long, Maren reaches out her hand.

“Hey, I’m Maren,” she says, shaking my hand, “you must be Sawyer, come on in.” I silently move to the side as she grabs one of my suitcases and brings it into the apartment. My eyes linger on the spot where my half-ton suitcase sat, my mind unable to comprehend how easily she grabbed the bag. It took every muscle in my body to drag that thing around and she just picked it up like it was a cotton ball. Hesitantly, I follow behind Maren, lugging my suitcase with much less grace.

“This is the apartment; your room is on the right and the spare bathroom is down the hall.” I shuffle towards my room taking in the layout as I go. The kitchen and living room are open concept and the space is well decorated, with tasteful art covering the walls. A massive gray couch sits at the center of the room, full of fluffy, blue throw pillows with a thick oak coffee table sitting in front. Across from the couch is a large TV mounted to the wall, but the feature that stops me dead in my tracks is the floor-to-ceiling windows that boast an incredible view of the ocean.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” Maren comments, noticing my reaction to the view, “Makes the creepy lobby totally worth it.”

I nod silently as I continue to follow her in the direction of my room. Apparently, I've lost all ability to speak and form coherent responses.

Just great. Fantastic.

As she opens the door to my room and leads me inside, my common sense seems to catch up with me.

Have I gone insane? I must have lost my mind somewhere between here and Indiana. There is no way that moving across the country was a good idea. What idiot convinced me to do this?

Sitting down on the bed, I rapidly descend into a panicked state because *I* was the idiot who convinced myself that moving to the other side of the country was a fabulous idea and a fun adventure.

A. Fun. Adventure.

Going to an amusement park is a fun adventure. Spending the day shopping is a fun adventure. Packing up your belongings and hauling them across the country is NOT a fun adventure. It's insane. That's what it is.

I know exactly two people in the entire city—three if you count my new roommate—and I hate the smell of rain, which is a nightmare considering it rains nearly half the year in Seattle. It smells like worms and dead people. All rain-scented candles should be banned. Right as I begin to truly spiral about my recent life decisions, Maren interrupts my train of thought.

“I know you just arrived and may want to get settled, but if you want, we could grab dinner?” she asks, leaning against the doorframe.

I pause for a moment, considering. I’m not sure I have the social battery for dinner, seeing as I was so close to losing my shit only thirty seconds ago, but I also do not want to sit in my room and contemplate all my life choices. Ultimately, a potentially awkward dinner sounds better than being left alone with my thoughts. “That would be great,” I respond, fiddling with the edges of the mattress.

Oh good, I can still speak.

“Awesome, I know this great Thai place right down the road, let me know when you’re ready to go.”



A bell rings as Maren and I enter a small Thai restaurant just a few blocks from our apartment and settle at a small table close to the window. Food sizzles from the kitchen and chatter fills the space. Right as we sit down, a waiter comes by with water.

“Hey Maren, long time no see. Want the usual?” he asks, winking as he makes his way over. Maren looks over at me with a sheepish grin, her cheeks a soft pink.

“Yeah, thanks, Eric.” She throws him a grateful smile. “I come here a lot. Know what you want?”

I pretend to look over the menu. When I go out to eat, I like to look at the menu beforehand. Having to decide on the spot

is too much pressure. I choke every time and order chicken tenders. Impossible at a Thai restaurant. Since Maren didn't mention the name of the restaurant, I had to do some quick cyberstalking. Having chosen the pad Thai before we even left the house, I tell the waiter—Eric—my order, I hand my menu back to him and turn towards Maren.

“So,” Maren starts from across the table, “what made you move to Seattle?” Thankfully, she initiates the conversation since I'm not confident in my ability to ask coherent questions at this point in the day.

“I got a job working at this non-profit called GameChangers,” I explain, playing with my condensation on the water glass, “they provide sports and other after-school programs to kids from lower-income families who may not be able to afford other extracurricular programs or after-school childcare.”

“Impressive,” she nods, taking a sip of water, “Do you know anyone else in the city, or did you move here on your own?”

I pause, unsure of how I want to respond to the question. The rational, normal response would be to tell her that my boyfriend and best friend both live in Seattle and play for the Seattle Mavericks. However, the idea of telling her that has my stomach rioting. While Maren doesn't strike me as someone who would care (although it's hard to tell from knowing her for five hours), I don't want to worry that our friendship is due to the fact both the people I know here are professional athletes. I want her to like me, not who I know. I was burned

once before, and it broke something inside of me. Opened a part of me that questions my worth. Not something I want to experience again.

“My boyfriend and best friend actually both live in Seattle so when I got the job offer, it made sense to make the move.”

It’s not technically a lie.

She offers an understanding nod, gearing up to ask another question. Right as she begins to speak, Eric comes back to our table with food, allowing me to take a breath.

We both thank him and begin to dig into our dishes. After her first bite, Maren lets out the loudest moan I may have ever heard. My eyes go wide as I watch her devour the food in front of her. Part of me feels like I’m interrupting a private moment. “The food is amazing, I basically foodgasm every time I’m here.”

I have no response to that, so I decide to ignore it entirely.

“What do you do for work?” I ask, taking a bite of my pad Thai.

Holy shit, this is incredible. Totally understand the moaning now.

“I study the impacts of climate change on different marine ecosystems in the Pacific Northwest,” she says between bites.

A lightbulb goes off in my head. “So, you know about whale-watching tours then?”

Maren's eyes widen, looking at me like I've grown another head. "Of course, I know about whale-watching tours. What species do you want to see? Humpbacks? Orcas? Gray Whales?"

I stare at her, slightly afraid of the can of worms I may have opened with that question. Someone once told me not to ask a scientist about their research if you're not prepared to listen to a TED Talk about an incredibly niche topic. It's advice I should probably adhere to.

"Henry, my best friend, said he would take me on one before it gets too cold. There aren't whales in the Midwest and I've always wanted to see one. Bucket list item."

"Oh, well there's this one company that's environmentally friendly and super ethical. I can send you the info." She pulls out her phone to send me the link, then pauses, eyes narrowing on me. "Wait... you're from the Midwest?"

"Yes...?"

"I'm from Michigan!" she basically screams inside the small restaurant, the reaction startling a couple a few tables away. "What state are you from? Where did you go to school?"

"I'm originally from Indiana and went to the University of Notre Dame."

"Damn, you must be a genius then." I blush at the compliment, and she quickly changes the topic. I'm beginning to get conversational whiplash, but it's so nice to talk to

someone who isn't my family that I can't contain the grin on my face.

When Henry and Declan decided to become famous, talented football players, they left me behind in Indiana to hang out with my parents for six months. Conversation consisted of topics like 'when I'm going to give them grandchildren' and 'deals they found at Costco'. Needless to say, listening to Maren talk about the ocean is a much-appreciated change of pace.

"If you like whales," she rambles on, "then you would love the tidal pools! We totally have to go. There are so many fascinating little creatures at low tide."

As she continues to wax poetic about the different species that inhabit tidal pools around Seattle, some of the apprehension I had earlier begins to dissipate. So far, Maren seems great and not the type of person to collect creepy dolls, which is a relief, because sleeping in an apartment full of dolls is my worst nightmare. The smooth start with Maren gives me hope that adjusting won't be as difficult as I imagined. As I continue to shovel down my pad Thai, I begin to wonder if Seattle has any other surprises up its sleeve.

Maybe this move won't be so bad after all.



CHAPTER 3

“I want you, but I know I’m only one of your friends”

What Can I Do—Renee Rapp

Henry

I stride off the practice field, helmet dangling in my hand as I drag my ass back to the locker room. It should be illegal to run that much at practice during the season. Maybe the wide receiver coach dropped his protein shake this morning. That would explain his sudden desire to torture me and every other guy in my position group.

Droplets of sweat trickle down my face as I daydream about gluing myself to my couch cushions for the rest of the night. Images of plush blankets and squishy throw pillows propel me forward, giving me a renewed sense of energy after a brutal practice. Walking through the door into the offensive locker

room, I'm assaulted by the pungent scent of two dozen other sweaty football players. Maneuvering through the crowded room toward my locker, Deon Adams, our quarterback, shoots me his signature smile.

“Good practice today, rookie,” he says as I walk past him.

I nod in acknowledgment. I have to keep playing it cool, even though his compliment has me popping imaginary confetti in my mind. Tossing my helmet down, my eyes snag on my name tag. Not a day goes by when I'm not stunned to see my last name next to the Seattle Maverick's logo above the door. Amazing that my childhood dream has become my reality. With a groan, I sit down and begin to methodically take off my practice gear. As I peel off my sweat-drenched shirt, someone pokes my ribcage. I turn to my left, and grinning at me like a fool is Jack Walters. If you spotted Jack on the street, you would assume he was in some sort of biker gang. Sitting at six-foot-five, a light three hundred pounds, and covered in tattoos, Jack makes my six-foot-three frame look tiny. Any reasonable person would be afraid of him, that is until he opens his mouth. The man is sunshine incarnate. I'm not sure I've ever met someone more optimistic than Jack.

“Didn't your friend just arrive?” Jack asks, drying the water from his messy brown hair with a towel.

Excitement blooms in my chest at the mention of my best friend and the most wonderful, most beautiful person in the entire world. Sawyer Jones and I now live in the same city. No more Facetime calls cut short because of the time difference

and her geriatric bedtime. No one under the age of seventy-five goes to bed at 9:30 PM, except Sawyer. Now I get to see her in person and I couldn't contain my joy even if I tried. It's been a long six months alone, but my suffering has come to an end.

“Yeah, Sawyer landed yesterday afternoon.”

I nearly squealed when Sawyer told me she got a job at a non-profit in Seattle. Knowing Sawyer and I live in the same city again gives me a head rush akin to letting a kid run free in a candy store. Pure, unbridled happiness. When I'm around Sawyer, I can relax. She's my own personal hit of Xanax. Even with my excitement for her move, a lump still gets caught in my throat every time I think about her. The cause of that lump is standing a mere ten feet away from me on the other side of the room.

Declan Monroe.

My former teammate at Notre Dame, my current teammate on the Seattle Mavericks, and worst of all, Sawyer's current boyfriend. In my eyes, Declan Monroe is a grade-A asshole. Proud owner of the cockiest personality of anyone I've ever met, and the looks to back up that mentality. With his black hair and piercing blue eyes, he's every woman's dream man and objectively very attractive—I'm willing to admit it—even if I get a migraine every time he speaks.

My glaring must have triggered some internal alarm in Declan, and I continue to stare at him as he saunters toward

Jack and me. “Have you spoken to Sawyer?” Declan asks, too curiously.

I begin to haphazardly throw things into my gym bag, attempting to leave as quickly as possible. The less time I have to speak to Declan, the better. Sawyer told me frowning is bad for wrinkles and I plan on staying good-looking for as long as possible.

“Yeah, I texted her last night when she landed,” I mutter, hoping to avoid whatever conversation he’s attempting to start.

I haven’t always disliked Declan. I mean, sure, he can be annoying and cocky, but overall, I’ve tolerated his presence at worst and occasionally enjoyed hanging out with him at best. That is until he asked Sawyer out six months ago. From that moment on, Declan and I have not been on good terms. If I had a dart board, a picture of his face would sit on it, front and center. While he’s never said it outright, I’m confident he knew I had feelings for Sawyer when he asked her out. Hell, the whole University of Notre Dame probably knew I was head over heels for Sawyer, except Sawyer.

Snatching my bag and fleeing towards the exit as fast as humanly possible, Declan shoots me a saccharine smile. “I’ll tell Sawyer you said hello tonight when I see her.”

He knows exactly what he’s doing when he says shit like that, which only adds to my theory that he knew about my feelings for Sawyer and just chose to go and break the bro-code anyway. There is something sacred about the bro-code and he took it and drop-kicked it out the window.

Since they started dating, Declan has constantly made subtle comments about Sawyer in an attempt to get under my skin. The worst part is it works. He's burrowed deep in there and as hard as I try, I can't dig him out. Jack shoots me a questioning look as I beeline for the door, not dignifying Declan's comment with a response.

I quickly walk out of the practice facility, into the parking lot, and flop into the driver's seat of my black BMW. Leaning my head back against the leather headrest, I exhale a ragged breath, releasing all the built-up tension from having to interact with Declan.

I hate that asshole.



Unlocking the door and stepping into my apartment, I unceremoniously drop my gym bag by the threshold, kick off my shoes, and throw my keys on the entryway table. I'm halfway to the kitchen when my phone dings.

Sawyer: What are you doing
this weekend?

Me: We have a bye this week,
so nothing.

Unless you have an idea...

Sawyer: My new roomie told me

about a whale watching tour.

We should go.

I remember a promise being made...

Me: I'm not one to
break my promises.

Sawyer: Great, it's a date :)

My stomach plummets as I read her text and I sigh, setting my phone down on the kitchen island. Disappointment rushes through me. It's not a date in the way I want it to be. I hoped that six months of only speaking on the phone would dull the feelings I have for her. That the lack of proximity to her would rewire my brain and the feelings would magically disappear. If anything, they've gotten stronger. Distance. Heart. Fondness. Whatever the saying is. And to add fuel to the dumpster fire that is my love life, she has no idea that I even feel anything at all. This unrequited love thing is total bullshit.

I shuffle around the kitchen, grabbing what I need to make my post-practice smoothie. The kitchen has to be my favorite part of my apartment, but that's because I know Sawyer would love it. I know how it looks. I'm sappy and so in love with someone, I bought an apartment based on what she would like in a kitchen. Not my finest moment, but I won't apologize for it.

A large granite island sits at the center, and it's equipped with new, top-of-the-line, stainless steel appliances. It's every baker's dream kitchen. I even splurged on some fancy kitchen mixer in case she decided she wanted to make her famous chocolate chip cookies here. Hell will freeze over before I turn down one of those cookies and if an outrageously expensive mixer is what it costs to convince her to make them for me, it's worth every single penny.

Now that I've thought about cookies, my smoothie feels like a disappointment. I toss all the ingredients into the blender and dig through the cupboard looking for my favorite smoothie cup. I pull the bright yellow cup from the shelf and grin at the smiley faces covering the outside.

Would things be different if I had admitted how I felt that night?

Pushing that painful thought away for what's probably the thousandth time, I pour the smoothie into the cup, leaving the blender in the sink to clean later. I meander towards the couch where I plan on spending the next several hours trying to come up with a game plan so that I don't fall further in love with my best friend.

Not likely to happen, but a guy can dream.

I grab the remote from the coffee table and turn on the TV. Scrolling for what seems like ages, I decide on an action movie. I don't plan on paying attention and the last thing I need is to get confused halfway because I was daydreaming and missed most of the plot. Settling deeper into the couch, I

pull a throw blanket off the back and wrap myself up like a burrito. About halfway through the movie, my phone dings again.

Hoping it's Sawyer, I fling myself out of my cocoon, press pause on the remote, and snatch the phone off the couch to read the text. As fast as elation floods me, disappointment follows.

Jack: Are we going to talk about what went down in the locker room earlier?

Groaning, I respond.

Me: What went down in the locker room?

Jack: Don't play dumb.
What is up with you and Declan?

Me: Nothing.
You must have imagined it.
Have you gotten your eyes checked lately?
Maybe it's a sight issue.

Jack: I have perfect 20/20 vision

thank you very much.

And I see the deflection.

Consider this me letting it go.

But I'm not forgetting it.

Setting my phone down on the couch, I press play on the remote and put forth my best effort to erase the conversation from my mind. For the last six months, I've adopted the ideology that if I pretend that my feelings don't exist, then the crushing weight pressing down on my chest every time I think of Sawyer is also just a myth. *Wishful thinking*. It hasn't worked thus far, but I'm hoping my tenacity wins out. If my feelings are this strong after not seeing her for six months, I'm terrified of how I'll feel when I see her this weekend.



CHAPTER 4

“Happy to see how far I’ve come”

Up Up & Away—Kid Cudi

Sawyer

Pulling into the nearly empty parking lot, I glance at my GPS to make sure I haven’t gotten lost. I’m great at a lot of things, but directions are not one of them. Without Siri and Apple Maps, I would be lost constantly.

Located in a neighborhood directly outside of Seattle, the inconspicuous red brick building sits quietly at the end of the street. Large bushes bracket the front doors and without the GameChangers sign, you would have no idea the building was occupied. I gather my purse from the passenger seat, my chai latte from the cupholder, and walk through the parking lot toward the entrance. I enter through the glass doors heading to

the reception desk stationed at the back of the lobby. Perched behind the desk is a middle-aged woman, one I recognize from my interview. Noticing my presence, she stands up from behind the desk, moving to greet me.

“Sawyer. Nice to see you again!” She beams at me, sweeping me into a quick hug.

“Hi, Erika. It’s nice to see you too.” Erika grabs her coffee mug from behind the desk and begins to climb the staircase on the left side of the lobby.

“All the offices are upstairs. I figured I would wait for you down here so I could be the first one to greet you.” Erika is the founder of GameChangers. Before she started the non-profit, she spent twenty years as a schoolteacher in Seattle. After noticing how many children had to miss out on sports and other after-school activities because of the cost associated, Erika opted for a career change and started the non-profit. The story is inspiring, one of the reasons it was an easy yes when she offered the job. She leads me up the stairs into the office space.

“Your office is down the hall on the left. It overlooks the second gym.” The entire building is a recreation center that was renovated to have an office space overlooking both of the gyms. “Unfortunately, I have some meetings with investors today that I can’t miss, so Nathalie is going to give you the tour and spend time with you during the after-school program today to show you the ropes. With that being said, you’ll probably spend most afternoons with the kids, so don’t feel

like you need to dress up. Jeans are just fine here.” She smiles at me as I look down at my outfit. Dressed in a cream sweater, black dress pants, and black pumps, I look heavily overdressed compared to Erika, who’s rocking a pair of jeans and a Game Changers long-sleeve T-shirt. “I have to head out but make yourself comfortable and Nathalie will come find you for the tour.”

She makes her exit and I finally circle around to take in my surroundings. The office is spacious with a large, wooden desk facing the window overlooking the gym. A basketball court takes up one side of the gym, while the other looks like a hockey game is planned for the afternoon. I set my purse and coffee mug on the desk and drop into my chair. I obviously spin in it for good measure. Pulling out my phone, I open my messages up and send a text.

Me: Hey, want to have dinner tonight?

I can cook something you like :) I miss you.

I place my phone back down on the desk and begin pulling things out of my purse to decorate the office space. Pens. Sticky notes. I set my laptop in front of me, pull out two framed photos, and place them in the corner. I continue setting up my desk space when I hear a soft knock on the door.

The door flings open and a woman I’m assuming is Nathalie steps into the office space. Long, brown hair is intricately braided away from her face. *I wish I could braid like that.*

Wide, brown eyes hidden behind a pair of funky blue glasses stare at me with curiosity. Dressed similarly to Erika, she's wearing a pair of jeans, a Boston Celtics t-shirt, and a pair of platform green Converse.

“Hi, I'm Nathalie. You must be Sawyer, it's so nice to meet you!” She walks towards me, a clipboard in hand. “I'm sure Erika told you, but she has meetings today, so I'll be giving you the tour.” She smiles at me and looks down at her clipboard, using a pen to check off something on the top sheet of paper.

“Stop number one: the lunchroom.” She turns on her heels and heads out of my office and down the hallway. She leads me through the office space, pointing out different offices and bathrooms. “My office is directly next to yours. I run the social media and website and will help you plan events for the organization.” She continues through the space taking the staircase back to the lobby.

“If you take a right instead of a left at the reception desk, that leads you towards the two gyms and other rooms that host the after-school programs. We'll head down there this afternoon, so you can meet some of the kids and get a feel for how things run.” We return to my office, and I expect her to leave, but instead, she takes a seat.

“So, a little about the culture here,” she starts, looking down at her clipboard momentarily before looking back at me. “We're a small group. Outside of Erika and I, there are not many of us. We have students from the local universities that

come in and volunteer in the afternoon, but most everything else is run by us. We have an accountant and all that, but I think I've met him once and I'm not convinced he's not just a ghost who's really good at math."

She laughs at her joke, and I can feel the last remnants of my anxiety about the move fade away. So far Erika and Nathalie seem great, and the job sounded like the perfect fit when I applied. I was excited about the job, but it's hard not to worry when you've interviewed online from a different state and only met the founder. Lots of potential for something to go wrong.

Nathalie looks around my office, investigating the decorations I put up when her attention snags on the two photos I placed in the corner of the desk. My shoulders tense, afraid she may recognize them both. When it seems like she doesn't, I release a breath.

"Oh!" she says excitedly. "Is that your boyfriend? He's so cute!" I follow her gaze to see what photo she's looking at and huff a laugh when I realize which one caught her eye.

"No," I chuckle. "That's Henry, my best friend." The photo is of the two of us at the NFL Draft. A photo I absolutely adore. Henry and I are standing beside each other in front of a backdrop. I'm wearing a gorgeous floor-length emerald gown and Henry is wearing a crisp black suit. The photographer caught us mid-laugh, where I'm looking up at Henry and he's gazing down at me, laughter crinkling our eyes. We look

adorable, and I can see how she would mistake him for my boyfriend.

Nathalie pauses, embarrassment crossing her features, cheeks stained a bubblegum pink. “Oh my, I’m sorry, I just assumed since he was looking at you like...that.” She shifts in her seat, waving her hand to signal at whatever ‘that’ is. I refrain from asking what exactly she means. She’s uncomfortable with her slip-up, so I decide to offer an olive branch.

“The other photo is of my boyfriend, Declan, and I at the zoo.” I push the photo towards her, so she can take a look. The picture makes me laugh every time I see it, the exact reason I spent way too much money on it. Declan and I visited the zoo for our first date and at the entrance, they offered to take our photo. The borders of the photo are different zoo animals and at the center, Declan and I stand next to each other, looking incredibly awkward. My hair is a frizzy mess and Declan looks nervous. Neither of us knew what to do with our limbs and before we could decide, the photographer took the photo, shoved a card into our hand, and shooed us away. “It’s actually us on our first date,” I grin. “We both look insane; I love it.”

Nathalie seems to have recovered from the small bout of embarrassment she was feeling, the red color in her cheeks fading. “Do they both live in Seattle?” she asked.

“Yeah, it was hard being apart from them when they moved.” She nods in understanding. Not being close to the

people you love can become isolating. Six months away from Henry and it felt like I had lost a limb.

“If my boyfriend and best friend looked like that, I would also miss them enough to move,” she winks, shooting me a grin. “Well, I’ll let you get settled and come back later when the kids start coming for the after-school programs.”



Spending the morning brainstorming event ideas to raise money leaves me even more excited about my new job. Closing my laptop, I finally take a break and check my phone.

Me: Hey, want to have dinner tonight?

I can cook something you like :) I miss you.

Declan: Sorry. I can't.

Have football stuff.

Maybe this weekend.

I reread the text messages, confused. I've been in Seattle for a few days, and Declan hasn't texted first once, let alone tried to see me. I imagined moving to Seattle would make the relationship easier. With his football schedule, long distance was hard on both of us. His lack of interest in seeing me is beginning to feel less about his schedule and more like he's intentionally avoiding me. Part of me wants to bring it up to

him. The other part keeps trying to convince myself I'm overthinking. Creating something from nothing. Before I can dwell on the thought, Nathalie knocks and enters my office.

“The kids are starting to show up for the afternoon. We can head down there, and I'll show you around.” Pocketing my phone, I follow Nathalie down the stairs towards the gym.

Pushing open the door that leads into the large gym, I'm bombarded with the sound of screaming children and squeaky shoes echoing against the hardwood floor. I follow Nathalie towards the volunteers huddled in the back corner while I try to dodge running children and errant balls.

“It's always chaotic before the program officially starts.” She laughs, weaving through the crowd of children, gracefully avoiding collisions. Nathalie leads us to the sideline set up with chairs on each side of a plastic folding table. “Today's sport is basketball, so the kids will be split up into teams and play in a little mini-tournament. The volunteers act as coaches and every kid is encouraged to play. If they don't want to participate in the sport of the day, they can play in the other gym where there are more volunteers or in one of the craft rooms down the hall.”

Right as I begin to respond, I watch a child beeline at max speed directly toward Nathalie, crashing into her with a hug. Peeling off of her, the boy turns to me with an inquisitive look on his face. He can't be older than six or seven and is covered head to toe in Seattle Mavericks gear. A walking advertisement. He turns his head to the side, looking at

Nathalie and then back at me. The movement displays the number eleven shaved on the side of his dark, black hair. A soft smile spreads across my cheeks and I pocket the small piece of information. The little boy looks absolutely adorable and based on the large amount of navy and silver covering his body, I would bet Henry's salary that he's the Seattle Mavericks' biggest fan. With a very serious look on his small, round face, he reaches his tiny hand out toward me. "My name's Micah Campbell. Do you work here now?"

I grasp his small hand in mine and give it a firm shake, working hard to keep my expression neutral. "Hi, Micah Campbell, I'm Sawyer Jones. Yes, I work here. Today is my first day."

He processes that information, and an exaggerated look of contemplation takes over his features, trying to decide if he deems the answer acceptable. With a nod, he asks a very important follow-up question, "Do you like the Seattle Mavericks?"

I do my very best not to laugh at the seriousness and accusation in his tone, but a smile slips through anyway.

"I *love* the Seattle Mavericks."

Satisfied with my response, he turns around without a word or a wave goodbye and runs back to his friends across the gym, limbs flailing as he runs away. The moment he's gone, Nathalie bursts out in laughter. "He does that with every new volunteer and employee," she says doubled over, in between

breaths, “but I’ve never seen someone respond to him with the same seriousness he has. That was amazing.”

“He asked some very important questions.” I shrug, shooting her a smile while she catches her breath. If Micah ever found out about my connections with the Seattle Mavericks, he may faint.

We spend some time watching the kids play some very questionable basketball, then Nathalie shows me the craft room and we head back to our offices.

“The after-school program runs until seven, so parents have time to pick up their kids after work,” Nathalie explains as we sit back down in my office. “One of us stays until all the kids are picked up, so we usually trade days on who stays late. We can both stay tonight so I can show you how to lock up and then we will add you to the schedule.”

Nathalie and I spend the rest of the night chatting, then wait for the last kid to get picked up by their parents. After some coaxing and sharing on my part, I learn that Nathalie was born and raised in Seattle. She originally wanted to be a schoolteacher but met Erika during her undergrad at a career fair and decided to work for her instead. Once the last child has left, Nathalie quickly locks up and we head out into the parking lot together.

“I’m not sure who you know in Seattle,” she says hesitantly, standing by her car, “but if you ever want to grab drinks or do something, let me know.” She fiddles with her purse strap, and I sense a bit of shyness in her tone, almost like she’s hoping

I'll take her up on the offer. I wonder if she's looking for some friends as much as I am.

“That sounds amazing.”

“Alright then, I'll see you tomorrow, Sawyer.” With that, Nathalie hops into her car and drives off. I unlock my ancient Ford Escape, throw my purse into the passenger seat, and head home, excited about my new job and seeing Henry this weekend.



CHAPTER 5

“But you brought me here and I’m happy that you did”

Malibu—Miley Cyrus

Sawyer

Rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, I wake up with excitement humming through my bones. Not even having to get out of bed before seven in the morning on a Saturday could dull the childlike joy. Ever since I was little, I’ve dreamt of seeing a whale in the wild. Even though the sun isn’t up yet, I’m itching with anticipation. Rolling out of bed, I hit play on my “morning vibes” playlist and set about getting ready for the whale-watching tour. I throw on my favorite cream-colored sweater, a pair of jeans, and my brand-new yellow rain boots, finishing the look with a dainty, gold, smiley face necklace that Henry bought me for my birthday

last year. With the sound of “Wildest Dreams (Taylor’s Version)” in the background, I dance my way towards the bathroom, brush my teeth, swipe some mascara on my eyes, and spray the same orange blossom perfume I’ve been wearing since I was nineteen. The smell is reminiscent of summer and sunshine and days with no responsibilities.

I fight to wrangle my curly, blonde hair but it simply does not want to comply. Don’t get me wrong, I love how thick and curly my hair is since it has *amazing* volume. But some days I fight tooth and nail against it, and more often than not, the hair wins the battle. Today is definitely one of those days. With a huff, I give up and decide to throw it up into a bun. We’re going on a boat, so the wind is going to tangle it up no matter what I attempt to do with it.

Heading to the kitchen, I shuffle around as quietly as I can and pull out everything I need to make a chai latte. If I’m going to be up this early, then I’m going to need one. Non-negotiable. It’s almost sacrilegious to wake up so early in the morning and not have a hot drink to keep you sane. As I begin to steam the milk, a soft knock at the front door interrupts me. I fly through the kitchen to the entryway. Frantically, I scramble to unlock the door, flinging it open with more strength than I knew I possessed. Standing on the other side of the threshold, Henry’s holding two to-go coffee cups and a nondescript paper bag. A wide smile takes over his face as I stand in the doorway.

I drink in his appearance, momentarily forgetting he’s standing in the hallway and that my mother told me it’s rude to

stare. His curly, brown hair is mussed like he didn't have time to style it but in a way where it looks like it was intentional. I get hair that fights me tooth and nail and he gets perfectly mussed, bedhead chic. Explain to me how that's fair. I'll wait. He's wearing a gray sweater, navy chinos, and a pair of Air Force 1's. Frankly, Henry looks like he's ready for a photo shoot with GQ, not a whale-watching tour.

"I figured if we were getting up this early, we needed coffee and muffins to sustain us." He says, gesturing with the coffee tray, then breezing past me towards the kitchen.

I momentarily stand frozen by the front door, contemplating my outfit choices. I'm not sure I'm dressed to stand next to a runway model this morning. Especially not one who looks as good as Henry does right now. I hear him chuckle behind me.

"Are you gonna stand by the door all morning, or are you going to come eat the blueberry muffin I brought?"

I shake my head, clearing all my odd thoughts about Henry and immediately launch myself at him. I haven't seen my best friend in person since he moved to Seattle six months ago, which is the longest we've been apart since we became friends. The small hole in my heart where Henry exists didn't feel especially empty before I saw him standing in the doorway, but I've missed him.

A lot.

With a deep belly laugh, Henry catches me and sweeps me into a crushing hug. My feet dangle in the air as he swings me

back and forth. The motion wafts the scent of eucalyptus towards me.

“I missed you too, Sawyer,” he murmurs into my hair as he continues to sway me back and forth, a motion so soothing I could probably fall back asleep in his arms. Peeling away from him reluctantly, I smile and snatch a muffin from the bag. He hands me a coffee cup and I take a sip.

Oh my god...

“Where did you get this?” I hold back a moan as I take another sip. My taste buds have died and gone to heaven.

“This great little café down the street from my apartment. Found it a couple of weeks after I moved here. I’ll take you some time.” He shoots me a grin and takes a sip of his own coffee. “Ready to go?”

I nod enthusiastically, grabbing my bag and rain jacket as we make our way out the door.



“So,” I start, letting the seriousness creep into my tone, “Maren told me to look out for three different species: orcas, humpbacks, and minke. Hold on, I took notes.” I riffle through my bag, looking for my trusty notebook. “Aha! Here it is. Orcas are black and white. Obviously.”

Henry chuckles, peering down at my loopy handwriting and poor drawings of whales covering the pages. “*Obviously.*”

I glare at his sarcasm, then soldier on. “I googled it, and humpbacks are more bumpy and minkes are smoother.”

“Very scientific.” I can’t see his eye roll, but I can feel it. In my soul.

More scientific than him at least. All he can do is point and say, *Oh look, it’s a whale*. At least I can identify the species. Seems pretty damn scientific to me.

“Well, don’t come running to me when you don’t know what type of whale it is.”

Henry simply laughs at the indignant tone in my voice. I’m serious. I’m keeping my science facts to myself. No sharing for him.

As the boat leaves the harbor, the temperature seems to drop several degrees, the breeze chilly from the autumn air. Peering over the side of the boat, looking down into the endless blue water, I shiver.

“Are you cold?”

“I’m okay, it’s just a little chillier than I thought it would be.” Honestly, I’m freezing, but I always run cold and there’s no point in complaining about something that isn’t going to change. I’m also too proud to admit I should have worn a heavier coat.

“We can sit inside for a little while so you can warm up.” Henry offers. While it’s a nice gesture, I am bound and determined to see a whale, and if I go inside and miss any

sighting, I know I'll be upset. I didn't spend hours on YouTube watching whale identification videos to miss a spotting.

"That alright," I shiver again. "I really don't want to miss any of the whales."

Huffing a laugh, Henry moves behind me and puts his arms around my shoulders, wrapping himself around me. Instinctively, I back into his chest, cocooning myself in his warmth. I'll never understand how someone can exude so much body heat. I'm thoroughly convinced he could heat an entire house from his body heat alone, whereas I feel like I'm one layer away from becoming hypothermic. It's unfair. As I begin to thaw, I turn my head to look up at him. I'm not sure I've ever realized how much Henry towers over me. I mean, I always knew he was tall. But being this close to him really makes the disparity noticeable. He's at least half a foot taller than me even in my rain boots, which take me from a tall five-five to an even taller five-six.

"Thank you," I say quietly, looking back towards the water.

"*It's a little chillier than I thought,*" Henry mocks in a high-pitched voice, his chest rumbling with laughter against me, "Sawyer, you're a popsicle." I smack his hand and he continues to laugh, the vibrations shaking me in his arms.

"Yeah, yeah," We get it. I'm cold. Well, I was cold. My personal furnace is doing his job impeccably.

We stand in comfortable quiet, looking out at the water for what seems like a lifetime before I break the silence. "Can I ask you something?"

“Anything. Always.”

“How busy are you? Like with practice and team stuff?” I try to make the question vague. I thought that once Declan and I were in the same city, our relationship would be so much easier. But every time I reach out, he tells me he’s busy with practice or film. After the ambiguous text he sent me earlier this week, something has felt off. I understand how busy he can get during the season, but Henry seems to have time to spend a whole day on a boat. Maybe there’s just something I’m missing. I would think that after six months apart, my boyfriend would miss me and want to see me. The thought that he may not feel that way puts a sour taste in my mouth, leaving me feeling unwanted, yet again.

“During the season I would say pretty busy. We usually have practice four days a week plus a game, with film sessions, weight training, and physical therapy thrown in there. Why?”

I can feel his gaze lingering on me, but I keep my eyes firmly fixed on the ocean, unable to stomach the worried look that’s surely on his face.

“Oh...Well. I—” I stumble to get the words out, feeling embarrassed to even have this conversation with Henry knowing Declan isn’t his favorite person on the planet. “Well, I’ve tried to see Declan a few times since I got here, but every time I text or call, he blows me off or says he’s busy with football. I offered to make dinner. You know I’m a good cook. And he turned me down. Said he was busy. I don’t know. Maybe I’m overthinking it. It’s bugging me a little.”

Ughhhh. I word-vomited out my issue and divulged more details than I wanted. I wanted to sound like a cool girl casually asking about professional football and schedules. Not however I just sounded.

It feels uncomfortable dumping how I feel about Declan on Henry, but he's the only one I could talk to about this since I don't have a lot of girlfriends and I'm not sure Maren and I are in the 'share our feelings' stage of our very new roommateship.

At the mention of Declan's name, I feel Henry's arms stiffen up around me.

Siren's blare in my mind. *Asking that was a mistake.* I look back at Henry to attempt to backtrack and tell him to forget I even said anything, but he responds.

"We're busier than we were at Notre Dame, but we still have free time," he says hesitantly. "We have a bye this week too, so our schedule is freer than usual." It seems like there's more he wants to say about the situation, but he doesn't add anything else. Instead, his arms tighten around my shoulders slightly.

"Oh. Okay." My shoulders slump and frustration builds inside me. The unwanted feeling continues to snowball in my chest. Henry opens his mouth to say something else but is interrupted by an announcement from the captain.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if you look to the starboard side of the ship, you'll see a pod of orca whales."

The announcement from the captain pauses my minor spiral, and with a slightly childish squeal, I grab Henry by the hand and drag him to the other side of the boat, leaning over the railing as far as I can go. Chuckling, Henry grabs me by the shoulders, peels me away from the railing, and drags me back to a safe distance, saving me from falling over the side of the boat. Pulling something out of his jacket, he hands me a pair of binoculars I hadn't even noticed he brought.

“These should give you a better view of the whales than leaning over the railing,” he says, shooting me a cocky grin. “Unless your goal was to swim with them, and in that case, you were one strong gust of wind from accomplishing that.”

Snatching the binoculars from his hands and giving him a playful shove, I muster up my most convincing *don't mess with me* face—which means I probably look five seconds away from tears—before I turn away from him and back towards the pod of orcas.

Bringing the binoculars up to my face, I watch as the whales swim along the coast. I gasp and hand the binoculars back to Henry so he can take a look. “Cheese and rice!” my voice is loud over the sound of the water and wind. “There's so many of them!”

Henry grins wide as he looks through the binoculars, then hands them back to me.

“Thanks for taking me,” I peer over at him while he looks out towards the whales. “I've missed you.”

For a moment, his face looks wistful. Before I can begin to decipher why, the emotion disappears, and a grin appears on his face. “I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else in the world.”



Staring out the window as Henry drives us back to my apartment, I can’t seem to shake the uneasiness I have about Declan. Spotting the whales had temporarily tabled the queasy feeling, but now it’s back with a vengeance. Henry had said that they can get pretty busy, which I understand, but he also made it clear they have free time. What is Declan so busy with that he doesn’t have time to see me once? I’m not asking him to see me every day and or spend every waking moment with me, but dinner would be nice considering I am his girlfriend.

I am still his girlfriend, right?

He never broke up with me and everything felt okay when we last Facetimed, but I can’t seem to shake the feeling that I am more invested in this relationship than he is.

Henry pulls me from my thoughts, “How’s the new job going?”

“Amazing! My coworker, Nathalie, is super cool, and the program is amazing. The kids who show up for the after-school program are hilarious.” I laugh, remembering something. “Oh! And there’s this boy named Micah, he may be the cutest kid I’ve ever met and is probably the Seattle

Mavericks' biggest fan. Guess what he has shaved on the side of his head?"

Henry laughs, shooting me a smile. "I don't know," he taps his chin with his free hand, "a football?" He guesses.

"Even better. He has the number eleven."

Henry whips his head to look at me, eyes wide, then quickly looks back at the road. "He has the number eleven shaved on the side of the head?"

"Are you a parrot now? Yes, Henry. That's what I said." I chuckle, basking in how adorably confused Henry looks as he puts together the pieces of what I'm saying together.

"But eleven is my number." Henry responds slowly, "He has my number shaved on the side of his head?"

I do my best, but I can't hold back the laughter that bubbles up in my chest. I double over in my seat, laughing so hard tears are coming out of my eyes. He's so perplexed at the fact a seven-year-old child has altered his physical appearance with his jersey number that he's lost all his comprehension and communication skills.

"Why are you laughing, Sawyer?! What is so funny to you about this situation?" He demands, trying to keep his eyes on the road while I'm doubled over, shedding tears of laughter in his passenger seat.

"Your reaction is why I'm laughing," I clutch my sides, gasping for air. "I told you a kid at work had your number on the side of his head and you lost all ability to speak except to

parrot whatever I said back to me.” I take a deep breath, attempting to compose myself, ultimately losing my battle, continuing to laugh.

“It was shocking, okay? I’m a rookie, I didn’t expect anyone, let alone a kid at your work, to have my number on the side of his head! Like it’s free advertising!” Henry finally starts to laugh with me. “I can’t believe he got it shaved; it’s going to grow out so poorly.” He chuckles.

“I believe it.” He shoots me a confused look at the conviction in my voice. “You’re a great player and an even better person Henry. If I was going to shave any player’s number on the side of my head, it would be yours.”

He looks at me then, an emotion I can’t quite decipher flickering across his gaze. “Not even Declan’s number?”

“Not even Declan’s.” Not that Henry needs to know, but it’s not even a competition. I would choose Henry’s number over Declan’s any day.

Clearing his throat, Henry changes the subject. “We have an away game in Detroit on Thursday, but we can do something this weekend if you aren’t busy.”

“It’s a plan, Stan.”

Henry and I sit in amicable silence for the rest of the drive. I look out the window as we drive through Seattle, absorbing the bustle of the city. He pulls up to my apartment building and puts the car in park. I gather up my things and open the

door to get out. Right before I move to leave, Henry's eyes drop towards my mouth, then quickly look away.

Did he just look at my mouth? Did Henry just think about kissing me?

Laughing to myself realizing how absurd I'm probably being, I shake off the thought and hop out of the car. I say bye to Henry before I shut the door and make my way through the dilapidated lobby. I ride the elevator up to my floor, make my way to my apartment, and unlock the door. The image of Henry glancing down at my lips pops back into my mind. I shake it away and shuffle through the kitchen, waving to Maren before I flop onto my bed, exhausted. After laying like a corpse for far too long, I force myself to get up and get ready for bed. As I change into my pajamas and brush my teeth, the mental image of Henry looking down at my lips replays in my mind. I know I saw it. But I don't understand why it happened. As I lay in bed, another thought jumps into my mind right before I fall asleep.

Did I look at his, too?



CHAPTER 6

“I’m trying to cool about it, feelin’ like an absolute fool about it”

Cool About It—Boy Genius

Henry

I’ve been hit one too many times in the head playing football. It’s the only logical explanation for my stupidity. What’s rule number one of being in love with your best friend in secret? Don’t look at her lips. Or any off-limits part of her body. Arms are safe. Eyebrows are safe. Lips are not safe. They are a very dangerous region and I broke the rule. Actually, I smashed the rule into a thousand tiny pieces and then steamrolled over them for good measure.

What was I thinking?

Actually, I think the problem was that I wasn't thinking, at least not about things I have any right to be thinking about. At that moment, my arms itched to haul her back into the car and kiss the ever-loving shit out of her. Seeing her in my passenger seat, her curly, blonde hair windblown and her eyes sparkling with joy made me weak in the knees. And in my moment of weakness, I glanced down at the lips I've imagined kissing a thousand times. Her lips were a siren call and I was the foolish sailor falling into the trap. The worst part of it all is I think she caught it. I'm not entirely sure, but I'm confident enough to have spent the rest of the weekend anxiously thinking about whether or not she saw and what she could've been thinking.

I've mentally kicked myself in the shin at least a dozen times.

A sharp cough brings me back to reality. Deon glares at me out of the corner of his eye and quirks one eyebrow up, conveying a silent *pay attention*. I try to focus back on the coach explaining the defense of the Detroit Reapers. I catch a few words before my mind wanders away again. Pass routes and coverage defense seem irrelevant compared to the whale-watching tour and my slip-up in the car. The tour was the highlight of my time in Seattle thus far. Major shoutout to the universe for how cold it ended up being on the boat. Holding Sawyer in my arms was a euphoric experience. I can't explain it but holding her like that felt right. Even with her short stature, she fit perfectly against me. Before that moment, I had forgotten how amazing she smells. The hint of oranges, flowers, and something uniquely Sawyer always puts me at

peace and reminds me of summers in Florida. The smell is reminiscent of moments in the backyard, picking oranges from the tree, and planting flowers in the garden with my mom and grandma. Simpler times when life was uncomplicated and free.

The coach turns off the film, the change of lighting dragging me back to reality. He gives us the weekly speech about getting a good night's rest and dismisses us for the day. Gathering up my protein shake and water, I'm working my way towards the exit when Deon stops me.

"What was up with you today? It seemed like your head was in the clouds."

Embarrassed that it was that obvious I wasn't paying attention, I lie to Deon. "I slept horribly last night; I was just having trouble focusing."

"Well get yourself straight man, we need you Thursday. So go home, get some sleep, and get yourself right."

With that, Deon walks out of the film room. While I don't know him super well, Deon wants us all to reach our potential and works hard to make sure he encourages the entire team. He can be blunt at times, but he means well, so I don't take it to heart. It helps that his bluntness makes his compliments mean more. I feel special when I get a compliment from Deon. I continue towards the door when a voice I recognize stops me in my tracks.

"Yeah, man. She's been texting me constantly since she got here, asking me to meet up day and night." Declan laughs at

whatever the person he's talking to says, then continues. "For real, she's acting like a grade-A clinger, and she can't seem to take a hint."

Recognition of who he's referring to hits me immediately and *anyone* speaking about Sawyer in that way causes my blood to boil and my vision to go hazy at the edges. She might not be mine, but I'm hers, in every way. Advocate. Supporter. Friend. I belong to her, like the stars belong to the moon. If Sawyer asked, I would destroy the world, then glue the shattered pieces back together. Solely for her happiness.

Having heard more than enough and recalling the embarrassment painted on Sawyer's face when she asked me about our schedules, I storm out the door, fury fueling me. I head straight for Declan and whatever teammate he was talking with. At the sight of me barreling towards Declan, the other guy skitters off, leaving Sawyer's boyfriend to face my wrath.

Smart man.

The closer I get to Declan, the angrier I become. *Is he fucking serious?* His audacity is truly unmatched.

"Why the hell were you talking about Sawyer like that?" I nearly yell into his face, my finger pushing into his chest and indignation overtaking my body. I'm nearly vibrating with anger and the urge to slam my fist into his perfectly symmetrical face is intense.

Declan looks me up and down, his attention lingering on my finger against his chest for a moment before meeting my eyes.

He's the perfect picture of nonchalance and calm. A complete opposite of myself. "What do you mean?" He asks innocently.

"That bullshit won't work on me Declan. What you said about Sawyer was rude and degrading, not to mention it doesn't sound like Sawyer at all."

He looks at me again, huffs a laugh, and begins to walk away, apparently done with this conversation.

"If I *ever* hear you speak about Sawyer that way ever again, I will make your life a living hell Declan. And not in the way you think. I won't put itching powder on your gear or egg your car. I will make your life full of so many inconveniences that you'll be afraid to leave your apartment. Think about that next time you talk shit about your own girlfriend." It wasn't the best threat I could have mustered up, but considering how angry I am and how bad I usually am with confrontation, I'm impressed I even managed to come up with one at all.

Not even turning back to face me, he sing songs, "Whatever you say, Parker," as he walks away.



Stepping onto the bus that shuttles us to the airport for our away game, I'm still fuming from the interaction with Declan yesterday. The adrenaline from the confrontation faded away, but the anger still simmers right beneath my skin. I yank the hood from my sweatshirt over my head and stomp toward the back of the bus. Flopping down into the window seat, I pull

out my headphones and put them on, shutting out the world. I recognize I may be behaving in a similar way to a toddler having a tantrum with my stomping and flopping, but life is rough. I'm doing the best I can.

Sitting down in the aisle across from me, Jack takes one look at me and pulls a grimace. It must be pretty obvious, based on his reaction, that I look pissed. I'm sure however angry I look on the outside, I feel ten times angrier on the inside.

“Wanna talk about it?” Jack offers.

“No.” I spit out, a bit more forcefully than I had meant to.

Gearing up to apologize, Jack just shoots me a smile and shrugs like I didn't just snap at him for asking a simple question. I glare at Declan as he walks past, wagging his fingers at me as he slides by. My phone buzzes and I glance down at the screen.

Jack: Frowning isn't a good look on you.

Maybe you should talk about it.

It's good for the soul.

I scratch the side of my head with my middle finger, directly in Jack's line of sight. My phone vibrates again.

Jack: He's got jokes.

Jack's comment cools some of the anger, but I still don't say a single unnecessary word to anyone the entire time I'm on the bus or plane. When we land in Detroit, I head straight to my hotel room. Usually, I chat and joke around at team dinner, but tonight I'm nearly silent. I answer if someone asks me something directly, but otherwise, I eat in angry silence. And since I can't stab Declan with my fork, the poor grilled chicken and broccoli take the brunt of my anger.

I'm sure it was obvious to anyone with eyes that I was in a horrible mood but no one was bold enough to acknowledge it. Except Jack. Having to interact with Declan will only make it worse. Right now, I am a storm cloud. If I have to speak to Declan, I will become a full-on category-four hurricane. This is why I'm choosing to sit in my hotel room rather than hang out with some of the guys. And as I lay in my bed, the same question is running through my mind.

How did someone as arrogant and selfish as Declan end up with someone as kind and giving as Sawyer, while I ended up in love with my best friend who's dating a world-class jerk?

I'm not sure I'll ever understand.



CHAPTER 7

“And I know it makes you nervous, but I promise you it’s worth it, to show ‘em everything you kept inside”

come out and play—Billie Eilish

Sawyer

“Miss Sawyer, do you know how to throw a football?”
Micah looks up at me, a ball in his hands and a hopeful gaze in his eye.

“Of course, I do. Go long, Micah.” When Henry and I first became friends, he spent a week forcing me to learn how to throw a football. *Any potential best friend of mine has to be able to throw a perfect spiral*, he said. I remember thinking he was insane, but now the skill is coming in handy. I grab the football from his small hands and line the laces up with my fingers. I wait for Micah to get far enough away from me

before I launch the ball into the air, aiming for a spot three feet ahead of him. I watch as he runs, pumping his small, little arms, and jumps up to catch the football out of the air.

“Touchdown!” Micah screams before spiking the ball on the ground and performing his best touchdown dance, waving his hands in the air while he does a wiggle.

“Micah,” Nathalie calls from the other side of the gym, “your dad is here.” Micah runs to put the football away then heads back towards me. He runs in for a hug, and with a quick wave goodbye, bolts towards the lobby to meet his dad.

“He’s really taken a liking to you,” Nathalie comments as she walks towards the pile of footballs, bending down to grab a few. I help her clean the mess so that we can head home sooner.

“Micah’s a great kid, and hilarious. Not that I would ever tell him that, it would go straight to his head.” I laugh, picking up the last football, placing it in the storage room, and shutting the door.

My first full week of work has been both exhausting and exhilarating. Hanging out with the kids in the afternoon keeps things exciting and I’ve brainstormed a few ideas for community outreach days and new after-school programs. Instead of going home on days when I’m scheduled to stay late, Nathalie has stayed to keep me company. I like having her around; the time seems to fly by and she’s fun to talk to. It’s beginning to feel like Nathalie could become a really great friend. She’s kind and funny and has the patience of a saint.

Some of the kids get on my nerves on my best days, and she handles them like a champ. Last week, a kid thought it was funny to draw on my nice, white shirt with a marker. He said he made it look “cooler”. I nearly blew a fuse, but Nathalie simply pulled a Tide pen out of a drawer, handed it to me, and resumed whatever task she was doing. Didn’t even blink an eye.

We lock up the building after the last child gets picked up and walk towards our cars in the parking lot. Before Nathalie gets into her car, an idea pops into my head.

“Hey, wanna come over for a girls’ night? My roommate and I were planning on hanging out, maybe watch a movie.” Maren and I hadn’t spoken about a movie night, but a girl’s night with the both of them could be fun. Plus, I think she is more likely to agree if we already have plans.

“Yeah, that sounds great!” She beams at me.

“Awesome, I’ll send the address. See you soon.”

I unlock the driver’s side door, get into the car, and pull out my phone.

Me: Hey, I invited my coworker
over for a girls’ night.

Would you be interested?

I’ll supply booze and snacks.

Maren: You had me at booze

and kept me at snacks.

See you at home.

Laughing at her response, I put my phone in the center console and head out to buy some booze and snacks.



Walking through the front door of the apartment, I waltz my way toward the kitchen, setting down the wine and chips on the kitchen island that I picked up from the store. I freeze as I turn back towards the living room and absorb the sight in front of me. Sprawled on the couch is Maren, in all of her tall glory. On a normal day, seeing Maren on the couch wouldn't be anything exciting, but apparently, today is not any normal day. Covering the coffee table in front of her, there is a smorgasbord with enough food to feed ten people. The ungodly amount of food isn't even what shocks me most. What truly causes me to freeze is the Seattle Mavericks jersey she sports and the eye black she's drawn on nearly half of her face. Maren looks like she's supposed to be on the field but accidentally missed the plane to Detroit.

Taking another moment to process, I finally move into the living room and sit down on the other side of the couch. "What's all this?" I ask, gesturing at the food and her ensemble.

“Oh, well I was putting a snack together to watch the game tonight and then you texted me, so I made more.” She responds, not taking her eyes off the TV, which has the pre-game special playing.

“I told you I would cover the snacks,” I laugh, swiping a cracker off a plate. “But I’ll never turn down food.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

I settle into the couch, getting comfortable when suddenly the realization of what she’s wearing hits me. *She must really love the Mavericks.* It feels as though something is lodged in my throat and I start to become hyper-aware of the situation, my heart thumping in my ears.

What will happen if she finds out about Henry and Declan? The last thing I want is for her to end up using me for my friendship to get closer to them. I haven’t had a ton of girlfriends in the past, and the budding friendship with Maren is one I’m growing to cherish. I was used by my so-called ‘friends’ once before and I’m not sure if I would recover from it emotionally if it happened again.

“You must really love the Seattle Mavericks,” I comment, hoping the tone of my voice doesn’t give away any of my concern or fear.

“Eh, they’re fine,” Her hand waves through the air in dismissal. “Honestly, I’m more of a Detroit fan since that’s where I grew up, but I spilled a whole bunch of hot sauce on that jersey earlier when I made the buffalo chicken dip, so I

changed into this one since it felt wrong not to wear a jersey while I watched the game.”

Her response eases some of the tightness in my chest and I take a deep breath, having slightly more reassurance that she won't completely lose her shit if or when I tell her about them. Although, it seems like it's only a matter of time before she runs into one of them in the apartment. Henry and I left so early for the whale-watching tour that Maren was still asleep, saving me from having to explain why a professional football player was standing in our kitchen. I can only imagine the conversation. Who's that? Oh, just my pal, Henry. He's just a six-foot-three, slab of muscle who crunches numbers for a living. Yeah right. On sight, it's a dead giveaway he's an athlete. The same goes for Declan. They aren't fooling anyone.

A knock at the door ends the conversation and I move through the kitchen to answer the door. On the other side of the threshold, Nathalie juggles a bottle of white wine and two boxes of Cheez-Its in her grip. I chuckle, then move to the side so she can walk into the apartment and shut the door behind her. As I follow her back into the kitchen, I hear Maren yell, “You brought Cheez-Its? Score!”

The moment I saw Nathalie holding the multiple boxes of Cheez-Its in her hands, I knew she and Maren were going to get along just fine. The way to Maren's heart is through her stomach, and you get an express pass if you have artificially flavored crackers.

Chuckling at Maren's comment, I attempt to grab a wine glass from the cabinet above the fridge, wiggling my fingers as I extend my arm toward the cupboard. I perform a small leap, snatching the glass.

She sticks the landing.

The crowd goes wild.

Maren must have forgotten that some people live their lives at a lower elevation. I mentally put a step stool on my shopping list.

Passing it over, she mumbles a quick thanks and pours herself a glass. With her wine glass in one hand and a box of Cheez-Its in the other, we both shuffle into the living room and join Maren on the couch. Looking at the coffee table, it's blatantly obvious that all three of us share a love for snacks. Given all of the food we each brought combined, the three of us could hunker down if there was an apocalypse and still probably have leftovers.

“Nathalie, this is Maren. Maren, this is my coworker, Nathalie.”

“Hi,” Nathalie's voice is soft as she looks Maren up and down. Her eyes latch onto the eye black painted on Maren's skin. Honestly, if I met Maren in her current state, I would also be a bit hesitant. She looks less like a sports fan and more like a Viking prepared for battle.

“She brought Cheez-Its, Sawyer. No need for introductions, we're already best friends. The game's about to start, if you

guys are okay to watch that.”

Maren turns the volume up on the television, the sound of announcers chatting in the background. While we wait for the game to officially start, Maren tells us about her day at work. It pains me not to pry, because I love a good secret, but the last few times she’s spoken about her job, she hasn’t seemed very...enthusiastic. Her excitement for the ocean is obvious. I mean I’ve seen at *least* a dozen fish-themed shirts and I haven’t lived with her for that long. Maren doesn’t share often, but the curious part of me wonders what exactly makes her feel that way.

I pick at the snacks on the table while the coin is tossed, and the game begins. The offense takes the field and my eyes are glued to the screen, searching for numbers eleven and ninety-seven. My stomach does a small flip-flop when I spot Henry and Declan. The three of us watch in concentration as the center snaps the ball to Deon, the quarterback. Deon hands it off to the running back who manages to gain a few yards. The rest of the first half goes in a similar manner and neither Henry nor Declan touches the ball very often. I swear Maren was going to burst a blood vessel from screaming “throw the ball” at the TV screen. At halftime, Seattle is down by seven. Even through the TV screen, I can see that some of the players are frustrated as they move toward the locker room.



Midway through the third quarter, both teams are tied, and my stomach has been doing one-eighty flips every time Declan or Henry gets tackled. It's easily the worst part of watching them play. For sixty minutes, my entire body is tense with anxiety that one of them is going to get injured. I've nearly developed a nail-biting habit.

The game seems to take a turn for the worse, at least for Seattle. It's clear there was some sort of adjustment in the locker room at halftime because the offense came out throwing the ball more than running it. The team battled all the way down the field into the red zone, with the chance to take the lead. The ball is snapped, and I watch as Deon takes in his surroundings, head swiveling, looking for the open player. In the back of the endzone, he spots Henry and launches the ball. I hold my breath as the ball flies through the air in a perfect spiral right toward him. The ball meets Henry's hands, and just as I fly out of my seat in excitement, Henry drops the pass.

The wide-open-no-one-even-close-to-him pass.

Henry never drops a pass.

"What are you doing, butterfingers!" Maren shrieks, launching herself off the couch and towards the TV screen to yell as if he could hear her through it. The camera zooms in on Henry, his head hung low standing in the end zone. Running towards him, Deon puts a hand on his shoulder and says something to him. Nodding, Henry heads back towards the line of scrimmage. They snap the ball to Deon, and he scans the field again. This time, both Henry and Declan are open in

the end zone. Expecting him to throw it to Henry, my jaw drops slightly when Deon throws the ball in the other direction, towards Declan, who catches the ball with grace.

“Touchdown!” Maren and Nathalie scream in unison. At this point, I’m not sure what team Maren is actually rooting for. An empty smile flutters onto my face. A small war rages inside me as I watch the game. Part of me knows I should be more excited for Declan, but all I can think about is the curt messages and how he keeps blowing me off. The other part can’t shake how bad Henry must feel. For as long as I’ve known him, he’s always been so hard on himself when it comes to football. I never really understood why, but I know he’s probably beating himself about the fumble.

The fact that Declan keeps blowing me off constantly returns to my thoughts with a vengeance. Since I refuse to talk to Henry about it, I may have to rip off the band-aid and tell Maren and Nathalie my little secret so I can ask them for advice. If they end up reacting poorly, at least it’s early enough in the friendship that it won’t hurt as badly. Hopefully. It would make living here impossible and my job awkward, but I’m crossing my fingers I didn’t misjudge them.

I watch the rest of the game in stoic silence, and when Maren moves to turn off the TV, I decide it’s time to drop the truth bomb.

“I have something to share with you guys.”

The energy in the air shifts, and Maren and Nathalie both look over at me, confused by the seriousness in my voice.

“Okay?” Nathalie’s brows furrow together behind her glasses.

“I haven’t been totally honest with you both about who my boyfriend and best friend are, and I need some advice. So, I’m about to fess up so that you two can hopefully help me.”

“Sawyer, what are you talking about?” Maren asks, completely at a loss. “They do exist, right? This isn’t some sort of imaginary thing? I mean if it is, more power to you.” She holds up her fist in solidarity and Nathalie chokes back a laugh.

“They’re very real,” I snatch a handful of crackers from the table and shove them into my mouth. I’ve resorted to stress eating. “My best friend is Henry Parker, and my boyfriend is Declan Monroe,” I spit out before I could change my mind. As soon as the words are out, I wait anxiously for their response, sitting on my hands so I don’t bite my fingernails.

Nathalie replies first. “Who?” That’s...surprising considering her job, but as I turn towards Maren, I can tell she recognized the names.

“So, you’re telling me that the players I just spent yelling at for the last four quarters are your best friend and boyfriend?” she asks, face pale, slightly shaking her head in disbelief.

“Wait, what?” Nathalie asks, head swiveling between Maren and me.

“Uh...yes,” I say quietly, suddenly feeling bad for putting her in a weird position.

“Hmm. Alright,” Maren nods, the motion swaying her ponytail back and forth. “That’s awkward, but I’m hoping we can move past that considering I’m seventy-five percent confident I probably wouldn’t have called them names if I had known. I won’t say one hundred percent because I know myself, but you get the sentiment.” She grimaces at me in what must be her attempt at an embarrassed smile, and I bark out a laugh at the sight. I should have known when she called Henry ‘butterfingers’ that I had nothing to worry about. If anything, Henry should worry about her. I have a feeling she’s not afraid to mention the dropped pass if she meets him.

“Why didn’t you just tell us?” Nathalie asks. I do my best to pretend that I don’t hear the hint of hurt in her voice.

“I...um. In undergrad, I made some friends, and I thought things were going well. We would hang out and watch movies. Go to bars. We were a girl gang. Then they met Henry. From there, everything shifted.” I look down at the couch, picking at a loose thread. The story is embarrassing and not something I love reliving. “After that, they would always tell me to invite Henry. They would always ask where he was and what he was doing. Finally, one of them made a move on him and I guess he rejected her. I’m not sure what happened, honestly. Henry never told me the specifics, but not a single one of them spoke to me again. I tried to reach out, but they would ignore my attempts. So eventually I stopped.”

The room is silent. I don’t blame them for not having a response. There isn’t anything anyone could say about the situation that I haven’t thought of myself.

“What a bunch of shit-eating assholes. I hope they get bit by a triggerfish,” Maren declares. Her threat packs a punch given her Viking-esque appearance.

I can't say I've thought that. Also, what is a triggerfish?

“That’s very unkind,” Nathalie adds, although I can tell she agrees with Maren’s assessment.

“It wasn’t the best,” I shrug, trying to downplay exactly how awful it felt. My stomach still churns when I think of how easily they discarded me. “But it’s why I’m not very open with who they are. Especially now that they’re in the NFL.”

“Well, I hope they get a horrible rash in their nether regions as karma.” Nathalie hums her agreement with Maren.

That's an intense wish.

“So, what exactly did you need us to help you with now that we know the top-secret information?” Nathalie asks, shifting the conversation before Maren tries to curse someone. I admire her ability to change the conversation without Maren noticing. A very valuable skill.

I explain to both of them the texts with Declan and what Henry said on the boat about their schedules. I decide to omit the part where I thought I caught Henry looking at my lips like he wanted to kiss me because I’m still firmly attempting to deny it happened.

“Maybe he has some other position responsibilities that Henry doesn’t have?” It’s Nathalie’s halfhearted attempt to find any other reason except the obvious one for why he’s

blowing me off. Maren takes a much blunter approach, which in the moment I appreciate.

“Yeah, he’s gotta go. Break up with him. You’re telling me you spent nearly the entirety of your relationship apart and he hasn’t tried to see you?” She pauses, waiting for me to respond. Her face tells me she knows the answer already. I don’t see why I have to confirm the obvious, but I reluctantly nod. “You don’t deserve that. The person you’re in a relationship with should miss you the moment you’re gone and count down the minutes until they can see you again. Based on what you described, that’s not Declan. So, save yourself the heartache and time and break up with him.”

Nathalie gives her approval to what Maren said and then asks her a question about her job. Once again, I appreciate Nathalie changing the subject, giving me a moment to breathe. While Maren goes on about the inner workings of kelp forests to Nathalie, I can’t help but think that Maren’s right. I don’t miss Declan the moment he’s gone and it’s clearly the same for him, so maybe ending the relationship is for the best. However, I don’t love confrontation and have no idea how to break up with someone.

Nathalie leaves and Maren heads to bed as I finish cleaning up the feast in the living room. As I head to bed, a thought occurs to me. I’ve always counted down the minutes until I can see Henry.



CHAPTER 8

“I’ve been in love with her for ages and I can’t seem to get it right, I fell in love with her in stages”

Me & You Together Song—The 1975

Henry

Lining up against the practice squad defense on the line of scrimmage, I gear up to run the slant play that the offensive coordinator called. With the snap of the ball, I rush forward, then make a sharp change of direction towards the center of the field. I lock eyes with Deon, confirming that he sees me in the open pocket. With a crisp pass, the ball lands in my grip and I take off running towards the end zone. With the sharp sound of a whistle, the play comes to a stop.

“Great catch, Parker. Good throw, Adams. Alright practice is over, hit the showers. I’ll see you all Monday, enjoy the day

off.”

Smiling to myself at the compliment from the offensive coordinator, I walk off the field towards the locker room. Heading through the door, I make my way towards my locker. I shuffle through my belongings and dig out my phone. As the screen lights up, I groan.

Heading back out into the hallway, I put the phone up to my ear and begrudgingly return the four missed calls from my father.

“Hi, Dad.”

“Henry,” he responds, voice cold. *What a warm greeting for your only son.*

I attempt to make this call short and sweet. “What’s up, why did you call?” The sooner he tells me why he called, the sooner I can hang up. I’m ripping off the band-aid.

“We need to talk about what happened in the game last night. How could you drop a wide-open pass? I trained you better than that.”

My stomach drops at his analysis of how I played. If my father is good at one thing, it’s knowing how to hit me right where it hurts.

“It was one dropped pass, Dad. It happens.”

Apparently, that response wasn’t sufficient for Matthew Parker, former pro-bowl MVP and Super Bowl champion. If anything, it only made him angrier. Heaven forbid I make a mistake.

“We’ve talked about this. How important your rookie season is. It defines your career,” He really emphasizes the word ‘defines’, driving the point home. “You can’t afford any screw-ups.”

With those lovely words about what he thinks about me, he hangs up.

Walking back into the locker room after the tense phone call with my father, I spot Jack getting ready to leave. The last thing I want to do is go home and stew in the anxiety coursing through my body after that conversation. There’s a gray cloud dampening my mood and being alone will only make it worse.

“Any plans tonight?” I ask, sitting down next to Jack. It’s a Saturday with no practice or game tomorrow, so I’m hoping if he has plans, they’re of the drinking variety.

As usual, Jack responds with the last thing I was expecting. “I was planning to go home and watch the new David Attenborough documentary. What’s up?”

Who?

“Just wanted to see if you wanted to grab a few beers at Longboards?”

Jack shoots me a look I can’t quite decipher. “Sure, why not, I can get my Attenborough on later,” I shake my head, laughing as we both head towards the exit.



Three hours later, I walk through the front door of Longboards, heading towards the bar. This bar is one of my favorite spots in Seattle. It's a bit run down but still has a charm to it. The walls are covered with nautical-themed décor and flatscreen TVs playing different sports games. The wooden bar spans the entirety of the back wall and the lacquer on the wood is beginning to peel from age. My favorite part is the crowd. There's not a soul in here that pays me or my friends any mind. Most of the patrons are over the age of 60 and couldn't care less about football, let alone name a team. It lowers my anxiety about being recognized when I know that not a single person in the bar cares about what I do for a living. I enjoy the fans, but sometimes I don't want to be noticed. In this bar, I'm just Henry. Not Henry Parker, the wide receiver for the Seattle Mavericks. The thought of it is freeing, especially after the phone call with my dad.

I sit down on a barstool and flag down the bartender. Ordering a Miller Lite, I kill time watching HGTV on one of the TVs while I wait for Jack to arrive. I *ooh* and *ahh* at the house flip reveals, entertaining myself while I wait. Five minutes later, Jack saunters into the bar, wearing jeans and a fitted, olive-green t-shirt, looking like he came straight from the set of "Sons of Anarchy." As soon as that thought crosses my mind, he shoots me a goofy, crooked smile, banishing any thought that he may look intimidating.

"Hey," Jack says as sits down next to me and flags the bartender to order a drink. He turns back to me after getting the bartender's attention and cuts straight to the chase. "So

why did you ask me to get drinks with you on a Saturday night when you could be doing literally anything else? Not that I'm not happy about the invitation, I am. But I feel like there's an ulterior motive here."

I sigh, not surprised in the slightest that he saw right through me. Usually, I would talk to Sawyer when something was bothering me. However, considering that the thing that's bothering me is my feelings for Sawyer, I'm at a crossroads.

"Was I really that transparent earlier?" I ask, taking a long gulp of my beer.

"Yes, now spill," Jack quirks an eyebrow, his eyes glittering with amusement.

In a rush, before I lose my momentum and nerve, I blurt out what's on my mind. "I'm in love with Sawyer but she's dating Declan and I thought the feelings would fade but they only got worse. Now she lives in Seattle, and I have no idea how to act because all my feelings just bubble right up to the surface every time I'm around her and it's exhausting. And to make matters worse, last week we went on a whale-watching tour and before she got out of the car, I looked down at her lips and she definitely noticed." I take a deep breath after getting it all off my chest.

Wow. That was freeing.

Jack looks back at me with wide eyes and a slack jaw. "Okay...Uh. Yeah." He says scrubbing the back of his neck. "That's uh... a lot of information to process, so maybe start at the very beginning. Some background information may help

me here. How did you and Sawyer meet? I'm assuming in college?"

"Yeah, a gen-ed history class at the beginning of our sophomore year. We were partnered up for this project about the fall of ancient empires and hit it off. We would talk about everything and nothing while we worked. I don't think I've ever laughed so hard in my life while working on something so boring." I smile, thinking about all the hours spent in the library with Sawyer, laughing until we were both in tears.

Now that I've opened the emotional floodgates, the words begin to pour out of me. Jack better strap in. He's about to ride the emotional rollercoaster that is my life. "At first, it was just nice to talk to someone outside of football. We would just hang out and have fun and I wouldn't have to think about the stress that football would bring. About halfway through the season, one of the other wide receivers on the team took a nasty hit and tore his ACL." Jack grimaces, imagining the injury. "After that, I was promoted to the starting lineup. I was so nervous and afraid that the night before the first game I was supposed to start, I had a panic attack and couldn't breathe."

I've never spoken to anyone besides Sawyer about my anxiety and the panic attacks that sometimes happen, but Jack doesn't seem like the type to judge me about it or comment, so I soldier on.

"The anxiety was suffocating, and it felt like the walls were closing in on me. I had never had a panic attack before, so I did the only thing I could manage, which was to call Sawyer.

She showed up at my apartment and helped me work through it. After I calmed down, Sawyer grabbed a permanent marker and drew a smiley face on my hand. She told me that if I felt anxious during the game to just look down and remind myself that she's with me and to have fun. At the moment, I thought it was a bit silly. *How is a smiley face going to help?* I remember asking her. She just shrugged her shoulders and said, *It may not, but it definitely won't hurt.*

“The next day, as I stepped out onto the field, I started to feel the panic rise in my body. I peeled back my gloves to look at the smiley face she drew. When I glanced at it, it felt like there was a weight lifted off my shoulders. I remember thinking to myself *I honestly cannot believe the smiley face worked.* After that, it kinda became our tradition. She would draw a smiley face on my hand, and it would help keep the anxiety at bay. It may seem dumb, but it was our thing and without it, I'm not sure I would have made it through the season.”

“So that's where that ugly cup originated from?” Jack responds, laughing.

“Yeah,” I smile at him. “We were heading to a bowl game and Sawyer couldn't come, so for Christmas she bought me the smoothie cup and stashed it into my bag before I left. When I got to the hotel and unpacked my bag, I found the cup and a card with it. On the card, she wrote this sentimental note. I had never gotten a gift so thoughtful before, even if it is a bit of an eyesore.” The cup isn't the most aesthetically pleasing thing I own, but it is my favorite. “I think that's when I started to recognize that I was falling in love with her. I'm sure it was

happening little by little before that, but I remember that moment well.”

“You’ve never wanted to tell her how you feel?”

Frankly, if the whole football thing doesn’t work out for him, Jack would make a wonderful therapist.

“No, I did. I had the whole thing planned out. I was going to tell her after I got drafted. I figured the adrenaline pumping through my body would prevent me from chickening out.” He laughs at me, nodding in understanding. “As I was walking back to the table after being drafted, I was hyping myself up to do it. But when I got back to the table, she told me that Declan had asked her out. She was so excited, man. It felt like a punch to the gut. I tried to convince myself to tell her anyway, but I was so afraid that she would reject me, and it would ruin our friendship, so instead I said nothing.”

I glance down at the bar, picking at the label on my beer bottle, not wanting to look up and see the sympathy that’s certainly painted across Jack’s features. I would give up almost anything to be able to tell Sawyer how I feel, except our friendship. I would rather have her as a friend than nothing at all.

“You should invite her out,” Jack says, breaking my train of thought.

Not the response I expected. Sympathy, yes. An unnecessary apology for my shitty luck, maybe.

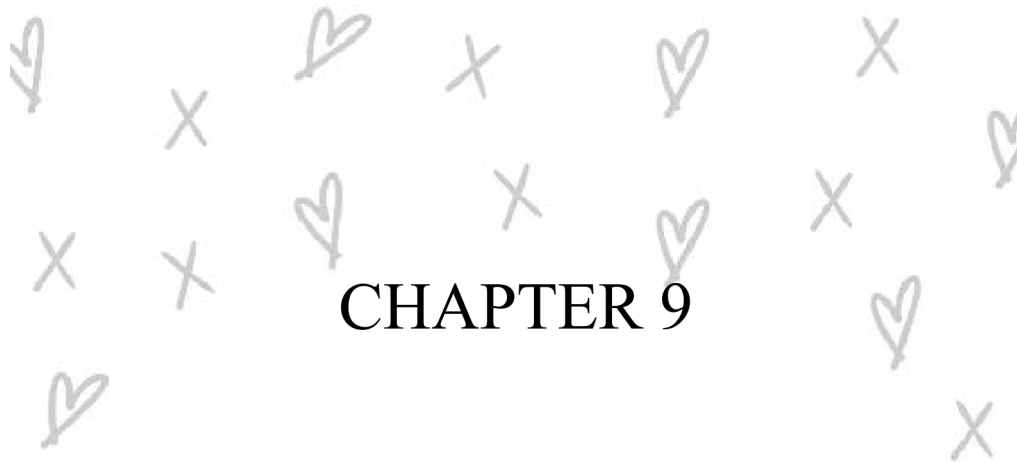
“Now? To this bar?” My body lights on fire and I begin to sweat. Inviting her here would be weird. Especially after I just spilled my guts to Jack about my teeny tiny (massive) feelings for Sawyer.

“Yeah, why not. Maybe we can sense the vibe, see if she finds you attractive or there’s a spark.”

“She’s with Declan, that doesn’t seem like a great idea.” It sounds like a sure-fire way for me to end up disappointed. It’s been years. If there was a spark, it would have happened by now.

“She’s also *your* best friend.”

Touché.



“Sorry if you’re starstruck, blame it on the stardust”

Hymn—Kesha

Sawyer

Henry: I’m out at Longboards with Jack.

You should come!

If you want.

Bring the roommate.

No pressure!

Okay, see you.

Maybe.

I read the messages from Henry. My brows furrow together as the messages continue to pop up on the screen. I'm not sure why he worded it like that. I can't tell if he wants me there or if he's inviting me to be polite. The texts are giving off confusing vibes.

I look down at my outfit, the ratty t-shirt and sweatpants, then over at Maren. Most definitely not bar attire. If someone were to describe our style, they would categorize it as "hobo chic". Needless to say, neither of us had anything fun planned on a Saturday night. I turn to Maren, nudging her foot to get her attention.

"Henry just messaged me, he's at a bar called Longboards with his teammate. Do you wanna go?"

"Oh, Longboards is chill. Sure, why not." She glances down at the mustard stain on her t-shirt. "Just let me change my outfit."

Maren and I both make half-assed attempts to look presentable enough to leave the apartment. Maren throws on a shark shirt and calls it good, waiting on the couch for me to get ready. It takes me a bit longer. Deciding between two pairs of similar-looking jeans is tough work. I nearly broke a sweat. Once we both decide it's as good as it's going to get, we head out the door. Maren orders an Uber and I send Henry a quick text while we wait in the lobby.

Me: On our way! :)

Henry: Yes.

Great.

See you soon!

Uh...okay? Not sure why he's freaking out over text all of a sudden. A simple 'cool' would suffice.

Maren slides into the front seat of the Uber and within minutes convinces the driver to play ABBA. Her off-key singing drowns out my laughter from the backseat, my sides in pain from laughing as she serenades the poor driver to "Gimme!Gimme!Gimme!".

Three songs later and Maren is singing her final note, the driver patiently waiting for us to get out of the car. Finished singing, she hops out of the car, waving goodbye before heading into the bar.

Maren and I navigate our way through the nautical-themed bar towards the back, where I spot Henry sitting on a barstool. The lights are dim and old country music plays from a jukebox. The aroma of fried food and cheap beer waft around us. Henry notices our arrival and leaps out of his seat. He closes the distance between us in two large steps and drags me into a tight hug, my feet lifting slightly off the ground. I giggle and hug him back, amused and flattered by how excited he seems to see me. Right as I go to pull back, I notice Henry takes a deep breath, right into the top of my head.

Did he just sniff my hair?

Shaking away the odd thought, I begrudgingly unwrap myself from Henry's arms and when I do, I miss the warmth immediately. I really need to invest in a thicker coat. I can't keep Henry around all the time to keep me warm. Although it's not my worst idea. Henry turns towards Maren standing beside me who's grinning at Henry and me like she knows something we don't. The gleam in her eyes frightens me.

For a moment I had forgotten she was here.

"You must be Maren," Henry says, gaze fixed on Maren. "I'm Henry, Sawyer's *best friend*." He slowly emphasizes the last two words.

What is with this man tonight?

First the hug, then the hair sniffing, and now the not-so-subtle best friend pissing contest with Maren. I don't know what's happening, but I can't decide if I hate it or love it. Honestly, the little attention gremlin residing in my head kind of loves all the attention Henry is giving me. A complete one-eighty from Declan.

However, Maren is thoroughly unimpressed by whatever Henry is trying to do and just smiles and nods.

"Nice to meet you," Maren shakes his hand and turns to walk away. I catch her muttering "butterfingers" under her breath as she passes by me and I hold back a snort. She sits down by some guy covered in tattoos and I leave her to fend for herself.

“She seems...nice,” Henry comments, watching Maren and the stranger at the bar, his brows furrowed.

“She’s hilarious. Thanks for inviting us, by the way. This is a lot more exciting than the night the two of us originally had planned.”

“What were the original plans?” He asks, shooting me a look that almost resembles fear. Like he’s afraid of the answer.

“Maren and I planned on watching this new documentary, with her explaining all the scientific intricacies while I pretend to understand her big science words and gorge myself on Cheetos. *Very* exciting stuff.”

Henry shoots me a goofy grin. “The new David Attenborough one?”

I look at Henry bewildered considering he does not enjoy documentaries in the slightest and I would bet that he doesn’t even know who David Attenborough is. “Yeah, that’s the one. How on earth do you know about that?”

“Oh, I don’t but Jack was talking about it.”

“Yeah, that makes more sense.” He shoves me playfully then takes me by the hand and drags me towards the bar. I grimace as our hands touch. “Why are your hands so clammy?”

Henry snatches his hand away, wiping it on his pant leg. “It’s the condensation from the beer bottle.” I look around for a beer bottle. There’s none in sight.

“Hm...okay.”

He's acting weird.

Right as we make it to the bar, Maren lets out a huff of annoyance at whatever the man covered in tattoos just said to her.

“You're telling me you *seriously* think Lebron is better than Jordan? Really?!” She asks, exasperated, her hands rapidly moving through the air. “Let me see Lebron do what Jordan did without a super team to back him up, then we'll talk.” Maren's voice has raised two octaves and I watch as her face begins to flush with anger.

The man she's nearly yelling at just shoots her an amused grin, like what she just said is the most endearing thing on the planet, which only makes her more irritated. At this point, you could basically see the smoke coming out of her ears. I'm not sure I want to know how that conversation started and how it got to the point where she looks like she's one comment away from losing her shit.

“It looks like you've already met Maren, Jack. This is Sawyer,” Henry introduces the aforementioned tattoo-covered man, interrupting whatever conversation/argument he was having with Maren.

Jack swivels to face me, gets out of his chair, and sweeps me into a hug, catching me off guard. His massive frame wraps around me and I feel...soothed?

The man gives a damn good hug.

After another moment, Jack places me back on the floor. He looks down at me, smiling, while towering over both Maren and me. A fact I think she also just recognized as she drags her eyes up and down his body, a scowl forming as she sips her beer.

“It’s so nice to meet you Sawyer, I’ve heard great things about you.” I shoot a look at Henry, who is inspecting a beer bottle sitting on the bar and is sporting the slightest tinge of pink on his cheeks.

I smile back at Jack, then flag down the bartender to order a drink. Ordering a classic vodka cranberry, I take a seat next to Henry at the bar. We spend the next hour chatting. Jack asks Maren and I both about our day and Jack and Henry talk about practice. Jack explains some practice drills he does as an offensive lineman. He loses me after about three words, but Maren nods along. At least one of us understands.

I explain my job and the non-profit, then Jack asks Maren what she does for work. With that question, Jack and Maren get into a heated debate about the ethics of zoos and aquariums, a topic I have no knowledge of but by the looks of it, both Maren and Jack have strong opinions. I turn to Henry, whose back is facing the door, to ask about his week and the away game they had when my jaw drops at the sight in front of the entrance.

Walking through the front door into Longboards is Declan. Holding hands with a tall, platinum-blond-haired woman.



CHAPTER 10

“You can’t fill the hole inside of you with money, girls and cars”

You should be sad—Halsey

Sawyer

W^{hat the fuck?}

What the hell is Declan doing at Longboards holding hands with a woman? He told me earlier this week he was too busy with football to eat dinner, but now he’s at a bar with someone I don’t know? I would *love* for someone to explain how that is. My mouth must be hanging wide open and the look on my face alarming because Henry follows my gaze and glimpses at the sight before us. I watch as he cringes, then turns back at me, eyes wide as saucers and concern lacing his features.

“What is Declan doing here with a woman?”

This is not the time for stupid questions. Based on my unhinged jaw and the angry tears beginning to form, I’m flabbergasted and don’t have the slightest clue. I’m as shocked as everyone else.

“That’s the million-dollar question, isn’t it?”

They say there’s nothing scarier than a woman scorned. I never truly understood the phrase, to be honest. Sure, I’ve been hurt by other actions in my life—when friends ditched me for someone better or I was rejected by a boy I had a crush on. But I have never gotten upset or angry or fell into a fit of rage. In those situations, my default emotion was sadness. All the feelings would rush right up to the surface, and I would cry. Once I was done crying, I would pack it up neatly into a box and throw those feelings away because they had no value to me anymore.

At this moment, however, the only emotion surging through my body seeing Declan with another woman is rage. I’m not sad or jealous or hurt. I’m angry. Really fucking angry. All the hurt feelings I had about the fact he hadn’t made the effort to see me once since I moved to Seattle have morphed from hurt into full-on animosity. And that fury is what propels me out of my chair and straight towards Declan.

Before anyone has the opportunity to process what I’m doing or stop me, I’m standing in front of Declan, who has the gall to not even look embarrassed or ashamed. Still standing beside

the random woman, Declan looks me up and down. “Hi Sawyer, didn’t expect to see you here tonight,” he drawls.

I exhale so deeply that I probably create a breeze. *I’m going to punch him in the face. I’m going to sucker punch him right in his stupid-looking face.* I’ve never been a violent person. Hell, I can’t even squash a bug. Maren had to squash a spider for me last week and just thinking about it makes me queasy. But right now, a good punch to his perfect fucking nose would feel like a righteous victory.

I slap on the fakest smile I can muster so that Declan knows I see right through his bullshit. Because that’s what this whole situation is. Absolute bullshit.

“Henry invited me out since my *boyfriend* has been too busy to bother to see me,” I say, glaring at him, then glancing at the woman on his arm. Her legs go on for miles and miles and she looks chic. Classy. In a way I could never achieve. I mentally slap myself for comparing myself to her and focus on the real issue. My dumb ass, soon-to-be, ex-boyfriend.

The blonde-haired woman interrupts my glaring.

“I’m Hannah, Declan’s *friend*. How do you know Declan?”

There is no need to emphasize the *friend*, but my gut tells me she’s fishing for information. Women have great intuition and mine is telling me this poor woman has no idea Declan has a girlfriend. Which only fuels my anger.

I glance at her, then resume my glaring and respond, looking straight at Declan. “Declan, would you like to answer that

question, or shall I?”

My hands are glued to my hips and my stance exudes disappointment. I may have to physically look up to see him, but mentally I’m looking down on him. Shaming him.

At my thinly veiled threat, Declan finally shifts his feet, clearly becoming uncomfortable. *Good. Squirm, you little shit.* Declan remains silent—a new skill for him—so I answer instead.

“Declan is, or *was*, my boyfriend. The same boyfriend that couldn’t find time to see me, but apparently managed to find the time to go out on dates.”

Hannah, Declan’s poor *friend*, looks like she’s seen a ghost. She quickly mumbles an apology at me and insists profusely she had no idea he wasn’t single, then turns and walks out the door. Middle finger raised in the air, directed towards Declan.

Good for her.

I watch her walk out the door then turn my attention back to Declan. Before I can even get a single word out, he opens his mouth.

“I mean this is probably for the best right? We weren’t all that compatible anyway, it was only a matter of time.”

My jaw drops at the audacity of the statement, and I laugh. Hysterically. The sound echoes throughout the bar. I’m sure I resemble someone in a movie on the brink of an existential crisis.

“Are you actually trying to absolve yourself from this by saying we weren’t compatible?” I ask, in between breaths. “If we weren’t compatible, you should have just broken up with me, not do whatever you’ve been doing while I was in Indiana.”

Declan shifts uncomfortably again, now noticing all the eyes on us. It doesn’t seem like he’s going to say anything more or apologize, so I guess I’ll finish the conversation.

“If it isn’t already abundantly clear, Declan, we’re over.” I shake my head, turning away before I decide I have one last thing to say. “You’re not a bad person, we both know it. You have a good heart, I know, I’ve seen it.” He looks down at the floor. I wait for him to make eye contact with me before I continue. When he does, I go on. “But this was a *really* shitty thing to do.”

His face pales at my final comment and now that I have the final word, I spin on my heels and make my way back to the bar where Henry and Jack look shocked, and Maren only looks proud.

For someone who doesn’t love confrontation, I did a pretty damn good job.



CHAPTER 11

“Because you look so fine and I really wanna make you mine”

Are You Gonna Be My Girl—Jet

Henry

Time stops. The world stops spinning. I grip the barstool, using every toned muscle in my body to keep me in the chair. To not fly out of my seat and sing a little song and do a little dance.

I stare slack-jawed at Sawyer as she rushes back to her seat, chugs her vodka cranberry, slams the empty glass down on the bar then immediately orders another one. Her face is flushed and her eyes are frantic as she sits down beside me. Her breath is labored like she just ran a mile. Watching her suck in air, I give myself a friendly reminder to keep breathing.

There's no way that just happened. My mind is having a hard time processing what my eyes just saw. Sawyer is single.

Holy shit.

Sawyer. Is. Single.

I lock eyes with Jack over Sawyer's head and attempt my best *did that just fucking happen* eyes with my eyes. His eyes widen and he wiggles his eyebrows up and down which I can only assume is *hell yeah it did*.

Could this be a sign from the universe that I should go for it? Truthfully, I've never put much stock in fate or the universe and the only reason I know anything about what astrological sign I am is because Sawyer looked it up using my birthday. I'm a Pisces, which apparently means I'm emotional and empathetic, but I've never really put much weight into that kind of stuff. Now, I could be easily convinced that the universe may be playing its part. And if that's the case, I'll send the universe a fruit basket as a thank you for making the love of my life single.

I shake myself out of my stupor and lean into Sawyer. "Are you okay?"

If I thought I couldn't have been more bewildered after she just broke up with Declan in the middle of Longboards, then Sawyer takes it as a challenge. The last thing I expect her to do is laugh. She starts laughing, the sound soft, before it deepens into full-on body shakes and she inhales raggedly between laughs. It doesn't seem like she has plans to stop anytime soon. I'm not sure what's funny about the situation, but

clearly, Sawyer is having some sort of emotional breakdown because hysterically laughing is not what I would do if I were in her situation.

I glance at Maren and Jack sitting on the other side of her, hoping to get some kind of help, but Jack just looks at her uneasily and Maren mouths *You're her best friend* and makes a shooing motion with her hands toward Sawyer. I guess I'm on my own.

“Um...Sawyer, do you want to talk about it?” I ask, trying my best to come off as gentle and supportive when mentally I'm pumping my fists into the air.

Sawyer sucks in a breath and seems to gain some composure. “I can't believe—honestly how was I upset over that idiot? I can do *so* much better. I'm not even sad. No tears here.” She swipes under her eyes and shows me her dry hand. “I'm honestly just annoyed at myself for wasting six months on that dicknugget.”

Dicknugget? That's a new one.

That was definitely not the response I had expected, but none of this is normal. I make a note to send Declan a nice little thank you basket for being such a jackass, because his loss could be my gain.

“Dating!” Sawyer exclaims, slamming down the glass of her fourth drink onto the bar, “I'm gonna go dating. Do the dating thing. It could be fun. Yes! It will be great. Free coffee and flirting. That's what I'm going to do.”

At that, my excitement level that was orbiting outer space gets a solid dose of reality and it shoots right back down to earth. Sawyer *cannot* start dating someone else before I tell her how I feel. It happened once and I will be damned if it happens again. If the whole ‘universe has a plan’ thing is real, then I’m taking this as it putting up a massive neon sign saying, “Shoot your shot, dude.”

Which is exactly what I plan to do.



After spending the night staring at my ceiling, trying to come up with a game plan, I quickly realize I am way out of my league and need some serious manpower to pull this off. If Sawyer ends up dating someone other than me, I might dig myself a hole, crawl into it, and stay there forever. I will not recover. Which is why I need help. So, I text the only two people I know and trust besides Sawyer.

Jack and Deon.

Me: I’m calling an emergency dude meeting.

9:30 AM. Donna’s Diner.

Jack: Oh, hell ya!

Deon: A what?

Jack: Just show up Deon, it’s important.

Deon: Fine. but you're buying my meal.

Me: Fair.



I sit down at a booth in the back of Donna's Diner, a cute 1950s-themed restaurant that makes the world's most amazing French toast. No joke. I have to watch myself or I'll scarf down six whole pieces without taking a breath. While I wait for Jack and Deon to arrive, I wave the waitress down and order a coffee. This whole situation is way outside of my comfort zone. I was so ready to tell Sawyer how I felt six months ago. But then she started dating Declan. I had spent weeks on end hyping myself up in the mirror, practicing my speech, even though I was relying heavily on adrenaline to get me through the whole experience. I had time to prepare.

Now, I don't have time. And I'm slightly—alright, very—terrified that if I tell her and she doesn't feel the same, our friendship will blow up. Kaboom! Goodbye best friend, hello sadness and despair. I'm still going to do it. Signs from the universe and all that jazz, but I definitely need a game plan or else this will end in disaster.

Jack is the first one through the door, immediately spotting me and making his way to my booth. He slides his bulky frame into the seat across from me, his signature goofy smile plastered on his face when puts his elbows on the table and head in his hands then singsongs.

“Henry has a crush...”

If I didn't need his advice on what I should do about this so-called crush, I would slap him upside the head, but he clearly understands his value to me right now. Annoying asshole.

I shoot Jack a look telling him to shut up before I do it for him. He just shrugs off my death stare and laughs at my distress over this situation. Fortunately, Deon saves me from having to deal with any more of Jack's looks or childish comments. Deon slides into the booth next to Jack and gets right down to business.

“Why am I here?”

I have to respect how efficient Deon is with this whole situation, but a little small talk before I spill my little secret—again—would be appreciated.

“Oh, nothing major,” Jack replies, a mischievous gleam in his eyes, “just that Henry here is in love with his best friend who was dating Declan, but then broke up with him last night. So now she's single and he's trying to figure out what to do.” He smirks at me. “Did I cover most of it?”

“Yeah,” I say meekly. “Pretty much sums it up.”

Deon looks between us, eyebrows raised, clearly not expecting that to be the reason I forced him to meet me at a diner early on a Sunday morning.

“Okay. Well, I'm still not sure why I got the bat signal for this, but I'm here, so I'm all in now.” He pours out the coffee

creamers and begins to stack them in a tower. “Have you ever tried to scope out the vibe with her before?”

“No. Well kinda. I was going to tell her but then Declan asked her out.”

Deon grimaced, clearly sympathizing with that. “Tough break.”

Jack smiles mischievously before he creeps his finger over the table, flicking Deon’s tower, causing it to tumble down. Jack snickers, amused by the childish act while Deon beams lasers at Jack.

“Not cool, man. Not cool.” Deon shakes his head, rounding up the small, white containers and starting to stack them in a new shape.

“Focus!” I whisper yell, snatching the creamers away, “I need help.” The two of them frown at me. They have no reason to be frowning. I am the one deep in the friend zone. Not them. I need to go from the friend zone to the end zone as soon as possible before I lose my second chance.

“Oh, I know!” Jack exclaims, clapping his hands together. “You need to do some of the things they do in romantic comedy movies and see how she reacts.”

I open my mouth to shut down that idea because it has to be about the dumbest thing I have ever heard. *Do some things from romantic comedy movies?* Jack clearly has a screw or two loose because there is no way that would work. It’s all the blocking and repetitive hits. Has to be.

“I think Jack may be onto something,” Deon agrees, leaning back in the booth.

Oh, just great. They’re both losing their minds. Next, they’re gonna suggest I serenade her with “Can’t Take My Eyes Off You” while she’s at soccer practice. Which would be absurd since she doesn’t play soccer and I’m not Heath Ledger.

“Have you both lost your minds? There is no way that me reenacting scenes from romcoms is going to help me figure out if Sawyer could be into me.”

“We’re not saying do anything crazy, like run through an airport or rent a mariachi band, but I think the little actions might work. Build the tension. See if she reacts when you touch her or let your gaze linger slightly longer than normal. Leave her little notes or buy her something that has a special meaning for you both. Not enough to be weird, but just enough for her to notice.” Deon pauses and his eyes narrow slightly, “Seriously, you can’t be weird about it. It has to be chill. You can’t panic.”

“Yes, exactly! Tuck her hair behind her ear or try that scene from *Ghost* where he comes up behind her at the pottery wheel. That one always gets the ole motor running.” Jack adds to the growing list of romcom clichés.

I guffaw, offended they think I can’t pull off this ridiculous plan. “I won’t be weird about it. I am chill.”

“You’re not chill,” they say in unison. I can feel the frown on my face. I am chill. The chilliest.

“Deon’s right though, it’s the small stuff that will help you gauge her feelings,” Jack says. I don’t love how the two of them agree to this asinine idea.

I begin to tell them that this plan is outlandish when the waitress returns to the table to take our order. Jack and I both order enough to feed a family of four and when Deon starts to place his own order, the waitress grows flustered. Her cheeks go red, and she starts nodding aggressively at every word Deon says. Jack and I try to hold back a laugh because this isn’t the first time it’s happened. Deon seems to attract women from a mile away, even without trying. The dark skin, piercing green eyes, and sparkling white smile seem to have an effect on women. They either get flustered or flirt aggressively. It’s hard to watch either way. Deon finally manages to place his order and when she walks away, his head drops into his hands and he groans.

“It happens every time and it’s so embarrassing. I don’t want this type of attention. Honestly, I would prefer no attention at all, thanks.”

Jack and I just laugh because he’s dramatic and it’s hilarious that he can’t stand how much attention he attracts. You would think an attractive NFL quarterback would enjoy the spotlight, at least a little. Not Deon. I’ve never seen someone go out of their way to avoid the female gaze the way he does.

“Not our fault you struck gold in the looks department, buddy,” Jack adds, not at all sympathetic to his plight. Deon only glares at him.

I redirect the conversation back to *my* very pressing issue. “First of all, I am deeply concerned about how much knowledge the two of you have about romantic comedies.”

“They’re good, man. You should watch some,” Jack assures me, as Deon nods emphatically.

“I’m just not sure how this will work with Sawyer. Some of it seems like crossing the friendship line and I don’t want to make it weird.” I feel stuck. Every fiber of my being is at war. I want to tell Sawyer how I feel, but the fear of losing our friendship makes me hesitant.

“That’s inevitable. You’re going to have to cross some small lines to see and if she doesn’t react well, then take a step back behind the line,” Deon suggests.

When he says it like that with all the logic, it makes sense that it could work. I understand the appeal of making decisions with logic. I try to make most of my choices with logic but right now all my choices seem to be laced with a pinch of panic.

“Look, I’m not convinced that this is the best plan, but considering it’s the only thing we managed to come up with, I’m going to give it a try.”

“Operation: RomCom is a go,” Jack responds, putting his finger up to his ear as if he’s talking into an earpiece.

“I’m not calling it that,” Deon mutters. I agree with that. Not a chance.

“Suit yourself, but it’s a fun name and it makes us seem like super spies.”



CHAPTER 12

“You could just be yourself when you’re with me, no judgment”

No Judgment—Niall Horan

Sawyer

I watch as Nathalie launches popcorn, aiming for Maren’s mouth. With flair, Maren snatches the piece from the air and chews. Giggling, she chucks another piece in her direction, hitting Maren square between the eyes.

Her eyes narrow for a moment before she snags the kernel from her lap and pops into her mouth. “Good throw.”

An action movie rages on in the background. I tried to turn the volume down when Nathalie arrived, but Maren swatted my hand away muttering about how no one silences Gerard Butler. I would prefer to keep my fingers attached to my body,

so now we're talking over the sound of Gerard Butler doing action stuff. I don't know, those movies are not my thing.

The moment we left the bar last night, Maren was texting Nathalie to meet at our apartment the next morning and to bring snacks. Which is how I got here. Watching Nathalie throw popcorn at Maren while she regales the details of my breakup like she's a narrator in a movie. Nathalie showed up this morning arms full of snacks and eager to hear Maren retell the entirety of last night in intense detail. Maren didn't leave out a single thing. From the vibe of the bar to the look on Declan's face as I broke up with him, she covered the entire order of events quite well. I couldn't even chime in because she covered all the bases.

"Are you sad about it?" Nathalie presses, swapping the popcorn bowl for a bag of chocolate.

Am I sad about it?

Yeah...no.

I feel a little robbed that I lost six months to Declan, but I wouldn't use the word 'sad'. In all honesty, it probably wasn't going to last long-term, but the way it ended does sting a little bit. The idea he may have cheated on me leaves me a bit queasy, but I'm not heartbroken over the ending of our relationship.

"No, not really. Maren was right, breaking up was for the best."

“I’m never wrong,” Maren mumbles from the other side of the couch, her mouth full of snacks.

“Aren’t scientists hesitant to use the word *never*?” From the way Maren glares at Nathalie, I can tell she does not enjoy someone questioning her.

“Was he at least good in bed? That would make up for some of his shitty behavior.”

“That does not make up for poor behavior, Maren.” Nathalie chides, concern plastered across her face.

“I beg to differ,” Maren shrugs, a smirk on her face.

Nathalie and Maren turn to me, waiting for my answer. I open my mouth then close it. Open it, then close it. I’m not exactly sure how to divulge this information without causing a riot. Because that’s what will happen. I’ll say the words and Maren will lose her shit. She’ll throw a million different questions in my direction, her thirst for knowledge unquenchable. Especially when the knowledge is about my personal life.

“Oh, well about that...I haven’t—I didn’t sleep with him,” I scratch the back of my head, nerves overtaking my body.

“What?! He looks like a misunderstood villain,” Maren’s arms whirl through the air, “and you never slept with him? I would have jumped him the moment we started dating.”

Oh god. Here it goes. I covertly slide backward on the couch, widening the space between Maren and me. “Actually, I haven’t slept with anyone.”

Maren's jaw goes slack, and her face goes two shades paler. My eyes dart to Nathalie, who has a similar response. They both look at me with awe and confusion and shock.

I snatch a bag of goldfish from the coffee table and shove a handful of crackers in my mouth. The need to stress eat is overwhelming. The two of them look at me like I'm some exotic zoo animal and not a twenty-four-year-old virgin. It's not all that uncommon. I looked it up for reassurance one night when I was sad about my love life. Just to be sure.

Finally, after what felt like years, Nathalie speaks. "You're a *virgin*?" She whispers the last word like it's a swear word and she's in front of children.

"Um...yeah. No need to whisper. It's not a forbidden word."

"By choice?" Maren asks the question, making a face like the answer may hurt her.

"No. Not by choice." My cheeks flame and I can imagine how I look. As red as a ripe strawberry.

I'm not waiting for marriage or anything, but I need an emotional connection to be vulnerable in that way. I attempted the whole one-night stand thing to get it over with, but the second the guy wanted to leave the bar and go back to his place, I panicked and said my pet fish needed to go for a walk. Not my best work excuse-wise, but I freaked out. He was honestly so confused that I was able to scurry away, tail between my legs.

“Okay...yeah, okay. Gotcha.” Maren’s face lights up in a feral smile. I think it’s her attempt at a supportive friend’s smile. Her execution needs some work.

In the past, it has never really bothered me that I was a virgin, but now it’s slowly beginning to feel like the race has already started and I’m still on the bench, trying to tie my shoelaces. People say that everyone moves at their own pace, and for a while, I was a confident believer in that. Now, however, I’m becoming more skeptical. It’s not even really about sex, although that’s part of it. I want to be loved and to give love back. I want to know that someone chooses me, wants me, and loves me. So far, that hasn’t happened, and the feeling I’m not meant for that type of love is slowly starting to creep into my mind. Doesn’t help that Declan solidified those thoughts with his actions.

“I’m touched you shared this with us,” Nathalie smiles softly. That is the smile of a supportive friend. Not whatever Maren just attempted. “Thank you for trusting us with this.”

Nathalie shoves Maren’s shin with her foot. “Ouch!” She looks at Nathalie bewildered, who raises her eyebrows and jerks her head in my direction. Maren blushes. “Oh! Yeah, thanks for sharing. Very cool of you.” Maren throws up some finger guns for good measure.

I can’t hold back the laugh that tumbles out. The information has short-circuited Maren’s brain. She’s floundering and it’s fun to watch. Even if it’s at my expense.

“You could sign up for one of those dating apps, maybe go on a few coffee dates?” Nathalie offers.

“Wait. Hold up. We’re not done here.” Here come the questions. I sigh, getting comfortable. We’re going to be here a while. This is Maren losing her shit. “Have you ever...?” Her hand makes an in-and-out motion near her mouth, her tongue pushing her cheek out.

“No.”

“Sure. Sure. Have you ever...?” She makes an up-and-down motion near her crotch, her eyebrows wiggling.

My ears go warm because that’s also a ‘no’ but before I can answer, Nathalie shuts Maren down. “That’s enough. No more gestures. I can’t watch them.”

Maren gives Nathalie a look, like a puppy who was just yelled at. Hurt and confused. Nathalie rises from the couch, gathering her things.

“I wish I could stay, but I have to meet my sister for lunch. I’ll see you guys later.” The door closes behind Nathalie and Maren turns to me, a mischievous smile on her face.

“Nope. I’m going to my room. No more questions.”

“Friends share things with each other.” Maren whines.

“You know more than enough.”

Maren groans as I walk away, leaving her in the living room to watch her action movie. She can ask Gerard as many questions as she would like.



I emerge from my lair after hours of scrolling on TikTok, my stomach rumbling with hunger. I quickly make a cup of tea to warm up since Maren keeps the apartment at an arctic temperature and my poor circulation can't keep up.

Maren's on the couch, reading, when I flop down onto the other side of it with a loud sigh, grateful for the fact that my roommate is mostly normal and harbors no weird, secret hobbies. The snacks from earlier are still spread out on the table and I pick at what's left. I don't have the energy to make a real meal, so it's more snacks.

Maren sets her book down on the coffee table with a thud, entirely unaware of my presence. She must have been very enthralled in the book to not have noticed my grand—albeit dramatic—entrance into the living room. I glance at the cover to see if it's something I've read but don't recognize anything other than a half-naked man posing on the front. A romance then. She looks almost angry at whatever she read in the book, which doesn't shock me if it was the part where they get all gushy about their feelings. She describes those scenes back to me so angrily, but she continues to read them. It makes me think she secretly loves them and hates that she loves them simultaneously.

I've learned a few things, outside of the love-hate for romance novels, about my roommate since I moved in about a month ago.

One, Maren Rivers is as loyal as they come. Once you're a part of her inner circle, she will take a bullet for you. No questions asked.

Two, she doesn't like to talk about her feelings. At all. I think she would rather have her teeth pulled one by one without laughing gas than talk about her own emotions. I know she has them, because I have witnessed the annoyed emotion every time she encounters a slow walker or someone who chews with their mouth open, and I had a front-row seat for the flabbergasted emotion earlier when I told her I was a virgin. They exist.

Third, you do not want to get on Maren Rivers' bad side. It's hard to get there, but once you're there it's nearly impossible to leave. She refuses to deal with people who lack attributes that she deems as common sense, like being courteous to others or minding your own damn business (her words). The last one is ironic considering how much she likes to know my business.

Finally, Maren will tell you how it is. Not in a mean way, but she's honest, which I appreciate in a friendship more than she will ever know.

I've personally learned just how honest Maren can be, like how she straight-up told me to break up with Declan. Even though I've experienced her honesty firsthand, I'm still astonished to hear the words that come out of her mouth from the other side of the couch.

“Henry has a crush on you.”

I nearly choke on my chamomile tea and spill it all over myself. *Where the hell had that come from?* I'm trying to enjoy my tea in peace and tranquility, and Maren decides this is the moment to take my Zen and throw it right out the window.

"He what?" I sputter out, placing my tea on the coffee table to avoid any third-degree burns.

"He has feelings for you," she says simply as if it's the most nonchalant, normal statement in the world and not causing my brain to cease to function. This must be her way of getting back at me for my information bomb earlier. She was shocked so now it's her turn to shock me.

"How do you know this? Did he tell you?"

First of all, there is no way that Henry has feelings for me. Even if he did, which is a ridiculous thought to even consider, he definitely wouldn't tell Maren. He met her once and they didn't even have a conversation without me present. It took me months in undergrad to get him to open up. The man is a geode: damn near impossible to crack, but what's on the inside is worth the effort. It was a year into our friendship before I knew his favorite pizza topping. It's olives. He's a monster.

"No, he didn't. But I have a radar for these things. I just know."

"You just know...?" I ask, skeptically.

She looks over from where she's sitting. Apparently, she's finally noticed the shock and disbelief in my voice because she

faces me, looks me straight in the eyes, and repeats herself.

“Yes, I sensed it. Henry has romantic feelings for you.” There isn’t a hint of humor on her face. Just seriousness and confidence.

“Maren, I don’t want to discredit your so-called radar on these types of things,” I say gently, even though internally I am discrediting her entirely because she’s insane, “but I really don’t think Henry feels that way about me. We’re best friends, that’s it.”

There. That should settle that conversation. She understands that as Henry’s best friend, I would be able to recognize if he was into me. Which he is not. There are no romantic feelings coming from Henry Parker aimed in my direction. Zero. Zilch. Nada. He has not shown any of the classic symptoms of having a crush. According to science, you need data to back up a hypothesis, and she doesn’t have any. Take that, Maren. Let me see you try to argue against science as a scientist. Checkmate.

“I saw the way he looked at you when you weren’t looking at the bar. And it wasn’t in the way someone simply looks at their best friend. He gazed at you as if you were the sun, the moon, and the stars and someone had just handed him a telescope. We’ve recently established that I’m never wrong. Keep that in mind.”

With that, she gets off the couch and nearly skips toward her bedroom, leaving me sitting in the living room, dazed and confused. I feel like she just checkmated me right back.



I stare up at the ceiling above my bed. *The sun, the moon, and the stars?* Maren has been reading too much poetry or something because that may be the cheesiest thing that has ever come out of her mouth.

No matter how hard I try to fall asleep, my mind keeps wandering back to what she said. I've known Henry for three years and not once has he made a move or even hinted he wanted to make a move. There were no lingering touches or heated looks. Three years is ample time to tell me that he has feelings if he has feelings. It's not like I was dating left and right or was in a relationship. By that logic, it would only be right to assume that he has no feelings and Maren took an edible or something that was making her speak like a lunatic. But the more I stew in the whole thing, the more muddled everything becomes. I don't think I've ever seen Henry speak to the opposite sex in anything more than a casual 'hey we're friends or acquaintances' kind of way and he surely hasn't spoken to me about anyone. No late-night chats about which girl he is crushing on or any stories about his romps around town. I've never heard of him asking anyone out on a date, even though I know any woman within a ten-mile radius would say yes. It was just never a topic we discussed, and then once I started dating Declan it really became a taboo topic. But now, as my eyes begin to go heavy and I drift off to sleep, I can't help but wonder if it just truly never came up, or if he avoided it.



Henry cages me in between his arms, backing me into the counter. My hands grip the cool countertop for stability. As his bicep grazes my bare skin, the sensation strikes through me like a lightning bolt. I sharply inhale a gasp at the featherlight touch, and my heart starts to race, nearly beating out of my chest. I attempt to lean away from him, but he has me trapped between him and the kitchen island.

“Tell me,” He says quietly into my ear, leaning in closer. “Tell me what you want.”

The warmth from his breath tickles my neck and goosebumps break out all over my skin. He takes a step towards me, and the air between us feels charged. His head leans in closer, inches separating us. Heat swirls in his ocean-blue eyes as he stares down at me. If I lifted my chin our lips would be touching. Kissing.

“Sawyer,” His voice is gravelly, and my name tumbles from his lips like a prayer.

The deep, husky sound sends tingles down my spine, and I grip the granite to avoid doing something stupid, like touching him or grabbing his shirt and ripping it off his body.

He inches closer to me, and our bodies sit flush against each other. The hard contours of his body press into me and the air in my lungs dissipates, leaving me breathless. He leans his

body into mine and if I wasn't trapped between him and the counter, I would have melted to the floor.

“Do you want this? Do you want me?” he whispers in my ear. I bob my head up and down, afraid that if I speak all that will come out is a strangled squeak. His finger softly grazes over my hand and I jump, the contact between our bodies consuming my every thought. “Tell me with your words, baby.”

“Yes,” my response is airy and breathless but causes something in him to snap. The sweet, wholesome Henry I know vanishes, leaving behind a version that melts my bones and causes my heart to thunder in my chest. The desire and lust in his eyes mirror my own.

His lips crash into mine and he kisses me desperately. Like I'm the answer to every question he's ever had. I fall into the kiss, clutching onto his forearms to stay standing. He's demanding, yet gentle, taking control of the kiss. He sweeps his tongue across the seam of my lips, looking for an invitation, and I melt against him, giving in to the silent demand. He kisses me with fervor. He gently pulls my bottom lip between his teeth and a whimper tumbles out of me. Henry begins to trail kisses along my neck and collarbone and my head falls back, the press of his lips against the column of my throat unraveling me.

“I've imagined those sounds a thousand times and it doesn't even come close to the real thing.” He murmurs against my skin as he travels down my chest towards my breasts.

With one good tug, my shirt and bra are yanked down and his mouth clasps onto one of my nipples. I arch into him and moan, digging my fingers into his dark, curly hair for stability. He licks and sucks at one nipple while he gently rolls the other between his thumb and forefinger. He pinches one and the mild sting sends heat traveling straight to my core, settling in my lower abdomen. He pulls away and the cold air meets my skin, my nipples peaking from the chill. He steps backward, widening the distance between us. My chest rises and falls in time with his and as I begin to protest, he yanks my shirt and bra over my head until I'm bare before him from the waist up.

“Beautiful,” he murmurs as he hungrily looks me up and down. My body lights on fire at his perusal, at the desire in his gaze.

The next moment, he's back on me, kissing me with abandon. I get lost in this kiss. Time comes to a stop. There's no beginning or end. Only Henry. He slides his hands underneath my thighs, hiking me into the air. I wrap my legs around his waist and clasp my arms around his neck, his erection pressing into me. I run my hands through his hair, drawing a groan from his lips. Without breaking the kiss, Henry carries me to the couch. Gently, he lays me down and hovers over me, kissing my neck.

His hand begins to snake down my body past my breasts, towards the planes of my stomach. I begin to tense up, but Henry smashes his lips to mine again, chasing away all thought as he nips and licks. My skin tingles as he slides his hand into my sweatpants and his fingers softly slip beneath my

underwear, grazing my clit. From the caress, I buck into him, chasing the sensation. He glides his fingers over me, getting torturously close to where I need him.

“You’re already so wet for me,” he says, voice low and raspy, as his fingers dip between my folds.

His fingers move in slow, circular motions while he resumes his attention on my breasts. I arch up against him, searching for more pressure, but he just continues his unhurried, languid strokes so close but so far from what I need. I gasp as he slowly presses a finger into me, the stretch torturous and perfect. He dips in and out, the movements unhurried, while his thumb gives featherlike touches to my clit. The pressure in my core continues to build, nearing implosion.

“More,” my brain isn’t capable of anything more intelligent.

I make an unintelligible sound, lifting my hips off the couch, desperately searching for release. He presses a second and third finger against my entrance and the stretching morphs to pain for a singular moment before the pleasure is overwhelming. Henry’s lips devour mine as he plunges in and out of me. He curls his fingers upwards, the movement striking a spot inside me, and my vision goes hazy at the edges and I race toward release. I buck into him, my hips rising off the couch as I try to deepen the angle.

“Henry,” his name falls off my lips with a moan. The pressure becomes too much and not enough.

“That’s it,” he mutters against my lips, as I begin to move with him. “Take what you need.”

I begin to ride his fingers, shifting my hips up and down as he moves with me. He pulls my nipple into his mouth and swirls his tongue around the sensitive peak. Distantly, I hear the moans falling from my lips as Henry begins to increase the pace. Finally, he applies the sweet pressure I'm desperate for to my clit, and a moment later, I feel my muscles tense up. I begin to grind against him faster, stars beginning to blur my vision as my chest tightens in anticipation.

“Henry, I’m going to—”

I jerk awake, panting. Sweat coats my back as I fling myself out of bed. Standing, I frantically absorb my surroundings attempting to pull myself back down to earth.

Did I just have a sex dream about Henry?

Oh my god. This is bad. No, actually, overplucking your eyebrows is bad. Forgetting to put deodorant on in the summer is bad. Having a sex dream about your best friend is horrifying. I don't have sex dreams, about anyone. Especially not Henry.

This is bad. Really fucking bad.



CHAPTER 13

“I wanna do whatever you wanna do, if you wanted to, girl, we could cross that line”

Feelings—Lauv

Sawyer

The information bomb that Maren dropped on me and the horrifying—albeit extremely hot—sex dream I had about Henry have taken a sledgehammer to my focus. I’m thinking about one or the other all the time. Searching for any proof that he does have feelings, then trying to prove that he doesn’t. Plus, I have no idea how I feel about the prospect Henry may have feelings. That muddles the lines of our friendship, which is terrifying since it’s one of the most important relationships in my life.

I expend a vast amount of energy to avoid thinking about the sex dream, only to hyperfocus on the dream and wonder about how it would play out in real life. Is the dream accurate, or would the dream be better than the reality? Super inappropriate thoughts to have about your best friend.

It's become an exhausting endeavor since I keep coming to a stalemate where I end up convincing myself he might have feelings then change my mind and decide he doesn't. He's into me. He isn't into me. I'm starting to annoy myself with the back-and-forth.

Not once in my life have I spent this much time trying to determine if a man is interested. I am a grown-ass woman, and this is not productive. But I'm also curious to a fault, and if I don't know something, I need to find out. It's a fact that Henry has used to his advantage more times than I can count. He can dangle a secret in front of me like a dog with a bone and I'm hooked. He knows it. I know it. It's just a fact.

I *will* find out if Henry has feelings for me and when he doesn't, I am going to give Maren a big, fat 'I told you so'. But to do that, I need to be subtle, which is not my strong suit. My usual method is to pester him until he relents. So instead of coming up with some grand plan to figure it out, I'm just going to do flirty things and see how he reacts. I'll touch his arm if he says something funny or lay my legs on his lap on the couch. Oh! I'll graze his arm. That will work. Things that can be friendly but can also be interpreted as more. And if he reacts then I'll have my answer. I have no idea what I'll do with the information, but I'll burn that bridge when I cross it.

It's not exactly revolutionary science, but it seems foolproof, so it's the plan I'm going with.

I pull out my phone and commence my investigation.

Me: Movie night?

Henry: Count me in.



I'm running around my apartment like a chicken with its head chopped off when the doorbell echoes through the space. For the past two hours I've scrubbed every surface spotless, like the success of my plan rides on a clean kitchen and living room. I hastily pull my hair out of a bun and run my fingers through the blonde curls in an attempt to look more put together. I look down at my tank top and sweatpants, grimacing. It's not the most jaw-dropping outfit I've ever worn but considering I'm on a time constraint it's going to have to do.

"It's open," I yell, loud enough so Henry can hear me.

Henry saunters through the door with a takeout bag and my breath hitches. He kicks the door shut with his foot, flings his shoes off, and smiles at me, bright and open.

My heart stutters a bit at the smile. The sex dream must have altered my brain chemistry. Because I'm looking at Henry and

I am seeing a modern-day Greek god, not my best friend for years. It's disconcerting.

Objectively, I know that Henry is attractive. His face is symmetrical, he has piercing, electric blue eyes, and a slightly crooked smile that's so contagious you can't help but smile along with him. Not to mention he has a nice, glowing tan year-round that I could never replicate, even with self-tanner. Even though my mind can admit he's good-looking, I was never impacted by his attractiveness. Now, his stupid handsomeness is stopping me in my tracks. He looks effortlessly put together in a pair of gray joggers and a fitted white t-shirt that does wondrous things for his arm muscles.

Arm muscles I would very much like to lick.

If you looked up the phrase panty dropping in the dictionary, there would be a picture of Henry standing in my hallway.

My life has taken a wrong turn if I've reached the point where I'm ogling my best friend and losing my ability to speak just at the sight of him. I blame this entire reaction on Maren and her 'radar'. There's no chance I would be having any of these thoughts without her planting the seed of curiosity in my mind. She changed my perspective from entirely platonic to whatever is happening in my brain.... so, this is her fault. I need to stay objective, I don't need any of my emotions mixed up into my plan, because developing feelings myself only to uncover Maren was wrong would be awkward. I know myself. I have lots of feelings. I am a hopeless romantic. My favorite movies are ones of true love and grand gestures. I want to be

loved and if I let myself, I'll mistake some normal interaction as a romantic gesture. Which would be horrible. That's why determining Henry's feelings is imperative. Knowing that will prevent me from reading into what Maren is saying and getting hurt.

Enough staring, Sawyer. It's game time.

I execute the first step of my plan. Give Henry a strong, lingering hug.

"Hi," I mumble into his chest as I wrap my arms tight around his waist and squeeze. Hard. A quick internet search told me that hugs around the waist are flirty, so that's what I'm going with. He smells delicious, like eucalyptus and soap and something uniquely Henry. If they had the scent in candle form, I would buy one for every room in the apartment. I linger in his arms for a second longer than I usually would—for my plan, of course—and then pull away. A small shiver racks my body as I leave his warmth.

Henry's eyebrows crinkle together. "Is everything okay?" he asks.

"Yeah, everything's fine. I just missed you."

Apparently, lingering hugs do not provide definitive results about feelings. I mentally jot that down and lead him into the kitchen.

"I brought some Thai food from a place near here," he begins pulling containers out of the bag, placing the food on

the counter. My mouth begins to salivate from the smell wafting out of the containers.

I nearly squeal with excitement at the mention of what could be considered the best Thai restaurant on the planet. Not even offering Henry a second glance, I swipe the pad Thai off the counter and head towards the small kitchen table. Henry chuckles at my excitement for the food and sits down beside me at the table.

“Be prepared,” I warn him as I begin to dig into my food. “This is the *best* Thai food you’ll ever have.”

“That’s a lofty claim.” He grins at me, laughing, as I shovel noodles into my mouth. This food is too good to be concerned about how I look eating. “I’ll be the judge of that.”

I stare at him while he brings the fork full of food to his mouth, waiting for his reaction. He begins to chew, and as I watch in rapt attention, I try to gauge his reaction. Except it’s clear he’s trying to hide it from me. His face is stoic as he chews, giving nothing away.

“Well?” I ask, slightly perturbed that he hasn’t admitted to how amazing the food is.

“You were right,” he mumbles in between bites.

I hear those glorious three words and I can’t help the shit-eating grin that spreads across my face. Music to my ears.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you. Can you repeat that?” I ask with all the faux-innocence I can muster. Within moments, half of his takeout container is gone and his fork is drifting

toward mine. “Hey! Back off. Eat your own food,” I swat his fork away with my own. I’m ready to fight to the death for my food.

“You’re such a brat,” he says sarcastically, looking like he’s holding back a smile.



Henry

“What do you wanna watch?” I ask, walking from the kitchen towards the living room. I flop down next to Sawyer on the couch, attempting to act casual and not like I’m going to jump out of my skin with the asinine plan I let Jack and Deon convince me was a good idea.

“Ohh...I don’t know. Let me think,” she scratches her head in faux concentration, “*The Princess Bride?*”

She asks to watch this every other movie night. It’s predictable and cute.

“As you wish.”

Sawyer huffs out a laugh at my reference and begins to shuffle through different streaming services to find the movie. I scramble to determine what my next move is. This is my moment to pull out something from a romcom. The yawn

maneuver is tacky and way too obvious. I could try to inch closer to her, but the couch is massive, and she may think it's odd if I get any closer. I sit stiff as a board for the first half of the movie, my brain flipping through my mental Rolodex for romcom movies I know. Spoiler Alert: I know very few except the ones Sawyer has made me watch. I really should have watched something to prepare. A crash course of romantic comedies for dummies' or something.

While I debate my options, I periodically look over at Sawyer, who watches the movie in rapt attention, even though she's seen it a thousand times. She mouths the words, muttering *Inconceivable!* every time the actor does. She could perform this movie as a one-woman show.

"It's so beautiful how Westley has loved Buttercup for years," she coos, "even though he never told her, he showed her. That's true love."

I want to scream, 'I am your Westley! I'm standing right here! I love you!' but instead I hum and say exactly what Westley said every time he wanted to say I love you.

"As you wish."

"Exactly! You get it."

More than you know.

I turn back to the movie, trying to shake the comment and focus on what I should do to test the waters but before I can even make my move, Sawyer stops me in my tracks. Unintentionally stealing my thunder. Re-adjusting her position

on the couch, she leans back and lays her legs onto my lap. My muscles go taut. This is not something she has ever done before. We aren't touchy like this. We hug occasionally, but we don't lay our legs on each other. Thighs do not touch calves! I'm internally panicking, sirens going off in my brain. I look over at Sawyer who is acting like this is totally normal, meanwhile this is so far from normal that my brain is glitching. I have no idea how to respond to this. Do I put my hands over her legs, or do I just keep them at my sides? Is it weird to touch her leg? It can't be if she put her legs on mine in the first place.

Any person with eyes could see the panic clearly painted across my features. At this moment, I have never been more grateful for Sawyer's obliviousness and mild (major) obsession with Westley in the movie. Taking a deep breath, I decide to go for it and lay my hand on Sawyer's shin. As I place my hand on her leg, she quickly glances over at me, then down at my hands, and then quickly shifts her gaze away at the screen when we make eye contact.

Odd.

I force my attention back on the TV and pour my focus into the movie and not on how Sawyer's leg feels under my palm. My hand itches to move, to glide my hand across her calf. Merely touching her has my heart racing, the sound of it thumping in my ears. After the longest hour of my life, the credits begin to roll on the screen and Sawyer pulls her legs off my lap. I sit there, frozen, unsure of what to do with myself. Slowly, she gets off the couch and I follow behind her,

subtly adjusting myself so she doesn't notice the half hard-on I was sporting the entire movie. From touching her calf. It's embarrassing. She fills her water bottle at the sink and yawns three times in thirty seconds. I take that as my cue to leave.

"It's late, I better go." I gather up my things and pull her into a quick hug. "It's past your bedtime, anyway." The smell of flowers and citrus wafts around me and as soon as the hug begins it ends.

"It's only nine-thirty," she glances at the clock above the oven then back to me, her eyes narrowing.

"Yep," I boop the tip of her nose and watch as her face turns rosy, "someone has a very early bedtime."

"So do you!" She stomps, her nose scrunching in anger. She's so cute when she's worked up. I poke her nose again. Since I can't help myself. "Stop booping me!"

"*Goodnight, Sawyer.*" I close the door behind me, smiling to myself as I walk away.

As I stand waiting for the elevator, I realize I never did anything to see if she was into me.



CHAPTER 14

“She could be the Mona Lisa, if the Mona Lisa had a prettier face”

Mona Lisa, Mona Lisa—Finneas

Henry

I slide my helmet from my head as practice comes to an end. Dragging air into my lungs, I bend over, grasping my knees. The final drill killed the last of my energy reserves, leaving me a huffing pile of muscle on the sideline. I worked a little too hard in the weight room yesterday, needing to release some of the pent-up energy I had after my movie night with Sawyer. The friend zone is the worst purgatory a man could be in and my only solution to the frustration was extra reps. With the way my muscles are cramping, I’m regretting that decision.

At no point did I get to enact any of my plans. Even if I had, the results would have been inconclusive because the moment her legs landed on my lap, I lost the ability to think or function. I had lost control of the situation. What I need to do is really *wow* her. Do something that will either reveal feelings or plant a seed. Either works for me.

Ideas bounce around my mind as I strip from my sweaty practice gear when I'm shoved from behind, my body teetering forward into my locker. I whirl around, expecting to see Jack and a massive grin. Instead, I come eye-to-eye with Declan.

"Sorry, man. Didn't see you there," He doesn't even try to make the apology believable.

"*Seriously?* You didn't see me?" I'm tired, sore, and confused about where I stand with Sawyer. Which means I am not in the headspace to deal with Declan and whatever shit he has going on.

"Nah."

"What is your problem?" This version of Declan is so far from the one I knew at Notre Dame. That version was cocky and goofy, but he was a good person. The person standing in front of me is not that. "You know what," I hold my hand up. I don't want him to answer, "I don't care. Figure your shit out. Don't take it out on me or Sawyer."

Turning back around, I continue packing up my gear and heading to the showers. His face is blank at the dismissal and I ignore him when I come back out. This day has turned to shit

and all I want is to see Sawyer. Her presence has a calming effect on my soul.

Suddenly, a thought occurs to me. I spin around the locker room, eyes searching the space. I might as well use my need to see Sawyer as an opportunity. I did some very important research for my plan, a.k.a I watched every romcom on Netflix. One common theme? The hero does something special for the heroine to show he knows and cares about her. And I have just the idea.

Spotting Deon and Jack on the other side of the room, I wander over to them, ready to convince them to join me on my adventure and give up their free time for the pursuit of love.

“What are you guys doing this afternoon?” I ask them both. The two of them put their street clothes back on as they get ready to leave.

“I didn’t have anything planned. Why?” Deon responds, Jack nodding.

“I have an idea and I need you two to help me.”

I explain my idea to them, and they both immediately agree. I tell them when and where to meet and then nearly skip out of the practice facility, excited to execute my idea.



I zip into the parking lot where Jack and Deon are already waiting for me, leaning against the side of Jack’s pickup truck.

“So, this is where Sawyer works?” Jack asks, looking at the non-descript brick building and the GameChangers logo.

“Yeah, the after-school program just started, so it’s perfect timing.”

With that, I lead Jack and Deon into the building and head towards the receptionist. It’s probably not the best idea for the three of us to just wander around while the kids are here without anyone knowing. Sounds like a public relations nightmare.

“Hi,” I say to the receptionist to get her attention. “We’re here to see Sawyer. Could you let her know?”

“Sure thing,” She smiles at me, glancing over at Jack and Deon. “Why do you need to speak to Sawyer?”

“I’m close friends with her and thought we would stop by and surprise her and hang out with the kids.”

“You want to hang out with the kids?” she asks us, her eyes narrowing as she sizes the three of us up. I suddenly feel uncomfortable and can see how odd my explanation is. And creepy. Definitely creepy. “Just wait here for Sawyer.” The three of us stand awkwardly in the lobby when the receptionist informs us that Sawyer is on her way.

Suddenly, my palms are sweating, and an alarm sounds in my mind. What if she thinks this is a bad idea or is upset I interrupted her at work? I didn’t think about the fact that we might not be able to just walk in as volunteers. I’m sure there’s some kind of protocol to vet the people who work here.

I'm beginning to tumble down a rabbit hole when Sawyer walks through the door and falters a step. *Oh god. She doesn't want us here.* She recovers quickly and makes her way over to us, her ponytail swaying behind her as she moves through the lobby. God, she's stunning. The greatest artists of all time couldn't recreate her beauty.

"Hey guys," she says tentatively. "What are you doing here? Is everything okay?" Her eyes dart to the receptionist who looks at us skeptically and ready to start a fight if needed.

I go to respond, but Jack beats me to it. "Everything's fine. We finished practice early and Henry here thought it would be fun to surprise the kids and spend the afternoon with them." He points his thumb toward me and grins at Sawyer.

Sawyer turns to me, a look of surprise and admiration in her eyes. Her green eyes sparkle and I don't miss the fact she's wearing a Seattle Mavericks t-shirt.

Is that look for me?

"You came to volunteer?" she asks, voice hopeful. The way she phrases the question has hope blooming in my chest. That my idea may work.

"Well, how else am I supposed to meet my biggest fan?"

She laughs, still semi-shocked that the three of us have decided to swing by her place of work.

"Alright then, I guess we shouldn't leave the kids hanging. It's fine Sandy, they're with me. They're NFL players. The kids will love this." She waves off her guard dog and Sandy's

gaze changes to a more appreciative one. Aimed directly at Deon and his sheepish smile. I give Sandy a nice, totally normal grin to drive home that I am not a weirdo. Just a lovesick idiot who is trying to surprise his best friend.

Sawyer leads us back towards the double doors she came from. She herds us down a hallway, the sounds of children yelling and laughing growing louder as we move deeper into the building. As Jack and Deon enter the gym, Sawyer grabs my hand and pulls me back, her small hand slipping into mine.

“Thank you,” she wraps her hands around my waist, dragging me into an intoxicating hug. The scent of oranges and flowers blooms around me. My arms instinctively wrap around her, and I lean my head onto hers, her hair soft against my cheek. “You coming here means a lot to me.”

“Anything for you and my number one biggest fan.”

She laughs into my chest then pulls away from the hug. The moment she leaves my arms, I miss her. I want to grab her and hug her again, but I’m not greedy, so I shove my hands into my pockets. “Micah is going to lose his shit.”

We enter the gym and it’s a madhouse. Children are running around everywhere. On one side of the room, college-aged kids are attempting to corral a group to start a game of basketball. On the other side, Deon and Jack are standing next to a small, brown-haired woman who seems to be giving them directions, waving her hands around in the air and gesturing at things. Sawyer leads me towards Jack, Deon, and the woman.

We miss most of what the woman said to the two of them, but I catch the end of what Jack is saying.

“We’re not college students. We’re here to volunteer, but we were hoping it would be in the gym and not preparing the afternoon snacks.” He looks exasperated with the conversation as if they’ve been arguing in circles. Jack spots Sawyer and the relief on his face is obvious.

“Oh, there you are, thank God!” He gestures for Sawyer to walk faster towards him. “I was just trying to tell her that we should volunteer in the gym, but she’s insisting that we are on snack duty.” He gestures at the small woman. “I tried to explain that we were football players, and it would make more sense for us to be in the gym, but she didn’t believe me. She said if we were football players then she was the Queen of England.”

I burst out in laughter, receiving glares from both Jack and Deon. With the size of the two of them and the Seattle Mavericks gear they’re both wearing, it’s entirely plausible that they play football, but the fact that the small woman managed to rile Jack up is beyond funny. I ignore both of them and look over to Sawyer who is biting back a smile when she responds to the woman.

“Uh, Nathalie?” She plasters on a soft smile. “They are football players. Professional ones. Nathalie, meet Henry Parker, Jack Walters, and Deon Adams. They all play for the Seattle Mavericks.” Sawyer gestures at the three of us and a

triumphant look overtakes Jack's face. Nathalie's face goes pale for a split second, but she recovers well.

“Oh, well, in that case, I am not the Queen of England. It's nice to meet you all.” She reaches her hand out and shakes each of ours a tad too enthusiastically. “But I don't see what that has to do with the fact that we are short-staffed in the kitchen. Someone needs to cut the carrots.”

My eyes dart to Sawyer, the look on my face screaming *fix this, I cannot cut carrots*. If I get exiled to kitchen duty while she's out here, then my plan is shot and I will never hear the end of it if Jack and Deon give up their afternoon to cut vegetables.

“Why don't we move some of the volunteers from the second gym and have them do snacks? The guys only have a few hours and I'm sure the kids would love to hang out with professional athletes. It's also a great PR opportunity. I'm sure they would agree to photos being posted on social media.”

All three of us nod our heads up and down, emphatically. Anything to avoid handing out grapes. Nathalie perks up at the mention of PR and social media and I can watch as she softens. Sawyer just smooth-talked our way out of snack duty and Jack and Deon look grateful and relieved.

“Yeah, that should work,” Nathalie glances down at a clipboard for a moment, her brow furrowing as she pulls her bottom lip between her teeth. “It's flag football today. The kids pick teams and then play. You can coach or play with them. But a warning, they aren't big fans of listening.”

Jack chuckles and slaps Deon's chest. "Neither is Deon. They'll get along great." I snort, watching a scowl form on Deon's face as the grin on Jack's face grows larger.

Just as Nathalie finishes explaining, a gaggle of children runs through the gymnasium doors. At the sight of us, about a third of the kids stop and stare, while the rest ignore our presence and run right past us. Based on the different reactions, it's obvious which kids are fans of the Mavericks. One of the children breaks off from the small group and races toward Sawyer, who is standing beside me chuckling. He screeches to a halt in front of her and I see the number eleven shaved on the side of his head. This must be Micah.

"Hi, Miss Sawyer," Micah says quietly. His eyes dart back and forth between Sawyer and me. He gestures at her to lean down to his level and then whispers in her ear. Quite loudly. "Is that Henry Parker? Why is Henry Parker here?"

Sawyer huffs a laugh and smiles kindly at Micah. He watches the two of us with curious eyes, his attention focused on the logo on my chest. Rising, Sawyer turns to me. "Micah, I want you to meet my best friend, Henry Parker. Henry, this is Micah."

I reach my hand out to shake his, but Micah is frozen like a statue. After a long twenty seconds, Micah snaps out of it and tentatively shakes my hand, my hand dwarfing his in the most adorable handshake I've ever been a part of.

"You play for the Mavericks?" Micah asks me, clearly not believing what he's seeing.

I chuckle and respond, “Yeah, I play for the Mavericks. And so do they.” I gesture at Jack and Deon, standing off on the side of the gym, talking to a group of young children.

Micah seems to digest that information, then turns back to Sawyer, looking both shocked and annoyed. “Miss Sawyer, your best friend is Henry Parker?”

“Yes.”

“And you never told me?”

“I didn’t realize that was something that I needed to tell you.” She laughs, clearly amused by his questioning. “Plus, I just told you.”

Micah guffaws at Sawyer’s response like he can’t believe that was her excuse. His hands fly to his hips. He resembles a parent getting ready to discipline their child. “That seems like important stuff to share, Miss Sawyer. If my best friend was the best wide receiver in the NFL, I would tell my friends.”

I feel my cheeks heat at his compliment and the fact that he thinks Sawyer should be telling the world about our friendship. I agree. I should buy Sawyer a shirt that says ‘I’m Henry Parker’s best friend’ on the front and ‘Back off, I’m taken’ on the back. Seems like a great idea to me, although I’m not sure Sawyer would go for it.

“You’re right, Micah. I should have told you, as my friend. I’m sorry. But Henry came to play some football with you today so hopefully that makes for a good apology.”

Micah’s head whips to me. “You’re going to play with us?”

“That was the plan.”

Micah snatches my hand and begins to pull me toward the other kids surrounding Jack and Deon. “Can you teach me some routes and how to push off the defense?”

“Sure, kid.”

After re-organizing the kids into teams, Jack, Deon, and I spent the next two hours playing flag football with a bunch of children. They tackle us in an attempt to grab our flags and we teach some of them how to throw the ball or how to run a pass route. At one point, there are seven kids trying to take Jack down. Micah gets over the initial reaction of meeting us and peppers us with every football question under the sun. My favorite question was what flavor of Gatorade they hand out on the sideline of games. It’s the blue one. It’s the crowd favorite and there would be riots if the trainers changed the flavor.

It’s the most fun I’ve had in a long time. Sawyer ends the game and tells the kids the snacks are waiting in the craft room, corralling them out of the gym and into the room down the hall. As she guides the kids into the room, she looks over at me and smiles, bright and sunny. Her eyes crinkle at the corners. She radiates joy.

I want more of that smile.



CHAPTER 15

“Every once in a while, the little things make me smile”

Longshot—Catfish and the Bottlemen

Sawyer

When Sandy texted me to come to the lobby, the last thing I expected to see was Henry, Jack, and Deon. Her exact message was ‘There are three massive men in the lobby asking for you. Do I need to use my taser?’. Initially, I thought the taser would probably be a good idea, until I spotted the three of them standing awkwardly, looking around the lobby. My heart nearly leapt out of my chest. At first, I thought maybe something had happened, but it didn’t make sense why the other two would be with Henry if that had been the case. When Jack explained why they were at

GameChangers and that it was Henry's idea, butterflies erupted in my stomach. Freaking butterflies.

His gesture is one of the most thoughtful things he could have done. I've told him about how much I love my job and about Micah, and he made the effort to actually get to know the kid, *and* he brought two others! I know how precious free time is during the season, so the fact that he made time for this means the world to me. The best friend side of me loves the gesture, but the Nancy Drew side is trying to pick apart what it means. Was it only a kind gesture or does it have more meaning behind it?

Watching the three of them play football with the children, letting them pull their flags, and teaching them routes may have been the cutest thing I've ever seen. That is until we stepped into the craft room. On the other side of the room, Henry, Jack, and Deon are all squished into small, plastic chairs, at a table much too small for them. Jack's in the worst shape, his knees pushed against his chest as he perches on the small chair. They color with crayons or cut construction paper while talking to the kids. As they move around, the glitter covering their bodies catches in the light. My ovaries are ready to combust, and from the gleam in Nathalie's eye, she's not far behind me.

I need my brain to get control of itself. I have no room for my ovaries to explode or butterflies to erupt in my stomach while I try to figure out where he stands.

I walk over to where she's standing, watching the three massive men with their crafts and juice boxes.

“How did you not realize they are football players? We watched a game together,” I question, bumping my hip against hers. This is our first moment free since the snack debacle and I've been curious since the interaction.

Nathalie looks over at me, slightly embarrassed. “Well, they came up to me saying they were here to volunteer, and we needed snack help. But as I was explaining where to go, Jack interrupted me and asked if they could stay in the gym. I told him no and that's when he tried to explain that they played football. But I thought it was just an excuse to get out of snack duty.” No one likes snack duty, so I can see how she went on the defensive. We have a volunteer complain about it at least once a week. “In retrospect, they do look like football players. They're *big*.” Her eyes bulge out of her head as she lifts an arm over her head, stretching it higher to show just how tall.

“They are in fact *big*.” Not every football player is tall, but those three definitely are.

“Also, when we watched that game, I was not focused on what any of them looked like. I don't watch football often, so I have no idea who they are, and I don't really care. I was too focused on keeping track of which team had the ball. I couldn't also watch and remember specific players.”

I can't help the laugh the bubbles from my chest, the sincerity of her statement ringing true. Kids ask her who her favorite players are all the time. She responds with ‘the tall

one' or 'the one that runs with the ball'. Given her connection to sports, you would think she would know a few popular athletes to name. I glance back over at the guys when a young girl walks up to Deon. She tugs on his shirt to get his attention. He peers down at her, a gentle smile on his lips. He listens intently as she says something, then shyly hands him a piece of paper. As soon as he thanks her, she runs away, back to her friends who all giggle and look in Deon's direction. Deon just shakes his head, folds up the paper, and puts it into his pocket.

"Holy shit, that may have been the cutest thing I've ever seen." Nathalie swoons at the interaction between the two of them, fanning her face. I peer over at her and she's watching Deon intently.

"You look like you want to jump his bones, Nathalie." She breaks her gaze at Deon and glares at me.

"Don't even try to lie and say that wasn't the sweetest thing you've ever seen. And you don't have room to talk. You keep looking at Henry with heart eyes."

"I do not."

Nathalie looks over at me and shoots me a look, suggesting she knows I'm full of shit. Which I am. I have totally been looking at Henry with heart eyes. It's honestly hard not to do it when he's playing with children and coloring with crayons and surprising me at work because he knows how much it would mean to me. I would like to see Nathalie keep her heart eyes to herself if she was in my position. I know she couldn't. No sane person could. It's swoon-worthy, and I'm swooning, dammit.

My brain is frazzled by kind gestures and cuteness overload and it's failing to do its job of remaining objective in my pursuit of project 'Determine if Henry has feelings'. The title is a work in progress.

Confusion has been my constant state of being since our movie night. I was confident that I would be able to gauge if he's into me, but I couldn't find any tangible evidence. I put my legs on his lap, and I felt his muscles lock up. I thought I had made a mistake. But then he rested his hand on my shin and didn't move it for the rest of the movie. That small movement didn't make anything any clearer. It only made it murkier because there is nothing sexual about touching a person's shin. It's one of the most unsexy parts of the body. Arguably, a shin touch would be safely placed into the 'friend' category, but it felt charged, so I'm unsure. I have no idea what is going on in his head, and it's killing me. I *need* to know. His showing up here is even more puzzling because it doesn't have a clear category it falls into friends or more-than-friends.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I say, nonchalantly, responding to the look she gave me.

"Mhm. Sure." Nathalie is not at all convinced but gracefully drops the conversation.

Eventually, the guys leave, having practice early in the morning. We have to peel Micah off of Henry, but after some intense promises to teach him how to throw a perfect spiral, Micah lets Henry leave. After they're gone, I spend the rest of

the day trying to figure out what everything means, but no amount of self-reflection or thought clears any of the perplexity.



CHAPTER 16

“And I thought about kissing you underneath kitchen lights”

all my ghosts—Lizzy McAlpine

Sawyer

Oh, Henry!” I sing song as I throw open the door and saunter into his apartment, hands full of groceries. “I’m here.”

I slip my shoes off by the front door and turn to figure out where the kitchen is when I stop in my tracks. This is the first time I’ve been to Henry’s apartment and holy shit it is *nice*. He apparently spared no expense when he decided where to live. Perks of being a first-round draft pick, I guess. I unglue my feet from the entryway and wander into the massive living room and kitchen combination when my jaw drops. I thought my apartment was nice but compared to this place I’ve been

living in squalor. The living room has high ceilings and massive windows with a view of the Seattle skyline. The area is surprisingly homey, with paintings scattered on the wall and a throw blanket on the back of the couch. The living room is cozy, but the real star of the show is the kitchen, which seemingly emerged straight from my dreams. Stainless steel appliances. A large kitchen island. And...*is that a KitchenAid mixer?* I could spend the rest of my life in this room and die a very happy woman.

As I begin to imagine everything I could cook and bake in the beautiful kitchen where I'm seriously considering becoming a squatter, Henry ambles down the hallway with nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist.

Holy fuck.

He looks like a wet dream. My mouth goes dry, and my eyes immediately travel the plains of his *very* bare torso. Tan skin stretches on for miles as I watch, enraptured, as droplets of water drop from his hair and travel down his chest, then onto his rippling abs, finally descending into the towel. What I would give to be one of those water droplets. I slowly drag my gaze back up to Henry's face, where he's smirking at me, watching me ogle him. Suddenly, my cheeks go fire engine red, and the room feels way too small and way too hot. I rip my eyes away and busy myself with the groceries on the counter to avoid eye contact.

“Sorry, I didn't realize you were in the shower. The door was open, so I assumed it was okay to just walk in.”

This must be my end. Time for me to go.

‘Died from embarrassment’ is what the mortician is going to write on my autopsy. Not only did I spend far too long ogling Henry, but he also caught me in the act. And he smirked.

He. Freaking. Smirked.

Cocky bastard.

Henry chuckles at my reaction, walks past me, and heads towards his bedroom. And since I apparently have zero self-control or self-preservation skills, my eyes linger on his sculpted back as he walks away from me. Even through the towel, I can tell the man has an ass that doesn’t quit.

What is happening to me? We don’t ogle best friends. Even ones that look like they were sculpted from marble.

I take the next few moments to cool down, fanning myself with my hands. A few minutes later, Henry resurfaces from his room, fully clothed. I feel an immediate sense of disappointment at that fact. I quickly shove that concerning feeling aside and attempt to act as normal as possible.

Which means I act like a total nut job.

“I’m making cookies!” I blurt out before Henry can even attempt to get a word out. “I wanted to thank you for coming to GameChangers and I know how much you love cookies, so I figured why not make some with you so you can learn how. Obviously chocolate chip. I even splurged on the good chocolate. You’re welcome.”

My rambling and quick thinking of mentioning food must have worked because Henry doesn't mention my blatant staring and instead focuses on the word 'cookies'.

"The *famous* chocolate chip cookies?" he asks, hope resonating in the question.

"Yes, the most famous chocolate chip cookies," I laugh.

If I know anything about Henry, it's that the man loves chocolate chip cookies. In fact, I would probably say he borders on being addicted to them. The first time he tried them, I brought some with me when we met up to do our group project in undergrad. I figured it would be a friendly gesture, but I didn't expect him to become obsessed with them. After that, he would text me asking if I had made cookies about once a week. At one point, I was concerned he was becoming too dependent on them, so I had to withhold the cookies. I was genuinely concerned about his blood sugar levels. That did not end well for either of us. Henry was even more insistent about the cookies after that, so eventually I gave in and made them for him again. There's nothing super special about the cookies, except for a ton of butter. But he's adamant that they're the best in the world, and I won't be the one who corrects him on that. Every time he says it, I feel all warm and fuzzy.

Henry comes to stand beside me in front of the kitchen island and begins to pull all the ingredients for the cookies from the grocery bags. I work my way around the kitchen, collecting what I need to make the batter. As I search drawers

and cupboards, my eyes keep moving back to the KitchenAid mixer on the countertop. The shiny, cream-colored mixer draws my attention. Calling my name. I can hear it whispering in my ear, *use me*.

Why did Henry buy a mixer?

My mind keeps wandering, trying to come up with an answer. He knows how to cook and he's not half bad, but he's not making anything fancy that requires a mixer like that.

Oh my god. Does it belong to a woman?

Does Henry have someone coming over and baking things for him? The thought causes my stomach to flip and drop, like a rollercoaster ride from hell. A feeling foreign to me that I do not have the bandwidth to decipher. I need to know, but I need to be subtle. The last thing I need is for the question to come out sounding like jealousy. Because that's not what I am. I'm simply curious. No envy here.

"Um...Is it okay if I use the mixer?" I say, breaking the silence.

"Oh, yeah. I figured you would," Henry responds casually, organizing the ingredients on the counter.

"You figured I would?" I ask, not understanding the statement, but also annoyed he wasn't forthright with how he came into possession of the thing. I'm clearly fishing for information, and the fact he didn't just tell me is bothersome.

There may be a tad bit of jealousy. Who's to say?

Henry fidgets and pulls at the back of his neck while I stare at him, waiting for a response.

“Um... Well. I—” he stutters out. Immediately my shoulders droop to prepare myself for the news that someone else has been baking for him. “I bought it for you.” Henry finally chokes out, looking away, with what looks like a blush on his cheeks.

“You bought a KitchenAid mixer for me?” I ask, stunned.

“Yeah, I figured it would make baking easier for you,” he says, looking shy. “I mean I also kinda bought it for me, so that you would be more inclined to make cookies.” He smiles at me sheepishly.

My mind takes a moment to process what I’m hearing. He bought the mixer. For me. To make baking easier and so I would bake for him more.

He. Bought. It. For. *Me*.

I celebrate internally, saying a mental ‘suck it’ to the imaginary woman I conjured up who I thought was baking for Henry. My little green monster is doing its best touchdown victory dance.

I close the space between us and drag him into a crushing hug, attempting to express all my emotions in the simple action. He wraps his arms around me, and I lean into him, sucking in a big gulp of Henry. The smell of eucalyptus and something unique to Henry envelops me.

“Thank you,” I mumble into his chest, not wanting to pull away from the hug. “But you just developed a squatter problem. I’m never leaving this kitchen.”

“Anything for you, Sawyer. Always,” he says into my hair, laughing. I can hear the conviction and promise in his voice, which sends warm, gooey feelings directly to my chest. *Ugh, go away emotions. We need to be sensible here.* “And I’m okay with a squatter as long as they bake.”

Finally, after a few more seconds of latching myself to him like a koala, I peel myself off. “Alright.” I clap my hands together. “Are you ready to learn how to make the best cookies on planet Earth?”

Henry nods enthusiastically, his curly hair bouncing all around as he turns back to the ingredients and takes inventory of everything on the counter. I pull all the dry ingredients towards us and begin to measure everything that we need. Henry watches me, captivated.

“Do you want to measure the wet ingredients?” I ask him, grabbing the sugar, butter, vanilla, and eggs and placing them in front of him.

“Oh, yeah. Sure.”

Henry measures out all the ingredients slowly and with intense concentration. His brow is furrowed as he places them into the mixer. He looks more like he’s disarming a bomb and not measuring out brown sugar. I plug the mixer in and turn it on. I watch as the wet ingredients combine in the bowl. “Okay.

Now it's time to add the dry ingredients," I say, placing the bowl in front of him. "You can do it."

He grabs the bowl off the counter and I attempt to scoot to the side so that Henry can stand in front of the mixer. Except he comes up behind me, presses his body flush against mine, and slowly pours the ingredients in. Red lights flash and sirens blare in my mind. He leans down, looking over my shoulder into the mixing bowl then tilting his head towards me. "Like this?" he asks, voice sounding husky in my ear.

I can feel the heat of his breath on my neck. My heart skips a beat, and blood flow to my brain ceases. *What the fuck is happening?* I hum in response to his question, incapable of forming words or thoughts while his body is pressed up against mine. This is definitely crossing some kind of friendship line. His *entire* front is pressed against my *entire* back. Including my butt. Henry's body is touching my butt. This would be perfect if it was a part of my plan to figure out if Henry has feelings for me, except I can't think at all, let alone figure out how to use this to my advantage.

I stare at his hands, mapping the veins with my eyes, as he continues to pour the flour mixture into the bowl. When he finishes, I shakily pick up the chocolate chips and add them to the bowl. I inhale a deep breath to regain some sort of composure. He put us in this weird situation, so I might as well use it to my advantage. For my investigation, obviously.

I lean back into him, feeling every hard part of his body press against every soft part of mine. He sucks in a breath as I

lean against him, watching the chocolate chips incorporate into the batter. We stand there in silence, basically glued together, both watching the batter mix endlessly in the bowl, when I finally speak.

“I think we can put it onto the pan now,” I tell him. The sound is airy and shaky.

“Oh...Yeah. Good idea,” Henry responds, not making a move to peel his body off of mine.

I stand there for a moment, waiting for him to do something. Anything, really. Except he just stands there. Leaning on the kitchen island, essentially gluing me to the spot and trapping me between his arms.

“Uh...Henry?” I ask, both concerned and confused at what is happening and how we even got into this increasingly awkward situation.

“Mhm,” he hums as he leans down towards me, his face in my hair.

“I can’t move unless you do.”

“Oh. Shit.” He says, jumping back like he had touched something too hot and was afraid he had burned himself. Embarrassment crosses his features for a moment before it fades into a slightly forced smile. “Baking sheet. Cookies. Yes.” He spits out, spinning in a circle around the kitchen, looking for the tray.

I bark out a laugh at him spinning around like a dog chasing his tail. He stares at me for a second before he breaks out in

booming laughter, breaking the tension. We roll the cookie dough into balls in our hands and place them onto the baking sheet. Occasionally, his eyes flutter to me, then dart away when I make eye contact. While we wait for them to bake, Henry and I work in silence to clean the mess we made in the kitchen.

Fifteen minutes later, the kitchen is clean, and the cookies are done. I sprinkle some flaky salt on them for a final touch, then hand one to Henry. He doesn't waste a second, devouring half the cookie in one bite. A small moan escapes him, and the sound immediately travels to my core. This must be an alternate reality because clearly, something isn't right. Needing to do something to correct the weird feelings I'm having, I take a split second to decide what I can do to gauge his feelings. The universe must be looking down upon me, because right as I begin to think of ideas, Henry gets chocolate on his cheek.

Not taking another second to contemplate my decision, my hand darts out, grabbing his face. "You have chocolate right..." I swipe the chocolate off his cheek with my thumb. "Here." Henry's eyes go as large as saucers as he looks at me, then to my hand on his face, then back to me. I stare into his eyes, trying to decipher the emotions flashing through them. For a split second, I see his eyes drop to my lips, then back to my eyes. It was almost too quick to catch, but I know I saw it. I'm confident.

"Thanks," Henry says quietly.

I smile up at him as he looks down at me. The air between us becomes heavy, and for a moment, I think he may kiss me. He takes a small step towards me, eyes never leaving mine. I take a deep breath, preparing myself for the kiss. The kiss that my body is humming in excitement for.

Sensible Sawyer is screaming in my brain *what are you doing?!* So, I throw her into a soundproof box and ignore every single logical thought coursing through my brain, like *is this a good idea?* I'll decode my actions later when my best friend isn't about to kiss me.

He leans down slightly, and I can see it in his eyes. Desire. I inch closer to him, making the space between us even smaller. I reach out to touch him. To make contact.

My phone dings, breaking the moment. We both startle away from each other, and I leap for my phone, expecting some type of emergency, because there is no other reason anyone would think it would be appropriate to destroy my almost-kiss with Henry.

I look down at the screen.

SUPER SALE!!

40% off all full priced Items.

Today Only!!

Shop In store or online.

There is no way a freaking sale ad text message is what prevented my kiss with Henry from happening.

You've got to be kidding me.



CHAPTER 17

“Started crawling in my skin, looking for a way out, I can feel it happening so I talk myself down”

Keep On—Sasha Alex Sloan

Henry

“**I**’m not sure what the hell y’all are doing out there but it’s definitely not playing football,” Coach Barrett yells, his voice echoing through the silent locker room.

It’s halftime in our game against the Boston Gryphons and saying we aren’t playing our best is a kindness. We’re playing like shit. I am confident that the kids we met at GameChangers could play better than we did in the first half. I look around the room. Heads are hanging low, and the energy in the locker room is downright atrocious. I’m right there with them because the way I played in the first half was embarrassing. I

nearly dropped a pass and I couldn't shake a defender to save my life, forcing Deon to have to throw the ball away on a few plays. Coach Barrett walks out of the locker room, leaving us sitting there in uncomfortable silence.

“Let's shake it off, boys. We're only down one touchdown. Let's get back out there and show them who we are!” Deon booms, rising out of his seat and signaling for us to head back onto the field. The confidence Deon exudes seems to rally the team, shifting the energy. We jog out of the locker room, through the tunnel, and back onto the field. The sound of tens of thousands of fans immediately overwhelms me and I can feel the beginning of a panic attack. No matter how often it happens, I'm never prepared for the sudden rush of anxiety.

My chest begins to tighten, and my vision begins to blacken around the edges. My hands feel detached from my body as I jog to the sideline next to Jack, gasping to catch my breath and work through the overstimulation before it leads to a full-blown panic attack. I drop onto the bench and go through the motions that Sawyer taught me. Five things I can see. Jack. The water bottles. The turf. Coach Barrett. My cleats.

Four things I can feel. The groves on the bench beneath me. The rubber on my gloves. My pads. The sweat dripping down my face.

Three things I can hear. Deon laughing. The music from the stadium speakers. Coach Barrett talking to an assistant coach.

Two things I can smell. Popcorn wafting from the stands. The deodorant of the player who walked past me.

One thing I can taste. The aftertaste of the blue electrolyte drinks the athletic trainers gave us at half.

I suck a deep breath, feeling slightly more grounded than I did when I walked out of the tunnel. The anxiety still thrums heavily through my body, but the threat of a panic attack reduces a bit. I've been so excited that Sawyer lives in Seattle now because nothing works as well as her signature smiley face. I wanted to get one before we left for the away game in Boston, but she was at work. I figured that if I survived for six months without the smiley faces, I could go one more game. I guess the way I played in the first half paired with the pent-up anxiety I have from the last phone call with my dad has left me more vulnerable to the panic attacks I get.

Jack jogs over to me from where he's stretching, a concerned look on his face. "Hey, you okay?"

Since I explained to Jack about Sawyer and the smiley faces and the anxiety and panic attacks, he's made an effort to check in with me before and during games. He's not pushy about it and he doesn't try to pry anything out of me. It's more of a 'Hey, I'm here if you need me.' It's thoughtful, and it's what makes Jack a great person and teammate.

I nod, not quite trusting myself to speak yet.

"Were you able to see Sawyer before you left?"

"No, she was at work. I didn't want to bother her."

He nods at me in understanding, his eyes searching the field for something. I'm not sure what he's doing, but he turns and

jogs towards an athletic trainer. I watch, grasping the bench as he says something to her. She hands him something and he turns and makes his way back towards me. He sits down on the bench next to me, a sharpie in his grasp.

“I know I’m not Sawyer,” he winks at me, “but I figured knowing someone else is in your corner can’t hurt.”

He grabs my left hand, pulls back the glove then draws a big, wonky-looking smiley face on the top. I look down at my hand, then back up to Jack. I haven’t known him for very long, only since I moved to Seattle after I got drafted, but he is one of the kindest people I’ve ever met. Most of my other teammates wouldn’t understand the anxiety or attempt to help me with it. But Jack is different.

I shoot him a watery smile, my throat clogged full of emotion from his kind gesture. “Thank you,” I manage to choke out.

“Of course, man. Now let’s go kick Boston’s ass.” He pats me on the thigh, a very fatherly gesture, before heading back onto the field, continuing to stretch.

The second half of the game starts, and we play like someone lit a flame under our asses. One of our tight ends scored at the end of the third quarter, making it a tied game. The defense battles, keeping it a tied game toward the end of the fourth quarter. There’s only three minutes left in the fourth quarter, and we have the ball on Boston’s forty-yard line. If we can get a few first downs, we will be in the red zone with a great position to score before the game ends. One amazing run

from our running back, Jayden, and a bullet of a pass from Deon to me in the center of the field, we're on the twelve-yard line with fifty seconds left to play. Deon waits for the signal from the sideline and when he calls the play, my stomach drops. The pass is going to come to me. The same pass I dropped two weeks ago. I feel my palms beginning to sweat beneath my gloves and my vision starts to get spotty. The cheers from the crowd begin to get louder, the sound thundering in my ears.

I move to my position on the line of scrimmage and look over towards the offensive line. Jack makes eye contact with me, nods down at my hand, and smiles. *You got this* he mouths to me. The heavy feeling in my chest dissolves a bit and I repeat what he said to me.

I've got this.

I take a deep breath and wait for Deon to call for the play to start. The ball is snapped, and I sprint toward the defender in front of me. The moment before I can run into him, I sharply change direction, heading toward the middle of the end zone. Deon spots me and launches the ball into the air. Time begins to move at a snail's speed as I watch the football spiral through the air towards me. I leap into the air, meet the ball, and snatch it before a defender can swat it away. I land and tumble onto the ground. For a moment, I freeze. I feel the ball pressed against my chest and I release a breath.

Suddenly, the crowd roars and Jack lifts me off the ground and into a choking hug. He spins me around in celebration,

then drops me back onto the ground. Other players come around and slap my helmet as the kicker comes onto the field to score the extra point.

“Great catch,” Declan says as I pass him on the sideline.

I whip my head around, eyes wide in disbelief. Outside of what’s necessary, I haven’t spoken to Declan. The way he treated Sawyer pisses me off, and the fact he didn’t even seem ashamed of his actions only made it worse. Then there was his stunt in the locker room a few weeks ago. He’s been a dick but even if I think he’s an asshole, I’m not going to be rude.

“Uh, thanks,” I say, moving towards the table full of cups. I glance back at Declan, whose face is scrunched together, looking both embarrassed and guilty. I brush off the odd interaction and turn towards the field.

Twenty seconds later, the game ends, and the Seattle Maverick fans in the stands cheer as we make our way back to the locker room. Coach Barrett comes into the locker room, gives us a speech about comebacks, and then leaves us to get ready for the flight back to Seattle.

The entire way back to Seattle, I think about getting back to Sawyer. I silently urge the plane to fly faster. I’ve missed her, despite only being gone for two days.



I’m sitting on my sofa, enjoying my free afternoon when Jack texts the group chat he created after our breakfast, which is

ceremoniously named 'Seattle Super Spies'.

Jack: We're going out tonight.

Deon: You may be, but I'm not.

Me: I planned on asking Sawyer
to see if she wanted to do something,
so no.

Jack: Oh! Invite her out with us!

Tell her to bring her friends.

Deon: If Sawyer goes out, I'll come.

I want to see how they interact.

Me: Fine, I'll ask.

Even though this is a bad idea.

Jack: *good idea

Deon: ^^^

Begrudgingly, I pull up my text message thread with Sawyer.

Me: Jack, Deon, and I are

going to longboards.

You, Nathalie, and Maren
should come.

I put my phone down and head towards my bedroom to change my clothes when my phone dings. I run back to the phone and unlock it. The speed at which I grab my phone could be considered concerning.

Sawyer: Sure! Just asked Maren and she said yes.

I'll ask Nathalie, but I'm sure she's down.

Sawyer: Oh, also.

I didn't tell Maren that Jack is going to be there.

I felt it might sway her decision towards no,
based on their interaction last time.

Me: That's probably for the best.

See you soon! :)

I text the group chat with Jack and Deon to let them know and to meet at Longboards in an hour. I move towards my closet and immediately begin to contemplate what I should wear. It needs to be casual since it's Longboards, but I also want to look good. Sawyer may have tried to play it off, but I saw her staring at me. Her eyes were glued to my body and it

looked like she enjoyed the view. It boosted my ego, but it also gave me a small sliver of hope that she could be into me. She's at least attracted to me. You can't fake the reaction she had. I want her to ogle me again. It wasn't a part of my plan for her to see me in nothing but a towel, but the universe was looking out and it will 100% get a fruit basket for its help. Hell. I'll even splurge on the tropical fruit.

The way she looked at me like she would devour me if she could gave me some confidence to invade her personal space while we baked. I was so close to saying fuck it and kissing her, but then her phone dinged, and it broke the moment, and she ran off pretty quickly after that. If we're both going to be drinking tonight, I'm going to use that to my advantage. Hopefully, by the end of the night, I'll know if Sawyer has feelings. And if she does, then I'm making my move.



I stroll into Longboards and scan the length of the bar. Jack and Deon lounge in a booth in the back of the room. I maneuver through the crowd of people, dodging a group of older women who are dressed in flowery outfits.

“Hey guys,” I say as I slip onto the bench beside Deon. They both greet me, then look at me expectantly.

“Why are you two looking at me like that?”

“Well, what's your game plan?” Deon asks. Straight to the point, like always.

“My game plan?” I question, not realizing I needed to come up with one other than getting tipsy and hoping she spills that she’s into me. It felt foolproof to me. That is until these two asked about my plan. Now, it seems ridiculous. “I was just planning on drinking and hoping something would happen. No actual plan.” I shrug, hoping I come off as confident and calm.

“You need a game plan,” Jack nearly whines. “Oh! Occasionally, lean down and talk to her. Get in her personal space.”

“Yeah!” Deon agrees enthusiastically. Which is a surprising response. He is supposed to be the levelheaded one compared to Jack, not supporting his shenanigans. “And make sure she’s sitting right next to you, and let your thigh brush hers.”

“Exactly!” Jack exclaims, knocking his fist against the table, “And casually drape your hand behind her then play with her hair.”

“That might be too obvious,” Deon comments. Jack hums and the two of them toss ideas back and forth. Jack suggests feeding her pretzels and thankfully, Deon cuts him off before I do. Feeding her pretzels in the middle of the bar will do nothing except make everyone—myself included—uncomfortable.

I shake my head at the absurdity of the plan. Considering I hadn’t had a plan of my own, I can’t judge, but it sounds like it’s straight from a Hallmark movie. I open my mouth to express that sentiment when the front door swings open and Sawyer walks in with Maren and Nathalie. I immediately shut

my mouth and Jack nods his head up and down, rapidly agreeing to his ideas. I slide out of the booth and move towards the bar, where the three of them are ordering. Sawyer is telling the bartender the last drink of the order when I slide up next to her.

“Put that on my tab,” I say to the bartender, startling Sawyer at the same time.

“Jeez, Henry! You scared the shit out of me!” she yelps, her fist connecting with my bicep.

God damn. She must be working out. That kinda stings.

I chuckle at her response and say hello to Maren and Nathalie. Nathalie smiles at me, but when I look at Maren, she’s looking past me towards the booth.

Directly at Jack.

Uh oh.

She whips her head back at Sawyer, who shoots her a guilty smile. Maren shoots daggers at her, then closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. Her jaw is clenched so tight she may crack a tooth. She looks back at Sawyer and smiles, except it comes out more like a murderous grin. I shiver and turn back to Sawyer, who is biting her lip in an attempt not to laugh. I’m not sure exactly why Maren doesn’t like Jack, but it must be ridiculous if Sawyer is holding back laughter.

Maren snatches her beer the moment the bartender sets it down and storms off towards the table. I watch her slide into

the booth across from Jack and sips her beer, not breaking eye contact with him while she does.

Alright then.

I can't peel my eyes away from the stare down when I notice Deon get up and head towards me, clearly trying to avoid whatever is happening over there. He shakes his head as he makes his way to me, clearly amused by whatever one of them just said.

"Do you know what is going on with those two?" he asks, looking back at the two of them before grimacing at Maren's signature scowl. He turns from me, noticing I haven't ordered, and flags the bartender then looks back to me for a response.

"I have no idea."

I peer over at Sawyer and Nathalie, hoping one of them can answer the question.

The two of them burst out in laughter, nearly keeling over. Deon and I watch in utter shock as they gasp for breaths, like whatever happened between Maren and Jack was the funniest thing to ever happen. Nathalie is clutching her sides while Sawyer smacks the air, the two of them unraveling in the middle of the bar. Eventually, Sawyer's laughter turns into soft giggles and she gazes at me, tears of laughter in her eyes.

"I'm not sure how the topic came up, but according to Maren, the first time they met they were talking about some nature documentary and Maren said something about a bug in South America and Jack corrected her saying it was in Africa.

Maren was confident she was right. Except he looked it up and she was wrong. And Maren did not respond to that well. Especially when he laughed at her reaction.”

I chuckled, not surprised by his apparent knowledge of African bugs. Jack watches a shocking number of documentaries, and I swear he knows more biology facts than I could ever imagine.

“Oh. It gets worse. Well, according to Maren, it gets worse. Personally, I think the whole thing is funny.” She and Nathalie laugh again, and she continues. “He then said that LeBron was the greatest player of all time. That really sent Maren off the deep end.”

“Maren made me listen to her entire speech about the Jordan versus LeBron debate after she told us what happened,” Nathalie shivers, reliving the memory, “If anyone was curious, Jordan has two more championship rings than LeBron.”

“I do remember her screaming about Michael Jordan at one point and Jack laughing at her outburst. He seemed amused, not upset.”

“Oh, he was amused. Maren was pissed. She spent days complaining about him to Nathalie and me. Which is why I didn’t tell her he was going to be here.”

All four of us turn our heads to look at Maren and Jack sitting in the booth. Neither of them is speaking. Maren is glaring at Jack; Jack is smiling back at Maren. All four of us chuckle at them. The bartender returns with the beers, and we move back towards the booth. Sawyer slips into the booth next

to Jack, and I sit down next to her. Beside Maren, Nathalie slides into the booth, followed by Deon.

Maren breaks the staring competition and looks at Deon and me, pointedly excluding Jack in her statement. “We watched the game on Thursday. You two played well in the second half.”

“Thank you,” Deon says gracefully.

“We?” I question at the same time.

“Yeah. All three of us.” Maren gestures to Sawyer and Nathalie.

I look down at Sawyer, and she just smiles. I look back to the table when Nathalie clears her throat. “It’s confirmed. You three actually play football. It wasn’t just a ruse to get out of snack duty.”

The table is silent. One second. Two seconds.

Then Deon breaks out in booming laughter at Natalie’s comment. His chest shakes as he sucks in oxygen. “You still weren’t confident we were? Even after Sawyer confirmed it?”

I’m not sure I’ve ever heard Deon laugh so hard since I met him.

Nathalie blushes, but then straightens her shoulders and turns directly to Deon. Ready to defend herself. “I don’t know what football players look or act like. Before you three, I had never met one. Nor have I fangirled over any either. So, yes. It took watching you prance around the field for the knowledge to fully settle. Plus, people will say anything to avoid cutting

carrots and celery. Lying about being a professional athlete isn't entirely unbelievable."

Deon looks at her curiously then, something I can't decipher flickering across his gaze.

"We don't prance," Jack guffaws, defending us. "We run majestically." He says, proudly.

"They may run majestically," Maren declares, sipping on her beer, "but you prance."

A mischievous gleam forms in Jack's eyes, as he smirks at Maren. "Were you watching me on TV, Maren baby?"

The victorious smile Maren had on her face instantly fades away at his response. We all watch while her cheeks go red in annoyance. She simply huffs at him and goes back to sipping her beer.

I take the moment of silence to look at Sawyer, who is already almost finished with her first vodka cranberry. Her cheeks are rosy from the alcohol flowing through her bloodstream. A blonde curl falls in front of her eyes, and the urge to tuck the piece behind her ear is overwhelming. Before I can think better of it, my hand is moving. Gently, I take the rogue strand of golden hair and tuck it behind her ear. I let my hand linger for a moment before I pull away.

Her forest green eyes dart to my hand, then to my face. She smiles shyly at me, then looks back at the table. Not saying a single word. The lack of a response has me suddenly worrying that I made a mistake by doing that. I couldn't even help it.

One second, I'm thinking about touching her hair, and the next thing I know my hand is moving by its own volition. My lack of control over my limbs is almost as concerning as how out of control my feelings for Sawyer are. I scan the table and my eyes connect with Maren's, which are narrowed on me. Studying our interaction. I go to look away, but she gestures her head towards the bar. She slams the rest of her beer, then turns towards Nathalie and Deon.

“I need to use the bathroom and get another beer. Can I get out?”

They both shuffle out of the booth, and she disappears to the bathroom. A few minutes later, she walks out of the restroom and heads towards the bar. She looks at me, then glances back to the bar. Understanding the cues, I stand.

“I'm going to get another drink, does anyone want anything?”

I get everyone's order, then head toward Maren. I move to stand next to her, and she cuts right to the chase.

“I see what you're doing, Parker,” she states simply.

Not one to beat around the bush. Reminds me of Deon.

My pulse quickens and my hands begin to go clammy at her statement. Does she see what I'm doing with Sawyer? Does she know something? I take a deep breath before I blurt out questions that I may not want answers for. I attempt to deflect by answering her question with my own.

“What exactly am I doing?” I ask innocently. I quickly turn to the bartender, signaling for the same drinks. They give me a nod, and I look back at Maren.

“Flirting with Sawyer.”

Oh shit. She knows. It can't be that obvious that I'm flirting. I'm doing my best to be subtle. If Maren knows, then Sawyer must know, too. Is that why she was acting weird? Does she know but doesn't know how to break it to me that she isn't into me? Maren must read my mind because she continues.

“Don't panic, buddy,” She pats my chest, “Sawyer has no idea, but I see it. I have a radar and my radar is saying you're into her.”

I fumble for words. *A radar?* I have no idea how she caught that from the two times we've met, but I have to say I'm both terrified and impressed. I stare at her, my jaw nearly on the floor. Aware of my inability to function, Maren carries on the conversation and nearly gives me a heart attack from shock with the words that come out of her mouth.

“I think she has feelings for you too. At least, she does now. My radar can't detect whether the feelings were there before I met her.”

“Uh. What?” I choke out. I'm not sure I could form any words other than that.

The bartender returns with a new round of drinks. Maren grabs her beer and two other drinks, then heads back to the table, not saying another word about the absolute bomb she

just dropped on me. *Come back*, I nearly scream. She can't just walk away like that. I take a moment, then grab the remaining drinks and chase her down.

“*Maren*,” I hiss, right before she sits down next to Nathalie. I slip in beside Sawyer and pass around drinks.

Clearly, Maren is no longer divulging what she knows or what her ‘radar’ is telling her. Jack quickly glances at me, widens his eyes, and then smirks. I have no idea what that means.

Slowly, I shift closer to her, my thigh pressing against hers in the booth. Her muscles stiffen up at the contact, then relax, her leg fully pressed against mine beneath the table. I release the breath I was holding and turn back towards the table, attempting to act normal.

The simple touch has my neurons firing on all cylinders.

Conversation and alcohol flow and we sit, chatting about everything and nothing in the dimly lit booth. Maren and Jack argue about sports. An event that could turn into an Olympic sport. Sawyer and Nathalie share stories about some of the kids at the after-school program, and we discuss the upcoming game. Deon watches us all with an intense curiosity that's slightly unnerving and far too perceptive. At one point, Maren and Jack agree on something, which annoys Maren to no end.

“So...” Jack starts, looking between Sawyer and me, his eyes glittering with mischief. I'm suddenly very afraid. “You and Henry have been friends for years?”

I narrow my eyes on Jack when Sawyer answers.

“Yeah, about three years.”

“So, you have embarrassing stories about Henry that you can share with the group then...” Jack has the attention of the entire table. They all look at Sawyer expectantly.

Sawyer glances up at me and without a single word, I already know what she’s going to say. The story is horrifying, and I would prefer to never have to relive the moment. I drop my head and Sawyer giggles, turning back to the table.

“Well, senior year, I got a call from Henry at two in the morning. I was obviously freaked out and I thought something had happened. He had told me he was going to the bars with some of his teammates and I hadn’t expected to hear from him until he rose from the dead and needed hangover bagels.”

“Hangover bagels are the best,” I confirm. Nothing like a bagel and cream cheese to really absorb the alcohol.

“Yeah, well I get the call and Henry is still drunk, rambling about how he can’t get into the building. So, I run downstairs to swipe him into the building and he’s half naked. No pants. Just his shirt.”

Jack booms in laughter. “Oh my god, like Winnie the Pooh.”

“Exactly! He told me he was taking out the trash and forgot his key card. And his pants apparently. He was so embarrassed that he avoided me for a week. I would see him and break out in laughter. I couldn’t help myself.”

Everyone at the table laughs at my expense and Sawyer reassuringly pats my arm. Our thighs are still pressed together and the movement shifted her closer to me.

“In my defense, I was just trying to clean up before bed. I don’t remember losing my pants in the process.”

Sawyer is right that I avoided her. But not because she kept laughing at me. It was because I got a boner the moment I saw her in her pajamas and the image of her was so seared into my brain that it took me a week to mentally recover enough to face her.

My feelings were haywire then. I now have a tighter leash on them.

Everyone else shares their embarrassing drinking stories to make me feel better, but if it makes Sawyer laugh, I would embarrass myself every single day.

Throughout the night I feel Sawyer looking at me every so often, and I feel the warmth of her thigh against mine constantly. I peer at her from the corner of my eye each time and she quickly looks away when she gets caught. Maren catches my eye after one of the moments and winks at me.

Maren’s comments and the way Sawyer reacted to my touch bounces around my mind far after we leave the bar. It consumes my mind as I get ready for bed. I replay the quick glances and soft smiles. It feels like a herd of wildebeest is stampeding in my stomach and I feel lightheaded thinking about what it all may mean.

Maren may be right.



CHAPTER 18

“But I can’t help the fact that my mind keeps track of
everywhere your hands have been to”

that was then—Emily James

Sawyer

I’ve been replaying the same moment in my mind since Friday night. Henry and I at Longboards. His hand reaching out and tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. His electric blue eyes on mine while his hand lingered for half a second. His hard thigh pressed against mine underneath the booth.

Two. Long. Days.

The same memories on repeat.

I groan. Not being able to shake the image is torture. Part of me revels in the memory, at the way goosebumps broke out across my skin when he touched me. How my heart began to race when his hand closed the space between us. The other part of me, the more logical part of me, is very concerned about the reaction I had towards him touching my hair. It was an entirely platonic interaction, there's no reason to get all worked up over a little hair touch. *Right?*

I collect the snacks from the pantry and drop them onto the coffee table, next to the bottles of wine and assortment of face masks. It's Sunday night, which means it's the first official meeting of the book club Maren created. She started reading some fantasy romance with faeries and decided that Nathalie and I had to read it. We all quickly became obsessed and decided we needed weekly girl nights or book club meetings to talk about the brooding, morally gray main characters who are too sexy for their own good.

I connect my phone to the TV and turn on the book club playlist Nathalie crafted for the night, full of Taylor Swift and 2000s throwbacks. That girl has a playlist for every situation under the sun.

Sad? Listen to 'These aren't tears, *sniffles*.'

Angry? Try 'fist meet face'.

Decided to go for a run then instantly regret it? Take a listen to 'I have made a grave error'.

A knock on the door signals Natalie's arrival. I yell to Maren as I open the door for Nathalie. As usual, she shows up with

snacks, even though I told her I had it covered. She bulldozes past me into the kitchen with the Cheez-Its and Oreos in her hands. Her purse dangles at her waist, a bag of Cheetos sticking out. My mouth salivates from the hot orange color. It's a Pavlovian response.

“I finally finished chapter fifty-five and I have things to say,” Nathalie says as a way of greeting.

I know exactly what scene she's talking about, and I also have several things to say about it. For example, how did the paint not get into areas where paint should never be? The logistics seem questionable, and I haven't been able to work out how it wasn't wildly uncomfortable and messy. And did not lead to a horrible UTI. Wait, do they even have UTIs in a fantasy world?

“Book Club!” Maren yells as she makes her way into the living room. Her hair is pulled back into a bun and she wears another signature science shirt. This time it's different coral species. I made the mistake of asking about it earlier and had to listen to her ramble for twenty minutes about reefs and climate change and ocean acidification. At least her soap-box speeches are making me smarter.

Nathalie and I flop onto the couch beside her, the two of us dressed down in preparation for pampering.

“I need wine for this. I have a feeling I'm going to be defending my opinions,” Maren pours herself a large glass of white wine, then slides the wine bottle in our direction. Wine in hand, we begin to debate the different male characters.

Maren starts by ripping all of them to shreds, except one who she describes as “a tall, sexy man with tattoos who can do no wrong.” I decide not to mention that she basically described Jack because I don’t feel like being boob punched. I already have to deal with the back pain the ten-pound beasts give me, the last thing I need is the pain from a boob punch added to it. And I know Maren can pack a punch. Nathalie argues that the quiet one, who barely spoke in the books, is a misunderstood soul. I’m not sure how you can determine that someone is misunderstood if they barely speak, but I digress. I’m not here to yuck someone’s yum. I adore the main character, who is so deeply in love with his mate it is almost too sweet.

We go back and forth on theories and predictions for the next books, and all choose a face mask to put on. Maren splurged on expensive ones made with natural ingredients so the colors are wild. While we wait for the time to pass to take the face masks off, I gorge myself on Cheetos while Maren dives into the ridiculous theories she has come up with. Right as Maren and Nathalie begin to debate redemption arcs, the doorbell rings. I glance at Maren, wondering if she’s expecting anyone. Enthralled in the debate, Maren doesn’t even acknowledge the doorbell. Her hands fly around as her argument turns passionate. I get up from my spot on the couch to answer the door. I peer through the peephole first and my heart stammers.

On the other side of the door, Henry is standing in the hallway, wringing his hands together and shifting on his feet. He looks almost nervous. I swing the door open, and his eyes

shoot up from the ground and land on me. They go wide in shock.

What?

A slow grin spreads across his face as he takes in my appearance.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I thought this was Sawyers’ apartment, not Shrek’s swamp.” The joke takes a moment to land, but once it does, I have to fight back a laugh. Suddenly, I remember the green-colored mask on my face and the worn-through white t-shirt and plaid shorts I’m wearing. Between the outfit and the mask, I probably look like I’m starring in a high school production of Shrek the Musical.

I bite my tongue to suppress my laugh and feign hurt, putting my hand over my heart. “Get out of my Swamp!” I holler at him, baring my teeth.

He laughs deeply, his chest rumbling, and the sound shoots directly to my chest. I want to hear that laugh more often. It’s hearty and deep and feels like hot chocolate on a cold, winter day. Warms me from the inside out.

“Now that you’ve compared me to Shrek, would you like to tell me why you’re in my swamp?” I ask, sticking with the bit.

“I was in the neighborhood and thought I would stop by and see what you were doing.” He looks away, staring down the hallway like it’s the most curious thing in the world.

In the neighborhood? On a Sunday night?

Henry lives on the other side of town. Twenty minutes away without traffic. Before I can question what the actual reason for his visit is, Maren and Nathalie's argument draws our attention.

"He doesn't deserve a redemption arc! I don't care if she could possibly be his mate!" Maren passionately yells. "Also, why should someone so horrible get a mate? Explain that!"

"Everyone deserves love, Maren. Even people who have made mistakes," Nathalie counters. Her voice is calm and level, while Maren's has continued to get louder.

"Well, not him!"

"Everyone," Nathalie emphasizes.

"I disagree. He's an ass," Maren huffs while taking a sip of her wine.

I look back at Henry, who has taken in the scene in the living room. The snacks. The wine. The face masks. The bickering about fictional fae men. He looks like he just witnessed a car crash and can't look away. Both disturbed and insanely curious.

"Uh...Are you—Did I interrupt something?" Henry asks, hesitantly. His eyes are glued to the blue gunk plastered on Nathalie and Maren's faces. "Why are—Is this some sort of Avatar thing? Like a dress up?"

"Avatar?" My eyebrows skyrocket on my forehead. *The movie?*

“The blue...on their faces,” He gestures at his face, making a weird swiping motion near his eyebrows.

I laugh at his confusion. “No, it’s just a book club and we all have very strong opinions about wingspans.”

Henry swings his eyes from the living room back to me. “Did you just say wingspans?” he asks, like his ears are deceiving him.

“Yes,” I chuckle. “Come inside. We have plenty of snacks.”

“I don’t want to intrude,” Henry states, seeming hesitant to join in on the chaos. He eyes the living room, then looks down the hallway. Probably checking for an escape route.

“Nonsense.” I grab his hand and drag him into the apartment, throwing him to the wolves.



An hour later, Henry has fully committed to the book club. A bright pink face mask is smeared on his face and he sips from a wine glass. He’s debating the power ranking of each character that Maren graciously explained to him when he showed up. It took him a bit of time to wrap his head around the concept of ‘fae’ but once he did, he peppered Maren with questions about powers and the strengths and weaknesses of each character. My sides hurt from listening to him get heated about different powers and who would win in a one-on-one fight. He’s comparing characters like they’re Pokémon he can battle, which is endearing as hell. I watch him as he talks to

Nathalie and Maren, his gestures animated and questions highly specific. His azure eyes shine with laughter as Maren helps him scrub off the face mask. I'm not confident Declan would have joined the book club with us, let alone debate the validity of wingspans and sex scenes as if it's the most casual thing in the world. Definitely not the Declan I saw at the bar.

I gaze at Henry when he isn't looking, drinking him in. He's beautiful. So beautiful it hurts. The sharp nose, the cerulean eyes I could get lost in, the blinding smile. Outside of his glorious face, he's kind and funny and witty. Henry looks over at me, catching me staring at him. I'm nearly a bottle of wine in, so some of my inhibitions have flown out of the window, and instead of looking away, I keep my eyes locked with his. Any barrier I placed to keep myself from viewing Henry in a romantic way has been demolished after our almost-kiss.

The air grows heavy between us, and my body begins to heat from his gaze on me. Maren and Nathalie fade away and all I see is Henry. For a moment, it feels like time stops between us. Slowly, Henry moves his hand towards mine. His fingers graze mine, gently, and my breath gets trapped in my throat. His touch is charged, the soft caress sending bolts of lightning directly to my chest. I wait for him to move, for his hand to leave mine. But it doesn't. His fingers linger. Subtly, Henry shifts towards me on the sofa, the side of his body shifting toward me. His thigh grazes against mine, and a shockwave races through my body. Suddenly, I'm hyper-aware of my body. Goosebumps break out on my skin, and I can feel my face turning red.

Be cool, Sawyer. Do. Not. Panic.

I'm cool. Totally fine. Cool as a cucumber. They call me Ice Ice Baby.

This is fine. Totally normal. My heart is definitely not beating out of my chest. Nothing to see here. Keep moving people!

I turn back to Maren and Nathalie, ignoring the blatant looks they both give me. *I have no idea why you're looking at me like that*, I convey by raising an eyebrow toward them.

They both look at me with shit-eating grins but don't push it. *Mind your own damn business*, I express with my eyes. A girl is allowed to have heated touches on couches with her best friend and not have to explain herself.

We debate the book a while longer before Nathalie yawns and gets up, deciding it's time for her to head home. It's 8:30 PM. I know that yawn was fake. The wink she gives me as she passes by confirms my suspicions.

"See you at work tomorrow," she yells as she leaves.

It's just Maren, Henry, and I sitting in the living room. Maren makes herself scarce almost immediately.

"I'm going to take a shower. See you later, Henry." She salutes him as she saunters off towards her bedroom.

With Maren gone, the silence is heavy. Neither of us make a move to part from our position. We sit on the couch for a moment before Henry breaks the silence.

“I should probably go. I have practice tomorrow.”

My stomach drops at the suggestion of him leaving. The idea of him not being here makes me sad. Disappointed. A feeling I will definitely need to address later. It's on the list of priorities I have including figuring out how to get my heart to stop racing in his presence and order more face wash. It's a comprehensive list. Right now, I ignore the feeling and slap a smile onto my face.

“Okay.”

I quickly move towards the door, trying to avoid the emotions attempting to break the surface. As I go to turn the door handle, Henry's hand intertwines with mine and pulls me into a tight hug. I melt against him almost instantly, sinking into the embrace. We stand there in the entryway for what seems like eons before he finally pulls away.

“I had fun tonight, thanks for letting me stay,” he moves towards the door. “I'll see you soon, Sawyer.”

He says it, almost as if it's a promise, then walks out.

I hope it's a promise.



I clean up the mess in the living room and get ready for bed on autopilot. Lying down in bed, the small moments from tonight rush to the front of my brain. The butterflies I feel when our skin grazes. The way my heart skips a beat when I see him. The disappointment I feel when he's not around. My mind digs

up things in the past. The way my eyes linger on his body and the way I feel when he smiles at me.

I shoot up out of bed. Alarm bells blare in my mind. Dots are connecting and puzzle pieces are falling into place.

Oh. My. God.

Holy shit.

I have a crush on Henry.

A massive, all-consuming crush. On my best friend. This is bad. Not good. No bueno. I begin pacing my room, attempting to rationalize my feelings. Except I can't. I can feel my feet leaving track marks on the hardwood floor as I pace back and forth, my head scrambling to accept the revelation.

How did this happen?

I firmly told myself to keep my emotions in check when I concocted my idiotic plan. I needed to stay objective in my pursuit to uncover his emotions. Instead of revealing his, I discovered my own. There's no other explanation for any of my reactions to him except for the fact that I have a massive crush. I grab my phone, hoping Maren can talk me off the cliff that I am inching closer to by the minute.

Me: CODE RED!!!

I shoot her the S.O.S. and resume my pacing. Suddenly I feel stupid for not seeing it before. I'm blaming it on my lack of romantic experience in the past. All of the emotions I've felt

the past few weeks can be explained by the fact that I have not-friendly feelings for Henry. At first, I thought it was just my need to know if Maren was right or not, but somewhere along the way, the feelings developed. And now here I am, pacing my room trying to figure out what to do with this information. Rule number one of having a best friend is to not develop feelings for said best friend. Did I listen to that rule? Nope.

Thirty seconds later, Maren shoots into my room, arms full of tampons, Tylenol, and chocolate. She's panting like she just ran a mile and her eyes search my body, lingering on my stomach. I give her a bewildered look, not understanding why on earth she has all that with her.

"Did you start your period?" I ask her, trying to understand what a box of tampons has to do with my distress signal.

"Uh. No. But you said code red. So, I brought everything you needed for a code red." She looks at me, befuddled like the answer is common sense.

"I meant code red as in 'I have an emergency'," I explain.

She flops down on my bed, discarding the tampons and Tylenol to the side and ripping open the bag of chocolate.

"I guess all we need is chocolate then. What's up?" she asks as she shoves pieces of chocolate into her mouth.

"I have a problem," I state, not sure how to explain I have feelings for Henry, especially since I just came to the realization myself.

“Clearly.”

I shoot her an annoyed look, which she immediately shrugs off as she continues to barrel through the bag of chocolate. Taking a moment to think through my strategy, the best idea I can come up with is ripping off the band-aid.

“I have a teensy, tiny crush on Henry, and I have no idea what to do about it,” I blurt out, placing my head into my hands. No need to divulge that it’s much larger than *teensy tiny* and is more like *super-duper big*.

I expected Maren to have some kind of response. Shock. Horror. Happiness. Gloating because she was right. Something. Instead, she pops another piece of chocolate into her mouth and chews. Ten seconds go by. Then twenty. Then thirty. I stand there, shuffling from side to side, watching for any reaction. I’m having a full-on crisis and she is just munching away on chocolate. Not a single care in the world. My hand itches to snatch the candy away from her. Finally, she speaks.

“I’m glad you finally figured it out.”

Excuse me.

I must have said it out loud because Maren responds.

“I’ve watched you two interact three times.” She gestures the number three with her fingers, “That’s it. And it was clear as day. Henry likes you and you like him back. So, yeah. I’m glad you’ve finally reached the same conclusion I did weeks ago.”

I stare at her like she's grown three heads. It's not the 'I told you so' I had expected but it pretty much is one, in not so many words. She stands and walks out the door, taking the chocolate with her.

I stare at her back as she walks back towards her bedroom. I call a code red, and she doesn't even help me. I'm in no better position than I was before she came into the room. She just left tampons on my bed and took the chocolate with her. The chocolate that was originally meant for me.



CHAPTER 19

“And oh how romantic, we both like to panic when there’s something to talk about”

say it first—Role Model

Sawyer

Three days.

Three full days of having a massive, soul-consuming crush on Henry and I still have no idea what I’m going to do. There’s no handbook or guide for dummies on how to navigate the shitstorm that I’m in. Trust me, I scoured Amazon. I haven’t spoken to him since book club on Sunday night when I finally realized how deep I was in my feelings for him. This isn’t a little crush. This is a spend-every-waking-moment-thinking-about-him infatuation.

It's fair to say I'm in a pickle. Having feelings for your best friend is dangerous territory. Navigating what I should do is like trying to walk through Target without buying anything. A disaster waiting to happen. I've been avoiding speaking to or seeing him. I respond to every text he sends me with vague answers.

Now that the crush is real, I have an earnest fear of what may come out of my mouth if I'm flustered. I ramble and I try to fill the silence when I'm uncomfortable, which will happen if I'm alone with Henry. If that happens, who knows what I will say. I'm a different person when I'm nervous and being around him is incredibly nerve-racking.

Unfortunately, my days of avoiding him are over. Bertha—my lovely, yet ancient car—decided to crap out on me which means it had to be taken to an auto shop. It's partially my fault, I should have known better than to buy an old car off Facebook Marketplace when I got here. So now, I'm stranded. I tried to call Maren, but she's at work, meaning she's in the lab and isn't looking at her phone. I would have Nathalie pick me up, but she had the late shift at work. She won't get out until 7:30 P.M., and I really don't want to sit at this auto shop for four hours. I looked at Uber, but the cost to my apartment is over fifty dollars, which seems absurd. Considering I only know two other people in Seattle, and one is a douchebag, I was left with one option.

Henry.

I had all my fingers and toes crossed when I called, hoping he would have practice and I would just have to bite the bullet and pay for the Uber. I do not trust myself in a confined space with that man. One whiff of his cologne and I'm dust. I'll crumble under the weight of my feelings and then do something stupid, like kiss him. I need to stay far, far away until I can put my feelings into a box and toss it into the middle of the Pacific Ocean. But the universe has other plans. It just so happens that Henry had an early morning lift, and he can come pick me up.

Yay...No worries here. I am totally not sweating through my deodorant.

Sitting in the auto shop lobby, I've decided that my best plan of action to avoid accidentally blurting out my feelings is to prevent myself from talking as much as possible. If he asks a question, I'll just grunt a response. My knee moves up and down as I wait for Henry to arrive.

It's only a ten-minute drive.

It's going to be a test of my strength.

Five long minutes later, Henry pulls into a parking spot. I gather my belongings and haul them to his car. Spotting me with arms full of items, Henry hops out of the driver's seat and grabs some of the load. I falter a step as he moves towards me. He looks good.

Freaking. Fabulous. Just what I need. It wouldn't kill him to look bad sometimes, for my sake.

His hair is still wet from practice and his skin has that workout afterglow I can never manage to achieve. When I work out, I look like a squashed tomato. The grin he aims in my direction makes my heart flutter and I rush to throw my things into the back seat of his car, avoiding getting too close to him.

“Jeez, Sawyer. Did you have your whole apartment in your car?” he teases, throwing my belongings into the back seat.

I smile, sliding into the passenger seat of the car. So far, so good. I haven’t had to say a single word. I can do this. I start to fiddle with the vents to occupy myself. Henry gets back into the driver’s seat, puts the car in reverse, and heads in the direction of my apartment. We sit in comfortable silence, and when I start to believe I might make it out of the car without having to speak, he decides to ask me questions.

“How was work?” he asks casually. His fingers tap on the steering wheel to the beat of the song on the radio and I watch, enraptured. Who knew fingers could be so...hot?

Get it together, Sawyer! No ogling of fingers or other body parts. I shift my gaze to the center console, where I start organizing his junk. Might as well clean up a bit.

“It was fine. Busy,” I respond, hoping he takes the curt answer as me being frustrated from my car problems. He opens his mouth to ask another question when I realize that conversation is inevitable. I rush to say something before him, which comes out as a slew of questions that seem super normal and not at all weird. “How was practice? Were you really

sweaty? Is it hard to grip the weights if you're dripping in sweat?"

He raises an eyebrow and looks at me from the corner of his eye.

"Practice was fine. No, I was not super sweaty. And we have things called towels." He answers, a smirk on his face.

I nod, not trusting myself to ask another question or respond. I pointedly look out the window as if the street is the most interesting thing on the planet. I can feel Henry looking over at me, but I ignore him and keep my gaze fixed on the sidewalk.

Finally, after the longest ten-minute drive of my life, Henry pulls up to my apartment complex. I leap out of the car and grab my stuff from the back seat.

"Thanks!" I yell as I shut the door. He looks at me through the car window, bewildered.

He rolls down the window, concern etched in his features. "Sawyer, are you okay?"

"Yes. I'm fine!" I say, a little too forced. "I'm just stressed about my car," I amend, hoping it makes up for my chaotic behavior in the last ten minutes.

"Alright," he says, not entirely buying into my excuse, but letting it go, nonetheless. "Call me if you need anything."

He puts the car in drive and pulls back onto the road, driving away. I turn and walk through the disturbing lobby towards the elevator. I make it up to my floor and into my apartment building when the sense of loss hits me like a bus. I was just

with him thirty seconds ago, and now I have a sharp pain in my chest about the fact he just drove away.

In a moment of complete insanity, most likely driven by my unhealthy crush, I pick up the phone and call Henry.

He picks up on the second ring. “Sawyer, is everything okay?” His voice sounds worried, and I immediately panic. My brain has caught up with my body and I have no idea what to say or do where I don’t end up admitting my crush or sounding like an idiot. Unfortunately, I blurt out the first thing that comes to my mind.

“I lost my chapstick.”

So much for not sounding like an idiot.

“You lost your chapstick?” Henry parrots back to me, clearly confused.

“In your car.”

“You lost your chapstick in my car?” he questions, still not understanding what I’m saying. At this point, I don’t even know what I’m saying, but I’ve dug myself this hole, so I might as well keep digging. Maybe I’ll find some answer for how to salvage this conversation at the bottom.

“Yes, Henry. Keep up.” I say, exasperated when I have no right to be, “I need you to come back so I can find it.”

Henry chuckles, finding my total breakdown funny. “Breathe, Sawyer. I’ll take a look when I get home and if I find it, I’ll hold onto it until I see you.”

It's a logical response, and if I was in a logical headspace, I would agree. Except, I am as far from logical as someone can be, so I immediately shoot the idea down.

"No!" I yell into the phone, "I need it. It's my favorite. Please come back." The last few words sound more like a plea coming out of my mouth, but I've completely lost it, so I don't have time to evaluate how needy I may sound.

"Alright, I'll turn around. Be there in a minute."

I spend the next few minutes trying to figure out what the hell I just got myself into and how the hell I'm going to get myself out of it. Walking out of my apartment and into the elevator, I still have zero ideas. I make it through the lobby and onto the sidewalk when I determine that I'm going to have to wing it and hope Henry doesn't think I've lost all my marbles.

I watch as Henry pulls up to the curb, puts his car in park, and gets out. Sheepishly, I walk over to meet him. Embarrassment hangs over me like a storm cloud.

"Could it have fallen out of one of your bags?" he asks, already searching the backseat. I know full and well that there is no long-lost chapstick in his car, but I search anyway. Many would consider my dedication to the bit an Oscar-worthy performance. I lean over, trying to peer under the seat, when Henry clears his throat. Loudly.

"I'll, um...I'll go look up front," he says, hastily closing the back door and laser-focusing all his attention on the floor of

the driver's seat. I peer over at him from the corner of my eye while I keep "searching," and Henry's face is cherry red.

Why is he so flustered?

I look around, trying to pinpoint what exactly has Henry so worked up when my eyes glance down to my chest.

Where my boobs are nearly falling out of my tank top. The girls are trying to escape.

They must have lost some support while I was looking for the totally-not-lost chapstick. An immediate feeling of triumph and warmth floods me. Henry got flustered. Over my slightly revealing top. The power I feel overwhelms me. I quietly thank the ole gals for doing a good job and continue my search, digging around under the seats.

Maren may be right. God, that hurts to admit. Henry might have feelings for me. He's at least attracted to me. The color of his face makes that obvious. Thoughts pour into my head about what it could mean and if I should do anything.

I search for another minute before I throw in the towel and declare to Henry, very dramatically, that the chapstick is lost forever.

R.I.P. imaginary chapstick.

You will be missed.

I wander back to the curb, unsure of what to do now. Henry must be as unsure as I am because he follows me over and stuffs his hands into his pockets. He shifts forward and backward on his feet a few times awkwardly.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t find your chapstick,” he offers.

Oh, Henry. If only you knew.

I dissolve into giggles at the absurdity of this entire situation. People say that you shouldn’t jump off the deep end if you can’t swim. I leaped without a floatie. This crush has caused me to lose my ability to make rational decisions. Competent Sawyer would never panic-call someone because she freaked out that they left.

Henry joins in on my laughter, finding my lapse of sanity amusing. Slowly, we both regain our composure and look at each other.

“Well, I should get going,” Henry says, scrubbing at the back of his neck.

“Oh, yeah.”

Once again, I feel disappointed he’s leaving. These feelings are debilitating, and I’m not prepared for how I’ll feel when he leaves for an away game. If I can’t even watch him drive off, then I’m sure knowing he’s in a different city will be fun for me.

He pulls me in for a hug, which ends entirely too quickly for my liking. I watch as he gets back into his car and drives off. Again.

Sadness flows into me like a wave.

I’m so fucked.



CHAPTER 20

“Say my name and everything just stops, I don’t want you as a best friend”

Dress—Taylor Swift

Henry

I’ve spent the better part of a week weighing my options. Tell Sawyer. Don’t tell Sawyer. Back and forth until I’m at a stalemate. I keep thinking back to what Maren told me at the bar: that Sawyer has feelings for me. My immediate reaction is to brush it off and deny it. Years sitting on the sideline makes it hard to wrap my head around the idea she’s into me too. However, I can’t help but notice how weird she’s been acting lately. I haven’t concluded what the chapstick debacle was about, but it was out of character for her.

After thinking through every moment and interaction, my confidence begins to grow. Sawyer is into me. Her actions prove it, at least based on what Jack and Deon told me. I forced the two of them to analyze every interaction, just to make sure I wasn't creating something from nothing. She reacts to my touch, her eyes linger on my body, and she's been acting flustered and weird lately. Maren confirmed what I wanted to hear. The only thing I need to do is put my big boy pants on and tell her. Which I plan to do. I need to do it soon before I lose what little courage I've mustered up. The idea of putting my heart on the chopping block makes me want to vomit, but I would rather face the fear of telling Sawyer and being shot down than say nothing at all and miss my shot.

Deciding to tell her before we leave for an away game probably isn't the best strategy if she rejects me, but the confidence I have is slightly overpowering the anxiety. And on the off chance she does reject me, I'll be in a different city where I can wallow in peace. I leave for L.A. at 2 P.M., which means I have a few hours before I need to be at the airport. Pulling out my phone, I text Sawyer.

Me: I don't leave for a few hours.

Want to get a coffee before I go?

I put my phone down and begin to pack my bag, my stomach in my throat, as I try not to glance at my phone every thirty seconds. I throw some t-shirts and shorts into the bag, some

underwear and toiletries, and call it good. I shuffle around my apartment, tidying up before I leave so that the place is clean when I come back. I'm just finishing the dishes when my phone dings. I drop the sponge and rush over to my phone. The way I drop what I'm doing in the hope that Sawyer is messaging me feels like a boy with a schoolyard crush. Which isn't entirely inaccurate, but the realization that's how I'm behaving is slightly sobering.

I unlock my phone and tap on the message.

Sawyer: Sure.

Meet in half an hour?

Me: Yeah. See you then.

I send her the location of the shop where I got her chai tea when we went whale watching, and every ounce of confidence I had to send the text message fluttered away into the abyss. Now I'm standing in my kitchen, attempting not to shit my pants with nervousness. I rush back to my bedroom and start to go through my closet, picking out an outfit. Nothing in my closet screams 'confess feelings to your best friend'. I need something that knocks her boots off but is also comfortable enough to cry in, if necessary. Versatility is key. I decide on a cream, knitted sweater, a pair of navy chinos, and my Nike blazers with the Seattle Maverick blue and silver. No matter the outcome, at least I'll look good. My chest tightens and my

heart begins to pound as I run my fingers through my hair and attempt to manage the curls. Deciding it's as good as it's going to get, I grab my keys and wallet and head out of the apartment toward the parking garage.

In an hour, I will either be elated with joy or overcome with sadness.

Only time will tell.



I enter the small café and scan the space for Sawyer. People chat amongst themselves and the smell of coffee and sugar floods the space. Plants are scattered around the space and the open ceiling gives the space an industrial vibe. Not spotting her, I locate a table by the entrance that allows for a quick getaway if things go south. I order a chai latte for her and a black coffee for myself, then sit down at the table. I feel just as nervous as I did eight months ago when I had planned on telling Sawyer how I felt at the draft. I feel queasy, sweat drips down my back, and my knee moves up and down fast enough to create a breeze. I am a nervous wreck.

A few moments later, a bell dings above the glass door signaling someone's arrival. I look up from my phone, and my gaze lands on Sawyer. She spots me and beelines for the table, an enormous smile spreading across her face. She looks like a ray of sunshine. Hair up in a bun, baby hairs sticking out left and right. If the color yellow was a person, it would be my

Sawyer. I watch her as she makes her way to the table, my heart skipping a couple of beats at her natural beauty.

She sits down at the table and doesn't waste a second.

“Oh. My. God. You'll never guess what I saw on the way here.” She's already so caught up in her story that she doesn't notice how ramrod straight I'm sitting or the slight sheen of nervous sweat on my skin. I'm confident I look like I'm about to throw up since that's exactly how I feel.

“I was walking from the parking garage down the street and —” Before she can get any deeper into her story about her walk to the café, I do the one thing I didn't want to do. I blurt out exactly what I'm thinking.

“I have feelings for you.” *Oh god. Stop talking Henry.* My mind tries desperately to shut my mouth, but I keep going, no longer in control. “Lots of them. Which may make our friendship weird, but I can't sit around and not tell you. It's been eating me alive,” I ramble out, not taking a breath. The moment the last word leaves my mouth, I feel like I've made one massive mistake.

I look at her, hoping to gauge her reaction to my untimely confession. Sawyer is staring at me, her lips parted in shock. She blinks once. Then twice. Another few seconds pass when she does something I never expected. She grabs her bag, stands up out of her seat, turns around, and walks out the café door. She doesn't say a single word.

As she walks out the door, my stomach plummets, and tears threaten to bloom in my eyes. It feels like someone has taken a

sledgehammer to my chest.

I've never been a big crier, not that men can't cry or anything. Fuck the patriarchy. Men should embrace emotions. Tears just haven't been my first reaction when I'm upset or overwhelmed. However, at this moment, the embarrassment is debilitating. I have no idea what I was thinking telling Sawyer how I felt. No matter the outcome of the confession, not in a million years did I expect her to get up and leave without a word, but the rejection cuts me to my core.

In a span of three sentences, I managed to destroy the most important relationship I have. Tears sting my eyes as I watch the steam rise from her drink, abandoned across from me. Utterly defeated, I collect my things and make my way to leave. If I'm going to cry over this embarrassing, soul-crushing interaction, it's not going to happen in a coffee shop. It's going to happen in my car, in a parking garage. Where I can play sad music in peace.

As I begin to rise from my seat, the bell on the door rings again. Subconsciously, I look up. My eyes begin to glance away when they dart back, unbelieving. Standing in the doorway is Sawyer, wide-eyed and panting. She frantically scans the room, eyes landing on me. Guilt flashes over her face as she takes in my appearance. The rejection and sadness must be etched into my features. I shift my eyes downwards, focusing on the pattern of the tile flooring, knowing I can't stomach her rejecting me with both her actions and her words. A man's heart can only withstand so much, and this is where I reach the end of my rope. I keep my eyes locked on the table,

hoping she will take the hint and leave me to wallow in my misery in peace.

Instead, she marches over to me, grabs my hand with a strength I didn't know she possessed, and pulls me out the front door. My coffee forgotten on the table. I allow her to drag me out the door but as we turn the corner and into an alleyway, my brain catches up with me. If she tries to gently let me down, I won't recover. So, I pull my hand back, directing my eyes towards my feet, unable to stand the pity in her gaze. Watching her leave was painful but having her come back to let me down is excruciating.

“Sawyer, I—” Before I can get another word out, Sawyer grabs my jaw, tilting my head so I'm looking her in the eyes, and crashes her lips into mine. I stand there in shock, frozen, my lips unmoving against hers. The whiplash of the morning has taken its toll, and I am shell-shocked.

Sawyer pulls back once she realizes I haven't kissed her back, looking horrified. The same emotions I just felt flutter across her face. Rejection. Disappointment. Embarrassment.

“Oh my god,” Sawyer says, looking alarmed, “I'm so sorry. I just thought—When you said—” She isn't able to get a complete sentence out. Which seems to be a common trait between the two of us. “Henry, I'm so, so, so—”

I cut her off, crushing my lips against hers. She responds instantly, leaning into me and wrapping her arms around my neck, her bag thumping on the ground. The kiss is soft and hesitant at first. I want more. I'm desperate for more. I'm a

man lost at sea and her lips are a sailor's song, calling me home. A sudden blast of confidence has me trailing my tongue over her lips, begging for an invitation. She opens for me almost instantly and I deepen the kiss. I nearly groan at the taste of her strawberry chapstick. The taste, sweet and sultry. I spin her around and back her into the wall of the alleyway, leaning my body into hers. Searching for more contact. She drags her nails through my hair, pulling at the ends on the back of my neck, eliciting a groan from my lips.

“Get a room!” someone yells, passing by. The comment breaks the moment and I pull away from Sawyer. We stand there, staring at each other. Sawyer touches her fingers to her lips, almost like she can't believe what just happened. Her skin is flushed, and her chest moves up and down in time with mine.

She laughs at the passerby, filling the silence. She looks up at me, vulnerability in her eyes. “I like you too, Henry. A lot.” Her hand grazes my jaw and I lean into the touch.

I grin at her declaration, giddiness building in my chest. She likes me.

God, that doesn't feel real. Sawyer is into *me*.

The last eight months of having to watch her date Declan and stand on the sidelines wash away with those simple words. The statement feels like a victory of some kind. Makes me feel like the luckiest son of a gun on the planet. Because Sawyer Jones is into me.

I kiss her again, unable to help myself. Now that I can, I plan on making up for the years I couldn't kiss her or touch her. I should warn her that she accepted a Henry-sized tumor into her life, but I'm too caught up in the feeling of her. I sigh, leaning my forehead against hers, knowing that I have to head to the airport.

“I have to go,” I say, peppering kisses on her lips between words, “for the game against L.A. But when I get back, you and I are going to continue this.”

I give her one more lingering kiss before I grab her bag from the ground and hand it to her, heading to the parking garage where I left my car. I peer back to where I left Sawyer. She's just standing there, hands on her lips, a grin taking over her face.

I continue towards my car, unable to shake the smile from my face.



CHAPTER 21

“Honey, just put your sweet lips on my lips, we should just
kiss like real people do”

Like Real People Do—Hozier

Sawyer

Nathalie bumps her hip against mine, jolting me back into existence. My daydream washes away, leaving me standing in the center of a gym, children running around me.

“Why are you grinning at your phone like that?” She asks. Her face lights up. “Oh. My. God. Are you seeing someone?! You have to tell me if you are. I need to live vicariously. Dating has been brutal. I’ve given up.”

It’s been two days since the incident in the alleyway. At least that’s how I’m referring to it since I still haven’t established if it was a good idea or insanely stupid. I’m leaning towards

good but a small part of me is afraid that it might have been idiotic. I'm still coming to terms with the decision I made to kiss him because it irrevocably changes our friendship. He confessed his feelings and I fled, like a bat out of hell. My instinct was to run. I'm not a fighter. I made it ten steps out of the coffee shop before I realized I made a massive mistake and I ran back, praying he hadn't left. I don't regret kissing him because the kiss with Henry was mind-boggling. World changing. Quite frankly, no kiss will ever compare. If he hadn't had a hold of me while he kissed the shit out of me, I would have ended up on the ground. In the middle of the alley.

To quote the greatest movie of all time, *The Princess Bride*, 'since the invention of the kiss, there have been five kisses that were rated the most passionate, the most pure, this one left them all behind'.

Truer words have never been spoken.

But...

A small part of me is afraid that it might ruin our friendship, that if we dive into this and something goes wrong, our friendship will change or end. Which will crush me. I try to banish the small doubt, but it lingers.

While I've been a whirlwind of emotions, feeling happy and sad and concerned and scared, Henry has been messaging me non-stop since he left for L.A. on Saturday. We've texted before, but never like this. Usually, it was only to ask each other something or share something exciting. Now it's about everything and nothing. Neither of us has mentioned the

massive elephant in the room, but the messages are not platonic either. They are flirty and fun, and not in any world did I imagine that this would be what Henry and I are doing. I'm not even sure what the hell we are doing. Another thing that concerns me.

One thing I am definitely not going to do, though, is voluntarily tell Nathalie about it, especially since it's so new and I have no answers and I don't want to answer any questions she will undoubtedly have.

"No!" I yell in response to her questioning, my phone nearly flying out of my hand. I'm not seeing Henry. But I'm also not sure that I'm not seeing him. It's confusing and I don't love the gray area. I look away, scanning the gym, watching all the kids run around. I pointedly do not look at her, but I can feel her eyes burning holes into the side of my skull.

Micah runs towards Nathalie and me, a goofy grin on his face. He screeches to a stop in front of us.

Saved by a seven-year-old. Thank you, universe.

"Where's Henry, Miss Sawyer?" He looks around as he asks, like I'm hiding Henry somewhere and if he looks hard enough, he'll be able to spot him. Henry shows up once, and now every couple of days Micah asks if he's here or when he's coming. It's honestly adorable.

"He has a game tonight, so he can't be here."

Micah's shoulders slump and a frown forms on his face. He's clearly disappointed by my response. I can't even blame the

kid either. I'm also disappointed that Henry is in L.A. and not here with me. I could barely stand Henry driving away, so the fact he's in an entirely different state is not a concept I am enjoying. I knew it was going to happen, but it still didn't prepare me for the disappointment. When he originally left Indiana, I missed him, but not in the same way I do now. Then, there were no feelings. Now, it feels like part of me has left with him. Almost like until he comes back, I am not quite whole. It's not a fun feeling to have, and I am still attempting to understand how to cope with it.

“Miss Sawyer?” Micah asks.

“Mhm?”

“Is Henry your boyfriend?”

I snap out of my daydreaming and stare down at Micah, wide-eyed. Jeez, this kid is either super perceptive or assumes all adults who are friends are dating. I'm hoping for the latter. Nathalie jerks her head towards me, suddenly interested in my response.

“Oh, um no. We're just friends,” I can feel the heat rushing to my cheeks and the blush beginning to form. I'm not a great liar. But it's also not technically a lie. He's not my boyfriend. He's just my best friend who I made out with in an alleyway. Totally normal relationship. Apparently, Nathalie noticed my reaction as well, since the smirk she's giving me is screaming 'I knew it.'

Micah ignores my response and does the one thing every child loves to do. Make things incredibly awkward.

“Henry and Miss Sawyer sittin’ in a tree,” Micah starts. “K-I-S-S-I-N-G.” He continues to sing the song while the blush on my face continues to deepen. From a soft pink to a deep strawberry red. He finishes his song and just skips away, without another word. If the kid wasn’t so adorable, I would give him a stern talking-to. Embarrassing people isn’t nice. Especially people with skin paler than Casper the Ghost. There’s no hiding my blush.

Nathalie’s bent over in laughter at the whole ordeal.

Traitor.

I’m glad one of us finds this amusing because I certainly don’t. I was just embarrassed by a seven-year-old. Worse, he wasn’t wrong. We were just K-I-S-S-I-N-G only it wasn’t in a tree; it was in a grimy alleyway.

“Do you want to explain why you turned red when Micah mentioned kissing and Henry in the same sentence?” Nathalie questions me. She looks at me knowingly, apparently waiting for the answer she already knows. Only a minute ago, she was asking me if I was seeing someone. Now she’s figured out something is going on with Henry. She’s too smart for my good.

I take a deep breath and regale the entire thing to Nathalie. From the subtle touches to Henry’s confession in the coffee shop and the alleyway make-out session. Throughout the entire story, she stares at me, enraptured, like what’s going on between Henry and I is a Christmas Hallmark movie. I finish

with the texts he sent me yesterday and wait for what I expect to be an explosive response. But it never comes.

“Oh, Maren is going to love this!” Nathalie exclaims. “She told me about her radar and her theory that you two liked each other.” She claps her hands together, excitedly. She turns back to watch the kids in the gym, rambling on about how cute we are together and how much she loves Henry. I’m genuinely surprised she didn’t have any questions like if we’re officially dating? Or if we’ve spoken about the kiss? Because the answers are ‘I have no idea’ and ‘Nope’.

Nathalie was pretty neutral to Henry before book club. They had met at Longboards, but with the group and the showdown happening between Maren and Jack, she said she hadn’t spoken to him much. After book club, however, I swear Nathalie was gunning to take my spot as Henry’s best friend. The following morning at work, Nathalie spent the better part of an hour telling me about how much she liked him. How cool he was and how great it was that he hung out with us put on a face mask and talked about faerie books. Before she gushed about him, I had never thought about how lucky I am to have Henry as a friend. It made me feel even more grateful that he’s in my life. I don’t know where recent events will take us, but I still wouldn’t trade Henry for anyone else.



Henry: I’ll be home today.

Can I come over?

My heart plummets out of my chest and onto the floor as I read the text message. So much has changed in the last two days, I don't think I've truly processed it. I hurl my phone from my hands onto the other side of my bed, so I don't type something stupid or dumb. This response requires finesse. I need to sound cool and casual. Not like I'm panicking. I am definitely panicking but what he doesn't know can't hurt him.

Me: Yes!

That sounds amazing!

I would love that!

Nailed it.

The moment I send the text, I launch myself into preparation mode. I hop into the shower and shave the entirety of my body. Just in case. From there I clean both the living room and my bedroom. Apparently, the apartment looking lived in isn't appropriate for Henry to see. I blame the nerves. My default is to stress clean so now Henry can see his reflection on the floor. It's so shiny. Once I'm showered, dressed, and attempting not to shit my pants with nervousness, Henry texts me again.

Henry: Left the airport.

On my way.

I had finally just calmed my nerves the tiniest bit when the text message popped onto my screen. Six simple words and I am a bundle of anxiety again. Not one time was I nervous when I hung out with Declan. Granted, we only saw each other a handful of times before he moved to Seattle, but not a single time did I feel like this. Full of excitement and anticipation but also nervous as hell. My heartbeat skyrockets at the thought of Henry. The few times Declan kissed me, I didn't feel much. It was nice but that's all it was. Nice. When Henry and I kissed, it was electric. It felt like the rush of a rollercoaster. I could have drowned in that kiss.

I scramble out of bed when I hear a knock on the door. I quickly look myself over in the full-length mirror in my bedroom. Confident in my appearance, I head towards the door. I swing the door open, locking eyes with Henry on the other side of the threshold.

He smiles at me, shy and nervous. "Hi."

"Hi," I respond, not moving from my spot in the doorway. I look him up and down, drinking him in. The toned legs, the arms full of muscle. The goofy grin. He chuckles, enjoying my clear perusal of his body.

"Sawyer, you have to move if you ever plan on letting me in from the hallway."

I look down at where I am and sure enough, I'm right in the middle of the door, blocking the entrance. I huff out a laugh and move to the side, allowing him to move past me into the entryway.

“How was the game?” I ask, immediately wincing the moment the words leave my mouth. In my attempt to fill the uncomfortable silence, I asked an awkward question. “Oh god, I’m sorry,” I say immediately, trying to backtrack.

“Sawyer, it’s okay. We lost the game, but we’re still in a good position for the playoffs, so it’ll be fine.” He laughs off my question, but I still feel slightly bad because I know he was probably beating himself up about it. And in true Sawyer fashion, I say something else dumb because I’m flustered and nervous.

“Micah asked me today if you were my boyfriend.” He is barely three feet into my apartment and two awkward things tumble from my lips.

Henry’s eyes jolt to mine, searching for something in my gaze. “He did?”

“Yeah, it was funny and embarrassing. He asked me then started singing the song about kissing in trees. I’m sure my face was so red that you could see it from outer space.”

He bellows out a laugh at Micah’s shenanigans and my embarrassment. Then, he sobers up, a seriousness in his gaze that I haven’t seen outside of a football game. “Am I?”

“Are you what?”

“Am I your boyfriend?”

Holy shit. I have no idea how to respond to this. I look him over, hoping that something in his body language gives the answer away. But there’s nothing. His face is blank. Like he’s

purposely hiding whatever he's feeling while he waits for a response.

Do I want Henry to be my boyfriend? I ponder the question for about half a second before the answer is in the forefront of my mind. Bright like a neon sign on the Vegas strip. Of course, I want him to be my boyfriend. If that kiss told me anything, it's that we have chemistry. Off the charts. And our friendship has been amazing. It would make the most sense if we dated. Plus, I want to date him. I want to touch him and hang out with him all the time. And kiss him. I most definitely want to kiss him. Many more times. All the kissing, please.

I'm not sure I want to give away just how much I want Henry to be my boyfriend, so I decide to deflect his question with one of my own.

“Do you want to be my boyfriend?”

Without a moment of hesitation, he responds. “Yes.” The blue in his eyes pops as he speaks with conviction.

One simple word, but it flips my world upside down.

Henry Parker wants to be my boyfriend.

“Okay,” I respond, incapable of forming any other response than the four-letter word.

“Okay?” He parrots back at me, both confused and hopeful.

“Yeah. I would like that. You as my boyfriend, I mean.” I look up and smile at him. The smile he gives me in response could light up the darkest of nights.

He sweeps me into a stifling hug and swings me around in circles. My giggles fill the air as he places me back on the ground. He separates us about an inch, almost as if any farther distance will prove to him that this is a dream. The way he looks at me makes my toes curl, full of desire and then pulls me into a crushing kiss. I immediately melt into him, holding onto his forearms for dear life while he kisses me like there's no tomorrow. Leaning into the kiss, I match his passion. After a moment, he attempts to pull away. He then thinks better of it and peppers me with kisses all along my neck and collarbone. After a few more pecks to my lips, he regains some self-control and pulls away fully. It's a good thing one of us has any semblance of discipline because if I had the choice, I would choose to do that until the end of time.

“Sawyer, we still need to talk about some things.”

I groan because that sounds messy and complicated and all I want to do is kiss Henry and bask in the fact that he wanted to be my boyfriend and now he is.

Sawyer: 1. Rest of the world: 0.

Begrudgingly, I nod, and he leads me to the couch. He sits down first and pulls me into his lap. I've never sat in Henry's lap before, but it's my new favorite place. A throne meant just for me. He's soft, yet firm and so warm. I snuggle deeper into him, hoping the heat will transfer from me to him. The moment I'm comfortable, his hands are on me again, rubbing my back. This new touchy side of Henry is something that I

could get used to. If all it took was kissing him twice to receive this treatment, I would have kissed him earlier.

“I don’t know how to start this conversation, so I’m just going to spit it out.” His hand on my back pauses and he wraps me up, his arms cradling my stomach. Mumbling into my hair, he continues. “I’ve had feelings for you for a long time, Sawyer. Since we were at Notre Dame. I had planned to tell you the night I was drafted, but then Declan asked you out, so I didn’t say anything. I saw how excited you were, and I didn’t want to make anything messy or uncomfortable, so I chose to say nothing. It felt easier. But I’m telling you now, so you know exactly how I feel about you. I’m all in Sawyer. You and me. I don’t expect you to be where I’m at, but I want you to know.”

He places a gentle kiss on my forehead and then pulls back, eyes searching my face for my reaction to his confession. I just stare back at him in awe. Warmth begins to bloom in my chest, stretching to my limbs. For years, Henry has had feelings for me. And the moment he was ready to tell me, he chose not to because he saw I was happy. It doesn’t matter that the relationship was a bad idea, but he stood by me and watched me date Declan because it brought me joy. Even when it probably tore his insides apart. I have never felt more appreciated or wanted by anyone as much as I feel wanted by Henry. The worries I had that this could be fleeting for him disappear with his confession. I don’t think I’ve wanted anyone as deeply as I want Henry in return. It’s a need. An insatiable itch.

I grab his head in my hands and kiss him. Pouring every emotion coursing through my veins into the kiss. Hoping he understands how much I want and adore him. He returns the kiss with equal fervor. Without breaking the kiss, I shift my position in his lap to face him and straddle his hips. Wrapping my arms around his shoulders, I deepen the kiss. I feel his tongue sweep across my bottom lip, and I open for him. Losing myself to the kiss and Henry, I slowly begin to grind against him, looking for friction. My body is overwhelmed with emotions and feelings and touches. I am a fire ignited by lust. At my movement, Henry groans. I muffle the sound with another kiss, continuing to rock into him.

“Sawyer,” he says, straining to keep his composure.

“Please,” I plead, continuing the movements. The plea snaps something inside him because Henry returns my kiss with a new sense of urgency. His hands run down my arms, across my torso, ending on my ass. He pulls me closer to him, nearly chest to chest. As I continue to grind into him, I gasp as I feel him lengthening beneath me. He swallows my gasp with another kiss. He makes his way down my neck, planting soft kisses on my skin as he makes his way toward my collarbones.

“You have no idea how badly I want you,” he says as he continues his way down my chest. He pauses at my tank top, looking up at me, his eyes hooded with desire. “How badly I’ve wanted you for years. You’ve consumed my every thought from the moment I met you.”

“Henry...”

I have no words, the declaration ripping them from my throat. He stares at me, the truth of his statement swimming in his gorgeous blue eyes.

“Can I take this off?”

I nod, lifting my arms as he slowly drags my tank top up and over my arms. He flings it to the other side of the couch. Not wearing a bra, I’m bare from the waist up. Instinctually, I go to cover my breasts with my arms, but he gently pulls them away, drinking me in.

“God you’re fucking beautiful,” he whispers, “What did I do to get so lucky?”

He slowly lifts his hand, cupping my left breast. His thumb grazes over my nipple and I moan tumbles from my lips. I arch into him as he rolls my nipple between his fingers. The contact is breath-taking, and he leans his face down, taking my right breast into his mouth. The stubble on his cheek rubs against my skin, the sensation combined with his tongue causing my knees to buckle. I start to grind into him again, seeking out friction. He playfully nips at my right breast before pulling away and refocusing his attention on the left. He alternates between soft laps and quick nips. The pressure in my core builds as I continue to move my hips against him.

I bracket his head between my hands and drag his lips back to mine. As I kiss him, my hands run along the expanse of his stomach. They explore the plains of skin, his skin soft as he slowly moves in time with me. Grabbing the bottom of his shirt, I break from the kiss and lift the shirt over his head. I

lean back, taking a moment to drink him in. He's so beautiful it hurts. I run my hands along his torso, tracing the curves of his muscles. As I admire him, Henry begins kissing my neck, sending shivers down my spine.

His hands grip my ass and yank me closer to him, molding our bodies together. I can feel his erection pressed against me, which pulls me back to reality.

"Henry, hold on," I say, pulling back, covering myself with my arms.

Henry snaps back, looking me up and down, worry etched into his features. "Is everything okay? Is something wrong?"

"No!" I shriek, afraid he thinks that my hesitation has anything to do with what he was doing. Things I was very much enjoying. I just need to move slowly and it's unfair to him if he doesn't know everything before we move forward. "Henry, I haven't done any of this before."

"What do you mean?" he asks, confused. All the blood has rushed away from his brain and towards other body parts because I feel like that statement is pretty clear. But I clarify it for him anyway.

"I'm a virgin. I haven't done any of this. I need to move slowly." I slightly cringe at the statement. I've never been embarrassed by the fact before, but sitting here on Henry's lap, half-naked, is exposing and vulnerable.

He looks at me, understanding flickering across his gaze. I expected shock or for it to be an instant turn-off, but he just

nods. He pulls me in for a kiss again. This time it's gentle and full of affection. I sink into the kiss, but he leans back, breaking the kiss.

“We can go at whatever pace you need, Sawyer. We won't do anything you're not comfortable with.”

I release a breath I didn't realize I was holding in, instantly feeling more comfortable. I sink into his warmth, pulling my arms away to wrap them around his chest. I lay my head on his shoulder.

“You don't have to answer,” he starts while he mindlessly rubs his hands up and down my spine, “but what have you done? I'm not judging you; I just want to know so that we're on the same page.”

I shouldn't be surprised with how communicative and supportive Henry is with this, but I am. While he waits for my response, he presses a kiss on my forehead.

“Honestly, not much. I've made out with people before but nothing more.” He basically growls at the concept I've kissed anyone else, the sound immediately shooting to my core.

“Tonight is about you, then. Tell me if you're uncomfortable or need to stop. There's no pressure to do anything you don't want to.”

I nod, then he grabs the bottom of my thighs, lifting me into the air. I wrap my legs around him as he walks us towards my bedroom. He grips my ass in his hands, pressing me against him. I was so caught up in Henry, I hadn't even realized we

were both half-naked in the living room and Maren could come home at any moment. He walks into my room, shutting the door with his foot, then makes his way toward the bed. Gently, he places me down onto the bed, and leans over me, caging me in between his arms.

Henry kisses me again. Deeply. He shifts his knee between my thighs as he peels his lips away from mine. Agonizingly slow, he makes his way back to my breasts, nipping and sucking, causing me to gasp and arch off the bed. His hands travel lower towards the band of my sweatpants. Henry looks up at me, eyes filled with lust, his pupils large and jet black.

“Can I take these off of you?”

I nod and he grabs the band and slowly drags the sweatpants down my legs, leaving only my underwear. Thank God I had the sense to put on my nicer underwear and not a stained pair. Way to go, Sawyer. He places the sweatpants on the floor and focuses back on me.

“Absolutely stunning,” he says, his heated gaze all over my body. The compliment heats my cheeks. “Tell me if we’re moving too fast.”

Henry pulls at the waistband of my underwear, and I lift my hips as he slides them down my legs. He leans back onto his knees, slowly peeling my legs apart, baring everything to him. His hand travels down my stomach, towards the apex between my legs. As his fingers move across my skin, goosebumps break out along my skin.

His hand cups me and he grazes a finger through the lips of my heat. He releases a low growl as he feels the wetness between my legs.

“Fuck, you’re already so wet for me,” Henry’s gaze turns feral as he drags his finger up and down my slit.

Oh my god.

The dirty talk version of Henry is *hot*. With a capital H. I moan as he grazes over the bundle of nerves then begins to move two fingers in a circle, applying pressure right where I need it.

A whimper leaves my lips and I arch off the bed.

“God, Sawyer,” he says voice deep and full of need. My mind jumps back to my dream, but this is a million times better. And real.

So, so real.

“More,” I say, barely audible. He stops circling my clit and I whimper in protest. He chuckles, running a finger through my slit downwards. Slowly, he presses his middle finger into me. I gasp at the intrusion, my stomach muscles tightening as he begins to move in and out of me, bending his finger forward causing lightning bolts to shoot straight to my lower stomach.

His thumb begins to rub my clit while he leans down, taking my right breast into his mouth. Everything feels like sensory overload. Nothing has felt so good, but I need more. I can feel the pressure slowly rising as I begin to move against him, matching his pace. He adds another finger, continuing to circle

my clit with his thumb. Henry sucks on my breast, hard, then releases it with a pop, the sound erotic.

I can feel the pressure on my lower stomach growing stronger, more intense. I'm so close. I begin riding his fingers, searching for release.

"Holy shit," he mutters as I continue to move, lost in the sensations. I peer down at him, eyes heavy, the sight of him is unholy. His pupils are blown as he watches me, his bare chest rising and falling rapidly. "That's it, baby."

He thrusts his fingers in and out, faster. He curls his fingers inward, hitting the perfect spot inside me, sending tingles down my spine. His thumb grazes over my clit one more time and I explode.

"Henry," I moan, arching off the bed as I have the strongest orgasm I've ever experienced. My body orbits outer space as he drags my orgasm out, continuing to pump his fingers in and out. A few moments later, my body returns to earth and my brain begins to function again.

I peel my eyelids apart and peek at Henry. He pulls me up and kisses me, the strokes of his tongue unhurried and languid. I've never been this vulnerable or intimate with someone, so I'm unsure of what to do now. I slowly sit up, my limbs feeling like jelly. He rises off the edge of the bed as I scoot under the covers. When he moves, I notice the bulging erection in his pants.

"Um... I can do something for you. Reciprocation and all that jazz," I say awkwardly, throwing up jazz hands for good

measure. I am not sure I have ever been more awkward or embarrassed in my life than I am at this moment.

Jazz hands? Really, Sawyer?

Henry only chuckles at the blush blooming across my cheeks, walking out of the bedroom into the kitchen. He comes back moments later, with a glass of water. Handing it to me, I take a sip. While I drink the water, he strips out of his joggers and makes his way towards the bed. I've seen Henry in a swimsuit before, which showed nearly as much skin, but right now just looking at him sets my skin on fire. He lifts the covers on the other side of the bed and gets comfortable under the covers.

The room suddenly feels too small. I have no idea what I'm supposed to do now. Do I touch him? Are we going to do more? I place the glass on the nightstand and pull the covers over my shoulders, covering my naked body. I'm hyper-aware of the situation. I just fooled around with Henry and now I'm naked in bed. With him. And he's nearly naked himself.

A tap on my temple breaks my train of thought. "What's going on in that beautiful head of yours?" Henry asks, scooting closer to me. A second later, he's swinging his arm over my stomach and dragging me towards him. I let him pull me closer and lay my head on his chest. I can feel his heart beating and his chest rising and falling. Even though we've never been in this position before, it feels comfortable. Safe.

A million things are going through my head, but I give him the one at the forefront of my mind.

“I don’t know what to do now. And not knowing is making me slightly uncomfortable,” I say, bearing my truth to him.

His hand begins playing with my hair, twisting gently on the locks.

“We’re going to cuddle then go to sleep. You have work in the morning, and I have practice.”

“But... you didn’t finish,” I say, cringing. This is the weirdest conversation I have ever had, and I haven’t quite gotten comfortable with all the sex talk. Not confident I will.

“Tonight wasn’t about me, Sawyer. It was about you and making you feel good. And being able to do that is what’s important to me.” He kisses my forehead, twisting my hair between his fingers. “We have all the time in the world. I’m in no rush.”

“Okay,” I respond, snuggling into him. My breasts are pressed against his side as he burrows deeper under the covers. I lay there, my arm across his chest. Eventually, I hear his breathing even out, signaling he fell asleep. In his arms, I lay in bed, just watching him, afraid all of this is a dream. I’m not sure what’s going to happen or what life will look like moving forward, but I could get used to this. Henry and I in bed together.

Eventually, I feel my eyelids go heavy and I drift into sleep still snuggled up into Henry’s side.



“Go on a date with me,” Henry says as I shuffle through the clothes in my closet. My hands pause and I turn to look at Henry, who’s leaning against the doorframe, smirking at me. His lean frame blocks the doorway, wearing nothing but his boxers. He can tell he flustered me, and he’s enjoying every moment.

Asshole.

“Huh,” I ask, unsure I heard him correctly.

“A date. You. Me. Together. It’s this thing people do. There’s food and an activity.” He says, trying not to laugh as he watches me work through what he’s saying. “Maybe I’ll even let you get a good night kiss.”

“I know what a date is!” I yell, causing him to lose his battle, breaking out in laughter. I’m so indignant that he suggested I didn’t know what a date was that I almost miss the second half of his statement.

“I *might* get a goodnight kiss?” I ask incredulously. He nods his head up and down, the smirk still on his face. The audacity of this man is truly astonishing. “Alright then. You might get to sleep over again. Maybe.”

I swing around and focus back on choosing my outfit. It only takes about ten seconds before Henry rethinks his entire approach.

“I was just kidding!” He yells as he wraps me up in his arms, shaking me. “You know I’ll put out on the first date. You’ll totally get a kiss.”

He makes a very exaggerated puckered face, leaning in to kiss me. I laugh, playfully shoving his head away from me. He puts me back down on the ground, grasping his chest, pretending he's injured.

“The pain...it's too...much,” He says, as he begins to dramatically fall to the ground, “only...kiss...save,” he sputters out before he throws his arm over his eyes, pretending to be dead.

Honestly, this man is incredibly dramatic. But looking down at him sprawled on my closet floor pretending to need a kiss to survive, I feel nothing but warmth for the big fool. I might as well indulge in his crazy.

I drop down to my knees, pretending to wail. “No!” I yell, grabbing his face in my hands. I can feel his chest rumbling as he works his hardest to stay ‘dead’ and not laugh. “Don't leave me!”

I plant a kiss on his lips, then throw myself over his chest, pretending to sob. It's very Romeo and Juliet. Shakespeare would be proud of our performance. His eyes shoot open, and he leans up onto his elbows. “I'm alive!”

The closet is silent for a moment before the two of us keel over in laughter, all tangled limbs on the closet floor. He plants a real kiss on my lips before he gets up from the floor. He reaches out his hand, helping me up.

“So, is that a yes?”

The playfulness is still there but I can sense a hit of something else in his voice. Is Henry... nervous? The idea that Henry is nervous to ask me on a date after what happened last night is charming. You would think the roles would be reversed considering everything. All it does is make me like him more.

“Yes. Now get out of here.” I say, shooing him away so that I can get ready for work. He steals one more kiss before he runs out of my bedroom door, yelling as he walks away.

“Bye, baby.”

I could get used to that.



CHAPTER 22

“You’ll be playing in my head cause you’re a summer hit, I’m singing it”

Slugs—Slow Pulp

Henry

Leaving Sawyer this morning was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done, and I once had to do a summer of strength and conditioning with my father in the blazing Florida heat. Last night was more than I could have imagined. I didn’t want to leave, but I hadn’t expected to stay over, so I had to head to my apartment before practice to change and grab my workout gear. Sawyer and I have never spoken much about our love lives, mostly because I didn’t want to know, but I hadn’t expected her to be a virgin. Frankly, it was surprising. Sawyer is drop-dead gorgeous, and any man would be lucky to even

be in her presence. I did my best at the moment to school my features, but the small little caveman inside of me was jumping with joy.

Outside of anything sexual, nothing felt better than her falling asleep in my arms. It felt like a homecoming. I would give up a large chunk of my salary to be able to wake up to her every morning. I spent a good thirty seconds just staring at her while she slept this morning. That sounds creepy. But she just looked so ethereal, I couldn't look away. Her blonde hair was splayed across the pillow, messy and curly. She looked so peaceful.

Then this morning, with all the playfulness while we got ready. It felt so easy and normal. I usually dread getting ready for the day but doing it beside Sawyer makes it bearable. Most mornings, I hit snooze at least two times, but this morning a new sense of energy was coursing through my veins. Not to mention that she agreed to go on a date with me. Don't get me wrong, I'm thrilled she agreed to be my girlfriend. My heart nearly jumped out of my chest when she said yes, and it took every ounce of willpower not to propose to her right then and there. But the friendship we already had allowed for that to happen. We didn't get to do the whole dating thing, and Sawyer deserves to get taken out. Doted on.

I'm starting to understand what the older guys on the team mean when they say it's hard to leave home. Leaving Sawyer in bed just to go to practice was hard, and I can't even imagine having to leave for an away game.

I pull my car into the players' parking lot at the practice field, grab my bag from the backseat, and head inside towards the locker room. As I walk through the facility, I can feel the shit-eating grin form on my face. I do my best to sober my features, but I'm so damn happy that nothing can kill how I'm feeling. However, the feelings etched onto my features will be a dead giveaway to Jack and Deon that something happened, and I do not want to tell them anything about Sawyer and me. Especially in the locker room.

As I walk through the locker room, I keep my head down to avoid any eyes. I'm only a foot away from the cubby, and I can feel the relief start to rise in my body when I feel a large hand grab my shoulder.

So. Close.

I turn around slowly, preparing myself.

"Hi, Jack," I say, attempting to be cool and casual. I'm not sure I nailed it, but we're going with it.

"Hello, Henry," Jack responds, a twinkle in his eye and a too-wide grin on his face. He knows something is up. It's like he can sniff out when I'm having strong emotions, good or bad. Frankly, it's terrifying. "How are you doing on this fine Wednesday morning?"

"I'm good. How are you, Jack?"

"Oh, just great. I slept so well last night; how did you sleep?"

Oh shit. *Oh shit.* He's not even attempting to be subtle. How on earth does he know that I spent the night at Sawyer's? The only people who know are Sawyer and me. I didn't tell anyone I was going over to her place, and I know that she didn't tell Jack.

That leaves only one person who could have told him. Which doesn't make any sense because she does not like him. At all. There's zero chance she talked to him unnecessarily.

"How?" I ask. He knows exactly what I'm talking about.

"A little birdie told me," Jack responds, the grin on his face getting so large I want to punch it right off him. I shoot him a look that is serious enough because he spills about who his secret informant is. "Maren sent me a photo of your shoes in their hallway this morning when she left for work."

What a traitor.

"She doesn't even like you. Why would she send you that photo?" I'm genuinely shocked she sent it to him, especially after the whole bar thing a few weeks ago. I cannot read Maren, and it's unsettling. "How does she even have your number?"

"I gave it to her at the bar so we could talk about documentaries. I never expected her to use it, but she likes me, she just doesn't know it yet," Jack responds, confidently. I am even more confident that she doesn't, but I'm not going to tell him that when I need him to give me information. "Plus, she loves to be right and to mess with her, I told her she was really off-base about you two being into each other."

There it is.

No chance Maren did it for any other reason except to prove to Jack she was right, especially after documentary-gate.

“Well, there’s nothing to say and it’s none of your business.”

I turn around and start getting dressed to head to the weight room, effectively ending the conversation. I busy myself, tying my gym shoes and reorganizing my locker when I have nothing else to do. The moment I can, I bolt from the locker room into the weight room and get right to work. I don’t need Jack trying to gossip about it while Declan and the rest of the team are around.

An hour later, we’re on the practice field, running through plays for the upcoming game. Since we had a game on Monday, it’s not a tough practice, just working on plays that will work against the other team’s defense. The offensive coordinator calls a play, and we all line up on the line of scrimmage. The ball is hiked by the center, and I take off, running the route the coach called. Deon launches the ball toward me, and the moment it hits my hands, it lands weirdly and I drop it. I immediately curse under my breath, annoyed that I dropped the ball.

I look back at Deon and signal that it was my bad, not his throw. I chalk it up to hitting my hand odd and make my way back towards the line of scrimmage. I can feel eyes on me, but I ignore them. They act like they’ve never dropped a pass before. I do my best to shake it off when the coach yells for us to run it again.

We run the play again and the same thing happens, I go to secure the ball and I drop it. We run in a third time. The same thing happens. At this point, I'm super frustrated and can't figure out what is going on. The offensive coach gives up on that play and calls one that's meant for the running back. I run my route, which is meant as a decoy, the entire time trying to figure out why I can't catch the ball properly.

I line up again, when Declan runs by me, pausing for a moment.

"Don't let it shake you." He says, knocking my arm as he continues past me to line up for the play. First the compliment at the game, now this. I'm not sure what's going on with Declan or the recent change in behavior towards me, but I'm not in the headspace to do a deep dive on that.

I don't drop passes often. It was one of the things that allowed me to be drafted as high as I was. We run a few different plays, then the coaches call the practice.

Finally.

I drag myself off the field towards the locker room when a booming yell stops me in my tracks.

"Parker, my office."

I drop my head, knowing exactly where this is going. Instead of heading left from the practice field, I take a right heading towards Coach Barrett's office. I drag my feet down the hallway towards his door, take a deep breath, and knock.

“Come in,” Coach Barrett responds on the other side of the door.

I walk into his office and take a seat on the other side of his desk. The space is covered with accolades and achievements and the massive oak desk is a massive barrier between him and I. I know exactly what he wants to talk to me about. All the passes I dropped in practice. I’m sure he wants an explanation. I would love to give him one, except I have no idea why it happened. In the past, I’ve dropped passes from anxiety or if my dad got into my head, but none of that’s happened. I’m the happiest I’ve been in a while.

“What’s up, Coach?”

“Cut the shit. You and I both know why I called you in here. What happened out there today? Three dropped passes in a row? That isn’t like you, Henry.”

I sigh because he’s right. “I know. I’m not sure what happened. But it won’t happen again.”

He looks at me, almost like he’s trying to see into my mind. “It better not. I don’t want to have to, Henry, but if it keeps happening, I’m going to have to play someone else. We can’t afford dropped passes in a game, especially so close to the playoffs.”

My stomach immediately drops, and I feel sick. He can’t bench me, especially not this close to the playoffs. I’ll just have to focus harder. Today was a blip. It won’t happen again. I keep telling myself that to prevent the anxiety from rising.

“I understand. It won’t happen again.”

Coach Barrett nods, accepting my answer. “I don’t expect perfection, Henry. I know that we’re all human, but I will not tolerate consistent mistakes.”

With that, he dismisses me, and I head back to the locker room. In a span of a few hours, I went from on top of the world to feeling like utter shit. I’ve never done well with tough love when it comes to coaching. My dad tried it when I was young and all it did was force me to get caught up in my head. I could never shake the feeling of dread that I was going to mess up. And because I hyper-fixated on trying not to mess up, I became more likely to do it. It was a vicious cycle. It took me a long time to realize that was just the way some people coached. At Notre Dame, the wide receivers coach took a different approach. One of constructive criticism with a healthy dose of compliments. He would correct us if we made a mistake, but he would also acknowledge our accomplishments. It worked for me. I can take criticism and coaching, but with my anxiety, tough love tends to put negative thoughts into my head. Which is exactly what’s happening in my brain currently, thanks to Coach Barrett’s lovely speech.

I change out of my sweaty workout gear and head into the shower. I stand in the water for what seems like a lifetime, and after drying off, I change into joggers and a Mavericks t-shirt. Not saying a word to any of the guys left in the locker room, I grab my bag and head towards my car. The last thing I want to

do is to talk to anyone, especially after that conversation with Coach Barrett.

Apparently, my father has different plans. I sit down in the driver's seat of my car when he calls me. I debate not answering, but if I don't, he'll just keep on calling. Which I don't want. Resigned to my fate, I answer the call.

"Hi, Dad," I say, as monotone as possible.

"Hello, Henry. How are you?"

He usually jumps straight into telling me what he wants or critiquing me, so the pleasantries catch me off guard.

"Good, just got out of practice. How are you and mom?" I respond skeptically.

"Your mother and I are fine. She's excited to see you during the playoffs. Says she hasn't talked to you in a while."

I immediately feel bad because he isn't wrong. I've been meaning to call her, but I get busy and forget. Which isn't fair to her. I make a mental note to call her.

"I know. I'll call her soon. Promise."

Part of me hopes that was the reason that he called, but there's no chance I'm that lucky.

"Speaking of the playoffs, are you ready? These are important games, especially for a rookie. Can make or break your future career. A good playoff run can set you up for a great career like mine."

Very subtle.

I couldn't tell you if it was the bad practice, the talk with Coach Barrett or just having to speak to my dad on the phone, but the change of conversation sparks anger inside of me.

"It's funny", I say. "You only seem to call or text me about football. Never about my life."

Indignation swells inside of me. Is football the only thing he cares about when it comes to my life? I'm his only kid. You would think he would want to know what I'm doing. If I'm dating anyone. Who my friends are. Anything outside of football.

"I'm just looking out for you, Henry. I want what's best for you. Which is a long, successful career."

I'm shocked at how disappointed I feel by that response. I was hoping he would see where I was coming from, but apparently, I was wrong.

"That's great. But I do have a life outside of football."

"I didn't say that you don't. But the important part of your life is your career."

I have nothing else to say in this conversation since it's clearly not going anywhere. "Right. Well, I gotta go, Dad. Talk to you later."

Without waiting for him to respond, I hang up the phone. I drop my phone into my lap and lean my head against the steering wheel of the car. After taking a few deep breaths, I turn the car on and drive on autopilot all the way back to my apartment.

I thought my morning couldn't get worse, but my dad proving he doesn't care about me outside of football only made it more frustrating.



I grab my phone from the center console of my car and press answer. The call connects to the Bluetooth feature on the car and Sawyer's voice fills the speakers.

"Just tell me where we're going," Sawyer whines, "so I know what to wear."

I chuckle at the whining. She's been texting me non-stop all day to figure out what I have planned for tonight. I've kept my lips shut, no matter how much she tries to bribe me. I almost cracked when she threatened to stop making chocolate chip cookies, but I held steadfast. She tried to exploit my greatest weakness.

"Just wear something casual," I respond, giving her nothing.

I can hear her groan on the other side of the phone, and the sound goes straight to my dick. I need to get off the phone before I end up with a boner and have to sit in my car for ten minutes before I walk into her apartment building. I've seen too many people the times I've been here to risk running around with a hard-on.

"Be there in ten," I say, hanging up the phone before she can protest.

A few minutes later, I pull into the parking garage of Sawyer's apartment. I grab the bouquet of flowers from the passenger seat and head up towards her apartment. When I was planning the date, it didn't seem complete without giving her flowers. Does it seem corny? Yes. But my girl deserves all the corny shit, flowers included. It's why I spent the better part of an hour after practice today harassing a florist to create the perfect bouquet. I have no idea what the names of any of the flowers are, but the mixture of purples and yellows and pink reminds me of Sawyer.

I knock on the door, suddenly nervous. I shove my empty hand in my pocket to prevent fidgeting or running my fingers through my hair. I spent too much time making my hair look perfect to ruin it. Before I can get too antsy, Sawyer swings the door open.

"Hi," I say, shoving the bouquet towards her. "These are for you."

She looks me up and down, slowly. Her gaze travels from my feet to the bouquet, then to my face. I feel my ears start to heat up from the attention. I never want to get comfortable with Sawyer checking me out. The feeling I get from her perusal is all-consuming.

"They're beautiful," she says bashfully, taking the flowers.

Sawyer turns around, heading towards the kitchen. I follow close behind.

"Just let me put these in some water, then we can go to wherever you've decided but won't tell me about."

Well...she isn't subtle. But she is adorable. Apparently, she's not done dropping hints about how she's annoyed she doesn't know where we're going.

"How is my outfit? Appropriate for the *secret* place?" she asks while trying to pull a vase down from the top shelf.

I move behind her, grabbing the vase from the top shelf.

"Thanks," she mumbles, "Maren forgets that some people in this apartment aren't six feet tall."

I chuckle and watch as she shuffles around the kitchen, filling the vase with water and placing the flowers in it. I could watch her do any mundane task and be completely enamored by her. She looks gorgeous tonight. Then again, she looks gorgeous every day. Her hair is straight for a change, and I have to shove my hands in my pockets to prevent myself from running my fingers through it.

Sawyer places the flower at the center of the island then grabs her bag from the stool.

"Ready to go?" she asks, walking past me towards the door.

I snatch her hand as she walks by, pulling her back towards me. She makes a sound of protest as I drag her towards me.

"Henry, what are you—"

"You look beautiful tonight," I say, cutting off any protest.

"Oh."

Her lips form an 'O' in surprise, and I steal a kiss before I back away. Still stunned, I grab her hand, dragging her out the

front door.

“Tonight’s going to be so much fun,” I say, a grin consuming my face.



“This place looks sketchy,” Sawyer says hesitantly from the passenger seat. “Are you sure you know where we are?”

I laugh at the concern in her voice.

“This is the place.” I hop out of the car, heading towards the passenger side door. I open the door for Sawyer, who’s still looking at the building like it’s a murder scene. I grab her hand to help her out of the car, but she stays glued to the seat. “Sawyer, I promise it’s nothing creepy.”

“Alright,” she says, grabbing my hand as she gets out of the car. She doesn’t seem entirely convinced, but she’s trusting me. The knowledge that she’s putting her faith in me warms me inside.

Hands interlocked, I lead her towards the gray metal door, a massive bouncer standing beside it. He nods at us as we walk through the doors and down the stairs towards the basement area.

“If this is how I’m murdered, I’m going to haunt you from the afterlife,” she says, even as she lets me drag her down the hallway.

I don't argue the fact that if she was murdered then I would be too, and she wouldn't be able to haunt me. Doesn't seem like she would enjoy me pointing that plot hole out. Especially when I am leading her down a creepy hallway towards another non-descript metal door.

Pushing the door, the view of bright lights and the sound of music assaults my senses.

"An arcade?" Sawyer asks, incredulously, as she scans the open space full of different arcade games.

"An adult-only arcade," I correct her. No way would I take her to an arcade full of screaming children on our first date. I like kids as much as the next guy, but I would prefer not to sucker punch a kid because he can beat me in Mario Kart.

"What's the difference?"

"That," I say, gesturing towards the bar that spans the back wall.

The whole reason I chose this place is because of the bar. They advertise these movie-themed cocktails, and once I saw one, I knew Sawyer would lose her shit. I pull her towards the bar and hand her a menu.

"The cocktails are movie-themed," I tell her as she reads over the menu. Having read the menu online, I watch and wait as she makes her way down the list of drinks. They have a drink for *Jurassic Park* and *Star Wars* and nearly every Disney movie ever made. Her energy shifts and I can immediately tell she reached the drink I knew she would love.

Sawyer's eyes go wide and her head swings from the menu, to me, then back to the menu. After staring down at the list of ingredients below the cocktail name for a moment longer, she finally turns back to me.

"It's a—They have a *Princess Bride* drink." She says with a wide smile on her face and a girlish look in her eyes.

"I know, that's why I chose the place."

She flings herself towards me, arms wrapping around my waist as she squeezes me tight. I laugh as I wrap her up. She pulls away, nearly bouncing with energy.

"Let's get drinks, then play some games."



"Die. Die. Die!" Sawyer yells at the screen, while she aims the plastic rifle at the aliens attempting to attack us. She cocks and reloads the plastic gun with more energy than I ever expected. I know that she's competitive, but I hadn't expected this sort of dedication to a game where the entire goal is to shoot blue aliens.

I can't say I've ever seen Sawyer act so violently. Especially not towards a game. She can't even kill a fly. Instead of swatting it like most people, Sawyer will leave the window cracked to let it out, which only lets in more flies. I don't have the heart to tell her it's a vicious cycle.

The worst part about watching her shoot at aliens and scream at the screen is that it's turning me on. I never thought that I

would want to jump Sawyer while she battles against giant blue aliens, but here I am. I'm blaming the feeling on the three 'As You Wish' cocktails I've had with Sawyer. I also blame it on the way her ass looks in those jeans.

"Shit," she yells. I stopped shooting about a minute ago since I was too busy staring at her, but I watch as the aliens overtake her character and the screen fills with the words 'game over.' "I was so close to beating that level."

"You did good," I say, placing a kiss on top of her head as I peel the plastic gun out of her hand and place it back into the holder. "Why don't we play something with a little less... death."

"Drinks first," she says, pulling me back towards the bar. She's addicted to Princess Bride cocktails, chugging them like they're juice.

With new drinks in hand, we head towards the arcade games at the back of the room. I scan the space, looking for something that doesn't require dancing or killing. I spot a game in the corner that I know both of us would enjoy.

I tow her towards the game and we both sit in the seats, side by side.

She peers over at me, a hint of mischief in her eyes. "Oh, you're going down."

"I've seen you drive, I'm sure I'll be fine," I tease.

Before I can even jerk away, her fist connects with my upper arm. "Ouch," I rub my bicep.

“You’re. Going. Down.”

“Less trash talk, choose your character.” I scroll through the character options, choosing the obvious choice.

“Yoshi? Really. This won’t even be a competition.” She rolls her eyes at me, selecting exactly who I knew she would.

“As if Toad is any better.”

Her eyes swing from the screen where she’s choosing her car to me. “Take back the Toad slander!” she yells, hands waving in the air for emphasis.

I laugh at her outburst. It’s too easy to rile her up, especially when it’s about Mario Kart. She looks too cute when she’s passionate, even if it’s in argument to something I said. I pointedly do not take back the slander and choose a course from the list.

We wait for the countdown, then we’re off, battling for power-ups to beat each other. I have no idea how she continues to get the green turtle shells, but I’m one more shell away from losing my cool. Worse, every time I get hit, Sawyer laughs maniacally. The fact I’m not doing well is bringing her true joy.

That’s my girl.

The dude in the cloud floats onto the screen with the sign for the final lap. I look to the corner of her screen, then to mine. With her in first place and me in third, I have two options: let her win and just ride it out, or let her win but make her work for it. I chose the latter.

I drive through a power-up and then get a spiny, blue shell. I launch it at her but lean off the acceleration so that even if she gets hit, she can recover. I watch as it travels forward on the screen directly towards her.

“Goddamnit, Henry!” she yells beside me as her car goes spinning towards the side of the racetrack. I can’t make it look like I’m letting her win, so I start to creep up on her, even though I have no intention of passing her.

She rights herself faster than I expected and shoots towards the finish line. A moment later, she flies over the checkered line, launching herself out of her chair, jumping up and down.

“Eat dust!”

She spins around, doing a victory shimmy before flopping back into her seat. Meanwhile, I bite my lip to prevent the laughter from spilling out. Sawyer flings her hand out to shake mine. I take it, then pull her towards me, stealing a kiss.

“Consolation prize,” I say, basking in the feel of her smile against my lips.

“No trying to distract me with kisses in hopes you’ll win,” she says, but I can see the blush forming on her cheeks, even under the neon lights from the game.

“Round two?” I ask, putting more coins into the machine.

“If you’re okay with losing...again.” She shrugs, trying to goad me. I sit on the fact that I let her win but enjoy her teasing, nonetheless.

“I don’t lose twice.”



“I don’t lose twice,” Sawyer mocks from the passenger seat of my car. She’s been giving me shit since we left the arcade bar about my win-loss record. Which is 0-4 in case anyone was curious.

I’ll give her one of those losses. She beat me. I managed to slip on nearly every banana and found myself in eleventh place, behind the computer-generated players. Which did sting. I threw the other three games though, just to see the smile on her face. I’ll lose in every game of Mario Kart for the rest of my life if I keep getting to see that smile.

“Yeah, yeah,” I respond, feigning annoyance.

“It’s alright,” Sawyer says, placing her hand on my knee. “I still like you, even if you suck at Mario Kart.”

I grab her hand from my lap, intertwining our fingers, then bringing them to my lips. I place a kiss on the back of her hand before putting both our hands in my lap.

“I’m glad to know you won’t dump me because I’m bad at video games,” I say, laughing.

I wait for Sawyer to respond or to continue to make fun of me, but she’s silent on the other side of the car. I peer over at her from the corner of my eye and catch her staring down at our hands in my lap.

“Everything okay?” I ask. I don’t understand the sudden silence, and the idea that I might have made her uncomfortable

by grabbing her hand makes me nauseous. I didn't think it was a big deal but based on the way she's staring at our hands, she's thinking about something.

"Oh, yeah," she says. I go to pull away when her thumb strokes across the back of my hand. The innocent touch sends tingles down my spine and my heart does a small pitter patter in my chest. She looks out the window as I drive back towards her apartment, her thumb continuing to move back and forth while she quietly sings to the music on the radio.

All the while, one word bounces through my head.

Love.

This is what I've been waiting for. The quiet moments of love. A smile. The holding of hands. I don't think she's at the same place as I am, but this is the love I want. With her.

I pull up to her apartment building, push the hazard button, and hop out of the car. I round to the other side of the car and open her door. The last thing I want is for the night to end, but I have film early in the morning, and then have to spend the night at the hotel with the team before our game on Sunday.

Sawyer steps out, grabbing my hand as we stand on the curb.

"I had a great time," she says bashfully.

"Even though I lost at Mario Kart?" I ask, laughing.

"*Because* you lost at Mario Kart," she responds, winking. "I think you earned your goodnight kiss, though."

She pulls me towards her, closing the space between us. I lean down, my face inches away from hers.

“Oh, did I?”

“Mhm...For being the world’s greatest boyfriend.”

I close the space between us, placing a gentle kiss on her lips. Her hand leaves mine, and she wraps her arms around my torso as I pull away. Gently grabbing her face in my hands, I kiss her one more time. For good measure.

“I lo—” I cut myself off before I can do something incredibly stupid, like tell her I love her only days after we officially started dating. “I’ll see you on Sunday,” I say, doing my best to recover.

Luckily, it doesn’t seem like Sawyer noticed my small slip-up, kissing me one more time before she peels away.

“See you later, Henry,” she yells as she walks into the lobby of her apartment building. I watch her walk away and into the elevator. As the elevator doors close, I slip into my car and lean my head back against the headrest.

Fuck, that was a close one.

The more time I spend with Sawyer, the harder it’s going to be not to say anything.



CHAPTER 23

“I used to call you my best friend way back before you were
my everything”

Ode to a Conversation Stuck in Your Throat—Del Water Gap

Sawyer

“**M**om, don’t cry,” I say into my phone, exacerbated.
“It’s really not that big of a deal.”

I’m totally underplaying it, but I really don’t think I can handle her crying on Facetime, because it will make me cry. Even if they are tears of joy.

“You know how your Mom gets when she’s happy. The emotional floodgates open,” my Dad teases, but the look he gives her when he says it is full of love. He’s looked at her that way ever since I could remember. Full of love and admiration.

Even when they fought, the love between the two of them never dimmed.

“I just always hoped,” my Mom says through sniffles and tears, “that you two would end up together. You know how much I love Henry.”

I can't help but smile because I do know how much she loves Henry. She talks about him any chance she can and asks about how he's doing constantly. I can't count the number of times she's bragged about him to someone as if he's her child. She has a blow-up of his roster photo in a frame in the living room and the photo of the two of us at the NFL Draft is hanging in the living room. According to Heather Jones, Henry is already a part of the family, but the knowledge that we're dating probably made her year.

I hadn't planned on telling them yet since it's so new, but they called and it just tumbled out. Part of the reason I've been avoiding calling them since I moved to Seattle. I didn't want to explain what happened with Declan and then I didn't want to share my feelings about Henry. The two of them seem to have an effect on me that causes me to spill my deepest darkest secrets to them. I am withholding the date though, because I know if I tell her about it, I'll never get off the phone. Not that I could blame her. The date was perfect. I've always loved hanging out with Henry, but that was different. Better.

“Yeah, I know. He's great.”

“Are you going to the game today?” my Dad asks. He always keeps up with Henry’s games, even though he couldn’t care less about professional football. He only watches the games that Henry plays in and then will message me every time he catches the ball. It’s both adorable and annoying because Henry catches the ball a lot, which means I receive a lot of text messages from my father full of exclamation points.

“No. Maren, Nathalie, and I are going to watch at home.”

We had all planned to go since it was a home game and worked with everyone’s schedule, but the tickets left were way out of our price range, so we decided to stay home. Henry is great, but he is not worth spending a thousand dollars on nosebleed seats.

“We better let her go then, Jim,” my Mom says to my father, still sniffing, “I’m sure her friends are coming over soon.”

“We love you, Sawyer. Tell Henry we say hello and let him know how excited we are that you two are dating!”

“I love you both, too.”

With that, I hang up the Facetime call and get out of bed to get ready for the day.



A few hours later, I hear a knock at the front door. It’s about the time I told Nathalie to come over, so I meander over to the doorway and look through the peephole. Sure enough, Nathalie stands on the other side of the door, holding a

package in her hands. I swing the door open and immediately start.

“I told you that you don’t need to bring something over every time. Even if it’s polite to bring the hostess a gift. Maren’s going to become addicted to Cheez-Its if you keep bringing them,” I playfully scold her.

The last few times she’s come over, she’s brought something for the both of us. Finally, I told her to stop because I felt bad accepting something every time she came over, especially when we were just watching a movie or having book club.

“I didn’t, I swear! There was a postman heading to your door at the same time I was, so I grabbed it. It’s addressed to you.”

She hands me the package, then moves towards the living room, flopping down onto the couch.

“What did you order anyway?” she asks, scrolling on her phone.

“I didn’t order anything.”

At least I don’t remember ordering anything. Skeptically, I walk to the kitchen and grab a pair of scissors to open the box. I pull back the cardboard and sitting on top of tissue paper is an envelope. On a piece of stationary sits a note covered in a chicken scratch I instantly recognize.

Sawyer,

You once told me you would always be my biggest fan. There's nowhere else I would want my biggest fan to be than in the stands.

Since you don't play football, a Wikiffow on how to catch a football is pointless, so here are step-by-step instructions on how to put on a shirt.

I got you a little something I hope you'll wear.

Henry.

Tears well in my eyes. The note is almost identical to the one I gave him one Christmas. He was heading to a bowl game and I couldn't go, so I sent him a note with a smoothie cup telling him I was his biggest fan and an instruction guide on how to catch a football. In case he forgot, of course. I didn't even realize he remembered the note I wrote. Slowly, I peel back the tissue paper and gasp at the contents. Three tickets for the game sit on top of a Seattle Mavericks jersey. I put the tickets to the side and pull the blue and silver Jersey from the box. I chuckle at the instructions taped to the front and flip the jersey to the back and a gigantic smile spreads across my face. Right at the top of the back of the jersey reads 'Parker'. I trace my fingers along the seams. He gave me a jersey with his name on it.

Never in the years I've known him have I worn a jersey with his name on it. It always felt too intimate. Something that a girlfriend would do, and we were strictly friends. It means a lot that Henry thought of this and wanted me to wear it.

Nathalie drags me back to the present. “So, what did you get?”

“Henry sent me a jersey and three tickets to the game today.”

Nathalie shoots up from the couch and bolts into the kitchen where I’m standing. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her move so quickly. Her speed is truly impressive.

“Maren, get in here!” she bellows, nearly shaking with excitement.

Maren struts out of her room, dressed in her usual game-day fashion. Mavericks’ jersey, leggings, and eye black on nearly half of her face. “What’s going on?”

“Henry sent Sawyer a jersey with his name on it and tickets for the game today!” Nathalie squeals. She almost seems more excited than I am.

“Oh...” Maren coos. “How nice of your *boyfriend*.”

I told Maren that Henry and I were officially dating the evening after he spent the night, but she already knew since she had seen his shoes while leaving for work. Gracefully, she didn’t say ‘I told you so’ out loud, but she 100% said it with her eyes. She seemed genuinely happy by the news, and it was a comfort to know that both she and Nathalie were in my corner. After the issues I’ve had in the past with friendships, it’s been refreshing to have them as friends, even if they can be wild at times.

“We better get ready to leave for the game then, since there’s no way I’m watching from the couch when Henry gave us

fifty-yard line seats,” Maren adds, holding onto the tickets like they’re precious. The gleam in her eyes tells me she will fight someone who even suggests taking them away.

“Fifty-yard line?!” Nathalie and I yell at the same time.

Maren laughs and waves the tickets in front of our faces. I was so preoccupied by the thoughtfulness of the jersey I didn’t even notice the details on the tickets. Sure enough, the tickets are way nicer than anything we would have ever contemplated buying.

A thought pops into my head now that we’re going to the game and Henry is sure to see us, considering he just gave us front-row seats.

“We need to make a pit stop before we head to the stadium.”



“There’s so many people!” Nathalie yells as we navigate our way through the stadium searching for our seats. In the car, Maren and I learned that Nathalie has never attended a football game before. She explained that it wasn’t that she didn’t enjoy sports, they are ‘fine’ according to her, but she never wanted to pay to watch the game live when it was free on T.V. To be honest, I can’t really argue against the statement.

However, the moment we stepped into the stadium, Nathalie reacted similarly to a child on their first visit to Disney, with awe and a high level of excitement. Maren and I almost peed our pants in laughter when she decided she needed a jersey to

match the ones we were wearing. We watched her go and pick one out, skipping back to us wearing Deon's jersey. Except, she has no idea that it's his, which isn't entirely surprising since she wasn't convinced he was a player until she saw him playing on the T.V. We had asked her if she knew which player was number fourteen, but she just shrugged and said it was her favorite number. Maren and I both decided that what she didn't know couldn't hurt her.

We continue to make our way through the stadium until we reach our section. The worker checks our tickets and gives us directions toward our seats. As we move closer to where we're seated, it starts to feel more and more real. The fact that Henry and I are dating. Not that it wasn't real beforehand, but this is entirely different. This is basically a public declaration of our relationship to the world.

Suddenly, the excitement I was feeling is replaced by nerves. I clutch the poster in my hand tighter, latching onto it like a lifeline. We sit down in our seats and wait for the players to warm up on the field. I listen to Nathalie chatter about the seats and the game and how excited she is. Maren responds to her every comment and question. Maren leans towards me during one of Nathalie's long, yet weirdly inspiring speeches about teamwork and sports.

"Henry is the real deal. It was nice of him to get us tickets. He didn't have to do that, especially not seats this nice."

I look towards the field, watching as the players slowly make their way onto the field. "He's the best thing to happen to me."

The weight of what I said to Maren hits me straight in the chest. It's true. Henry has been the best thing to walk into my life. I know my life wouldn't be the same if we had never met, and I can't imagine a time in my life from this point on when he isn't.

A thought that's both thrilling and terrifying.



CHAPTER 24

“Nervous, trip over my words, you’re so pretty it hurts”

i’m yours—Isabel LaRosa

Henry

My knee shakes as I sit at my locker. I got the confirmation email that the package was delivered, but it’s been radio silence from Sawyer. I have no idea if she liked the gift or if she’s going to show up at the stadium. Not knowing has been eating me up inside, and I haven’t been able to focus. In retrospect, surprising her may have not been my best idea. All it’s done is give me more anxiety before a game where I need to play well so Coach Barrett doesn’t bench me. Especially when it’s the final game of the regular season.

“She’ll show up,” Jack says, making his way towards me. “It was a great idea, and I’m sure Maren and Nathalie were

equally excited.”

His attempt to soothe my worries is noble. I take a deep breath and repeat what he said to me in my mind.

“You’re right.”

“I’m never wrong,” Jack responds, a cocky grin plastered on his face. He sounds just like Maren.

“That’s not true,” Deon yells from the other side of the locker room.

Jack immediately begins to defend himself, asking Deon for evidence of times that he’s been wrong. Watching the two of them bicker helps reduce the pressure I feel in my chest.

We get the cue that it’s time for us to warm up out on the field, and we all make our way down the tunnel. I brace myself for the small possibility that the three seats I bought will be empty. Better to be happily surprised than disappointed.

I walk out onto the field, heading straight towards the fifty-yard line. Jack and Deon walk beside me, neither of them saying a word. As I move closer, I breathe in a sigh of relief. Right smack in the center of the stadium, Sawyer, Nathalie, and Maren are all sitting and eating popcorn. They notice the players making their way onto the field and immediately stand up, scanning the grass. All three sets of eyes land on me, and the three of them start jumping and waving, drawing the attention of everyone around them.

I break out in laughter at the sight of the three of them leaping with joy, arms flailing as they try to catch our attention. Jack and Deon walk up and stand next to me.

“See,” Deon says, his hand landing on my shoulder. “Nothing to worry about.”

I watch as Sawyer spins, showing me my last name across her back. My heart skips a beat. I would give a lot of money to see her in nothing but my jersey. Not a fantasy I realized I wanted to make a reality, but I want everything when it comes to Sawyer.

Nathalie and Sawyer turn around with Sawyer to show the jerseys they’re wearing. To my left, Jack makes a noise almost sounding like a growl. I peer over at him, and his eyes are aimed directly at the name on the back of Maren’s jersey.

I raise an eyebrow at his reaction. “Everything alright?”

He huffs in response, shifting his gaze to Nathalie’s jersey. “Is that your jersey, Deon?” he asks, shifting the attention away from his reaction to Maren’s outfit. I noticed the deflection of my question, but I let it go.

“Uh...yeah. But I have no idea why she’s wearing it.” Deon looks both uncomfortable and confused as to why Nathalie has his jersey on.

“Not a chance she knows it’s your jersey, dude. She wasn’t even convinced we played football. I would place a bet that she doesn’t even know what positions we play.”

Deon doesn’t look convinced by that, but he lets it go.

I look back to Sawyer, who's grabbing something off the ground. She pulls a tube-shaped item from the floor and begins to unroll it. I recognize it as a poster, but I have no idea what she could have put on there. The nerves I felt before I left the locker room have come back in full force.

With help from Maren and Nathalie, she pulls the massive poster apart, revealing a giant yellow smiley face. Sawyer beams at me while holding the poster, her grin almost as large as the smile on the paper. Jack starts laughing. Since I told him the story, he understands the inside joke. Deon looks at us both in confusion but smiles at the gesture she made.

I stand there for a moment, drinking her in. I don't think I've ever felt so content and at peace as I do right now with Sawyer in the stands, cheering me on and wearing my jersey. Knowing she's in my corner.

I wave at her quickly before I head off to warm up, smiling through every drill.



Halfway through the third quarter, and I can't remember a time I've ever felt more alive playing a game of football.

Ever.

I'm enjoying myself, having fun. Instead of giving me anxiety, the game is pumping me up. Which is something that hasn't happened in a long time. The game started to lose its enjoyment when my dad put pressure on it. Requiring me to

live up to the standard of being Matthew Parker's son. To him, it's more than just a game, it's everything. Which is what he tried to drill into me as soon as I showed any talent in the sport. Don't get me wrong, I still love football, but at times, I haven't loved playing.

But having Sawyer in the stands and knowing she's out there cheering for me has changed how I feel. I still feel the pressure to perform, but it's not as intense. It's a bearable weight on my shoulders.

I've already scored twice, and Coach Barrett even gave me a nod as if to say I'm doing well. Which I'll take considering the last conversation we had. I'm playing lights out and I'm feeling good. Deon has been throwing rockets all game, every single player on the team is in sync.

The final seconds on the clock tick down to zero in the fourth quarter, and the stadium goes wild with the win. I shake hands with a few of the opposing players, then jog over to where Sawyer and the girls are sitting. I get as close as I can and wave at Sawyer. I catch her attention, and she blows me a kiss. I turn towards the tunnel to get off the field but stop by an usher.

"Hey man, see those three up there?" I point at the girls and wait until the usher recognizes them. "Could you make sure they get to the family area?"

The usher lets me know he will make it happen and I make my way towards the locker room.

In the locker room, we listen to Coach Barrett give his post-game speech, which is not as long as it usually is. He dismisses us, and I bolt towards the shower. The sooner I'm clean, the sooner I get to see Sawyer. I haven't seen her since our date on Wednesday, and I'm itching to spend time with her. Not to mention, the image of her in my jersey is seared into my brain forever.

Not appropriate shower thoughts.

I force my mind to go blank while I finish showering to prevent myself from becoming any harder than I already am. Turning the shower off, I wrap the towel around my waist and head back to my locker. As I get dressed, Jack comes over to chat.

“Where are you headed to after this?”

He knows exactly where I'm going, but he just wants to hear it again.

“Home with Sawyer.”

Well, that's my plan at least. I haven't gotten around to asking her yet, but I'm hoping that's just a formality.

“Aww,” he coos. “How domestic of you.”

I grab my bag, walking towards the door with Jack on my heels. We make our way towards the concourse area specifically for the family of the players. Before today, I never had anyone to meet, but coming out here to meet Sawyer feels right. Natural.

As we make our way closer to the meeting area, I can hear the girls chatting amongst themselves.

“That was exhilarating!” Nathalie screams.

Both Maren and Sawyer seem incredibly amused by Nathalie’s reaction to the game. I make a mental note to ask Sawyer about why exactly Nathalie was more excited than normal. I saunter up to Sawyer, whose back is facing me, and sling my arm over her shoulder.

She immediately jumps and goes into flight mode. Sawyer has never been much of a fighter, which is good for me, otherwise, she might have punched me straight in the nose.

“Cheese and rice!” she squeals. “Don’t scare me like that!” The moment she realizes it’s me though, she leans into my side, her hand resting on my chest. Our bodies fit together perfectly. She looks up at me and gives me a soft smile. “You played amazing. I’m proud of you.”

Her comment causes a smile to spread across my face, and I pull her closer, leaning down and planting a kiss on her lips. I hadn’t planned on kissing her in front of everyone, but my body moved faster than my brain.

“Oh, shit. I’m sorry. We didn’t talk about if you wanted everyone to know, with the spotlight and all.”

She halts my apology with a kiss of her own. A gentle one, full of admiration. She looks up at me, stark desire in her eyes. “I want everyone to know we’re dating. The whole world, preferably. I want them all to know you’re *mine*.”

Her sudden possessiveness has me feeling things that I shouldn't in the middle of a hallway full of other players' families.

Thankfully, Jack breaks the tension by doing what he loves most, annoying Maren.

"Hey, Maren baby," he says, swinging his arm over her shoulder. "Have fun at the game?"

Maren looks him up and down, peers over at the elbow on her shoulder, then carefully peels his arm off her and places it back at his side. I have to bite my lip to hold back my laugh, and a quick glance at Nathalie and Sawyer confirms that they're feeling the same way.

"Hello, Jack," she says, robotically. "It was a good game. How have you been?" It looks like she wants to peel her own skin off by asking that question, but it seems like whatever politeness she is going for has won over.

I can see the light dance in Jack's eyes. He's about to mess with her. We all noticed how polite she was attempting to be, and he's about to exploit that.

"Oh, I've been good. I watched this documentary recently. It was about the flora and fauna of the rainforests in Africa. Have you seen it?" He shoots her a saccharine smile. Not even attempting to act coy.

I watch as a plethora of emotions flicker over Maren's features. Anger. Annoyance. A bit of embarrassment. I watch

the fire blaze in her eyes, and she takes a deep breath before she responds.

“Oh, very interesting,” she says with such a patronizing tone that it even hurts me. “I haven’t seen it. I’ve been busy lately, actually. You know, just doing my part to help combat global climate change. A rather large endeavor.”

Noticing that the exchange is only going to go downhill from here, I step in, ceasing the battle between the two of them. Their exchanges amuse me, but right now I want to go home with Sawyer. Not listen to them debate some obscure species found on some island in the middle of nowhere.

“Come home with me?” I ask quietly, so only Sawyer hears me.

“Okay,” she responds, voice hesitant. “Just let me see if Maren can drive my car back home.”

I wait off to the side while Sawyer talks to Maren and Nathalie. They both glance from her to me then back to her while she talks to them. Sawyer turns towards Nathalie, and Maren takes the opportunity to look at me and wink. Finishing her conversation with the two of them, Sawyer walks back towards me.

“Maren’s taking my car home. Can you drop me off tomorrow so I can get ready for work?”

I nod, grab her hand, and basically drag her towards my car. I leave the rest of them in the dust. I have one thing on my mind, and it’s Sawyer. She seems to remember her manners and waves goodbye, giggling as we make our way towards my

car. Opening the passenger door for her, she hops in. I make my way to the driver's side, turn the car on, and head back to my apartment. We sit in amicable silence, and halfway through the drive, she places her hand on my thigh.

It's a harmless enough act since she's not moving north, and it's not inherently sexual, but it sends a shock below the belt. I do my best to not pull the car over right there and kiss the shit out of her. What feels like a lifetime later, but in reality is only five minutes, I pull into the parking garage and put the car into park. I hop out, leaving my bag in the backseat, and open the door for Sawyer.

"You don't need to keep opening my door," she laughs as she gets out.

"I've always wanted to, and now I can, so I'm going to."

Her cheeks turn a rosy hue, but she intertwines our fingers as we step into the elevator. As subtly as I can, I reposition my semi-hard-on so that I don't accidentally show any strangers how attracted I am to Sawyer. Which is a lot.

Sawyer begins to rattle off her thoughts about the game, telling me about how Nathalie had never been and how much I spoiled Maren who will 'never be able to sit in peasant seats again'. I just stand there, watching her eyes light up as she talks about her friends. Happiness looks beautiful on her. I know she's had a hard time making real friends, so the fact she has Maren and Nathalie makes me happy.

The elevator dings and we step off, heading to my apartment. The closer we get, the more the air becomes electric between

the two of us. There's something unspoken between us that both excites me and makes me nervous. I open the door, waiting for her to step through, then shut and lock it.

“So...” she trails off, dropping her purse on the kitchen barstool. You could cut the sexual tension between us with a butter knife.

“Do you want some water?” I ask, suddenly panicked and nervous about where the night could lead. This isn't my first time, but it might as well be given I feel as nervous now as I did then. Sawyer isn't just anyone. She's the love of my life. This means something, for both of us.

“Sure.”

I grab a glass of water for her and myself, and we stand there in silence while we both empty our glasses. The moment has grown uncomfortable. Both of us unsure of what to do next. Sawyer moves beside me, putting her glass in the sink, then turns to look at me.

“So...Are you going to kiss me? Or are we going to—”

I cut her off, crashing my lips to hers. The kiss is charged as I walk her back against the counter, lifting her off the ground and dropping her on the granite. Spreading her knees, I settle between her legs and deepen the kiss. She responds, hungrily, and pulls my bottom lip between her teeth. I groan, and she swallows the sound with another long, languid kiss.

Her arms wrap around my shoulder, pulling me in closer so our bodies sit flush together. Her lips leave mine and make

their way down my jaw towards my neck. She peppers kisses along my skin, leaving a tingling sensation everywhere her lips touch. I drag her face back up to mine and kiss her with a fury.

Her hands travel down my chest and grab for purchase at the hem of my shirt. She clutches the cotton material, slowly dragging it up my body. I break the kiss, allowing her to pull it up and over my head. She tosses it over her shoulder and begins to pull at her jersey.

“Keep it on,” I say, voice husky and full of desire.

Sawyer looks at me, eyes hooded, then pulls me back in for another kiss. “I want you,” she murmurs against my mouth, kissing me between words. Her hands roam across my chest and back. Smoothing over my shoulders.

“Are you sure?” I ask. “We can go slow, I’m in no rush.”

Every moment tonight is special. It’s not something I can admit to Sawyer, but I haven’t slept with someone in a long time. Not that I haven’t tried. When I first arrived in Seattle I thought having a fling would get rid of the feelings I had for Sawyer. But even the thought of touching anyone else made me sick and I eventually gave up.

This isn’t just sex for me. This is much, much more. It’s connecting with the person I love on an intimate level.

“I want this. I want *you*.” My neurons fire on all cylinders as the words echo in my head. Words I’ve waited years to hear. Her hands slide to the back of my neck, fingers intertwining in

my hair as she waits for my response. I small moan tumbles from my lips as she grabs the strands, pulling my head down to look into my eyes. “I want it to be with you.”

I search her gaze for any indecision, but all I find looking back at me is lust and determination.

Grabbing her thighs, I lift her off the counter and walk her towards my bedroom. She kisses my neck, sending shivers down my spine as we move. Kicking the door open, I walk her back to the bed and lay her down, fully intending to worship every inch of her body.

She scootches towards the headboard, and I follow her. My hands glide up her thighs towards her hips, landing on the waistband of her leggings. I look up at her, waiting for confirmation that this is what she wants.

Sawyer nods her head, and torturously slowly, I peel the leggings off her body, leaving her in nothing but a pair of red, lacy underwear. My mouth waters at the sight of her in my bed, wearing nothing but a jersey with my name on the back.

That thought alone sends my half hard-on into a full-blown erection. I drop the leggings off the side of the bed and move upward to lean over her. I grab the bottom of the jersey and begin to pull it up over her head. She lifts her arms to help me, and I throw the jersey in the same direction as the leggings.

Sawyers’ lips meet mine again as I begin to unclip her bra. The straps fall from her shoulders, and she shrugs it off. I lower my lips to her breast, sucking it deep into my mouth and

swirling my tongue around the peaked nipple. Sawyer arches off the bed, the sounds she's making spurring me on.

She runs her fingers through my hair, grasping at the strands.

Slowly, I travel down her body, trailing kisses along her stomach until I'm positioned right where I want to be. She tenses up when she realizes where I'm heading.

"Henry, you don't—" Sawyer looks down at me, self-consciousness flickering across her features.

"I want to. Need to, actually. If you don't want it, that's fine, but don't say no because you think that's what I want."

She mumbles her agreement and I begin to drag my hands up her thighs, closer and closer to the apex. I discard her underwear, take both my hands and spread her legs, giving myself a perfect view of her. She's already glistening wet for me. I drag my finger through her folds, eliciting a shiver from Sawyer.

I spend time nipping and biting at her inner thighs, moving up towards her center. Leaning down, I place a gentle kiss on her clit. She jolts at the sensation, and I splay my palm across her stomach, holding her in place.

Locking eyes with her, I take my tongue and drag it up through her center. I groan at the taste of her, and the moan that leaves her shoots straight to my dick. Her eyes slam shut and her head falls backward as I continue the motion, listening to her sounds and body to guide me.

I lightly suck on her clit, and she launches off the bed, hands reaching down to grab my hair. Realizing she likes that, I do it again, working it in while I suck and lick. With one palm keeping her to the bed, my other travels up to her breast, pinching and twisting.

Sawyer moans again, holding my head against her center.

“Henry,” she moans, breathless.

“That’s it, baby,” I respond as I remove my hand from her breast and slip a finger in.

I curl my finger towards me, the moans coming faster and stronger. I can tell she’s close. I add another finger, working them in and out, quickening the pace.

“Oh...god,” she breathes, gripping the sheets at her sides.

“Come for me, Sawyer,” I demand, moving my fingers faster. One hard suck on her clit and I can feel Sawyer clench around my fingers. I continue licking and sucking while her orgasm barrels through her. She moans and writhes as she reaches climax, her sounds making me feral.

Sawyer takes in deep breaths, and she opens her eyes, looking down at me.

“Holy shit,” she says, chest heaving, giving me a perfect view of her.

I move towards her and place a searing kiss to her lips. The taste of her lingers on my lips. Her hands move down my torso, towards my waistband. Her hand slips under the waistband of my boxers and grips me, slowly moving her hand

up and down my shaft. I groan into the kiss at the sensation, my hips moving towards her subconsciously.

“Is this okay?” Sawyer asks, openness in her gaze.

“More than okay,” I breathe out, barely able to form words at how amazing it feels. She strokes me a few more times when I pull away. Lifting off the bed, I yank my joggers and briefs off, leaving me naked. I move back to the bed, fully erect. I watch as Sawyer’s gaze goes wide as I head back towards her. She meets me at the edge of the bed, claiming me with a kiss.

I slowly lean her back until she’s lying flat on the bed. My cock grazes against her center and we both moan at the contact. She grabs me again as we continue to make out. Her pressure is just right as she strokes me, pulling me closer and closer to the edge.

“I need to be inside you,” I say, hoping the desperation in my voice isn’t evident.

She nods and I move to find my bag, pulling out a condom. I rush back towards the bed, ripping the wrapper and sheathing myself. Lining myself up with Sawyer, I drag my dick through her slit, getting the condom wet with her. She moans as I graze her clit, becoming wetter with every pass.

“Please,” she moans, nearly coming undone with desperation.

I grab my cock and place it at her entrance. I pause for a moment, wanting to make sure Sawyer is okay.

“I’ll go slow. You say stop and we stop,” I assure her. I want this to be as comfortable as possible for her. She is the most important thing to me and I want this to be good for her. For the both of us.

“I trust you, Henry,” she responds. I search her face, looking for any hesitation. She gives me a soft smile, quickly squeezing my free hand. “I’m ready.”

Confident she’s comfortable, I slowly ease forward, entering her an inch. Her breath hitches and she immediately tightens up, her hands gripping the sheets. I lean down and claim her mouth, attempting to relax her.

“Breathe, baby,” I say in between kisses. I can feel her muscles loosen a bit and I move forward another inch. I continue to kiss her while I push into her until I bottom out.

She moans as I fill her. I’m unsure if it’s in pain or pleasure, so I hold still, waiting for her signal. “Fuck, Henry.”

She continues to breathe while I use all my strength to stay still. Being inside her feels euphoric. She’s tight, and I fit perfectly inside.

“I’m okay,” she whispers, grabbing my hips and pulling me forward. I start to rock my hips, slowly moving in and out. She feels so good, I’m seeing stars. No way I’m going to last long. She begins to move against me, meeting me thrust for thrust.

I lift her hips slightly, hoping for a deeper angle. Moving deeper inside her, Sawyer arches her back off the bed, moaning.

“Yes,” she moans, enjoying the new angle. I continue the movement, moving faster as she becomes more comfortable. I grab her breast and pinch the nipple between my thumb and forefinger pulling a breath from her lips.

Seeing her come undone in front of me has me creeping closer to the edge. Determined for her to come before me, I trail my hand down from her breast to her clit. Steadily, I begin circling my finger around her clit as a drive into her. Her breaths start to become uneven, and I can feel her walls start to clench.

She’s close.

I drive into her faster, continuing the pressure on her clit. Moving my head down, I press my lips against hers, kissing her deeply. The stimulation sends her over the edge, her eyes slam shut, and I can feel her walls tighten around me.

“Open your eyes for me, baby. I want to see you when you come.”

Her eyes open and she locks her gaze with mine. Her skin is blotchy and flushed. She looks stunning as she begins to come undone. One more thrust and she’s falling over the edge. Her mouth falls open, a moan escaping her as she comes on my cock. The feeling of her unraveling and the sounds she’s making sends me tumbling with her. I manage two more thrusts before I feel the tingle down my spine and the pressure in my balls tighten. The sound that leaves her mouth as she continues to orgasm shoots straight to my dick, and I’m coming with her, spilling into the condom. I continue to move

through my orgasm, trying to prolong hers as much as possible.

Pulling out of her, I flop onto the bed beside her, the both of us catching our breaths. The moment I think I can stand again, I head towards the bathroom, disposing of the condom and getting a wet washcloth. Moving back towards Sawyer, I take the washcloth and clean her up. She watches me, saying nothing as I put the cloth in the laundry hamper and move back towards the bed.

I pull the covers up and pat the bed, signaling for her to climb under. I wait for her to get situated, then crawl in behind her. Grabbing her hips, I pull her against me, molding our bodies together.

“How are you feeling?” I murmur into her hair, wanting to make sure she’s okay. I throw my arm over her waist, my hand swiping back and forth across her stomach. I can’t help but touch her. The contact is settling.

“Good. Great. Legless.” I laugh at the last one because I know the feeling.

“I—” I pause, immediately shutting my mouth before I say something I shouldn’t. Panic floods through my body as I figure out what to say, but she beats me to it.

Turning to see my face, she places a gentle kiss on my lips. “I’m glad it was you, Henry.” She rolls back over and snuggles into me.

I wrap my arm around her and fall into a slumber, dreams full of Sawyer and all the love I feel for her.



CHAPTER 25

“From a friend to a lover, looks like forever in his eyes”

I Think I Fell In Love Today—Kelsea Ballerini

Sawyer

S luggishly, I open my eyes. Sunlight filters through the curtains and I feel a dead weight draped over my stomach. Looking down, I see Henry’s arm wrapped around my waist, his stomach pressed against my back, cradling me. Slowly, I lift his arm, trying not to wake him. His grip tightens around me, pulling me back into him.

“Morning,” he mumbles into my hair, placing a kiss on the side of my head.

I turn in his arms to face him. Rays of sunshine land on him, giving him an ethereal glow. I like every version of Henry, but

this one might be my favorite. Sleepy eyes, mussed hair, and still half asleep.

“Hi,” I say, leaning in for a kiss. He meets me halfway, placing a gentle, tender kiss on my lips.

“How are you feeling?” Henry mumbles as he tries to block out the sun with his forearm.

“Good. A little sore.”

I’ve heard people talk about the post-sex high in TV and movies, but I always thought it was something exaggerated by the media. It is incredibly accurate. I’m seeing rainbows and unicorns, I’m so happy and calm. But I’m also sore.

A good sore. A happy little reminder of what happened last night.

I’m not sure what I was expecting, but I should have known that he wasn’t small. He’s a massive football player. I’m not sure my vagina would have been prepared even if I had known.

“Sorry,” he apologizes, looking a bit sheepish.

“Don’t do that. It’s a sore that I’ll take any day.”

Grabbing my phone and looking at the time, I groan. If I had it my way, I would spend the rest of the day in bed with Henry repeating what we did last night. Unfortunately, I have responsibilities and a job, which means Henry needs to drive me home so I can get ready for work.

“I have to get home to get ready for work.”

“No,” Henry whines, attempting to drag me back towards him in bed. “Stay here. Working is for losers.”

I laugh at his ridiculousness, then throw the covers off and stand to get out of bed. For a moment, I forget that I’m naked. That is until Henry comments.

“Even more beautiful in the sunlight,” he murmurs, causing me to blush. I quickly pick up my clothes from yesterday, grimacing at the fact I have to put on the old clothes. I must have made a face because Henry hops out of bed and heads towards his dresser.

I take a moment to ogle him the way he just did to me. He probably has the nicest ass I’ve ever seen. It’s tight and toned and I would like to thank the football gods for blessing him with it. He grabs some items out of the dresser and pulls a pair of gym shorts on.

Sad.

He turns around and walks towards me, a cocky grin spread across his face. “Enjoying the view?” he teases, handing me a shirt and pair of sweatpants.

I make a non-committal sound, instead hyper-focusing all my attention on putting the clothes on. That fit surprisingly well. This is not one of his baggy shirts. Suddenly, my heart begins to race, and I feel nauseous.

Why does he have women’s clothes in his dresser?

I make a valiant effort to not panic, but considering I just slept with him and now he’s handing me random women’s

clothing, my breathing is becoming erratic.

I can't help it.

I scurry out of the bedroom, not giving Henry a second glance. I scour the room for my purse, trying to get out of here as soon as possible. I can recognize that the adult response would be to ask him about the clothing, but I am terrified of that answer, and I am not going to voluntarily cause myself heartache.

Henry makes his way down the hallway, following me into the kitchen, visibly concerned. "Sawyer, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," I say immediately. I can't have this conversation right now, especially not in some random person's clothing.

"Stop for a minute." Henry grabs my shoulders, spinning me around and guiding me towards the barstool by the kitchen island. He sits me down, then grabs my hands and looks at me, eyes full of worry. "Is this about last night? Are you having regrets?"

The question sends a punch to my gut and the vulnerability and tinge of hurt in his eyes forces me to reassess my current state.

"Whose are—," I try, but the words have trouble falling from my mouth. I attempt to ask the question again. "Where did you get these?" I gesture down at the joggers and shirt.

"The clothes?" he asks, clearly confused. What I don't understand is why he's confused. The question is simple. "I bought them."

“Why?”

The question comes out harsher than I intended, but I’m on the brink of losing my shit, and I need him to tell me why he has them or else I may have a full-on sad girl moment before 8 A.M. Which won’t be good for anyone.

“For you.”

For me?

My eyes snap from his face to the clothes I’m wearing, then back to his face. Looking at them now, they do seem to fit oddly well and are exactly what I would pick out for myself. If not a little nicer than what I would buy. Realization dawns on his face, suddenly understanding my response.

“I thought—” He scrubs the back of his neck, flustered. *At least both of us are flustered now. An even playing field.* “Well, I thought you might need something to wear if you ever came over. I bought them last week.”

He avoids my eyes, red tinging his cheeks. He begins to pull at the back of his hair again, a dead giveaway he’s slightly embarrassed and a bit uncomfortable.

It’s...sweet.

Honestly, I’m embarrassed at how I didn’t take a moment to think about the situation. Henry would never keep anyone else’s clothes, let alone give them to me. That’s not his style. I feel bad that the thought even crossed my mind. I launch myself at him, wrapping my arms around his waist, hugging him like my life depended on it.

“I thought they—I’m sorry,” I mutter into his chest.

He leans his chin on the top of my head, pulling me in closer.
“It’s okay.”

Emotions suddenly flood through me, and tears start to prick my eyes. I sniffle, attempting to hold them in, but Henry notices. He starts rubbing my back, soothing me. I should be the one soothing him. I just accused him of giving me some other woman’s clothes to wear and instead of telling him how sorry I am, I’m crying.

What is happening to me?

“It’s fine, Sawyer. Promise.”

His promise only opens the floodgates further. I have officially lost it. At this point, I’m not even sure why I’m crying. If we’re being honest, it’s probably the wide range of emotions I’ve felt in the last 24 hours.

“Baby, please stop crying. It’s okay.”

I sniffle again, pulling back and wiping away my tears. Henry’s thumb darts out and gently wipes away a tear rolling down my cheek.

“They’re really cute,” I say, referring to my outfit. I really do like it. He picked things out I would choose for myself, not to mention it’s super comfortable. The joggers feel like butter on my skin and the shirt is a dusty blue, a color I love. I shoot him a watery smile, and he booms in laughter.

“Glad you like them. Now let’s get you home so you can go to work.”



“You cried?” Nathalie asks, poorly attempting to hide her laughter.

I spent the better half of the morning regaling my night to Nathalie, who jumped me this morning looking for juicy details. I gave her a very vague retelling of the night. She doesn't need to know the intimate parts about what Henry and I did last night. Against my better judgment, I decided to tell her about the clothing, which I'm currently regretting.

“Yes, it was incredibly embarrassing. Let's move on.”

I stand from my desk and make my way towards the gymnasium. The children will start arriving soon, so we need to set up all the sports equipment for the kids to play with. I rush down the hallway, Nathalie trailing behind me. I pick up my pace, hoping to shake her so I don't have to answer any more questions. Unfortunately, she has a few inches on me, and it takes her only moments for her to catch up.

“At least tell me if it was a cute outfit?” I stop and shoot her a look, a mix of exasperation and humor. No one is more invested in the longevity of Henry and I's relationship than Nathalie. She once referred to us as her Brad-gelina. Which was both a compliment and slightly concerning. She ignores my look and responds to herself. “Of course it was cute. Who am I kidding?”

I huff a laugh, completely amused by the absurdity of her talking to herself. Pushing the door to the gym open, I unlock the storage room and begin pulling out the drawstring bags full of soft foam dodgeballs. Today's sport is dodgeball, which has to be my favorite day because the kids go wild and will all pretend a ball didn't just hit them straight in the chest. I have to give them some credit, they put on Oscar-worthy performances.

Kids begin to filter into the gym, full of energy and nearly bouncing off the walls. It's more energy than I'm used to on a Monday. My favorite Mavericks fan comes bouncing into the gym, heading straight towards me. Micah is wearing a new jersey today; one I haven't seen before.

"Miss Sawyer!" Micah screams as he runs towards me. He crashes into me, hugging me much harder than I thought a seven-year-old was capable of. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"What are you—Why are you thanking me?" I laugh, confused by the greeting.

"I went to the game yesterday!" he yells, so excited he's nearly vibrating.

"That's great, Micah! But what does that have to do with me?"

I have no idea why Micah is thanking me. I had nothing to do with him going to the game. He should be thanking his parents. I mean, I'll take the hug any day, but the thanks seem misplaced.

“My dad said I need to thank you and Mister Henry Parker.” Micah stands back, still humming with energy. My eyebrows raise at the mention of Henry’s name. I’m utterly befuddled about what’s going on.

“Micah,” I say, bending down to his level, “I’m confused, why exactly do you need to thank us?”

“For the tickets and the jersey! My dad told me that you thank someone when they give you a gift. It was the bestest gift.”

What?

Micah turns around, showing me his new jersey. I expect to see Henry or Deon’s last name, but what’s sewn into the top stuns me. It’s personalized to Micah. His last name is written at the top of the jersey with Henry’s number sewn below. The gift is thoughtful and exactly something that Henry would do.

“And the game was sooo fun,” Micah continues. “We had the best seats and my dad bought me nachos.” His eyes go all dreamy at the mention of nachos.

Same, kid.

Micah hugs me one more time, throwing a few more ‘thank you’s’ at me, then runs off to meet his friends before the dodgeball game starts. I watch as the volunteers begin to split the children up into two different teams. As the kids throw the foam balls at each other, my brain keeps going back to the tickets and jersey.

What I can't wrap my head around is why he didn't say anything to me. Or how he even got it to Micah. The excitement in Micah's eyes keeps replaying in my mind, and I can only imagine how much fun he had at the game yesterday. I had a blast, and I'm not a seven-year-old who is obsessed with the Seattle Mavericks.

Between last night, the clothing this morning, and now learning what Henry did for Micah, several emotions flow through me, one stronger than the rest. The strength of the emotion I'm feeling terrifies me.

No.

We are not thinking about that. Not now. Maybe when I'm at home by myself I'll root through some of the emotions, but I'm not doing it in a room full of children. Especially since I'm prone to tears today.



Time flies after my interaction with Micah. Since the kids have more energy today than usual for a Monday, it's been all hands on deck. By seven o'clock, I'm exhausted and ready to go home and lay on the couch. I head towards my office to grab my purse and keys, when I hear my name being called from the lobby. I turn around, recognizing Micah's dad immediately.

“Hi, Mr. Campbell.”

“Oh, Call me Rob. Just wanted to thank you.” He smiles, looking over at Micah, who’s talking to his friend. “It meant the world to Micah.” He places his hand over his heart in gratitude.

“It was all Henry.” I don’t want to take the credit away from him and his kind act. “He loves Micah. We both do.” The statement couldn’t be truer. Both Henry and I love Micah. He’s hilarious and fun and an all-around good kid.

Micah comes bounding back over to his dad. And in true Micah fashion, he says something to embarrass me. It may very well be his superpower, and if I hadn’t just gushed about how much I love him, I would seriously consider giving him a look.

“Henry and Miss Sawyer kiss in a tree.”

I can feel my face go red with heat. I look at Rob, pleading for help with my eyes. What am I supposed to say to this man? That it’s not true? Because that would be a big fat lie and I refuse to lie.

Rob just chuckles and politely admonishes his son. “Let’s not embarrass Miss Sawyer, Micah.”

Micah mumbles an apology and runs off to talk to another friend, leaving me and his father in an uncomfortable silence. Rob breaks the tension first. Thank God, because I probably would have stood here in silence until I passed away from embarrassment.

“It’s not my business, but for what it’s worth, any man who goes out of his way to make a child’s day is a good one.”

Rob and Micah say farewell, leaving me dazed in the lobby, replaying what he said in my head over and over.



Again and again, I go through the day’s events in my mind. I lay wide awake in my bed, having thought through every waking moment of my day. Waking up next to Henry in the morning. The feeling of comfort and domesticity about laying beside him in bed. How well I slept, too. It could partly be due to the multiple orgasms he gave me, but I think the other part was feeling safe. I haven’t slept that well since I got to Seattle.

There’s the fact he had gone out and bought clothing for me just in case I ever needed it. And then kept it at his apartment. After the minor miscommunication about where the clothing originated from, my heart had doubled in size. I could feel something fluttering deep inside me, insistent for acknowledgment. I pushed it down, hoping it was just the emotional whiplash from what happened the night before and the crying.

Learning about what Henry did for Micah permanently lodged the feeling in my chest. It’s there to stay. The kindness and thoughtfulness behind the gesture speaks volumes about who Henry is. The fact he didn’t say anything to me about it. Everything he did was of his own volition. Out of kind-

heartedness, only wanting to make a seven-year-old happy. Every time I see him, I find something else to love about him.

Love.

The emotion bouncing around my chest.

I'm in love with Henry.

Not a friendly love, but a soul-consuming one. A love so strong it lights me up inside and I get all warm at the mention of his name.

Part of me thought the realization would cause me to panic, but I've never been more confident about anything in my life. I want to spend every moment with him. I want to cheer on his every accomplishment and support him through all his low moments.

The realization doesn't concern me, but the time frame does. We haven't been dating very long and it feels way too soon to drop that particular four-letter word. I don't have the most experience on when the right time is to say 'I love you', but now seems like the wrong time.

Which leaves me at an impasse.

I'm madly, deeply in love with my best friend, but it's too soon to tell him.



CHAPTER 26

“You’re my only compass, I might get lost without you”

Compass—The Neighbourhood

Henry

For a brief moment, I had forgotten the reason I don’t call my mom as often as I would like to. Unfortunately, that lovely moment has come to an end. Only five minutes into Facetiming with my Mom, Dad has decided to take over the phone call and talk about the one thing I would rather not talk about. Football.

I’ve attempted everything I can to steer the conversation away. I’ve asked my mom about her garden and the orange trees. I’ve talked about winter in Seattle. I’m running out of talking points to keep him from the inevitable playoff game talk. I throw out my Hail Mary.

“Sawyer and I are dating.”

The other side of the phone is silent for one second. Then two. Finally, I hear a screech comparable to a pterodactyl in ‘Jurassic Park’. On the phone screen, my mom is beaming, a grin stretched across her face.

“Oh. My. God!” She screams. I have to turn the volume down. She’s so loud I’m sure the neighbors could hear her.

“Mom, relax.”

I make the half-assed attempt, knowing full and well she isn’t going to relax. This is her Superbowl. She couldn’t care less about football, but she loves to know about my love life. Previously, I’ve done my best to share as little as possible, because she gets way too invested for my liking. But desperate times call for desperate measures. I would much rather have my mom ask slightly invasive questions than talk to my dad about football.

“Matthew,” she yells offscreen. “Did you hear that?! Our baby boy is dating Sawyer.”

I cringe at the term ‘baby boy’. I haven’t been a ‘baby boy’ since I had a growth spurt in the seventh grade. The term of endearment is slightly embarrassing, but I love my mom, so I don’t say anything.

“Yeah, I heard him, June. That’s nice.”

My mom is super excited and my dad couldn’t care less. It’s not entirely shocking, but it’s still disappointing. I don’t expect

a friendly father-son chat, but an attempt at excitement would be appreciated.

He hasn't always been this disinterested in my life. When I was younger, he made it a point to spend time with me. Take me to do things. Sneak me out for ice cream without my mom knowing. He was so busy during the season when he was a player that he would spend the entire offseason with me. We would take trips to the beach and spend hours wandering around Disney, but once I started to show an interest in football, we would spend time throwing a ball in the backyard. When I was young, I loved playing football with my dad. I felt special.

As I grew older, something shifted and now he cares more about how I play football than our relationship. I think to him, it is our relationship. Since he retired, he's become consumed with my career, constantly calling and giving me tips on how to succeed.

My dad grabs the phone from my mom's hands, essentially ending our conversation. I frown at how dismissive he was to both her and me. To keep the peace, I say nothing about how he snatched the phone from her hand.

“Are you prepared for the playoff game on Sunday?”

Time's up.

Part of me wants to just hang up, but you don't just shrug off advice. Especially not advice from Matthew Parker. As much as I hate admitting it, he has a Super Bowl championship and that makes what he says potentially valuable.

“Feeling good about it.”

“This is make or break, you gotta focus all your attention on winning. Not on some girl.”

The suggestion that Sawyer is ‘some girl’ boils my blood and has me seeing red. He doesn’t have to act excited about my relationship or want to talk about it, but he will respect her.

“Her name is Sawyer, and she isn’t some girl,” I say, teeth clenched to hold back my anger. “Do not refer to her like that again.”

The anger in my voice must be apparent because he drops the topic of girlfriends and goes back to football. I spend ten minutes listening to him break down the Carolina Rams defense and what I need to do to score. All things I’ve heard from my coaches. I let him ramble on about the importance of playoffs and how my career rides on my performance. I make a valiant effort to let it all slide off, not allowing any of it to burrow under my skin. However, some of his comments worm their way into my mind. I can feel the worry settle into my bones. The anxiety to perform slowly creeping in.

The moment I can, I say goodbye and hang up the phone. I lean my head back on the couch and take a deep breath, trying to regulate my heartbeat. My phone dings and I look down, hoping it’s Sawyer.

Dad: Forgot to tell you.

Your Mom and I will be

at the game on Sunday.

The simmering, low level of anxiety I had surrounding the game and the playoffs immediately spikes, settling at a mid-level panic. I type out a response, knowing he will be upset if I don't respond.

Me: Alright.

I don't have the mental capacity to reply with anything else. I throw my phone to the other side of the couch, grab the remote, and turn on the T.V. As I sit on the couch watching crappy reality shows, I spend the rest of the afternoon counting down the minutes until Sawyer is off work.



The moment I walk into Sawyer's apartment, a weight lifts off my chest. Breathing is an easier task, and the anxiety for the upcoming game is a thought deep in the back of my mind rather than the focus.

Part of me wonders if it's too soon to tell her I love her. Every time I see her, I'm afraid the words are going to pop out of my mouth. It's a real fear. It almost happened. Twice. On one hand, if I told her, then I wouldn't have to worry about accidentally spilling the beans. On the other hand, I worry that if I say those three little words, she'll freak out. Rightfully so.

We've only been officially dating for a month. I may have been in love with her for years, but she hasn't been. The last thing I want to do is scare her with a declaration of love.

I slip my shoes off by the door and walk deeper into the apartment. I follow the chatter in the living room. Maren must be home and hanging out in there. At first, I was unsure about Maren, especially after her showdowns with Jack. She scared me a bit, I'll admit it. I couldn't get a read on her and it was unsettling. After book club, she slowly grew on me. She's funny as hell and it cracks me up how easily Jack can get under her skin. Most of all, she's a great friend to Sawyer. I don't doubt for a second that Maren would go to war for Sawyer, which is exactly what she deserves in a friend. Anyone who treats Sawyer like that is on my good side.

I waltz into the living room, unprepared for the scene before me. Both Sawyer and Maren are sprawled out on the couch, snacks surrounding them, watching some sort of sitcom. They both register my arrival at the same time.

"Henry!" they yell in unison.

I sit down between the two of them on the couch. Maren playfully shoves me with her foot as I lean over and place a chaste kiss on Sawyer's lips. She smiles at me, and not being able to help myself, I kiss her again, feeling her smile against my lips.

"Alright, lovebirds." Maren groans. Her foot shoves me again and I swat it away. She jams it back in my direction and I grab her ankle, yanking her in my direction. "Unhand me,

you heathen!” She slaps at my hand, trying to pry my fingers off her ankle.

“Don’t mess with me Maren,” I say, tickling the bottom of her foot.

“Uncle! Uncle! Jeez, you win,” she whines, flailing around. I can hear Sawyer snorting behind me as she laughs, her breaths ragged. I release Maren’s ankle and she immediately pulls her foot back.

I chuckle at her. She acts like she didn’t spend weeks scheming for us to tell each other how we feel. She’s insane but I do owe a part of this working out to her scheming. I lean back, resting my arm behind Sawyer and pulling her into my side. She moves, getting comfortable, and leans her head on my shoulder.

“How was your day?” Sawyer’s face is flushed with laughter and her green eyes glimmer. She pokes my side as I wink at the Maren in response to her glaring.

“Good. Long,” Sawyer responds. “Excited for the weekend.”

I turn and look at Maren, waiting for her response.

“Eh. Fine.” The sour look on her face suggests that her day was not fine. I don’t want to press, since it doesn’t seem like she wants to talk about it, but Sawyer has other plans.

“Lies. She had a horrible day at work. Her coworkers are assholes.”

Maren shoots daggers at Sawyer, but she holds her ground against a very intimidating Maren. I would be cowering if I

were Sawyer, but apparently, she's immune to whatever look Maren is giving her.

“They were assholes, yes. It doesn't impact my job, it's *fine*.”

Maren effectively shuts down the conversation, snatching a bag of goldfish off the coffee table and turning back towards the T.V. I look down at Sawyer, who looks resigned. The energy shifted dramatically from a simple question. Not sure how it happened, but not my business, and it surely doesn't look like this is the first time the conversation came up. Sawyer and I settle in and watch the show for a while when her phone rings. Picking it up from the coffee table, I recognize the photo on the screen.

“I can talk to them in my room if you want,” she offers.

“It's fine, I'll say hi,” Sawyer answers the Facetime call from her parents.

“Sawyer!” They both scream through the phone screen. She cringes at how loud they are while turning the volume down. Maren chuckles from her corner of the couch, shoveling down the crackers.

“Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad.” She smiles at them, excited they're calling. “I'm with Maren and Henry.”

She turns the camera around and shows both Maren and me to her parents. Maren waves and then goes back to watching her show, leaving Sawyer and me to talk to her parents.

“Henry,” Sawyer’s mom, Heather, coos. “You look so handsome.”

I instantly blush at the compliment. She tells me I look good every time I see her, and every time, the compliment always forces a scarlet hue to my cheeks. She shoots me a cheeky grin, suggesting she knows exactly what she’s doing, and swings her attention back to her daughter.

“We just called to say hello, Hun. See how you’re doing.”

“Good. Henry has a playoff game this weekend,” Sawyer says, sounding proud.

With that statement, Sawyer’s dad, Jim, jumps onto the screen. He wears the same goofy grin every time I see him.

“That’s right. We’re so proud of you, Henry.”

Heather nods her head in agreement, the pride in their voices evident. Surprise courses through me. Compared to the phone call with my parents earlier, this is one-eighty. I know my mom is proud of me, but she isn’t the best at expressing it. My father, on the other hand, I’m not sure anything I do will live up to his expectations. The fact that Sawyer’s parents are vocally proud of me stabs me directly in the chest.

Sawyer spends time regaling her week with her parents, and I add to the conversation when her parents ask me a question. Her mom chides her for not calling more, which she promptly blames on me. I only laugh at her shenanigans, kissing the top of her head. Her mom shrieks at the action and Sawyer looks up at me in amusement and incredulity. I just gave her mom

another reason to cry, not that she really needed it. Throughout the call, my mind keeps returning to the fact that they're proud of me. Eventually, Sawyer begins to wrap up the phone call. A couple of goodbyes and a few more tears—from Heather—later, Sawyer hangs up the phone.



In silence, Sawyer and I get ready for bed. Brushing our teeth. Getting dressed in pajamas. I shamelessly watch her as she puts on her cute pink shorts and matching top. I am a weak man. The acts themselves are so mundane, but the love coursing through me is powerful. I bite my tongue as we shuffle around her room so I don't accidentally drop the love bomb on her. I track Sawyer around the room as she continues her nighttime routine. She puts some goop-like thing on her lips then shuffles under the covers, saddling up next to me. Wrapping an arm around her, I drag her against me.

She begins to slowly trail her hand up and down my stomach while her head lays on my chest. Her nails lightly scratch against my skin, the sensation soothing and thrilling at the same time. Since we've officially started dating, there's another side of her that I hadn't experienced before. A touchy one. My girl is definitely a fan of physical touch. If it were up to me, I would keep her by my side every hour of the day just so she could play with my hair. It feels incredible, the way she pulls the strands and scratches my scalp, and I would consider selling my soul to make sure I can have it forever.

“Anything you need to tell me?” she asks, too casually to be considered normal.

I tense up, panicked. I rack my brain, searching for anything that I should have told Sawyer. I can't think of a single thing. I update her about the most mundane things every day. What I ate for breakfast. The color of the socks I'm wearing. I do whatever I can to have an excuse to talk to her, which means she knows everything. Clearly, there's something I didn't tell her, though, because you don't ask a question like that if you don't already know the answer.

“Um...I don't think so.”

At this point, I'm hoping she just fills me in on what I should have told her so I can apologize and we can move on to more exciting, sexy things.

“Why didn't you say anything about getting tickets for Micah and his dad?”

A shuddered breath escapes me. With everything happening with Sawyer and the pressure of playoffs looming, I had forgotten that I invited Micah and his dad to the game. After meeting Micah at GameChangers, I had wanted to get him his own jersey. I figured the tickets would be a nice addition, so he and his dad could spend time together. I remember how it felt to go to a game with my dad as a kid and I wanted Micah to experience the same excitement. Honestly, I didn't want anyone to think I was doing it for publicity or charity, so I didn't feel there was any need to say anything. Sawyer isn't just anybody, though, and I probably should have told her.

“I didn’t want the spotlight and then I kinda forgot.”

“Well...it was nice,” she says, leaning forward and pressing a kiss to my lips. Whatever goo was on her lips transfers to mine and the taste of strawberries lingers on our lips. My tongue darts out, savoring the taste.

Lifting her body, she swings her leg over my torso, straddling my hips. She slides right across my crotch, pulling a small groan from my lips. The sound lights a fire in her, and she repeats the motion. I knead her ass, pulling her closer to me, claiming her lips with mine. Forevermore, I will find the taste of strawberries erotic.

“If only there was a way I could show you how much I appreciate you,” she says, a slow grin spreading across her face as she continues to grind against me.

“I can think of a few.” I flip her beneath me, her giggles filling up the room.



CHAPTER 27

“I swear you could hear a hair pin drop, right when I felt the
moment stop”

right where you left me—Taylor Swift

Sawyer

The energy in the stadium is electric. I can feel the hum of anticipation deep in my bones. The endless potential. Win-loss records from the regular season no longer matter. I’m glued to my seat, waiting for the players to run onto the field. Henry running at full speed really gets my motor running, and the last thing I’m going to do is miss it. Not even for cheesy, gooey nachos.

Similar to the last game, Henry got Maren, Nathalie, and my seats for the game. The only difference is this time, we’re in the family section. He had asked if we wanted to be in one of

the family boxes, but all three of us chose to stay in the stands since we love the energy they have.

Nathalie showed up at our apartment to carpool earlier, looking like a mini version of Maren. Eye black covers her face and she rocks the jersey she bought at the game before. For someone who has very little football knowledge, she has gone all in. I had noticed something was different, but I chalked it up to the ensemble. Then, I realized she wasn't wearing glasses. Nathalie looked good. Really good. Other people noticed in the stadium too. She was oblivious to it all, which was endearing.

When Maren came out of her room this morning, her wardrobe stunned me, but not for the usual reasons. I've become accustomed to the eye black but instead of some random jersey, she had bought Jack's. I asked her why she would buy the jersey of her enemy; I truly had no idea what was going on in her mind. She simply stated that it was a way to get under his skin. I nearly choked and had to leave the room to prevent myself from bursting out in laughter.

It's not the jab that she thinks it is, but I'm not going to tell her that. Maren thinks she just one-upped Jack, but she fell right into his trap. I immediately texted Henry, hoping he still had his phone. He lost his mind, and now we're both hoping Jack notices and says something. Watching the two of them argue has become a kind of reality TV show for Henry and me. You never know what you're going to get, but no matter what, it's entertaining.

Finally, the players run out onto the field, and the crowd goes crazy. The three of us immediately jump to our feet, screaming at the top of our lungs. I spot Henry through the sea of players, running beside Jack. He turns his head towards us, scanning the crowd. The moment his eyes land on us, I can feel it. Giving us a small wave, he turns his head back towards the team.

I watch in rapt attention as Deon and another player saunter towards the center of the field for the coin toss. The referee announces the call, and the stadium goes silent for half a moment as the coin flips through the air. Landing on the ground, the choice goes to Seattle who choose to defer to the second half. Seattle kicks the ball and the crowd roars, the sound rumbling the ground.

The three of us have probably spent a total combined thirty seconds in our seats since the game began. The Mavericks are playing incredibly well, and Henry has been on fire. He scored early in the first quarter with a beautiful pass from Deon and since then, the momentum has been for the Mavericks. As much as it pains me to admit it, even Declan is playing well. It seems like the team has hit their stride, and being able to watch is incredible.

After an incredible stop by the defense, the ball is back to the offense. I shamelessly stare at Henry while he lines up on the line of scrimmage. I really need to convince him to wear those pants around the house, because his ass looks amazing. I continue to ogle him when the ball is snapped and he charges towards the defensive player in front of him, then takes a sharp

right towards the sideline. Deon launches the ball in Henry's direction and two seconds later, the ball lands flawlessly in his hands. Henry begins running toward the end zone at light speed. Suddenly, a player on the other team tackles Henry from behind, hitting him so hard I can nearly hear the collision from here.

My stomach flips and the nachos I ate earlier attempt to make an appearance. I've watched Henry get tackled before. It makes me uneasy every time, but I've never felt like this. My gut tells me something is very wrong. My skin prickles as I stare at the field, my eyes zeroed in on Henry's body laid out on the ground.

Maren sucks in a breath beside me as the hit replays on the big screen. My eyes never leave Henry. One second passes. Then two. The player on the other team gets up and shakes the hit off, but Henry stays on the ground. Jack and Deon sprint over to him. The noise in the stadium begins to quiet, but the roaring in my ears gets louder and louder.

"Get up," I whisper.

I see Maren and Nathalie exchange a look in my peripheral vision, but I can't tear my eyes away from Henry. Slowly, Maren grabs me and pulls me into her side, comforting me. In any other state, I would recognize the weight behind the gesture, but all I can feel is bone-deep terror. My hands begin to shake as I grab onto her shirt to ground myself.

"Get up," I say, louder. As if saying it loud enough will make him hear me and do what I say.

I watch as Deon turns around, scanning the sideline, eyes frantic. He yells something, and medics run over with a stretcher and a first aid kit. It's only been a minute since Henry got hit, but it feels like a lifetime. Jack stands over Henry, his face the most serious I've ever seen. Tears prickle my eyes as I watch the man I love lay on the ground, unmoving.

“Get up,” I murmur, one more time.



Henry

The moment I landed on the ground, I knew the hit was bad. We had both landed odd and the pain radiating from my foot was debilitating. Daggers being stabbed into my ankle with no reprieve in sight. I know better than to try to move, so I lay on the turf. My breathing is erratic, and the pain is all I can think about. I turn my head and see Jack and Deon running towards me, worry etched into their features. Deon kneels next to me, eyes frenziedly searching my body.

“My foot,” I tell him in between the shooting pains. My brain is fuzzy and adrenaline shoots through my veins, the only thing keeping me conscious as the pain begins to worsen.

Deon turns around and screams for the medics and athletic staff, who begin running from the sideline towards us. I peer

up at Jack, who is just staring down at me, face pale. *I must look worse than I feel.* We make eye contact, and I can see the tears begin to well up in his eyes. Jack crying isn't a good sign for me. I take a deep breath and close my eyes.

I open them a moment later to medics surrounding me, asking me a million questions. Did I hit my head? Where is the pain? Do I think I can stand? I answer all the questions as they move to get a cart to carry me off the field. Someone shines a light in my eyes as another tenderly touches my ankle. I hiss in pain and the trainers share a weighted look. The athletic trainer gives me the go-ahead and I sit up. The movement causes pain to race up my leg from my ankle, and my vision blackens. The stadium begins to clap when they see me sit up and for the first time, Sawyer pops into my mind. I can only imagine the terror coursing through her right now.

“Jack!” I yell, trying to get his attention through the sound of the crowd and the people surrounding me. He snaps out of whatever trance he's in and pushes through the trainers towards me. He nearly topples over one of them, not sparing them a second glance. “I need you to get to Sawyer. Tell her I'm okay. Find her after the game, get her to the hospital.”

Solemn, he nods, then he books it towards the sideline where the girls are sitting in the stands. Knowing Jack will take care of Sawyer eases a weight in my chest and I focus on the trainers and Deon, who hasn't left my side. Gingerly, they lift me, avoiding putting weight on my left leg, and help me wobble to the training cart that will carry me out. I force a

wave in Sawyer's direction, hoping she will understand it for what it is. A signal that I'm okay.

Gently, they place me on the cart, trainers on either side of me. At a snail's pace, they drive off the field while the crowd cheers and claps. The only thing I do the entire time on the way to the hospital is hope. Hope that I'm not as injured as I think I am. Hope that Sawyer isn't too freaked out. Hope that everything will be okay.



CHAPTER 28

“You left a hole in my chest when you left and my heart followed you out the door, And I stood and bled in the hall, watched it all, and the mess that it left on the floor”

I Burned LA Down—Noah Cyrus

Henry

The coaching staff surrounds me as the doctor walks back into the room. Monitors beep and sneakers squeak against the shiny, tile floor. An incessant buzzing sound fills my ears as I fiddle with the wires connected to my body. Hours after the game ended and several tests later, the doctors seem to have a diagnosis. Every muscle in my body tenses up, preparing for the worst.

“I’m going to get straight to the point,” the doctor starts. “You’ve torn your Achilles tendon.”

The blood rushes from my face and I can feel myself beginning to get dizzy. Thank God I'm sitting down because I definitely would have fallen if he gave me that news standing up. A torn Achilles is way worse than I was expecting. I had thought I broke a bone in my ankle at worst and had a bad sprain at best. The buzz transforms into a roar in my ears and it becomes hard to focus on anything else going on. The room begins to spin and close in on me. Voices fade away.

Shock.

That's what this is. I'm in shock.

"What's the prognosis?" I distantly hear Coach Barrett ask. It sounds like he's underwater. Muffled to my ears.

"After surgery and regimented physical therapy, I would say six to nine months to get back to full strength."

I don't hear the rest of the conversation, simply replaying the numbers in my mind.

Nine months.

Hopefully.

What was once shock descends into full-blown panic. The adrenaline of being injured is beginning to wear off, and the dread is rising in my body. Fast. The doctor and coaches finish talking, and Coach Barrett walks over to the hospital bed I'm in.

"We're in this together, Henry," he says, placing a hand on my shoulder. The gesture meant to comfort only curdles my stomach.

Unable to speak, I nod at him. The door to the room swings open and my eyes land on my parents. My mom's face is tear-soaked and blotchy whereas my father's shows no outward emotion at all. His eyes are dark and his jaw is tense. Until this moment, I had forgotten they had attended the game. I was so focused on making sure Sawyer was okay, I forgot to tell my parents I was fine. Guilt trickles into my gut at the look on my mom's face, the look of pure fright.

"I'll give you a moment," Coach Barrett says, walking towards the exit and nodding at both of my parents in passing.

The moment my coach leaves, my mom barrels towards my bed, throwing her arms around me. Her breath hitches as she frantically pats my body, searching for any additional injuries. I throw my arms around her, hugging her back, leaning into her. It's a hug I didn't know I needed, but now that I have it, the panic is fading. Her being here feels like a lifeline. Something to make sure I don't float away from the pain and anxiety and despair. Because the prognosis feels like I've been dropped into the middle of the ocean with no way to get back to shore.

"I was terrified," she says, through tears. I've been lucky that I haven't been injured like this before and it's clear from my mom's appearance that the whole situation threw her. I grab her hand and squeeze it, reassuring her I'm safe. "What happened?" she whispers, almost afraid to ask.

I relay to them what happened and what the doctor said. My mom holds tight to my hand and reassures me that everything

will work out. Standing at the end of the bed, my father has yet to speak.

Not a single word.

My mom wipes her face and stands from the edge of the bed. “I’m going to go clean up and get a coffee. Want anything, Matt?” she asks, looking at my father. Concern flickers over her gaze at my father’s stony appearance.

He shakes his head, and she hesitates but ultimately grabs her purse and disappears from view. The moment she leaves the room, his demeanor changes. The once blank expression morphs into cold fury. If I hadn’t already resigned myself to an interaction the moment he walked through the door, the one-eighty would scare me. He spends a few minutes saying nothing. Simply pacing the length of the room, exuding energy so angrily it makes me lean back in the bed to distance myself from him.

“Well....” he starts, shoving his hands in his pockets. “I can’t say I’m surprised.” The humorless laugh that escapes him echoes in the room.

That makes one of us because this is all a surprise to me. I’m not sure what the hell he’s talking about, but I’m sure he’s about to tell me. I stay silent, knowing that speaking will only drag this out longer. Emotionally, I’m running on fumes, and this conversation is going to take everything I have.

“If you had worked harder, trained harder, you wouldn’t be in this position. I told you time and time again how important

it was to focus,” he chastises me like I’m a small child who drew on the walls with markers and not a grown man.

The worst part is, I feel like that small child. I know I didn’t do anything wrong but hearing him tell me it could have been avoided hits me straight in the gut. Not once in his career did he get hurt.

“Now you’re injured and you haven’t finished your first season,” he continues. “What are you going to do now?”

I say silent, assuming it’s a rhetorical question. I have no idea what I’m going to do. The only thing I can do, I guess. Get the surgery, do the rehab, and hope the Mavericks keep me on the roster. My dad stares at me, pointedly, and I realize he wants a response.

“I’ll do the rehab, the doctor said I should recover just fine.”

“And if you don’t?”

Recover, he means. What if I don’t recover? It wasn’t something I had thought about until this moment, and the thought is incapacitating. I don’t know what I would do if I can’t play anymore. I haven’t been on the team long enough for my guarantee, and no other team in the league would take me, not with an injury like this and no guarantee that I would recover fully. I would essentially be back at square one. The thought is haunting.

I have no response to his question.

“You better hope everything goes well, because if it doesn’t Henry,” he pauses and my chest goes tight, fearful of what he

will say next. “You’ll have nothing.”

With that, my mom walks back into the room, a coffee in her hand. The bags under her eyes are dark and she looks haunted. As she walks up to my father, anger flickers over her face. An emotion I haven’t seen from my mother much in my life. She stands beside him, shoulders tense. He attempts to grab her hand, but she shifts away. Subtle but apparent.

“We’ll give you time to rest, I think there’s someone else here who wants to see you.”

Sawyer bolts through the door a moment later. Her eyes are frantic and bloodshot, and her hair flies everywhere. She looks ragged, but I’ve never seen a more beautiful sight. The tightness in my chest loosens as she flies towards my bed.

“Thank god, you’re okay,” she says, immediately grabbing my hand. Her skin is clammy as she grips my hand, her fingers squeezing tight against mine. My parents slip through the door behind her, leaving us alone. “Jack had the usher—he...he...” she hiccups, sobs wracking her body as she gulps down air. “Sawyer, breathe,” I rub soothing circles on her back, trying to calm her.

“I was so scared,” she admits. Her voice is quiet as she looks at me, her eyes brimming with tears. “You were just lying there, and I thought...” She doesn’t finish but I can see the fear in her eyes. I felt the same fear when I was lying on the field.

“I’m alright.” I try to reassure her just as much as myself, but the worries seem to worm their way deep into my core.

She pulls up a chair next to the bed, her hand latched to mine as we sit in silence.

The air is heavy between the two of us. Both our fears mingle in the space, the uncertainty of my future staring us in the face. The feeling of relief I felt seeing her transforms into something different. Anguish. A small voice in the back of my mind whispers the words my father told me. That I have no direction right now. Nothing to fall back on and no guarantee that I'll be able to play football again. I fight to dispel them, to disprove them, but I fall short. They sit and linger as I watch Sawyer flutter around the space, tidying up to keep herself busy. She smooths out the sheets and then organizes her purse. I can see the anxiety eating at her. I notice the bags under her eyes deepen as doctors and nurses come in and out, checking my vitals. She's a worrier and I'm nothing but a cinder block that will drag Sawyer under with me if I let her.

My reality sinks in and the truth hits me like a semi-truck barreling down a highway. Fast and painful.

I know Sawyer better than I know anyone. I've spent years loving her, being in love with her, so I know exactly who she is. Sawyer is kind and loyal and caring, and she will stand by me through this, no matter the outcome. I love her for it. But I can't let her do it. She deserves more. Someone who can give her everything she could ever want and need. A person I'm not sure I can be. Not now. The only option I can come up with will shatter me, but maybe I can prevent her from too much heartache. For Sawyer, this relationship is new. She will

recover. I know I won't, but I won't let her get dragged down with me.

I pull my hand away from hers, placing it on my lap. The gesture immediately warns Sawyer that something's off.

"Henry, what's wrong?" Her eyes shift down to my foot, "Are you in pain? I can find a nurse." Sawyer rises from the chair.

I let out an empty laugh. "What's wrong?" I echo back, voice full of condescension. I force my features to go cold, the same way my father did. The similarities between the two of us make me queasy.

"I—I don't understand." She searches my face for an answer, but I just stare back at her, my heart breaking in the process. "I can't begin to imagine how you're feeling, but we'll get through it. Together."

Her face softens as she takes a step in my direction. She's going to comfort me, to tell me how things will work out. I yearn for the words, for her to hold me and banish every fear and worry but dragging her down with me is cruel to her.

"No." The one-syllable word comes out harsh. The moment I say it, it feels as if the world stopped spinning, and birds stopped chirping. Every sentence I say, my soul shatters more and more.

"No?"

The softness forms into confusion then something even more heartbreaking. Sadness.

“I can’t do this, Sawyer. The thing between us. It’s not working.” I quickly gesture between us, barely looking at her. Everything inside me screams to take it back, to say I was lying. To tell her it’s not true. To drag her into my arms and never let her go. But I hold steadfast in my declaration, knowing that in time she can see the mercy I’m trying to give her.

“Wha—what are you saying?” Her voice cracks as she asks the question, and the sound hits me straight in the gut, crumbling what little left I have. “This *thing*?”

The hurt in her tone guts me from stem to stern.

“We were foolish to think this could become anything serious long term. This thing just wasn’t meant to last. I think —,” my voice breaks as I spit out the last part, “I think we made a mistake. We should never have been anything more than friends.”

She stares at me in disbelief. Her eyes blink rapidly as she works to process what I’m saying, scrambling to understand why I’m saying the things I am.

“Do you—” she chokes out, tears welling in her eyes. “Do you mean that?”

She’s giving me a chance. A chance to take it back. I almost give in. I nearly drop to my knees and take it all back. The pain in her eyes, the slump of her shoulders begs me to give in.

“Yes.”

Three letters. All it takes.

Her eyes lock with mine, tears mingling with the gold flecks in her irises as she hunts for confirmation that my words have substance. Standing there in silence, it seems she finds what she is looking for. The tears fall from her eyes down her cheeks, and I watch as I break her. Her chest deflates and her shoulders curl inward. My soul feels as though it's been beaten and battered and trampled. But I see no other option. No other way out.

I'm on the verge of throwing up and taking back everything I said, so I do the only thing I can think of. Taking a deep breath, I demolish what's left of my heart.

“Just go, Sawyer.”

“But I—I thought we—I gave you *everything*.” She wrings her hands together, tears streaming down her face. “I thought this was it for us.”

I had thought so too, but I won't let her sink with me.

Looking away from her, I effectively end the conversation. Dismissing her.

I listen, as tears build and fall in my eyes, while she grabs her purse and runs out the door, taking my heart with her.



CHAPTER 29

“How could I think that all that I gave you was enough, ‘cause every time I get too close, I just go mess it up”

Mess It Up—Gracie Abrams

Sawyer

I return to my apartment on autopilot. The fact I made it into the parking garage without crashing into anyone is a miracle. Numbness courses through my body. My mind is dull, and empty except the words that keep replaying in my mind, like a broken record. Over and over.

I stood and watched as he dropped on the field and it felt like my heart was out there with him. I nearly threw up and clutched onto Maren to keep standing. Having to watch as he got carted off was one of the most frightening moments of my life. Jack yelled to Maren that Henry was okay, but it didn't

make it easier to breathe. Because Henry was somewhere, injured and alone. The smell of disinfectant and the sound of beeping terrified me as I entered the hospital room, but when Henry's deep, blue eyes connected with mine, I was finally able to take a full breath. Not in a million years had I thought I would leave that hospital room broken. A shell of the person I was when I walked in.

Getting out of the car, I move towards the elevator, feeling like I'm moving in slow motion. My limbs don't feel like they're my own, and I can hear the blood pumping in my ears. I shuffle out of the elevator and towards the apartment. Standing in front of the door, I dig through my bag to find my keys. My hands shake as I riffle through my belongings. Before I can find them, the door swings open, Maren standing on the other side, face tightened with worry. She won't admit it, but she was as terrified for Henry as I was.

The worry on her face for Henry knocks down the last thing that has kept me standing, moving. I wasn't sure there was anything left of me to shatter after Hurricane Henry, but I was wrong. In the hallway of our building, my world finally comes crashing down. The conversation in the hospital room catches up to me. I burst into sobs, and Maren drags me into her chest, closing the door behind me. Unable to stop, I use her shirt as my own personal tissue, tears staining her shoulder. She grabs the purse from my hands, leaving it by the entryway and backs me into the living room, to the couch, never releasing me from the hug.

Wordlessly, I sit, and she wraps a blanket around me. Tears continue to stream down my face as I watch her move through the kitchen, grabbing mugs and every piece of chocolate in the cupboard. Finished in the kitchen, Maren softly places a mug into my hand, then sits directly beside me. I take a sip, expecting coffee or tea, but instead, I take a large gulp of wine.

I choke from the unexpectedness of wine in my coffee cup and need a moment to compose myself.

“It’s easier to drink quickly with a mug,” she explains after I finish choking, taking a gulp of her own wine.

She doesn’t know what happened, but she knows something is wrong. Not that it’s hard given my breakdown in the hallway. Gratitude floods me. I’ve never had someone like this in my life. That will help me pick up the pieces when I fall apart. The realization sends another wave of tears through me.

I know that I need to say something. Explain the tears and snot and complete and total breakdown, but admitting what happened feels like accepting it. Something twists in my chest at the thought, and panic swells within me. I can feel my breathing become rapid, the walls beginning to close in on me as what was said in that hotel room sinks in. Tears continue to roll down my cheeks as I start to hyperventilate.

Maren quickly scoots closer to me on the couch and grabs my hand. I couldn’t be more thankful for the physical touch than I am right now. She squeezes once.

“Breathe, Sawyer,” she commands, as she begins to take deep breaths in and out.

I follow her direction, timing my breaths with hers. The room begins to pull back, and the pressure in my chest lets up a little.

“He broke up with me,” I mutter, no louder than a breath.

Any louder makes it real. I’m not ready for reality. I don’t think I ever will be. No part of me believes I will ever truly recover from this.

I know she heard me by the sharp intake of breath. I do the last thing I want. I tell her everything. I relay every word he said to me in the hospital room. I share with her every way he broke my heart. Tears stream down my face as I relive every moment, and my heart aches as I repeat the words he told me.

I wait, expecting anger from her. For one of us to rage against the injustice of the situation. It should be me, but I’m too hurt to do anything but cry. I sit, clutching my mug of wine like a life raft, waiting for her to say something, but nothing comes. Just silence. It feels worse than fury.

Looking over at Maren, I see something sadder than rage.

Sympathy.

But I don’t want that. I want someone to be upset in the way I should be. For someone to throw things and yell and feel the indignation.

The sudden burst of anger in my body shocks me. It starts a small kernel in the back of mind and blazes into a raging inferno. I jump off the couch and begin to pace through the living room, the blanket around my shoulders trailing as I

move back and forth. There are too many emotions coursing through my body to stand still.

Maren watches me cautiously from the couch, looking unsure of how to help or what to say.

“How dare he?” I mutter, mostly to myself, as I continue my heated pacing.

I begin to replay the entire relationship in my mind. Every touch, every moment. Henry was the one to admit his feelings. He made the first move. I was vulnerable with him. In ways I’ve never been with anyone before. And this is how he treats me? This is what he thinks I deserve?

I let out a humorless laugh at the situation. I have no doubt I look unhinged. I’m right back to where I was with Declan only months ago. My heart wasn’t shattered when I broke up with Declan. Not the way it is right now. But I’m still here. Alone. With one common denominator.

Me.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Maren asks from the couch. She sips on her wine as her eyes track me.

I stop to look at her, the weight of what I realized moments ago pressing against my chest. “Do you think it’s me?” I ask, vulnerability and fear lacing the question.

Her brows furrow together and her head cocks to the side, so I elaborate.

“I mean Declan probably cheated on me and Henry broke up with me. Within three months my only two relationships have

started and ended.”

It would make sense, wouldn't it? That I'm the reason neither has worked out. If it was just Declan, I would chalk it up to him. But it's Henry, too. I never thought Henry would think the same as Declan. That we were better off as friends. The realization settles deep in my chest. I am the common denominator. In all my relationships, as friends or more, I've been left. Something about me is unlovable. Or too difficult to love. Not worth the time or the energy. I mean, they both basically said so. Declan told me we weren't compatible, and Henry told me we were better off as friends. Neither of them saw the relationship the same way I did. Shame fills me. I feel foolish and silly and sad. So, so sad.

“No,” Maren says, breaking my train of thought. The word is harsh. Commanding. “Don't even go there.”

Too late.

I look down at my feet, avoiding her gaze. The truth is sitting right in front of me holding a massive sign. I am the one who is too much.

“Did he tell you why?” she asks as gently as she can. Gentle is not a word I would use to describe Maren but her effort to comfort me is valiant.

I shake my head and I watch her as she tries to work through her thoughts.

“Nothing at all?”

I shake my head again, but her confusion nags at something in the back of my mind. The lack of explanation seems off. I expected something like that with Declan, but that's not Henry's style. He would tell me why.

The indignation and anger return with fervor. If he is going to break up with me, I at least deserve an explanation. I have the right to know what went wrong. What I did. Because to me, everything felt perfect. Right. For me, Henry was the *one*. The person I wanted to spend my days and nights with. He was who I wanted to share a life with, to grow old with. The realization that those things will never happen is death by a thousand cuts. Each small hope and dream I had for us is a slice against my flesh, cutting me down to the core.

I settle into the fact that if I want the answer, I'll have to face him again. Knowing that the anger releases from my body, leaving nothing but bone-deep sadness.

I crawl back onto the couch, curl into Maren's side, and sob. For the loss of the relationship. For the loss of my best friend. For the loss of the future I had imagined.



CHAPTER 30

“Is it insensitive for me to say, “Get your shit together so I can love you?” Is it really your anxiety that stops you from giving me everything, or do you just not want to?”

Renegade—Big Red Machine, Taylor Swift

Henry

Groggily, I peel my eyes open and the scent of oranges and flowers surrounds me. My heart skips in my chest at the smell, the reminder of Sawyer. I take note of my surroundings and my heart stops beating altogether. Sawyer sits in the chair beside my bed, staring down at her phone. After what I said to her yesterday, the last thing I expected was for her to show up again. I should have known better. No matter how badly I hurt her, she would still be here to make sure I was okay. It’s the kindness that I fell in love with. I lay

there a moment, just taking her in, since it might very well be the last time I get to look at her, fully. I know it's my fault, I pushed her away. I'm under no assumption that it wasn't entirely my fault. Every single thing in my life is crumbling in my hands, and there's nothing I can do to stop it.

“Why are you here?” I ask her, forcing my voice to go hard and deep. It was difficult enough to send her away yesterday, and the agony in my chest hasn't left. My heart was ripped from my chest the moment she walked out the hospital room door. Seeing her here is reopening the self-inflicted wound in my chest where my heart should be.

She jolts in her seat, unaware that I was awake. Settling herself, she puts her phone back into her purse and turns to look at me. Her hair and skin are dull and she looks tired, her eyes red-rimmed. My stomach plummets as I catalog her ragged appearance.

“You owe me an explanation,” she demands, her gaze focused entirely on me, though instead of looking at me, it feels like she's looking through me.

“For?”

“For whatever bullshit you pulled yesterday. I want a reason. What did I do?” With that question her voice cracks, and whatever fire she had leaves her. “Why are you doing this? I don't understand. Is it me?”

I open my mouth to respond. To shut down any thoughts of self-doubt she has. To tell her it's me. I'm the one who's not

good enough. That it has nothing to do with her. But I don't. I stay silent. No explanation seems enough.

Sawyer's eyes search mine, pleading for a response. Her eyes fall shut and she inhales a deep breath and when her eyes open, they're resolute. She barrels forward, shattering what's left of my heart when she does.

"You're not going to say anything at all?" She draws her bottom lip into her mouth, giving me opportunity after opportunity to say something. Even now, after everything, she's trying. When she realizes I'm not going to speak, her demeanor changes. "Fine, but I have some things I want to say."

A heavy moment sits between us, everything balancing on the precipice. Whatever she is going to say will destroy me. And I welcome it if it softens her pain.

"Declan ignored me and made me look stupid at that bar, one of my worst fears and biggest insecurities bubbled right back to the surface." Her eyes shine as she speaks quietly, her lip trembling as she holds back tears. Her next words eradicate what little left I had holding myself together. "That I'm unlovable. That the reason I've always struggled to make friends and didn't get asked out in college was because something was wrong with *me*." She jams a finger against her chest. "That *I* was the reason all my friendships faded, and guys never called me back. That it was simply in my DNA. I had believed it for such a long time. Until you came along. We

got partnered for that dumb project and something shifted. Almost like we understood each other at an atomic level.”

I force myself to look at her, to witness the pain I caused. The damage I created. A small penance for the misery I’ve created with my choices. I’ll take her agony and hold it for her, protect her from it. Sawyer can’t see the choice I’m making is for her and I can’t blame her. So, I watch her fall apart in front of me.

“You made me feel loveable, that someone wanted what I brought to the table. And that meant the world to me. I had felt *so* alone before we met. Then, our relationship changed, and I felt loved in a different way. A new and exciting way. But yesterday, you brought back every thought I have spent years trying to banish. Those words—what you said, it hurt me, Henry. Deeply. You did the one thing I never thought you would be capable of. You made me feel unlovable again. Disposable. And my heart broke into a million little pieces. The one person who made me feel safe and accepted ripped the rug from under my feet in a matter of minutes.”

The tears welling in her eyes fall, trailing down her cheeks. “I need to know why.”

“I have nothing now,” I whisper, the reality almost too painful to share with her. “Football was the one thing I was good at, and I can’t play. The doctors say I should be able to play again, but what if that doesn’t happen? What if I re-injure myself? I don’t know what to do now, and that’s the last thing you deserve. To be with someone who has nothing to offer,

because you deserve the world and I'm not sure I have anything to offer if I don't have football."

I lay my truth bare. All my wounds and self-doubt lay open for her. The reality is that I may not be able to give her everything she deserves. Everything my dad has said has been true. Looking at my life outside of football, I have nothing. No plan to fall back on. No friends outside of the team. I am utterly empty without football.

She looks like she's been slapped, shock and anger morphing on her features. Then, the anger fades and a heavy realization sets into her features.

"You don't get to tell me what I deserve. I decide that. I could give two fucks that you play football. It has nothing to do with why I love you."

Did she...did she just say she loves me?

"Wipe that idiotic look off your face. Of course, I love you, but until you learn to love yourself, Henry, this won't work. *We* won't work," she says, gesturing between us, more tears falling from her beautiful green eyes. I want to wrap her up in my arms and wipe the tears away. To comfort her because I know she's in pain. The urge is overwhelming. But I stay rooted to my hospital bed. I'm the reason for her heartbreak and tears, and no matter what I say, I can't change that fact.

"I need you to figure out who you are and what you want because if you don't, I will spend the rest of however long this thing between us manages to last, wondering and worrying if you truly love *me* or if you only love how you hate yourself

less when I'm around. And that's unfair to me. Figure out what you want and who *you* want to be, not whoever you think you're supposed to be. And if you still want to end this, end us, then so be it. If you reflect and realize you don't feel the same as I do, that we really are better off as friends, it will hurt, but I'll understand. Because I would give up every ounce of my own happiness if it meant you could have all of yours."

After saying her piece, she grabs her purse from the floor, stands up, and disappears. She leaves no room for discussion as she walks out the door and I stop fighting my tears, allowing them to fall freely as I sit in my hospital bed. In twenty-four hours, I've lost everything that was important to me. Sawyer. Football. I feel alone like I'm floating in the ocean, searching for the shore in the dark, with no beacon of light to guide me.

The realization of how little I have left pulls a sob from my chest. Turning onto my side as gently as I can with my ankle, I curl into the pillow, falling asleep with tears streaming down my cheeks.



I wake up sometime later, the room shrouded in shadows from the setting sun. Leaning up against the hospital bed, my mother sits in the same seat Sawyer occupied only hours earlier. The thought of Sawyer pulls a choking breath from my chest, alerting my mom I'm awake. She looks up from the book she was reading and takes in my expression.

I see the concern rush to her face. The sympathy strikes a chord and she scoots the chair towards the side of the bed taking my hand in between hers, while I grieve for everything I've lost. Given up.

“Henry, look at me.” Our eyes connect, mine the mirror image of hers. Her bright blue eyes look sad and tired. “Sweetheart, I owe you an apology.” I shake my head, unsure of what she has to apologize for. “I heard what your father said to you yesterday. It was cruel and unacceptable and so, so far from the truth.”

She scoots her chair closer to my bedside and strokes my hand. Drawing in breaths is arduous and words seem impossible. All I can do is shake my head in disbelief.

“You are the greatest thing that has ever happened to me. To your father, too. I have spent every single day proud that you're my son. You have been the light of my life, and I am so deeply sorry that you have ever doubted how honored I am to be your mom. How proud your father is. I am not justifying his actions or words, because he was wrong. He got caught up in what he thought was the best for you and lost sight of what is really important.”

Her brows bend together, then she looks around the room at the wires and machines. “Is Sawyer at work?”

Fuck.

My lip trembles as the image of her in tears jumps to the front of my mind.

“Tell me what’s wrong, honey,” she sees right through me, she always has.

The sincerity in her voice breaks me, and I let it all out. Every thought I have about myself. What happened with Sawyer. Everything with Dad and the pressure I feel to succeed. She sits through the entire thing, silent, except for the occasional hum to show she was listening. By the time I finish, I feel drained. Every emotion I’ve bottled up rushed out of me all at once, leaving me feeling empty.

“Your worth has nothing to do with football and everything to do with who you are.”

“Mom,” I start, but she cuts me off.

“I have never seen you happier than when you’re with Sawyer. It seems like she turns your world into technicolor. She is a beautiful person and she brings out the best in you.” Her eyes shine with unshed tears. I’ve seen and cried more tears in the last forty-eight hours than I have ever in my life. “So, listen to her. Find out what you want, but I hope you see how wonderful you are and how happy she has made you.”

I say nothing. There is nothing I can say. We sit in silence together for about a half hour when a nurse comes in to check my vitals. After the nurse leaves, my mom gathers up her book and purse. She leans down, placing a kiss on my forehead, then moves towards the door.

“Find yourself, Henry. I love you.”

“Love you too, Mom.”

Not long after she leaves, I fall back asleep. The emotions from the day leave me drained and lost.



CHAPTER 31

“I used to float, but now I just fall down. I used to know, but I’m not sure now”

What Was I Made For—Billie Eilish

Henry

Three loud bangs at my door disrupt the fog in my brain. My couch has become my best friend since I was released from the hospital. Given the massive boot on my foot, I can’t go far without my crutches, making the comfy cushions my home base for all my thrilling activities. Said activities include watching movies, eating takeout, and constantly thinking about Sawyer. The latter has caused a tear or two. Okay, a lot of tears.

I grab my crutches and hobble towards the door, assuming it’s the food I ordered. Instead of my Chinese food, I’m

greeted by two massive walls of muscle who look less than happy to see me.

It's been nearly a week since my surgery and a few days since I was discharged from the sterile hospital room full of my worst memories. Outside a few texts to my mom and Coach Barrett, I haven't spoken to anyone. On purpose. I don't want the false optimism or the 'it will get better' from either of them.

I also can't stomach having to admit I broke up with Sawyer. I feel shitty enough about everything, the last thing I need is for them to add fuel to the fire. All they will do is tell me what I already know. That I'm an idiot. That Sawyer deserves better.

Apparently, the time I spent avoiding them has come to an end since they're both standing in my entryway. And they look pissed. Rightfully so. I probably would be too if I were them.

"Move," Jack commands as he pushes his way through my doorway into my apartment. Deon walks behind him, barely glancing at me as he passes by. I knew this confrontation was coming, I was just hoping I would be more prepared. I haven't talked to either of them since I was stretchered off the field. What am I supposed to say to them? That I broke Sawyer's heart and my own? That my career may be over and I'm falling apart? Yeah, no. I would rather wither away on this couch never to be seen or heard from again. A much easier way to go.

I sigh and close the door, shuffling towards them. I sit down on the couch, elevating my ankle on the ottoman. The moment

I've situated myself, Jack starts.

“What the actual fuck were you thinking?”

Oh. He's *mad* mad. He never swears unless he's pissed. He wouldn't be this upset about my injury, which means someone filled him in about what happened with Sawyer. The thought of him learning about what I said to her causes shame to sliver up my spine, settling deep in my gut. I'm not proud of what I said, but it felt like the only way to get her to leave. She would have stayed otherwise, and I couldn't allow that.

“I would also like to know,” Deon adds, raising his hand. “I'm not sure what you did, but Jack dragged me here after practice and he swore, so it must be bad.”

“I got a text from Maren,” Jack says, shooting daggers at me.

Knowing Maren texted Jack about what happened sickens me. Her putting aside how she feels about him to text him gives me an idea of just how badly I hurt her. The thought of Sawyer in any type of distress causes my stomach to churn.

Deon's head swings to Jack, the information news to him as well.

“Well...Do you want to explain why Maren texted me to Deon or should I?” I freeze up the moment I open my mouth. I should explain myself, but every excuse or explanation I have falls short. “No? Well, I can fill everyone in then. Henry broke up with Sawyer.” Deon gasps, but Jack continues, “While he was in the hospital.”

“What?” Deon whispers, looking hurt and confused.

“She asked why, and he said it was because he wasn’t good enough.” I cringe when he puts it like that, it sounds childish and dumb coming from his mouth. “Then she told him to figure out what he wants and let her know, but he hasn’t called.”

He’s right. I haven’t called. I’ve wanted to, but I don’t know what to say. I don’t know what I want or where to go from here, and she deserves those answers. I can’t face her again until I have an answer for her. So, instead, I’ve just wallowed in my apartment, trying to figure out what I want. I could say that I want her, which is the truth. But it’s also a cop-out, and she doesn’t deserve that.

“Sorry,” I mutter. At this point, I don’t even know what I’m apologizing for. Not telling him. Hurting Sawyer. Not being able to decide what I want. All of the above.

Deon shakes his head in disappointment. “I don’t get it, man. You’re in love with her, right?”

“I love her more than anything on this earth.”

“Then why break up with her?” Deon questions.

“I did it *because* I love her. She shouldn’t be tied to someone whose life is up in the air and has nothing to offer.”

Up until this moment, Jack has stayed silent since he told Deon what happened. Simply walking to one side of my living room, turning, and then heading in the other direction. Back and forth. My reasoning ends his short-lived quiet.

“Bullshit,” he growls. “That’s a shitty excuse and we both know it.”

Deon hums his agreement to Jack’s statement.

Anger bubbles up inside me. It already feels like my heart has been run over by a semi-truck. I know that I hurt Sawyer, but I did it because I know her. She would never walk away, even if I pulled her under with me. Like the captain of the Titanic, she would rather go down fighting than abandon ship. Sawyer is full of kindness and compassion. Helping people is in her nature and those traits are one of the numerous reasons I love her, but it’s not always fair to her. So, I made the choice. To release her from the burden. A decision where I shattered my own heart in hopes that hers would not break completely.

“I don’t need you two telling me shit I already know,” I practically yell, the sadness morphing into irritation. “I feel like shit, but I wouldn’t change a thing. I won’t take her down with me.”

“What in the hell are you talking about?!” Jack yells back, angrily stomping in front of the couch.

“I have nothing without football, and she deserves everything.”

Jack stops pacing to face me. Realization dawns on Jack’s face, and it softens. I hate the way sympathy fills his features so quickly like he suddenly understands me.

“Henry,” he says, quietly. “That’s so far from the truth.”

Jack sits down on the couch next to me, his gaze heavy on the side of my face. I shake my head, unwilling to believe what he's saying.

“He's right, man. Your worth has nothing to do with how you perform on a football field,” Deon adds from the other side of me.

What the two of them say breaks something inside me, and every emotion and regret and fear I've bottled up inside for years breaks loose. The comments have a different weight than what my mom told me. Not any less important but hearing the same words from my friends opens a chasm in my chest, cracking me open. A tear streams down my face as I look Jack in the eyes and say out loud the one thing I've never voiced. The one fear I've held onto so tightly it suffocates me.

“I'm so lost.”

There it is.

The truth.

I have no idea who I am without football. Sure, I have a college degree in advertising, but I have no idea what to do with that. I was required to pick something, but I never saw myself using it. I have no idea who I want to be. What I want. I've spent so long focusing on what my dad wants or what people expect of me. Play Division One college football. Get drafted to the NFL. Lead a successful career. I've never stopped to ask myself what I want. I love football, but I've treated it as if it's the only thing about me that's important.

Worse, I've allowed my father to tell me that, too. Let him reinforce the idea that I'm worthless without football.

I wait for Jack or Deon to respond to my confession. Tell me I'm overreacting. That I should be grateful I play in the NFL. Respond in the way my father would. The way most people would.

"Being able to admit that is brave," Deon says. "Something not many would share." He looks over at Jack, a silent conversation occurring between them.

"Look," Jack starts, "No one can tell you those things or answer those questions, except for you. It sucks that you're injured, I won't sugar coat it, but see this as an opportunity."

Did he actually just tell me to find a silver lining for my injury and broken heart?

"Find out what you want since you can't play football. For now." He continues, "You're going to heal fine, so take the moment to discover who you are without it."

I say nothing to his suggestion, but the idea settles. I need to discover my goals and desires. Outside of football. If I don't, I'll never see myself as enough for Sawyer.

The three of us sit on the couch in silence for a while until the doorbell rings. It shocks us out of the silence, and Deon rises to answer the door. Turning back towards the living room, Deon carries the Chinese food I was originally expecting.

“I want to get home,” Deon says, placing the food on the coffee table in front of me. “But think about what we said and stop hiding from us. We’re your friends, we want to be here for you.”

Jack rises off the couch following behind Deon. Almost to the door, Jack turns around, facing me.

“You deserve her just as much as she deserves you.”

They both walk out the door, leaving me alone in my apartment.



The coaching staff left me alone for an entire week before I was summoned back to the facility. I may not be able to play, but according to them, I can help motivate and be with my team while they practice. I was hoping to avoid football entirely so it wouldn’t impact my thoughts or decisions. In retrospect, I can see how delusional that sounds. Especially with the fact we’re in the middle of playoffs.

Walking into the practice facility, I had expected to feel like shit. For jealousy to get the better of me, but the morning went surprisingly well. Guys on the team were encouraging, sharing stories of when they were injured, and kept wishing me a quick recovery. I had a meeting with the athletic training staff and Coach Barrett, both assuring me I should recover quickly. What shocked me most was the meeting I had with Coach Barrett one-on-one. He said in no uncertain terms that the

coaching staff was behind me and that they would be there to support me, whether or not I recovered. The reassurance that no matter what, I had support loosened the constricting feeling in my chest.

The routine of practice has sucked me in, occupying my brain for the morning. But now that practice is over and I have nothing to do but go home and sit on my ass, my mind is centered on Sawyer and the ultimatum she delivered. I've replayed it in my head a thousand times.

Leaving the practice field, I hobble through the building towards the parking lot at a snail's pace. Since I haven't left my apartment, I haven't gotten used to the crutches. They hurt my armpits, so I prefer to just hop around and hold onto the wall for support. Any elderly person on a scooter could outrun me at this point.

"Wait up," a voice calls from behind me, the sounds of footsteps echoing on the linoleum floor. I drop my head, praying to any higher power willing to listen to save me from this conversation. I've managed to avoid him as much as possible in the last few months. We've had a conversation here and there about football. Now that I can't play, there's no reason he should be talking to me.

I swivel around on my crutches and come face to face with the person who called for my attention.

Declan.

"Have a minute?" he asks, stopping in front of me. I take a good look at him, and he almost looks...different. Nervous.

His right hand is pulling at the back of his neck, and there's a slight tint of red on the top of his cheeks.

I don't particularly want to talk to him, but the curiosity about what he's going to say wins out. I nod my head towards the bench and wobble over to it. He sits down next to me, and his knee immediately starts to move up and down.

He *is* nervous.

The million-dollar question is, why?

"I need to apologize," he blurts out. My eyes nearly bulge out of my head at the declaration. Honestly, color me shocked. I did not expect Declan to apologize. For anything. I'm not sure exactly what he's apologizing for, but I'm glad I agreed to this little chat. "I've been a dick to both you and Sawyer.

"I'm not going to make any excuses, because there are none, but I want you to know I'm sorry for how things were earlier this year. I was an ass, and after the thing in the bar with Sawyer, I took a good look at my life, and I wasn't happy."

He looks genuinely remorseful, but one thing doesn't make sense.

"Why now? Why apologize now and not then?"

It's not that I don't accept his apology, I just want to know why he's apologizing before I commit to forgiving him and moving on.

"I—Well, my therapist told me it's important to make amends." He looks down at the floor, wringing his hands together.

Therapist?

I try to peer into his mind, digging for something in his features that hints at a lie. But I can't find anything. Shit, he's serious.

I choose a stoic approach to say nothing, and he continues, nearly stumbling over his words to fill the silence. "After Sawyer broke up with me, I found one. I had finally come down from the high from the draft and being new to the NFL, and I felt like shit. I wasn't proud of my choices, and some days it was hard to look in the mirror."

The level of honesty he's giving me is shocking. Not even I would be this honest to my friends if it wasn't pulled out of me. Case and point with Jack and Deon. They're my best friends, but even they had to pry my emotions out of me. I fumble for Declan's confession or his apology. Declan, however, saves me from having to figure it out.

"No need to respond, just wanted you to know. For what it's worth, you and Sawyer both seem happy. I'm glad you two got together."

With that departing statement, he rises from the bench and begins to walk away, back toward the locker room. He gets about twenty feet from me before I do something that shocks even myself.

"We broke up." Now it's my turn to blurt out something and mildly embarrass myself.

He swings around, shock coloring his features.

“What do you mean you broke up?”

Apparently, Declan and I are both admitting our deep shit to each other. Not what I had on my to-do list this morning but might as well roll with it. I’m already at rock bottom, sharing with him can’t make things any worse.

“I broke up with her at the hospital. You know Sawyer, she will stick by you, even if she drowns in the process. So, I did the only thing I could and made sure she couldn’t drown with me.”

He walks back toward me, silent, and sits back down on the bench. He doesn’t look at me, just stares off towards the lobby.

“I get it.” Color me surprised. I expected him to call me an idiot like Jack or be disappointed in me like Deon. What I didn’t expect from Declan was for him to relate. “Part of you thinks you’re not good enough.”

Damn, he nailed that on the head with scary accuracy. I don’t know how I feel about this version of Declan. I’m glad he’s worked on himself and everything, but I don’t need him to see directly into my soul.

I can’t say it, but the statement rings true, nonetheless.

“Been there,” he continues. “But there’s a reason she chose you, man. Clearly, she finds you worthy. Don’t push her away because of the thoughts swimming around in your head.”

“Easier said than done,” I mumble.

“You didn’t ask for my advice, but I’m going to tell you anyway.” That’s more like the Declan I know and mildly

tolerate. “There’s a million people who have an opinion about you. Coaches, family, fans. None of them matter. No one else has to live in your head but you, so tell those people to fuck off in your mind.”

I’m shocked and silent by how his words reverberate in my mind. The Declan I knew six months ago is not the same one sitting next to me. He’s changed. Grown. And it has nothing to do with football. He’s wiser than he was when we played in college, and I’m sure the therapist has played a role in that.

“How do you know what you want?” I find myself asking. Didn’t mean to say it out loud, but now that the question is out there, I’m genuinely curious. “Outside of football, I mean.”

He nods his head, understanding my question. “I didn’t, not for a while at least.” He looks at me, eyes open and vulnerable. “It took my world turning to rubble for me to see clearly. The view is clearer after the storm. Now, I just want to be happy. Whether that is playing football or quitting and moving to the middle of nowhere. Life becomes significantly easier if you let go of what doesn’t make you happy.”

I feel right in the middle of the storm. Darkness on either side of me and no way to escape. Searching for a beacon of light to guide me.

“Thank you,” I murmur, the only words I can let out that show how grateful I am for what he said. For being honest and vulnerable. Trusting me with how he feels.

He just hums in response, rising from the bench and disappearing down the hallway. This time, however, I don’t

call him back. I sit there for a moment, gathering my thoughts, and dissecting my feelings. Before this moment, I hadn't realized someone else could be experiencing the same thing I was. At least, I hadn't expected them to vocally express that they're feeling that way.

For that person to be Declan is surprising, but knowing someone seemingly opposite to me relates to how I feel lightens the weight sitting on my chest. Even after making mistakes and poor decisions, Declan seemed to find out what he wanted and became someone he's proud of.

If he can figure it out, then maybe I can too.



CHAPTER 32

“I’m a shoulder you can cry on, your best friend, I’m the one
you must rely on”

Chiquitita—ABBA

Sawyer

As a child, I would watch romance movies with my mom. The ones set in small towns during Christmas. Every time the main character had her heart broken, I would complain to her. ‘I just don’t get how she isn’t able to function’ I would whine, exasperated by how the woman would crumble to pieces, unable to do simple tasks like brushing her hair or eating when she had her heart broken. ‘It’s only a boy’ I would usually add, confused, since at the time I thought boys were stupid and had cooties. In true motherly

fashion, my mom would laugh at my comments and say she hoped I never had to relate to the woman on the screen.

Now, at the ripe old age of twenty-four, I am that woman in the romance movie. The one who falls apart when the person she loves breaks her heart. Who's unable to get out of bed and has no appetite. I foolishly made fun of those women as a child, never truly understanding how debilitating a broken heart can be. I can chalk it up to the viewpoint of a child, but even before this, I never thought it would be me. Some other people maybe, but not me.

For the last week, I've survived solely due to Maren and Nathalie's efforts to keep me from totally spiraling. They really should be given a Nobel prize for how they've taken care of me. I'm not proud to admit it, but the two of them had to force me into the shower and feed me like a child to get me to eat. Maren flying potato chips into my mouth like an airplane was the first time I had laughed since I walked out of the hospital. I've barely left my bed and I've slept more in the last week than I have in years. After a few days, Maren was tired of my shit and forced me to go to work. So, I went. And I did everything on autopilot.

Nathalie covered the after-school program, so I went home and decomposed in bed. Or on the couch. The point is, I've done a lot of lying around and mourning. My boyfriend didn't just break up with me, my best friend did as well. Which hurts worse. I haven't been able to come to terms with either scenario. Half of my soul feels like it was brutally ripped out from my chest.

It's not a great feeling.

With the start of a new week, I told myself I was going to pack up my emotions and throw them in a trash bin and then light said bin on fire with kerosene.

Adios, emotions.

However, easier said than done. I woke up this morning with every intention to leave the 'mourning' stage and enter the 'moving on' stage. I already went through my denial and anger stages, all that is left is acceptance and moving on.

Except I can't move on, not from this. Not yet at least. I need Henry to tell me what he wants. When I told him to take the time and space, I meant it. He has the right to self-reflect, to find out what he wants his life to look like, but the waiting part hurts. A lot. Hence the difficulty to just move on. Damn near impossible without the closure.

Patience has taken on a new meaning, and I have never been the most patient person on the planet.

It's been a week avoiding the after-school program, but I can't anymore. I feel guilty leaving Nathalie to do it all on her own. It's not her fault I'm heartbroken. She told me she would cover for as long as I needed, but knowing I may never completely mend from this, it's time to put my big girl panties on and rip off the proverbial band-aid.

That band-aid? An interaction with a certain seven-year-old who may love Henry more than I do.

I haven't had it in me to face Micah. It's embarrassing to admit, but looking at his big, wide eyes and the Maverick's jersey he refuses to take off will feel like a knife in the chest. I don't have the heart to tell him we broke up, but I also can't stomach him asking questions about Henry. Which is inevitable. He was hurt in the last game; he's bound to have a million questions. I've spent all day bracing myself, coming up with hypothetical answers to any question he might ask.

The likelihood of crying decreases if I prepare.

Bracing myself, I push through the doors and wander into the gym. Immediately, I'm assaulted by the sound of giggling children and balls bouncing on the hardwood floor. Sticking to the sidelines, I quietly make my way over to the gaggle of volunteers, hoping I can blend in and Micah won't notice me.

Now I'm hiding from a seven-year-old.

As if my life couldn't get any more depressing.

"Miss Sawyer!" I hear hollering from the other side of the room. Painstakingly slowly, I turn from the huddle of college students towards the bundle of energy zooming towards me.

Deep breaths. It's only a child. We will not cry in front of a child.

Not feeling remotely confident in my pep talk, I open my arms for Micah as he flings himself towards me.

"I missed you! Miss Nathalie said you were sick and didn't want to spread germs." Micah says into my stomach, his sounds coming out funny and distorted.

I mean, heartbroken is a type of sickness, I guess.

I peel him off my body and look down at him as he grins up at me, a tooth missing right in the front of his mouth. The odd pronunciation of words suddenly makes more sense.

“Is there something different about you?” I ask, making a show of spinning him around looking for something different, purposefully avoiding his face. His giggles fill the air, shining a small ray of light into the darkness I’ve been feeling. “Did you get taller? Oh, no! I know what it is...your eyes changed colors!”

I bend down, getting close to him, pretending to examine his eyes. Through the sound of laughter, Micah responds. “I lost a tooth!” His tongue wiggles through the hole in his mouth.

“Ahh... how did I miss that?” I say with a smile, feeling better from the interaction.

“Tooth fairy brought me twenty dollars,” he reveals, leaning in like it’s a massive secret.

I nod seriously, then make a motion of zipping my lips shut, signaling I won’t tell a soul. Micah opens his mouth to ask another question, but by the grace of God, a volunteer blows the whistle, and the kids go running to form teams.

Letting out a massive breath, I spend the rest of the evening bouncing between the craft room and the gyms, never staying long enough where Micah is to make sure he can’t ask any Henry-related questions. The effort it requires to avoid him

takes it out of me, and by the time I'm locking up for the evening, I'm exhausted down to my core.

It was nice to see the kids and get back into some type of routine, but the ache that sits in my chest only seems to worsen with time. As I fall into the driver's seat, my cell phone rings.

Turning my purse over, I dump the content out, frantically searching for my phone, hoping it's Henry. As I turn the phone over and look at the screen, disappointment floods through me. I debate not answering, but there's no way he would call to chat, so I answer.

"Hello?"

"Oh. Sawyer. Hi," Declan says, sounding flustered.

"Is everything alright?" I'm concerned that he's calling me. We haven't spoken since the bar, and considering how we left our relationship, I wasn't expecting his call.

"Yeah. I called because—well, I need to apologize. For everything that happened between us."

"Apologize?" I ask, certain I've heard him incorrectly.

"Yeah," he trails off. He's silent for a beat before he continues. "I want you to know, it was never about you. I treated you poorly as a result of how I saw myself. I let the attention get to my head and hurt you in the process."

"Oh...Okay," shock leaks into my response. I'm genuinely surprised by the apology. I believe him. I liked Declan before he moved to Seattle. He was kind and goofy and somewhere

along the way, that version of him got lost. Forgotten. Set aside for who he thought he should be.

“I know I was a shitty boyfriend, but I would like to try to be a better friend. If you’re willing.” I hear him take a deep breath on the other end of the phone. “I understand if not. I’ll respect that boundary. I’ve been talking to my therapist about what I want in life and one thing that was important to me was apologizing to you. And Henry.”

I suck in a sharp breath at the mention of Henry’s name. Tears well in my eyes, on the precipice of falling, and I bite my lip to hold back a sob.

So much for keeping it together.

“Fuck. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—sorry,” Declan says, worry in his voice.

“It’s okay, it’s just been a lo—wait. How do you know?” I ask, suddenly suspicious.

“I...uh...He told me when I apologized. For what it’s worth, he’s trying. I know because that’s where I was at after what happened at the bar. Figuring out your shit is hard, especially when you have no one in your corner.” He says it as though he relates to the statement. Maybe he does. “Thanks for hearing me out, Sawyer.”

“Sure,” I have no other response.

“I hope it works out with you two.”

Before he hangs up, I yell into the phone. “Wait!”

“Yeah?”

“I’m in your corner, Declan.” I’m not sure why I say it, only that it feels right. True. Even though he was a shithead, it’s clear he’s working on himself. I’m a firm believer that people deserve second chances if they work for them. It’s clear Declan is doing that. So, if he needs someone in his corner, then he has me.

“Thanks, Sawyer.”

Having nothing else to say, I hang up and drop my phone onto the passenger seat, with the rest of the contents of my purse. I’m not sure how much more I can take emotionally.



Hell must have frozen over. Yup, that’s it. It’s the only explanation for the scene in my living room. I shake my head just in case it’s an illusion and I’m just dehydrated. No such luck. I step deeper into the apartment, treading carefully like the area is a minefield and I’m one wrong step away from being blown to pieces. Which isn’t unlikely given who is sitting on the couch.

“Uh...Hi?” I say as a greeting, unsure of how I’m supposed to respond to this unicorn of a situation. There’s a ban in place preventing this from happening. Maren decreed it. And I’m not going to break that law. The fact he’s blacklisted in our apartment makes his presence incredibly confusing. “Not that

I'm not happy to see you, but how the hell did you get in here?"

The laughter is so loud, it nearly shakes the wall.

"Don't worry, I was invited."

Invited? What the fuck.

Hell has most definitely frozen over.

Maren glides back into the living room from her bedroom, looking unphased by our visitor. "I'm calling a temporary truce. For your sake. You're welcome." She deadpans, grabbing two beers from the fridge and handing one to Jack.

My head swings back and forth, looking at them both. I feel like I'm witnessing history or spotted some rare species, and if I go to tell someone, they'll call me crazy and then attempt to commit me.

Wait.

"For my sake?" I ask her, incredulously, moving into the kitchen to grab myself a glass of wine. I have a feeling that alcohol is going to be a vital player in my survival for whatever Maren has planned.

"Mhm," Maren hums, taking a sip of her beer. I wait for her to say something else. Maybe elaborate on what the hell she's talking about, but it's radio silence from her.

I swing my head to Jack, pleading with my eyes that he fills me in on whatever is going on.

“Sit,” Jack says softly, but I recognize the command in his voice. I immediately feel like I did something wrong, and my parents are sitting me down to scold me. Not something I ever imagined feeling in the presence of these two, but I guess weirder things have happened lately. I flop down onto the couch and take a massive gulp of wine.

“Maren baby decided she wanted to play cupid and now feels responsible.” I look over at Maren, who is giving it her best shot not to glare daggers at him with the use of the endearment. She loathes when he calls her ‘Maren baby’. I think it’s adorable, and the fact she hates it makes it even more endearing. “Which is why she called me and proposed a ‘cease fire’. Personally, I wasn’t aware we were at war, but that’s a chat for later.”

“Um...” I am super confused. The most confused.

“I want to help fix things,” Maren states, sincerity lacing the statement.

“Help... fix things?”

“With you and Henry. You two are clearly meant to be together; he just needs a little push.”

I sigh. I couldn’t love her more for trying to help. But she can’t mend this back together with sheer will and brute force. If that was all it took, I would have done it in that hospital room. It’s not that simple.

She keeps going. “I know I told you to stop wallowing, but I couldn’t watch you keep falling deeper into the rabbit hole, so

I went for tough love.” She shoots me a watery grin. “I haven’t always been the softest person, but I’m trying. I care about you. And you deserve to be happy. Henry makes you happy. So, we need to work towards that.”

I can see how her brain has processed it all. With logic and fact and science. I can see how much effort she’s put in to express her feelings. Just knowing how much she cares sends tears to my eyes.

“Oh, god,” she shrieks, eyes wide in panic. She turns to Jack, clearly freaking out, “help me!” she pleads to him.

I bark out a laugh. I never imagined her to panic and ask Jack for help. She turns her panicked face back towards me, eyes searching me like I’m some puzzle she can’t complete.

“Sorry,” I say between laughs. “The tears aren’t sad, they’re happy ones. Grateful for our friendship tears.”

“Oh.”

Now it’s Jack’s turn to laugh. Maren turns and punches his arm. If anything, it makes his laughter worse. He gasps, feigning hurt, but she just rolls her eyes and turns back to me.

“Well?”

She wants an answer to her proposition. To help Henry and I get back together. Part of me wants her to help. To drag him back by force. But that won’t work. If Henry wants this, wants us, he needs to decide that on his own. And if he doesn’t, that’s something he also needs to decide.

That thought sends a new stream of tears and suddenly I'm ugly crying into my glass of wine in front of my roommate and her 'enemy'. Between seeing Micah and my conversation with Declan, I'm at the end of my rope with what I can handle emotionally. This shindig is sending me over the edge.

"Those are sad tears," Jack adds helpfully, causing me to laugh between the tears.

"No," I say, the conviction in my voice clear, even through the tears. "It's on him to decide."

It doesn't look like she agrees with my choice, but she doesn't argue. Instead, Maren scoots over towards me and gives me a crushing hug. In the nearly six months we've lived together, I can count on one hand the amount of times Maren has initiated a hug. She'll accept them, but she doesn't give them out often. I sink into the hug, feeling better from the contact.

"It'll be alright," she whispers into my ear as she rubs my back, soothing me.

I pull away, wiping the tears from my face. I attempt to give them both my best 'I'm okay' smile. It's not very convincing, but neither says a word. Maren moves back to her spot on the couch when Jack says something that sparks hope in my chest.

"He's—well, he's trying. I think." I can feel the kernel of hope blossoming inside my chest. I try to squash it, because hope is a dangerous game, and my heart can't afford any more damage. It didn't mean much when Declan said it, but it does

hearing it from Jack. “Be patient, Sawyer. I think—well, I *hope* he figures it out. You both deserve happiness.”

I nod, unable to speak in fear that the wish Jack is right will come tumbling from my mouth.

“I better get going,” he says, shoving up from the couch and moving towards the entryway. “Catch ya later Maren baby.” He winks before walking out the front door.

Standing up from the couch, Maren grabs my empty wine glass, refills it, and fills her arms with snacks. She hands me the wine glass and dumps the snacks in front of us.

“Wanna eat our feelings and watch television?”

“Ugh, yes. Pass the goldfish.”

The both of us settle into the couch, wrapped in blankets, stomachs full of snacks, and the sweet buzz of wine dulling the heartache ever so slightly. She scrolls through old episodes of River Monsters, our current obsession, selecting one set in the Amazon. Neither of us even enjoys fishing all that much, but we both find watching Jeremy Wade catch the weirdest-looking fish exciting.

After about three episodes, I turn to Maren. “Thank you.”

She looks at me confused. “What for?”

“Trying to help. Calling Jack. Having my back.”

Maren pauses the show, turning towards me on the couch. I can see the seriousness in her face. “I consider you my best

friend, I would fight a dragon for you. No more thanking me. You'd do the same thing."

"You're my best friend, too."

"Damn straight," she says, her confidence after saying something heartfelt making me laugh. "Now, let's get back to watching Jeremy Wade traipse through the jungle."

I huff a laugh, turning my attention back towards the T.V. For the past week, I've felt like shit. There's no point in trying to sugarcoat it. Henry broke my spirit, bringing back up feelings of being unlovable. I don't think that was his intention, but the feelings were dug up, nonetheless. It's a feeling that can easily drag me under. Coupled with the heartbreak Henry dished out at the same time and the combination was nearly lethal for my self-confidence. Maren and Natalie threw me on a life raft and dragged me back to shore. An act I can never repay them for. The security in knowing I have two solid friendships even when the rest of my world has seemed to crumble makes everything more bearable. The two of them, my stained-glass window on a rainy day, bringing beauty and joy into my life even during the gloomiest of times. They say you know when you meet your people, the ones who always have your back. No matter what.

I've met mine.



CHAPTER 33

“Don’t speak for some time to find those words inside
yourself”

Anyway—Noah Kahan

Henry

The lights of the stadium. The sound of the cheering fans. The pressure to perform. Everything about a game like this would send anxiety coursing through my body. The moment I would walk out of the tunnel, the sensation would hit me all at once, nearly causing my knees to buckle. Now, as I nearly waddle toward the sidelines, the anxiety is nonexistent. Without me, the team managed to make it to the semi-finals. Win one more game and the Mavericks are in the Super Bowl. I’m proud of them but watching your team from

the sidelines is a humbling experience. One I wouldn't recommend.

I look on silently as special teams line up, preparing for the kick. Boston won the coin toss and chose to defer, giving us the ball first. The moment before the ball is kicked, the stadium goes silent. Only for a split second. In that moment, the possibilities are endless. The fate of the game isn't decided. The second passes and the noise drowns out any thought. With the ball caught on the twenty-five-yard line, special teams run off the field and the offense takes their place.

A knot forms in my stomach as I scan the line, noting where I should be standing. In my place, a different wide receiver stands at the line of scrimmage. I keep scanning the line, noticing Jack and Deon. Even Declan.

A tiny part of me wants to wallow in the feeling of not being out on the field, but I recognize how unhelpful that would be. I've been trying to shift my focus to what I have, instead of what I'm missing, so I throw myself into being another cheerleader. If I can't be out there in body, I might as well be in spirit. Every time the new receiver catches the ball, I'm the first one cheering him on. When the running back gains yardage, I'm yelling compliments. Hell, when Declan has a touchdown at the end of the first quarter, I'm the first one to congratulate him when he makes it back to the sideline. At that interaction, Jack raises an eyebrow. I simply shoo him off and keep up my energy.

I'm behaving like a helicopter parent at a youth soccer game. All I need is a shirt that says 'football parent' and I would nail the role in any movie. I'm fired up. Even not being able to play, I'm having fun. Enjoying myself. It's not a feeling I've had on a football field in a long time.

Longer than I want to admit.

The first half flies by as I clap and cheer and guffaw when there are flags. Some of my teammates watch me, confused, while others join in. At the half, we're up by seven, and we have the momentum entering the locker room. Chatter is bouncing off the walls with players making suggestions. Discussing different plays and how to adjust to the defense. You can feel the buzz of energy in the players. The belief they could win starting to trickle in.

The room quiets when Coach Barrett and the other coaches walk in. His face is unreadable. We've played an admirable half, but there's always room for improvement.

"That," Coach Barrett starts, tapping the whiteboard with his marker, "was an impressive half of football, boys." Players' heads swivel, looking at each other, nodding at each other. Coach Barrett continues his speech. "While you've played well on the field, what I'm most impressed with is the teamwork. The camaraderie I'm seeing. You're playing for each other. That's what I want to see."

He looks around, searching for someone. Suddenly, his eyes land on me. "Parker. Up here." He gestures at the spot next to him.

I stand up from the chair I'm sitting on and stumble my way to the front of the room on my crutches. Coach Barrett places a hand on my shoulder, squeezing it.

“Parker here is the main reason we're playing the way we are.”

I swivel my head at him in disbelief.

Can he not see the crutches and boot?

I look around the room and half the team seems just as confused as I am. I lock eyes with Declan, who looks calm. He nods at me, then smiles. Somehow, he understands whatever Coach is saying. I shift my gaze towards Jack and Deon. Both look as sure in what's happening as Declan. Finally, I focus my attention back on Coach, expecting an elaboration.

“Henry had two choices when he was injured. The easy one or the hard one. Henry chose the hard road. A road that makes this team better for it.”

I'm still confused as hell. Feeling all the eyeballs on me, I begin to sweat. The attention of the entire team causes my skin to crawl, and if I could bolt out of the room, I would. Unfortunately, in my current state, I wouldn't make it far before I was dragged back.

“Does anyone know what takes a good team and transforms it into a great one?” Coach Barrett asks the room. No one answers the question, and the faces morph back to confusion. I swear he's speaking a different language. “No one? A great team has a connection and a single common goal. Before the

game today, y'all had a common goal. The Super Bowl. But you lacked connection. Henry is creating that connection. His effort on the sideline, cheering you on, and giving you advice is what will make you great. If every player has the same mindset as Henry, we'll be unstoppable."

He finishes his speech and walks out of the locker room, the other coaches following behind him. I stayed glued to my spot, regarding the other players around the room. It's eerily quiet. No one seems to know what to say.

Deon rises from his seat, instantly taking everyone's attention from me. I sag in relief. Standing up here was bad enough, and then the attention from Coach Barrett's speech only made my skin itch. It didn't seem like much of a choice. I could sit in my anger and sadness, or I could do whatever I was capable of to help the team. It didn't seem as big of a deal as Coach made it. I'm only focusing on what I can do instead of wallowing.

"He's right," Deon says, referring to Coach Barrett, "Not all of us would do what Henry did today. Cheering us on while he watches from the sideline. In a game he would certainly have played if he wasn't injured."

Deon peers over at me, inclining his head in respect. Two statements about my character from two people who are well-respected on the team have meaning. Other players hum their agreement, then shuffle towards the center of the room to huddle around me.

“If we all act,” Deon declares, “the way Henry has been, we’ll be a better team, better players. Hell, better people.”

I make eye contact with Jack, who is smiling at me, nodding his head in agreement. Looking around, I notice everyone is agreeing with him. I feel my cheeks heat and a burst of warmth blooms in my chest.

It feels almost like...pride.

In myself.

A feeling I haven’t had in so long, it’s nearly foreign.

Deon yells a few more motivational words then the players run out of the locker room back towards the field. I wait for them all to shuffle out, then follow. Except for Declan, who lingers in the doorway, waiting for me.

I’m still unsure about the relationship between us, but I don’t hate him. He’s different than he was six months ago, and I could see myself being friends with the new version of Declan. Let bygones be bygones.

“Who do you want to be?” he asks, before turning and running towards the field.

I’m not entirely sure, but I’m starting to have an idea.



Ten. Nine. Eight. I watch as the time runs down on the scoreboard. Seven. Six. Five. Only moments until the game is

over. Four. Three. Two. The crowd begins to roar, the sound shaking the stadium. One.

The buzzer sounds and the sideline goes wild. Players launch themselves at each other, hugging, and cheering. Older players run to the sidelines, to their families. They grab their children, laughing and smiling as the confetti falls. I watch as my teammates celebrate the win against Boston. The crowd cheers, and players cry tears of joy and joke with each other.

I stand there, watching it all. It's an out-of-body experience. At Notre Dame, we had played in bowl games and even made it to the championship semi-finals, but the energy then is nothing compared to now.

It's not even the win, it's the response. Families cheering on their players. Wives screaming on the sideline in joy. Children giggling and the excitement on everyone's faces. The support and happiness radiating is overwhelming. Consuming.

The realization hits me like I semi-truck.

This is what I want.

I want to support and be supported. I want to be happy in the way the players are around me. Not just because they won the game. That's part of it, but not the whole. Half the bliss comes from celebrating with the people you love.

Like Sawyer.

It's all suddenly crystal clear. What I want for my life. I want Sawyer by my side. To support her. To cheer her on. I want the same from her. Not just in football, but in life. The worst part

about it is I had that. Before I threw it all away. Because I thought that I was nothing without football.

Well, I haven't had football in two weeks, and I'm still standing. The thought is freeing. Just acknowledging that I can exist without football breaks the mental chains I had on myself. I didn't have to be on the field to make a difference in the team.

Football is a part of my life. That much is true. I don't want to give it up. The injury has reformed the way I think about the sport. Showed me how to love it again. But it's not who I am. It no longer defines me the way it did before.

I know what I want now.

To be happy. A better person every day. No matter what.

Whether it's playing football or not. Declan was right. I would never tell him that, but every word he said was true.

Right now, I have everything I could ever want. Teammates, friends, goals, dreams. I'm only missing one thing. The most important thing.

And it's about damn time I fix my mistakes.



CHAPTER 34

“So pay attention now, I’m standing on your porch screaming out”

Stubborn Love—The Lumineers

Henry

“I need your help,” I jump Jack and Deon as soon as they sit down in the two seats across from me. Since I’m injured, I boarded the plane first and I’ve been sitting here, waiting for them to show up so I can get their advice.

They move much slower than I have patience for.

I have a girl to win back and only a five-hour plane flight to figure out how to do it. Needless to say, I’m on a time constraint. It’s all hands on deck.

Jack's eyes glitter and I already know he's picked up on exactly what I'm talking about.

"Help with what?" Declan says as he moves in front of me and sits down beside me. The action has both Jack and Deon's mouths hanging open and eyes bulging from their heads. Both of them defer to me on what to do, at a loss with the situation.

"He stays," I state, leaving no room for argument.

After our heart-to-heart and the moment in the locker room, I've decided I like the new version of Declan. Do I still think he's an ass for what he did to Sawyer? Of course, I do. But that's her battle to fight, and both he and I could use another friend. So, I'm making him a new member of the group. Jack and Deon will need some warming up to the idea, but once they get to know the new version, I think they'll be fine.

Until then, I have bigger, more pressing issues. Like finding a way to apologize to Sawyer for being an idiot, and then convincing her to give me another chance. I feel like I'm David and this task is Goliath, except I'm not going to win.

Thankfully, both Jack and Deon say nothing in response to the expansion of our group and peel their gaze from Declan and focus back on me.

"You're gonna win her back, aren't you?" Jack says, excitement spreading across his face.

Deon and Declan turn to me, waiting for my response.

"Yeah, and I need help. I have a lot of groveling to do and not a lot of time to plan how to do it. I don't wanna spend any

more time away from her than I already have.”

“Do you know what you want to say to her?” Deon asks.

Fuck. I hadn't even thought that far ahead. I had my lightbulb moment and realized I needed to win Sawyer back. That was supposed to be the hard part. I grimace at how foolish that line of thought is. This is exactly why I need help.

Noting my reaction, Deon shakes his head laughing. “I love you would be a good start.”

“And an apology,” Jack adds.

“Maybe tell her you’ve been an idiot, but you took time to figure out what you wanted, and now you know. And then you tell her what it is,” Declan states simply, causing all three of our heads to turn.

“When the hell did you become smart?” Jack asks, looking at Declan skeptically.

“I went to Notre Dame, I’m not an idiot. But also, therapy. You should try it.” There isn’t much you can say to either point, so Jack yields and focuses back on me.

“I don’t want to admit it, but Monroe has a point.” Deon sighs and Declan shoots Jack a smirk, and I know the old Declan hasn’t entirely left. The cocky part is still in there somewhere. “Maybe just tell her the truth and pray to the universe that she forgives your dumb ass.”

“I was hoping for something a little more...romantic,” I murmur. She deserves the grand gesture.

The flight attendants announce take off on the loudspeaker, momentarily silencing our conversation. They make their way down the aisles, checking everything before moving to the back of the plane before take-off.

Declan turns to me. “She doesn’t want the romantic gesture. She wants real.”

I sit on that comment. Real.

I can give her real.



Standing on the other side of the door, I feel like I might faint. Or shit my pants. Or a combination of both. That would be quite a sight. I spent the entire flight planning out what I want to say. How I want to apologize. Now that I’m standing here, every single thing I came up with flutters away, leaving my brain empty. I am terrified, but I’ve got one shot to win back my girl, and I plan on doing just that. I just might go into cardiac arrest in the process. Finding the tiniest sliver of nerve, I knock on the door. I hold my breath, hoping Sawyer answers the door. I am not that lucky.

The door swings open and standing on the other side, Maren’s looking at me with boredom. Before getting to know her, I would shrug it off as apathy. But to Maren, a look of boredom is worse than being annoyed. She’s written me off. The thought that she no longer cares causes my stomach to

plummet like a roller coaster ride from hell. Does Sawyer feel the same? Am I too late?

“Henry,” she drawls, leaning on the doorway, effectively blocking the entrance to the apartment. For the first time, I’m noticing how tall she is. I can’t see around her and into the apartment. Which is her intention. “What did I do for you to show up at my door?”

“Is Sawyer home?” I ask.

It’s late. Not past Sawyer’s normal bedtime, but late enough for her to be home. I shift to peer into the apartment, praying for a glimpse of blonde hair, but Maren only mirrors me. I watch her smirk. She’s enjoying this. If I didn’t need her help seeing Sawyer, I would shoot her a dirty look.

“Where Sawyer is doesn’t concern you.”

“Please,” I nearly beg. I’m itching to see her. Apologize to her. Make her mine.

“Have you finally pulled your head from your ass?”

Jeez, she doesn’t pull any punches. I can’t argue with her, though. My head was far up my ass.

“Yeah... I—Look, I’m here to apologize and win her back.” Might as well lay it all out on the table and let Maren decide if she’s on board with my plan. I mentally cross my fingers, hoping she lets me in.

“In her room,” she says, standing off to the side, permitting me entrance into the apartment. I slip off my shoes and begin

to head towards her room, when she grabs me by the elbow, stopping me in my tracks. “One shot, Parker.”

With that thinly veiled threat, she releases me and disappears into her room. I walk in the opposite direction, my stomach full of rocks.

I take one deep breath, praying to every god out there.

Then, I knock.



CHAPTER 35

“If honesty means telling you the truth, well, I’m still in love
with you”

Still—Niall Horan

Sawyer

I hear the knock at my door and groan. “Maren, I already told you, I’m not going—” The words fall from my mouth the moment I look over at the door. Curly brown hair and eyes as blue as the sky. Tan skin and corded muscles. I nearly fall over at the sight of Henry standing in my doorway. For a brief moment, I forget the heartache and pain and self-doubt he planted in my brain.

I hate that part of me still goes warm in his presence. That my heart races when he touches me. I hate that I love him so

deeply, even though he broke me so thoroughly. Worst of all, I hate the part of me that hopes he's here to say he wants me.

My mouth goes dry and my brain empties, except for one word.

Henry.

“I—Uh. Can I come in?”

He's standing in the doorway, hands in his pockets. The tension in the air is so thick you could cut it with a knife. Not once since knowing Henry have I felt awkward in his presence. Being around him has always been fun and light. Now it's heavy. It's unfamiliar territory.

I nod, and he slowly walks in. It's clear he's feeling the same way. He awkwardly stands at the end of my bed, unsure of where to put himself in the room. Nerves have taken over my body's ability to function. My hands begin to shake.

The last thing I want is for him to see that I'm nervous. Slyly, I sit on my hands to prevent the shaking and to prevent myself from doing something stupid. Like touching him.

“Can we talk?”

I nod again.

Good lord, Sawyer. Pull yourself together.

“You can sit down,” I say, gesturing at the end of the bed. The mattress dips and memories of what we did in this bed flood my mind. Hands on skin. The way he made me feel. Loved. Cherished.

He looks at me like he's thinking the same thing. The thought sends shivers down my spine.

“I have some things I want to say.”

My stomach drops and the need to vomit is imminent. By the grace of God, I don't up-chuck my dinner and manage to make a noise, signaling him to speak. This is it. I can feel it. The end of us. No more limbo.

“I'm sorry,” Henry starts, his gaze connecting with mine. My eyes begin to sting and tears start to build. I hold steadfast, pushing back the tears. He may break my heart all over again, but I won't cry. I make a valiant effort, but the tears fall anyway.

Goddamn gravity.

Henry's eyes widen in shock, and he extends his arm out to touch me, then pulls back. Almost like he thought better of it. The action crushes another piece of my heart, and another tear falls.

“Sawyer, sweetheart, why are you crying?”

Even the question causes me pain. The gentleness in his tone. The endearment I no longer have any claim on. This whole thing is more than I can handle. I thought I was strong enough to hear him say it, but I'm not.

“Please, just—just tell me.” A few tears turn into streams down my face. The sooner he ends this fully, the sooner I can cry into my pillow and fully mourn.

He looks at me, face full of concern, but nods. He inhales a deep breath, then looks me in the eyes. His eyes are full of conviction.

“I love you.”

Uh...what.

That’s an odd way to start a break-up speech.

“For years, I’ve loved you. When I told you how I felt, I lied.” My heart begins to race but he doesn’t allow me to get worked up. “I didn’t want to scare you with the depths of my feelings, but I don’t want to live another second without you knowing. Sawyer, I love you. I’m *in* love with you. And I have been for a long time. Since the moment we met, you’ve taken my breath away—captivated me—with your beauty and kindness and how you walk through this world with such optimism.”

I choke out a sob and the tears come on strong. I clutch onto a pillow in front of me for dear life. I can feel that small kernel of hope lodged in my chest. Slowly beginning to expand.

“I thought about what you said, about worrying I only love you because I hate myself less when I’m with you. That couldn’t be farther from the truth.”

He moves from where he’s sitting at the edge of the bed towards me. Holy shit. I have no idea what to do or where this is going or how to act. My skin is on fire and my heart is moving a mile a minute. Slowly—giving me time to tell him no—Henry sits down next to me, grabbing my hand and lacing

our fingers together. Our palms meet and fireworks explode in my chest. I missed touching him. He places our hands in his lap and continues.

“The truth, Sawyer, is that being around you—being your friend—has made me a better person. A kinder person. Someone I’m proud of when I look in the mirror. I love you because you encourage me to be that man. You cheer me on and inspire me. But you’re right. I spent a long time believing my worth was tied to how I played on the field, and that’s partially from my father. But it’s partially because of me. Because I chose to see myself that way, to allow my anxiety to take hold and make it worse, but I’m done with that. I refuse to continue belittling myself because I dropped a pass or because I messed up a play. So, instead, I’m choosing a newer, better version of myself. And every fiber of my being hopes you choose that version of me, too.”

The once small kernel expands in my chest, taking over my whole body. I stare into the deep, blue eyes I love so much. With his other hand, he cradles my face and I lean into the touch, savoring the gentle love he pours into it.

“Because if it came down to it, Sawyer, I would give it all up in an instant. The games, the fans, the money. I thought I was nothing without football. I was wrong. So wrong. I am nothing without you. The last three weeks without you have been the darkest days of my life. You’re my lighthouse, Sawyer. When I feel lost in the sea of my thoughts and can’t seem to find my way back, you shine like a beacon, guiding me home.”

I sit there next to him on the bed.

Stunned.

Speechless.

Everything I've been waiting to hear and more. A small part of me hesitates. The part that was destroyed by his words, by the way he dismissed what we had.

"You hurt me," I whisper. The truth of the statement written into my soul. He's telling me everything I want to hear, but a part of me is terrified that if things get tough, he might do the same thing again.

He unlaces his fingers from mine, taking my face into both of his hands. His eyes bore into mine as his thumbs banishes the tears from my cheeks.

"I know, baby," he murmurs. "There's nothing I regret more than breaking your heart." Another tear falls from my cheek, his thumb banishing it with the rest. "But I'll spend the rest of our lives making it up to you. If you let me."

"I'm afraid you'll hurt me again."

It's my last truth. Out in the open.

I watch as he absorbs what I say. He closes his eyes for a moment and when he opens them back up, his eyes are wet with tears.

"Not a day will go by where I won't think about that. What I said in that hospital room. How badly I hurt you." The tears

fall down his cheeks. “But I will do everything I can to prove to you how much I love you.”

Holding my face in his hands, he waits for my answer. I gaze up at him. His love for me is evident in his face. The fact I’ve never noticed before is truly mind-boggling.

“Okay,” I mumble.

My head jerks in his hands from his shock. Realizing his reaction, he pulls his hands away from my face, saving my brain from any further scrambling.

“Shit. I’m sor—Wait. Did you say okay?”

I nod, holding back a giggle from his reaction.

He pounces on me, releasing the full giggle. Bracing his hands on either side of me, he peppers kisses all over my face and I taste the salt from his tears on his lips. The laughter continues, unable to contain the happiness bursting in my chest.

“I love you,” he says in between kisses. I reach up towards him, shifting his jaw towards me, and place a kiss on his lips. I pour every emotion I’m feeling into the kiss. Happiness. Contentment. Love.

I pull away, keeping my eyes on him. “I love you, too.”

I watch as he steps off the bed, shucking his sweatshirt, joggers, and the boot, leaving him in nothing but boxers. I salivate just at the sight of him. Not seeing him for three weeks has allowed me blatant ogling.

My eyes track him as he hops toward the other side of the bed, lifting the covers and getting into the bed. He pats the spot next to him, lifting the covers for me to lie next to him. I shuffle in beside him. He rolls onto his side, and I slide up against him, my back to his bare chest. We fit together perfectly. The last two pieces of a puzzle.

His arm slings over my waist, pulling me even closer to him. Part of me expected some make-up sex when he took his clothes off. Which I was not opposed to, but this is better. It feels more intimate.

“Let me hold you,” he murmurs into my hair, brushing it away from my face. “Go to sleep, baby.”

The emotions from the night begin to catch up with me and my eyelids begin to go heavy. Right on the cusp of sleep, I feel Henry place a kiss on my temple.

“I’m never letting you go.”

It’s a promise.



CHAPTER 36

“Dusk until the dawn, you’re where I wanna go”

Your Bones—Chelsea Cutler

Sawyer

Heat radiates beneath my sheets. Maren must have turned the heat up. *Finally*. I want to cocoon into the warmth. I snuggle deeper into the covers, attempting to banish the bone-chilling cold of late January. My eyes jolt open at the sensation of skin under my cheek. Not sheets.

My erratic heartbeat settles as the events of last night come back to me. Henry standing in my doorway. His confession. Falling asleep together. I allow myself to drink him in while he lays there, asleep. His curly, chocolate hair is mussed, and his arm is slung over his eyes to block the sunlight from my window. He looks disheveled, and it’s the cutest thing I’ve

ever seen. Slowly, I peel my body off his and wiggle out of bed.

The moment I move, the arm covering Henry's eyes snaps out, grabbing my wrist.

"No," Henry whines, still half asleep, "stay."

"I need to pee," I laugh. I'm confident Henry is going to turn into my own personal koala. Stuck to my side wherever I go for the foreseeable future. You won't hear me complaining about it.

I place a kiss onto the hand holding my wrist, then stand up from the bed and quietly pad to the bathroom. After I pee, I brush my teeth and head back into the bedroom. Henry's finally woken up, sitting against the headboard, looking sleepy and hot as hell.

His eyes track my movements, full of hunger and desire, as I move about the room. The focus he's giving me sends tingles along my body and goosebumps break out along my skin.

"Come here," he says, voice husky and full of sleep.

I move towards him, and the moment I'm in arm's reach, he grabs my hips and drags me into his lap. His lips immediately go to my pulse point, the feeling sending shivers down my spine.

"I love you," he murmurs into my skin, continuing to place soft kisses across my neck. I turn in his lap, straddling his hips. I cradle his head in my hands, the rough stubble grazing my palms. His lips meet mine, the kiss gentle and slow.

“I remember something about making it up to me?” I ask, mischief lacing my voice. As much as I try to keep a serious face, I can’t help the massive grin that spits my face.

“Oh yeah?” he asks, eyes going dark.

“Mhm,” I manage as his hands splay against my ass, dragging me forward. I’m pressed against him, and I can feel his erection.

“Better get a head start.”

Before I can even comprehend what he said, I’m flipped over onto my back, Henry leaning over me, looking like a Greek god, promising sin, and carnal pleasure.

“Lift your arms for me, baby.”

I do as he says, my arms rising over my head so he can drag the shirt over my head. He notices the shirt that I was wearing, his pupils going black, and the yearning written all over his face. It’s a t-shirt I stole from his apartment after I slept over one night. His scent was all over it. I’ve worn it every night since the hospital. I’ve refused to wash it, afraid the smell would disappear, even though it’s covered in tears.

I scoot back, leaning against the headboard, naked except for a pair of granny panties. At one point in time, they were black. Now they’re a faded navy color. I don’t have a moment to feel self-conscious about my underwear choice when he grabs the waistband and looks to me for consent. Nodding my head, Henry drags the underwear down my legs and tosses them to the side.

“Mine,” he grumbles as he drinks me in.

The declaration and claiming sends heat straight to my core. Never in my life did I expect Henry to behave all caveman-like. Nor did I expect to like it as much as I do.

“Yours,” I say back, grabbing him by the waist of his boxers and pulling him towards me.

Our lips slam together, the kiss a claiming. A declaration. Everything still unsaid is poured into it. His tongue teases me, sliding against the seam of my lips. He nips at my bottom lip, and I arch into him, searching for more.

I swear to God, if he doesn't put his hands on me, I'm going to lose my shit.

The universe must fear my wrath because Henry's hands slide up my waist to my chest. He takes my nipple in his finger, pinching and twisting. The sensation is electric, and I grind into him, needing friction.

I drag my hands down his torso, running my fingers across the lines of muscle. Henry begins placing kisses down my neck towards my collarbone. I shudder when he lightly sucks at the base of my neck. He continues down, taking my breast into his mouth, sucking my nipple deep into his mouth. I moan at the sensation, and heat pools in my stomach.

“I missed those breathy little sounds you make,” Henry whispers, focusing his attention on the other breast. I arch into him, my hands flying to his hair, pulling at the strands.

He groans and the sound spurs me on. Pulling harder on his hair, he looks up at me, gaze devouring me.

“Keep that up and this won’t last long,” he growls.

I watch him as he slowly moves toward the end of the bed, hobbling off. Until this moment I forgot about his ankle. I cringe, immediately cooling off at the prospect he’s in pain.

“Oh god. I forgot. We can—Let’s stop,” I say, looking down at his ankle.

“I will crumble to dust and die if we stop,” he responds, eyes feral.

I gasp at the declaration. It’s both dramatic and soul-consuming. Henry slowly kneels at the end of the bed, grabbing my ankles and dragging me towards him. I giggle at the movement but quickly stop when his mouth latches onto me, his tongue lapping me from my entrance to my clit. The moan I release is so loud I’m sure it woke Maren up. If I wasn’t nearly high from the feeling, I would be embarrassed, but all I can focus on is Henry’s mouth on me.

His stubble rubs against my inner thigh, further igniting the fire in my core. I jolt upwards as he pushes two fingers inside of me, working them in and out. His tongue never stops, lapping and licking. He circles my clit, then flicks it with the tip of his tongue. I feel myself getting closer and closer to the edge.

“Henry,” I moan, head tipped back from the sensation.

“That’s it, come for me.”

The command sends me over the edge, my orgasm rolling through me. My back arches off the bed and I grab onto Henry's hair to prevent myself from shooting into orbit. He continues to thrust his fingers in and out as I ride out the orgasm. A millennium later, I can breathe semi-normally again.

He lifts me, kissing me. I can taste myself on his lips, and he groans as I slide my hand into his pants, gripping him. I stroke him a few times before he stands, pulling his boxers down his legs. I watch as he wobbles trying to get out of them.

I hold back a laugh, but he notices. He gives me a look, a promise that I'm going to regret that. The thought heats me further. I rise from the bed to help him. He places a hand on my shoulder, leaning his weight to shimmy one side off, then the other. I grab his waist, guiding him towards the bed, then push him back so he's leaning against the headboard. Following him, I lift one leg over his hip, straddling him. His erection prods against my thigh and I grind against him, the remnants of my orgasm coating him. Grabbing him, I stroke him a few times before I lift my hips and line him up to my entrance.

"I'm on the pill," I say, waiting for him to make the decision. If he wants to wear a condom, that's fine. But considering I've never slept with anyone but him, I'm clean. And I want to feel him inside me. Bare.

"Are you sure?" he asks. Even after what I said, he still wants to check in to make sure it's something I want. Love

burns bright in my chest.

I nod, snapping whatever is holding Henry back. He devours me in a kiss and with a small shifting of my hips, he thrusts into me. I lower my hips, inch by inch, reveling in the way he fills me. I go slowly, allowing myself to adjust to the stretch. A moment later, he's fully inside me.

His hands hold onto my hips, his grip tight. I rise, then unhurriedly move back down, riding him. As I move up and down, I can feel Henry's composure slipping. I'm purposefully moving slowly, building him up.

"Sawyer," Henry groans.

I grind forward, rubbing my clit against his pubic bone. A moan leaves my mouth. The sound has Henry twitching inside me. His hips start to match me thrust for thrust, both of us moving in sync with each other. He leans his head down, taking my breast into his mouth. I lean into him, my hands moving to his thighs for leverage.

Moving with a new sense of urgency, Henry begins to move faster and faster. As he pulls my nipple between his teeth, I feel the pressure in my stomach continuing to grow. Two more deep thrusts and I can feel myself tightening around him. The orgasm rips through me, blurring my vision. I lean forward, biting his shoulder to muffle my moans as the sensation rolls through my body.

He drives into me a few more times before he follows me. One final thrust and I feel him cum inside me. He continues to

drive into me, extending both our orgasms. We sit like that, our breaths ragged as we recover.

He glances down at the small bite mark I left on his shoulder. “I’m tattooing that to my body.”

I sluggishly slap his chest, his chest vibrating with laughter. “You will not.” That would be horribly embarrassing. I can imagine the questions his teammates will ask about his singular tattoo. Of the bite mark I accidentally left.

I feel boneless, my whole body loose from the two magnificent orgasms. Grabbing Henry’s hand, I help him to his feet. He’s clearly feeling the same as I am. He’s basically dead weight as we shuffle to the bathroom.

“Thanks,” he mutters as I help him into the shower.

Honestly, I have no idea how he’s been showering on his own for the past few weeks. The image of him sitting in one of those plastic shower chairs pops into my mind and I bite down on my lip to hold in the bubble of laughter forming in my chest.

“Let’s get you clean,” I say with a small laugh.



After I help Henry stay standing in the shower, then take one myself, the two of us venture out of my bedroom for something to eat. After our make-up sex this morning, I’m starving. If I’m this hungry, Henry must be even worse.

The last few weeks haven't been the greatest, which means I have zero food in the fridge. I'm prepared to shove a piece of toast at Henry to hold him over, then move as quickly as possible to a diner for food. However, the feast covering the counter stops me in my tracks.

The sight of the food in the kitchen makes my mouth water. The kitchen island is covered with bagels and different types of cream cheese. There's a plate of bacon and eggs with orange juice and coffee. I swing my head towards Henry, looking for an explanation, except he looks as confused as I am and one second away from devouring the entire plate of eggs.

Both of us stare at the food, unsure if we are allowed to eat anything. It's enough food to feed a small country, meaning it's most likely Maren's. My initial thought is that she is having people over, except it's Monday and she has work.

Thinking of Maren must summon her as she wanders out from her bedroom, dressed for work. The number of science-themed shirts she has is insane. Today, she's rocking one that has the anatomy of some sort of fish. It's honestly kind of badass.

"Eat up, you two. Gotta replenish the lost energy," she says with a wink as she swipes an everything bagel and puts chive cream cheese on it.

My cheeks immediately heat. The idea that she heard us this morning makes me want to curl into a ball and hide like an armadillo. But it also led to this feast, so maybe it's not that

bad. Where I look embarrassed, Henry looks at Maren with heart eyes.

“I think I love you,” Henry mumbles at Maren, reaching for a bagel.

I slap Henry’s arm, causing him to flinch and drop the bagel. His head swings towards me, eyes wide in shock.

“What the hell was that for?” he asks, grabbing the bagel again and holding on for dear life like I might snatch that from him next.

I shoot him a look, but he just smirks at me, then turns away, focusing on what type of cream cheese he wants.

Maren chuckles, then rounds the kitchen island, coming to stand next to me.

“I’m glad it worked out,” she whispers as she pours herself a cup of coffee.

“Me too.”

I turn to make myself a plate when Henry shoves one in my hand. I open my mouth to protest that he doesn’t even know what I want when I look down at the plate. He put together everything I would have chosen for myself.

“I know you, Sawyer,” he says, with a wink, waddling towards the couch with his plate in his hand. Watching him try to move without his crutches is hilarious, and Maren has no shame in laughing right in his face about it.

He grumbles something about being lucky she bought bagels, then digs into his food. I follow behind them, sitting next to Henry on the couch. Halfway through his second bagel, Henry drops the bagel onto the plate with so much force it causes me to jump.

“I almost forgot!” he exclaims, looking at both Maren and me. I peer over his shoulder at her, noticing the alarm on her face. “I got you all tickets.”

“Tickets?” I ask, confused about what the tickets are for. Maren, however, figures it out immediately.

“No... no way,” she says, both excited and hesitant. Her eyes grow larger as she processes the statement and a smile slowly forms on her lips.

“Yep, forty-yard line,” he says, the grin on his face proving how proud he is.

Personally, I’m still confused as hell. Why the hell are the two of them talking about tickets?

“Can someone please fill me in?”

“The Super Bowl, Sawyer. The Super Bowl!” Maren yells, her excitement filling the room. I haven’t seen her this riled up since she won that Instagram giveaway. She won kelp pasta. It tasted horrible and our apartment smelled so bad I nearly vomited, but it didn’t dim her excitement for winning.

In all honesty, I had forgotten the Mavericks were still in the playoffs. After Henry got hurt and then everything happened, I stopped watching. There was no point. I didn’t want to

potentially see him on the screen and then burst into tears. My emotions were volatile, and I did not trust myself. So, I removed all temptation.

Henry turns to me. “Will you go?”

“Yes, of course we’ll go!” Maren responds, jumping off the couch and launching herself at him. His quick reflexes allow him to catch her, pulling her into a hug. From the hug alone, I know how excited Maren is about this. She’ll probably cause a national shortage of eye black.

He chuckles at her burst of excitement. She peels off and immediately grabs her phone, looking at the time.

“Shit, I gotta go to work.” She grabs her bag and keys and heads towards the door. “Super Bowl!” she yells one last time as she shuts the door.

Laughing at her ridiculousness, I turn towards Henry. “Maren already answered, but yes, I’ll go.”

“Nathalie, too. I already booked everything.” I quirk my eyebrow. How did he manage to plan and book everything when we weren’t speaking before last night? He looks sheepish. “I booked it all on my phone last night after you fell asleep.”

I lean in, placing a kiss on his lips, my hands cradling his face. He leans into the touch, closing his eyes. My love for him grows with every new thing he does. He didn’t need to get tickets for them or book anything for us. But he did. Because they mean something to me, which means they’re important to

him. He basically made Maren's year. There's no way I can top this.

"Love you," I say against his lips, kissing the smile that forms on his face. I pull back, grabbing our plates and placing them in the kitchen. "I have to get ready for work, and you need to get to the practice stadium."



CHAPTER 37

“Watch as our world has begun”

Light My Love—Greta Van Fleet

Henry

Sawyer and I have been glued at the hip for the last ten days. Every moment she’s not at work and I’m not at practice, we’re together. Hanging out. Making up for lost time. Every day I’m with her, I’m grateful. I don’t want to spend a single moment away from her. Three weeks was enough time.

I did not want to leave her this morning to head to Dallas. The Super Bowl is being held there this year, and the team is leaving two days before the girls are. Maren hasn’t stopped talking about the game since I told her I got tickets. She has sent no less than ten text messages asking about the game. I didn’t realize how easy it would be to get on Maren’s good

side. I'm positive I cemented my position in her life with those tickets.

They all seem excited, and knowing Sawyer, she has a whole itinerary planned of things for them to do in Dallas. Even injured, I'm amped up for the game. My energy buzzes right beneath my skin.

I walk onto the plane, sans crutches. The moment the doctor told me I could walk on the boot without the crutches, I threw those things back at the athletic trainer who gave them to me and said good riddance. They made my life infinitely more difficult. The only upside was that Sawyer would wait on me a little more, and I can't say I didn't enjoy the attention.

Nothing like your girl taking care of you.

Declan, Jack, and Deon follow behind me on the plane and we all settle into our seats. As I predicted, Jack and Deon weren't entirely thrilled that I invited Declan to join our little group, but after I explained how he apologized to both Sawyer and me, they relented. It helped that I've been able to see an actual change in him compared to the person we've played with the last six months.

"I'm sleeping the entire flight," Deon says, whipping an eye mask out of his bag and putting it over his eyes. He stuffs his ears with earplugs and throws his hood over his head. He is in hibernation mode.

I look over to Jack, who pulls out a book, puts his headphones in, and silences the rest of the plane. I squint at the

cover trying to decipher the large words on the front. All I recognize is the general shape of fish.

I turn and look at Declan. “Guess it’s just me and you.”

“Nope. Just you,” Declan responds, putting in his headphones and starting a movie on the back of the seat in front of us.

Alright then. Party of one.

I dig my phone out from the bag between my feet and begin rapidly downloading games. I had banked on at least one person wanting to talk. Now, I’m racing against the clock for a game to download so I’m not just staring at the wall for the next two hours.

As I wait for Candy Crush to download, my phone buzzes, and a notification pops onto the top of the screen. Noting who sent it, I tap on it, putting up the entire thread.

Mom: We’ll be in Dallas.

I’m so proud of you.

Kissie face. No. The emoji.

Damnit.

The message immediately makes me laugh. When she finally upgraded to a smartphone, she declared that the talk-to-text feature was revolutionary. ‘The days of using thumbs are gone’ she stated. Now, a heavy majority of her texts make no

logical sense or are just a string of words she's trying to turn into emojis.

I type out a response.

Me: Great.

Love you.

Kissie face.

Since the hospital, she's made an effort to text me, telling me she's proud of me. I know she feels guilty about how my dad behaved and not recognizing how it impacted me. When they got home, she ripped him a new one and he slept on the couch for a week. He hasn't messaged or called me yet, but she keeps telling me to give him time. It's not easy for someone to realize that they did damage to someone else when they were trying to help. I understand that concept better than she realizes. It's what I did to Sawyer. A mistake I have to live with.

Now I can see it for what it was. His attempt to help me. Did he go about it terribly? Yes. But I recognize the intent, even if the execution was horrible and caused a number of issues. When I thought about what I wanted, I spent a chunk of time debating on what to do with my relationship with him. I didn't want to cut him off. Outside of football, he was a good dad. Is a good dad. We just need boundaries. When he's ready to reach out, I'll be here.

The craziest part of that realization is that it never would have happened if I hadn't gotten injured or pushed Sawyer away. While those were the worst weeks of my life and I have no plan for that to ever happen again, it changed the dynamic between my dad and me. Something I'm grateful for.

I look down at my phone and shout a thanks into the universe. The games downloaded in time, meaning I won't die of boredom by the end of the flight.



“There they are,” Jack says, pointing towards the forty-yard-line. I scan the seats, looking for Sawyer and her friends. I make it halfway down the row when I spot her. Honestly, she's hard to miss. She, Maren, and Nathalie are jumping up and down, arms flailing to get our attention. Their signature greeting. Her hair bounces around as she attracts attention.

A smile splits across my face at Sawyer in my jersey. My mind immediately thinks of Sawyer wearing nothing but the jersey. The thought causes blood to flow straight to my dick, getting a semi from the idea of that happening again. Thank God I'm in sweats, otherwise I would be giving a stadium full of a hundred thousand fans a free show.

Jack squints, looking at the girls as they continue to jump around. I wave at them, so they stop drawing attention from half the stadium.

“Uh, guys...Is Maren wearing my jersey?”

Deon and I lean in, squinting to look at what jersey Maren has on. Sure enough, it's Jack's. I immediately break out in laughter, remembering what Sawyer told me before the last game they attended.

Both Jack and Deon look at me like I've grown ten heads. I can't blame them; I'm laughing so hard I'm nearly wheezing.

"Why are you laughing so hard?" Declan asks, walking up and standing next to Jack. He shoots a wave at Sawyer who waves back before turning to me for a response.

I explain to them what Sawyer told me. How she bought the jersey because she thought it would get under Jack's skin. Since they're 'enemies.' The more I get to know her, the more confused I become. She's truly an enigma.

Jack laughs so loudly, I swear Maren could hear him from the stands.

"She's in love with me."

"Dude, it sounds like she hates you," Declan says, unhelpfully.

"She just doesn't know it yet. She will."

It's a declaration that none of us want to touch. Luckily, the position coaches call for warmups, and the three of them run off onto the field. A small sliver of me is jealous that they get to play, and I don't. But the rest of me is just grateful. To be here. To have my friends and Sawyer. My scans showed that the tear is healing nicely, and I should be able to start physical therapy. Soon, I'll be out there, but until then, I'll do what only

I can manage. Cheering them on like a middle school soccer parent.



The first three quarters fly by. Touchdowns are being traded back and forth. We have the ball, and if we score, the game will be tied with less than a minute left. I hold my breath as the offensive coordinator relays the play to Deon. With a terse nod, Deon turns to the huddle, explaining the play. I recognize it immediately. They're going to throw the ball to Declan in the end zone. I watch as the huddle breaks and my teammates line up on the line of scrimmage.

Declan makes eye contact with me as he jogs to his position. I can see the nervousness in his features. I nod to him, then exaggerate the motion of taking a deep breath. He takes one, then smiles, turning towards the end zone.

Ten seconds later the ball is snapped. I watch it all play out. Deon catching the ball from the center. Declan sprints towards the defensive player, then veers left. Jack slams his body against the defensive tackle to give Deon time in the pocket. Time slows as Deon releases the ball, sending a perfect spiral in Declan's direction. I watch as the ball flies through the air, landing perfectly in Declan's hands. Shifting into a dead sprint, Declan covers the last ten yards to the end zone in a second.

The moment he steps into the end zone, the crowd roars. I watch as the team runs at him in celebration. Jack lifts him off

the ground and Deon pats him on the back. He jogs off the field as the kicker comes out for the extra point.

I knock on his helmet as he walks by. “One hell of a catch.”

“I know,” He smirks, moving towards the athletic trainer holding water.

The extra point is good, special teams kicks the ball and Cincinnati catches the ball on the thirty-yard line. With forty-five seconds left on the clock, Cincinnati makes their way down the field as quickly as possible. With two solid stops, the defense only needs one more to force the team to kick, sending the game into overtime.

My eyes stay locked in on the field as I watch the quarterback launch the ball into the air. A Hail Mary. The ball moves through the air in slow motion. One second turns into two, and I watch as a Cincinnati receiver comes out of nowhere, catching the ball. He’s tackled immediately. With six seconds left on the clock, there’s not much they can do, other than throw another Hail Mary and hope a player catches it.

Then I notice the kicker for Cincinnati running out onto the field. My eyes drop to the yard line. Forty-seven. An incredibly long kick. Another hail Mary of sorts. I can’t peel my eyes away as I watch the ball being snapped, and then kicked. I track it in the air as it barrels toward the field goalposts. The referees’ hands fly up.

It’s over.

We lost.



I tap my fingers against the steering wheel as I wait in the pick-up lane at the airport. Nervous energy coursing through my body. Since I bought the tickets a week in advance, the girls had to fly out on the Tuesday after the game. After we lost and Coach Barrett talked to us in the locker room, we left Dallas pretty quickly after media and other requirements. No one wanted to be there any longer than necessary. The loss still hurts. To be so close and watch it slip away.

In the end, it's a loss I'm willing to live with. We left everything out on the field.

I honk, spotting the girls walking out of the airport. I hop out of the car, meeting them halfway. I meet Sawyer, planting a kiss on her lips while I take her bag.

"Hi," she says, blushing. There's nothing I love more than seeing my Sawyer blush. And PDA does it every single time.

I open the trunk of the car, throw Sawyer's bag in, and then move back to grab Maren and Nathalie's. Once everyone is settled, I turn my hazards off and pull away from the airport. The drive back is silent except for the sound of the radio. The girls seem tired, and no one wants to address the very large elephant in the car. Sawyer places her hand on my thigh as a drive, setting shivers up my spine.

I drop Nathalie off at her apartment, then make my way towards Sawyer's apartment. Pulling into the parking garage, I

hop out and grab their bags. We silently ride the elevator to their floor. The moment we enter, Maren immediately moves towards her bedroom.

“I’m taking a nap,” she yells as she leaves us in the dust.

Now that Sawyer and I are alone, my nerves ramp up.

“Wanna stay for a while?” she asks, dragging her luggage towards her bedroom.

I follow her into her bedroom, shutting the door and sitting on the bed. I watch as she drops the suitcase, sits in front of it, and begins to unpack.

Now’s my shot.

“Maybe you shouldn’t unpack,” I say, going for nonchalance.

“What. Why? You know I like to unpack right when I get back,” Sawyer responds, still entirely focused on her task.

“It would make it easier to move.”

“Move? Why the hell would I move?”

I let the question settle for a moment before her head jolts towards mine, eyes searching my face.

“Move in with me,” It sounds like a demand, but really, it’s a plea. I hate having to be apart from her. We’ve been best friends for years. I know all her quirks, and she knows mine. There’s nothing she could do that would deter me from wanting to be with her.

Her eyes lock with mine and she looks down at the suitcase.

“I don’t know. Doesn’t it seem fast?”

“I’ve been in love with you for years. Living together seems like the next logical step.” She seems conflicted by my response. I can see the cogs turning in her head. She’s debating it. Which means I need to do whatever’s necessary to convince her. All is fair in love in war. Or so they say. “I hate to do this....” I start, “But you’ve twisted my arm.”

“Hate to do what?” She asks, looking at me skeptically.

“I hate using my trump card but...I do have a KitchenAid.”

Her eyes go wide, and I can see her trying to refute my argument. I watch as her face morphs into acceptance.

“Okay, I’ll move in with you.”

I run to her, triumphant, as I pluck her from the ground, pull her into my chest, and swing her back and forth. She giggles as I set her down, and I gaze at her as she grins from ear to ear.

A year ago, I never would have imagined this is where I would be. Enjoying playing football again. Living with the love of my life. And all it took was a play for the heart.



“I want you for worse and for better”

How You Get The Girl—Taylor Swift (Taylor’s Version)

seven months later

Henry

One thing you hear from couples who have spent years together is that you learn a lot about your partner after you start living with them. It’s true. The last seven months living with Sawyer have been eye-opening. For one, I didn’t think I could fall any further in love with her.

I was wrong.

Every day, I fall more deeply in love with Sawyer. I thought I knew all her quirks before she moved in, but she proved me wrong. Things I've learned include Sawyer washes her socks inside out, she only likes crunchy peanut butter and her toothbrush has to be on the right side of the sink. Three things I've learned to love, even if they both are a little...odd. Living with Sawyer has been the best time of my life, even if I did get yelled at by the nutritionist for eating too many cookies. As if anyone could have 'too many cookies'. If Sawyer is going to make them, then I'm going to eat them. Between cookies and everything else she's baked, I've managed a great return on my investment in the KitchenAid mixer.

From the moment she moved into my apartment, I've wanted to propose. I've been upfront in wanting to propose, I'm not going to lie and say I haven't talked to her about it. I like to imagine our lives together. Which turns into me daydreaming about our life and telling Sawyer every single one of my thoughts. I mentioned kids once by accident because I was thinking about how fun Micah is, which freaked us both out. I want kids, but one step at a time. Step one is a proposal. And an acceptance.

Fingers crossed.

I would have proposed sooner, but bending down onto one knee isn't the easiest thing to do in a cast boot. Getting down isn't the issue, it's getting back up. Not to mention the thing is an eyesore. No way am I allowing that in proposal photos. The moment the athletic trainers told me I no longer needed the

boot, I started to plan. Which was not easy. I thought Sawyer was going to catch me multiple times.

Her curious nature allows her to sniff out when I'm withholding something from her. What makes it worse is I tell her everything. Things I probably shouldn't. What I had for lunch. When my stomach hurts. The vulgar things my teammates have said in the locker room. My oversharing nature has come to bite me in the ass. I had to enlist Maren's help to get what I needed, so I wouldn't spoil the surprise. Her love for plans and ability to sneak around to get what she needs is truly shocking. Slightly terrifying, but impressive, nonetheless.

Once I had the ring, all I needed to do was convince Sawyer to go on another whale-watching tour, which wasn't difficult. To me, the tour is what sparked the beginning of everything, so there is no better place to propose. Everything was going according to plan. Until that damn sweater.

The sweater that currently sits at the number one spot on my shit list.

I saw her this morning with that horrendous whale sweater on. I swear I've hidden it on three separate occasions since she bought it for the tour. More than once, I've contemplated starting a small house fire where the only damage is to that damn sweater. I've tried. I really have. I can only do so much besides just telling her I'm proposing, which would ruin the surprise. So, Sawyer is going to get engaged in a whale sweater. A very, very ugly whale sweater. The universe knows

I did all I could to prevent it, but my girl is stubborn, and she's decided to die on the whale sweater hill.

“Are you really going to wear that?” I try one last time for good measure.

“Yes, now will you stop?” Sawyer places a kiss on my lips, attempting to shut me up. The move is effective, I'll give her that. She grabs her binoculars and purse from the kitchen counter and heads towards the door.

“Let's go,” she declares, swinging the door open.

“No one can say I didn't try,” I mutter under my breath as I follow her out the door.



Sawyer

“Come *on*,” I yell, dragging Henry behind me by the hand. I swear I saw something in the distance. I'm determined to see the first whale. I may or may not have squealed when Henry suggested doing another whale-watching tour. The last one was so much fun, and after living with Maren, my love for the ocean has increased tenfold.

I came prepared this time. These eyes will not miss a single whale. My binoculars hang around my neck and the book

Maren gave me for Christmas about whales sits in my purse. Plus, I found this great sweater at a thrift shop with whales on it. I snatched it up the moment I saw it, specifically for this. It looks like something my grandpa would wear, but it's charming and the perfect whale-watching sweater. Obviously, I'm wearing my rain boots to complete the outfit since we're on a boat.

Overall, I would rate my outfit a ten out of ten. I was bewildered when Henry begged me to change before we left. I look great. I nailed the whale-watching theme. I didn't want to hear him argue, so I shut him up with a kiss and walked out. He muttered all the way to the car about regrets, but I have zero regrets about this amazing sweater-binocular combo. If anything, I regret not trying to find the same sweater for Henry as well.

"Sawyer, it was the reflection of the light," Henry grumbles as I drag him to the railing. "Let's go back to the other side."

Geez, someone is grumpy this morning.

I snap the covers off the binoculars, putting them up to my eyes, peering out at the horizon. I'm confident I saw a blast of air. Now I only need to scan the area, and hopefully, I can find...

"Henry, look!" I yell, turning back to look at him. That was definitely air from a blowhole, and if he looks fast enough, he can probably spot it.

My breath gets lodged in my throat at the sight before me and the potential whale I may have spotted goes away with the

Dodo. Down on one knee, Henry holds a small velvet box in his hands. Behind him, I can see all our friends attempting to hide in the enclosed section of the boat and a photographer starts to snap photos of us.

My hands immediately begin to shake and tears spring to my eyes. Henry grabs my hand with his empty one, entwining our fingers together.

This cannot be happening. Not in my whale sweater.

Suddenly, I understand why Henry wanted me to change. I like the sweater, but not an outfit I would choose to get engaged in. I can only blame myself. At least the photos will tell a story.

“The moment I met you, Sawyer, my life went from black and white to technicolor. The past four years with you, as best friends and as more, have been the best of my life. You complete me. I love you more and more each day if that is even possible.” He chuckles and continues. “I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want the ups and downs, the good and the bad. I want it all with you. You’re my lighthouse, always guiding me home. My beacon of light in the darkest of days.”

The tears stream down my face as I attempt not to hyperventilate. Not in a million years had I expected Henry to propose. Not now at least. He’s told me multiple times that it was only a matter of time, but I hadn’t thought it would happen so soon. Since we moved in, he brings up a different future scenario every day. Buying a house. Getting a dog.

Having children. I had to nip the last one in the bud quickly before he got any grand ideas. I want children, and Henry would be an amazing father, but we're twenty-five. We have plenty of time for all that.

“Sawyer Jones, will you marry me?”

He looks up at me with love and adoration in his eyes as he opens the small blue box. I choke out a gasp at the sight. Set on a dainty, gold band, a beautiful purple stone sits surrounded by tiny diamonds. It's exactly what I would choose for myself.

“It's beautiful,” I murmur, the shock of the whole ordeal catching up to me.

“Is that a yes?” he asks, nervousness fluttering across his face.

“Yes!” I yell, leaning down and pouncing on him, toppling him over. I pepper kisses all over his face as I nearly squeeze him to death.

The moment I say yes, our friends pour out of their ‘hiding spots’, hands full of champagne, cheering us on.

I peel myself off Henry and he helps us both up off the boat deck. Grabbing my left hand, he slips the ring on my finger. It fits perfectly, not something I expected. I figured most people have to have it resized. I lift my hand in the air, admiring the ring.

“How?” I ask. My brain still hasn't caught up with what's happening and it's still processing the concept of being

engaged. It understands it happened, but it hasn't accepted it yet.

Henry understands immediately, chuckling as he wraps his arms around me from the back, admiring the ring with me. The purple stone glistens in the September sun, the light reflecting off the smaller stone surrounding it.

“Maren helped. She stole a ring from your room so I knew the size, and then she stalked your Pinterest and sent me options.” I move my hand back and forth, in awe of the beauty and grateful I had my nails done earlier this week. “Once I had the idea, Maren helped me have it made. She says everything is ethically sourced.”

I look over at Maren, who is popping champagne with Nathalie. She looks over at me and winks. I'm not surprised in the slightest that she was in on it. She loves scheming. Even more, I'm glad Henry asked her for help. She knew that a ring being ethically sourced was important to me, and she made it happen. Sometimes I don't know how I got as lucky as I did with a random roommate. Maren walks over, two glasses in her hand, handing us each one.

“Congratulations, I'm so happy for you,” she says, tears welling in her eyes. I break from Henry's grasp, pulling her into a hug.

“I love you, Maren,” I whisper into her ear.

“Love you, too.” She pulls back, wiping the tears away. “Now let's celebrate!”

Now that her emotional quota is filled for the month, she's ready to party. Not that I can blame her. I'm also in the mood for a celebration now that I'm engaged.

That's going to take some getting used to. Engaged.

One by one, people come up to congratulate us. Jack pulls us both into a bear hug and Nathalie cries when she looks at the ring. Both Declan and Deon both just smile at us, both slightly awkward. I thought it would be weird to add Declan to our small group after everything, but he fits in perfectly. We call my parents, then Henry's. Both sets nearly break the speakers of the phone when we share the news.

I pull Henry to the side, away from the group, for a moment just for us. Placing a kiss on his lips, I wrap my arms around his waist.

"You're my fiancé," I whisper up at him. I still haven't quite wrapped my head around the whole thing.

"It has a nice ring to it."

"I know something that sounds even better." I look up at him, a hit of mischief in my gaze.

"Oh, yeah?" he asks, pulling me into him, "and what's that?"

"Husband."

The group of us spend the rest of the day laughing, celebrating, enjoying each other's company. A year ago, I decided to apply for a job. To be closer to my best friend. The terror of moving across the country, only knowing two people in Seattle, almost prevented me from doing it. But I took the

leap of faith. Now, looking around at my friends, at my fiancé,
I couldn't imagine a different life for myself. A job I love.
Friends I adore. Engaged to my best friend.

I couldn't imagine a better life.

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Nicole Cubba is an iced coffee, sports, Taylor Swift, and rom-com book enthusiast. She believes every person deserves a happily-ever-after and her favorite stories are ones that reflect that sentiment. Nicole works as a marine biologist and has a deep passion for the ocean and the planet. When she isn't in the lab, you can find her searching for new coffee shops, wandering in nature, and spending far too much time watching sports. She was born and raised in Michigan. *A Play For The Heart* is her debut novel.