



Anti
PLAYER

R.C. STEPHENS

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All characters in this book are fiction and figments of the author's imagination.

For everyone who has ever felt like their life has come crashing down. It takes courage to pick up and move forward but always remember to move forward.

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PROLOGUE

KALEB

I pop a bite-size cake into my mouth and groan. This sweets table is out of this world. The team has the day off today for Connor and Ellie's wedding. Tomorrow is the big game. The final of the season. It's crunch time, yet I am allowing myself this guilty pleasure since my good friend just got hitched.

Damn, that's good. I lick my fingers when I hear a giggle come from behind me.

I turn to see a woman wearing a white button-down dress shirt and black pants, her hand covers her mouth.

"You're really enjoying those mini cheesecakes," she cackles, removing her hand. She's beautiful with long brown hair and warm chocolate brown eyes. Her smile is sincere, and her red lips are sexy as hell.

"I've never tasted anything so good in my life. That base is to die for. What is it? Some sort of graham cookie crumble?"

“Are you a baker?” she asks.

I laugh. “No, I just know a good dessert when I taste one.”

“My boss owns the catering company who catered this event. She is quite the baker. Those are her mini mango cheesecakes. Have you tried the dulce de leche ones? They’re my favorite.”

“There’s dulce de leche?” I ask, unable to contain my excitement. I’m like a kid who has their hand in the candy jar with no repercussions.

The woman points to another table. “Right here.”

My eyes widen and my mouth waters. I pop the bite-size morsel in my mouth and the flavor bursts on my tongue. “Oh, that is good,” I groan. These cheesecakes are freaking orgasmic.

“You really like your desserts,” the woman laughs.

“I’m a professional athlete. I eat clean most of the season. We’re in the finals now and my good buddy just got married. This is me celebrating,” I explain. I better slow down on these mini cakes. As good as they are, they are so sweet, and I am starting to feel nauseous.

“What sport do you play?” the woman asks.

“Hockey,” I say dryly, as if it’s no big deal.

“Are you guys famous or something? I’ve never seen so many guys above six feet with your build in the same room at the same time before,” she giggles.

“I mean, I don’t know if we’re famous.” I scratch my jaw. I’ve never liked the attention of being a professional athlete, so it’s nice she doesn’t know anything about hockey.

Brett walks over. He’s my best friend, even though he’s five years older than me. We grew up next door to each other. I was friends with his younger brother, Henry. When I drafted to the Rangers, it was Brett who showed me around. I even lived with him for the first year, until I figured everything out about living on my own since I drafted right out of high school.

“Hey, bro,” Brett says, interrupting.

I nod at my friend, who can also be a pain in my ass.

“What’s your name?” he asks the woman I’m talking to. I didn’t even get her name and he just swoops in and bam.

“Taylor,” she replies with a warm smile.

“Nice to meet you, Taylor. I’m Brett. I see you’ve already met Kaleb,” Brett says, being a pushy jerk.

“We were talking but I didn’t get his name. Nice to meet you, Kaleb,” she says batting her lashes. She’s pretty and sweet.

“Nice to meet you too, Taylor. Ignore my pushy friend.” I laugh.

Taylor laughs too.

“I’m not pushy,” Brett argues.

“Yes, you are,” I counter, which is the wrong thing to do with Brett.

“Are you guys going to dance?” Brett asks, looking between us. I want to kill him. Ever since I told him I was a virgin, he’s been an annoying aggressive idiot.

“Actually, I’m on the job,” Taylor explains.

“That’s okay,” I smile. I eye Brett, willing him to walk away because him supervising how I am picking up a girl isn’t helping. He’s ruining any game I have.

“Brett, Matt is calling you,” I lie, and I physically turn him around and push him in the other direction.

He leaves, thankfully.

“Sorry about that. Brett can be a lot.”

“He was funny. Is he a professional hockey player too?” she asks.

“He’s my teammate and best friend. And before you say I have bad taste in friends, I can vouch he’s a good guy. When he isn’t butting into my business.” I roll my eyes playfully.

She smiles and bats her lashes some more. The guys have really been on my case about me finally putting the nail in the coffin and losing my virginity, although that may be a bad analogy for something that's supposed to be a good thing.

“So, can I get your number? Maybe we can go out for coffee,” I suggest. She clearly isn't a puck bunny, which is a relief.

“That sounds nice,” she says. She gives me her number, which is the easy part for me. I know how to get a date. I even know how to hook up with a date, but it's making the home run, so to speak, that makes me take pause. This time I need to make sure to hit the ball out of the park. It is weird I am making baseball analogies when I don't play baseball, but something about going all the way makes me tense up and I say and think weird shit.

“Well, I better get back to work. My boss is the niece of the house manager here. She told us all to make sure everything goes without a hitch. I don't want her to think I'm slacking off, but before I go, you should really try those fudge bites. They are the most orgasmic thing I've ever tried.” Her brown eyes light up and I am guessing her word choice was purposeful. Orgasmic as in orgasm as in sex.

I clear my throat and give her a sheepish grin. I pop one of the fudge bites in my mouth.

“Holy shit, that is good,” I moan.

Taylor laughs.

“Now I know what you'll sound like when you come.” She laughs. “Have a good night, Kaleb.”

Holy shit.

She isn't the first girl to expect me to take her to bed. They mostly are disappointed when I don't. Some of them get angry, which isn't pleasant at all. Maybe I just want to get to really know a girl before I take her to bed. Get to know what makes her tick and what puts a smile on her face. I also want to know someone is with me for who I am and not what I do.

“You too, Taylor. I’ll be in touch.” She walks off swaying her fine ass, and it does look fine in her fitted dress pants that hug her butt just right.

I sigh when she is far enough away. She’s pretty, sweet, and forward. I don’t know if I like forward, but I always find faults with the women I meet. I need to give Taylor a chance. I am very attracted to her looks, so getting to know her should be a piece of cake. Thinking of cake now makes me feel nauseous. I’ve had too much sugar. I have to stop.

I walk over to the guys. Brett is standing around with Matt, Aaron, Liam, Evan, and Wolfe.

“I got her number. You all need to take a chill pill,” I say to the guys.

Brett begins to cheer, “Told you he’d get the number. I totally helped you by going over there, right?”

“Dude, you didn’t help me. You made me look incompetent,” I say to him.

He frowns. “That’s just not true.”

“It is true,” I confirm. “You got to let me do things my way.”

I know he’s looking out for me because we grew up as neighbors and I was friends with his younger brother.

“Your way isn’t getting the job done,” he deadpans.

I give him the stink eye. Not everyone on the team knows about my predicament, and I prefer to keep it that way.

“Dude, the guy has a new chick on his arm every other week,” Matt reminds.

“Exactly, I don’t need your help.” I give Brett’s shoulder a squeeze. I know he means well. As the oldest child in his family, with a father who was absent, Brett constantly feels like he needs to protect everyone around him.

As the older brother in my family, I get where his overprotectiveness stems from. Mom divorced my dad when I was eight. He was a professional hockey player who cheated

on her, but when they divorced Dad walked away from me too. I had a bad stutter he hated, and I wasn't the son he envisioned he would have as a professional player. Mom then married a guy named Ryan and had my sister, Jane, and my brother, Jack. When she divorced Ryan, she promised she was done with men but she met Calder and married him. He was another loser and it was me who was there to pick up the pieces of her broken heart when she'd fall apart and couldn't do anything around the house, like take care of my siblings.

Most of the guys go off to dance. They are friends with Ellie, the bride, and her friends. Brett sticks by me. "Aren't you going to dance?"

"Nah." He shrugs. "Have you seen Willow?" he asks of Ellie's good friend.

"No," I reply.

"Weird, they're like best friends. You'd think she would come to her wedding," Brett says, looking thoughtful, which doesn't happen too often.

"That is strange," I agree.

"Come on, let's do shots," he says, smacking my chest.

"No way, I just had way too much cake. I'll puke."

"I don't understand you," he says, shaking his head. "Fine. I'll go find me a cute waitress to shag."

"Not Taylor," I warn, lifting up my finger.

"Bro, I'm offended. I would never steal your girl. Bro code." He fist bumps me and I fist bump him back. This is what makes Brett a great friend. He lives by the code. He'll never stab you in the back. He'll always be there for you. You just need to follow the code too. Too bad that isn't what happens...

CHAPTER

ONE

MADISON

“Mommy, I really need to pee,” Asher complains from the back seat.

“Honey, Waze says we’ll be there in fifteen minutes,” I plead. We’ve stopped five times already, making the almost two-hour drive three hours.

“I’m going to pop,” he says, breathing hard.

My Dodge Caravan is literally filled with everything I own. After I caught my boyfriend cheating, I had no choice but to move out of his place.

“Mommmeeee,” Asher begs.

Oh, for crying out loud. I pull off to the side of the freeway, which isn’t the smartest thing to do, but desperate times call for desperate measures. I get out on the passenger side and take Asher out on that side too. No way do I want him close to the moving cars.

“Okay, baby, make your pee,” I urge.

He looks up at me like I am crazy for insinuating he should pee on the side of the road. “This is the only bathroom we got. Peeing in nature is good. You are watering the earth.”

“There are no plants growing here,” my five-year-old, who is too smart for his age, insists.

“Do it for Mommy. There are no bathrooms,” I say.

He begins to pee, only things get out of control and he starts to spray my jeans and sweatshirt. This day keeps getting better and better.

“All done.” He looks up to me with a sweet smile.

Now I get to show up to my brother’s house smelling like piss.

“Okay, let’s get you back in the car,” I say to my son.

He gets back in and puts on his seat belt. I close the back door and get back in on the passenger side. I merge onto the highway as the smell of piss fills my nostrils.

I seriously want to cry. I had been with Nathan for two years. I thought he was the one. He told me I was the one. I moved in with him and got rid of my apartment. Then things started to change. He didn’t come home until late. He was a real estate agent and said he was working late in the office every night. I stopped by to bring him food, only to find that he was screwing the secretary.

Tears prick my eyes. I’m such a fool. My brothers like to say I’m like our mom. I’m too trusting and give my heart too easily. That is going to stop. From here on out, I do not believe in relationships. I will not give my heart to anyone. I need to go on a dating cleanse. No men. No sex. I need to purge whatever it is inside me that makes me fall so easily for a guy. I think back to my sophomore year of college. I was seeing a guy named Joel. He was so handsome and smart. I thought he was the real deal. We went to a party and drank too much. When he told me he would die if he didn’t feel me bare during sex it should’ve set off alarm bells, but I hopped on for the ride, enjoying a very wild night of sex. I also got knocked up and Joel didn’t want to have anything to do with a baby. I’m grateful for my son but I need to stop being so naïve.

I drive along, heading towards my brother’s apartment building. There was no way I could stay in Jersey. My life just crashed and burned there. It’s summer and Asher and I need a fresh start. New York City is the perfect place. I should’ve maybe given Brett advanced warning of my arrival, but my brother is one of the best people I know. My other brother,

Henry, lives out in Connecticut. He is amazing too but he's the brain in the family, working on his immunology PhD. Besides, I don't think Connecticut is for me.

I call my oldest brother on speed dial.

"Maddie, what's up?"

"I've been better," I sigh.

"What happened?" Brett asks angrily. He's a big guy and I can just picture his angry expression. "Do I need to drive to Jersey and beat the shit out of Nathan?"

He's also a hockey player that may get into one too many fights.

"I left him," I say.

"Shit," he swears.

"I moved out of his place. Asher and I are about ten minutes away from you," I say to my brother. His team just won the Stanley Cup, so he is in the offseason right now.

"Um, what?" he asks, confused.

"I moved out of Nathan's, we have nowhere to go," I say, because why try to sugarcoat it?

Brett hisses and is muttering profanities under his breath.

"I'm not home. I went for lunch with some of the guys," he says.

"Does Kaleb have an extra key?" I ask.

"Yeah, let me get a hold of him. I also need to let management know you're staying for a prolonged amount of time. You'll need a parking spot in the underground. You and Asher can have your own rooms."

"Brett, you're the best."

"Tell me something I don't know," he snickers. "Let me get a hold of Kaleb, and I'll let security know to let you in the building."

"You're a lifesaver," I say to him.

“Some advanced notice would’ve been nice,” he scolds and he’s right.

“Sorry. We won’t get in the way,” I assure my brother. “I’ll get a job and put Asher in camp or something.”

“Ahuh,” he says.

When I got pregnant, I dropped out of college. Not that I knew what I wanted to be. Then after Asher was born, I started culinary school but it was too much with taking care of a newborn so I dropped out. I’ve been cooking and baking most of my life. My mom is the best cook on the planet, and I always loved spending time with her in the kitchen. I can make delicious food, but most places want to see a degree to hire you as a chef.

“I’ll call you back. Just head on over.”

“Thanks, Brett.”

“Mhmm.”

My brother has the softest warmest heart.

I finally pull up to his building. Security is expecting me so when I press the button on the intercom for the underground parking garage, the security guard lets me through. I also ask him about a dolly and he says he will come down to the garage to bring it to me.

When I park the car, the security guard is waiting at the door.

I walk over to him. “Thanks so much for meeting me down here,” I say to him. “I’m Maddie, by the way, and this is my son, Asher.”

“Nice to meet you both. I’m Sheridan,” he says. “I can help you unload the car.”

“Thanks, but I can handle it on my own,” I assure. “I packed it up.”

“It’s not a problem, ma’am. I don’t mind helping. I’m a big fan of your brother,” he insists.

“Thanks, Sheridan.” I smile. He looks to be in his mid-forties and is very kind.

He helps me unload my van and we take the elevator up to Brett’s apartment.

“Oh, I forgot to ask my brother what apartment Kaleb lives in,” I mutter to myself, taking my cell out of the back pocket of my jeans.

“Kaleb Bardot?”

I nod.

“He shares the floor with Brett,” he explains.

“Sweet.”

Sheridan helps us off the elevator. “Here you go. You can bring the dolly down when you’re done. Just leave it by the security desk on the main floor.”

“Thanks so much for your help,” I say.

“My pleasure.” He waves as he waits for the elevator.

I fix my hair as much as possible. Kaleb was friends with my older brother, Henry, when we were growing up. He also lived next door. I know he’s still in touch with Henry, and he and Brett are attached at the hip. I had the biggest crush on Kaleb when we were growing up, but he never looked my way. I was his friend’s little sister. He was just as protective of me as my brothers were.

I take a deep breath and while I inhale, I realize I smell like old piss. Shit. I wish I could change into different clothes, but I’m not going to strip in the hallway.

“Mommy, I need to pee,” Asher says.

“How is that possible? You just peed.”

“I drank that red drink you got me. I need to pee, Mommy,” Asher complains.

“Jesus H. Roosevelt.”

I walk up to the door and knock. I can’t exactly have Asher pee in one of the potted plants in the hall. Besides, there are

probably cameras.

The door swings open and I am met with all the male glory that is Kaleb Bardot. Tall with muscles that go on for days. The best hair, brown and straight, and it's gotten longer since I saw him last. His chocolate brown eyes zero in on me. "Mad Pie," he says opening his arms wide.

"There is no Mad Pie, just Maddie." I step in and give him a hug.

He hugs me back and I feel his muscles tense around me. His body is glorious. He's so big and strong and so damn handsome. That facial structure should be illegal.

He scrunches his nose and I remember I have piss on me.

"Shit." I pull back.

His eyebrows hit his forehead and he looks at me like I am a loose cannon.

"Sorry, I forgot Asher peed on me on the freeway," I explain.

His eyes roam over my body and he gives me a meaningful look. I think he is trying to gauge if I am being serious.

"Mommy," Asher whispers.

"Hi, little man," Kaleb says. It's been a hot minute since I've seen Kaleb. We usually come to Brett's for Christmas since I haven't been back home to Michigan in a heck of a long time. Mom and Henry come here too, and Kaleb always joins us, but for the past two years I stayed in Jersey because of fucking Nathan.

"You remember Asher," I say to Kaleb.

"You've grown a lot, little man," Kaleb says.

"Mommy, I need to pee," Asher says, scrunching his face.

"I'm so sorry. Can he use your bathroom?" I ask Kaleb.

"Of course, come on in, Mad Pie."

I give him a smile that's tight. He really needs to stop calling me that because it makes me feel like I'm five.

“I’m just going to help him. I don’t need him peeing all over your walls,” I explain.

Kaleb laughs because he clearly thinks I’m joking.

My straight face probably lets on I was being serious and his smile falters.

“Let me show you where the bathroom is.” He blinks and then he is moving, and we are following him.

We get into the bathroom, and I remind my son to aim at the toilet. The last thing I want is to be cleaning piss off Kaleb’s bathroom walls. I ask my son to turn around and I pee too because my bladder was close to exploding.

When we head back out, Kaleb is holding a key and dangling it in the air.

“Brett said you guys are staying for a while?” he inquires.

I take the key from his grasp. “That’s the plan.”

“Cool. It’s like our childhood all over again.” He grins.

I don’t know how it’s possible, but this guy gets better looking every time I see him.

I smile because I really don’t know what to say. “We better get ourselves unpacked,” I direct to Asher. “I need to shower and get these clothes off me. Then we need to eat something,” I say to my son because I am a mumbling mess around Kaleb. I’m pretty sure he was my first crush. Of course I never let on how I felt. My brothers would never allow me to crush on their friend. Once, Henry accused me of having a crush on Kaleb, and Brett pinned him to the wall and made him take his words back. He threatened to prank him in his sleep if he didn’t. Henry, being Henry, took them back swiftly.

“I’ll be seeing you two around,” Kaleb says.

“See you.” I smile and wave. Why am I being so awkward?

“Bye, Asher, nice to see you again,” Kaleb says to him.

Asher waves.

“Thanks, Kaleb, see you around,” I say to him.

He nods and Asher and I exit his apartment.

It’s only when we get back in the hall do I realize I was holding my breath and, holy shit, my heart is beating fast and my body is feeling warm.

No. No. No.

I can’t catch a crush on Kaleb. I’ve sworn off men and Brett would have a meltdown, and right now we need to be living with Brett. Which means I need to take a deep cleansing breath. I am not attracted to Kaleb. Not in the least bit.

It’s lies. Dirty terrible lies.

CHAPTER

TWO

KALEB

I'm late meeting with the guys for lunch since I took my morning run late and had to shower. Turns out my lateness worked out well because I got to see Maddie. It's been about two years since I last saw her. I blow out a breath. She is still as gorgeous as I remember. Considering I am friends with both her brothers, I have always kept my feelings in check but I remember watching her grow up. When she got to high school, I was a junior. Henry was always the studious type. It was me who stepped up when guys tried to ask her out, and Maddie had quite the lineup back in the day. Brett made me promise to keep an eye on her and I kept my promise. My eyes were on her. On her beauty, on her warm smile. Maddie was a serial monogamist, and I hated seeing her with each of her boyfriends. I told myself she had a big heart, and she did. She'd babysit my younger siblings for me while I went to hockey practices and Mom was tuned out.

Now I walk up to the patio where my friends are hanging out and having lunch. I fist bump each of them. Coming off of a Stanley Cup, win we are all on a high.

"Dude, it took you long enough," Matt chides.

"I had to let Brett's sister into his apartment," I explain.

"Whoa, is she hot?" Matt asks.

I don't have to anticipate what is going to happen because I already know. Brett slaps him in the chest hard. You can hear the impact of where his hand makes contact.

“What the fuck?” Matt complains, his face scrunched in pain.

“Do not fucking look at my sister or I’ll twist your balls off,” Brett warns.

Yup, that was the reaction I expected.

“Shit, bro, you need to chill out,” Matt says. “Point taken.”

“Good,” Brett confirms with a nod.

“So, are we booking Florida?” Aaron asks.

“No one wants to go anymore,” Brett answers. Evan isn’t coming since his affair with Patty has been outed. Liam just got married.

“I want to go,” Brad chimes in.

“Me too,” Aaron says.

Brett looks at me. “I could go to Florida once I am done with hockey camp. I could use a break, but what are you going to do with Maddie and Asher? You can’t leave, they just got here.”

“True,” Brett says, rubbing the scruff on his chin. “I could bring them along and most of us are helping you with the camp thing, so we’re tied up anyway.”

I created a foundation to support kids who have a stuttering problem, and I run a hockey camp every summer for them.

“You can’t bring Asher and Maddie to Florida,” I gasp. “Did you forget it’s a fuckfest for you guys?”

“No shit, I’ll get her and Asher a room on the other side of the hotel. They could do their own thing. She could probably use a vacation.”

I don’t know what Maddie’s story is or why she clearly showed up out of the blue to live with her brother, but my guess is she was in a relationship that went south. Where I don’t trust at all, that girl trusts too easily.

I get situated and order my lunch.

“I’ve been texting that Taylor girl. I want to take her out,” I say to the guys.

“You haven’t taken her out yet?” Brett asks, his blue eyes round.

I give him a look that says “Shut up” but he raises his eyebrows, and now I have four sets of eyes watching me.

“I’ve been busy.” I shrug.

“Doing what? We’re on break,” he states.

“Probably getting pussy on the side first.” Matt grins wide and then he fist bumps me, but I leave him hanging.

Brett continues to wait with his brows raised. I appreciate his concern with me being a virgin at age twenty-seven but he shouldn’t be concerned, I’m not.

“I don’t have a side piece. I’ve just been chilling since the win,” I admit.

“I’ve been chilling too,” Aaron admits. “My body has been killing me.” He’s one of our goalies.

“I’ve also been exhausted,” I relay. “Playoffs were hard on my body.”

“I’m older than all you fuckers. You don’t hear me complaining,” Brett says.

“You aren’t complaining but it doesn’t mean you aren’t hurting. We all took some rough hits,” I remind him.

“True dat,” Matt says. “We earned that Cup. I’ve never played so hard in my life.”

“Tell me about it,” Brad agrees.

The server brings my large Cobb salad and my draft beer. Hanging with the guys and having time to chill feels great, only my mind keeps pulling me back to Maddie and her pretty blue eyes. She still has those soft freckles on her cheeks too. I blink the thought away, knowing how murderous Brett would be if he had access to my thoughts. We leave lunch and I head back home and watch some movies. Offseason is usually boring. I pick up my phone and text Taylor. She says she’s free

tonight, so I ask her out for a cup of coffee. She may have different expectations, but I'm not up for clubbing or a wild night.

I head to my kitchen and open my fridge. I have an assistant who does my shopping and cooks my meals. I scratch the back of my head because my fridge is practically empty. How did I not notice this? I send my assistant a message and ask her if she was at my place earlier.

Sandra: Sorry, got food poisoning. Supposed to restock you today but couldn't make it and was too sick to message you.

Me: No worries. Feel better.

I'm hungry and tired when I slip on my slides and walk over to Brett's apartment. He must have some food. I go to open his door with my key because I usually just walk into his place when I need something, but I forgot I gave it to Maddie. Damn. I'm about to knock when the door swings open and Asher is standing there looking at me with a smile.

"Asher, get back in here and close the door," Maddie says, running up to the door. She makes a full stop when she sees me, and I remember I am wearing a white wifebeater and basketball shorts.

"Kaleb?" she asks. I realize I'm staring because she is also in her comfortable clothes. Her hair is wet and falls in strands over her shoulders and she's wearing a cropped gray T-shirt and shorts that look like they were once jogging pants that have been cut off—short.

I blink and get a grip before Brett catches me gawking at her. "Yeah, hi," I mumble. "I didn't have food in my fridge. Came to see what Brett has for dinner."

"He had all kinds of meals prepped for him, but I cooked. Come in, there's plenty of extras," Maddie says, inviting me in. The smell of her cooking brings back one of the few good childhood memories I have. Maddie would love to prepare food and treats with her mom growing up and when I came over, I was her favorite taste tester. Probably how I came to

love dessert so much, because she would spoil me with all the treats she made.

Brett comes to the door. “What up, bro?”

“Got no food in my fridge,” I say to my friend, trying to get my feelings in check. Brett’s radar is on point when it comes to his sister. I don’t want to be giving off weird vibes.

“Good timing. Maddie’s been cooking up a storm,” Brett states.

“Thanks, bro,” I say.

I walk in and Asher is kicking around a soccer ball. “Do you play soccer?” I ask.

“I was playing on a team but we left Jersey so I can’t play anymore,” he says with a frown.

“Asher, you’ll make new friends in New York and they have soccer teams here too,” Maddie assures him.

“I can play soccer with you,” I say to him.

“But you’re a hockey player,” he says.

“So, I’m good at soccer too. So is your uncle, Brett,” I say.

“Leave me out of it. I’m hungry and the food smells too good,” Brett replies.

“Nice,” Maddie chides her brother.

Brett shrugs. “My stomach is grumbling.”

“Dinner will be up in five,” Maddie announces.

“Thanks, Mad Pie,” I say. It’s automatic. It’s a nickname I gave her when we were really small and she wanted to play with Henry and me, but Henry didn’t want her playing, so I called her Mad Pie and she hated it and left us alone. As time went on, I continued to call her the annoying nickname to remind myself she was my best friend’s little sister and she was off-limits. When I moved out to New York, Brett took me in and he and I bonded. Where I used to look up to him as Henry’s older brother growing up, he just became Brett, my friend. A friend I’ve respected since childhood.

I kick around the soccer ball with Asher and show him a few tricks. “See, I can bounce the ball on my knees a hundred times.”

“Really?” Asher asks, interested.

“It takes a lot of practice. It’s about balance,” I explain, bouncing the ball. I stop and pass to Asher.

He begins to bounce the ball on his knee and gets three in a row. “Good job,” I praise and the kid smiles. He’s cute and has small freckles on his cheeks, just like his mom. “Keep going. You can’t give up. A good athlete keeps practicing and doesn’t give up.”

The kid keeps trying to bounce the ball and each time gets a little better.

“Dinner is ready,” Maddie calls.

I walk over to Brett’s dining room table.

“Holy shit, this was the best choice I made all day,” I say, looking at the spread.

“Language,” Maddie scolds, watching me wide-eyed.

“Can I sit beside you?” Asher asks me.

“Sure, kid,” I reply, and I pull out the chair beside me.

“What is all this?” I ask Maddie because she makes things I haven’t seen before.

“That’s shrimp creole,” she points at the dish with shrimp. “That’s garlicky braised lamb shanks with mushrooms, and that’s baked goat cheese salad.”

Brett and I eye each other like excited little kids.

“It’s really good having you here, Mads.” Brett grins.

Maddie smiles.

“What’s for me, Mommy?” Asher asks.

“You can eat the salad and then I made you some baked chicken,” she says to him.

“How did you have time to make all this?” I ask.

“Brett made a grocery order to some fancy schmancy grocery store close by, they delivered all the fresh ingredients, and I got cooking,” she explains.

We sit down and dig in. I start with the salad and when I place one of the pieces of breaded goat cheese covered in thyme in my mouth I groan. “This is delicious.”

“Maddie is the best cook. I swear I think she’s outdone my mother,” Brett says.

“Don’t let her hear you say that.” Maddie giggles. I love the way they interact. The Noble kids were always close. Not like my siblings. When Mom divorced Ryan, my half siblings, Jack and Jane, lived with us until I drafted, and then they left to live with Ryan since Mom wasn’t on top of things. Ryan apparently didn’t know about Mom’s neglect and he was pissed. He picked them up and I haven’t heard from them since.

Asher digs into the salad and eats the chicken on his plate.

“Wow, he eats the fancy stuff,” I say, impressed. “Jack and Jane hated eating healthy food.”

“That’s not true. I remember coming over and cooking for them. They would eat my food,” Maddie says thoughtfully as she takes a bite of salad.

“It must have been my shi... I mean bad cooking,” I reply, taking another bite.

We move on to the first course, which is the shrimp creole. Brett and I go crazy over it.

“You need to go back to culinary school. You were meant to be a chef,” Brett says to Maddie.

“That costs money and I wouldn’t be able to work,” she explains.

“The girl I’m seeing works for a catering company. Maybe I can ask her if they are looking for chefs,” I offer.

“Any credible company won’t hire me as a chef without the proper school credentials,” Maddie responds.

“You aren’t seeing her. You haven’t even gone on a date with her,” Brett announces, and I want to kill him. “Damn, this is good,” he compliments, eating more shrimp creole.

I roll my eyes. “Whatever.” He needs to shut his mouth. Especially in front of Maddie. She is the last person I want to know about my virginity issues.

“I can ask Connor to ask Ellie about the chick who owns the catering company. Connor said she was a friend of Ellie’s family. That’s a better connection. Taylor was waitstaff. We need to make sure Maddie gets her foot in the door,” Brett says.

“Who are Connor and Ellie?” Maddie asks.

“Connor is our teammate. He just married Ellie. He has a cute kid named Sydney. Asher would like her,” Brett says. “They live in the building.”

“A girl,” Asher says, scrunching his face.

Maddie laughs and rolls her eyes. “I’ll take any help I can getting a job.”

“I’ll call Connor,” Brett states.

“Thanks,” Maddie says.

“You’ll like Ellie, she’s nice, if you’re looking for friends in the city,” I suggest. From what I remember, she always had a hard time with girlfriends.

Maddie stands and offers Brett and me some red wine, saying it will complement the braised lamb. She pours each of us a glass and sits back down.

“So why haven’t you gone out with Taylor?” Brett pushes.

“Leave it alone,” I urge, but my friend isn’t good at taking the hint.

“You’re a virgin, Kaleb,” Brett spews like I need the reminder.

I drop my fork on my plate, just as Maddie spews the wine she was about to gulp down. Her blue eyes are wide and she watches Brett with a crooked smile.

“What the fuck, Brett?” I hiss.

“It’s just family here,” he says.

“Guys, my son is five,” Maddie reminds.

“Sorry,” Brett says, but he’s sorry for being inappropriate he’s not about embarrassing me. And I do not consider Maddie family. I’ve wanted in her pants since high school.

“That was messed up.” I get up to walk away.

“You can’t be serious,” Maddie says, and I pause.

“What’s a virgin?” Asher asks.

I squeeze my eyes shut. This is seriously getting worse by the minute.

“Don’t worry about it, honey. It’s adult stuff,” Maddie deflects.

“I’m outta here,” I say, and I get up. “Thanks for the meal, Mad Pie.” I leave. I’m pissed at Brett, but I am also pissed about not getting the braised lamb.

“Kaleb, wait,” Maddie says.

“Just leave it,” I advise her.

I walk toward the door. She follows me.

“Brett can be a little much sometimes,” she says when I reach for the handle.

“Don’t I know it,” I mutter.

“I’m here if you want to talk about it,” she whispers.

I turn to look at her. “You’re the last person I want to talk to about this.”

She flinches, but it isn’t what I meant. I am attracted to her. I don’t want her thinking I’m weird.

I leave and head over to my apartment.

I can’t believe Brett embarrassed me like that. Fuck him.

I head to the shower because I told Taylor I would meet her at a coffee shop in an hour.

In the shower, memories of my childhood come tumbling back. I'm ten years old, stuttering in class. Kids are making fun of me. Truth is I always stuttered. Mom got me help when I was younger. My dad would get upset when I couldn't speak right. He felt my stutter showed weakness. The only time I didn't really stutter was when I was with my team playing hockey. I felt relaxed with them. My relationship with Dad was tense, but he gave me hockey. Got me on skates by the time I was three and had me stickhandling by the time I was five. In high school I was a Tier 1 player. Things got more intense with practices, and I slowly grew out of my stutter, but the effects stuck with me. I couldn't get a date in high school until I made it on a Tier 1 team. Kids made fun of me and I didn't have the guts to ask a girl on a date. I went to junior prom with friends. It was only my senior year of high school that things changed. My stutter improved. Girls were breathing down my neck. I grew tall, strong, and had muscles on me from all the exercise. I enjoyed the attention, but it felt like it wasn't genuine. Some of those girls didn't look my way when I was younger. Some even laughed at my stutter in class. I try to shake off all the bad vibes radiating through my body. I'm pissed that Brett outed me in front of Maddie. She was the only girl I knew who had been kind to me. Henry was a genuine friend too, but he was content being the class nerd. Maddie was beautiful, smart, and popular, but she was always kind, helping me out with my siblings. She had my back. She liked me for me.

I give my head a shake. Thinking about how kind and beautiful Maddie is won't help my current situation because I can't pursue her. Brett would never accept me going for his sister, and I don't think she looks at me in that way. That is why I need to keep her in the safe pocket of being Mad Pie. She didn't like when I called her that, but it's better I keep that boundary for myself.

I exit the shower and get ready for my date. I don't have my hopes up for tonight because why will Taylor be any different to me than the others? Besides now my head is spinning with Maddie back in town. Still, I need to give Taylor a chance. I can't break the bro code.

I remind myself Taylor is sweet and not a puck bunny. She didn't even know I was a hockey player. That's already a good start. I need to focus on Taylor and not pine for a girl I'll never get.

With that I get dressed and head out for my date. I hop in an Uber because I don't want to deal with parking. When the driver pulls up to the dessert place, I don't see Taylor. I head inside and text her. She says she is walking over and will be here in a minute. I am feeling on edge after Brett blurted my virginal status to Maddie. When Taylor walks in, she looks pretty. She's wearing a jean skirt and a T-shirt with her hair falling over her shoulders. It's a simple outfit but I am digging her choice.

"Hi," I say and lean in to hug her. She's not a puck bunny who is forward about their intentions so she's kind of awkward about the hug, and I like that too. We are seated at a table for two.

"So how have you been?" I ask.

"Busy, I've been working with the catering company a lot and I help out at a homeless shelter delivering food. I also walk dogs for some of my neighbors, so I am basically always on the go," she explains.

"Being busy is good." I nod.

"Yeah, I guess. How about you? You mentioned winning the championship in your league, right?" she says.

"Yeah, that was a whirlwind." I blow out a breath just thinking of the excitement of winning the Stanley Cup.

A waiter comes by. "Can I start you off with drinks?" he asks.

"I'll take whatever coffee you have that's spiked," Taylor says.

"We've got a lot," he explains, and he shows her the menu. She makes her choice.

Then he asks me for my order. "I'll have a chamomile tea, please."

Taylor cocks her brow. “You aren’t going to order cake?”

I laugh. “I can’t always indulge. Even if I am in the offseason right now.”

“So what do you do when you aren’t playing hockey?” she asks.

“I run a foundation for kids who stutter,” I reply, and I watch her reaction. This isn’t something I normally talk about on a date. The puck bunnies are not interested in my charity work.

“That sounds nice. What exactly does that entail?” she asks. I know I am being critical, but the fact that she cares to ask more questions makes me like her more.

“I run an intensive summer hockey camp for the kids,” I explain. “I stuttered as a child. I still do sometimes when I get nervous, or I’m caught off guard.”

“So, I don’t make you nervous,” she says.

“I guess not.” I smile.

“That’s good.” She grins. “But I don’t get how offering these kids sports exercises will make them stop stuttering.”

“It’s not really to help them stop. It’s more about providing them with a safe place. A place they can feel comfortable to be themselves. When I started playing hockey, I was made fun of but once those same kids had to play me on the ice, and I showed them my skills, they had a new respect for me. I never forgot some of those initial reactions. Those stung and I remember them until today, but as time went on, I met good people who didn’t care how I spoke and, eventually, I mostly grew out of it.”

“Wow, that’s really inspiring.”

The waiter brings over our drinks.

We converse some more and then Taylor says, “I’d love to see your place.”

My body turns rigid at her suggestion. I was hoping to get to know her. Don’t people want to date and get to know one

another anymore before hopping in the sack? Her forwardness throws me off.

“I was hoping we could get to know each other before I show you my place,” I reply.

“Okay, okay.” She twirls a piece of hair through her fingers. “You’re a nice guy. You aren’t only interested in sex.”

Her comment makes me chuckle. “I’m at a point in my life where I was hoping to get to know someone before jumping into bed.”

I figure that is the only way I will go all the way, when I know I am with someone who really wants to be with me. I get that sex is all about getting off, but for me it needs to be more. I don’t know why I am like this; it’s just how I feel.

“Interesting,” Taylor says like she is really pondering my words. “I’m digging that. I’d like to get to know you better, Kaleb Bardot.”

Something inside me feels taken aback by her words and it’s that I never told her my last name.

I smile. It isn’t hard to look me up and I guess she did just that.

After our little date, I walk her back to her apartment, which isn’t too far from the coffee place. I peck her cheek, and she smiles and tells me to have a good night.

I’m not overly excited about how the date went. Maybe it’s me, I don’t know. Taylor is pretty. She was nice enough, but I didn’t feel a real spark between us. Thing is, I’ve never really tried to get to know someone before. Being a professional athlete has always meant women just offer themselves up to us. I know how to pleasure a woman and how to receive pleasure, but I’ve never tried building something with a foundation before. Maybe this just feels off for that exact reason.

I call an Uber from where I am standing on the street because it’s late, and I don’t feel like walking all the way home.

When I get back to the apartment, I exit the elevator on my floor and I am about to head into my apartment when I spot Maddie sitting on a window ledge, staring out into the city. She is clearly so deep in thought she hasn't realized I'm here.

"Mad Pie?" I ask as I slowly approach her.

When she turns her head, her eyes are red. "Oh, Kaleb." She swipes at her eyes, wiping away tears.

"What's going on?" I approach her like I would a scared animal.

"My life is just a mess. I needed some space and I was pissed at Brett. You know he means well, right?" she asks, referring to him outing me earlier.

"Yes, I'm aware Brett means well. He can just be a lot sometimes." I grin and rock back on my heels.

She giggles. "Tell me about it."

"But you aren't upset because of Brett," I observe, watching her.

She shakes her head and licks her lips. She's wearing short shorts and she has her knees pulled up to her chest. Her dirty-blond hair sits in a bun on her head. She is so beautiful it hurts to look at her. Seeing her upset guts me.

"I keep messing up, Kaleb. How many times does a person need to mess up to really learn?" she asks.

"You're being too hard on yourself. You have a big heart. You always have, Mad Pie. You just give it too easily because you think everyone is good like you are."

She watches me and her lips spread in a smile. It makes my chest ache. "You're a good guy, Kaleb. Do you want to explain to me why you haven't taken a woman to bed?"

I pinch my eyes shut then open them and swipe at my mouth. "This is embarrassing enough. Having you know isn't cool."

"But I know. I want to help," she says.

“Of course you do,” I mutter. She has always wanted to help.

“Just spill it. We’ve known each other a damn long time.”

“Which is why I don’t want to go there,” I say, and we look each other in the eyes. Sometimes when she looks at me it feels like more, but that can’t be right. She’s just really pretty and kind, and she smiles at everyone.

She licks her lips.

“I’ve dated a lot of women,” I admit.

“Probably all puck bunnies, like Brett,” she scoffs.

“You aren’t wrong.”

“You know that Brett is messed up because of Mom taking Papa back all the time. My brother has a fear he’s like my old man,” she explains.

“I know that,” I say point blank.

“Then what is your story, Kaleb? You didn’t have your daddy around long enough to scar you,” she says.

“I don’t think that’s true.” I snicker.

“No?” she asks.

“My stutter,” I remind. Those words speak for themselves.

“He was an asshole. Pardon my French.” She laughs. Dad came from the French part of Canada. He eventually went back there. We aren’t in touch.

“He was, but I don’t think that is my issue,” I say.

“We are going to get to the bottom of it then.”

“That won’t be necessary. I went on a date tonight. I haven’t ever dated,” I share.

She watches me like she is maybe trying to get in my head or maybe understand what I mean by that statement. I don’t elaborate.

“That’s a start,” she agrees with a nod.

“I’m going to get to know this girl.”

She watches me with a crooked grin.

“What?” I ask curiously.

“Do you really like her? Do you feel all excited and tingly when she is close to you? Do you wish you could rip her clothes off?” Maddie asks, looking me in the eyes.

I swallow hard as my eyes eat up her legs and slowly drift over her body. She is wearing a gray tank top. Even though she has a bra on, I can see just how full her breasts are but it's when my eyes land on hers that I feel what she is saying. That pull, that animalistic want to rip someone's clothes off. I swallow again. I didn't feel that way about Taylor, but I sure feel that way about Maddie. I mean Mad Pie. Damn.

“You should go back inside the apartment. Get some rest, Mad Pie. Things are always brighter in the morning. I'm going to check around to see if we can find you a job and get you back on your feet.”

She hops off the windowsill and hugs me. Her breasts press into me, and it takes me a moment to hug her back because I am so thrown off by how her body feels pressed to mine. Sparks aren't enough to describe this feeling when it feels like a full-on fire.

“Don't stay mad at Brett,” she says when she pulls away. “He may be a big ogre, but he wants the best for you.”

“Yeah,” I reply. “Go get some rest.”

With that I turn away from her and head into my apartment. Before I hear my apartment door close, I hear hers close first. I shut my door and lean against it. This is really messed up. How can I still want her after all this time? How can my attraction have grown exponentially? This is a recipe for disaster. I try to push the feelings away, but I can't. I strip off my clothes and get into bed. I'm hard as a rock as I think of Maddie in that tank top and short shorts. I'm stroking my cock as I think of her, unable to stop the torrent of emotions flowing through me. I want to have sex with Maddie. NO. My voice booms through my head with warning bells. Brett would never accept that, and I don't even think she wants me. She's

in a bad headspace from her recent breakup. She and I can only be friends. Only I come hard, picturing her naked breasts and that's when I know I am screwed.

CHAPTER

THREE

MADISON

I'm running late for my interview with Lucy, the owner of a catering company. Brett got me the interview through his friend, Connor, who is married to a woman named Ellie, who apparently knows Lucy.

"Asher, please hurry," I urge, bouncing my foot as my son slips on his Velcro sneakers.

"Go on, Maddie, I'll take the little man to camp," Brett offers.

"Are you sure?" I ask my brother. He literally just rolled out of bed.

"Yes, I'll be dressed in a jiff," Brett assures. "Is it okay if I take you to camp?" he asks Asher.

Asher nods. "The kids will see I have a famous uncle."

Brett likes that answer.

I smile and shake my head because my brother's ego doesn't need to be made larger.

I grab the to-go coffee cup I prepared. "You should go apologize to Kaleb," I say to Brett.

Brett pinches his lips.

"You embarrassed him. You need to own up to that. Kaleb isn't just a friend. He's family," I remind Brett. We may not be blood related and I am so thankful for that, but we grew up

together. Experienced the fracturing of our families in different ways together and we were all there for each other.

Brett sighs. "I was trying to help him."

"You were an ass," I say pointedly.

Brett gives me an incredulous look. He's a good guy but he can be a jerk.

"Own it and apologize," I repeat.

"Fine," he concedes.

"I better get out of here," I say and I lean down to kiss Asher's cheek. "Have a fun day at camp and I'll be there at pickup."

"Okay, Mommy." He smiles.

I ruffle his light brown hair, grab my keys and purse, and run out the door.

"Good luck," Brett calls out, just as the door closes.

I didn't even look in the mirror but I figure not much has changed since I got ready. I'm wearing a white blouse and a pair of beige dress pants. I have my hair in a ponytail with some loose hairs falling on my face.

I put the address for the catering company on the Waze app. I do not know my way around the city very well. Everything kind of just blends into each other here.

It's a twenty-minute drive, which isn't too bad, because it will give me ten minutes to find the place and I want to arrive early. As I drive, I think of last night. I've been feeling down on myself for falling for another loser. You'd think I would have loser radar by now, but that doesn't seem to be the case. I tend to always see the good in people. It should be a good trait. Brett would tell me it's a terrible trait. Our mom saw the best in our father, even after his multiple screwups. It's ironic that in the end he left her. Although, maybe it isn't that ironic because he was an addict and cheater. A vision of Kaleb comes back to me. He startled me at first when I saw him out in the hall. His hair is longer and was tucked behind his ears. He looked perfect, probably without trying. He was wearing

an off-white T-shirt that hugged his chest and arms in all the right places. Kaleb was a handsome boy, but the man he has grown into is downright sinful. The way those dark gray jeans hugged his thighs. I lick my lips. Kaleb is a wall of muscle, but it's his facial features that really have me locked in. The strong cut of his jaw. His slightly pointed nose. The man is a masterpiece and when he opens his mouth, it just makes matters worse because he is sweet and caring. He reminds me maybe there are good men in this world. Not that he would be an option for me. First, because I've sworn off men, and second, Brett would have a freaking meltdown if I liked Kaleb. Correction, I've always liked Kaleb. Brett would freak if he knew just how attracted I am to his friend.

Good thing he came back from a date. He has a woman in his life and that's for the best. Only there were moments last night, when we looked each other in the eyes, that it felt like he might feel something too. No, I give my head a shake. I'm clearly dreaming.

I think about what Kaleb said about his dad not being supportive of his stutter and my heart broke. He never spoke about his stuttering when we were younger. Mom explained that Kaleb was so smart his mind just worked faster than he could get his words out. That was enough explanation for me. Where my dad was a loser who never showed up, Kaleb's dad was just never around. When his mom remarried, the guy was a loser and didn't take responsibility for his kids. Kaleb was the one who stepped up. He was always caring for Jack and Jane. I don't know what they would've done without him. It's why I always offered to babysit them. Kaleb needed the help, and I would do anything to be around him. Damn, it's a crush that never dies. How can it when the guy gets better looking with age and his sweetness just grows?

You can't go there, Maddie. Besides, he calls you Mad Pie. He sees you as his friend's little sister and nothing more.

I arrive at the building where the catering company is located. It's an industrial location with a little sign that says: Lucy's Fine Foods.

I walk in and the place is bustling with employees. A man looks up from his station. “Hi, I’m looking for Lucy.”

“Just head through that door over there and walk through the next two stations. Her office is at the back.”

“Thanks,” I say, and I head deeper inside. This is quite the business she has going. Maybe one day I will become a chef. That’s where my true passion lies, but I will accept any type of kitchen work for now.

I reach what must be Lucy’s office door. She’s looking down at her desk writing something, so I give the door a light knock. She looks up with a smile. “You must be Maddie.”

“Yes, nice to meet you.” I walk in and shake her hand.

“Please have a seat,” she says, pointing to the chair in front of her desk. The office isn’t fancy by any means. The furniture is simple. There are old filing cabinets along a wall and lots of papers everywhere. “Welcome to my organized chaos.” She smiles.

She doesn’t look like she is much older than me, so being the owner of this type of business is a huge accomplishment and very inspiring.

“Thanks so much for meeting me. I just moved to the city, and I really appreciate the opportunity,” I say, feeling jittery.

“My aunt, Nora, absolutely loves Ellie. If she asked for me to meet her friend, I couldn’t say no, but I do have to admit that I don’t know what I can offer you at this time. You don’t have any culinary school experience,” Lucy states.

“That is true, but I do have a knack for being in the kitchen. I could probably make anything you ask and make it look pretty too,” I assure.

Lucy laughs. “I don’t doubt that. We are looking for a sous chef but considering your lack of experience, and the high-end clientele we cater to, I can’t take any risks. I’ve worked hard to get where I am,” she explains.

“I understand,” I say.

“That being said,” Lucy continues. “I can start you off in the kitchen cleaning and cutting vegetables. I appreciate that isn’t what you were hoping for, but I can move you around a little and see what it is you can do. Also, we have waitstaff that joins us at events. They make good tips if that is something extra you’re willing to consider.”

“Definitely, I can’t be picky. Starting with cleaning and cutting vegetables is perfect,” I reply. Even though I hate the idea, I am used to being told I need to start at the bottom because of my lack of schooling. “And I am happy to be a server as well. I could use the extra money.”

“Great,” Lucy says. She reaches out and shakes my hand. “Glad to have you aboard.”

“Thanks. Glad to be part of your team,” I reply.

“I know it’s none of my business,” Lucy says. “But there are some top-notch culinary schools in the city. If you can get into one, it would really help your career.”

“I’ve thought about it, but I have a five-year-old son. I don’t want to be working and going to school. He needs me,” I explain.

“I get it. I have a seven-year-old daughter. It’s a lot of work,” Lucy says with a smile.

“Come, I’ll show you around and introduce you to some of the other kitchen staff. We’re prepping for a bat mitzvah in the Upper West Side tomorrow.”

We walk around the kitchen. It is made up of large rooms that basically connect with each other.

There are about five people working on the vegetables, which is also the cold salad section. Lucy introduces me to a girl named Taylor, a guy named Henry, a girl named Vivie, and another girl named Ali. They are all very welcoming. She tells me I can start working tomorrow and I thank her. She also tells me to speak with Taylor about the waitstaff schedule since she is in charge of it. Before I leave, I find Taylor and she says she can put me on for the bat mitzvah tomorrow, which is perfect.

I thank everyone and leave, but I am feeling like shit when I get in the car. I'm grateful for the job, but I want to make something out of myself. Maybe have my own restaurant one day. Now I will be washing vegetables and being a waitress. I should be happy, but I just feel like such a failure. I head back to my brother's apartment because I don't need to get Asher for a few hours. I just want a cup of coffee and to chill the heck out. Maybe I could read a good romance novel on my Kindle. Book boyfriends are always so much better than the real kind.

I've got AirPods in my ears, listening to "Bad Blood" by Taylor Swift when I open the door to my brother's apartment. I feel emotionally drained from the interview. Lucy was nice but the job isn't what I was hoping for, even though it's something. I kick off my heels at the front door and begin to roll the sleeves of my blouse. I am going to bake a cake for Brett's friend, Ellie. It's because of her I got the job. I want to say thank you.

I begin to go through my brother's kitchen. For a guy who doesn't cook very much he has all the gadgets, and I am grateful. I set up my mixing bowls and take out the flour and sugar. I decide to make what Asher likes to call a funfetti cake. Brett mentioned they have a seven-year-old daughter and kids go crazy for sprinkles. With all my ingredients in the bowl I begin to mix. I'm dancing to more Taylor tunes and swinging my hips, feeling like I am really in my happy place in the kitchen. Cooking and baking relax me. My thoughts drift away and I'm vibing to the music.

A light tap on my shoulder causes my whisk to go flying out of my hand and the batter with it. I turn and scream because I am met with a wall of chest. Bare chest. Then hands are on my shoulders, and Kaleb is moving me away from him.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"Me?" he replies surprised.

"Yes, you. You don't live here," I remind him.

My eyes sweep over his abdomen. They take in the ridges of muscle and make their way up to his chest. His pecs are

defined. His skin is golden, which is his natural coloring.

“I always stop by here. My assistant is still sick and I don’t have food. Your brother doesn’t care. He’s used to me,” he explains, and then he moves to the fridge and opens it. He’s wearing a pair of basketball shorts low slung on his waist and he’s barefoot. I lick my lips. He is just so hot. My gaze drops to his ass, and I lick my lips again.

“Right, okay, well, don’t you believe in clothes?” I chide. I pick up my whisk and go to the sink to wash it since it fell to the floor.

“What’s wrong, Mad Pie, does a little skin bother you?” he asks, and he pulls out some turkey slices and whole grain bread.

“Not at all.” I swallow. “I could care less about skin,” I mutter like an idiot. I hate how he makes me nervous. I’m fourteen all over again and swooning over Kaleb. *Get yourself together.* I finish washing the whisk and walk back over to my bowl to mix, while Kaleb prepares his sandwich. I peek over at his hands. They are manly hands with thick veins running through them. His fingers are long but not too long. They are thick but not chubby. His skin looks a little calloused and I picture what those hands would feel like on my skin. I blink the thought away. *No men, remember?*

“What are you making?” he asks.

“It’s a cake for Ellie. I want to thank her for hooking me up with the job,” I say.

“So you got it. Congratulations,” he says, and he bites into his sandwich.

“I’m going to be working in the kitchen washing vegetables, and I’ll be waitressing at their parties. It’s not my dream job but I’ll make some money, which we really need,” I explain.

Kaleb places his sandwich down. “You have a place to eat and sleep. You know your brother isn’t charging you rent. Why don’t you go back to school and become a chef?”

I hate that question.

“Mad Pie?” he asks when I don’t answer him.

“You really need to stop calling me that. I’m not a teenager anymore,” I say, and I feel my eyes tear.

“Hey.” He moves into me. “I think Mad Pie is cute but if you don’t like it, I’ll stop.”

“Thank you.” I swipe at a stray tear.

“What’s going on, Maddie?” he asks, and he looks concerned, but he also reminds me of my brothers. They never knew what to do when I started to cry. They’d get nervous and call for my mom. Also, the way he calls me Maddie sends warmth to my belly. Warmth that makes me feel hot and bothered, which is messed up. It’s like I can’t stop myself from liking him and I need to. I need to break all my old patterns.

“My life is a mess. I’m a mess, Kaleb.” I begin to cry, and he gathers me in his arms. My head rests against his warm bare chest. His strong arms hold me close, and I feel safe, cared for, but I shouldn’t. I always do this. I’m shown kindness and take it the wrong way.

“You aren’t a mess. Why don’t you tell me what happened?” he urges.

I pick my head up off his chest, even though it felt good there. “Nathan cheated on me. I always fall for the wrong guys. I’m just like my mom,” I say, and the tears fall more.

Kaleb pulls his head back and looks at me. “Maddie, your mom is a good mom and the kindest person I know. When my mom checked out, she helped me and my siblings a lot. I don’t think there is anything wrong with being like her.”

I snicker. “Brett would tell you it’s very bad. The way she took my dad back over and over. It was pathetic.”

“She has a big heart and she cared for him, despite his faults,” Kaleb notes, and I have never thought of my parents’ relationship in that way before. “I don’t want to dis your dad, but he was the messed-up one. Not your mom.”

“As kids, we were always so upset about him breaking her heart over and over. We wanted her to be strong. I’m weak like

her. I keep falling for the wrong guys, and even though I've sworn off men, it doesn't matter at this point because my life is a mess."

"Your life isn't a mess. You have a brother who loves you and you've got a great place to stay. You just landed a job, which is good, but you also have the option of school. Why won't you go back? I noticed you dodged my question when I asked." He raises his brows and I pull out of his embrace because it's too much. It's starting to feel intimate.

"I just can't go back to school now. I'm not in a good headspace, I don't have the money, I need to be here for Asher, the list is too long to get through."

Kaleb pinches his lips. "Brett would pay, just saying, and I don't want to push because I don't like when people push into my business, but there is more to why you aren't going back to school. You're amazing in the kitchen. I'm sure any school would take you."

"Leave it, Kaleb," I insist.

"Fine," he agrees. The way he is watching me with concern is making me like him even more and I need to shut this feeling down. It isn't healthy for anyone. I'm a mess. I need to get my life back together.

I go back to making the cake and Kaleb stands beside me. "Let me help you," he offers.

I snort accidentally. "You want to help me bake a cake?" I begin to laugh, it feels good and releases the tension inside me.

"I don't know why you're laughing." He grins.

"Okay, fine, we need to place the batter in these pans here and then make the frosting," I explain.

While I pour some batter into one pan, Kaleb does the next one. Then he passes me the ingredients I ask for so we can make frosting. It really is funny how he knows his way around my brother's kitchen so well.

When we mix the butter, powdered sugar, cream, and fresh vanilla bean extract together, I tell him to take a taste.

“How?” he says.

“Swipe your finger inside. Just don’t double dip,” I tell him.

“I’m not the kind of guy to double dip,” he replies, and my lady parts get warm. Kaleb has always been the nice guy but since I saw him last he’s turned into an Adonis. If I didn’t know about his virginal status, I would think he was with many women. “I also don’t want to get my fingers sticky.”

“I can’t believe you said that.” I laugh. When we were young, he never liked to get his hands dirty. If there was a sticky fruit my mom cut, Kaleb would pass or ask for a fork. It was a funny quirk. I dip my own finger in the frosting and offer it to him. Big mistake, because when his mouth wraps around my finger and he sucks and I feel his warm tongue, my body turns to fire. Our eyes lock and it’s like recognition strikes him, or I’m not sure what happens, but his slow movement turns fast and he’s pulling away and licking his lips.

“That is delicious,” he says, taking a few steps back.

“What’s going on here?” Brett’s voice booms from behind me. I didn’t hear my brother come home.

“Nothing, I was making a cake and Kaleb was hungry and raided your fridge,” I say to my brother holding my tone even, which is a task with the way my heart accelerated from having my finger in Kaleb’s mouth.

“Bardot, go get dressed. Why are you here shirtless?” Brett chides Kaleb.

“I always come over like this,” Kaleb reminds.

“Yeah, well, now I got houseguests. Go get some clothes on,” Brett demands. He just came back from a workout by the looks of it.

“Did Asher get to camp okay?” I ask Brett.

“He wasn’t so happy when I first dropped him off, but then the counselor took him over to some kids and he seemed okay,” Brett says.

I nod.

“Why, is he having trouble making friends?” The question comes from Kaleb.

I move my head from side to side. “Kind of.”

“You could bring him to my hockey camp tomorrow. There will be kids there his age,” Kaleb offers.

“That’s nice but I committed to work a bat mitzvah tomorrow afternoon,” I say.

“A bat mitzvah?” Brett questions.

“I got the job working in the kitchen today. They also need waitstaff for events and I figured you’re off right now and I could use the money, so I told them I’d serve too,” I explain.

My brother blows out an exasperated breath and gives me a pointed look. I return his look with one that is just as pointed that says, “Don’t push this now in front of Kaleb.” Thankfully, my brother drops it.

“I can take Asher with me,” Kaleb offers.

“Thanks, but he doesn’t really know you, no offense. I don’t know if he’ll want to go,” I say. Damn, it is super sweet of him to offer though.

“I’ll be there too. Asher can come with us. It’ll be good for him,” Brett offers.

“Okay.” I nod.

“I’m going to shower,” Brett announces. “Bardot, get out of here and put on a shirt.”

I laugh and Kaleb laughs too. It’s easy to be around him. He reminds me of the good parts of my childhood.

“Now I want to try that cake,” he says with a mischievous grin. I can’t tell if he’s flirting with me, or if I am reading into something that isn’t there.

“It’s for Ellie. I can make you a cake another day if you tell me what flavor you like,” I suggest. “Or wait, let me remember.” I tap my lips. “Salted caramel.”

His brown eyes widen. “Fuck yes.”

I grin. “You got it. Now get out of here before my brother gets out of the shower and finds you shirtless in his kitchen.” I swat him playfully with a dish towel.

“He can be so weird,” Kaleb says of Brett. “You’d think he would trust me around you by now.”

“I don’t need to tell you how overbearing my brothers can be.” I giggle. “They can be ridiculous.”

“Yeah, it’s not like I would hit on you or something,” he states and my stomach dips. So, he wasn’t flirting before. He was just being friendly. *Jeez, Maddie, get your head on straight.*

“Duh, now shoo,” I say to him. He turns to walk away, taking his unfinished sandwich with him. “Kaleb, wait, which apartment does Ellie live in?”

“Fifth floor,” he replies and then he waves and leaves the apartment. I blow out a breath. I really need to get my head on straight where he is concerned.

“Thanks.”

CHAPTER

FOUR

KALEB

The next morning, I go for a run because I am so worked up I don't know what to do with myself. I can't believe I sucked Maddie's finger. What was I thinking? If Brett walked in only minutes earlier, he would've kicked my ass. She tastes good. Watching her eyes spark when I slowly sucked that frosting off her digit made my cock wake up and say come hither. Only that can't happen. I try to convince myself that I should see where things go with Taylor. She texted me last night and wanted to come over, even after I told her I wanted to take things slow. We've only been out for coffee once and I don't owe her anything, but she was pretty and she seemed nice enough, and she is not related to Brett. Brett has issues where his sister is concerned. I know it has to do with his father and Brett wanting to basically protect Maddie from the world, but he can be eccentric where she is concerned. I just wish the excitement I felt for Maddie would dissipate. Truth is, I'm an asshole because I was hoping she would be there when I walked in for a sandwich, and my luck, she was in the kitchen but I have to stop pushing my luck because it's going to run out. Besides, Maddie just got out of a complicated relationship. She needs to focus on work and her son. She doesn't need me as a distraction. If anything, I am pretty sure she considers me like one of her brothers, which is probably why she felt comfortable to break down in my arms. It's terrible that it felt good holding her. The floral scent of her hair. Having her face pressed to my chest. I wanted to console

her, but I also pictured us doing very dirty things in that kitchen.

By noon I meet some of the guys for lunch and we discuss programing for this evening because some of them volunteer their time at my hockey camp. My camp has over one hundred kids registered and even more kids involved with the foundation. I also have a lot of college-age students who want to work in speech therapy, physical education, and other areas, who also come to volunteer their time. It makes the program amazing. The kids have a good time and can just relax in an environment that isn't judgmental, and that's what it is all about.

By four I head over to Brett's. I am about to knock, but Maddie said she was going to work a bat mitzvah, so I just walk in.

"Yo," I call out.

"Coming," Brett calls from his room.

I head to the kitchen and fill a glass of water. I think I feel super comfortable here because I lived here for a full year. I hear some female giggles. Shit. I think he has a girl with him.

"Brett, we need to get Asher from camp," I call out.

"Coming," he says again, and I wonder if that statement is literal. I shiver and shake my head.

Two minutes later, Brett walks out wearing a baseball cap, a T-shirt, and shorts. The woman walks past me, giving me a devious smile.

"Your friend didn't want to have sex with me. He was complaining about some other chick," she says to me as she leaves his apartment.

I cock my brow. "Was that the waitress from lunch?"

He shrugs. "Let's head out."

"What is she talking about?" I ask. It isn't like Brett not to follow through on a hookup, but he's been on a dry spell these last number of months and never wants to say why.

“Leave it,” he says.

“So you get to dissect my virginity but I don’t get to understand why you’ve stopped having sex, or why you brought a girl back to your apartment so you could complain about another girl?”

“Should I drive?” he asks.

“Who is the girl? The last girl you were with was Willow.” I pause and watch him because he freezes. “Does this have to do with Willow?”

“I said leave it,” he repeats, and I can see he’s stirred up so I do.

“I’ll drive,” he says since I never answered him. “Maddie gave me a booster seat for Asher.”

We head over to the camp and pick up Asher. When he sees me his face lights up.

“Hi,” he shouts, running up to me.

“Hey, buddy, how was your day?” I ask him.

“Hey, don’t you say hi to your uncle?”

Asher shrugs. “Hi, Uncle Brett.”

“Did you play soccer today?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “We played floor hockey, went swimming, and did arts and crafts.”

“Sounds fun,” Brett says.

“It was okay,” Asher replies, and his voice sounds bland.

“Well, guess where you’re going tonight?” I ask with excitement.

“Mommy said I can go play hockey in your camp,” Asher says to me.

“Would you like that?” I ask him.

“I don’t really know how to play,” Asher states.

“That’s okay. There are teachers there who will help. Uncle Brett is one of the teachers,” I say.

“Can you teach me, Uncle Brett?” Asher asks. He really is adorable, but I also get the feeling he seems a little sad or maybe lonely.

“You bet,” Brett confirms. “You might as well learn from the best.”

I shake my head and laugh at Brett’s antics.

We head out and drive over to the complex we rent out for the camp. It has an arena but it also has a large indoor field made of fake grass. Ideally, it would have been nice to find an outdoor location since it’s summer and the weather is great, but there weren’t many options available in the city and this place is central.

When we arrive to the complex we begin to set up. My staff begins to show up and I give everyone a list of the campers. We go over safety and then the guys from the team go to each subgroup and review what activities will be done today. It’s mainly the college students running the program with us as the helpers who come in and give some tips.

I place Asher in a group with kids his age. We have a great turnout this year. I started the foundation last year and this year’s camp has grown by thirty percent, but it really isn’t about the numbers. I greet parents as they drop off their kids. We even have kids in high school who come out to play. Everyone participates. It helps the guys from the team are here because most of the kids have an idea of who they are, and they are excited about the whole process. Last year it was such a good feeling to hear from parents what a change the program had made in their children’s lives. Knowing you are accepted and you can succeed, no matter what, makes a huge difference. In the middle of the program the entire camp breaks for a snack. It’s at this point I use my megaphone and talk to the kids about my own journey with stuttering. Some of them may be too little to understand, but I know from parent feedback that it makes a difference for those old enough to understand. Besides, the young ones still enjoy eating their popsicles and hanging out.

During the second part of the program, I head over to Asher's group. Brett had been helping them earlier and he moved on to touch base with the older kids.

"How is it going?" I ask Melanie, their counselor.

"Really good." She grins.

"Good," I reply.

Since these kids are young, we play some games with them. Melanie is playing Under the Bridge and so I join in too. I notice Asher talking to one of the boys and it makes me happy.

By the end of the night the parents slowly trickle in and pick up their kids. We serve the kids pizza at the end of the night, so that they go home happy and on a full stomach.

The counselors stick around to clean up. Since Brett and I came in one car, I tell him to take Asher home because he's yawning, but he assures me it's fine and tells Asher to take a seat on a bench and relax.

I walk around the complex, ensuring we haven't left a mess, when Melanie comes up to me. She wasn't with us last year, so I don't really know her. She looks to be in her twenties with a cute blond bob, blue eyes, and a sweet smile.

"Tonight was really great." She smiles.

"Thanks." I nod.

"Would you maybe want to go grab a coffee?" she asks. Her right eye creases like she knows she's overstepping, but she's going to do it anyway. I wouldn't be robbing the cradle, but I also don't make a point of dating my staff.

"Sorry, I like to keep my work and private life separate," I reply.

She nods. "It was worth a try. It's nice what you're doing with these kids."

"Thanks," I say because this is awkward, and I need the moment to end.

"See you tomorrow." She waves.

“Thanks, see you.” I do appreciate her volunteering her time. It isn’t the first time I’ve been asked out by a volunteer. I know some of the guys have been asked out too, and I’ve asked them to abstain from dating my staff to avoid any problems. Thankfully, they’ve listened this far.

With the place cleared out, we head home. Asher crashes in his booster seat on the way and Brett carries him inside. His mood seemed to have perked up a bit tonight. It makes me happy.

I get a text from Taylor. She wants to meet for coffee again. I tell her we can meet at the same place. It was pretty chill there last time and I don’t need to be swarmed on my date.

Just as Brett opens the door to his apartment, Asher picks up his head. He looks sleepy and adorable. His medium-length brown hair is askew.

“Can Kaleb come over to play?” he asks Brett.

“I think Kaleb is tired,” Brett answers.

“I can come in for a bit,” I correct Brett. For some reason this kid pulls on my heartstrings.

Asher smiles.

I follow them inside and Brett places him on his feet.

“Did you have fun?” I ask.

He bobs his head. “I met a friend named S-smith.”

It takes me a minute to process what is happening.

“Smith is a nice boy,” I correct.

“He said his name was S-smith,” Asher corrects me in turn.

I smile. “Come, let’s head over to the couch.”

Asher follows. When we get to the couch, I take a seat and pat the spot beside me for him to sit. “The kids at the complex tonight all had one thing in common. They have something

called a stutter. It means they can't always get their words out smoothly."

"I don't have one," Asher says.

"I know," I reply.

"So how come I was allowed to go?" he asks.

"Because we're friends," I say, and his cute little lips tip up. He likes that answer.

"Cool," he replies. "Smith is my friend now too."

"I'm happy you made a friend."

"I don't have any friends at camp," he suddenly says, surprising me.

"That can be tough," I reply.

"I don't like it. I don't want to go back," he complains.

"Well, wasn't today your second day at camp? It can take longer than that to make new friends."

"No, the kids were mean," Asher insists.

I sigh. "I had that problem too when I was young. I used to talk like Smith. I couldn't get my words out properly and kids gave me a hard time," I explain. "Actually, your uncle, Henry, was my only friend for a long time."

"I like Uncle Henry," Asher states. He is a good guy.

"Can I go back to your camp again?" Asher asks.

"You sure can."

"Thanks, Kaleb," he says.

"Buddy, why don't you go take a shower? Get clean before your mom comes home," Brett cuts in.

"Okay," Asher agrees. He hops off the couch, stares at me a moment and pauses, then he reaches over and hugs me.

"Oh," I say, and it takes me a moment to hug him back. I pat his back then he pulls away and runs off.

“Looks like he likes you more than his own uncle.” Brett chuckles.

“Aww, are you jealous?” I say with a mocking tone.

Brett laughs.

“He’s a cute kid.”

“You do have a way with kids,” Brett replies. “They really look up to you when you talk about your past. It’s commendable, Bardot.”

“Wow! A compliment from the infamous Brett Noble.”

“Fuck off.”

“There we go. That is a lot more Brett of you.”

“Fuck off.”

“You’re on a roll, buddy,” I tease. “I would stick around but I’m going on date number two with Taylor, and I need to shower.”

“Is tonight going to be the night?” Brett asks.

“Stop with the pressure,” I warn. “You just don’t get me.”

“So explain,” he urges, and he isn’t being a jerk so I indulge him.

“Growing up, girls didn’t want me. They started wanting me because of hockey. Because I was a popular athlete who was going to make it to the NHL. You remember all the talk in the papers about me drafting at eighteen?”

He nods.

“It came with a lot of pressure. I was always in the spotlight. No chick has ever wanted to get to really know me. They don’t care what I think. They just want to get me off and maybe become Mrs. Bardot because of my salary.”

“So?” Brett shrugs.

“Brett, it must get old at some point for you,” I say to him.

“You know me, Kaleb. I am a ladies’ man, like my father. Through and through. I won’t settle down and put a woman

through what my mom went through,” he reminds. This isn’t the first time we are having this talk.

“You’re nothing like your old man. You forget, I was living next door. Henry confided in me about all the shit that went down in your house. You aren’t your father,” I repeat. “You just took in your sister and her boy. You aren’t the guy who walks away. You’re the guy who sticks.”

“Don’t go getting all sappy on me, Bardot. Go get ready for your date. Your dick needs wetting,” he says.

I get up from the couch. This conversation is a dead end. I don’t know what it would take for my friend to change his mind, but it’s not happening tonight.

“Tell Asher I say goodnight.” I wave as I leave his apartment.

“Sure.” He calls to my back, “Get laid, Bardot.”

I wince, hoping Asher is under a stream of water and didn’t hear that. I head to my apartment and shower. I may not be having sex tonight, but I am committed to giving Taylor a chance.

CHAPTER

FIVE

MADISON

The event is wrapping up. I basically had two round tables I was responsible for serving. The job wasn't difficult, and the pay was good since we got tipped on top of our hourly wage. We were asked to wear uniforms, so I head to the bathroom and change. Some of the other servers are in here too, but I am changing in a stall.

“OMG, Vivie,” one of the server shrieks. “He wants to meet tonight.”

“Who?” Vivie replies.

“Kaleb, the hockey player I was telling you about,” she gushes. “OMG, I googled him and he is making like 60 million dollars over the next eight years.”

“Wow, lucky bitch,” Vivie replies.

“Tell me about it. He said he wants to take things slow, which means he must like me,” the girl says. It's terrible of me but I peek through a little opening in the bathroom door to see it's Taylor, who is kind of my boss.

“How did you score that one and does he have any friends?” Vivie asks as she is slathering lipstick on her lips.

Shit. I can't believe she's talking about Kaleb. My stomach dips.

“I just acted like I didn't know who he was when I went up to him at a small wedding. It was an intimate party, so we didn't have a lot of work to do. The whole Rangers team was

there. It was crazy. Another guy came up to me too, but I've read he's a total ladies' man so I decided to go for Bardot. I mean he's a ladies' man too, but I don't know, I got a different vibe from him," she explains.

I think I am going to be nauseous, or I am going to slam this door open and rip Taylor's hair out. Kaleb does not deserve this.

"Well, introduce me to the friend," Vivie says.

"It was Brett Noble. He's already in his thirties," Taylor informs her.

I am seeing fucking red right now.

"Yeah, that's a bit old," Vivie agrees as my pulse beats in my ears.

I walk out of the washroom stall with my head held high.

I give the women a saccharine look.

"Maddie, didn't realize you were in here." Taylor chuckles.

"Oh really," I say unable to hide the sarcasm dripping through my voice. "I heard every word."

Taylor's jaw drops.

"I'm really not a bitch, I swear." She giggles. "Kaleb is into me and I'm into him. We haven't even slept with each other because we are getting to know each other. He's really sweet."

"That isn't any of my business," I retort. "What is my business is that you're shit-talking my friend and my brother."

Taylor's brows draw together. "I don't understand."

"That's because you must be really dense. I should maybe reintroduce myself. Hi, my name is Madison Noble." I extend my hand to her. I don't think she will take it. What I want to do is slap her.

It takes her a moment to process; I can tell the ball is rolling by her expression.

“You’re Brett Noble’s sister?” she asks and her jaw falls slack.

“Damn straight, and Kaleb’s my friend. You’re a bitch who doesn’t deserve him,” I say.

“Excuse me?” she asks, as if I just spoke a different language.

“You heard me,” I repeat.

“You’re really rude,” she replies. “You’re fired.”

“You can’t fire me. Lucy is my boss. I plan to take this to her,” I state. No way am I getting pushed around by a mean girl like her.

“Maddie, Madison. Look, we’ve had some sort of miscommunication. Whatever I told Vivie was meant for her ears only. I’m sure you have a friend you can just spew anything to. I didn’t mean what I said, I was just jealous about her dating an NBA player recently and I was trying to one-up her.”

“I’m done here, Taylor,” I say. I take my clothes and leave the restroom.

By the time I get back to my car I am shaking from that whole interlude. Taylor was such a bitch, but I also feel protective of Kaleb. No wonder he has issues with women. They go after him for his status.

I’m tense the entire way home. I park in the underground and then take the elevator up. It stops in the lobby and Ellie gets on.

“Hi, Maddie,” she greets.

Hi,” I reply.

“Thanks so much for the cake. Syd loved it. Connor loved it too. It was delicious,” she gushes.

“Thank you.”

Her auburn brows draw together. “Are you okay?”

“Huh,” I say.

I realize I'm tapping my foot and I feel really on edge.

"Oh, I just had something really messed up happen at work," I explain.

"Oh no," Ellie says, looking wide-eyed.

"No, no, it's a good job. Just one of the employees did something and ..."

"Maddie, whatever it is you can tell me," she assures.

The elevator stops on my floor.

"I should go," I tell her.

"No, please come over. If you're this upset, it's not good for Asher to see you like this," she notes and she has a point. Funny how kids can pick up on moods while some adults just don't have a clue.

"Okay, yeah, thanks." I rub my arm, feeling cold.

We head up to Ellie's apartment, it's much bigger than my brother's.

"I like all the pink accents." I smile.

"That was my daughter, Syd. Well, she's my stepdaughter but I feel like she's mine," Ellie explains. "Connor was a single dad and he let her decorate the apartment."

"That is completely adorable," I gush. "If I told Asher to decorate my apartment, I think it would be all blue with pictures of the planets. He has a thing for astronomy," I explain.

"Sweet," Ellie replies. "Take a seat and make yourself at home. Should I make you a chamomile tea?"

"That would be great, but I can come with you to the kitchen."

Ellie places her purse on the dining table and I follow her to the kitchen. She starts the kettle and leans against the counter.

"What's going on? I know we don't know each other all that well, but I'm a good listener. Connor and Syd went to a

movie together so it's only us here, and I'm really good at keeping secrets," she says.

I liked her when I dropped off the cake, but seeing how she cares makes me like her more.

I don't have any good friends, so it feels good to have someone to talk to.

"After we served the party a bunch of the servers went to go change. I went to the restroom, and I was in a stall with the door closed when I heard one of the girls talking. She was talking about Kaleb. I know that he's met her for coffee. Then she started to talk about my brother and made a whole bunch of crass comments," I explain. I'm obviously not going to tell Ellie Kaleb's personal business. "Basically, she's using him for his status or maybe even his money, and it just made me sick. I grew up with Kaleb," I explain.

"Wow, some girls have no shame," Ellie says. "Connor gets picked up all the time. Right before our wedding day, a server offered him no-strings-attached sex after he told her he was getting married." She shakes her head.

"That's insane. Don't people have morals?" I snicker. "I mean I just caught my own boyfriend cheating on me, so I should have the answer to that question."

"I'm sorry, damn," Ellie says. "People can be jerks."

The water in the kettle is boiling so Ellie pours me the tea. I'm still upset but not shaking as bad as I was.

"I feel like I should tell Kaleb what I heard, but I also don't know if it's my place to intervene," I confess.

"That depends," Ellie says.

"She's using him because he's rich and she's wanting to become Mrs. Bardot." I roll my eyes.

"If I were dating someone who wanted me just because of my money, I would want to know," she states.

I take a sip of my tea.

She's right. I know she is. I just feel weird going to him about this because I've had feelings for him ever since I can remember, and I feel like I'm not impartial but I know what I heard and Ellie is right.

"Yeah, I would want to know too. I had a friend in Jersey who knew Nathan was cheating and she didn't tell me. It would've been better for her to clue me in than find out the way I did." I sigh.

Ellie rubs my back. "That sounds awful, but you're here in New York City now. We can find you a new man," she says, her lips tugging up in the corners.

"Oh no. I've sworn off men. I'm done," I state, and then I take a gulp of tea since it's not so hot anymore.

"Um, how old are you? If you don't mind me asking," Ellie asks, giving me a pointed look.

"Twenty-five, but I'm an old twenty-five. That's what happens when you have a five-year-old at my age," I explain.

"Oh, I know all about you young single parents. I'm married to one now. Connor is the epitome of responsible when it comes to Syd, but I also know you can't give up on love," Ellie advises.

"I already have," I reply. "I've got a problem. I fall too fast and too hard. I only see the good. I don't see the red flags and there are always red flags. I clearly attract a type and they aren't good guys."

"So, you've had some bad luck."

"It's more than that. I fall fast too. I can't control it. I have to just realize that I need to stop dating. I have a kid and he's my world. I'll focus on me and Asher," I declare with a pointed nod.

"It's all good to focus on you and I'm here for that. I honestly didn't date anyone for a very, very long time. Like an embarrassing amount of time, and then I met Connor. I kind of couldn't control my feelings for him. They just happened. So I get the falling hard and fast business, but it's not always a bad thing."

“I’m happy you found yourself a good man, but I’m a magnet for trouble.”

Ellie pinches her lips but she’s smiling. “You’re stubborn. I get it, but the right guy will come around at the right time. You’ll see, when the chemistry is there, it’s like magic happens.”

I laugh. “You’re clearly still in the honeymoon phase of your relationship, and I hope that lasts forever for you.” I take the last sip of my tea and place the cup in the sink. “Thanks. I better get my pessimistic self home.” I chortle.

“Fine, but I know I’m right, Maddie, you’ll see,” Ellie insists.

“Thanks so much for the talk,” I say and I lean in to hug her. “I’m really feeling a whole lot better.”

“Good.” Ellie nods.

“You have yourself a good night,” I tell her. “And I need to have you over for a meal sometime soon with your family.”

“That would be great. Looking forward to it.”

Ellie shows me out and I head back down to my brother’s apartment.

I will have to ask Brett for Kaleb’s number. I’ll call him tomorrow and let him know that the woman he is seeing is a psycho. Then I need to remind myself that even though he’ll be free, he is not going to be free to me because I am not going to think of Kaleb in any way other than friendship.

CHAPTER

SIX

KALEB

I arrive early for my coffee date with Taylor. I'm feeling off so I pace a little before she arrives, thinking how I am not excited to see her. It's just a second date and I don't really know her, but I'm not feeling a spark. She walks up to me wearing a cute little sundress.

"You look pretty," I compliment. It's the truth.

She pauses and stares at me strange. Are compliments not the way to go with this girl?

"Thanks," she says, and her head tilts a little to the side like she is gauging me. I reach over and peck her cheek, not knowing exactly what she is expecting from me.

The kiss buys me a smile. "Should we go inside?"

"Yes." She smiles and whatever apprehension she must have been feeling dissipates.

We get seated across from each other at a table and we both talk about our day.

Taylor tells me she was a server at a bat mitzvah, and I tell her about hockey camp. I don't mention my friend Maddie is working for the same catering company. I don't know why I don't mention it. It doesn't seem relevant, or maybe me saying I know Maddie is personal because she is someone who I used to be close with. I'm not sure. What I am sure of is I need to stop thinking of Maddie while on my date with Taylor.

The server comes by and asks what we would like to order.

“I’ll have a tea with milk and honey,” I say.

“Should we get dessert tonight?” Taylor asks.

“I had pizza for dinner. I reached my carb allowance.” I wince.

“Problem with dating a professional athlete.” Taylor rolls her eyes to the server.

“OMG, I thought it was you, but I wasn’t sure. I didn’t want to be rude and ask,” the server gushes. “I need your autograph, OMG, OMG.” She waves her hands in front of her face.

“If you feel like dessert, go for it,” I say to Taylor, since the server has run off behind the cash register, probably looking for some form of paper and a pen.

My gaze is on the server walking, or more like charging back to us, holding a pen in the air. “Got it.”

I’ve had some uncomfortable interactions with fans, ranging from someone locking me in a hug to patting my ass, so I am on high alert.

I oblige the server and then Taylor orders an ice cream latte, which is a latte with a scoop of vanilla ice cream inside.

The server leaves. I exhale until I feel Taylor’s leg rub up against mine under the table.

“I was hoping for a different kind of dessert tonight. I had a long hard day at work and could really use the relaxation.” She smiles seductively and twirls a piece of her hair.

I should be flattered. She is a pretty girl. Apparently, she thinks taking things slow is sex on the second date instead of the first.

“It’s been a long day,” I begin. “I just need to go home and crash.”

Taylor winces and withdraws her leg.

Just because I’m a guy doesn’t mean I want sex all the time and with any partner. Maybe I am picky or maybe I am not feeling in the mood.

The server places our drinks in front of us.

Taylor's upper lip tugs in the corner. To say she doesn't look pleased is an understatement. "I don't get it. I'm offering you sex. You do understand that?"

I nod, taken aback by her abrupt demeanor.

"Is this because of what happened today because if it is, I can explain," she begins.

"Excuse me?" I rear back feeling very confused. There is something off with this girl.

"She told you, that's the problem," Taylor states. "But she misunderstood."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I say, eyeballing her with suspicion.

"You know what? Whatever. Your friend's a bitch and I don't need this," she says and then she's standing.

It's then I put two and two together. Maddie worked the bat mitzvah today but I don't understand what could have happened there.

"Mind explaining because Maddie never said anything."

"Just great," she rolls her eyes and huffs. "This is too much. I'm out." She looks me up and down. "It's a damn shame too. We could've been fire together." She turns and struts out of the café.

What just happened?

I might as well enjoy my tea, so I sit back and drink it. The server comes by and gives me the bill. On the back is her phone number with a message that says. *I can kiss all your boo-boos away* then a heart. And this is why I am a virgin. Because I don't like all the crazy.

I pay the bill and leave a tip. I walk home. The whole night runs through my mind. The weird way Taylor said hello. She was expecting something from me and now I understand. She assumed Maddie told me whatever happened today, and something clearly happened. If I'm guessing right, Maddie

must have heard Taylor speaking about me and lost her shit. Maddie has always been passionate and she's all about standing up for those close to her.

By the time I get back to the apartment, I am feeling like shit. It's not that I don't want to have sex. I do, I just want it to be with the right person.

I head up in the elevator feeling lonely and down on myself.

When I get off the elevator, I turn to my right and spot Maddie sitting on the same window ledge I found her on the other night, staring out onto the city.

"It's a great view," I say.

She startles.

"Shit. Sorry. I thought you heard me," I say to her.

"I was deep in thought," she replies quietly.

"You know you can get the same view from inside Brett's apartment," I tell her.

She smiles but it seems sad. "I wanted to be alone. Asher is asleep and Brett is watching some action movie."

I nod. "I see."

We stare at each other as the silence stretches before us.

"Did something happen today?" I finally ask, rocking back on my heels.

Maddie licks those luscious heart-shaped lips of hers.

"She told you?" she replies, and I hear the surprise in her tone.

"Not exactly, she assumed you told me. I don't know what's going on, other than I was on a really weird date with a crazy girl."

"I'm sorry," she replies.

"You shouldn't be," I state the obvious.

"But it still sucks."

“It does,” I agree, and our eyes lock again. This feeling fills my chest as we stare at each other. It’s the same feeling I had at seventeen and at nineteen and so on. “Want to tell me what happened?”

“Not really.” She smirks. “But I will.”

“Want to come to my place for a beer?” I offer because I need a beer, and just a way to shake off all the tension this night has brought.

“I’d love a beer.” Maddie grins. She stands and that’s when I know I am in big, big trouble. She’s wearing thin, light-gray cotton shorts and a white tank top. Her white bra strap peeks from beneath the shoulder strap. She’s wearing a pair of slides, and we walk quietly to my apartment.

When I open the door, it’s pitch dark and all I can imagine is pinning her to the door and kissing the hell out of her. This is what passion and attraction feel like.

I flick on the switch and watch her throat bob. It’s a sexy throat. I try not to let my gaze run lower, even though it begs to.

“Come in,” I say, swallowing past the lump in my throat.

“Thanks,” she says, pinching her lips.

I turn on more lights as we make it deeper into the apartment.

“Nice place, it’s very neat,” she notices.

“I have a cleaner. It’s not me.” I laugh.

“Oh, I know. I was in your room when we were younger, remember?”

Her words cause the memory to come tumbling back. The year I was drafted I went back home with Brett. Mom was out of town. I went back to my house to grab some clothes. Henry and Maddie came along to intervene, just in case mom came back unexpectedly. Henry went to grab some Xbox games from my basement and Maddie said she wanted to see my room. She started looking at my trophies and pictures I had on my wall next to my desk. I had walked up to her when she

asked about one of the pictures, and then we had a moment. She was looking at my lips and I was fixated on hers. Henry came into the room and said he had the games and we quickly turned away from each other.

I blink. It was one stupid moment that didn't mean anything.

"Since you like views we can have the beer on the balcony, if you want," I offer.

"Sounds nice but won't it be windy up here?"

"I can grab you a hoodie." I need her covered if I am not going to lose my mind.

"Thanks," she says so I saunter to my room and grab the first hoodie I see. Then I head back to the main room. I pass her the hoodie, but not before my eyes rake up and down that glorious body of hers. Brett would have my neck if he knew how I was feeling right now.

"I'll grab some beers."

I head to the kitchen and grab two beers from the fridge. Then I use the bottle opener to open them.

"Nice place, Kaleb. I love this kitchen. You've done well for yourself," she says.

"Thanks. I wasn't sure if drafting straight out of high school was the right decision, but it all worked out in the end."

I pass her a beer. Our fingers brush each other, and sparks light up inside me. Holy shit. What is happening? I think back to that kiss on the cheek with Taylor earlier. I had felt nothing and now from the slightest touch I want to ravish the woman in front of me. A woman who is my best friend's sister. No, two of my best friends' sister, since both Brett and Henry would want to castrate me.

Maddie takes a sip of the beer and watching her put that bottle to her mouth does things to me. It stirs my dick and ... I blink to clear the thought. I take a sip of beer.

"Should we head out to the balcony?" I ask, sounding like I have a frog in my throat.

“Sure, I’m warm now. This hoodie is super comfortable,” she notes.

“Keep it.” I shrug.

Maddie laughs. “You were always very generous.”

We head out to the balcony. “Wow, it’s super pretty out here,” she says. I kind of invested in this small space. It has fake grass and tea lights with a long table and chairs. I like to sit out here in the warm months and take in the city lights.

“Thanks.”

We take a seat next to each other so we can look out onto the city.

“I need you to tell me what happened with Taylor,” I nudge, watching her. She has her knees pulled up to her chest and she looks cozy with my hoodie on. I feel like it should be me keeping her warm, and it’s weird that I’m jealous of a piece of clothing.

“Does it really matter?” she asks.

“It doesn’t because I won’t be seeing her again, but I need to know for me,” I explain, taking a gulp of beer.

She takes a sip of the beer and blows out a breath.

“You’ve got one heck of a view out here. It’s so relaxing.”

“Stop changing the subject,” I urge, looking into her eyes while trying hard not to drown in them.

“She knew you were a hockey player when she met you at Ellie’s wedding. She was hoping to snag herself a rich professional athlete. I wanted to vomit when I heard her talking about you. She also mentioned Brett, but she heard he was a big player so she thought you were the better option. Happy now?”

“No,” I say, taking a long swig of my beer. “I dodged a bullet with that one.”

“I’m sorry you even have to go through that with women. It must be exhausting,” she states looking out to the skyline, so I take in her profile. Her sleek jawline, her high cheekbones.

“It is,” I admit. “It screws with my head constantly.”

“I get that. I mean, relationships are hard enough as it is. I thought Nathan was all in, and bam, he’s screwing another woman. People aren’t straight forward. They should just say how they feel without any bullshit attached.” She looks at me. “What?” she asks because I am staring at her in awe.

“You’ve always been a straight shooter, Mad Pie.”

“I thought we agreed it would just be Maddie,” she insists.

“You’re right, but when your Maddie I forget you’re Henry and Brett’s sister,” I confess because my feelings are tied around this rope holding me together, and that rope feels like it’s about to snap because she is too beautiful, too kind, and too real.

“What do you mean?” she asks, watching me with curiosity or maybe confusion.

I blink and get a grip. “Nothing.” I grind my jaw. Do not confess your feelings to this woman. “You never did say what you did when you heard Taylor shit-talking me.”

“I lost it. I left the bathroom stall. She hadn’t realized I was there, and she tried explaining herself. Shit got real when I told her what my last name was and then I went on to call her a bitch. She’s a mean girl. I can’t even believe people like her exist. No human decency in that one.” She shakes her head and takes a long pull of the beer. “Then she had the nerve to say I was fired.”

“Damn, Maddie, I don’t need you losing your job because of me,” I say to her.

“I’m not losing my job. Taylor isn’t my boss and I told her as much,” she declares with a nod of her head. She’s a real spitfire.

“Well, thank you,” I say to her, and I reach my beer bottle over to hers and we clink bottles. Our fingers brush again, and our gazes connect.

“You don’t need to thank me, Kaleb. I really hate shitty people.” She pulls her hand away. She is clearly not feeling

what I'm feeling and it's a damn shame, because my body is burning for her in a way I've never felt before.

"Me too. She went a little crazy on our date tonight. She must have assumed you told me what happened, although I don't know why she thought I would agree to meet with her after she said she was going out with me for my money," I say.

Maddie stretches her legs in front of her and I take in their length, the slender shape of her figure. Her legs are long and lean. I lick my lips.

"All done," she says of her beer and then she stands.

"You want another?" I offer. I don't feel like I can get to bed now. I'm feeling so worked up.

"I should really go. You really don't want me here for an extended period of time. I seem to fall in love easily. I could just fall in love with you by talking to you here on this beautiful balcony." She laughs sarcastically.

"That wouldn't be such a bad thing, would it?" I ask, standing too.

She freezes.

"I'm joking, relax," I say because I don't need to scare her off. This woman has always had my back and tonight she stood up for me too.

"Okay," she giggles. "I wasn't joking. I fall too easy. I'm terrified because I don't know what's wrong with me. I keep messing up."

"There's nothing wrong with you, beautiful." I place a stray hair behind her ear. It's such an odd gesture for me. She's the untouchable Mad Pie, I should be keeping my hands to myself, only I can't.

Her blue eyes hold mine. My heart begins to beat differently.

"You aren't broken in any way," I assure her. "You've just been with all the wrong men."

“I don’t believe that,” she refutes. “I literally don’t think I can be with a guy without falling in love.”

“Maybe it isn’t love you’ve been feeling. Maybe it’s been attachment,” I suggest.

“Are you psychoanalyzing me, Bardot?” She giggles.

“I’ve psychoanalyzed my own life enough to know there is a reason I am still a virgin,” I say. Standing this close to her, feeling the warmth of her body so close, her breath so close makes me want to close the few inches we have between us and kiss the hell out of her. It makes me want to take her to bed and make love to her. The words in my mind are jarring. I never feel this... whatever it is...I’ve never wanted to go that far before.

“Why are you a virgin?” she asks timidly, and I watch her throat bob as she swallows.

“I don’t trust relationships. I saw too many men come in and out of my mother’s life. My relationship with my father scarred me in some way. I wasn’t good enough for him. I had too many people make fun of me as a kid that trust doesn’t come easy for me. There’s a grocery list of why I am the way I am.”

She reaches out and touches my shoulder. “You’ve always been the most handsome boy I know. The kindest boy. Your father was a jerk, and those kids were idiots. They didn’t see what I saw.” She freezes.

The heat between us is too much. I’m wound so tight I feel like a rope that has a lighter burning beneath it.

“What’s happening, Maddie?” I ask because I want to kiss the hell out of her and I feel like I don’t have any self-control.

“I don’t know, but we can’t do whatever it is we’re feeling. I’ll fall in love with you and that’s the last thing either of us needs. Besides, I like you. I don’t want you to be on Brett’s hit list.”

She pulls her hand away and heads back into my apartment. My head is spinning so it takes me a moment to follow her. She gets to the door.

“Maddie?” I ask, confused. Did she just tell me that she wants me? Is she feeling this too?

“I better get back to Brett’s,” she says quickly. “Thanks for the beer.”

“Come back again tomorrow,” I say, knowing I am pushing my luck.

She pauses and her lip curls in the corner. “When did you become a daredevil?”

She seems excited. “I’m not a daredevil, but I’m not willing to walk away from whatever I’m feeling.”

“We can’t go there, Kaleb,” she warns. “It’s called sexual attraction and it’s dangerous.”

I rake my fingers through my hair, trying to get a semblance of control. “Dammit, you’re right. Have a good night, Mad Pie. That’s why I always called you Mad Pie, so that I would remember just how off-limits you were.”

Her jaw drops. Her eyes widen and go back down to size, and then she leaves out my door without another word.

I turn around and chide myself, wanting to punch a wall. Why did I just confess my little secret? There’s no going back now.

Maddie is gone and I go to bed and jack off to thoughts of her heart-shaped lips. Thinking of those lips wrapped around my cock. Then I picture myself kissing the inside of her thighs and making her writhe beneath me. I may be a virgin, but I know how to bring a woman pleasure. The attraction between us is clearly fire. Maybe I can offer Maddie a proposal. She helps me lose my virginity and I help her get over her relationship issues. She can have sex with me without falling in love and Brett wouldn’t be the wiser.

CHAPTER

SEVEN

MADISON

My heart is racing as I walk back to Brett's apartment. What just happened? It feels like a dream. I'm getting too excited already. Kaleb wants me. Kaleb wants me. No, no, no. I need to get a grip. I take a deep breath and try to calm my racing heart as I replay the way his deep voice sounded when he said *that's why I call you Mad Pie, so I can remember why you're off-limits*. That means he was attracted to me when we were younger. My crush wasn't one sided. Even though Kaleb and I can't act on our attraction, it feels good to know those feelings are returned.

I head into the office that Brett has converted into an extra room to check on Asher. There is a daybed in here that is the perfect size for him. My son is sound asleep, curled up under the covers, looking peaceful. I peck his forehead lightly and head to my room. Brett must be asleep too because the lights are out, and he isn't around. When I get into bed, I still feel excitement coursing through my veins. Having Kaleb that close to me felt like a dream. Touching him caused sparks to erupt inside me, but I was smart to shut whatever was happening down. We can't go down that road, no matter how attracted we are to each other. It felt good to have self-control tonight. I wasn't willing to dive into something without thinking. It made me feel like I was in control of myself and my feelings for the first time in my life. I know better than to mess with my brothers' friend. Kaleb is family to Henry and Brett. I could never damage their dynamic, and I need to show myself I am not weak. I am not my mother. I won't just fall

into another man's arms. I need to show myself I can be independent.

I slide into bed; the sheets cool against my skin. I decide to keep Kaleb's hoodie on because it smells like him and it's delicious. It doesn't mean anything. I just like the way the man smells and his hoodie is oversized and comfy, just like Kaleb. A small giggle escapes me at that analogy.

I fall into a slumber with a smile on my face and when I wake up in the morning I am in a great mood. Since I don't have to be at work early, I decide to go for a jog before waking Asher up. I've never lived in a large city before. Running down the bustling streets at 7:00 a.m. is new since the last area I lived in was so quiet. I'm in a good mood when I return from my jog, which feels nice after the breakup with Nathan left me feeling down and depressed. Just thinking about Nathan causes a stinging pain, but I don't allow it to linger. Instead, I tell myself he wasn't worth my time and it's better I found out when I did. I like being in the city. All the excitement here gives me a rush.

I head to the kitchen and drink a large glass of water with a squeeze of lemon. Then I head into the office to wake my son.

"Hi, baby," I say, brushing his hair off his face.

He pulls away and turns over. He really enjoys sleep.

"Time to get up, sleepyhead," I urge.

"I don't want to go back to camp. I hate it there," he says, his voice gruff. Oh dear.

"You need to give it a chance," I plead.

He turns toward me and his eyes flutter until they open. He pushes out his lower lip.

"Please, Mommy," he begs.

"I need to be at work later. I need you to go to camp," I tell him, feeling a good dose of mama guilt.

"Can I just go to Kaleb's hockey camp? It's so much fun. Kaleb taught me how to use a hockey stick and I made a friend named Smith. There was pizza. It was the best."

“I’m glad you had fun with Kaleb.” I chuckle enjoying his enthusiasm, which doesn’t make an appearance often enough.

“He’s my best friend,” Asher says.

“What?” I’m confused, given the age discrepancy.

“Dude isn’t joking. He’s taken a liking to Kaleb,” Brett clarifies, leaning on the door to Asher’s room.

“Oh.”

“He likes Kaleb more than me,” my brother complains, sounding like a five-year-old.

I draw my brows together and give my brother an incredulous look.

“Hockey camp is the best,” Asher repeats. I’m happy to see him excited about something, but I would rather it not be Kaleb. Now that we’ve established how attracted we are to each other, it’s better we keep a distance.

“You can go back tonight,” Brett says to Asher. “But now you need to listen to your mom and go to day camp.”

Asher rolls his eyes. “Fine.”

I give my brother an impressed look.

Brett smiles back and shrugs, proud of himself.

“You do have the touch with kids,” I say to him.

“Only because he’s my nephew and I love him,” Brett says.

“See, I knew you had it in you,” I tease him.

“Where did you go last night?” he asks, his brows bunching and his forehead creasing. Sometimes he feels more like a father than a brother.

“I was hanging out in the nook in the hallway,” I tell him.

“I came to check on you and you weren’t there,” he says. Now it’s my turn to roll my eyes.

Asher is in the bathroom getting ready, so I assume he is out of earshot. “I went by Kaleb’s,” I explain. “I work with

that woman he was seeing. I had it out with her yesterday.”

“Oh no,” Brett says, giving me a deer in the headlights look.

“Don’t, oh no me. She didn’t know I was in the bathroom changing and she was saying all kinds of shitty things about Kaleb. She was using him for his money and status. She mentioned you too,” I poke him in the chest. My brother is a big ogre of a guy. “She said she almost hit on you but knew better because you’re too much of a player.”

“Shit.” Brett winces. “Bro probably didn’t take that well.”

Clearly my brother knows about some of Kaleb’s issues.

“He already told her where to go by the time I told him the story. Woman was unhinged and flipped on him during their date.”

Again, my brother winces. “Shit, that sucks.”

“She also threatened to fire me, but I told her she couldn’t because she’s not my boss,” I tell him.

Brett lifts his hand to high-five me and I meet him halfway. “Go, sis. You don’t take crap from anyone.”

“Damn straight.” I nod.

“Even though if she fired you then you could go to culinary school. I was googling it last night and there are so many options in the city,” he says, surprising me.

“Aw, I can’t believe you did that.”

“All ready, Mommy,” Asher declares when he leaves the bathroom. He’s wearing a mismatched T-shirt and shorts, but I’ll take it.

“Good job, honey,” I cheer. “Let’s go make some breakfast. Is oatmeal and fresh fruit okay?”

He nods.

“Can I have a spoon of brown sugar?” he asks sweetly.

“You sure can.” I ruffle my son’s hair.

I head to the kitchen to prep the oatmeal on the stove. While it's cooking, I wash some fresh berries. I need a shower, but I'll take one after I take Asher to camp.

The three of us eat breakfast together and then Brett says, "What do you guys think of going to Florida for a couple of weeks? I go every summer with some guys from the team."

"Um, that sounds like a guys' vacation," I reply hesitantly. No way do I want to be around my brother's antics.

"It is," Brett agrees. "But you guys can tag along, stay on the other side of the hotel."

I roll my eyes playfully at that comment. "You know, hang at the pool and just chill."

"I have my new job. I can't exactly tell them I can't show up to work for two weeks because I want to soak up the Florida sun," I say and then I place a spoon of oatmeal in my mouth.

"That's why you should quit the job and go to culinary school. You can chill this summer and start school in the fall with Asher," Brett says like it isn't a major life-changing decision.

"I don't think you need us living with you for that long and if you haven't noticed, I'm not rich," I remind my brother. I'm also trying to curb the anxiety bubbling inside me as I think about what all that change would mean.

"Maddie, I have a nice-sized apartment. Once the season begins, I don't use it half the time because I will be on the road with games. Use this time to get yourself on your feet. The job with the catering company is nice but it isn't a future. I want you and Asher to feel secure and I'm rich and very giving." Brett winks to Asher and then shovels more oatmeal in his mouth.

I take time to ponder his suggestion. What he says makes sense. If I'm not going to repeat past mistakes; I need to make different decisions. I've been stuck in mediocre jobs for a long time, which makes me financially insecure. When a situation arises that I can move in with a boyfriend it makes a whole lot

of sense to me because, why not pay half the rent? My cycle keeps repeating itself and I need it to end. Maybe taking the plunge of culinary school will make sense, even though it seems scary. It would also mean I would have to depend on my brother financially. I know he has a good heart and his intentions are sincere but I don't like the idea of being dependent.

Brett watches me carefully. "What about my offer is bothering you? I spoke with Henry last night. He thought it was brilliant and Henry is a mega smart dude."

I smile. "I would want to pay you back," I say to my brother.

"That would be ridiculous, Maddie. It would take you a long, long time to make what I do in a year. I don't want you to pay me back. I just want to see you on solid ground."

I reach out and squeeze my brother's hand. "We're lucky to have you," I say to him.

"Tell your new boss you're giving two weeks' notice," Brett insists. "We're going to Florida."

I take a breath. What he's saying makes sense. I don't want to be in my thirties running from one relationship to the next and going from job to job. I want to find stability for Asher because even though he is an easygoing kid, I don't want to move him around all the time. I need to settle down so he feels grounded and can make friends in one place.

"Okay, Brett, but I think I should just stay behind and work this summer. We really don't need to go to Florida."

"You need Florida, Maddie. You've never been on vacation and, trust me, it's so fun. We can stay in a place that has a good pool with waterslides. Asher will love it," he tells me.

At the mention of waterslides Asher perks up. "Mommy, can we please go?" He spreads his lips showing off his cute baby teeth, which haven't fallen out yet.

I give Brett a look and take a moment to ponder. I've been stepping outside of my comfort zone ever since I left Jersey.

This will be one more new adventure.

“Florida, here we come,” I chime, feeling a nervous swirl in my stomach, kind of like I’ve just dove off a diving board into the deep end without knowing if I can swim.

“Yes,” Asher hisses.

Brett and Asher high-five each other.

“Your mom is going to be an amazing chef,” Brett says to Asher.

“She already is,” my son replies.

My heart bursts.

“Come on, buddy. Let’s get you to camp,” I say to Asher. “You still need to go the next couple of weeks so I can make some money.”

“Okay,” my son concedes.

We leave the apartment and I drop Asher off at camp. He isn’t thrilled about being there but I hope he adjusts. I head back to the apartment to shower and get ready for work.

When I head back out to the elevator I bump into Kaleb.

“I was just thinking about you,” he says as he motions for me to step on the elevator first.

“Oh yeah?” My stomach dips as I think of what he could possibly say.

“Yeah.” He nods and his Adam’s apple bobs. Even his throat is sexy. “I have a proposition for you.”

“Kaleb, I need to get to work,” I say when we both arrive at the parking level. “I can’t be late.” I also am terrified what he could be propositioning. I want to believe I have my shit together and I fear one small move from Kaleb and I’ll fall over the ledge into love again.

“Come by my place when you’re done with work,” he suggests and now I want to know what he was going to say.

“I can’t just come by your place. Brett thought it was weird that I was there last night,” I mention.

“How did he know?” he asks.

“My brother is a detective who came looking for me,” I say sarcastically. “I really have to go.” I look at the time on my phone.

“Pass me your phone,” he says.

I pass it to him but I’m antsy. I want to be early, especially after my blowup with Taylor.

Kaleb puts his number in my phone and texts himself from my cell.

“We’re good,” he says, passing it back to me.

“Oh, I wanted to thank you for taking Asher to hockey camp. He had a blast. He wants to go back, hope it’s okay,” I say as I back away.

“My pleasure. He’s always welcome. Cute kid you got there, Mad Pie.”

I give him a look because he is still calling me that, even now that I know what it means to him.

Kaleb shrugs.

I smirk sheepishly and shake my head, but there is a certain amount of flirting going on between us.

“Have a good day,” I say as I walk away, speed walking to my van.

I hear him call out the same thing. When I get in my car, I replay our conversation. He has a proposition for me. What could it be? My mind goes to all kinds of dirty thoughts. I wouldn’t mind using Kaleb to help me get over Nathan. He’s a virgin but a guy who looks like Kaleb, with the attraction simmering between us, must be good in bed. I push the crazy talk out of my head. There is no way I could sleep with Kaleb, not that he would even want to. Instead, I repeat my new anthem. I have sworn off men. I have sworn off men.

CHAPTER

EIGHT

KALEB

I head to the gym because I need to blow off steam. Was I really going to proposition Brett's little sister? She isn't just Brett's little sister. She is my friend too. A friend I've been attracted to for a long damn time. This is crazy. I need someone to talk me out of this madness. I can't exactly share this info with anyone. If Brett knew the fantasies I was having about Maddie, he'd break both my wrists so I couldn't play hockey again.

I head into the gym and go straight for the treadmill. I try to talk myself out of this crazy idea but it isn't working. *I want to have sex with Madison Noble.* There, I said it out loud in my head. I want it to be her who takes my virginity. It makes perfect sense. I trust her. She likes me as a human. We respect each other. *It makes perfect sense,* I repeat in my head. Brett never needs to know. We will be super careful. She won't even come over to my apartment. We can go to a hotel. That is if she is willing to do this. I can make it good for her too. I'll worship her body like no man ever has. I'll help her forget the jerks she's given her heart too. This proposition will benefit us both.

After the treadmill I move to weights. I'm horny as hell as I think of Maddie in those short shorts wearing my hoodie. I work harder just to burn the extra steam I'm feeling. After my workout I head to the showers at the gym, which I don't usually do, but I am meeting the guys for lunch again. It would be nice to get Connor's opinion on my idea, but I can't risk

anyone from the team knowing my plans. This has to be well thought out.

I head to the café where I am meeting the guys. We sit out on the patio enjoying the sun and eating a healthy meal.

“Guys, I’m in for Florida and my sister is coming with my nephew,” Brett announces as he shovels a vegetable stir fry in his mouth.

I almost spit out the smoothie I am drinking. Having to see Maddie on the beach in a bathing suit will be the end of me.

“That’s cool. Maybe I’ll come with Ellie and Syd,” Connor suggests.

“That would be cool,” Brett replies. “But we aren’t turning this vacation into a family one. I plan on having fun.” He winks at Connor.

“With your sister and nephew?” Wolfe asks, scrunching his face.

“They’re staying on the other side of the hotel.” Brett winks like he’s thought this through.

“If you’re going, Donaldson, I’ll talk to Rebel, maybe we’ll come along with the kids,” Wolfe says to Connor.

“I’ll talk to Patty,” Evan says.

“Can Patty still fly?” Liam asks.

“I think so.” Evan shrugs and then bites into his sandwich.

“I’ll tell Sky we should tag along too. It would be good for Crew to vacation with friends,” Liam says.

“This is turning into a family vacation, not our usual fuckfest,” Matt complains. “Tell them the single guys need to have their fun,” Matt says to me.

I shrug. “I’m good with whatever.”

“I did not mean to turn our trip into a family event.” Brett chuckles. I’m guessing the guys don’t know about his sex drought.

“I mean, if your sister and Asher are coming along, it’s open season for us. The kids can hang out during the day, and we can go out at night. We just need a good babysitter,” Wolfe says.

“It’s fine,” Brett waves him off. “We’ll manage.” He winks at me and then Matt fist bumps him. “Heard things didn’t go so well with that chick from the wedding.”

Now I know that statement is directed at me.

“The hot one you were trying to pick up?” Matt asks.

“The one I helped him pick up,” Brett adds.

“She was a gold digger, so please don’t help anymore,” I inform Brett.

“Maddie told me she had it out with her,” Brett says regretfully.

“Wait up,” Matt intervenes. “You want to tell me that Brett’s little sister came to your rescue with a chick?”

I give Brett an incredulous look.

“Not how it happened,” I snap. “Chick went crazy on our date. I told her I was out. I only found out about Maddie’s quarrel after the fact.”

“You’ve got major chick drama,” Matt says, clinking his smoothie glass with mine.

“There is no drama. I hate drama,” I say.

“Just don’t make it a habit of having Maddie over at your place late at night,” Brett warns and he’s serious. The guys burst into laughter.

“Dude, she told me about the fight,” I explain to him.

Matt begins to make funny noises.

“That’s fine but Maddie is in a rough place,” he says.

“And I’m her friend. I grew up with her, just like I grew up with you,” I state. I’m used to Brett’s defensive big brother act; it’s just irritating me now. If my plan is going to work then

he needs to be okay with me at least talking to her or hanging out with her.

“It isn’t the same. Maddie is a female and she’s hurting,” he defends.

I laugh. “If she heard you say that she would sock you one.”

“No shit, just keep a distance, Bardot,” he warns.

I shake my head. “This is the treatment I get from my best friend.”

The guys around the table laugh.

“Would you mind if I hung around your sister? You know you can trust me,” Matt says impishly.

“Fuck no.” Brett drops his fork and points at Matt. “You stay the fuck away from her. Don’t even talk to her.”

Matt is laughing so hard his shoulders rise and fall with the movement.

I stay quiet. I don’t need to poke the bear.

After we eat lunch, we all go our separate ways. I have some supplies to get for tonight’s camp so I head out to buy them. By four o’clock I am walking over to Brett’s apartment since we usually drive to hockey camp together.

Asher is with him and when I see him, I say, “Hi, bud, how was camp today?”

“It sucked,” is his answer. He looks at the ground instead of me.

“But we’re going to have lots of fun tonight. You want to be my special helper?” I ask.

That perks him right up and his head lifts and his blue eyes twinkle. He bobs his head.

“Cool,” I say.

Brett smiles, clearly happy to see the change in Asher’s mood.

We head over to the sports complex. The kids get into their groups and programming begins.

“Do you want to try skating today?” I ask Asher.

“Only if you are,” he replies. He really is adorable.

“I’m gonna skate too. I plan on helping out the six-year-old group. Are you okay with that?” I ask him.

“Yeah.” He shrugs.

I get his skates on, and we join the group on the ice. These kids know how to skate so one of the instructors is showing them how to hold the stick properly.

I step in and Asher goes to stand with the other kids in a row.

I give them a spiel about holding the stick and then I tell them to skate around while imagining they are guiding a puck. Asher joins in easily.

“You’re so good with them,” Laura Lynn, their instructor says.

“Thanks. I enjoy working with them,” I reply.

“You can really tell.” She smiles wide and I am getting flirty vibes from her.

“Thanks.” I call out to the kids and tell them I will be giving each of them a puck. Once they’ve collected their pucks and they are skating around, I have time to just watch them. Laura Lynn sticks to my side.

“It’s just so cool you do this,” she beams.

“Thanks.” I nod.

“Do you maybe want to grab a coffee or a cocoa after camp?” she asks.

I take a breath. “Thanks, but I don’t date instructors.”

Laura Lynn blushes. “That’s fine. I can’t believe I had the guts to ask you out, but I figured it was worth a try.”

I smile because I don’t know what else to say.

Laura Lynn skates off to help some of the kids with their technique. Asher is skating with another boy.

“He really likes it here,” I hear the voice before I see her. Maddie walks onto the ice in her runners.

“He’s doing well.”

“Brett made me promise he would know how to skate,” she says. She’s wearing a hoodie but it’s freezing in here.

“Does that always happen to you?” she asks.

“What?” I feign innocence, although I’m guessing she witnessed me being asked out.

“I saw your instructor swooning on you.” She laughs.

“It happens on occasion. Almost feels like an occupational hazard,” I whisper.

“She is legal,” Maddie points out.

“I’m aware. Most of the instructors are college age.”

“So what gives, Bardot?” she asks, knocking her shoulder into me.

“Not you too, Maddie. I have enough pressure with your brother breathing down my neck, and we can’t talk about this here. I’ve got too many kids to deal with. We’re breaking for dinner soon.”

Asher sees his mom and skates over bumping right into her. Maddie’s sweet laughter fills the space between us as she wraps her arms around her son.

“Mommy, I’m Kaleb’s special helper today,” he tells her excitedly.

Maddie smiles at me. “Is that so?”

I pinch my lips and shrug. Asher is happy. That kid doesn’t smile enough but right now he is jubilant.

The kids come off the ice and all the groups meet in the eating area, which has lots of tables with benches. They all eat their mac and cheese and garlic bread. Asher sits with his friend Smith. Those two seem to be hanging out a lot.

Maddie is hungry after a full day's work, so she eats the mac and cheese.

"This is surprisingly good," she says, digging her fork into the pile on her plate.

"Coming from you that's saying something." I laugh.

"What kind of proposal did you have for me?" she asks, her voice full volume.

My heart skips a beat and I look around wide-eyed. Brett is way out of earshot on the other end of the cafeteria, which is huge.

"You need to be quiet unless you want Brett to castrate me," I whisper.

She winces.

"I'll have to find you alone later. And we need to be careful because you know how protective Brett can be."

"Gotcha. The hallway tonight, around ten?" She laughs. I think she is joking with her comment, but I answer.

"That's perfect."

Her jaw drops.

"Eat your food, Maddie, with your mouth closed. Seeing your mouth dropped like that is giving me all kinds of ideas I shouldn't be having." With that statement I leave a slack-jawed Maddie to her business, and I go take care of the kids. Ten o'clock can't get here fast enough.

CHAPTER

NINE

MADISON

With Asher fast asleep, I go to take a shower and wash the day from my body. I can't stop thinking of Kaleb's proposal. Does he want to give up his virginity to me? The thought seems ludicrous. He can literally have any female he wants. I watched how his instructor asked him out. She was a pretty girl. I know girls are always coming on to Brett, and vice versa where my brother is concerned. If it isn't his virginity, then what could it be? The comment he made about my mouth falling open was straight out dirty. I don't know this side of Kaleb. He was always very well behaved around me. He looked out for me like my brothers did. This attraction between us is clearly changing the rules of whatever game we are playing. It's dangerous to flirt with Kaleb. He's like family and we don't have a big family. He matters to my brothers, my mother, and if I'm being honest, he matters to me. This is all just so crazy, yet I go out of my way to shave my legs, even though I shaved them yesterday. I also shave my pits and bikini. There is no logic behind what I am doing. Yet I saunter to my room and put on a fancy pair of panties. I am supposed to be sworn off men, but this is different. Kaleb needs my help. *No, he doesn't*, the voice in my head mocks. He must have a different type of proposal. Maybe a job offer. Still, I slip on a lacy bra and then an off-white tank top and cutoff jean shorts. I brush out my hair and put on deodorant and then I moisturize my legs.

This. Is. Crazy. I keep repeating the mantra in my head. When I head out to the main area of the apartment, I see my

brother asleep on the couch. I'm hoping he's sleeping strong. First, I

head to the kitchen and gulp down a cool glass of water. Butterflies dance aimlessly in my belly as I slip on my slides by the door and head out to my little nook in the hallway. I stare out to the city, thinking it feels like there is so much possibility here. As upset as I was about catching Nathan in the act, I am starting to think it happened for a reason. My life in Jersey was far from perfect. Being around Brett has been good for Asher and me too. I realize I am five minutes early and I internally chuckle at my ambitiousness to get out here. My curiosity is on high alert.

What could he possibly have to propose to me?

"Hi," the voice is low and deep, and I immediately know it's him.

I turn my head, trying to keep my cool, because I am the new Maddie. I will not fall head over heels for Kaleb. I am in control of my heart, and I will not jump into anything new.

"Hi," I reply dryly.

"You really like that spot." He chuckles.

"I do," I admit. "It's quiet out here and this city is filled with so many possibilities. It always seems to have a pulse. Even this time of night."

"It does," he agrees, and he rocks on his heels. His hair is wet and slicked back and he's wearing a plain white T-shirt and basketball shorts. "You always liked quiet spots. I remember when you used to climb midway up the tree in your backyard and sit on the trunk."

I watch him carefully because it feels like I am seeing him for the first time.

"My room was in the back of the house. I'd see you sitting there," he explains.

"Oh."

He raises his brows. "You probably want to know what my proposal is about?"

“You’ve piqued my curiosity,” I admit, trying to keep my voice even. Inside my nerves are bubbling up.

“I would say you should come into my apartment, but your brother gave me a warning about that today,” he says with a wry smile.

“He did not.” I cover my face then uncover it. “Sorry, Kaleb.”

“Brett understood that you were only there to tell me about Taylor, but I still got the warning.” He chuckles.

“You know Brett.” I shrug. I look him in the eyes, which is a big mistake, because it’s hard to contain the happy flutters inside me when I do.

“I do, which is why my proposal is risky,” he begins and then he turns around and checks the area.

“Last I checked, Brett was fast asleep on the couch.”

Kaleb nods and licks his lips. They are fine lips with just the right thickness. I swallow and redirect my thoughts but his scent and just his overall demeanor, the way he stands tall, they do things to me they shouldn’t.

Kaleb then leans into me. My breath catches as his lips brush the edge of my earlobe. He begins to whisper. “I was hoping it would be you who takes my virginity. I need someone I trust and I’m attracted to you, Maddie, I have been most of my life. I can make it good for you and maybe being with me will help you get over that douchebag who broke your heart. Not that I want you to fall for me, just that I think the sex between us could be magic.”

He pulls away and my heart hammers in my chest as I try to get my bearings.

“Say something, Maddie.” He reaches out and caresses the side of my face with his thumb, and I feel like butter from that small touch.

“I ...”

He smiles warmly.

“I’ve sworn off men,” I blurt.

He chuckles softly. “That can’t be true. I felt the way you reacted to me last night. Was I reading that situation wrong?”

He waits.

I close my eyes and shake my head at the gravity of what I am considering.

“You aren’t wrong,” I admit quietly. I open my eyes and look in his and, whoa, what a mistake. His dark orbs smolder as he watches me, almost like he is undressing me.

“Then let’s do this. You don’t need to swear off men. You need to have fun and enjoy life. You can trust me and relax with me. This will be about our physical pleasure.”

I lick my lips, thinking of Kaleb bringing me physical pleasure. “I’ve never been in a physical relationship where I didn’t catch feelings,” I confess because all this is making me feel a little panicky. I want to be in control of my feelings. That’s why I swore off men.

“Wouldn’t it make sense then to prove to yourself that you can be with me and have pleasure without falling in love?” he asks.

“You’re making a solid point.” I swallow. I stand from the ledge and begin to pace while I repeat his arguments in my head. What if I proved to myself, I could have a sexual relationship with someone as hot as Kaleb without falling for him? I would be cured. I could go to culinary school, get myself on my feet economically speaking, and have a healthy dose of sex without putting my heart on the line. In theory, this is all brilliant. My life would be better, and I could prove to myself I am strong.

“You’re pacing is making me nervous,” he states, his voice pulling me from the arguments in my head.

I pause and watch him. I take a deep breath and take the plunge. I reach my hand out. “Deal.”

He takes my hand, only he pulls me into his chest. “We aren’t shaking on this deal, gorgeous.” Then his lips crash to

mine—all heat and warmth—and my legs almost buckle, but I wrap my arms around his neck for support and kiss him back. He breaks the kiss just as I am getting into it. “Can’t chance your brother whipping that door open.”

“Right.” I giggle like a schoolgirl. If our kissing is that heated, I wonder how hot the sex will be.

“We can’t let Brett find out about our plan,” he warns.

“Duh,” I laugh.

“We should meet at a hotel. I know it sounds a little shady, but for my safety I think it’s best.”

“You have a point. Brett would go ballistic,” I snort.

“Yeah,” Kaleb agrees wide-eyed. “Let me know what your work schedule is like. Maybe we can meet up while Asher is at camp.”

“That could work.” I swallow past the lump in my throat. I can’t believe this is my life.

“Brett mentioned you’d be going to Florida. I messaged him and the guys tonight that we need to push the trip off a couple of weeks so I can be here for the end of hockey camp,” he explains.

“I really have to thank you for including Asher. He can’t stop talking about it,” I say awkwardly. It shouldn’t be uncomfortable because this is Kaleb, my old friend. My brother’s best friend. Only it is awkward because we just struck a deal for me to take his virginity.

“You got a great kid,” he says.

“Thanks,” I reply, and then I am walking past him.

“Maddie,” he calls out.

“Yeah.” I pause and turn.

“I’m waiting for your schedule tonight. My patience is running low. I want you,” he says, and hot damn, my ovaries just burst.

“Okay.” I’m grinning so wide it’s ridiculous.

I get close to the door and Kaleb walks past me.

“One more thing, Maddie. I need you to do me a favor.”

I wait to hear what he has to say.

“I need you to get yourself off tonight to thoughts of me. And I’ll do the same for you.”

I’m frozen as I stare at this handsome as hell man in front of me. No one has ever said anything so erotic to me before. It almost feels impossible to think he’s a virgin.

I nod and swallow and then I let myself back into the apartment.

Brett is awake watching television.

“You good?” he asks, watching me with concern.

I wipe the stupid smile off my face. “I’m good, Brett. You don’t need to worry. I’m going to be just fine.”

“I know,” he says like he knew this all along.

“Have a good night,” I say to my brother.

“You too.” He yawns and then he gets up off the couch and stretches.

I head to my room. I check my schedule and send it to Kaleb. I need to be at work at 6:00 a.m. tomorrow for kitchen work, but I get off at noon. I message Kaleb I can meet him by one, so I have time to come home and shower.

Kaleb: Thanks, see you tomorrow.

My heart skips a beat at the thought.

My phone pings again with another message.

Kaleb: Now get yourself off. I want to hear all about it tomorrow.

I blow out a breath.

Me: I never realized you’re bossy.

Kaleb: This is foreplay, Maddie, now get started. I have...

Whoa, it's getting hot in here. I slip out of my clothes and put on an oversized T-shirt I wear to bed. When I get under the covers the bed is cold and I shiver, but once I close my eyes and slip my fingers between my seams, I warm up fast to thoughts of Kaleb.

CHAPTER

TEN

KALEB

I arrive to the hotel early and order room service for a late lunch, assuming Maddie will need to eat something before we make it to bed. I've got nervous energy pumping through me. I know it's time to lose my virginity because I am so damn attracted to Maddie. I don't need to worry about her being a crazy fan or using me for my status. This will be all about fulfilling a high school crush with a girl who has a warm heart. A girl I trust.

My room service order of thin crust pizzas, salad, dessert pastries, and fresh fruit arrives. After tipping the server, I roll a cart of food into the main room next to a table. I stare at the food a beat too long then head to the washroom and check myself in the mirror. I don't know what I am checking for, other than I need my nerves to calm down. I took a large suite at the hotel so we have plenty of room. I head over to the bedroom and place the condom box beside the bed.

I look at the bed and picture a naked Maddie spread-eagle across it. Shit, I'm getting hard. Down boy.

I texted Maddie the room information and she should be here any minute. She said she was going home to change after work.

I drop to the floor and do ten push-ups when there's a light knock on the door. She's here.

I rush to the door and open it, taking her in. Her dirty-blond hair is down with soft waves. She's wearing a gray tank

top and cutoff jean shorts with a pair of Chucks. She looks beautiful. I take a breath to calm my racing heart.

“Hi.” She waves awkwardly.

“Hey,” I say a little breathless.

“You okay?” she asks, her brows furrowing.

I run my hand over my hair. “I was doing push-ups.”

She cocks a brow. “You’re joking.”

“I kid you not.” I chuckle.

She walks past me into the hotel room. I close the door and my eyes drop to her ass.

“Wow, this is quite the suite,” she says, and she twirls around.

I walk up to her. She swallows. “I want to kiss you.”

She looks timid and possibly nervous, but I’m impatient for the first time in my life.

I wrap my arms around her back and draw her in close to me. “Are you nervous?”

She nods. “I can’t believe this is real.”

“Don’t be nervous. I’m not experienced with sex but I will make it good for you,” I assure.

“I feel like I’ve entered some kind of fantasy world. You’re friends with my brothers. This isn’t allowed.” She giggles nervously.

“It will be our little secret.” Holding her this close, our faces almost touching, makes my blood run hot.

“Our little secret,” she repeats quietly. “Shit, that sounds hot.”

I crash my lips to hers. She kisses me back with as much heat as I’m dishing. I feel the kiss touching every point in my body, igniting sparks of passion within me. Our tongues mingle and dance, and she tastes like forbidden sweetness, her hands roaming over my shoulders and back.

I break the kiss and we are both panting. “I got you food. I thought you’d be hungry.” I tilt my chin to the food cart behind her back. She turns her head to look at it. I forgot I wanted to feed her first because seeing her got me all excited.

“I ate something small when I went home to change. We can have it after,” she says.

I nod and kiss her again. I start slow but there is this burning feeling inside me, and she must feel it too because her fingers thread through my hair and she deepens the kiss. Passion is clearly not going to be a problem between us.

“Wrap your legs around my waist,” I urge. “I’ll take you to the bed.”

She lifts one leg to my waist and I help her with the other, propping her up so she can wrap her legs around my waist. I walk us over to the bed and lay her on her back.

When I stand back up, I remove the T-shirt I am wearing. She removes her tank top, revealing a lace bra.

“Shit, Maddie, you’re gorgeous,” I compliment, taking her in. Her hair is splayed across the bed, her pert nipples peek through the lace, her stomach is tanned, and her curves are glorious. She squirms on the bed.

“This doesn’t feel real,” she replies.

“It feels surreal to me too. I’ve waited so long ...”

“Come here,” she invites, her voice low and sexy. I move toward her and she sits up and takes my hand. “Have a seat.” She pats the bed beside her, and I take a seat. She crawls into my lap and then we are kissing again. My cock is rock hard at her center as she rocks into me. My hands are running up and down her back and everything is moving so fast, which has never happened to me before, but it’s like neither of us can get enough of one another. I stand with her on my lap and flip her on the bed. Then I am kissing her neck. Any hesitation I was feeling flies out the window. I knead her left breast with one hand and use my other to undo her bra.

“You seem to know what you’re doing.” Maddie smirks.

“I said I was a virgin; I didn’t say I don’t have experience,” I clarify.

“Oh.” Her mouth forms the sound she is making.

I smile and then I dip my head and suck her nipple. I flick it with my tongue while my other hand kneads her other breast.

I move to her other nipple, licking and flicking it with my tongue.

“That feels really good,” she says, running her hands through my hair while pushing her crotch into my cock.

“Are you wet, Maddie?” I ask her.

She nods.

“Did you get wet for me last night too?” I ask.

“Kaleb,” she sighs, but it also sounds like a plea.

“Answer me, Maddie. Did you get your sweet little pussy off to thoughts of me?”

She moans.

“Were you thinking of me, Kaleb?” she asks.

I shift and unbutton her jean shorts. I remove them for her but not before I see her white lace underwear. I want to cherish her, but I have never been this hungry for a woman before.

“I came hard, Maddie. I came hard thinking about your naked body. I came again thinking how good it will feel to be inside you.”

Another moan escapes her. “I came so hard last night thinking of you, Kaleb. I don’t understand it but...”

“Say whatever it is,” I urge.

“I usually have such a hard time getting myself off. I don’t... I can’t... really come,” she says.

“Why do I find that hard to believe?” With her naked in front of me, I remove my shorts and my boxers. My cock stands to attention against my abdomen and her dark blue eyes turn to orbs of fire as she licks her lips and mutters a thanks.

I lie back on the bed. “Sit on my face.”

“What?” Her eyes are round and filled with question.

“You heard me. Sit on my face. I want you to fuck my tongue. I want to feel your juices as you come apart.”

“There is no way you’re a virgin.” She shakes her head.

“Do you want to sit on my face?” I ask, cocking my brow.

“That is the sexiest thing anyone has ever said to me,” she replies.

“So is that something you want to do?” I ask.

“Kaleb, it would be my honor to sit on your face,” she says with a sweet smile. She reaches down and removes her panties. Her bra hangs off her arms, and she discards it to the floor too.

I smile too and I lie back on the bed as she straddles my face. Her pussy is mostly shaved and she’s already dripping for me as my tongue makes contact.

I flick her clit and then lave up the juices, running my tongue down her seam. She begins to move faster, holding the headboard for support, and she moves her hips, gyrating above me. Her moans grow louder and she fucks the hell out of my tongue, and I try to hold on, trying not to come like a teenager, my cock bobbing aimlessly. I open my eyes to see her breasts bouncing.

“Fuck yes!” she cries out.

I move my tongue faster in a flicking motion, ensuring I lick her from clit to opening as she moves faster and faster above me.

“I’m going to come, Kaleb. Fuck, this feels too good,” she moans.

I thought she said she had a hard time coming, but I don’t bring it to her attention because I feel her sweet pussy swelling as she falls over the edge, screaming so loud I am happy we are in a hotel and not my apartment because sound does travel.

She unravels above me and I suck up all her juices while continuing to lick her. She is coming so hard and for so long she gets out of breath.

“I don’t know what’s happening. It isn’t ending. Ohhh,” she continues to moan, riding out her waves of ecstasy. She finally falls limp and out of breath, and I guide her to lie beside me. She curls into my side, panting.

“Wow,” she says.

I laugh. “That good?”

She looks sated and flushed and so damn pretty.

I hold her in my arms and it feels good. I’ve fooled around with women before. I was definitely a late bloomer, but I never wanted to hold any of them the way I want to hold Maddie.

“Let me take care of you...or do you want to...”

“Whatever you are comfortable with,” I say to her.

“I am comfortable with you, Kaleb. I trust you. I can give you a blow job or I can...”

“You can what?” I ask curiously.

“I can sit on your cock,” she offers and heat rushes to my dick.

“They both sound super good. I’m about ready to blow my load from having you come apart like that.”

“Then let me give you a blow job and then we can have sex, unless you’re in a rush,” she says.

“I’m not in a rush,” I say quickly.

She straddles herself over my body and then she is kissing my neck. “Close your eyes, Kaleb. I want to make this good for you.”

“You are,” I state as my hands come and run down her back. I allow myself to give her ass a little squeeze because I really like touching her everywhere.

She moves down from my neck to my chest, sucking my nipple and flicking it. Damn, that feels good. She slowly makes her way down my abdomen. When her mouth connects with the crown of my cock, I groan as she licks the tip, taking my girth in her hand. She then covers my cock with her mouth.

“Oh, Maddie,” I groan, my hands coming into her hair.

She begins to bob her head.

“Fuck,” I groan as I move my hips. I open my eyes to watch her taking my cock down her throat. “You are so beautiful.”

She takes me deeper and swirls her tongue around my tip.

“I’m going to come, Maddie. You better watch out,” I alert her, knowing I am coming way too fast, but she is so hot and this feels so right. So different.

She begins to bob her head faster. Then she wraps her hand around the part of my cock she can’t get into her mouth, and starts jacking me off. I come so hard I am seeing colors. Maddie swallows all my cum. She doesn’t spit it out, and it’s the hottest thing I have ever seen. She is also making soft mewling noises like she is enjoying herself.

When I finish coming, she licks my tip and then she licks her lips.

“I hope that was good.”

“That was the best blow job I have ever gotten,” I assure her, not sure it is the right thing to say.

She seems pleased with herself.

“I think you’re being kind,” she replies, lying beside me.

“Kindness isn’t what I’m feeling right now,” I admit. “This was the hottest make-out session I’ve ever had. I’ve never gone down on a woman before.”

“Shut up.” She smacks my chest lightly.

“I’m not kidding. I’ve never wanted to.”

“So why did you tell me to fuck your face?” she asks me.

“It was a fantasy and I just needed to taste you. Call it an old teenage fantasy,” I confess.

“Damn, Kaleb.” She watches me like she doesn’t know me.

“I think the sex between us is going to be good.”

“It’s going to be great,” she corrects.

“I’m glad you feel that way. I’m glad it’s you,” I say to her. “I appreciate you doing this.”

“If we’re being honest, I need to admit I’ve never come apart like that before and for so long. It felt like an out-of-body experience.”

I smile proudly. “It was my pleasure. Who knew we would be so good together?”

“Who knew?” she agrees. “Lucky this is a one-time thing.”

I bite my lip and hold my tongue, thinking I would like it to be more than one time, but I want to get the sex part out of the way first.

“What position do you think we should do?” I ask her.

“Hmm,” she contemplates. “That depends.”

“On what?” I ask.

“Foreplay,” she states.

I lick my lips, very much liking the idea of foreplay with Maddie.

I shift off the bed and leave the bedroom.

“Where are you going?” she calls after me.

I return with the strawberries and chocolate sauce I ordered.

“I see you’ve put lots of thought into our little rendezvous,” she purrs.

“I have.” I place the strawberries and chocolate on the bedside table.

I dip one of the strawberries in chocolate and then tease her by allowing her to think I will be feeding her. But at the last second I pull it away and run it up her abdomen, making a mess on her body with the chocolate. Her blue eyes hold burning flames inside them as she watches me, her breaths moving her stomach up and down rapidly.

I feed her the strawberry and then dip my head, following the trail of chocolate. Licking it up with my tongue.

“It isn’t logical that you’re a virgin. You’re too good at seduction,” she observes.

“I’ve never seduced a woman in my life,” I retort.

She watches me with question. “That can’t be true.”

“I’ve never lied to you, and I don’t plan to start. Women have always seduced me. It feels good to be on the other end of things.”

I move up to her chest and dip my finger in the chocolate sauce. It is still warm as I paint her nipples with it. I lick her nipples and she moans with satisfaction as they turn to hardened buds. I lick off all the chocolate and make my way down her abdomen. I’m growing painfully hard as I reach her pussy, but I know from the guys on the team that there is a way to eat a girl out from this position, and that is to take my index and middle finger and spread her seam. She squirms beneath me and when my tongue makes contact with her clit, her back bows off the bed. I run my tongue up and down her seam and she slowly builds and moans as her hips begin to move.

“I need you to stop, Kaleb. I want to come on your cock.”

That causes me to pause.

She watches me, maybe reading my apprehension. I know what is supposed to happen but I am not sure I should take the reins.

“I think for your first time you may enjoy missionary so that you’re in control,” she says to me.

“Will that be good for you too?” I ask.

“You need to make sure you move deep inside me, rubbing my clitoris with your cock,” she instructs. “Most guys I’ve been with haven’t known how to do that. That’s why the sex has been bad. If I haven’t been on top I don’t come.”

“That sounds like a lot of pressure.” I laugh.

“You got this. Come here. Lie above me.”

I line up our bodies and my cock falls between her thighs. I can feel her wetness as she presses into me. I feel dumbstruck.

“I need you to put on a condom. I’m on the pill and I’m clean. I got checked after Nathan cheated, but I need to be extra safe.”

“I understand.” I reach over to the bedside, and she takes the box from me. She opens it and takes out a condom. She rips the wrapper open and takes it out and passes it to me. I shift up so I can sheathe myself. It feels a little tight.

Then I shift down her body. “Are you sure you want to do this?” I ask her.

She nods. “I want to be your first.”

She reaches up and kisses me and I kiss her back. When she slips me tongue, I moan into her mouth. She grabs the back of my head, pulling me down and we kiss feverishly.

Her hips come up to meet my cock and I feel her warmth.

“I want you inside me,” she says, breaking the kiss. She reaches down and guides my cock inside her. My breaths pick up as I begin to move. I am moving too fast because it feels too good.

“Shit,” I swear.

“Breathe, Kaleb. Slow down,” she urges.

“I want to make this good for you, but it feels too...” I fall over the edge, coming so hard my body breaks into a sweat as I drive inside her. She holds my back her, fingers digging in.

It’s over before I know it, and I know I’ve screwed up.

“I wanted to make it good for you,” I say to her.

“It was good for me. I didn’t come but I am happy I was here for you and made you feel good.”

“I’m sorry, Maddie.”

“Please don’t. This was special,” she says with the sincerest smile.

“Let me make it up to you. I know I can get it right,” I assure.

“I know you can too, but how about we have a little something to eat and then try again?” she suggests.

“That sounds perfect,” I breathe out. She reaches over and kisses my lips sweetly.

“You may want to discard the condom,” she reminds.

I laugh and shift off the bed. “Right.”

I walk over to the bathroom and discard the condom. When I look in the mirror, I feel different but I can’t describe it. Sex is definitely not overrated. It’s good and I want to do it again with Maddie.

I leave the bathroom wearing one of the hotel robes. I bring Maddie the other one.

“I’d like to eat with you naked, but I figured you may prefer the robe,” I say, passing it to her.

“Thank you.” She takes it and gets out of bed. She shivers. “It is a little cool in here.”

“I’ll turn the AC up a bit.”

We head into the main room and sit by the table.

“I hope the food is still warm,” I say since it’s covered.

I remove the covers.

“Wow, this looks really good,” Maddie cheers. “I’m starving.”

“I thought you said you ate,” I say as we both dig in on the thin crust pizza.

“I grabbed a banana.” She smirks sheepishly.

“I was a little overeager, wasn’t I?”

“You were great,” she reassures.

“But I need to make you come. Please say you want to have sex with me one more time,” I am pleading and it doesn’t make sense, other than being with Maddie felt different. Our chemistry was off the charts but there was a sense of comfort with her too.

“Since you’re promising orgasms, I won’t say no,” she jokes.

She looks at her cell phone. “We have an hour. I need to be out of here on time to get Asher from camp.”

“That can work.” I start to eat faster.

Maddie laughs. The sound is sweet.

She eats faster too, placing some salad on her plate.

“This is a lot of food,” she says.

“I thought we would be building up an appetite with our workout.”

We are both smiling like fools. I feel so relaxed and Maddie looks happy.

I pour some of the water from the jug into glasses for us.

We drink.

“I can’t believe I lost my virginity to you, of all people,” I say jokingly.

“I can’t believe it either. I had the biggest teenage crush on you.” The moment the words leave her mouth, her eyes widen.

“Don’t go taking them back now,” I reply easily. “I was crushing on you too. I thought you were seriously hot.”

“You did?” she asks, intrigued. She takes another slice of pizza.

“Yeah, Maddie, you’ve always been gorgeous and very off-limits.”

She nods and smiles and continues to eat.

I finish my slice and wait for her to finish hers.

Then I get up and walk over to her.

I kneel and spread her thighs open. Her robe comes undone so she is sitting on the chair, exposing herself with her legs apart.

She watches me in wonder and I lean over and begin to pepper kisses down her neck. I knead her breast with my hand as my kisses spread lower and I get to her breasts. I take each of them in my hands. They are a perfect handful as I lean in and flick her perfect rosy left nipple. It hardens as my tongue runs over the edge. By the time I move to the other one she is breathing fast.

“You’re really good at seduction,” she says, hugging the back of my head and running her fingers through my hair.

“Are you wet?” I ask her.

“Why don’t you check,” she replies, and damn, she is a spitfire, and I am so digging this.

I reach down and touch her pussy, pressing two fingers between her lips. She is warm and very wet.

“Kaleb,” she moans and then she reaches down and strokes my cock. I’m hard like a rock.

“We better take this to the bed,” I suggest.

I reach down and lift her in my arms. She squeals and laughs. “It’s fun being with a big, strong guy.”

Her words boost my ego.

I lay her on a pillow on the bed.

I open a condom wrapper and sheathe my cock, and then I am climbing on the bed like a predator wanting to ravish her. She is flushed and smiling as I reach down and we begin to kiss. She slips me tongue and I groan from her sweet taste. I lay my cock between her legs and she shifts up, needing the friction. I slide inside her and we groan together from the feeling of being connected. I begin to move and she moves

with me. I can't get deep enough as I fuck her, and her nails dig into my back.

"You've got stamina." She laughs.

"Thank you. Am I hitting the right spots?"

"Move a little this way," she instructs with her hands on my ass. "Now press into me here," she says, pressing her center into my cock. "Yes, just like that." I move my hips so I feel like I am also rubbing her clit. Her moans grow louder and I feel her swelling and squeezing my cock. The feeling is too much.

"Are you close?" I ask.

"So close. Yes! Yes!" she screams and then she is falling over the edge. I keep up pace, drilling into her but then sparks shoot down my spine and I am coming too, and when I do, she goes off even more and we fall over the edge together.

It takes me a moment to get my bearings and when I do, I look up at Maddie. She looks sated, flushed, and breathing heavily.

"Was that better?" I ask.

"That was amazing. Better than amazing," she confirms.

I reach down and we kiss. I'm not sure it's good to kiss so much because that is something that people in relationships do. I never really used to kiss the women I was with very much because it felt personal, and really, we were just getting each other off.

But Maddie kisses me back slowly. Our tongues tangle lazily until things feel heated again, and I turn on my back and grab her, rolling her on my body.

We stare in each other's eyes.

"I want you coming on top of me," I say to her.

She laughs and the apples of her cheeks turn pink.

"You just gave me two orgasms. I've never had two orgasms in a day before."

“Then we should really break the record and go for a third,” I say.

She reaches over to the bedside table and looks at the time. Her eyes widen. “Shit. I need to go.”

“What? Already?” That couldn’t have been an hour.

“Yes.” She begins to scramble. “Is it okay if I take a quick shower?”

“Of course,” I say, and get out of bed too.

She runs to the bathroom, and I follow her to discard the condom.

She turns on the water while I throw the condom in the garbage. She gets into the water and I come to follow her.

“That isn’t a good idea, Kaleb. Showering together is something couples do and I really need to run.”

“I was hoping we could have sex in here,” I admit, because taking her against the wall or on the bench seems hot.

“I have to go, sorry,” she apologizes, and she begins to soap up her body. “I don’t want to be smelling like you. My brother is sometimes a detective.”

I wince but I am not sure why. Brett can’t find out about us. It’s more that I like to be the one she smells like. I like marking Maddie.

“Okay.” I close the shower door and head out of the bathroom.

I slip on my clothes.

Maddie is out a couple of minutes later. She is also dressed.

“This was an amazing afternoon, Kaleb, thank you.”

She leans over and gives me a kiss. I kiss her back.

“Thank you.” I smile.

She smiles too and it’s like we are both blushing. After what we did there is no turning back. We can’t just be friends.

She grabs her purse. "I'll see you later with Asher."

It takes me a moment, but she means hockey camp.

"Definitely," I say, rubbing the back of my neck.

She leaves and I am left in a state of awe. I just lost my virginity to my best friends' sister.

CHAPTER

ELEVEN

MADISON

I enter my van, feeling on top of the world, after just experiencing the best sex of my life. That was even better than when I lost my virginity to Tommy Hunter on prom night. Tommy came fast. I didn't enjoy it at all, and he sure as hell didn't ask for a do-over so he could make me come so hard I was seeing stars.

I pull out of the hotel lot and head out toward Asher's camp. At a red light I check Waze to give me an indication of how bad traffic will be because it is usually bad in this city. Right now, it looks like I will be arriving on time. I turn up the radio and blast a song, a wide smile spreads my lips as I belt out the lyrics. This is a good day. Taking Kaleb up on his proposal was the smartest thing I ever did. I am giving myself a pat on the back for not overstaying in the hotel room or allowing my heart to get attached to Kaleb. This afternoon was about pleasure and spending time with an old friend I trust. Sure, I have a crush on Kaleb but it's clearly very manageable.

I arrive to Asher's camp at exactly four o'clock.

When he spots me, he smiles and runs to me. I open my arms and give him a hug. He hugs me right back.

"How was your day?" I ask.

"A little better," he says, but his tone lacks excitement.

"That's good," I reply, trying to be cheerful.

"Did anything special happen?" I ask.

“I made a friend,” he shares. “She’s a girl.”

“Okay, well that’s nice. You can be friends with girls.”

“She gave me the stick house she built in arts and crafts and told me we should be friends,” he explains.

That makes me laugh. “Sounds like a smart girl.”

“She’s on my soccer team. She scored a goal,” he continues. “She said she’ll show me how to play soccer if I show her how to play hockey,” he adds. “So I kind of have to go back tomorrow.”

I’m cheering in my head. “That’s a fair deal.” And I have to work all day tomorrow.

We head out and Asher can’t stop talking about wanting to go to hockey camp.

“I was thinking you and I could hang out tonight. Maybe we can go eat a burger together,” I suggest, since hamburgers are his favorite food.

He looks excited. “Maybe we can get burgers then go to hockey camp. I want to be a famous hockey player like Uncle Brett.”

Oh boy.

“Yeah, we can do that, but we need to go back to the apartment and change if you’re playing hockey.”

My son nods and we get in the car. We drive to the apartment and park in the underground garage.

In the elevator we bump into Ellie and Syd.

After initial hellos, Ellie asks Asher if he’s in camp.

My son nods. “I go to day camp but now I’m going to my friend Kaleb’s hockey camp. It’s more fun than my other camp.”

Ellie gives me a crooked grin.

“My camp is the best,” Syd says to Asher. “It’s a fashion design camp. Everybody gets to create something.”

“That sounds cool,” I say to Syd.

“Hey, why don’t you guys come over for dinner Saturday night? We can watch a movie and order takeout,” Ellie suggests.

“That would be nice,” I say to her.

“I’ll tell Connor to invite Brett.”

“I doubt my brother wants to spend his Saturday night watching a kids’ movie, but he can try.” I laugh.

“The eternal bachelor,” Ellie says, rolling her eyes.

“You know my brother well,” I joke.

We get off on our floor.

“I’ll be in touch on Friday about the plans,” Ellie chimes as we get off the elevator.

“Thanks,” I return.

We say bye to Syd and Ellie and then head into the apartment.

“You go grab your skates and put on a pair of long pants,” I tell my son.

I head into my room to change out of my shorts since it’s cold in the sports complex. The idea of seeing Kaleb again so soon makes my cheeks heat. He was so alpha, the way he took charge, but it was also his hot body and our chemistry that made things so explosive. It makes me wonder if I’ll be able to act normal around him, or if I’ll be remembering the way I sat on his face and had the strongest orgasm of my life.

I slip on a pair of leggings, and I put on a hoodie with a zipper so I can take it off if I get too hot.

I look around for Brett, but he isn’t here.

With Asher ready, we drive over to the sports complex. We see Kaleb at the entrance. He smiles and we have a moment of silence as we check each other out. My skin heats and my pulse quickens. My body clearly remembers what he is capable of doing to it.

I have to blink to clear my mind from being drunk on Kaleb.

He directs Asher to his group.

I thank him.

Brett walks over to us, and I almost choke on my own spit.

“What’s up?” he asks, looking me over like he wants to make sure I haven’t lost any pieces of myself.

“Asher is in love with hockey camp. He just told me he wants to be a famous hockey player like Uncle Brett.”

That makes Brett happy, as I knew it would, and he stands a little taller.

“He’s doing good here. I’ll work with him tonight,” my brother winks.

“Thanks, Brett,” I reply.

“How was work?” my brother asks as Kaleb moves to welcome more kids.

“I cut vegetables in a kitchen. It’s okay. I don’t mind the prep work but one of the exciting things I like about cooking is seeing the finished product. That isn’t happening now,” I explain.

“Did you give your two-weeks?” he asks.

“I did. She understood. She’s the one who told me at my interview that this was a dead-end job. Lucy is super nice.”

“Good, so it’s all working out,” Brett says.

“I hope so. I’ll start applying to some culinary schools now.”

“That’s the spirit.” He knocks shoulders with me.

Then he’s waiting.

“Are you planning on staying, Maddie? You don’t need to. I can bring Asher home after camp. I have the booster seat in my car.”

“Thanks,” I say. I kind of planned to stick around and now I realize it was because I wanted to see Kaleb some more. Being around him feels good. “I’ll head home and start on my applications.”

Asher has already left the area with his group, so I turn to leave. On my way out I bump into Kaleb.

“You leaving?” he asks.

“Yup.” I nod.

“What if we extend the proposal a little longer?” he whispers.

I look into his eyes, lost. Obviously, I want to have earth-shattering sex again. But it’s risky.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I answer. Who am I?

“We were good together. Nothing wrong with relieving some tension,” he states, and his words make my pussy clench from the thought.

“Maybe one more time,” I concede.

“Tomorrow?” he asks.

“I’m working every day this week. Full days. I won’t be free until next Monday,” I say, since Asher isn’t in camp on the weekends.

“That’s a long time to wait but I’ll take it,” he says. He winks and walks away, and all I can think about is wanting to have sex with him again and thinking that Monday can’t come soon enough.

I head back to the apartment and work on my culinary school applications. Some of the best culinary schools in the country are located here in New York City. I submit my applications, thinking the top schools are a long shot but I try anyway. I also apply to a school in Texas. It’s in the top ten but it’s the chefs who run the school that intrigue me. They are two famous French chefs. Only how could I afford to live in Texas and go to school? I read through the site. It says I would receive an Occupational Science Degree in the Culinary Arts and the degree would take just over a year. The place sounds

like a dream. I scroll some more and find that one scholarship is awarded each year and it covers housing expenditures and studies. I decide to fill out the scholarship application because it doesn't hurt to try. A girl can dream. Even if my chances are a drop in the bucket.

CHAPTER

TWELVE

KALEB

It's been three days since I had Maddie, and I can't wait to have her again. The last two nights I got myself off to thoughts of her, but it isn't satisfying my need.

Kaleb: I want you in my bed.

The statement is a bit daring but it's also the truth.

It takes a few minutes for her to reply.

Maddie: You know you can have any woman you want. Go out and have some fun. I'm pretty sure Brett is out, why didn't you go with him?

Kaleb: Guys went to Focus. It's a bar/club. Not my cup of tea.

Maddie: Instructors at hockey camp are pretty, of age, and clearly willing. I've seen it with my own eyes.

Kaleb: Sex between us was really off the charts, or did I read that wrong?

Maddie: It was good sex.

Kaleb: Brett is out. Come over. We can have a quickie.
<blushing emoji>

Maddie: My five-year-old son is asleep. Remember Asher? He loves your hockey camp. I can't leave him alone.

I chuckle at her snarky response.

Kaleb: I'm buds with your son. I obviously remember him. I just thought we could be quick and you would be next door.

Maddie: Not leaving Asher.

Damn, okay, she's probably right.

Kaleb: I'm coming over.

I get out of bed and look in the mirror. My hair is slightly askew, so I fix it by brushing my fingers through it. I'm already hard as a rock as I adjust my basketball shorts and place my T-shirt in a way that hides my erection.

I slip on my slides.

My phone buzzes.

Maddie: Do not come over here. Are you crazy?

Crazy about wanting her? Yes.

Kaleb: Meet me outside in that little nook of yours.

Maddie: What would be the point? Have you heard of security cameras?

Kaleb: Come to the nook, or I come to you.

I'm a man on a mission. My cock is in the driver's seat.

I'm out of my apartment without locking the door as I make my way to the little nook Maddie likes to sit in each night.

She isn't here. Damn.

"It was a one-time deal," the voice says from behind me.

I close my eyes and smile victoriously, then turn around slowly, taking in the gorgeous woman in front of me. Her hair is down and falls over her shoulders, her mouth is pouty, and her eyes are creased, her facial expression irritated and sexy as hell.

"Tell me you don't want more," I counter, taking steps to close the space between us.

“I don’t want more,” she states, lifting her chin slightly, but as I reach her I can see her heart rate quicken from the pulse point on her neck.

“Tell me you haven’t gotten off to thoughts of me eating your sweet pussy as you sat on my face,” I goad, holding her gaze.

Her eyes flicker from side to side.

“You can’t.”

Her resolve snaps like a fine thread as she reaches forward, pressing her lips to mine. She’s hungry and once I catch on to what is happening, I kiss her back with just as much hunger.

She breaks the kiss, licking her lips.

“Shit. We can’t do this out here,” she says.

“Sneak me into your room. I’ll have you writhing in under ten minutes,” I promise, my cock throbbing in my shorts.

She giggles, bites her lip, and watches me. “Ten minutes, Kaleb. Then you need to leave and we have to be quiet. Asher is a strong sleeper but I can’t chance him waking up.”

“It’s you who’ll need to keep it down,” I remind with a cock of my brow.

She smirks, knowing I’m right. “Come on.”

I follow her, taking in just how short her shorts are, her ass is round and fine leading to long lean legs. I want to give her ass a good squeeze.

I follow her into Brett’s apartment, knowing full well that if my friend comes home he’ll probably shoot me.

We enter Maddie’s room. She doesn’t waste time closing the door, then walking toward me and pulling my shirt over my head. I do the same to her tank top and she isn’t wearing a bra. Her nipples look like two sharp blades.

We are on each other in seconds, kissing hungrily as I walk her back to the bed. When she falls back on the mattress, she removes her shorts and underwear and for the sake of efficiency I remove mine.

I am on her in seconds, our lips pressed together. My tongue comes out to coax her mouth open, the heaviness of my cock lying between her thighs all warm and wet drives me wild with need.

She shifts over me and I find myself on my back. “We need to try it this way.”

She straddles me.

“Fuck, I don’t have a condom,” I mutter. “So much for my exceptional plan.”

“I’m clean and take birth control every day at the same time,” she says.

The thought of being inside her without a barrier seems almost too good to be true.

“Let’s do this,” I say. She seats herself on me.

“Shit, Maddie. This feels so much better,” I groan. I can’t believe what I’ve been missing out on all this time. “I don’t think there is any going back after this.”

She begins to move her hips, undulating above me. I take her breasts in each of my hands, kneading them and flicking her nipples.

I feel her pussy tightening. And I thrust my hips into her, causing the friction between us to build up gloriously.. She moans and I use my hand to shut her mouth, swallowing back my own groans.

She picks up pace, fucking me hard, and I thrust deep inside her, burying my cock. She is so wet. So warm and tight.

She comes apart. I follow her over the edge. My body is on fire, my breaths coming fast.

“You got to get up, Kaleb.” She moves me off her and I fall on my back.

“Sex with you is amazing,” I pant, smiling like a fool.

“You wouldn’t know if it’s amazing because you haven’t had anyone else,” she brings to my attention.

“Good point, but I have messed around and we are hot together, Maddie. Tell me you don’t think we’re fire.”

“We’re hot,” she agrees in a by-the-way manner. “Now get up and get dressed. I like you as a person, Kaleb. I’d hate for Brett to find you in my bed.”

“Yup.” I swing myself to a seated position and stand. She starts to pick my clothes up off the floor and shoves them in my hands.

I chuckle and get dressed quickly. “I feel so used,” I snicker.

This causes her to laugh. It’s a sweet laugh. She gets dressed too.

With my shorts on she takes me by the arm and guides me to the front door.

I lean forward to give her a kiss. After what we just shared it makes sense.

“Kaleb, this isn’t a relationship,” she reminds. She’s completely right. This is amazing sex with a girl I consider an old friend.

“You’re right.” I grin and wave, then turn and leave the apartment. I make sure to check the elevator area for signs of Brett but it’s thankfully clear. I make it back to my apartment and exhale when the door is locked. That was risky. Yet I felt like I had to have her, and it was worth it.

I go to the bathroom and take a shower. This plan with Maddie has turned out better than expected. I don’t need to worry about her falling for me or me falling for her. We are just enjoying each other.

When I get out of the shower, I see I have a missed text from her.

Maddie: Tonight was fun. But we really do need to be more careful.

She’s right, Brett can be a real hothead when it comes to his sister.

Kaleb: It was fun for me too. Sweet dreams.

I get into bed thinking that my proposal was my best idea yet.

CHAPTER

THIRTEEN

MADISON

“Mommy, I’m bored,” Asher complains on this bright Saturday morning as we sit on the couch watching cartoons.

Brett makes an appearance from his room. “You can take him up to the roof. There’s a pool up there.”

Asher looks at me, clearly waiting for my reaction.

“You want to go swimming?” I ask him.

I figure it’s not a bad idea to tire him out now so I can make a cake for tonight’s dinner at Ellie and Connor’s place.

“Yes,” my son cheers.

“Okay, go get a bathing suit on,” I say.

Asher runs off to his room and I go to get changed into mine.

I put on one of two bikinis I own. It’s turquoise. I grab a couple of extra towels from the bathroom and slip on a fitted blue and white tie-dye dress that fits like a mini dress but covers me up enough to get to the pool.

I meet Asher out in the main room. I pass him flip-flops and tell Brett I’ll see him later.

“Yeah, I’ll try to come up later. Just be careful. The guys like to swim laps there in the morning,” my brother warns.

I laugh. “It sounds like you just warned me about sharks in the water.”

He tilts his head from side to side. “Technically, I did.”

“You’re really overdoing it there. These guys are your teammates. I’m sure they respect you enough not to hit on your sister.” I realize the meaning of my words when they are already out, but I rationalize that Kaleb is my old friend too and what we are doing is none of Brett’s business.

“Relax,” I say to my brother. “Go sit on your balcony.”

“I don’t have chairs.” He shrugs.

“Then go order some,” I say then I wave, and Asher and I leave the apartment.

“Is there a water slide?” my son asks as we make our way to the elevator.

“I don’t think these kind of buildings have waterslides,” I reply.

Memories of meeting Kaleb out here last night fill my mind. Us unable to keep our hands off each other. I should not have brought him back to my brother’s apartment, but the sex was glorious and once again he managed to make me come in under ten minutes, which is unheard of with my sexual history.

Just thinking of riding him and watching the ecstasy on his face, with his abs clenching and his gloriously strong hands on my breasts, makes this elevator feel too hot. We head up to the roof. I need to promise myself this thing with Kaleb will be short-lived. More like a stepping stone before I find Mr. Right, which I am not in a position to do right now. I need to get my life on track before I can even consider finding a good man.

When we reach the roof there is a sign that says Pool so I take Asher’s hand and we head outside. It’s a sunny day, warm and humid. I forgot to bring sunglasses but I don’t want to head back downstairs.

“Let’s find a chair to put our towels on,” I say to my son.

There is no one up here except for a man swimming laps in the pool.

I choose a couple lounge chairs and remove my dress. Asher takes his T-shirt off and we head toward the water.

“I really hope it isn’t cold,” I say to my son.

I touch the water with my toes to find it’s the perfect temperature. Just warm enough for me to slip inside without shocking my body.

Asher sits on the ledge, and I pick him up and bring him in the water with me.

“You want to practice swimming strokes?” I ask my son.

He nods.

We start off with him doing the front crawl. As he moves through the water, I tread moving backward, so I can stay close to him since I don’t have a life jacket. When we reach the other wall of the pool, the man who was swimming laps smiles to us.

“You got a strong swimmer there,” he says.

“Thanks,” I say for my son.

“I’m Matt. I play for the Rangers. I’m guessing you must be Brett’s sister.”

“Maddie, nice to meet you,” I reply. “How did you know I was Brett’s sister?”

“I know everyone in the building and Brett said you were staying with him,” he explains.

I nod.

“So how are you liking New York?” he asks.

“It’s a busy city. Getting used to the rush. It feels like people never stop moving here,” I state.

“Takes getting used to,” Matt says. He’s smiling a lot and I get the feeling he’s a bit of a flirt.

A shadow looms over us and when I look up, I see Kaleb.

“Hi, Kaleb.” Asher waves excitedly.

“Hey, buddy.” Kaleb smiles to my son.

“I came to swim some laps. I didn’t realize you guys would be here,” he says. Then he looks at Matt. “Don’t you

have some laps to swim?”

I want to laugh but Kaleb’s jaw is ticking, and his mouth is set in a stern line.

“Are you kidding me, bro?” Matt asks. “What are you, Brett’s watchdog?”

I wince because something tells me this isn’t about my brother. Kaleb is acting possessive, and I am liking it a little too much.

“Something like that,” he mutters to Matt.

Matt laughs. “I’ll catch you two later,” he says to me and Asher.

I give Kaleb a curious look and then I go back to swimming with my son.

Once Asher gets tired of laps, he wants to jump in the pool, so he uses the ladder to leave the pool and jump in off the side. He repeats this about ten times as I stay in the water treading.

After a while Brett comes up too. He plays with Asher for a bit, cannonballing him into the water. I get out and soak up some sun.

I watch Kaleb swimming. His strong arms move through the water swiftly. I try not to keep my focus on him too long though because Brett is observant.

After a while, Kaleb gets out of the water and towels off. I can’t help but watch him. He’s all muscle, his skin sun-kissed and dripping with rivulets of water.

I lick my lips when I hear my brother clear his throat beside me. Shit. Brett cocks his brow and gives me a look of warning for ogling his hot friend.

“Hey, sweetie,” I say to Asher. “Are you ready for lunch?”

My son nods.

“Do you also want to help me make the cake for tonight?” I ask Asher.

“No,” he says.

Brett laughs.

“I’m coming tonight too,” he says to me.

“You’re coming for a hangout with kids?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he confirms. “I’m spending time with family.”

“Yay,” Asher says.

“After I finish my swim, I can take him out for a bit. We can go to Central Park Zoo or something,” Brett offers.

While my son cheers again, I tease, “Look at you becoming all domestic.”

“He’s my nephew,” Brett says like it’s obvious he’d want to entertain him.

“I can come to the zoo too,” Kaleb says from off to the side.

“Sure, bro,” Brett says to him.

I get up and slip my little dress back on. When I steal a glance at Kaleb, I catch him with his gaze on my ass. I’m enjoying this little game we’re playing. I just need to make sure my heart doesn’t want a piece of the action because I feel it fighting to catch feelings for him. He’s sweet, good with my kid, and an Adonis in bed. Nope, not going down that path.

“Ready?” I ask Asher.

He nods and we head back inside. We go to shower and change our clothes.

I make some quick grilled cheese sandwiches for all of us. Asher and I eat quickly, and I leave a sandwich for Brett and Kaleb in the warmer.

While I’m prepping the cake ingredients, Brett returns and says he’ll take a quick shower.

Asher plays with some of his Lego on the floor.

Brett comes into the kitchen, and I pass him his sandwich.

“Damn, you make all food look so good.”

“Thanks,” I say to my brother. “But how does it taste?”

“Like heaven,” he replies. “What the hell did you put in here?”

“I can’t tell you.” I grin.

Kaleb walks into the kitchen. Brett gives him a funny look. I get that he used to walk in here all the time, but I think Brett is needing boundaries with me and Asher here.

“Here, I made one for you too.” I pass Kaleb the sandwich.

“Sweet. Thanks,” he says.

I leave the kitchen to check on Asher because it feels too crowded in there with the three of us together. Things have changed for me and Kaleb. I’ve become hyperaware of him.

I check on Asher to see if he is ready for his outing with Brett. He’s on his bed talking to his teddy bear. I should announce my presence, but I also want to hear what my son is saying to his teddy bear. My heart warms when I hear him telling the teddy bear that he likes living here with his uncle, Brett. He goes on to gush about going with Kaleb and Brett to the zoo. Then he adds that Kaleb is super cool.

I warn my heart that there is no falling for Kaleb, yet I feel myself losing control.

“All ready?” I ask, announcing myself in Asher’s room.

“Yup,” Asher says.

“Okay, go grab your running shoes,” I say to my son, since they are going to the zoo and there will probably be lots of walking.

He brings his runners out to the main room. Kaleb and Brett are there waiting.

I begin to fantasize about Kaleb staying behind and us having another quickie, but I clear the thought fast because Asher is looking forward to spending time with him.

With the boys gone, I get to work on a cake. This time I decide on a cookies and cream flavor with a mix of vanilla and

chocolate cake. I place earbuds in my ears and dance as I mix the ingredients.

With the cake in the oven, I set a timer and head over to the couch. I take a small nap until the alarm I set goes off. By the time I finish the cake the boys are back, minus Kaleb. Asher gushes about his day with the boys. Truth is, none of my boyfriends ever paid him this much attention and it would break my heart, but it was also hard to find a man who would love your child as much as you do and want to be a father figure.

“Can I see the cake?” Asher asks.

“Sure, kiddo,” I say.

“He had a lot of fun today,” Brett says as my son runs off. “I enjoyed our day too. It kind of makes me sad he doesn’t have a dad. I know the feeling all too well.” Brett’s words are whispered but they burn sharp in the center of my chest.

“I hate it too.” I sigh.

“Shit, I didn’t mean to get you down. It isn’t your fault.” He winces.

“It’s fine. We should get going,” I say to my brother. I don’t want to leave Ellie, Connor, and Syd waiting.

“Yeah,” Brett says, but I can see my situation weighing on him. He’s a great brother and I love him to pieces. I just hate that he bears my mistakes on his shoulders too.

Ellie opens the door with arms wide open and a warm smile. I give her a hug with one arm and pass her the cake.

“You’re spoiling us,” she teases.

Syd is so excited she jumps up and down. She tells Asher they need to choose a movie they both like.

Asher agrees and they run off, which is nice.

Ellie introduces me to Connor and Brett fist bumps him. We walk deeper into their apartment.

“I hope you guys are hungry,” Ellie says.

Her dining table is covered in all kinds of food, ranging from pizza, salads, sushi, chicken parmesan, garlic knots, pasta, and my cake.

“Wow, this is quite the spread,” I gasp.

“Thanks, we wanted to make sure there was something for everyone and Connor invited Kaleb too,” Ellie explains. “He could always use a good meal. That man doesn’t cook very well, and he never has enough food in his house.”

That sounds about right from what I’ve seen so far. The thought of Kaleb joining us on this family night makes my skin buzz, which is a problem because I need to keep my cool around Brett.

“Gotcha,” I say.

Brett and Connor break into conversation, I think I hear Florida mentioned. Ellie tells me all about the city and fun places to take kids.

When there’s a knock on the door, Connor says he’ll get it, so I stay talking with Ellie.

Asher and Syd are playing a video game together. It’s adorable to see my son happy and interacting with a kid around his age, since Syd is slightly older. Nathan didn’t like us having too many playdates back in Jersey. They weren’t his thing.

When Kaleb enters the main room looking freshly showered, shaven, and wearing a white polo and beige shorts my heart ricochets in my chest. Why does he have to be so good-looking? And that white shirt against his tanned skin just makes him look so... I have to take a breath.

Ellie watches me curiously and I redirect my attention.

“Kaleb is a good guy,” she says.

“Oh, I know, we grew up living next to each other,” I say with nonchalance.

“Right, I forgot Brett and Kaleb know each other from childhood,” Ellie replies.

“Yeah, Kaleb is best friends with my middle brother, Henry,” I explain. “Henry’s the smart one in our family. He’s at Yale.”

“Nice,” Ellie says. “You think the kids are ready for dinner? I don’t want the food getting too cold.”

“I’m sure Asher is ready. Brett took him to the zoo today. He’s had a long day. I’m surprised he isn’t yawning.”

“Brett took him?” she asks surprised.

“I know my brother doesn’t seem like he’d be good with kids, but he’s great with Asher,” I explain.

“Interesting,” she says oddly.

I must give her a questioning look.

“Brett was interested in one of my friends, her name is Willow. Nothing came of it though. You know how he is with relationships.”

“If anyone knows it’s me. I’m hoping he’ll settle down eventually. He has too much time on his hands, so he worries about me too much.”

“I heard that,” Brett hollers from across the room.

We break out laughing.

Ellie calls everyone to come and eat. We all enjoy the meal filled with conversation and laughter. Even Asher is enjoying himself with Syd.

After dinner, we all take a seat on their sectional, and we watch *Encanto*. Ellie explains that Syd’s best friend, Crew, loves this movie and got her addicted.

Somehow, I end up seated between my brother and Kaleb, which is an awful situation because having Kaleb’s leg pressed to mine makes my body heat. It’s like my body knows his and all the deliciously orgasmic things it can do to me.

When Kaleb’s hand rests on his own knee and his pinky begins caressing the skin on my thigh, I want to jump out of my skin, or maybe I want to jump him if we didn’t have all this company.

At that point I stand quickly and ask Ellie where her bathroom is. I head to the bathroom and lock the door. I look in the mirror and blow out a breath. This attraction is getting hard to control. I want to sleep with Kaleb again.

I use the bathroom, wash my hands, and head back out to the couch. I need to prove I can handle being with Kaleb, while keeping my feelings in check and my hormones under control.

When I sit back down, Kaleb has his arms crossed in front of his chest but his scent lingers in the air, and I am fighting whatever this feeling is.

When the song about Bruno comes on, Syd gets up to dance and Connor and Ellie dance with her. Ellie explains that Crew passed this tradition on to Syd. Then she says that Asher needs to meet Crew because she can see them being best buds. This is what I have always wanted for my son, to have stable people in our lives, friends to laugh with and depend on.

I stand and take Asher's hand, and then we are dancing and being silly too. Asher is giggling so loud it makes my heart happy.

When we sit back down, he lets out a big yawn. By the end of the movie, he is sitting on the couch curled up in a ball, sleeping.

I thank Ellie and Connor for a wonderful night. Kaleb thanks them too and leaves at the same time. He gives me a small wave before heading to his apartment. Brett carries Asher back to his apartment, places him in bed, and kisses his forehead.

"It's good for him here," I say to my brother.

"Yeah," my brother sighs. "It's good and we are going to keep making it good for him."

"Thanks, Brett. For everything." When Brett straightens out, I give him a hug.

"It's the least I can do," he replies.

“You’re being modest, Brett. You’ve saved us. I don’t know how to thank you enough.”

“You don’t need too,” he replies and tells me to have a good night.

“I’m going out to the nook in the hallway. I need some quiet time,” I explain.

“You like that nook a little too much,” he notes.

“I have a lot going on in my head. Watching the city and the rush somehow calms what’s going on inside me,” I explain.

“Sure,” he says. He yawns and stretches and heads to his room.

I leave the apartment and walk over to my nook. I need to get my bearings.

CHAPTER

FOURTEEN

MADISON

As I sit in my little nook, I think of how my life has taken a one-eighty since I left Jersey. I've started a new job, quit said job. Looked into going back to school. I need to find Asher a good school. There is just so much. Then there is Kaleb. Starting a fling with the boy I crushed on as a girl was a big mistake. The stakes feel higher. I know Kaleb. I may not know the man he has become, but I know him at his core. I also notice the way he looks at me.

"I need more than ten minutes." His voice comes from a few feet away and startles me.

"Shit." I palm my chest.

"Sorry." He moves closer. "Come with me." His hand is extended like a life preserver, only if I go with him I feel like I will drown.

"We can't," I reply, but my resolve is so weak.

"You want me. I can read your body language." He's so sure of himself and he isn't wrong.

"This is dangerous," I warn, even with my body betraying me.

"This is hot," he corrects. "I can't stop thinking of having you in my bed."

"You aren't helping," I complain.

“I’m not trying to.” He grins mischievously. “Brett is with Asher. Come with me, please?” His pleading tone sets something off inside me.

I follow him to his apartment or more like he is holding my hand, leading the way. I’m not thinking of consequences.

We walk into his apartment. The lights are off. Kaleb spins around and pins me to the door. He kisses me breathless. I loop my arms around his neck and he lifts me off the floor as he wraps my legs around his waist.

“Kaleb,” I squeal.

“I’m impatient,” he responds.

He walks me to his room and places me down on his bed. He reaches over and turns on the lamp on his nightstand.

His room is masculine, and his bed is huge and plush. “This is very different from your room back home.”

“I know,” he says.

The walls are charcoal, and he has an off-white upholstered king-size bed in the middle with black and charcoal throw pillows. His nightstands are black, and his floors are oak with a light gray area rug.

“You really hate it there,” I say of our hometown.

“I don’t hate Cliftwood. I have nothing to go home to,” he says.

“I like what you’ve done with the place,” I say to him.

“Thank you. You’re the first girl I’ve ever brought to my bed.”

I pause and look at him. “Why?”

He chuckles. “Because there was no way I was letting puck bunnies know where I live. Not after I’ve seen the shenanigans Brett has faced.”

I lift my hand. “I don’t want to hear about my brother.” I cringe.

“Sorry.” He winces. “Now where were we?”

I lean back on the bed and move up to the pillows. “I think we were kissing.”

“I have a better idea,” he says.

“Oh yeah?”

“Take off your clothes...slowly.” I like where he’s going with this.

I slowly lift my tank top off over my head. “Is there any order I should be stripping for you?”

He licks his lips. “Now the shorts.”

I get up on my knees and remove the shorts. I get on all fours. My panties are a thong. And I turn my head to look back at him. “What’s next?”

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he strips his clothes off superfast, discarding them to the floor and gets on the bed. He gives my ass a smack and then rubs it and squeezes my butt cheek. I moan.

“Oh, you like that, do you?” he asks, his voice taunting.

I nod.

He smacks my ass again with the same motion of smack, caress, squeeze.

“Are you wet for me?” he asks.

“Why don’t you check?” I reply, still on all fours.

From behind me he slips two fingers inside me. I clench around him.

“You’re drenched. Fuck, Maddie.” He picks up the pace, fucking me with his fingers.

I grind on him shamelessly and when he stops and pulls them out, I feel bereft.

“Hey,” I complain and turn to look at him, as he slips his fingers into his mouth and sucks on them.

“So sweet,” he says.

Then he takes the same hand and begins to pump his cock, and it's the hottest thing I've ever seen.

"Sometimes I think you were lying about being a virgin. You have seduction down to an art form," I accuse him, feeling my pussy clenching. I want in on his action.

"I had a lot of time to fantasize about what I like and want," he says still pumping his cock.

I turn around and dip my head. I take his cock in my mouth while he fists my hair. I bob my head, taking in as much of him as possible.

"Fuck, Maddie. So good," he groans, his voice breathless and gruff. "Play with your pussy. I want to watch you." His words spark a blaze inside me because the fire was already burning.

I reach down and start rubbing my clit. My breaths pick up as I suck his cock.

"I'm going to come, Kaleb," I warn.

"Come, Maddie," he urges, and I rub harder, faster while sucking him off. I start to scream out and Kaleb starts coming, but it's all too much. So I fist his cock, rubbing it as his cum squirts on my stomach and I continue to prolong my orgasm.

I fall on to my side breathless and Kaleb says he's going to the bathroom to grab a towel. He returns and cleans me up.

"I should get back," I say, referring to Brett's apartment.

"Not until I can bury myself deep inside that pussy," he says. Who am I to deny him and me an earth-shattering orgasm?

"Are you ready to go again?" I ask, surprised.

"Let's get you on all fours. This time without the panties and bra," he says.

I realize I just came so hard without him even touching me. I still have my undergarments on, for crying out loud. Sex has never been this way for me before. I can't explain it.

I remove my bra and panties and get on all fours like he asks.

He reaches down and begins to lick my pussy from behind.

Even though I just came, I feel myself building. He flicks my clit with his tongue and my body vibrates.

“Pinch your nipples,” he directs me.

“You’re really demanding,” I reply.

“And you seem to love it,” he says. When I turn to look at him his brows are raised, telling me I shouldn’t even bother trying to argue otherwise.

I pinch my nipples like he says, and he goes back to licking my pussy. My moans grow louder.

“You need to be quiet,” he urges.

“You say that now?” I ask. “I just came completely apart.”

“Oops. I wasn’t thinking. You can hear through the walls.”

“Oh no. I should get back to the apartment,” I say to him.

“Give me a few more minutes,” he urges, and who am I to say no to this man?

He grabs a condom and sheathes himself, then he enters me from behind, while he reaches an arm around my waist and begins to rub my clit with his fingers.

I rock my hips against him, needing the friction, and he buries himself deeper inside me.

He pulls his hand away from my clit and takes hold of my hips, and then he really begins to drill into me. I come hard but I bury my face in the bed. When I feel Kaleb coming, it makes me push back harder into him. We can’t get enough. We both need harder, deeper.

After, we fall into the bed in a heap. Only I don’t wait. I get up and get dressed quickly.

“I better run,” I say to him. He gets dressed too and walks me to the door.

I give him one last peck on the cheek before I leave. I head back to my nook by the window because I need a moment to catch my breath.

I'm sitting out here alone, staring out to the city, knowing this thing with Kaleb is a lot more dangerous to my heart than I was initially willing to admit.

"Maddie?" Brett's voice pulls me from my thoughts, but he also gives me a mini heart attack.

"Shit," I say.

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you, but it's late. You should try to sleep," he urges.

"I know, just have a lot on my mind," I admit.

Brett frowns.

"I'll be fine, big brother." I hop off the nook and squeeze my brother's arm.

"Come, we should both get some sleep," I say to him as I walk back to his apartment.

We enter the apartment and Brett says. "I could've sworn I heard moans coming from Kaleb's apartment."

I want to freeze. My heart skips a beat.

"Maybe he was getting himself off," I say quickly.

"Not words I want to hear out of your mouth, and it was a woman," he notes.

"Maybe the guy finally got lucky," I joke. My heart is hammering in my chest.

"Maybe." Brett shrugs. He walks toward his room. "Night."

"Night," I call back.

When I get in my room, I melt against the closed door. This is very, very bad.

I take a few calming breaths to slow my racing heart and then I text Kaleb.

Me: Brett heard us. Told me he thinks you had a woman over.

His response is immediate.

Kaleb: Shit. Did you get back in the apartment ok?

Me: Yeah, I figured it was better to go sit in my nook and chill. He found me there.

Kaleb: That's a close call.

Me: Yeah. We can't do this anymore.

Kaleb: You can't deny me your sexy body.

His comment makes me laugh.

Me: We don't have a choice.

I turn my phone on silent and hook it up to charge, face down by my bed. I don't want to see his response. I am falling for him. My brother almost caught us tonight. This whole plan can go from brilliant to catastrophic in a blink of an eye.

Kaleb and I are done.

CHAPTER

FIFTEEN

KALEB

I spend the next week working out and hanging with the guys during the day. Maddie is busy with work. I know because that was the single text she sent me when I suggested another hotel rendezvous. Things can't be over with us. I like talking to her. She knows about my past. We are friends. A friend I am seriously attracted to and have great sex with. I don't have a comparison, but I don't need one. I know how I feel, and I have never felt this way before about a woman. This thing between us has to end at some point. We clearly aren't meant to be together, but we can ride out this little affair while I'm home for the summer.

Problem is, she won't talk to me. She's dropped Asher off every night for hockey camp. She waves to me and leaves. It's maddening. Now it's Saturday again and I want her in my bed. I miss the feel of her body against mine. I miss talking to her. Only tonight she is working at a wedding. I tell myself we will somehow find time in Florida to be together, but that seems impossible because how will we find time to run off?

I head over to Brett's apartment. He's babysitting Asher tonight and I figure I'll go hang with them.

I walk in and the guys aren't in the main room. I hear cursing from the bathroom. I walk over to the open door. Asher is hanging over the toilet puking, and Brett seems flustered.

"What's going on?" I ask.

“I don’t know. We had sushi for lunch. Then about two hours ago Asher said he wasn’t feeling well, and now he’s puking and I’m feeling...” He pauses, and his cheeks puff out as his eyes turn wide.

“Shit,” I curse and move out of his way. He takes off running for his room and then I hear him puking.

Asher throws up into the toilet. “It’s okay, buddy.” I rub his back. “I know it doesn’t feel good, but it’s better you get it out.”

He pukes some more. It smells awful and I feel terrible for him.

I reach over to the towel bar and grab one of the smaller towels. I turn the faucet on warm and I wet the towel.

“Let’s wipe you up here,” I say. I wipe his mouth and cheeks.

“Thanks,” he murmurs.

“Sorry you’re sick,” I say to him. “Do you still feel like you’re gonna puke?”

He shakes his head.

“Okay, if you feel it coming back up again, make a run to the toilet,” I advise.

He nods.

I flush the toilet and wash my hands with soap and water. That’s super gross. I used to take care of Jack and Jane when they got sick, so I have a clue of what to do. Google was my best friend.

“Come have a seat on the couch,” I suggest to Asher.

He walks over and climbs on the couch and then he shivers.

“Here, let’s get you covered,” I say, taking one of the throw blankets.

I grab the remote. “Can you find something to watch on television?”

He nods.

I go to check on Brett. Over the years we've both helped each other out when we've been sick. Grabbing cold medication, making soup. We've got each other's backs.

When I walk into his room, he's still in the bathroom with the door half open.

"Bro, you good?" I call out.

"No. I'm puking like hell," he snarls.

I wince.

"Damn, I got Asher hanging out on the couch watching TV."

"Thanks, bro," he says and then he throws up some more. I want to plug my ears because the sound is making me want to puke.

I leave his room and go back to Asher. We need to get some electrolytes.

I call Matt. "Hey, bro, please tell me you want to go out tonight," he says.

"Can't. At Brett's place. Dude has food poisoning. So does his nephew. I need you to go pick up some stuff for me."

He whines but tells me to text him the list and he says he'll get it right away, so that's what I do.

When I head back to check on Brett, he's lying in bed.

"Do you want water?" I ask him.

He nods. I run to the kitchen and get a glass for him and Asher. I give Asher his glass first. "Drink slow. Small sips."

He takes the water and drinks slowly.

"I'll be back in a sec," I tell him.

I run over to Brett's room and tell him the same thing. "How do you know this shit all the time?"

"You know how. Try having a parent who forgets to take care of you and leaves you in bed sick and by yourself. You

learn what needs to get done.”

“Yeah,” he says, and he starts taking small sips.

I head back to Asher. I take a seat beside him on the couch.

“My tummy hurts,” he complains. It’s so cute how he says his r’s.

“Here, hug the pillow against your stomach,” I offer. I also move in and he places his head on me.

We are watching some kids’ movie with Ryan Reynolds when there’s a knock on the door.

I open the door to Matt, who is holding a large brown paper bag.

“Thanks, bro,” I say to him, and fist bump him.

“No prob,” he replies.

“You want to come in?” I ask him.

“Absolutely not.” He winces.

“It’s food poisoning,” I say.

“Or stomach flu,” he adds.

“That’s true.” I didn’t consider that option, but it’s too late now.

Matt leaves and I pour some electrolyte drink for Asher and once again tell him small sips. I do the same for Brett. I head to the kitchen to make them both some chicken broth. They may not want to eat now but they may get hungry in a few hours. After I’m done with the soup, I head over to the couch and sit with Asher. At one point I get up to ask Brett if he wants soup, but he says he can’t think about eating or drinking anything so I head back over to the couch. Asher is fast asleep, and I continue to watch the movie on Netflix. My eyes lull shut and I fall into a deep slumber.

CHAPTER

SIXTEEN

MADISON

I walk into the apartment after a long-ass day and night. The lights are off but the television in the main room is on. I walk over to it quietly and spot Kaleb fast asleep, sitting up with my son's head on his lap. Asher is wrapped in a blanket and my heart gushes and splatters to the floor. Why did Kaleb come to help with babysitting? And why is he on the couch with Asher and not my brother?

I walk over and touch his shoulder. "Kaleb," I whisper.

"Ma wa," he replies.

"Kaleb." I give his shoulder a stronger nudge and his eyes open slightly. He picks up his head and looks around until he sees me.

Then he stretches his arms above his head and yawns. "You're home."

"I am. Why are you babysitting Asher? Where's my brother?" I look over my shoulder, wondering where Brett is. "He better not have left on a booty call."

"Nothing like that," Kaleb says, and he stands to his full height and stretches again. "Asher and Kaleb got food poisoning from the sushi they ate," he explains.

"Oh no, why didn't he call me? Why didn't you call me? I would've come straight home," I say frantically. "Is Asher okay? Where is Brett?" My breathing is erratic.

Kaleb reaches out. “Maddie, I had everything under control. I took care of Asher. He threw up three times then he had some electrolytes, we watched a movie, I made him broth but he didn’t want any.”

“Gosh, Kaleb, I feel terrible. I would’ve come home. Is Asher feeling better now?” I ask.

“He watched a couple of kid-friendly movies with me. He didn’t want to sleep in bed on his own so I let him crash on the couch. I must have passed out too,” Kaleb says.

“Is Brett okay?” I ask.

“He was puking his guts out but he passed out, which I take as a good sign. I made him drink some electrolytes too,” Kaleb replies.

“You should’ve called me. You don’t have to take care of my kid,” I say. I reach down to pick up Asher to take him to bed with me.

“What are you doing?” Kaleb’s voice stops me.

“Picking him up to take him to bed,” I state the obvious.

“I’ve got him,” Kaleb says and then he picks Asher up in his arms. My son wraps his little arms around Kaleb’s neck and places his head on his shoulder. *Don’t fall for him*, the voice in my head warns.

I can’t argue that. “Follow me,” I say to him, and I guide him to my room. I open the blanket on the bed and Kaleb slowly lowers Asher to the pillow, supporting his head and laying him down softly.

When he turns back to me, he says. “I may smell like vomit.”

“Thank you so much for taking care of him,” I say. We are standing less than three feet apart.

“It was nothing. Besides, you helped me with Jack and Jane all the time,” he reminds.

“Do they ever call you?” I ask.

He frowns. “No. I should go.”

“Thanks again, Kaleb,” I say to him. “I’ll walk you out. I want to check on Brett.”

He nods and I lead him to the door. He says goodbye softly and that he hopes Asher and Brett feel better soon. I close the door behind him. I go and check on my brother. He stirs awake when he hears me.

“You’re home.” He breathes a sigh of relief.

“You should’ve called me,” I scold my brother.

“Kaleb had everything under control. We survived,” he says.

“Can I bring you anything?” I ask him.

He sits up. “Maybe more water.”

I take his glass and head to the kitchen to fill it. My head is spinning. I’ve never been able to rely on any of my partners. If I got sick, I took care of myself. If Asher got sick it was always me. It feels good to have this kind of support. Knowing it was Kaleb makes me feel all fuzzy inside. High school crushes are hard to get over. Add to it that he’s turned out to be a kind, caring human who looks the way he does and I am in so much trouble.

I fill the glass of water and head back to Brett’s room. He drinks it down a little too fast, saying he’s parched.

“Let me know if you need anything else,” I say to him. I turn to leave his room.

“Maddie,” he calls after me. “Are you okay? I mean...you know...emotionally. With the whole Nathan business.”

“I’m good, Brett. I’m healing. You get some rest.”

“Yeah,” my brother says, and he lies back in bed and pulls the cover over his head.

I head to the bathroom and shower after a long day at work. I start to think back on my and Kaleb’s sexcapades. We are playing a dangerous game and it’s been so worth it for me, but now it’s time to end things. I already feel like I’m far gone on the guy. I get out of the shower and get in to bed beside

Asher. He smells like puke but we'll have to deal with it in the morning. I snuggle in close to my son, grateful he's doing okay now. Then my mind wanders back to Kaleb. He was being weird at the door tonight. I want to figure out what is bothering him, but I also can't risk getting any closer than I already am. I remind myself of the new woman I am becoming. A woman in control. A woman who can't fall head over heels for her brother's best friend.

CHAPTER

SEVENTEEN

MADISON

Sunday was spent in the apartment all day, making sure Brett and Asher were resting enough and replenishing the fluids they lost. Asher was in love with Kaleb's chicken broth and couldn't stop talking about how he and Kaleb spent the night watching movies together, even though he was sick.

This led my brother to watch me skeptically. "What?" I finally ask him.

"Do not grow feelings for Bardot," Brett warns, but it is more like an order.

"Obviously not," I say like the thought is preposterous.

My phone buzzes and I think it will be the man of the hour, but it's Ellie asking if I want to meet her for lunch and shopping.

Brett watches me, as usual, like he is trying to figure out what I am planning.

"Relax, it's Ellie. She wants to meet me for lunch and shopping, I'll just let her know I can't make it," I assure my brother.

"Why? You can go. Ash and I can chill at home, right, buddy?" Brett asks, looking between me and my son.

Asher nods.

"See, go have fun. You need female friends," Brett states.

I laugh. "You really are very intuitive for a hockey player."

“I don’t even know what to say to that,” my brother exclaims.

I walk up to him and peck his cheek. “Thanks. I’ll go get dressed. Although I’ll take her up on lunch sans shopping,”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’ll give you my credit card. What am I going to do with all my money anyway?” Brett is very thoughtful of how he spends his money. Where many players have fancy cars and a fancy life, Brett lives modestly.

“I’m not spending your money on clothes,” I assure.

“Yes, you are, and get some for Asher,” he insists.

I roll my eyes as my brother reaches into his pocket and passes me his credit card. I stand stubborn until he gives me a look that says this isn’t up for negotiation.

I take the credit card. “You’re the best big brother. Don’t let Henry hear that though.” I giggle. Henry is pretty awesome too, just in a different way.

I head to my room and put on a mini jean skirt and a white T-shirt.

Ellie said she would meet me downstairs in the lobby in fifteen. Truth is, I could use a girlfriend about now.

I give Brett a list of things he and Asher should not eat. He assures me they will have some toast and broth and they’ll play video games. I usually don’t allow my son to play video games all day, but he’s still feeling sluggish and complaining about a little tummy ache.

“I feel guilty leaving,” I mope.

“Get out of here,” Brett says, waving me away.

“Yeah, Mom, get out of here,” Asher repeats, copying Brett’s mannerism of waving me off.

I laugh and crouch down. “If you need me, call me. You know Mommy’s number.”

“Okay, Mommy,” Asher says.

“I love you.” I kiss my son’s soft pudgy cheek.

“I love you too,” he replies. “I’m fine with Uncle Brett,” he adds, like he can read my hesitation.

“I know,” I say to my son. “Have fun, you two.”

I whisper thanks to Brett, and he blinks. I grab my purse and phone and leave the apartment.

Ellie texts me she is downstairs.

I look back at Kaleb’s door. Something was off when he left Brett’s apartment yesterday. I’m itching to go check on him but I know I shouldn’t. Instead, I press the button for the elevator. This is the new Maddie. I can’t become obsessed with Kaleb. I can’t fall for him and forget to be a rational thinker. My brother is wrong. I’m not like my mother. I’m determined to not make the same mistakes. Only as I head down in the elevator not one of my arguments resonate. What I have with Kaleb has felt different. We have a history of friendship, the sex is off the charts, and he is a good person. He cared for my sick son.

The elevator doors open, and Ellie is waiting with open arms. I hug her.

“Good to see you,” she says.

“Nice to see you too. This is a great break for me. Thanks for suggesting it.”

“Do you want to drive somewhere or are you up for walking?” she asks. “Sundays can be a little crazy with traffic and it’s so hard to find a spot.”

“Walking it is.” I nod.

“I know the perfect lunch spot and it’s only a couple of blocks away. If it gets too hot, we can always Uber.”

“Sounds like a plan. Lead the way,” I say.

We start to walk down the street. It’s a muggy day.

She tells me how nice it was to have us for dinner. “I can’t believe how domesticated Brett is being,” she coos.

That makes me laugh. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. I know he’s your brother but he’s such a ladies’ man.”

“True, but his family is super important to him. There are two sides to Brett,” I explain.

“I’m seeing that now,” she agrees.

We make it to the restaurant. It’s a trendy place. It’s also packed. Ellie knows the hostess and when she sees Ellie, she hugs her and tells her she has a special table for her.

The restaurant is vegan and decorated like a tropical rainforest. We are seated at a table for two next to a waterfall. Ellie recommends a salad and a pasta, and we decide to share both dishes. I order an iced coffee.

It arrives in a tall glass with a straw. I take a long pull, feeling thirsty from our walk.

“What’s up with you and Kaleb?” Ellie blurts like she’s been holding on to that question a while.

My brows hit my forehead. “What?”

“Something is cooking between you and Kaleb. You better spill the beans,” she says with no malice, only genuine interest.

“I... Uh...”

“Maddie, whatever you tell me stays between us,” she assures as she sips her iced coffee.

“It’s complicated.” My teeth dig into my lower lip.

The waitress brings our entrées.

“This looks really good,” I say.

She places a clean plate in front of me and one in front of Ellie.

“Complicated, as in there’s something going on? I saw how he was watching you like you were his next meal. I watched his pinky moving back and forth caressing your thigh,” she states gleefully.

“Crap.” I sulk. “If anyone else saw...”

She shakes her head. “They’re guys. Nobody noticed anything. Kaleb has come by to hang with Connor on occasion. He’s a sweet guy. He’s a catch.”

“He’s best friends with both my brothers.” My palm comes up to my forehead. “Brett is very overprotective. Henry, that’s my other brother, he is too. My brothers would go ballistic. I don’t even know what is happening between Kaleb and me. It was supposed to be a one-time thing.”

“And ...” Ellie waits.

“I don’t know. We can’t keep our hands off each other,” I confess, feeling my stomach flutter just from the thought.

“Whoa. Connor and I were the same. I was Syd’s nanny,” she says, surprising me.

“Seriously?” I ask.

“Oh yeah, Connor was very guarded and all about Syd,” she shares.

“What changed?” I ask, truly interested.

“I got really close with Syd and I began to feel protective of both of them. I can’t really pinpoint an exact moment, other than the attraction between us was simmering and we couldn’t keep it under control.”

“Wow,” I say.

“We should eat.” She giggles and then we both take some salad and pasta.

“Kaleb and I are having a hard time resisting each other, but that’s going to change. I’m a single mom, Kaleb is young and has so many young beautiful women after him,” I say.

“And yet, I’ve never seen him with anyone, but I did see how he was looking at you. How he had to sneak that small touch,” she squeals. “There’s something so exciting about the start of a relationship.”

“Ellie, Kaleb and I can never be. Number one, he wouldn’t want it.” I don’t think it’s appropriate for me to reveal I was a way to relieve him of his virginity. “Number two, my brothers

would lose it if they found out Kaleb and I were together. It would end their friendship. They would consider it a betrayal. I could never be responsible for that. We all grew up together. Kaleb is family to us, and I've applied to culinary school. I may be leaving New York."

"Yeah, that's complicated, but I don't know. I think when something is meant to be it happens," she chimes, clearly freshly married and in love.

"And when it isn't, it can be so explosive it burns everyone in close radius," I correct.

"Gotcha," she says, forking some salad.

We eat quietly for a few minutes.

"I want to see you happy. Connor was a single dad too. Everything was about Syd, but people are meant to be in relationships. To fall in love."

"That's been my problem since I was a teenager. I fall in love too easily. I trust too fast. I always get screwed over. This thing with Kaleb was supposed to be different. It was supposed to be a quick fling. My heart isn't supposed to be on the line. I'm supposed to be in control," I explain.

Ellie watches me thoughtfully. "There's a saying that you need to kiss a few frogs before you meet your prince."

"That's a fairy tale, not real life. My father was a big jerk to our mother. Kaleb's father completely walked away. Relationships don't last," I tell her. "I know you probably think I'm a cynic but I'm not. I'm a realist."

She frowns but there is a hint of a smile embedded inside it. "My family was totally dysfunctional so I get where you're coming from, but there are good people out there," she shares.

"Kaleb is a good person. Don't misunderstand me. We just don't match. We aren't meant to be together," I argue, even though it falls flat to my own ears.

"Okay." She shrugs. "You know how you feel. Maybe I want to shine the bliss I'm feeling on others."

“That is sweet of you, and it means a lot to me that you care.”

“Well, if you need to talk, you know my number,” she says. “Wait, did you say you might not be staying in the city?”

I nod. “I applied to go back to school in the fall. Well, if I get accepted. I’ve applied to a couple of culinary schools here in the city. They are the top ones in the country so it’s really competitive. I also applied to this culinary school in Texas. There are two famous French chefs who run it, and it would really be a dream for me.”

“That is very exciting,” she says. “I get what it’s like to be passionate about something. I’m an artist. I paint but I haven’t found my groove yet.”

We sit and eat quietly, finishing off our food.

“I heard you and Asher are coming to Florida,” she says, changing the subject.

“I don’t really know the details. Brett is kind of booking everything for us,” I explain.

“It’s going to be so great for the kids. The hotel has a mini waterpark. It’s also on the boardwalk and the beach is nearby. The kids will love it.”

“Sounds like a dream,” I admit.

We finish eating lunch and we pay the bill. We head out onto the street and walk into some stores. Ellie and I try on some dresses she says will be great for Florida. We each buy one in different colors. Then we enter another store and buy bikinis. It’s nice to just hang out and be carefree.

After our little shopping spree, we head back to the apartment. She gets off on her floor and I get off on mine, but I don’t go straight to Brett’s. I knock on Kaleb’s door instead.

CHAPTER

EIGHTEEN

KALEB

There's a knock on the door but I can barely pick up my head. Go away. Whoever it is doesn't relent.

I get a text.

Maddie: Are you home? I'm outside your door.

I contemplate not answering. Brett and Asher didn't have food poisoning, they had the stomach flu, and I spent the morning puking.

I don't answer the door or her text. My cell rings and Maddie's name lights the screen. I can't answer because we need to call this thing quits. I am falling for her and that was not part of the plan. She has her life to live and so do I.

My cell doesn't stop ringing and I finally give in.

"Hello."

"Kaleb, what's up? I just wanted to say thank you for taking such good care of Asher," Maddie says.

"It was no problem," I assure.

"Your voice sounds groggy. Were you sleeping?" she asks.

"Yes," I reply.

"Are you feeling okay?" she asks.

"Define okay," I reply.

"That isn't funny, Kaleb."

“Last thing I’m trying to be.”

“What’s going on?” Maddie asks like a little detective.

I blow out a breath. “Stomach flu.”

“Crap. They weren’t food poisoned,” she states.

“Nope,” I respond, feeling slightly dehydrated. My head is pounding.

“Does Brett have a key for your place?” she asks.

“Obviously,” I respond.

She chuckles and mutters something but I’m too out of it to follow.

“Be there in a jiff.” She ends the call.

Madison

I return to Brett’s apartment. Brett and my son are content sitting beside each other and watching a movie.

“How you boys feeling?” I ask.

“Great,” my son answers.

“Much better,” Brett adds.

“Good, I’ll have dinner going soon for you two,” I say. I place my shopping bags on the dining table.

“How did your day go?” Brett asks.

“It was nice. Ellie is fun and super sweet,” I say.

“Yeah,” Brett replies.

“Kaleb is sick,” I say matter-of-factly. “I’m going to take him some electrolyte drink.”

“Shit. That means we weren’t food poisoned,” my brother says.

“Language,” I chide. He looks down to Asher and winks, and I wonder just what Uncle Brett taught him today.

I head to the kitchen and grab some of the drinks from the fridge since there was extra.

“I’m heading over to Kaleb’s,” I say to my brother.

“By yourself?” he asks.

I give him an incredulous look. “I’ve kind of known him a while and he just spent the night taking care of my sick kid and got himself sick.”

Brett nods, clearly accepting my points.

“I’ll be back soon. Where’s the key for his apartment?”

“By the door on the hook to the left,” Brett says.

“Really safe place to keep it.” I chortle.

I take the key and drinks and head over to Kaleb’s. I unlock his door.

“Kaleb, it’s me,” I call out.

“In here,” he replies, his voice carrying from the bedroom.

I walk over to see him lying flat on his back. The covers pulled up to his chin. He’s shivering.

“Damn, you must have a fever.” He looks pale with black lines under his eyes. “Why didn’t you call me, Kaleb?”

“I can take care of myself,” he says gruffly.

“Lying in a bed shivering and dehydrating isn’t taking care,” I retort.

“I’ll be fine.” His teeth chatter.

“Where’s your acetaminophen?” I ask.

“In the bathroom in the cabinet on the wall above the sink,” he says.

I go to grab the bottle. I head back over to the bed, giving him two extra-strength pills. Then I pass him the electrolytes.

“This is gross, Maddie. Please bring me water,” he states.

“You need it to replenish,” I insist. He takes the pills and winces from the clear drink.

“Why didn’t you call me?” I ask.

“You know why,” he answers.

“I don’t. If anything, we’ve always been friends,” I say to him.

“I told you. I take care of myself,” he insists.

“I don’t accept that. While I’m around, you ask for help. I’m sure Brett has been helpful too.”

“Brett is helpful, but he was sick too,” Kaleb says.

“I’m here, Kaleb.”

“I’m fine on my own,” he says stubbornly.

“You’re stubborn as hell,” I chide.

He laughs but it sounds weak. “Funny coming from you.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I ask.

“You’re Miss Independent. Always have been,” he points out.

“That may be true but I’m learning to hand the reins over to Brett a little,” I admit.

“Good for you,” he says.

“I spent the day with Ellie. We went for lunch and shopping. She saw us the other night, I mean she noticed we couldn’t keep our hands off each other.”

“That’s a problem,” he replies dryly.

“Drink the electrolyte drink slowly. You remember the drill,” I say to him.

“When Jack and Jane got sick,” he says, remembering.

“Yeah. Why is it that you aren’t in touch with them?”

“You’re nosy,” he replies.

“I would be insulted but you’re sick. I don’t get it. You took good care of them.”

“They were young when they left. They probably don’t remember, and it doesn’t matter. They were better off far away

from my house.”

“But they aren’t better off without you,” I say.

“My life is fine the way it is,” he insists.

“Right,” I reply sarcastically. *A twenty-seven-year-old virgin who doesn’t trust anyone and doesn’t want to let anyone in.*

I keep my thoughts to myself.

“I’m going to go make you soup,” I inform him. “You need to eat something.”

“That isn’t necessary.”

“I wasn’t asking,” I retort. “Make sure you drink that fluid. I’ll be back soon.” I get up and leave, locking the door behind me.

I return to Brett’s apartment feeling peeved.

“What’s wrong with you?” my brother asks as I bang the pots and pans.

“Kaleb is a stubborn mule. What is his problem?” I ask Brett.

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“You know what I mean. The guy is a twenty-seven-year-old virgin,” I begin since its unnecessary to mention I took his V-card. “He’s a loner and doesn’t want any help.”

“He has a hard time trusting people,” Brett says. “You remember what it was like for him growing up. The stuttering, kids made fun of him. His dad left him. His mom was in her own world. He’s always had to rely on himself.”

“He had us, Brett.”

“True, but he was always guarded. Still is,” Brett says. It makes my heart hurt.

I get the soup going on the stove and then I go to hang out with Asher, who is super excited he got to spend so much time with Brett. I can see how much he was missing male

companionship since we arrived. He's never really had a consistent father figure.

When the soup is ready, I take it over to Kaleb's. I bring him a steaming bowl to his room and leave the hot pot on his stove.

"You didn't have to do this, Maddie."

"You're always taking care of and helping everyone. Do you think we don't have the right to return the favor?" I'm pissed but I can't help it.

He nods.

My heart cracks.

"That's not how this works. I get what we had was a minimal fling, a proposal, whatever you want to call it, but bottom line is we were friends first, and we will stay friends after and as my friend I'm here for you."

He remains quiet and watches me.

"I'm serious, Kaleb. There are no ifs, ands, or buts about it. Us Nobles take care of our own. That's how my mom raised us."

"I know," he finally says. "But I'm not a Noble."

"You might as well be one." I laugh.

"What if I don't want to be your friend?" he asks.

My lips turn into a frown.

"Shit. I'm not thinking straight. I mean, what if I want this fling to last longer?"

"That's dangerous, Kaleb," I say, my heart picking up pace.

"I like what we're doing," he says.

"It's been fun but..."

"I know all the risks we're taking, but we can be careful. Are you not enjoying the sex?"

I giggle. “It’s been the best sex of my life. Shit. I shouldn’t have said that.”

I turn away.

“Get back here,” he urges.

I feel my cheeks, red as beets.

“The sex is fantastic. Why stop?” he asks.

“Because it’s trouble with a capital T.”

“That makes it more fun.”

“There is something sexy about sneaking around,” I admit.

“Then we continue,” he states.

“Until when, Kaleb? When do we end this? I start school in the fall. That is if I get into one of the culinary schools I applied to.”

“Then you’ll be staying in New York. We can just call it quits once the season starts,” he suggests.

“One of the schools I applied to is in Texas. It’s kind of my dream school,” I confess.

“That’s about the same time the season starts, so either way this has to end,” he confirms.

“Right,” I agree.

“So we can enjoy each other until then.”

“I guess we can. Nothing wrong with having hot sex all the time,” I tease.

“You think the sex is hot, huh?” he asks with a pleased grin.

“You know it is.” I smack his shoulder.

“I’m sick, you shouldn’t be hitting me or getting too close,” he warns.

“I’ve had time to build up my immunity to most of the viruses Asher gets. Now eat the soup, Kaleb.”

He laughs.

“Does that mean you’re feeling better?” I ask.

“Fever broke, I think.”

“Please promise me you’ll reach out if you need something. No matter what,” I say to him. I reach out and give his hand a squeeze.

“No matter what,” he confirms.

I release his hand. “Eat your soup.”

“Bossy,” he says.

“You have no idea.”

When he finishes his soup, I head to the kitchen to clean his bowl. Brett walks into the apartment with Asher.

“All good here?” he asks.

“Yup,” I say. “I gave him meds and soup. He’s doing better.”

“Good,” Brett says.

He heads over to Kaleb’s room to check on him. I lean against the counter, thinking of all the hot sex Kaleb and I will have until the season starts in September. I get hot just thinking about it. I’ll just need to keep my feelings in check.

CHAPTER

NINETEEN

MADDIE

It's Friday afternoon. I just worked my last day for Lucy's catering company. She wished me luck and told me to be in touch when I find out which culinary school I will be attending. Brett picked up Asher from camp and when I walk in the door, my son rushes toward me.

"My last day was the best," he gushes.

"Glad you got excited about camp on the last day." I laugh, hugging my son.

While Asher talks a mile a minute about all the fun he had at camp, I motion for him to follow me to the kitchen so I can prep dinner. Since I applied to the top culinary schools, I had to show how passionate I am about cooking and showcase my experience with food so I've been experimenting with new recipes.

"What's up?" Brett asks, walking into the kitchen.

I'm about to answer when his cell rings. "It's Mom," he says giving me a worried look. We usually talk once a week but it's usually on Sundays, this seems very random.

"Hi, Mom," he says, his tone searching. He falls quiet and his brows knit together. His jaw begins to pulse. "What? ... Are you kidding me?" His voice is now raised.

"What's going on?" I whisper to my brother. He places the call on mute with Mom still talking.

“Dad came back,” he whispers and then he takes it off mute.

“What the fuck?” I shriek.

“Mom,” Asher chides and I wince.

“I’m sorry, sweetie.”

We haven’t heard from our father in five freaking years.

“You can’t do that, Mom. Send him packing,” Brett urges.

“Why did he come back?” I ask quietly.

“He’s crying, saying he’s sorry for all the trouble. He wants to get sober and he needs help,” my brother explains.

“Why will this time be different?” I ask.

Brett shrugs looking torn.

He has Mom on speaker now.

“Hi, Mom,” I say so she knows I can hear her.

“Hi, darling, sorry to put a damper on your Friday evening,” she sighs.

“No worries, I just got back from work,” I say. I look down at Asher. “Why don’t you go play video games or something. There’s too much adult stuff going on here.”

He cheers and runs off.

“You work too hard, Madison,” Mom chides.

“Okay, let’s refocus here,” Brett redirects. “Tell the old man to leave.”

“I can’t do that,” Mom shoots back. Damn, this is old habits dying hard.

“He can’t stay with you, that’s crazy at this point,” Brett says. “You can’t put up with this shit anymore.” My brother is livid and so am I.

“I need you to come help me,” Mom says. “I don’t want him here, but I also don’t know how to tell him to leave.”

“Put him on the phone. I’ll tell him to go,” Brett booms. It’s not that my brother doesn’t have feelings, it’s that our father has walked all over all of us since we were small. He takes off for years at a time, then thinks he can just come home and everything will be fine, until the next time. Mom took him back enough times. This needs to end.

“Brett, he’s in a bad way. He looks thin and he’s a mess,” Mom says. “He’s still your father.”

Those words sting. It’s what she always used to say when she took him back.

My stomach churns.

“She needs help,” I whisper to my brother. “I’ll go.”

“You aren’t taking Asher around that man,” Brett quips. “I’ll go.”

“Are you sure, because I can handle it. Asher can stay back here with you,” I suggest.

“He needs his mom, Maddie. You stay. I’ll get on a standby flight.”

“Thanks, Brett.”

“Just make sure you’re ready for Florida come Wednesday morning,” he reminds.

I’m truly blessed to have a brother like him. How he could think he is anything like our father is insane.

“I’m so sorry, kids,” Mom says. It’s an apology we’ve heard before. I can’t be mad at her. I feel sorry for her.

“I’m going to pack now, Mom. I’ll send you my flight info when I have it,” Brett says.

“Thanks, honey,” Mom replies.

They end the call, and my brother and I give each other knowing looks.

“I’ll prepare you a sandwich to eat,” I say to Brett.

“I’ll go pack my bags.” He blows out a breath. “What am I supposed to do with him, Maddie?”

“Let’s call Henry,” I suggest. “He should know about Dad’s sudden reappearance.”

We call my brother, who sounds just as exasperated as we do.

“Maybe he really wants the help this time,” Henry says.

“Maybe,” I state, but I think it’s only the wishful thinking we all harbored as kids.

“I’ll go home and check him into rehab. There is no way he should stay living with Mom. She can’t deal with him on her own, that man always has a way of breaking down her defenses,” Brett says.

“I can stay with Mom. She shouldn’t be alone and I agree, if Dad wants to get sober that’s fine. Let him do it elsewhere,” I declare.

“He should do it elsewhere but there’s no way you’re going home to babysit our mother,” Henry says pointedly.

“Maddie is going to culinary school,” Brett shares. “You’re not taking care of our parents.”

“He’s right, Maddie,” Henry chimes.

“I’m going home,” Brett relays.

“Okay,” I concede.

“Good luck, Brett. Let me know if you need me to fly in,” Henry tells him.

“I’ll be fine. He knows not to fuck with me,” Brett says, referring to our father.

“Yeah,” I sigh.

We end the call with Henry. Brett goes to pack and I make him a sandwich and pack him one to go, since my brother likes to eat.

When he’s ready, we all leave the apartment to drive Brett to the airport. We bump into Kaleb in the hall.

“What’s going on?” he asks, looking between us. The tension in the air is palpable.

Brett gives him the spiel about my father's crazy return, and Kaleb looks concerned since he knows about all our highs and lows. The happiness of Dad coming back to us, the sadness when he left without a goodbye.

"Asher can stay with me if you want. He doesn't have to go to the airport," Kaleb offers.

I don't have to look at my son to know what he is going to think of that idea. He went to Kaleb's hockey camp every day. He came home filled with excitement and stories. He adores Kaleb.

"Can I, Mom?" Asher asks.

"I don't see why not," I say. It is silly to drag him to the airport. There may be a lineup to get a standby ticket.

Asher cheers and Kaleb offers him a hand. "Wanna go get ice cream?"

My son bobs his head.

"Don't you have plans?" I say to Kaleb. "You were leaving the building."

"Nothing important," he replies.

I thank Kaleb and leave with my brother. In the car ride over to the airport Brett calls some local rehabs in Michigan.

"I can't believe I'm going to have to pay for that fucker to get sober again," he complains.

"You don't have to," I remind him.

"You heard what Mom said. He's our father. No matter how shitty he's been, he needs help. I have the ability to help, but I don't have to like it," Brett says.

"I don't like it either," I agree with Brett.

The rest of the ride is silent. We make it to the airport and I head inside with Brett. There's a flight that leaves in an hour.

As I wait with Brett in the airport, a feeling of overall heaviness fills my chest.

Brett heads toward security and I follow.

“This sucks,” I say to him.

“It sucks fucking balls. I keep thinking we should abandon him like he abandoned us,” Brett seethes.

“Only we are better than him,” I remind my brother.

“We are,” he agrees.

“Call me if you need anything,” I say to him.

“You too,” he says.

We part ways and I head back out to my van. The rush of adrenaline I was experiencing leaves my body. I feel tired and sick to my stomach.

It’s been five years since we last heard from Dad. Five years. A part of me thought maybe he was dead.

When I get back to the apartment, Kaleb is there with Asher. Asher tells me they went for amazing ice cream and then they walked around for a bit.

“Thanks, Kaleb,” I say to him.

He watches me carefully and I yawn. Asher yawns too.

“We better get you to bed,” I say to my son.

“Go ahead and do what you need. I’ll watch some television,” Kaleb says and that’s when it hits me. My brother isn’t here to chaperone us.

I go to help Asher with his shower and tuck him into bed. His eyes are lulling shut before he even says good night. I decide to shower too because after a long-ass day at work and all the tension after it I need a scalding hot shower.

I wash my hair and shave my legs. Even though Kaleb said he wanted this sordid affair to continue when he had stomach flu, it’s been impossible with my work schedule and my brother always around.

After my shower, I slip into some comfortable pajamas of light heather-gray waffle shorts and a matching tank top sans bra.

When I head back into the main room, Kaleb is watching a movie but he shifts himself so he is upright when he sees me. His dark eyes smolder as he checks me out from top to bottom.

“You should put some more fabric on yourself if you expect me to keep my hands to myself,” he warns.

“Maybe I want those hands on me,” I taunt, taking the bait.

He lets out a low feral growl. “Don’t tempt me if you can’t follow through.”

“Oh, I plan on following through. I need to erase all this tension inside me.”

“I can help with that, come over here,” he says, not taking his eyes off me; his voice is low and raspy.

I walk over to him and straddle him on the couch. I wrap my arms around his neck and our lips brush softly at first.

“Not having your brother here is going to be trouble,” he states as his tongue comes out to play. Our tongues entwine and heat furls low in my belly. He dips his hand into my shorts and when he realizes I’m not wearing panties, he smiles through our kissing.

“You’re soaked,” he says.

“I know,” I reply.

“I love how responsive you are to me,” he says.

I reach down and rub his cock over the shorts he’s wearing.

“You’re responsive too.”

His fingers begin to work me over and my hips rub unabashedly against him.

“Should we take this to the bedroom?” I ask.

“Right, we probably should,” he concurs.

I get off his lap and take his hand, guiding him to my bedroom.

When we are in my room, I close the door and then we are on each other. Hungry hands tug at my tank top, lifting it over

my head. He hisses when he takes in my breasts. And then his hands are on them, kneading them roughly, as I remove his shorts and boxers in one fell swoop.

Kaleb removes one of his hands from my breasts and takes off my shorts and then he lifts me sideways and places me on the bed.

A giggle escapes me.

“Take off your shirt,” I order him.

He quickly discards it, throwing it to the floor.

I lick my lips. That chest and those abs just don’t get old.

“Lie back on the pillow and spread your legs for me, Maddie. I need to taste you. We have time on our hands tonight, and I plan on making you come over and over again,” he declares, his voice low and gruff.

I lie back and spread my legs and when his warm tongue makes contact with my clit, I moan. He begins licking me slowly. Long languid strokes that drive me wild. I reach my hips up, needing more, but Kaleb continues to torture me.

“Kaleb, I need it faster, harder,” I moan.

His tongue picks up speed. “Fuck yes.”

“Tell me how good it feels,” Kaleb says, flicking his tongue on my clit. He inserts a finger and begins to pump.

“I’m going to come.”

“I could eat this pussy all day,” he replies.

I come so hard I am writhing all over the bed. He flicks my clit so hard I’m pulling away, but Kaleb holds me in place, not letting me escape while dragging out my orgasm. He licks me until I am completely undone, and then he gathers me in his arms and waits until I am functional again. This time when we have sex it’s slow and exploring. We take time with each other. Kaleb peppers kisses down my neck, causing goosebumps to erupt all over my body. I lick his nipples and they turn hard and his ab muscles clench. We slowly learn each other and when he slides inside me and looks me in the eyes as he moves

above me, I fall a little farther into the abyss. I'm not judging my feelings; I am just letting them run free. There are no consequences in this moment. There is just him and me and when we come together it's blissful, real, and earth-shattering.

Kaleb rolls off me and goes to the bathroom to discard the condom and then he gets back into bed.

"That was two orgasms. I want more," he demands.

"I think we need a small break." I laugh.

He gathers me in his arms, and I lay my head in the crook of his neck.

"How long has it been?" he asks out of nowhere.

I look at him questioningly. "For what?"

"Since you've seen him," he says, and I know he's talking about my dad.

"Five years," I say, and I swallow hard.

"Damn, it was always crazy when he would just show up out of the blue. Sometimes I wished my dad would show up, but I realized I was wrong. I was better off without him in my life," he says, running a finger up and down my arm. The motion feels soothing.

"It was a high when Dad showed up and devastating when he left with no goodbye. With time I just resented him and didn't want to see him when he came home. The last time he came home I had just given birth to Asher. He cried when he saw Asher. I really thought things would be different that time, and then he left when Mom and I needed him most."

"I'm sorry, Maddie. That's awful," Kaleb comforts. "I can't even understand what makes a parent not stay with their kids."

"Have you seen him, your father? He would know you're a famous hockey player by now."

Kaleb snickers. "He knows. Found me my first week with the team at the arena. Wanted to make amends. He saw I didn't turn out to be the loser he thought I would be."

“He did not say that to you,” I say, feeling murderous for Kaleb.

“He basically said he was surprised I got this far but that it made sense, considering I had his genes,” Kaleb says, rolling his eyes.

“Fucking asshole.”

Kaleb laughs.

“I want to sock him one, I’m so angry now,” I say.

“Don’t worry, I told him where to go,” he shares, turning to his side. He’s smiling and it touches the dark orbs of his eyes. He’s so handsome.

My hand comes up and caresses his jaw.

“You’re hot when you get all angry,” he says to me.

“It’s not hot. I want to give that man a piece of my mind,” I say, feeling burning anger that someone could be so terrible to a wonderful person like Kaleb.

“Relax,” he says, and he pecks my lips at each corner. “Do you think Brett will be okay with your dad?”

“I don’t know,” I say honestly. “I wanted to go instead of him, but he insisted it should be him.”

“I agree, Brett has unfinished business with that man. It could be good for him.”

“He’s going home to help him get into a rehab center, so Mom doesn’t have to deal with him,” I explain.

“Your brother has a good heart. I just hope your dad really does want rehab and isn’t wasting Brett’s time.”

“I hope so too, but you know Brett. He’s our protector. He wants to shield Mom from this, but he doesn’t understand it’s her choice if she wants to help.”

“It’s her choice but how much crap can one person put up with?” he asks.

“I’ve asked myself that question over and over,” I sigh.

“Come here,” he says, pulling me flush with his body. I feel his erection press into my belly.

We make love again. This time we are hungrier as I climb on Kaleb and ride his cock. It doesn't take long for me to come undone, and true to his word, he relaxed me and made me forget all my problems. When he leaves in the middle of the night, all my old demons come rushing back because I've never had this feeling before with a man. No one has ever known so much about me, my family, it's unnerving but it also feels good to speak with someone who gets me.

I fall into a deep sleep feeling very sated and content.

CHAPTER

TWENTY

KALEB

I wake up with a smile on my face. I'm sorry for everything that the Noble family is going through, but I'm not sorry I got to spend half the night in her bed. Now I'm headed over to a bakery to buy all kinds of treats for her and Asher when they wake up. Luckily, those two like to sleep in on the weekend so I'm not in a big rush.

I call Wolfe as I'm walking down the street.

He answers after one ring. "Hey, bro, what's up?" he asks.

"Doing good. Brett had to take an unexpected trip back home and Maddie and Asher stayed in the city..."

"Is everything all right?" Wolfe interrupts.

"Bit of a family crisis. That's why I was thinking it would be good to distract Maddie today. Are you and Rebel up for a day at Coney Island?"

The line goes quiet.

"You want to go to Coney Island?" he sounds surprised. Not my usual cup of tea.

"I was thinking it would be fun for Asher, and I do like the beach. And since you have kids, you know, I thought they could hang with Asher," I say, stumbling over my words a little because I am very out of my element here, but I tell myself any good friend would do this.

“Let me ask Rebel,” he says. I hear him mumbling to her in the background. I plan on calling Connor and Liam next, since Asher befriended Syd, and Crew is just a little older than him. I can’t believe I’m organizing a family get-together, but I think Maddie needs to remain distracted so she doesn’t dwell on what is going on back home. There really isn’t anything she can do anyway. It will be up to her father if he’s going to get sober and really stick around.

“Sure, bro, Rebel thinks it’s a great idea. Should we meet in Times Square in an hour and take the train together?” he asks.

“That sounds like a plan. I’ll call Liam and Connor and invite them along too,” I say.

“Cool. See you soon,” he replies, and we end the call.

I call Liam and give him the same spiel. He and Sky are on board and Crew was cheering in the background. Then I call Connor. Buddy asks me if I hit my head and then I heard Ellie chiding him in the background. They are coming too so it will be a day for the gang on the beach.

I reach the bakery and buy some pastries then I take the box back to the apartment. The sun is shining, and the sky is clear. I inhale the fresh air and I just feel good. I get off the elevator and head over to Brett’s. I walk right in with my box of pastries. Maddie and Asher look like they just got up. Asher smiles when he sees me, but Maddie looks surprised.

“I brought you guys some pastries.” I pass Maddie the box. I want to lean in and kiss her, which isn’t right because this isn’t a relationship. We are friends and my goal is to make my friend happy today.

“Thanks, Kaleb.” She takes the box and peeks inside and then she looks at me wide-eyed.

“These look delicious,” she says.

“I got them from a little French patisserie not too far from here,” I explain. “I know how into French cooking you are.”

She reaches in for the pain au chocolat. Asher asks for one too and she passes him one.

“Hmm, this is to die for,” she says. “You have to try this.” She passes me the croissant she just took a bite from. This wouldn’t be happening if Brett were around, but Asher clearly doesn’t think anything of it. I reach forward and take a bite.

“That is good.” I lick my lips. She gets a small dollop of chocolate on the corner of her mouth, and I wipe it with my finger and then lick it off, hoping to get a small taste of her. I watch her breath hitch and I’m pleased to have an effect on her.

“You go sit at the table with that,” Maddie says to Asher since the chocolate is oozing out of it and he’s making a mess.

Asher goes off to the table.

“I have a fun day planned,” I say to her.

She opens her mouth to say something then closes it then opens it. “I should really stay in and check with Brett.”

“That’s why I made plans. You can’t just wait around for him to give you some news. He’s taking care of the situation and you and Asher deserve some fun.”

“What did you have in mind?” she asks.

“I already spoke to Liam, Wolfe, and Connor. They are all going with their wives and kids to Coney Island with us today,” I say cheerfully.

Her jaw drops.

“What’s Coney Island?” Asher asks from his spot at the table.

“It’s a beach that also has rides for kids and all kinds of junk food and it’s lots of fun,” I say to Asher, watching his eyes grow with excitement.

“Can we go, Mom? Please?” He places his palms together, begging his mom.

“I did this so you would be distracted. I don’t want you sitting here worried about your mom, dad, and Brett,” I say to Maddie.

“That’s what I should be doing.” She frowns.

“It wouldn’t change anything or help the situation.”

“When do we leave?” she asks, looking between me and Asher.

“I told everyone we would meet in under an hour at Times Square. There’s a train we can take directly to Coney Island,” I reply, feeling good about this.

“Okay, Asher, you need a bathing suit,” Maddie says.

Asher runs off.

“I did this just so I could see you in that turquoise bikini again,” I joke.

Maddie swats my chest. “This was nice of you. Asher and I never really had any other families and kids to hang with.”

“He’ll like Liam and Crew and he’s already met Syd,” Kaleb says. “And you’ll like Sky and Rebel. Sky is a good friend of Ellie’s and Rebel is super nice.”

“I’m sure they are,” she says, giving me a warm smile.

“I’ll just have to remember to keep my hands to myself,” I say, raising my brows. We both know that isn’t going to be easy. I’m a handsy guy when she is around. It’s something new I’ve learned about myself.

“Hush,” she warns. “Don’t want Asher to hear you and start asking questions.”

“Sorry.” I wince.

“We are old friends, period.” I grin.

“Of course that’s all we are.” She rolls her eyes playfully.

“Now go get ready.” I smack her ass and she yelps. She leaves to her room to get ready and I call out. “I’m making coffee to go.”

She walks away with a sway in her ass, and me, I can’t wipe the smile off my face.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-ONE

MADISON

I slip on the same turquoise bikini I wore when I swam with Asher in the apartment pool, figuring I want to keep my new swimsuit for Florida. My life has changed so drastically since I arrived to the city, I can't believe things could be this good. When I was little, my mom used to say when one door closed another opened, and that has really been the case for the first time in my life. Things are going my way. I'm making friends and so is Asher. They are good people who won't stab us in the back the way they did back in Jersey.

I go to the bathroom and brush my teeth and my hair. I get dressed in a pair of jean shorts and I grab a yellow T-shirt. I prepare a bag with some towels and a beach blanket. With my stuff ready, I head to the kitchen.

"I didn't know how you take your coffee," Kaleb says.

"One sugar and some cream would be great," I reply. I look in the fridge for some snacks to take with us, just in case Asher wants something on the train.

"Here you go," Kaleb says, passing me a coffee in a paper cup.

"Thank you," I gush, needing my morning joe.

"All ready," Asher announces, wearing only swim trunks.

Kaleb laughs.

"Buddy, you need a shirt and a sun hat," I say to my son.

“And my sunglasses,” Asher adds.

“Those too.” I ruffle the hair on his head.

I follow him to his room, and we finish getting him dressed.

“Did you brush your teeth?” I ask.

He shows me his teeth, holding his mouth open and his teeth pressed together.

“Good job,” I praise.

“I brushed up and down,” he says.

“They look good,” I assure him.

We head back out to the main room to meet Kaleb.

“Should we wear running shoes or sandals?” I ask him.

“There’s quite a bit of walking to do.” Kaleb shrugs. “I’m going to go next door to grab a bathing suit and towel. I’ll see you two out in the hall in a few.”

“Okay.” I nod.

Kaleb looks me up and down and then says, “Damn,” shaking his head.

I smile and shove him out the door.

Our dynamic has clearly changed since we were younger and without my brother in town keeping us both in check.

“Come on, Asher. Get your sneakers on.” I walk around the apartment turning off the lights and fixing up a little. Then I get my sneakers on and we head out the door.

Kaleb says it’s easier to Uber to Times Square so that is what we do. When we arrive, we meet the other families. Ellie hugs me and Kaleb introduces me to everyone.

They are all super nice and Asher immediately sticks to Syd, Crew, and Liam. It makes my heart so happy to see him as part of their little gang. They are a little older than he is, but they are good with him and it’s what I’ve always wanted him to have.

We all get on the train, and I sit beside Kaleb. The kids all sit together too. Rebel and Wolfe are sitting in front of us, and Rebel is holding her baby daughter, Ariella, who is beautiful. Skylar is telling me all about going back to school and I tell her how nervous I am about starting culinary school, even though I don't know if I'll get in.

By the time we arrive at Coney Island, I've spoken with everyone and have gotten to know them a little. They really are a nice group of friends. Very family oriented, which is something I haven't been around before with my knack for finding men who fit the bad boy persona instead of a family man.

When we arrive, everyone is hungry so we stop and get some food. We sit at a fast-food place facing the water.

"This place is something special," I say to the table of adults.

"Wolfe and I keep meaning to bring the kids and something always comes up, so it was really nice that Kaleb had this idea," Rebel says and then she looks at Kaleb curiously. He's been very good about keeping his hands to himself. Well, except for that small caress of my thigh on the train and the mischievous look he gave me while touching me.

After lunch we all head down to the beach. I lay out my beach towel and tell Kaleb there is plenty of room for him. The others lay theirs out too. Sky brought some beach toys so the kids run off and build a sand castle.

"This is just so amazing," I say to Kaleb. "Thanks for doing this today."

We look into each other's eyes. "Of course," he says in a by-the-way tone, but our gazes lock and hold.

Wolfe gets up and starts a soccer match with the kids and then big Liam joins in too. Kaleb follows suit and it's so nice to see him with the kids. He's good with all of them, which I already knew from seeing him at the hockey camp. Connor follows suit and Rebel says she's going to the bathroom. Ellie

offers to watch Ariella, and Sky joins Rebel to the ladies' room, which leaves me with Ellie and Rebel's cute baby.

When the other women are out of earshot, Ellie says, "OMG, Kaleb is totally falling for you." She smiles to Ariella who is bouncing on her knees.

"No, he isn't. We have an arrangement. This is just fun. Kaleb isn't the settling down type. Trust me, I've known him a long time."

"That isn't the vibe I'm getting from you two," Ellie pushes as Ariella giggles.

"I know Kaleb well. His family was all messed up when we were growing up. He doesn't want that life. He's happy to be single. This is just fun for him," I assure, squinting against the sun, even with my sunglasses on.

"And what about you?" Ellie asks and her lips are turned down.

"I'm falling for the guy. How could I not?" I say, looking on to the shore where Kaleb is playing soccer with the guys and kids. "Look at him. But I know I have to keep my heart in check. We have an expiration date. When the season starts, we're done."

"Is that what Kaleb suggested?" Ellie asks, sounding surprised.

"It was his idea. We were only supposed to be a one-time thing, which has turned into a whole lot more. We are having fun. I was upset over a breakup and Kaleb was dealing with things. This fling made sense. It still makes sense. I'm enjoying myself."

"But your heart is on the line," Ellie reminds, and I appreciate her being a good friend.

"It is, but I'm taking that risk because this feels good. Besides, I may be leaving New York if I get the scholarship for the culinary school in Texas. It's a long shot but my luck seems to have turned around. I'm hoping the streak continues."

“When do you find out if you made it in?” she asks.

“In the next couple of weeks. Unless I didn’t make it in anywhere, but I don’t have a plan for that. Something has to come through,” I say.

Rebel and Sky return, and we all head over to the shore. We dip our toes in the water when Kaleb starts a water fight. All of us get in on the action and we all end up wet. I’ve never had an experience like this before. Growing up, my family wasn’t typical. Dad was always abandoning us. Mom always had to work which meant she wasn’t around for us.. She didn’t have many friends. We sure didn’t take day trips to the beach with other families. This feels so good.

After our water fight, we head back to the sand to dry off in the sun. Asher comes to lie down beside me. Kaleb sits on my other side.

“Thanks for bringing us here today. It’s been a lot of fun. I’ve never done anything like this before with other families, it feels special.”

“I’m glad you’re having a good time and I know what you mean. Our parents weren’t taking kids to beaches or having fun days on rides,” he says with a crooked grin.

“They sure didn’t,” I say.

I take in his glistening skin and his rippled abs. He’s more than his looks, Kaleb is a good man.

“Do you want to go on some rides? I saw they had some smaller rides that would be good for Asher,” he suggests.

My son cracks his eyes open. “Rides?” He sits up. “I want to go on rides.”

From there it’s a domino effect of all the kids cheering they want to go on rides.

We all pack up our belongings and put on clothes over our bathing suits and we head over to the amusement park area.

The kids go on some kiddie rides together and the adults wait along the fence, waving and watching. Kaleb goes to get

some cold drinks with Connor, and I am left standing between Ellie and Skylar.

“There’s something going on between you two, isn’t there?” Skylar asks.

My eyes turn wide.

“Oh no, I shouldn’t have said anything,” Skylar says with a deer in the headlights look.

“It’s fine. We aren’t together. We’re just having fun. Please don’t tell my brother though. If he finds out, he’ll want to wring Kaleb’s neck and it’s a nice neck.”

Skylar laughs. “My lips are sealed, but why is it just fun? You guys look close.”

“Yeah, we grew up together, so we know each other well, but this thing between us is just to pass time,” I explain.

Rebel moves in closer. “Sorry, I just overheard all that. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but you guys weren’t exactly quiet. I can’t believe you and Kaleb are together. That’s so awesome. He’s such a nice guy and you guys are so cute together.”

“We aren’t actually together.” I wince.

“Okay, I get it. I started out having a fling with my husband too,” she tells me knowingly.

“The thing I have with Kaleb has an expiration date,” I explain.

“Oh,” she says.

“Yeah, once the season starts, we’re done,” I state, not liking the finality of my own words.

“Well, you all should still have fun while you can,” Skylar advises. “You should go on the Wonder Wheel. Liam took me here on one of our dates. It was super romantic and fun.” She winks, and my mind goes somewhere dirty, although I’m not sure if she meant it that way.

The guys return and Kaleb passes me an ice-cold cup of Sprite. I suck it down, enjoying the sweet coolness in this heat.

“Thank you, I needed that,” I say to him.

He grins.

“We are going to take the kids on the flying planes,” Skylar says. “Why don’t you two go try the Wonder Wheel?”

“Um.” I’m tongue-tied.

Kaleb watches me with confusion and then it dawns on him that Skylar knows about us.

“Does Liam know?” he asks, looking worried.

“Not yet.” She giggles. “But he would never share anything I told him, and it doesn’t hurt for him to know just in case you need protection if Brett tries to murder you.”

“Not funny,” Kaleb says, but he’s smiling.

“Now go on. Take this girl on the Wonder Wheel. Trust me, it’s quite the ride. We got Asher with us. Don’t worry, I won’t take my eyes off him,” she assures, and I really like this girl.

“You up for a ride?” Kaleb asks me.

“Sure, why not?” I reply.

He takes my hand, which is risky, and I raise my brows and look at him. “What? They all know we’re fucking now.”

I laugh and he leads us toward the largest Ferris wheel I’ve ever seen. We get in line and Kaleb puts his arm around me and we kiss.

“This is kind of like a date now,” he says.

“Only we aren’t dating,” I remind.

“But we are having fun,” he says, and then he slips me some tongue.

“We are,” I agree when a man behind us clears his throat and tells us it’s our turn.

We get on one of the carts and the guy closes us inside.

“Do you think Skylar was suggesting something sexual was going to happen in here?” I ask him.

“That would be my guess. Why? Are you up for some fun, Maddie?” he asks.

“I’m definitely up for some fun.” In fact, I don’t know when I’ve ever had this much fun.

Kaleb moves to sit beside me. His hand runs up my thigh and my body heats from that small touch.

“Pop the button on those shorts and lower them,” he orders.

I do as he says, maneuvering myself enough to lower my shorts while keeping my bikini bottoms on. Kaleb reaches over and begins to caress my thighs before dipping his fingers into my bikini.

He groans, “You’re wet.”

“What are the chances you have a condom?” I ask him.

He presses his lips together and then pulls out his wallet, taking out a single condom. “I always want to be ready for you.”

My heart gushes but he just means ready when we are together because the sex is so good. I try not to read into it.

“This is going to be tricky,” he says.

“Okay.” I shift. “Lower your shorts to your knees.”

He does and when his cock springs free it’s rock hard. I lick my lips.

I straddle him, tilting my head a little to the side because the height of the cart is limiting.

I take hold of his cock and stroke it, rubbing my thumb over the tip, and then I take him and put him inside me, seating myself on his cock. We groan together and then I begin to move.

“I hope this cart is strong,” Kaleb says, placing his hand on the roof for leverage. He rocks his hips into me and I rub my clit on his cock just right. I begin to build and I moan. Kaleb groans as he drives into me.

“Do you think other passengers can hear us?” I ask, breathing hard.

“I really hope not, it’s hard to tell,” he says through panting.

“I’m coming, Kaleb,” I cry out, fucking him hard. I come undone on his cock and he comes too, jerking inside me.

“Holy shit,” he swears. The cart is still swinging back and forth.

“We can’t be the only one’s having sex up here,” I say.

“You’re probably right.” He kisses me and I get off him as he deals with the condom and lifts his shorts back on, and I quickly get my shorts on in time for the ride to end.

When we get off the ride, both of us have red cheeks and stupid smiles.

“That was the craziest thing I’ve ever done,” he confesses excitedly, and he just kisses me in public.

“Same,” I agree. “But you need to stop kissing me. We don’t want our friends to see.”

“Fine,” he agrees.

We meet back up with the gang and Asher gives me a hug. We walk around some more and Skylar and Ellie catch me on either side, while Asher walks up front with the rest of the kids and Kaleb walks with the men.

“So did you join the Mile High Club?” Ellie winks.

“We did, it was crazy,” I say.

“OMG, I know, it’s such a rush,” Skylar agrees.

“Do you want to tell me that all of you have had sex on that Ferris wheel?” I ask.

Rebel walks up behind us, pushing Ariella in the stroller. “I made the Mile High Club when I first moved to the city. It’s quite the ride.”

We all agree and laugh together. I’ve never had friends like this where I can share this kind of thing. Maybe in high school

I did, but once I had Asher my life changed. I became a mom. My friends from high school all went to different colleges and we never stayed in touch. Then I found myself moving around a bit. I thought Nathan would be a stable choice. He had a good job and seemed serious about life, but I pegged him all wrong.

After walking around a while, the kids say they're hungry so we all go to eat in a pizzeria. I sit and eat pizza and watch my boy interacting with the other kids. He's so happy. Skylar and Ellie tell me about different schools in the city close to Brett's apartment. I'm not sure where we are going to land yet so I haven't registered Asher for school. I thank them for all the great information.

At the end of the day, we head back to the city on the train. Asher falls asleep on his seat but his head rests in my lap. The ride back is quiet since everyone is exhausted. Adults included.

When we get back to Times Square, Asher doesn't want to walk because he's half asleep. Kaleb lifts him up and Asher places his head on Kaleb's shoulder. My heart splatters to the ground watching those two. I've never seen Asher behave this way with a man other than Brett. Asher stays sleeping in Kaleb's arms in the Uber on the way back to the apartment. When Kaleb places him in his bed and then places the covers over him, tucking him in tight, it's not only my heart beating fast but my ovaries exploding too.

I leave Asher's room and Kaleb follows me out to the main room. I yawn. He caresses my cheek.

"Get some sleep," he says. "I'll see you in the morning."

"You don't have to," I tell him. "I'm okay."

"I know you're okay, Maddie. You're one of the strongest women I know." He chuckles.

"I don't know if I'm strong." I look away from him.

He takes hold of my chin and turns me to face him. "You're strong, Maddie. Look how much you've overcome."

“I could say the same about you,” I say to him. “Look how far you’ve come. You’ve beat the odds. You became a professional NHL player and proved your dad wrong.”

His lip quivers when I say the last thing and I don’t know if I’ve crossed the line.

“I had to prove him wrong to prove to myself that I was more than he said I was,” Kaleb replies, and my heart cracks.

“You’re a good man, Kaleb Bardot. Way better than he ever was,” I say to him.

“I’m still messed up, Maddie,” he says but he doesn’t elaborate. My guess is he means with relationships.

“I am too, Kaleb. You don’t see me running from you.”

“I don’t see you running,” he repeats.

He leans down and then we are kissing again and, somehow, we end up in the shower having sex. Under the water stream we wash each other, and then Kaleb gets into bed with me. He holds me in his arms and fractured parts of me feel like they are healing. I fall asleep with a sense of contentment, but when I wake in the morning he’s gone, as he should be, because this is all temporary.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-TWO

KALEB

After spending the entire day Sunday chilling at home with Maddie and Asher, I am out on my Monday morning run. The city is busy but I'm drowning in thoughts because spending that much time with Maddie has made me realize I have real feelings for her. Spending time with her and Asher made me happy. It felt like I belonged with them, and that thought is scary because I never saw myself settling down. She and I would never work. This thing between us is ending so I don't even know why I'm dwelling on it, other than she's gotten under my skin in the best way possible, and I've never felt this way before. My mind seems to be on a loop of me feeling all lovey-dovey and me convincing myself my feelings are insane. I make it back to my place and I take a shower. In the shower I'm thinking of her naked body and I grow hard and needy, which is crazy after all the sex we had this weekend. What is even crazier is that my friends know I had sex with Brett's sister on that Ferris wheel.

I get out of the shower and I'm towel drying when I get a call from Connor.

"Hey, bro," I say, answering the phone.

"Hi," he replies. "We should meet. You up for grabbing some lunch?"

"Yeah, I could do lunch," I agree.

"Cool. You up for something healthy or junk?" he asks.

“Healthy after all those carbs we ate at Coney Island.” I laugh.

“Kay, then I’ll meet you downstairs in ten?” he asks.

“Sure, I can drive,” I offer.

“Peace,” he replies, and we end the call.

I wonder what that was all about. I get dressed and run my fingers through my hair. I have hockey camp tonight. The food is all arranged but I need to pick up some art supplies from one of my suppliers.

I head to the lobby to meet Connor and then we head down to the parking garage. He doesn’t say much until I pull into traffic.

“What’s going on, bro?” I ask.

“What do you mean?” he says.

“Come on, I could tell by the tone of your voice something is on your mind so spit it out,” I say. I have a feeling I already know.

“Maddie is a single mom,” he begins.

“I know that.” As if it wasn’t obvious. “Wanna go to Table Turns?” I ask of a farm-to-table restaurant.

“That works,” he replies.

I make a left turn and find a parking spot out front, which is pure luck. We head inside and we’re seated at a table, which is a long light oak table with a bench on either side of it.

“Back to Maddie,” Connor says with his lips pressed into a thin line.

“Look, bro, you have nothing to worry about. Maddie and I have an arrangement. We are both very clear about what is going on between us.”

“Are you?” he says.

“Yes, we are,” I confirm.

“And what would that be, Kaleb? Because if I recall, you were a twenty-seven-year-old virgin. You had plenty of

women offering themselves up to you and you never took them up on their offers.”

“That isn’t true. I just didn’t want sex with those women,” I clarify.

A waitress comes by, “I’ll have the maple cider chicken plate, please.” I pass her my menu.

She turns to Connor. “That sounds good. I’ll have the same,” he says, and he passes her his menu. She leaves and all his attention is directed at me, and it feels a little scolding. I get it, he was a single parent before meeting Ellie. I know Maddie is on her own, but she is strong and independent and completely amazing. Whatever jerks she dated before was a run of bad luck and nothing more. Now she’s into having some fun and we’re enjoying each other.

“So what if I was a virgin before her?” I whisper because we are in public. There is no one sitting at the table next to us, but I don’t need my sex life to be public news.

“Why her, Kaleb? We all saw how you were with her. I’ve never seen you that way with a woman,” he says.

“You’ve seen me with puck bunnies, Connor. You can’t compare the two. I grew up with Maddie.”

“Exactly my point. She’s special to you. You invited us all out to Coney Island on a family day. When have you ever wanted to do something like that before?” he asks.

“Never,” I deadpan. “What’s your point?”

“My point is that you got something special going with this girl,” he pushes, and no shit, I do, but I can’t admit that out loud because of what it would mean.

“We are having a summer fling. We’ve got an expiration date. We went into this arrangement with our eyes wide open. Maddie doesn’t want something serious and neither do I,” I say to him.

“I don’t believe that, Kaleb. I know what it’s like to be a single parent. She’s a good mom. She has her hands full, but it

can also get lonely when you're constantly dealing with kid stuff and have no adult time."

"We are doing just fine managing our time."

"Not my point," Connor continues.

The waitress brings the food, and it smells delicious. Everything is made on the spot with fresh ingredients.

"What is your point because I'm lost," I say to him as I eat my first piece of chicken.

"You're blind to what is going on right in front of you. That girl cares about you," he says.

"I know, we've been friends a long time," I say, as if this is news.

"Damn, bro," Connor says, shaking his head.

"Look, I get what you're saying, and I want to assure you I would never do anything to hurt Maddie or Asher. They both mean so much to me, but what we have will be over by the end of summer."

"If you say so," Connor says. "I just hope Brett doesn't see what we all saw at Coney Island. The way you were both smiling at each other. You two were practically glowing."

"Because we had sex." I chortle as I eat some brussels sprouts and kale.

"It was before the Wonder Wheel." He raises his brows.

"We're having fun, Connor," I reinforce, hoping he can leave well enough alone.

"Fine, then have fun," he replies, but he says it in a way that tells me he doesn't believe me and maybe it's because I'm not believing myself either, but I can't let my mind go there. Maddie and I are temporary. It was always the plan.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-THREE

MADISON

“Hi, Mom.” She is finally picking up the phone.

“Hi, sweetie,” she replies.

“Where have you guys been? I’ve been trying to reach you and Brett the last few days and neither of you are answering my calls,” I say, feeling frustrated. I even thought about getting on a plane, but I didn’t want to take Asher there if things are out of hand.

“Why don’t you speak to your brother?” Mom says sounding off. I love my mom with all my heart, but I hate how she isn’t able to say certain things to us. Like every time Dad left, she’d make excuses for him instead of telling us straight he abandoned us again.

“Hello.” Brett’s gruff voice comes through the phone. Just by his tone I can tell he’s tired and frustrated.

“Finally,” I sigh. “Why haven’t you been in touch?”

“Things are not what I was expecting, Maddie. I took off for two days because I couldn’t be here,” he says, and my stomach dips.

“Why didn’t you call me?” I ask, feeling hurt. Even though Mom was shut down, Brett, Henry, and I were always able to open up to each other and be there for one another.

“I’m putting you on speaker,” Brett says.

“Hi, Maddie,” it’s Henry’s voice.

“You’re there too?” I ask with surprise.

“This asshole came to Connecticut and brought me here,” Henry chides.

“What’s going on, you two?” I ask.

“We need to tell her,” Henry urges. Their hushed tones are making me nervous.

Brett sighs. I know it’s him because of his gruff voice.

“Dad is sick, he’s dying,” Brett says quickly, like he’s exhaling some pent-up air inside him.

I freeze as the words slowly process in my mind.

“Maddie?” Brett asks.

I’m sad, confused, and hurt.

“How much time does he have?” I ask, trying to keep my wits about me.

“We don’t know. It could be two months; it could be a year. He’s in liver failure but he also needs to get sober.”

“Mom wants to care for him?” I ask flabbergasted. After everything he’s put her through. Put us through.

“You know Mom,” Henry says dryly. “She has a good heart. He has nowhere to go.”

“This isn’t fair,” I say. I don’t feel the tears streaming down my cheeks until they hit my lips and I taste the saltiness.

“No, it isn’t. I struggled too, Maddie. What are we supposed to do? At the end of the day, we are better humans than he ever was,” Brett argues. “I’m staying here to get him into rehab. That’s the first step. We’ll deal with his health issues as they come.”

“And Henry feels the same way?” I ask.

“He looks awful, Maddie. I know him crying and asking forgiveness isn’t new, but he’s dying. I can’t put him out now,” Henry says sadly.

“I want you leaving for Florida tomorrow,” Brett suddenly says.

“I forgot about that, shit,” I mutter. “I’m not going to stupid Florida without you. How can I vacation while you’re there dealing with our father? I’m coming home.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Brett counters. “You have Asher to worry about. He doesn’t have to witness this darkness.”

I’m stuck between a rock and a hard place.

“My head is spinning. I can’t think right now but I can tell you I’m not going to Florida. I’ll need you to cancel our flights and hotel,” I say to Brett.

“Fine,” he says, but he doesn’t sound happy. Then he exhales. “Take your time, Maddie. I didn’t know if I wanted to help the old man. I kind of blew up at him when I first got here, and my head was spinning.”

“Until I set him straight,” Henry jokes. Henry was always a softy. “We wouldn’t let a sick animal alone on the street, and he’s our father.”

“Biologically he is, but not where it counts,” I correct Henry.

“How long are you guys staying in Michigan?”

“At least a week,” Henry replies.

“Okay, I just need to wrap my head around this,” I admit.

“Tell me if you want me to book flights for you and Asher. There’s no way you’re driving here in that old van of yours,” Brett states, being his bossy self.

His kindness makes me laugh.

“Thanks, Brett. I’ll be in touch soon,” I promise.

“There is no right answer,” Brett says. “Trust me, I was breaking my own head. I just basically asked myself, if he died tomorrow, would I feel bad for not helping?”

I sigh. “Damn, okay, I need to go, guys.”

“Sure,” Henry says. “Take care and hug Asher for me.”

“Me too,” Brett adds. “We’ll talk soon.”

With that I end the call with my brothers.

I curl my legs up into my chest and sit on the couch. My mind is reeling between feeling bad and not giving a shit. I try to remember one good memory with my father, but all I can remember is the constant disappointment, the fights he would have with Mom, and him leaving without any goodbyes.

Asher comes up to me, “Mommy, why are you crying?”

“I’m sad but I’ll be okay,” I assure him.

He reaches over and gives me a hug. “Thanks, baby.” I rub his back and then suck back my tears. “You must be hungry. Let’s have lunch.”

While I’m making lunch, Kaleb sends me a text.

Kaleb: Do you need anything for the flight tomorrow?

Me: We have to cancel our trip. Can’t go.

Clearly Brett wasn’t in touch with him either.

A few moments later there are two knocks on the door and Kaleb walks into the apartment.

“Hello,” he calls out.

“We’re here,” I holler from the couch.

His hair is wet and he’s wearing a pair of joggers and a T-shirt. When I look at his feet, I realize he’s barefoot.

“Kaleb,” Asher says excitedly, and he runs toward Kaleb. My son collides into Kaleb and hugs him.

“Hi, buddy.” Kaleb hugs him back and ruffles his hair, but it’s the concern in his dark eyes that guts me.

“What happened? Are you and Asher okay?”

“Asher, can you go play in your room and give the adults a minute to talk?” I ask.

My son doesn’t like to be sent away with Kaleb here.

“Okay, Mommy.” He frowns.

“I won’t be long,” I assure him, and he nods with his head bowed walking to his room. The fact that these boys have

gotten so close shouldn't be a problem because Kaleb is a friend of my family, but it is a problem since I've grown feelings for him.

With Asher out of earshot, I reply, "Asher is fine. It's me who is feeling all messed up."

"Talk to me, Maddie. You're scaring me," he says.

"My father is dying," I blurt. "Brett and Henry are both back home together. My dad wants to get sober now that he's in liver failure." A manic laugh escapes me because of the irony of this whole situation.

"Shit, Maddie, I'm sorry. I know you guys have all kinds of mixed-up feelings where your dad is concerned," he says thoughtfully and he takes a seat beside me.

"I do. We do, but my brothers have decided to help him, and it doesn't feel right that I should be here when they're there," I confess. We've always been a team when they weren't trying to protect my ass or act like my father.

"You want to go home," Kaleb surmises solemnly.

"Yes, no, I don't know." I throw my hands up in the air, and Kaleb leans over and gathers me in his arms. It's then I feel the prick of tears. When have I ever had a man I could really talk to about my problems? None of my boyfriends were ever supportive in this way. *He's not your boyfriend*, the voice in my head reminds.

"It's going to be okay. I don't know if there's a right or wrong answer here," Kaleb states. His response takes some of the pressure off because my brothers clearly feel adamant about helping our old man.

He holds me as I fall apart, as my emotions get the best of me. I always dreamed of my father being a better man. I'd see my friend's families with their kind parents and how they were like a unit, and I craved that feeling. I prayed for my dad to get sober but it never happened and when I left the house, I realized it never would. I made peace with it.

My cell rings and I pull from Kaleb's embrace, even though I felt like I never wanted to leave his arms. It's Rebel.

“Hi, Rebel,” I say.

“How are you?” she asks.

Because I’m such a mess, and she seems like a super nice person, I reply, “I’ve been better. I don’t think Asher and I are going to make it to Florida.”

“Oh no, what happened?” she asks.

“My father, who I haven’t seen in years, showed up to my mom’s house. He’s an alcoholic and now he’s dying, but he wants us to help him sober up with the time he has left and my brothers have decided to help him, and I just feel so angry.” I blow out a harsh breath, feeling all kinds of tension leave my body.

Growing up I was very closed down. I did not mention our familial problems to anyone. In fact, when I was younger, I would lie to friends about my dad being on business trips all the time because it felt humiliating that he always took off on us.

“Shit, Maddie, I understand what you’re going through,” she says, surprising the hell out of me. “My dad was an addict. He was responsible for the accident when I lost part of my leg.”

“Oh my goodness, Rebel, I had no idea,” I gasp, feeling so hurt for her.

“That’s a story for another day. Tell me what you need? Does Asher want to come have a sleepover with Liam tonight? You could probably use some time to think.”

“He’s never had a sleepover before,” I say. “Let me ask him, give me a minute.”

“Asher,” I call out.

He comes running to me.

“Would you like to have a sleepover at Liam’s house tonight?” I ask.

The way his blue eyes round with excitement gives me the answer before his head starts bobbing. “Yes, yes, yes.” He’s

jumping up and down.

I laugh and Kaleb laughs too.

“That’s amazing. The boys will have so much fun together and we don’t leave for Florida until Thursday,” Rebel says, clearly hearing Asher’s response.

“Thanks so much for doing this. We would love to have Liam sleepover when you guys get back.”

“I’m sure he’d love that,” Rebel says and then she blows out a breath. “My dad never wanted to get sober. He was a dangerous drunk and he did drugs. He put me and my sister through hell. His death brought me relief.”

Her words make my heart twist.

“I’m so sorry you had to experience any of it,” I reply.

“He left me with emotional and physical scars,” she admits.

I can’t even imagine. Maybe it was better Dad left when he did. Maybe he spared us all the ugliest parts of himself.

“Thank you for sharing with me, Rebel. This all just feels so overwhelming. My brothers both feel sorry for him. They want to help him,” I say, wishing someone would give me the right answer.

“You have to go with your gut on this,” she advises.

“I know,” I reply, still feeling lost.

“We’re home all day so you can drop him off whenever. I’ll send you a text with our address.”

“Thanks again,” I say to Rebel.

“If you want to talk more, I’m here,” she offers and her understanding and kindness means everything.

“I really appreciate that,” I say. My brother really got lucky with his group of friends, and they have all welcomed me with open arms. “See you soon.”

I end the call.

“I’m going on my first sleepover,” Asher chants.

“We need to eat lunch first,” I remind him.

“Will you eat lunch with us?” I ask Kaleb.

“You know I don’t say no to food.” He grins.

I make some grilled cheese sandwiches using the French bread I bought from the bakery Kaleb introduced me to. I keep Asher’s simple and add a little twist to mine and Kaleb’s using smoked gouda cheese and bacon.

We all eat our meal together and it feels so easy. The conversation flows between the three of us. Asher can’t stop talking about his sleepover. I bought him a Batman sleeping bag a while back and he wants to take it with him. We finish lunch and then Kaleb drives us over to Rebel and Wolfe’s. We don’t stay long but I give my boy a big hug and tell him to have fun and when I finish hugging him, he hugs Kaleb. Kaleb is thrown for a second but then he wraps his arms around Asher and tells him to have a good time.

We leave Rebel and Wolfe’s and drive back to the apartment.

“I think I need to go home,” I state. “There are things I want to ask him. Things I want to understand,” I say to Kaleb.

“I’m coming with you, Maddie,” he says, surprising me.

“You can’t do that. You don’t like going home. When was the last time you were in Cliftwood?”

“Eight years ago. Went home the year I drafted. I don’t know what I was thinking but my mom was barely even there. I just went to pick up clothes,” he says with a distant look on his face.

“You can’t come home with me. My brothers will think something is up,” I bring to his attention.

“I’ll be on my best behavior,” he says and then he pauses and licks his lips. “I always thought about what I would say to my dad if I ever saw him again...” he begins. “Then when I did, it didn’t make me feel better. I just realized my dad was an ass...”

“I’m sorry.” I reach out and touch his arm when he’s driving.

“I realized none of my success mattered because I didn’t need to prove my dad wrong; I just needed to feel good about myself,” he says and it makes so much sense.

“I spent a lot of years feeling bad about myself. Thinking that there was something wrong with me,” I confess, and that’s why Dad left.

He removes one hand from the wheel and takes my hand in his. “There’s nothing wrong with you, beautiful. It was your father who had the problem.”

My heart splatters to the car floor. “I’m starting to see that.”

“We all need to start somewhere.” He smiles.

“What about you? Are you over the stuff with your parents?” I ask him.

“I don’t think it’s something we get over. It’s something we carry probably forever, if it’s as a lesson, a way not to be, it’s built us into who we are, but we get to make our own choices and live on our own lives.”

“And that’s why you remain single?” I ask, even though I know I shouldn’t. Not when I’m feeling the way I do.

“Yeah, I just never thought I’d go down that path. My life is good. Why rock the boat?” he says, and there I have it. This man does not want me the way I want him.

I sigh and lean my head on the headrest.

“You really don’t have to come home with me,” I reiterate.

“Maybe it’s time I face my past too. It wouldn’t hurt for me to check in with my mother. See how she is,” he says. “There’s Jack and Jane that I’d like to see too, but last I heard they were both in college.”

“Crazy that those two didn’t stay in touch,” I say.

“Pretty sure their dad demonized me and Mom,” he says. My heart hurts for him because he was so young, and he took

care of them so well.

He blows out a breath.

We head back to the apartment building, only Kaleb leads me to his bed, and he makes slow love to me. He does things to my body I've never felt before, and in that moment, I forget all our problems. There is only him and me. His fingers entwine with mine as we both come undone together. He looks me in the eyes, and I want to tell him how far gone I am on him, but I don't because I remember his words from the car ride about staying single and not wanting to rock the boat. I keep my mouth shut, knowing my heart isn't coming out of this situation in one piece.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-FOUR

KALEB

I'm boarding a plane with Maddie and Asher back to Cliftwood, Michigan. My head is spinning, but there was no way I could let her face her father on her own. I know she has her brothers there, but I wanted to be there for her too. Only, I couldn't tell her because we made a pact. We aren't falling for each other. We are having fun. Only it doesn't feel like just fun anymore, it feels real. I wasn't going to scare the shit out of her and tell her that, so I told her I wanted to check in on my mom. The very woman who doesn't respond to my calls when I only call at Christmas. But this trip home is for Maddie because not all of us are lucky to get closure. And I want to make sure that the woman I... The word in my head jars me and my heart rate kicks up. That can't be right. We are just having fun. I'm confusing all the good sex we are having for something else.

We take seats on the plane. With Maddie sitting in the middle. I try to push that last thought away, but I can't.

"I can't believe we're doing this," she says, blowing out a breath as the plane taxis down the runway.

I smile awkwardly at first, needing to get my emotions together. "I know. It's been a heck of a long time for me too," I say, looking straight ahead. Asher is busy with his iPad, which is good, because Maddie and I are clearly having small meltdowns about going home. That's all this is, I couldn't possibly have gone and fallen in love with her. Could I?

Brett called me yesterday and asked me why the hell it was necessary to accompany his sister and nephew home. I told him that their situation inspired me and I wanted to connect with my mom. Once he believed it had nothing to do with Maddie, he chilled the heck out. But I feel like an asshole for lying to my best friend. I've clearly offered to follow her home and make sure she and Asher are okay because I care for her. This trip isn't really about me.

The flight isn't long, and we land in Michigan and disembark from the plane. Asher is super excited about the whole flying experience. He's really an adorable kid. He's gotten under my skin too. It feels good to spend time with him. The way he looks at me with his bright smile does something to me right in the center of my chest. It isn't a feeling I've had before. I told myself I never wanted to have kids or settle down. Not with the shit things I've seen in my life, but spending time with Asher has changed that for me. I can see how much joy he brings to Maddie and the thing is, he brings me joy too. Walking into Brett's apartment and being greeted by Asher's larger-than-life hugs is the highlight of my day.

I blink away my thoughts as we see Henry and Brett waiting in arrivals.

Maddie packed a nice-sized suitcase for her and Asher, saying she didn't know how long she would be staying. I booked myself into a cheap hotel close to home since I didn't expect my mom to be hospitable.

"Long time no see, asshole," Henry jokes as he wraps me in a hug.

"Look at you looking all professorial," I joke back. "Are those glasses even real?"

He laughs. We all do.

Henry lifts Asher in the air and twirls him, and Asher giggles. "How are you doing? You're a big boy."

"I had my first sleepover with my friend, Liam," Asher says.

"You met Rebel?" Brett asks Maddie.

“Yeah, we all went to Coney Island on the weekend and I met everyone,” Maddie says. “You have a great set of friends.”

Brett looks me over, giving me a curious look, but it’s more like he’s sizing me up. “Did you make those arrangements, Bardot?” He only calls me by my last name when he’s pissed.

Henry chuckles and so does Maddie.

“Yeah, bro, I thought she could use a distraction with all this stuff going on. I was being a good friend.”

That seems to relax Brett, while I think of what a good friend I was being for taking her on the Ferris wheel and having sex with her.

We head into the car Brett rented and head back to Cliftwood. My hackles rise the closer we get.

“You planning on seeing your mom?” Henry asks me.

“Eventually, I’m staying at the Suites Hotel,” I reply.

Henry nods. Then he looks back at Maddie. “We got Dad into a rehab. Figured it was better he wasn’t in the house with you guys coming.”

“Can we see him?” Maddie asks.

“Not for about a week.” Brett winces.

“Damn,” Maddie says. It looks like she wants to say more but I’m guessing she is keeping her thoughts to herself because of Asher.

We pull up in front of their old house. My house is just next door and my stomach dips when I see a car in the driveway.

I want to reach out and hold Maddie’s hand, but that isn’t an option right now.

We unload the car. Maddie heads inside the house with Asher and Henry and I stay back to help Brett with the suitcases.

When he unloads mine too, I remind him, “I’m staying at the hotel.”

“Cancel it. We have enough room here,” he says because he’s a good guy.

“I don’t know if I want to stay here,” I admit. “What if I bump into my mom?”

“Tell her what you think of her. Trust me, it feels good to get that shit off your chest. I just did that with my dad. He listened and apologized. He acknowledges that he was a useless asshole.”

“I can’t say those things to my mom, Brett.”

“You can, trust me,” he says.

I laugh because he is something special.

We head inside and Brett brings my suitcases in, but before we get to the door he asks. “There’s nothing going on between you and Maddie, right?”

I swallow, look him in the eyes, and say no. I am a big fucking wimp. I should be telling him I have real feelings for her, but I can’t tell him if I haven’t told her. This is all so messed up. I don’t even know how I got here.

His mother welcomes us inside. She has literally cooked a feast for us. This is what I remember. Mrs. Noble was always the best cook. Maddie would spend a lot of time in the kitchen with her, making the best food and treats. It would always be the best part of my day.

We all sit down at the table for a meal.

“This all looks so delicious, thanks for having me,” I say to Mrs. Noble.

“It’s good to have you all back around my table, although, I wish it was under different circumstances,” she says.

“Some of us haven’t been home in a while,” Henry says, looking between Maddie, me, and Brett. “So at least we’re all here.”

“With the addition of Asher,” Brett says, and he tickles him.

“Wait until you try your grams mac and cheese,” Brett says to Asher.

“My mommy makes the best mac and cheese,” he replies. The table bursts into laughter.

“If anything, kids are always honest.” Maddie shrugs and winks at her son.

“Maddie, dear, I think you passed me a long time ago in the kitchen, and I couldn’t be prouder,” Mrs. Noble says with a warm smile.

“Thanks, Mom, but you taught me most of what I know,” she replies.

We all dig into the meal of roasted meat, roasted vegetables, mashed potatoes, gravy, and homemade sourdough bread.

After the meal, Mrs. Noble gets each of us settled into rooms. Maddie and her brothers take their old rooms, which leaves me in the guest room down the hall.

As I’m getting settled, I look out the window and see my old house. I wonder how my mother is doing. Does she ever think of me, Jane, or Jack? I leave my suitcase and head downstairs to the front door. I don’t know where everyone went, but I slip on my shoes and walk next door. I’m here and I need to know why she hasn’t reached out. Is she sick? Maybe she hasn’t been able to reach out and I’m the asshole.

My legs carry me across the grass like I’m on a mission.

In the distance I hear Henry call my name, but I wave him off. I’m not stopping now.

I knock on the door hard enough that it brings pain to my knuckles. Am I angry? I don’t even know what I’m feeling.

My mom answers the door. She’s dressed in a sundress. Her hair is dyed red and she has a smile on her face. She looks youthful and her smile is wide.

“Kaleb?” she asks, shocked.

“I ... was visiting with the Nobles,” I say, suddenly feeling frozen.

A man comes up behind her. “Susy, who is at the door?”

Mom raises her brows and stares at the man. He wraps an arm around her waist so he must be a husband or boyfriend. Mom doesn't look sick; she looks better than ever.

When Mom doesn't answer the man, he sizes me up and then it's like recognition strikes.

“Holy shit, do you know who this is?” he says to Mom excitedly. “This is Kaleb Bardot. He's a famous hockey player.”

Mom pinches her lips, giving the man a sheepish smile.

When Mom remains silent, he apologizes. “I'm David Melrose, nice to meet you. This is my wife, Susy,” he says. “How can we help you, son?”

I'm still frozen as I wait for my mom to react. She doesn't and then my blood begins to boil. Anger seeps inside my veins and I know it isn't healthy, but I want her to be a regular mom and just embrace me, love me. I don't understand what is wrong with this woman.

“She knows who I am, Mr. Melrose, because I am her son. I grew up in this house,” I inform him.

“Susy?” He gives Mom a questioning look.

“I haven't seen him in years. He went off to the NHL and hasn't been in touch since,” she says to him.

The man gives me an assessing look.

“I just wanted to come by and say hi. I would ask if you've seen Jack or Jane, but I'm guessing I know the answer.”

“Who are Jack and Jane?” Mr. Melrose asks her.

When Mom doesn't answer, I do. “Those are her two other children.”

“What?” he asks, looking stunned.

“David, I can explain,” Mom says, giving me a terse look.

“I should go,” I say.

“No, you shouldn’t go,” David says. “I think it’s me who needs to go.”

“See what you’ve done now,” Mom says to me. “You make all of them go.”

I take a step back, feeling like I’ve been slapped. I don’t know what I was looking for coming here, but I guess I got the closure I needed. This woman isn’t going to change.

I turn and walk away then I begin to run, and I jog all the way over to a park on the next block. My head is spinning as I take a seat on one of the swings.

What was I thinking going over there? Maddie came home for closure, and it seemed like a good idea, but my mom didn’t reach out to me. She didn’t ask to see me.

I hear Maddie’s voice in the distance and when I look up, I see Asher running toward me.

“Get back here, Asher Noble!” she is screaming. I don’t think she’s spotted me, but Asher has and he comes straight toward me.

He doesn’t say anything when he runs up to me and hugs me.

Maddie finally catches up and she’s out of breath, panting hard and holding her center.

“He said he was going to play out front and I left him for literally a minute to use the bathroom, and then I saw him sprinting down the street after you,” she explains, and she leans forward bracing her hands on her knees.

“I heard what she said to you,” Asher says, and he’s still holding on to me.

“What?” I ask, feeling confused.

“Your mom,” he says. “She’s mean. Nathan was mean too, but he wasn’t my daddy. My daddy didn’t want me.”

Maddie straightens and looks at me, tears filling her eyes. I wrap my arms around Asher. He heard what transpired with my mom and David and he ran after me.

“Asher, you’re wanted and loved. Your mom loves you so much. So do Henry and Brett, and I love you too. The mean people in the world don’t matter, buddy. Trust me, we need to stick to the ones who love us, and you are surrounded by love.”

“We love you too,” he says to me. I know he thinks he’s speaking for Maddie, but he isn’t. He is speaking for himself, and it means the world.

I get off the swing. “Would you like me to push you on the swing?” I offer.

“Yeah.” He bobs his head.

I push him fast and bubbles of laughter escape him. When I look over to Maddie, she keeps swiping at tears. We spend a good twenty minutes at the park and then we walk back to the Nobles’. I should be feeling a lot worse than I am, but Asher holds my hand and there is something in his support that makes me feel like my mom doesn’t really matter anymore. I’ve always had a family; they just aren’t blood related.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-FIVE

MADISON

It's been almost a week that we've been back home. We are allowed to go see Dad tomorrow and I have mixed feelings after hearing what happened with Kaleb's mom. Kaleb has been guarded since we've been home, which is understandable with my brothers around, but I miss his arms around me. I miss making love to him, but what really gutted me was the day Asher went running after Kaleb after he witnessed his mom saying a bunch of mean things to him. He told Kaleb he loved him, and my heart cracked down the middle because it was so honest and pure. He could just blurt his feelings because he feels safe with Kaleb. Only I can't do the same. Kaleb said he never wants to settle down. He clearly feels like he is one of Asher's uncles, just like my brothers. I don't think he would want to be a father. He so much as told me so.

I get a notification on my phone. It's an email from the culinary school in Texas. It says congratulations in the subject line and my heart kicks up pace. Is it congratulations you were accepted or congratulations you got the scholarship? Because without the scholarship I can't attend that school. My blood rushes in my veins as I read.

Dear Ms. Noble,

We are delighted to announce that you are our Mercier Scholarship winner for this upcoming school year. You have two weeks to reply to this letter. As you know the scholarship includes your full tuition, as well as living expenses for the year.

Congratulations on this achievement,
We look forward to hearing from you,
The Team at the Bourdais School of Culinary Arts

I begin to jump up and down and dance. I run down the stairs and find my brother on the floor of the family room playing Lego with Asher.

“Brett, OMG, OMG,” I bounce up and down, holding my phone.

“What is it?” he asks, looking at Asher and making a silly face.

“I got the scholarship,” I squeal.

Brett stands up. “Holy shit. That’s amazing, Maddie.” My brother picks me up and twirls me around.

“Me too,” Asher calls out. Brett picks him up and twirls him around too. Then my brother places him down.

“What does this mean?” Brett asks, placing his hands on his waist and breathing fast.

“We’re moving to Texas,” I say.

“Is that what you want?” Brett asks.

“That school is a dream of mine. I love living in New York but it’s a year,” I say to my brother.

“And that year can turn into more,” he says. “You could end up settling down in Texas and building a life there.”

“Would that be so bad?” I ask Brett.

“You’d be far away from me,” he says, and I can see that he doesn’t like this idea very much.

“Brett, it’s a full scholarship. A once in a lifetime opportunity,” I say to him. I also figure it’s for the best because come September my fling with Kaleb will be over. I’ll be left heartbroken, and if I still have to see Kaleb around it will be too hard. Especially if he starts to bring other women around now that his virginity issue has been solved.

Brett pinches his lips together. “If this is what makes you happy, then congratulations.” My brother envelops me in a big bear hug.

“We’re moving, Mommy?” Asher asks.

I nod. “But I don’t want to move. I have friends in New York. I don’t want to leave Syd, Liam, and Crew.”

Brett raises his brows at me.

I blow out a breath.

“Mommy needs to go to school, Asher. This is the best thing for our future,” I try to explain, but he isn’t having it. My son runs off up the stairs. I go to run after him.

“Wait.” Brett stops me by taking hold of my arm. “Give him a minute.”

“Okay,” I exhale. “What do I do, Brett? This is an opportunity I can’t walk away from. And even if I do get into a school in New York, I still want Texas. That place has been a dream for me.”

“Asher will come around. He’s a kid and he’ll adjust,” my brother says.

“Will he?” I ask. “He had a sleepover with Liam, and you had to see how happy he was when I picked him up. He couldn’t stop talking about all the fun things they did together.”

“He’ll make friends in Texas, if that’s what you really want,” Brett says. What I really want is for Kaleb to tell me to stay. To tell me he loves me and wants to be with me and Asher, but that isn’t going to happen.

“It’s for the best if I go to Texas,” I reply. I need to protect my heart. I need to not feel broken and do something good for my career, and if I do well it will be good for Asher too. He’s just too young to understand.

“Okay,” Brett sighs.

Kaleb and Henry walk in the door. They look like they were playing basketball together at the park since they are

both dressed in basketball shorts and Kaleb is holding a basketball under his arm.

“What’s going on?” Henry asks, looking between Brett and me.

“Maddie got that scholarship she applied for. She and Asher are moving to Texas,” Brett says.

Kaleb’s eyes snap to mine. He looks hurt. I should’ve been the one to tell him, but it doesn’t matter because our expiration date is fast approaching.

“When do you leave?” Kaleb asks, and I watch his Adam’s apple bob.

“Probably the week after next. We need to go see Dad tomorrow. I’m thinking we should spend a few days here and then I’ll go back to New York and pack up,” I explain.

He nods.

“Congratulations, Maddie,” Henry says, and he reaches over and hugs me. “I’ve heard you talk about that school in Texas. I’m really proud of you.”

“Thanks,” I sigh. “It feels like another big move, but I think it will be good for me and Asher.”

I break apart from Henry and look at Kaleb. “Congrats, Maddie. Glad you’re making your dreams come true.”

He looks sad, but that can’t be right. He is the one who kept saying how temporary we are.

“I’ll miss you guys,” he continues.

“Thanks, we’ll miss you too,” I say, feeling awkward. “Especially Asher. He considers you a friend.” I don’t know why I add that last part, other than this is a very uncomfortable conversation to be having with my brothers around.

Kaleb nods and smiles, but it doesn’t touch his eyes.

“I should go check on Asher,” I tell the guys. I leave them and head upstairs. My stomach feels like it’s in knots. I don’t really want to leave New York, but how can I stay? I also can’t let my heart dictate my life anymore. I need to make

responsible decisions for me and Asher, and the responsible thing is to go to Texas and get a degree. People who finish the culinary program in Texas go on to open restaurants that achieve Michelin Star status. Asher and I would be set. I wouldn't have to depend on my brother to support us.

I find Asher in my childhood room, lying on the bed with his arms crossed. I try to explain to him why it's for the best, but he doesn't want to hear what I have to say. It makes the decision to leave even harder.

The next day, Kaleb and my mom babysit Asher and my brothers and I venture to the rehab facility to see my father. I'm feeling sick as it is over leaving New York, so seeing my father is just added stress. Brett and Henry have already spoken with him and they have made some sort of amends with him, but it doesn't mean I will be capable of the same.

Brett is driving and we arrive to the rehab center. We leave the car and my brothers walk on each side of me. My protectors. They've always been this way.

"It's going to be fine. No pressure," Henry says, clearly reading my nerves.

"I'm jittery as hell," I admit, shaking out my hands like it will make my nerves just fall off me if I do.

"I was nervous when I met him too," Henry says. "But what do you have to lose? You're either going to get closure or not."

"After what happened to Kaleb with his mom..." I don't even have words. When Kaleb told me what happened, I just wanted to hold him and tell him how amazing he is and how she has no influence over the kind of man he is today. Instead, I told him she doesn't deserve his goodness and that was true too.

"Dad came to us," Brett reminds. "It's him who wanted to make amends."

"Right." I nod.

We enter the facility and Brett speaks to a woman at the front desk and says we are there to see Andrew Noble.

She tells us to wait a minute and then a nurse comes to guide us through the facility. It's very sterile and hospital-like but there are patients walking around freely.

We arrive to a room. "We have him in the hospital section because of the care he needs," she explains.

We arrive at the door. I pause and look up at each of my brothers.

"Do you want us to come with you?" Brett asks.

I mean, I do. But I know this is something I need to do on my own since they've already spoken with him.

"I'm okay. I'll go in." I give Brett's arm a squeeze and then look at Henry, who blinks and nods.

I inhale but I don't feel like I'm getting nearly enough air in my lungs.

I open the door and the man in the bed is unrecognizable to me. His hair, which was once dark and on the longer side for a man, is short and gray. His skin looks weathered and his cheeks hollow.

"Hi, Dad," I say, feeling my knees wobble.

"Madison," he says on an exhale. "Look at you, all grown-up and beautiful."

I take a few more steps into the room.

"Take a seat." He motions to the chair beside his bed, and I awkwardly sit, feeling like my body is rigid. My back is ramrod straight. "Thanks for coming. I wouldn't have blamed you if you didn't."

I nod, feeling at a loss of words.

"I know I failed you and your brothers, Madison. I started with drinking and the pills way too young and I just didn't know how to stop. There were times I had myself under control and by that, I mean I was a functioning alcoholic and then things would spiral. When they spiraled, I left," he shares.

“Where did you go?” I ask him.

“Usually to Detroit. I had some friends there, people like me. We’d fly off the handle together,” he explains.

“Were there other women? Do you have other kids?” I can’t help but ask because when I was younger, I came up with all kinds of stories in my head of where he would go. In one of those scenarios, he had a wife and kids he simply loved more than us.

“I’m embarrassed to say there were other women.” He winces and really his words sting for my mom, who always took him back. “I don’t know of other kids.”

I nod.

“It’s a sickness, Madison. I’m a sick man with a bad problem. I wanted to get myself under control, but I never could,” he confesses.

“Why now?” I ask.

“I’m dying and after living my life like a big asshole, I have no one,” he admits.

“So now you come to us because you’re out of options,” I say angrily.

“You have every right to be angry. Trust me, I’m angry with myself. You don’t know how many nights I went to sleep hugging a bottle, wishing it was your mother. Wishing I could be a healthy man, a healthy father. I’m a weak son of a bitch and now that I’m dying, my head is clearer. I can’t drink or pop pills and all I’m left with is the horrible pain I’ve caused my family.”

Tears begin to fall down my cheeks.

“I know I can’t ask for forgiveness. I thank you for making the effort to come see me. I hear I have one hell of a cute grandkid.”

“You don’t have a right to call him that. You abandoned us over and over. We could never depend on you,” I accuse, and then I feel bad for chiding a dying man. “Sorry.” I wipe at my cheeks.

“Better to get things off your chest. You’re right. I was unreliable. I tried to do the best I could when I was home. Teaching Brett to skate, playing basketball with Henry. You were more guarded. Your mother’s daughter. You were sensitive to her pain, I guess. You never did let me in and I understand why. I just want you to know I am so sorry,” he says and then he begins to cry. Something cracks in the middle of my chest and all this compassion suddenly springs forth inside me. He was sick. Could he be blamed for his sickness? He tried to hide the worst from us.

“I forgive you,” I blurt.

He pauses and looks at me. “You don’t have to say that.”

“But I do.” I reach out a hand and take his. It makes him stop crying and he smiles.

At that point Henry and Brett walk into the room. My guess is they were both hanging out in the hall watching to make sure I was okay. I’m grateful for those two knuckleheads having my back all the time.

We spend another twenty minutes or so visiting with Dad and then we head home.

Mom has cooked up a feast for dinner but I’m in no mood to eat, so I stay in my room while Asher hangs out with the guys and Mom enjoying dinner.

After dinner, I tell them I need to go for a walk. Henry offers to come with me. Kaleb gives me a look that says he probably wants to come with me, but I tell them I need to be on my own.

It’s dusk as I walk along the sidewalk. I don’t go too far from the house because it will be dark soon.

My cell rings and Rebel’s name lights my screen.

“Hello,” I answer.

“Maddie, how are you?” she says. “I’ve been thinking about you.”

“I’ve been better,” I sigh.

“How are things going back home?” she asks.

I tell her about my meeting with Dad. It feels good to talk to someone who gets me. It also makes me think of Rebel’s story. Her dad caused an accident that made her lose part of her leg. My dad left when he got ugly. It makes me realize that I was fortunate, even in that small twisted way.

“At least he apologized and can acknowledge his mistakes,” Rebel says. “That’s kind of huge.”

“It is,” I agree.

“How is Florida?” I ask her.

“It’s been really nice. Kids are having a blast. We spend the days at the pool. Then we go for dinner. We miss you and Asher.”

“Thanks,” I say.

“Maybe next summer,” she says.

“I got the scholarship to the Texas culinary school I applied for. I’m moving to Texas soon.”

“Whoa. Congratulations, but we are going to be sad to see you go,” Rebel says. “How did Kaleb take the news?”

“I told him along with the rest of my family. He really didn’t say anything other than congratulations, honestly. I told you this fling was temporary,” I say, and every time I say those stupid words my heart twists.

“Maddie, I don’t mean to put my nose where it doesn’t belong, but I’m a big romantic. I can’t help myself. If you knew how Wolfe and I got together, you’d understand. It was the most unlikely of circumstances.”

“I’d love to hear that story.”

“One day,” she replies. “Right now, I need to say that I saw you and Kaleb together the day we went to Coney Island. By me saying I saw you; I mean I saw those feelings you two shared, the way you couldn’t keep your hands off each other. That kind of feeling, it doesn’t happen often. Some people

never experience it ever, and here you are not acknowledging what it is.”

I laugh but then I begin to tear up. “What am I supposed to say, Rebel? That I’m madly in love with the guy and I probably have been since I was sixteen years old?”

“If that’s how you feel, why should you hide it or deny it?” she retorts.

“Because he doesn’t want more. He was clear from the start. It isn’t his fault I caught feelings. I always catch feelings,” I growl. I swipe at my tears and look up to the sky, which is darkening.

“So, the way you feel about Kaleb is the same as you’ve felt for your other boyfriends?” she asks.

“No.” My answer is direct and instant. “It’s not the same. None of my boyfriends have ever been as kind as him, as giving, as supportive. He’s the whole package and it breaks my heart. It’s why I have to leave. I can’t stick around New York and watch him go out with other women once the season starts. It will rip me to pieces, and I’m a mom. I need to be okay for my kid. He’s depending on me.”

“Shit,” Rebel hisses. “This is just so tragic. Are you sure Kaleb doesn’t want more?”

“He gave it to me straight, Rebel. It wasn’t that long ago that we spoke about things. It was after Coney Island.”

“Damn, Maddie, I’m sorry.”

“You see why I need to go,” I say.

“I guess, at the end of the day, you have to do what’s good for you and Asher.”

“Yeah,” I sigh. “Thanks for checking in. It really means a lot.”

“Of course. I’m here if you need to talk,” she reminds me.

We end the call. As I’m walking down the street, I stare at the email I got for the scholarship. I have two weeks to reply. What if I get another offer? Will I stay in New York? Right

now, I don't have another offer on the table. So Texas makes sense. But if I get another offer from one of the schools in New York City, I should maybe take it because Asher is happy there. I'd need to suck it up and handle seeing Kaleb with other women for the sake of my son's happiness. And I have friends in New York too. Good friends, who are also friends with Kaleb. There would be no way to not see him. I feel like I'm losing my mind because I really couldn't handle seeing him with someone else. He says he doesn't want a relationship, but he would probably be hooking up. Especially now that he knows how good sex can be.

I turn around and head back to Mom's. My head is spinning when I walk in the door.

"Where are the guys?" I ask.

"They all took Asher for ice cream." She smiles.

I nod.

"You got a minute, Madison?" she asks.

"Sure, what's up?"

"I thought we could talk. Do you want to come have a seat? I know you met with your father today and it must be a lot to digest, but I have some things to say too."

I follow Mom to the dining table. She's already cleared dinner off.

"I know you don't like to come back here. I know this place brings back bad memories for you, and I want to say I'm sorry. I did the best I could, given the circumstances. Andrew always came back. He always said he loved us. He was a sick man and nothing I said or did would help him. He doesn't have any other family and his friends, those people he went on binges, with weren't friends. They were sick like him," she explains.

"That must have been so hard for you," I say, reaching my hand out to hers. "As a single mom of one kid, I'm struggling. I can't imagine how hard it was to raise the three of us on your own."

“It was hard, Maddie. I had to work extra hours to put food on the table. Then there was Brett’s hockey, that was a huge expense. Luckily, Henry got that scholarship.” She chuckles. “And you loved to be with me in the kitchen. I always had to come up with cheap ways to feed us and keep us full. Things that were healthy. Creativity was key and you were always so talented, but I know you also saw me as weak for taking your dad back every time,” she says, and my stomach dips.

“Mom...” I try to interject, but she stops me.

“Let me say my piece,” she urges, and I nod. “There was no right answer. He was the father of my three children. I couldn’t just let him die on the street. It felt like I was failing all of you. You guys liked when he came home. He’d bring those stupid chocolate bars and joke around with you guys. He was the fun guy. I had to be the responsible one.”

“That sounds a lot more complicated than I ever realized,” I say to Mom. “Didn’t you ever want to find a man you could love and who would love you back?”

Mom pinches her lips and gives me a knowing look. “I have someone like that, Maddie. We don’t live together. We have our own homes, but we’ve been soulmates for quite some time. He’s a good man and he knows I can’t just put your father out on the street.”

“Wow. Should we meet him?” I say, referring to my brothers and me.

“I think Will would like that very much. Your brothers don’t know about him. I always worried I would get pushback from them about replacing your father, but he really hasn’t been a husband to me for a long time. After the first time he left, I stopped...” She tilts her head from side to side. “There stopped being intimacy between us.”

Her words floor me. I had my parents’ relationship all wrong. I had Mom all wrong.

“There’s a reason I’m sharing this with you, Maddie,” she confesses, and I wait patiently. “I know you thought I was weak. I saw how you craved attention from boys, the wrong

kind of boys.” She smiles, and I blurt out a laugh because she isn’t wrong. “But you’re grown up now. As we grow, we learn from our mistakes. I don’t want you to be hard on yourself for making the decisions you’ve made. Life is a journey. A learning process.”

“And I’m still learning.” I sag into the chair.

“You’re raising a fine young man. Be proud of the mother you are. We all make sacrifices for our children, that’s what love is all about.”

“Did Asher say something to you about leaving New York?” I ask Mom.

She nods. “He kind of mentioned that Kaleb spends a lot of time with you guys, and he may or may not have seen you two kissing.” She winces.

I close my eyes. “Shit.”

“You want to tell me what that’s all about?” Mom asks with a mischievous smile. “He’s a good man.”

“It’s a long story, but we’re temporary,” I reveal to her.

“Funny, because when I catch him looking at you it seems like the real thing,” she shares.

“It’s complicated,” is the only thing I say.

We end our conversation with a hug.

“I’m sorry I never wanted to come back here,” I say to Mom.

“I understand. There was a lot of hurt in this home, but we had good times too,” Mom reminds.

“We did,” I agree.

“I hope you’ll bring Asher for more visits. I heard you’re moving to Texas. I know you’ve been dreaming about that for a while, but sometimes dreams can change.”

“Yeah, I can bring Asher for more visits. I’d like to meet your special man one day.”

“Let me tell your brothers first.” She grins.

“Okay.”

We spent a few more days in Cliftwood. I took Asher to meet my dad. Dad got teary when he met Asher, and he laughed when Asher told him he'd never had a grandfather before. Then we got on a plane for New York City with Brett and Kaleb, while Henry went back to his life in Connecticut.

It was a good trip home in the sense that it gave me closure I didn't know I needed, and now that I had, it felt good. Mom and I were on better terms, and understanding my father allowed a lot of the anger I felt to leave my body. Now I was packing Asher and me up again. It felt like a common routine in my life. Get settled in a place. Make friends, move on. I looked into some schools for Asher in Texas. The one I liked the most agreed to hold a spot for him and I gave them a deposit. I still had a week to reply for the scholarship and it was crazy I hadn't replied yet, especially since I booked our plane tickets to Texas for six days from now. I don't know if I was hoping for another offer to come in from a local culinary school, or I was hoping Kaleb Bardot would profess his undying love for me. But in the meantime, I was leaving things up to fate because I was too much of a coward.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-SIX

KALEB

I pace back and forth in my apartment. I've been losing my mind for the past week. Maddie is leaving New York. That is all I can think about since I heard the news. I won't have her next door. I'll miss seeing her beautiful smile, miss holding her in my arms. We are supposed to end in about a month anyway, but I don't want things to end. How can I tell her that when from the start I promised her this would be casual? We haven't spoken about anything that would indicate she wants more with me, and I'm a fucking coward. I told her I don't want a relationship, but I was a blind fool. It took me going home and having my mom basically slamming the door in my face to realize how messed up I was. But that wasn't the moment I realized I wanted more with Maddie. It was when Asher chased me all the way to the park without me knowing, and having that boy wrap his arms around me. I suddenly realized I want him and his mom in my life always, and not just as friends, but as my people because that is what Maddie and Asher are for me. They are my people, my family. How could I have been so blind? I'm thinking it's my screwed-up parents who messed with my head, but I'm not them. I've always felt like more of a Noble than a Bardot. Those people made me a part of their family and I hadn't even realized it, but being back home and staying with my best friends made me realize that is what we've become somewhere along the line.

I decide to call Connor because I need help dissecting the whirlwind of emotions I'm feeling. He's in Florida and I need

him to pick up the damn phone because I don't know what to do. I need advice and he's the only one I can talk to about Maddie.

"Hello," he says into the phone.

"Thank fuck," I mutter.

"Kaleb?" he asks.

"Sorry, yeah, Connor, are you on your own? I need advice about Maddie."

I hear kids laughing and playing around him.

"Give me a minute," he says. He mutters something to Ellie about watching Syd. He tells her he has me on the phone.

The background noise falls silent. "Kay, you got my attention. What's going on?"

"I'm in love with Maddie," I blurt.

Connor laughs. "No shit. Are you just realizing this now?"

"Yes, no, honestly I've wanted her ever since we were younger, but yeah, I think I realized when I was back home that I'm in love with her, but I'm going to lose her and I don't know what to do."

"What makes you think you're going to lose her?" he asks.

"She's leaving New York, moving to Texas to follow her dream of going to some hot-shot culinary school there," I explain.

"For starters, you should tell her how you feel," he advises.

"I don't know if she feels the same," I say.

"Oh, she feels the same," he assures with a chuckle like I'm dense.

"How could you know that?" I ask.

Again, he snickers. "Because I'm not blind, dude. We all saw how much you two were in love that day at Coney Island. You two were like a couple of lovesick teenagers who couldn't control themselves. Do I need to remind you what happened on that Ferris wheel?"

“That’s quite all right,” I assure my friend. “She wouldn’t be leaving if she had feelings for me.”

“I disagree,” he says.

“I’m not following.”

“Have you given her any reason to think you may be interested in her past your little arrangement?” he asks.

“No,” I humph. “I promised her we would be fun. That I’d help her forget the douchebag who screwed her over. I promised her that her heart was safe with me. How can I take that all back and tell her I want it all?”

“Is her heart safe with you?” he questions.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Damn, Kaleb, you’re clueless. I’m asking if what you’re feeling is real. If you’re going to cherish her heart and do everything to make her happy?”

“I’d really like for that to happen, Connor. I’d do my best,” I say.

“Then you really aren’t going back on your word. You care for her, meaning her heart is safe with you.”

“She’s leaving,” I remind.

“Well, bro, you can’t expect her to give up on her dreams,” he says.

“I’d never want her to do that,” I agree. “I’m going to need to follow her to Texas, but my contract doesn’t come up until next year.”

“Enough couples do the long-distance thing. Besides, how long will her program be?” he asks.

“I’m not sure. We didn’t really talk about it. She kind of told me she was leaving when she told her brothers she was accepted. We didn’t have any alone time back home. The house was small, and Brett and Henry were there. No way was I willing to risk touching her and having those two beat me up.”

“Speaking of Brett,” Connors says. “You need to come clean to him. If you’re serious about his sister, I’d imagine he’d be okay. I’ve seen you with Asher and I think you’re great with him.” His acknowledgement does something to my insides. Connor is an amazing dad and his opinion matters to me.

“I really love Asher. We have a special bond,” I reply, feeling choked up.

“I could tell, and I’m guessing Maddie sees it too. You know that he and Maddie are a package deal, right?”

“I know, and it breaks my heart that his dad is a deadbeat. I want to be there for him. He deserves so much better,” I confess, my voice cracking as I remember Asher’s words when he found me in the park. At five, he found a way to console me in a way my grown mother never would.

“You want to be his dad,” Connor states, and I don’t know why but his words make me tear and it takes me a moment to get words out.

“I do,” I croak.

“Sounds like you have everything figured out, bro. You don’t need me.” He chuckles.

“Thanks, bro.”

“Stop wasting time on the phone with me and go get your girl,” he declares.

“Right.” We end the call and my heart is beating fast as nervous excitement pumps through my veins. I can’t just walk over to Brett’s apartment and tell Maddie I’m in love with her. I need to come up with a plan.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-SEVEN

MADISON

“Thank you so much to Rebel for hosting this lovely party for us,” I say, seated on a chair around a table since all our friends have come to say goodbye to Asher and me. Rebel’s backyard is huge and landscaped with a gorgeous pool, where all the kids are currently swimming with trained lifeguards watching them.

“My pleasure.” Rebel grins, taking a sip of her mojito. “Even if we are all so sad you’re leaving us.”

Rebel invited all the women and children to her backyard. No one has ever done anything like this for me before. Asher is on cloud nine with the kids in the water, but he’s upset with me for taking him away from this place and these people. I can’t say I blame him.

Wolfe walks into the backyard. “Day drinking, wife?” He laughs and then he lays a hot kiss on her. Damn, she is lucky to have such a good man.

“Enjoy your day drinking,” Liam says to Skylar and he kisses the hell out of her. Apparently, those two also grew up as neighbors but with very different circumstances than mine and Kaleb’s.

“It’s getting hot out here,” I joke.

The guys leave, saying they are taking a boat somewhere for the day with the rest of the guys. I’m assuming Kaleb is included in those plans. We’ve barely spoken since we returned from Cliftwood. He’s barely stopped by my brother’s

apartment. I assume it's because my brother hasn't left my side since I said I was leaving New York. He's been helping me pack and taking Asher and me around the city exploring. Something tells me Brett is trying to entice me to stay. It would have maybe worked if I had gotten another offer from a culinary school. The guys leave and the ladies hang out. We eat snacks, drink, and laugh. I don't remember ever having such a great time.

I get a notification that I have a new email. I open it. "Holy shit!" My jaw drops.

I don't realize everyone has stopped what they are doing and are now staring at me. I get up from the table and read the email, pacing back and forth like a caged animal. What do I do? What do I do?

"You guys aren't going to believe this," I say to Rebel, Ellie, Skylar, Patty, and some new girls I am just meeting today. Their names are Eden, Rosie, and Amilia and they are old college friends of Patty and Skylar.

"What?" Rebel asks on edge.

"I was just given an admission offer for one of the top culinary schools here in New York," I squeal.

Rebel bites her lip. "Congratulations, but are you going to give up your scholarship?"

"That's a good question." I begin to pace. "I don't know what to do." I place my phone on the table feeling antsy. "This is crazy. I'm supposed to be leaving for Texas tomorrow. I booked an Airbnb there, since the housing offered by the school isn't ready because I haven't replied to their offer. I was taking a chance and waiting until the deadline, which is tonight, because I was hoping for another offer."

"Holy shit," Rebel says.

"You have a decision to make," Ellie says. "And by the sounds of it, you don't have much time."

"I know." I palm my cheeks. Not answering the scholarship offer was like playing roulette, but something inside me wouldn't allow me to send that acceptance email.

My stomach turns and I rub it. I turn to watch my son in the water. He's laughing his head off and enjoying himself. Our life is good here. Surely, I can suck it up with seeing Kaleb around. It won't be my first broken heart, but it would hurt more than all the other times because Kaleb has always been special to me.

"I just need to process this," I say to the ladies.

The conversation and attention move away from me, and I'm pleased about that. Ellie starts to tell the other girls about their trip to Florida. "You have to come next year," Rebel insists.

"I hope so," I add in. My life isn't stable like theirs. I don't know where I'll land, but Florida does sound awesome.

The afternoon drags on and my mind is all over the place, but I know what I have to do. I need to stay in New York. It's the right decision for my son and he comes first, and the culinary school here will provide me with great opportunities and connections. It will be a way for me to secure my future in the city. Still, by the end of the afternoon I haven't replied to either school. I can't bring myself to make a final decision.

We end up staying at Rebel's for dinner. The kids are completely wiped out. Some of the kids are sleeping over at her house and Liam asked Asher to stay too, but we have a flight tomorrow afternoon so I tell him it's for the best that he comes home. I receive a mopey face from my son, but it doesn't last long because he falls asleep in the car on the way back to Brett's apartment.

I try to shake him awake, but he's out cold. I lift him over my shoulder, which is no easy task. I wobble my way to the elevator. He's too big at this point for me to be carrying. We head upstairs in the elevator. It stops in the lobby and Kaleb gets on.

"Oh jeez, let me help you," he offers, and he lifts Asher out of my arms. Asher lays his head on Kaleb shoulder. He holds him in a much better position than I was, with Asher's legs wrapped around Kaleb's waist.

“I’m going to miss him,” Kaleb says, and it looks like he holds my son just a little bit tighter.

“He’s going to miss you too,” I reply. I can’t exactly tell him I’m going to miss him, and I am completely in love with him when I promised that wouldn’t happen.

“You guys are leaving tomorrow afternoon?” he asks.

I nod. “Looks like it.” We stare awkwardly at each other, and I wonder how we went from not being able to keep our hands off each other to staring at each other awkwardly.

We arrive to our floor and Kaleb helps me get Asher to bed.

“Where’s my brother?” I ask him.

“He went with the guys for dinner, I wasn’t really up for it.”

I follow Kaleb to Asher’s room, and he lays him on the bed gently and I pull the covers over him.

Silence falls between us. Then Kaleb takes a step toward me and we are kissing, it’s hungry and angry. I rip away from him.

“Not in here,” I say.

“I can’t do this,” Kaleb says, and it feels like a slap to the face. But it’s when he turns and walks away, leaving straight out of the apartment, that he takes my heart with him.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-EIGHT

KALEB

I don't know what is happening to me but I'm panicking. I had planned to send Maddie a text message today, asking her to meet me at the hotel where we first made love. I had planned on this big grand gesture when I found out she was at Rebel and Wolfe's place having a goodbye party. Wolfe told me I should still go through with my plan since Asher was well taken care of, but my anxiety is gripping me by the throat. What if she doesn't return my feelings? I don't think I could handle being rejected by the one person I've trusted all along. I'm pacing in my apartment, holding on to the strands of my hair, feeling like I'm going to lose my mind, and it's all because I am terrified of losing Maddie and Asher. They are leaving tomorrow, and I won't have a chance to say how I feel. I need to get my shit together. I sit on the couch and take slow breaths. When I didn't follow through with my plan for the hotel, Wolfe told me to join the guys for the day boating. I did but my mind was elsewhere, and I know Brett saw it. He kept asking me if I was fine, and I assured my friend I was, because how could I tell him I was lying to him this entire time? I not only didn't keep Maddie at a safe distance, I went and fell madly in love with her.

I can't let her leave without her knowing how I feel, but at this point it's too late to meet her at the hotel. Brett is out for dinner with the guys and Asher can't be left alone. Yet I know I need to do something drastic. My palms are sweating and my heart is racing, and all I know is I can't lose Maddie. I need to put my feelings out there. If she doesn't return my feelings,

then at least I won't be left in limbo. I think her rejection may hurt more than my own mother's because I should've expected mom's rejection. People like her don't change. But Maddie isn't Mom, she's kind and has the best heart I know. I go to the bathroom and throw some water on my face. Then I take a deep breath and head toward my apartment door and pull it open, and when I do, she is standing there looking worried.

"Maddie?"

"I came to check on you," she says.

"I'm sorry," I sulk. "Is Brett back?"

"No, I called Ellie, Syd is still awake so they are hanging out at Brett's place for now," she explains. "I was worried."

"Shit, I'm sorry."

"What's going on, Kaleb?" Her brows draw together and her lips look all pouty, but it's the look in her blue eyes that makes my heart stutter.

"We should talk. Please come in," I say. I'm over being worried about Brett.

She walks inside and I close the door. I head over to the main area of the apartment and she is behind me.

"Are you mad at me?" she asks.

"I could never be mad at you, Maddie," I reply.

"So, what is it?" she asks.

Since I am still in panic mode, I don't just blurt my feelings like I want to. "I had this day planned very differently," I begin. "Maybe we should take a seat."

"Okay." She sits beside me on the couch, that look of worry causing a crease between her brows.

"I wanted to take you back to the hotel we went to that first day we were together. I figured it was our last day and it made sense to go back to where it all started," I begin and swallow. It shouldn't be so hard for me to share my feelings, or maybe it should be because I've never done this before. Feelings are confusing to me.

“That would’ve been nice.” She smiles softly. “I’m sorry, Rebel just got back from Florida, and they planned the goodbye party last minute.”

“That’s all right, there was a ... more I-I ...” Shit, now I’m stuttering, which only happens when I am super nervous. “I ...” I take a breath. “I wanted to take you back there because I wanted to tell you how I feel. How I’ve been feeling. Somewhere along the way I fell in love with you, and I know that wasn’t supposed to happen, and I’m sorry,” I confess.

“Kaleb.” She smiles. She’s a little too happy while I can barely get my words out. “I’m in love with you too. Oh my.” She palms her cheeks. “I’ve been beating myself up about falling for you because I promised you I wouldn’t, and then when we had that conversation in the car, you said you didn’t want a relationship.”

“I thought that was what you wanted to hear,” I admit sheepishly. “I was a coward and I’m sorry. I would never expect you not to go to Texas because I want you to live out all your dreams. I would never want to get in your way, so just so you know, my contract comes up next year. I can talk to my agent and see if Texas would be interested in me...”

She’s crying. Damn. What did I do?

“Why are you crying?” I ask her as full-blown tears run down her cheeks.

“Kaleb, I don’t want to go to Texas. I wanted to stay right here. I know I said Texas was my dream, and that was true before I moved to this city and fell in love with you and met amazing people who I call friends. Asher loves it here too and it was breaking my heart to leave, but I felt like I couldn’t stay here if we ended things. I couldn’t imagine seeing you with another woman or women. It would’ve broken my heart, even though I was having cold feet about getting on that plane tomorrow. I think I was going to choose to stay for Asher. He has been so happy since we arrived here. It was breaking me to take him away.”

“So you love me?” I ask with a smile. My heart has gone back into rhythm and is filled with so much happiness I’m

bursting.

“I love you, Kaleb Bardot. I always wanted you, but now that I know the man you’ve become, I love you with all my heart.”

“Shit, Maddie, it’s always been you for me. I mean, I lost my virginity to you. I never wanted anyone else. I’m so grateful that life brought you to me.”

He leans over and kisses me, and then we both burst into laughter and press our foreheads together when a loud banging interrupts our bliss.

We break apart and at the same time say, “Brett.”

“It’s now or never,” I say to her.

“Okay.” We both stand and walk over to the door. I open it and Brett walks past both of us.

“What is going on?” he asks, looking between me and Maddie. His burly arms are crossed in front of his chest.

“I’m in love with your sister,” I admit.

Brett swings a shot and it lands on my cheek. I go down and Maddie shrieks.

“Brett, what is wrong with you?” she says, charging at him.

I rise. “It’s fine, Maddie. I was expecting this. Swing all you want, Brett,” I invite.

“Did you hear him?” Maddie interrupts.

“Oh, I heard him,” Brett confirms, his eyes looking wild. “You were in a bad place and he took advantage of that. I told him to watch out for you, and what did he do?”

“Brett, he did watch out for me,” Maddie says. “I’m in love with Kaleb. He’s the best guy I know, and he’s been really good to me and Asher.”

Brett drops his fist and assesses me like he’s seeing me for the first time. “You have real feelings for my sister?” he asks Kaleb.

“I do, and I love Asher too, since I know that will be your next question,” I state, rubbing my cheek and feeling a bump forming.

“You know they are a package deal,” he confirms.

“I love her, Brett. I’m all in with her. Maddie is it for me,” I declare, looking at her.

She flings herself into my arms and kisses me.

Brett covers his eyes. “I don’t want to be seeing that shit.”

Maddie pulls away. “Sorry.” She winces.

“That’s fine. You’re the best guy I know, Kaleb, so if you’re completely dedicated to my sister and my nephew then I can accept that,” he says, surprising me.

“You can?” I ask.

“Yes, you numbskull.” Brett’s laugh echoes in the apartment.

“You big bully,” Maddie jokes and then she is hugging her brother.

“Wait? Aren’t you leaving tomorrow?” Brett asks.

Maddie licks her lips. “I got accepted to a school here in the city. I never did give them a reply on the scholarship. Leaving wasn’t sitting right with me and now that I can attend school here, I’m staying.”

“Wow,” Brett says, and I agree.

Suddenly, Ellie, Syd, and Asher are at my door.

“Why are you awake?” Maddie asks Asher, who looks adorable in pajamas with little baseballs on them.

“I couldn’t sleep. I thought I heard Syd’s voice,” he says sweetly.

“Sorry.” Ellie winces.

“We’re staying in New York,” Maddie says cheerfully.

Asher’s light eyes turn bright. “We are?”

“Yes, sweetie. You and Mommy are going to go to school here,” Maddie says, and Asher runs up to her and hugs her waist.

“Yay, you aren’t leaving. OMG, Crew and Liam are going to be so happy,” Syd says.

We all burst into laughter.

“And you guys?” Ellie questions, pointing between me and Maddie.

“Turns out he loves me too,” Maddie relays to her, wrapping her arms around my waist.

“Hold up,” I say. “She knew how you felt?”

Maddie nods. “Yeah, why?”

“Because Connor was the only one I confided in about my feelings for you,” I share.

“Huh,” Ellie laughs. “See, you can trust us with your secrets, and I’m so happy you both came to your senses. We all saw how much love there was between you.”

“Wait, how did I not see it?” Brett asks.

“We were careful around you,” Maddie explains. “But when you were back home, Kaleb arranged the most perfect day for us at Coney Island, and we kind of had a hard time keeping our hands to ourselves.”

Brett groans, “I don’t need details, but I am glad to see you happy and if you do anything to make her sad.” He points a finger at me. “I’ll break both your hands.”

I wince. “That won’t be happening. Her heart is safe with me.”

I reach down and peck her lips, knowing that this is just the beginning.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-NINE

MADISON

We're headed to a team preseason party at the arena. All the players will be there with their families and significant others.

"Will there be cotton candy?" Asher asks from the back seat.

"I don't know. They do bring a lot of kid-friendly stuff, I just never paid attention before," Kaleb replies and Asher sighs.

We spent the rest of the summer hanging out together. At night I'd head over to Kaleb's, but I never slept over because I always wanted to be there when Asher woke up in the morning. Last night was no different. We made love into the middle of the night and then I snuck back into Brett's place. I have to give my brother credit too, because he clearly knows what is going on but he doesn't call me out on it, showing me he truly does support Kaleb and me as a couple. Even though it was funny when Henry called Kaleb and asked him how long he'd been crushing on his sister. When Kaleb answered since high school, Henry told him to get out of town. When I called Mom and told her I was staying in New York and Kaleb and I were officially a couple, she said, "I definitely saw that one coming."

We make it to the arena and Kaleb parks in his usual spot. We head inside and we are greeted by the gang, as well as some other players I haven't met yet. Asher runs off with Syd,

Crew, and Liam while Kaleb and I mingle. There are also new players on the team that Kaleb is meeting too.

“Hey you,” Ellie says, coming up to me.

It’s good to see a familiar face. “Hi.” I lean in and hug her.

“Nice to see you. You’ve been busy lately.” She winks.

“I have been.” I blush, feeling my cheeks heat.

“That’s a good thing. I’ve been busy too but more in the sense of getting ready for the season. I’m the proud owner of the New Jersey Rockets,” she chimes. “It’s all very new for me. My nana passed away and left me the team. I know nothing about hockey, but I plan on learning slowly.”

“Wow, that is cool,” I say. “Even though I’m sorry about your nana.”

Connor leans over her shoulder. “What’s cool is all the art she’s been producing. The team was in preseason training, and she’s made some cool paintings.”

“I’d love to see them,” I say.

“For sure. You can come over any time. I have them in the spare bedroom and they aren’t that cool.” She smacks Connor playfully.

“See you two later,” he says as he waves at one of his teammates.

Skylar walks over and we all hug. “The season starting is the downside to being with a player,” she states. “They are on the road a lot but at least when they come home, they want lots of sex.” She winks.

I blush. “That must be hard. I’m bracing myself. Right now, I sneak over to Kaleb’s apartment every night,” I admit.

“That sounds fun,” Sky says and they both laugh. “You guys are sneaking around like a couple of teenagers.”

“It’s fun, only we aren’t teenagers. I don’t know how busy I’ll be with school and with Kaleb travelling a lot, I know we are in for some bumpy times ahead.”

“You guys will be just fine. I can see how much you two love each other. And we can all hang out when the guys are out of town. We’re lucky Syd, Crew, and Asher get along so well.”

“We should definitely hang out.”

The night progresses and we eat dinner. The kids are entertained by a magician, there is also cotton candy and a popcorn machine, so my son is in seventh heaven.

Kaleb comes up to me when the coach is giving a speech welcoming the newcomers and the regular team back.

His hand lands on my back and then he gives my behind a squeeze. I look over to him, feeling flutters in my belly. We just made love last night and yet I can’t wait to touch him again. He gives me a cocky grin.

The night wears on and Kaleb grows more handsy, wrapping an arm around me, kissing my neck softly, rubbing my arm. It’s clear we both can’t wait to get out of here. When Coach finishes his spiel it’s clear the night is pretty much over.

Brett walks up to us and out of respect Kaleb keeps his hands to himself.

“Why don’t you guys go out? Like take my sister on a date,” Brett offers, looking at Kaleb.

“Seriously?” Kaleb asks, looking so excited it makes me love him more.

“Yes, I’ll take Asher home,” Brett offers.

I lean up on my toes and kiss my brother’s cheek. “You’re one of the best big brothers a girl could ask for.”

Brett smiles. “Yeah, get out of here, you two.”

We head out to Kaleb’s car. The nights are chillier now and I slip on a light sweater over the short sleeve sundress I’m wearing.

We drive through traffic. “Where are we going?” I ask Kaleb.

“You’ll see,” he says with a gleam in his dark eyes and a sly smirk on his lips.

“Was this planned?” I ask Kaleb.

“I may have asked your brother if he could babysit.” He shrugs.

“That was very thoughtful of you. I’m sorry we don’t get more time on our own,” I say, rubbing my hand up and down his strong thigh.

“I love spending time with you and Asher. Don’t ever apologize for that,” he says. “If you keep rubbing my thigh like that, we may not end up leaving the car.” He gives me a side glance.

I press my thighs together.

Kaleb hisses, “You know what you do to me when you do things like that?”

“Like what?” I ask clueless.

“Press those sweet thighs of yours together. It shows me just how much you react to me,” he says with a raspy voice and then he adjusts his crotch.

“This is why we don’t go out because we don’t make it past the bedroom.” I laugh.

“We are making it to our destination,” he assures.

We arrive at the Empire State Building. “I’ve never been here before,” I say to Kaleb.

“It’s a first for me too,” he replies. “You seem to be taking all my firsts.”

I laugh.

“And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“I don’t know what I did to deserve you,” I say.

“You’re kind, beautiful, did I mention that smoking hot body of yours?” he replies as we pull into a parking garage. There is security that checks the car and then we are given the go ahead to proceed.

“My body may not always look like this,” I remind him.

“I didn’t mean it that way, Maddie. It’s you and your kind heart, the feeling I get when you’re near me,” he says, and he pulls into a spot.

I lean over and palm his face as I direct him to look at me, then I kiss him.

“We so aren’t getting up there,” he mumbles as my hand runs up his thigh.

He dips his hand between my thighs and presses his fingers between my folds. “You’re soaked,” he hisses. “There are cameras down here, Maddie. We have to be discreet,” he says like it’s an apology. He pulls his fingers out of me, licks them, and groans, “So damn sweet.”

“You aren’t helping my situation,” I complain.

“I promise I’ll take care of you later.” He winks, and he leans into the back seat and takes my fall coat and his. How did I not realize they were there before?

We head into the building and buy our tickets to the observation deck. Lucky for us, we are the only ones in the elevator so we take our time kissing, as Kaleb’s hands grab my behind firmly. We break apart when we reach the top.

It’s windy up here so it’s good we are both wearing jackets. My jacket is a light fabric fall peacoat that hits my knees, which is nice because it keeps most of me covered. We walk around holding hands. The view is spectacular. We take a couple of selfies and then single shots with the city in the background. There are other people walking around up here too but we find a corner that is more secluded, and we look out onto the city. Kaleb stands behind me with his arms wrapped around my waist and his chin on my shoulder.

“I want you and Asher to move into my place,” he announces, surprising me. “I know I only have a two bedroom, but you’d be in my bed and Asher can have his own room. We can decorate it any way he...”

I spin around and kiss him before he even finishes the sentence.

“I’m guessing that’s a yes.” He laughs.

I nod, bobbing my head. “That’s a yes.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.” Kaleb smiles. “We can get Asher a babysitter. I know Ellie and Connor use one for Syd. You’re going to be back to school and I won’t be around as much as I want to be. It would help you out.”

“I can’t ask you to do that, Kaleb,” I say, pulling away a little. “You know I can’t afford that kind of thing.”

He uses his forefinger to tilt my chin, just so I can look him in the eyes. “Whatever I have is yours, my body and my soul, my money too.”

I giggle like a schoolgirl. “That’s very kind of you. I love you so much, Kaleb. I didn’t know this kind of love existed.”

“I didn’t know either, Maddie. I didn’t even know I wanted to settle down until you came into my life. I pretty much thought I was going to die a bachelor,” he jokes laughing, and I smack him in the chest.

“You’re such a fool.” I laugh.

“A fool who is so crazy, deeply, madly in love with you.”

“Right back at you, Kaleb. I’m sure Asher is going to love to move into your place,” I say to him.

“I’m going to love having him there. I never saw myself as a father. After the father I had, I just felt like there was no point to having kids, but Asher has pulled on all my heartstrings from day one. I love that kid like crazy. I just feel so protective of him.”

My heart grows just a little bit more. I didn’t think it was possible to love this much and here Kaleb goes and pushes my boundaries, making me love him even more.

EPILOGUE

IT'S Christmas Eve and Skylar and Liam have invited us over to their beautiful new home for a Christmas dinner, along with Brett, Henry, Mom and her boyfriend, Will. Connor and Ellie are also here with Syd. The rest of the gang are with their families or out of town visiting family.

We all pack into my van except for Brett, who said he would be arriving soon in his own car since he was the last to shower because Mom, Will, and Henry are staying with him.

We arrive to Skylar and Liam's house. It's absolutely stunning. We've been here before for dinners and playdates with Crew, but the way Sky has decorated for the holidays is out of this world. There is a mix of pearl, red, and green decorations that shine. There are candles, candy canes, garlands, and stockings everywhere, but it's her tree that takes my breath away.

"I've never seen such a pretty tree before," I say to Sky.

“Thanks, I didn’t have a tree growing up so I kind of like to go all out,” she explains.

“Our tree was pretty simple, but I can’t complain,” I say, giving Mom a small smile.

“You have a beautiful home,” Mom says to Sky.

“Thanks for joining us, Ms. Noble, the more the merrier,” Sky chimes in.

Liam introduces himself to Will and Sky offers everyone some spiked eggnog. The kids get the nonalcoholic version, which they say is gross and the adults laugh. We take a seat in the living room while we wait for the guests to arrive.

Ellie gushes over the tree and she and Connor hug everyone. We introduce them to Henry, Mom, and Will.

Sky’s friends arrive next. Amelia and Eden, who I have met a handful of times already.

We all sit around the table, but we don’t start dinner because we are waiting for Brett. Just as Mom says, “I wonder what is taking him so long,” the doorbell rings and my brother walks in with a huge bag of gifts for the kids.

“For a guy bent on being a forever bachelor, he really is good with the kids,” Ellie leans into me and says.

I nod and we all laugh.

Sky places the extra presents by the tree and then Liam says grace. We all dig into the festive meal Sky made.

“Have you been in touch with Willow?” Eden asks Amelia.

My eyes are on my brother, and I watch him pause his fork on the way to his mouth. That’s strange. He waits to hear Amelia’s answer.

“Not for the past week,” Eden says, looking oddly from side to side.

“Where is Willow?” Brett suddenly asks. “It’s like she fell off the face of the planet.”

The girls give each other a look of warning. “She’s back home visiting,” Amelia answers, clearing her throat.

“For how long? I haven’t seen her with you guys since last winter,” Brett says. It’s weird to be seeing my brother taking interest in one specific girl. I clearly haven’t met Willow since she left before I arrived to the city.

“She’s helping on her family’s farm back in Tennessee,” Eden adds with a smile I hate to say looks forced.

“Right, she’s from Tennessee,” Brett mutters. The whole conversation seems suspicious to me but I can’t say why. Kaleb looks over to me with raised brows, clearly understanding that I am trying to dissect what is going on.

Sky gives Eden a weird look and then smiles and turns her attention to the whole table. “What should we do after dinner?” She clearly changes the subject. “I was thinking we could do a little sing-along with the kids and open some of the gifts, but there are some we need to keep for the morning,” she says looking at Crew, who looks disappointed.

“Sounds like a plan,” I say.

“We are good with that,” Ellie agrees too.

We finish eating and I help clear up the meal. With only me and Ellie in the kitchen, I ask her what all that talk of Willow was about because everyone was being so evasive.

“I really shouldn’t say,” Ellie hedges, dodging my question. It’s not the answer I was expecting with how close we’ve become, but they are all clearly covering something for their friend.

I head back to the table to get more empty dishes. Brett is helping with the cleanup too.

“What’s the story with this Willow girl?” I ask my brother.

“Not one of my brighter moments and not something I want to discuss with my sister,” he replies.

“But something is going on, Brett. I was getting weird vibes,” I whisper.

“Me too. Look, I kind of hooked up with Willow at a club, we spent the night together. Like I said, not one of my brighter moments. I haven’t seen her since,” he said. “She didn’t even show to Ellie and Connor’s wedding, and they’re best friends.”

I bite my lip. “So, the girl just took off?”

“No clue.” Brett shrugs. “It’s not my business, Maddie. I just asked because they mentioned her name but there wasn’t much between us.”

“Really, there wasn’t much, and yet you were curious about her after all this time?” I ask incredulously.

“Look, I appreciate you’re happy but settling down isn’t for everyone. You know me, it isn’t going to happen. Let well enough be.”

I blow out an exasperated breath. We all sit for dessert and then after we are done, we gather around the tree in the living room and sing songs. Asher sits on my lap and Kaleb sits beside me. I’ve never had a Christmas like this before, filled with so much family, friends, and love. I start to feel a little choked up.

Once we finish singing, the kids take turns giving each other gifts and since they are impatient, they also tear into all the pretty wrapping. It’s cute how the boys hug each other and say thank you for the gift. Syd being the only girl gets a lot of attention on her, which is completely adorable.

“There’s one more,” Asher grins, pointing to a small box. “It has my mommy’s name on it.”

“No, sweetie.” I lean forward. “That’s not for Mommy.”

Asher looks to Kaleb for guidance and Kaleb nods. Asher then picks up the gift. “It’s for you, Mommy. Merry Christmas.”

I take the gift, which is wrapped in gold paper with a red ribbon. Kaleb and Asher are clearly in cahoots. I remove the paper to reveal a red velvet jewelry box. My eyes sting.

“Omg,” Ellie gasps from beside me.

Sky squeals from the other side of the room, where she is sitting on Liam's lap smiling wide. I look over at Mom and she nods to me in a way that says, "Get on with it, Maddie," which tells me she is in on this thing too. When I look back at Kaleb, he shifts away from me and moves to the floor, where he gets down on one knee. Asher comes and stands beside him, placing his hand on Kaleb's shoulder, sending the message these boys are a team.

Kaleb's eyes are filled with so much love and affection when he begins, "Maddie, I never knew this life was possible. I never saw myself settling down or falling in love. Love didn't exist for me until you came into my life. You showed me what it means to be cared for, you make me feel like I matter. I trust you with everything and I just love you so damn much. I want to spend the rest of my life with you." Kaleb smiles, his own gaze filling with tears. "Will you marry me? And will you allow me to adopt Asher? I'd really like to be his father. Really, this is a proposal for both of you."

Tears that were pricking my eyes fall aimlessly down my cheeks as I lunge into Kaleb's arms. He falls over with me on top of him on the floor. He's kissing me in front of this whole crowd.

"Is that a yes?" he asks, and I roll off him.

I nod. "Yes, that's definitely a yes." I sit up, feeling slightly winded. "But Asher needs to answer that second part. Do you want Kaleb to be your daddy?"

Asher runs into Kaleb just like I did, colliding with his chest, and Kaleb gathers him up in his arms. He whispers something in Kaleb's ear as everyone around sits quietly watching.

"What did you say, sweet boy?" I ask my son.

Kaleb whispers something to Asher, and I think he's asking permission to tell everyone what he said. Asher nods.

"He said he asked Santa if I could be his dad and Santa made his wish come true," Kaleb shares, and now he's crying too. I reach over and hug both my guys. We stay hugging for

as long as it seems appropriate with a room full of our family and friends watching us. Sky hoots and claps.

When we pull apart, Kaleb places a square-cut diamond on a platinum band on my finger and we kiss chastely. The room breaks out in applause and everyone comes to us, one by one, hugging and congratulating us.

“I’m so happy for you, Maddie,” Mom says. Her boyfriend, Will, shakes my hand and congratulates me.

Brett comes up to me. “You know you almost make me believe in love.”

I punch my brother in the shoulder, and he laughs.

“You couldn’t have found a better guy,” he says.

“I agree on that,” Henry adds, and he hugs me too. “Kaleb was already family, so now he just has to continue to put up with our crazy.”

We all laugh at that.

“I heard that,” Kaleb says as his friends come up to him and hug him.

“This has been my best Christmas ever,” I tell Kaleb.

“Mine too,” he agrees.

“We’ve done well,” I say to him when I think of both of our pasts.

“We have,” he agrees.

At the end of the night, we thank Skylar and Liam for an evening we will never forget. By the time we get home, Asher is fast asleep and Kaleb carries him up to the apartment and places him in his room. We moved into Kaleb’s apartment shortly after he asked me to move in. He hired a decorator and with Asher’s help they decorated his room. Since Asher loves astronomy, his room is decorated with a blanket covered in planets. He has one dark wall that has the Big Dipper painted on it and his lighting is also in the shape of stars. He said it’s his most favorite room. His words, not mine.

With Asher asleep, Kaleb walks me to our room.

“New York really feels like home. All those people there tonight, they are our family,” I say to him.

“They are good people and I’ve been happy here with them, but my home is where you are,” he declares, gathering me in his arms. “And right now, I want to be inside my home.”

I laugh at his analogy. He laughs too but the laughter doesn’t last long because as he unzips my green and red plaid dress, that I bought specially for Christmas, I remove his ridiculous reindeer sweater. My hands connect with the heat of his skin and my body warms all over. It doesn’t take him long to strip me down and I remove all his clothes including his boxers. When I see his erection standing against his stomach, I lick my lips.

“I love the way you look at me,” he says, and he swipes me off my feet.

I giggle. “I just love you.” I lean in and kiss him, and he lays me on my back on the bed. He’s on me in seconds, kissing me, loving me, making me come undone like only he knows how. And when he comes inside me, and I come undone, both of us moving to the rhythm of our release, I know I am home and that he’s it for me.

Kaleb

The next morning, I wake up excited. I don’t think I ever got excited as a boy on Christmas. There were times Mom wasn’t even home. Maybe she had gone to celebrate with other people. The Nobles always knew, and they would always have me over. They always treated me like family, but I never felt like I really belonged until now. It took me falling in love with Maddie to get to this point. Now I have my family. I come up to the tree in our apartment. The tree Maddie and Asher helped me choose and decorate. I’d never had my own tree before, and this all just feels so surreal.

Asher wakes up and comes running to me and gives me a hug. The way he has so much love bursting inside him never gets old. It’s because Maddie is his mom and she’s such a

loving person that this kid is so affectionate, and I'm digging every moment of it.

"Can I call you Daddy now?" he asks, looking up to me with his big blue eyes that remind me so much of his mom.

"I'd be honored, Asher," I swallow hard, feeling choked up.

His brows furrow and I laugh.

"That's a yes, Son, that's a big yes, please call me Daddy." I lift him in my arms and throw him up in the air and he screams and giggles, so I stop because he'll wake Maddie. "Come, let's make some breakfast for your mom and then we can open gifts when she is awake."

Asher nods and I place him down. We head to the kitchen, and I take out the waffle maker because I'm no chef, but I use a pancake mix and the waffles turn out super fluffy. We wash some berries and use fresh cream and we set everything on the table.

Maddie walks into the main room yawning. Her hair is askew, and she looks thoroughly fucked and sexy as hell in a long T-shirt nightie.

"Morning, Merry Christmas."

"Daddy and me made you breakfast," Asher says. Her eyes turn wide and her lower lip trembles, and she looks at me with a look that makes my heart beat just a little faster.

"This looks delicious, baby," she says.

We sit down to eat, but before she puts a bite in her mouth she says, "I love you, Kaleb Bardot."

"I love you more, Maddie, and I can't wait to make you my wife."

The following day we leave Asher with Ms. Noble and Will. Brett, Henry, Maddie and I take the short flight back to Cliftwood, since the hospital called and told Brett their dad wasn't doing well.

I offered to stay back and let Maddie have this time with her father, but she wanted me to meet him, even though I had met him before, but he wasn't sober back then.

We arrive to the hospital together. Mr. Noble is hooked up to all kinds of machines and the Noble kids stand close to each other, supporting each other during this difficult time.

"I'm glad we had this time with him," Maddie says to her brothers.

"Me too," Henry and Brett say at the same time.

Mr. Nobles eyes flicker open. "You're here," are his first words as he sees he's surrounded by his children. His light eyes look clear and a smile tips his lips.

Maddie steps forward. "We're here," she confirms, taking his hand. His lower lip quivers.

"Merry Christmas, Dad," Henry says and Brett repeats.

"Merry Christmas," he replies in a scratchy voice.

"Dad, this is my fiancé, Kaleb. I don't know if you remember him, he lived next door," Maddie says.

"Bardot's kid, I remember you. You two are getting married?" Mr. Noble asks.

"Yes, sir, I've asked Maddie to be my wife," I say.

"Congratulations to you both. Are you a hockey player too?" he asks.

"I am. Brett and I are on the same team," I explain.

"I hope I make it to watch you both win the Cup this year," he says.

We all smile.

"That would be nice, sir. I hope so too," I say.

We stick around chatting a little and everyone says their goodbye to him. There is a heavy sense of finality in the air.

We leave and head outside. The drive back to Maddie's mom's house is quiet and draped in sadness, but once we park the car on the driveway and get out, Brett initiates a snowball

fight like old times. The sadness is drowned out as laughter rings through the air in puffs of white clouds. A good release after the grim mood in the hospital. The following morning, Brett gets a call that his father passed. We stay in Cliftwood an extra couple of days. We hold the funeral right away and have a graveside ceremony since Mr. Noble doesn't have any real friends and his family is standing right here. It's bittersweet but at least he didn't die alone. We all fly back to New York together and Henry hangs with us for a couple of days, but they can't stay sad forever.

On New Year's Eve we all head out together to a club in the city where my and Brett's teammates have rented a private lounge. I will cherish each day I have with Maddie. Now it is the New Year's countdown, and I just care about having another chance to kiss the love of my life.

"Happy New Year, Mad Pie." I grin as I lay a hot and heavy kiss on her.

She laughs and shakes her head and then we kiss some more. ***To find out more about the other characters check out **Second Chance Player** which is the first book in the series. Brett and Willow's story is coming early spring 2024. Turn the page to read an excerpt from the next book in the Player Series!***

Excerpt is unedited and subject to change.

PROLOGUE

WILLOW

“Jacob, turn the car around,” I demand of my brother as he’s headed down the freeway.

“We aren’t turning back now,” my brother insists his eyes intent on the road in front of us. We are heading into Nashville from our small rural town, Sugar Meadow to watch the Nashville Tigers play the New York Rangers tonight but that isn’t the real reason we are going to the game.

“My chest is tight. I can’t breathe,” I warn my brother. I’ve had these panic attacks ever since I found out I was pregnant.

“Slow breaths. You know what to do. Just focus on the breaths. We can’t turn back now. You want answers,” Jacob reminds.

“He didn’t want her Jacob. You saw the text message,” I remind my brother because my panic is controlling me now. I used to be a badass attorney but then my life changed with two

pink strips on a pregnancy test and I'm just trying to stay afloat now.

I tried calling Brett numerous times when I found out I was pregnant but the phone went to voicemail. That's when I changed course and started sending him urgent text messages. I wasn't being specific I just said we needed to talk. He would reply we have nothing to talk about. Then one night I got so frustrated and angry I wrote in big shouty caps *I'm Pregnant*. To which he responded with go bark up another tree.

His words ripped my heart out, but I wasn't surprised. Brett told me who he was from the start. Our night together was about mutual pleasure and he did make me feel good. I was just left with a parting gift.

My mind pulls me back to the night we met at Focus a lounge style club back in New York City. I had met up with Patty, Amelia, Eden, Rose and Ellie. It had been a regular night for us until a bunch of players from the Rangers team crashed our night. Little did I know my friend Patty was crushing hard on Evan one of the players and he came to see her. I couldn't take my eyes off Brett from the moment he pulled up to our table. I had sworn off men by that point but daddy had died the month before and I was in pain. I wanted to not feel the sense of loss for a while.

"Willow?" Jacob saves me from drowning in the past.

"I'm okay," I assure my brother. "I know this is probably not going to go very well but Ellie and Skylar seem to think there was a miscommunication," I tell my brother who isn't overly happy about driving me to a game to confront my baby daddy.

When Skylar called me on Christmas Eve to tell me how Brett had been inquiring about my absence in the city things didn't add up.

"Miscommunication my ass," Jacob hisses. "Even if he had been drunk or whatever when he first saw your message, he would've at some point sobered up and realized he needed to own up. The asshole doesn't deserve Maylee."

“Ellie and Sky said he seemed genuine, and his sister Maddie asked Ellie what the story was with me which means he didn’t say anything to her which is weird because according to Ellie, Brett and his sister are super close. She’s a single mom Jacob and he took her in,” I repeat once again.

“That’s the only reason I agreed to drive you to the game tonight because Maylee deserves better. I just don’t know how someone can misunderstand the words I’m pregnant,” Jacob growls. My grumpy brother is a very doting uncle. He pretty much thinks Maylee hung the moon and he would do anything for her. I replay the whole situation in my mind. About three weeks after I was with Brett, I found out I was with child. I had sent a message that I was back home on the farm in Tennessee. When Brett told me I could go bark up another tree, I was so infuriated and hormonal I took my phone to Jacob and broke down in his arms. Jacob’s response had been to take my cell and smash it to the ground. Problem is my brother doesn’t do anything half assed and he’s mega strong so my phone broke into tiny pieces. After that breakdown I knew I needed to pick myself up and keep strong. I promised myself I wouldn’t think of Brett for the rest of my pregnancy and that is exactly what I did. I spent my days helping out on the farm as much as I could. When my belly grew I stopped with the physical labor but I still went into town twice a week to the market with Lev another one of my brothers and helped him sell the cheese my family made. My life had become a far cry from the life I had envisioned but I walked away from my life in the city. When I left the law firm I was working for they told me I was making a big mistake. I didn’t tell them I was pregnant but that would have just made matters worse. The firm preferred people who could put in their eighty plus hours of work a week. A single mother would not have fit into their definition of efficient employee. I quit and came back home. I don’t regret my decision because my family has been my rock. They all love Maylee so much which is all I want for my baby girl which is to be surrounded by love.

“Do you have a plan? Like how are we confronting Noble?” Jacob asks tapping his thumb on the steering wheel.

“I figure we go to the locker room after the game. I show him the picture of Maylee and tell him I wanted him to see how perfect she is. We wait for his reaction and take it from there. I know there is a chance he’ll write us off but if I don’t try to reach out Maylee will feel abandoned, and I don’t want that for my baby girl not when we had the best dad.”

“Yeah,” Jacob sighs, and his voice sounds choked. “Noble is going to be blindsided.”

“He doesn’t deserve anything else,” I confirm.

My cell rings. “Hello.”

“Willow, we just landed,” Ellie says sounding panicked. “It took forever to deice the plane in New York.”

“Shit, that means you’ll never get to the arena on time,” I say biting my lip nervously because I could use all the support I can get and having my good friends there is going to be helpful since I don’t know what to expect from Brett.

Ellie insisted her and Eden fly out to be here for me. When I had first told them what happened with Brett and the awful text message they obviously wanted to wring Brett’s neck like I did. Then I made them promise that while I was pregnant I didn’t want to hear his name because it caused me stress. I knew it would be bad for my baby but since Christmas they’ve said they can’t keep quiet anymore. Brett has really proven to be a different person than we thought he was. His sister coming to town has gained him brownie points with my friends. They also said he can’t be that good of an actor because apparently he inquired about me at Christmas. Skylar was so shocked with how he randomly asked about me she almost spit out her turkey because he seemed concerned and confused as she put it about my whereabouts. Why would he be confused about me leaving town if he knew I was pregnant? That whole crazy Christmas encounter led my friends to build a case around Brett being a good guy and that there was an explanation for what they call the “misunderstanding” which was his crazy text message. I wasn’t going to come into New York City to confront Brett. I didn’t like the idea of leaving Maylee. I hadn’t left her since she was born and tonight was

the first time. Not only was I having separation anxiety from my baby, but I was also anxious about finding the truth. As an attorney it was my job to get to the bottom of things and here I felt like if I didn't I'd be failing my daughter.

"You got this Willow," Ellie assures. "Brett isn't who we first thought he was, I promise."

Those strong words from one of my best friends holds a lot of weight.

"That's why I'm going to the game. I'll find him after and set things straight. I'll keep you guys posted," I say to my friend.

"We love you," Ellie and Eden say simultaneously.

"You're strong. You got this," Eden cheers.

"Yeah, well I'm a shaking mess but no matter what I will confront Brett and make him hear me out," I assure to my friends.

"Damn straight," Jacob says from beside me.

"Hi Jacob," Eden giggles.

Jacob rolls his eyes. Eden had come to visit after I gave birth to Maylee and she had a major crush on my brother. Problem is Jacob has been shut down since his injury so he just didn't pay Eden any attention.

"Hi," Jacob says gruffly but it sounds forced, and I feel embarrassed over his rudeness.

Ellie is married to Connor Donaldson one of the players on the Rangers team so she was going to watch Connor play and Eden came for support.

"Eden, are you coming back to the farm tonight?" I ask her.

I know Ellie is staying with her husband in a hotel where the team will be sleeping tonight.

"I can just get a hotel room. We don't know how tonight is going to go. Maybe Brett will want to come back to the farm to see Maylee," Eden says.

Her words give me palpitations. “I honestly didn’t consider that as an option.”

“Okay we’re pulling up to the arena,” I say to my friends. “Pray that I have strength to do this.”

“We’re rooting for you,” Ellie says. “We’ll see you soon.”

I get off the phone with my friends.

“I appreciate you, Jacob, seriously. I don’t know how I would’ve made it through the last year and a half without all of you.”

“That’s what family is for,” Jacob reminds. “I just hope Noble understands that.”

Jacob has friends playing for Nashville tonight since that was his team. We have front row seats.

My legs feel wobbly as we head inside. Jacob heads to the concession stand and buys some popcorn and each of us a drink and we head into the arena. The arena is packed.

My muscles feel locked from being so nervous.

“Relax would you?” my brother says with a curt nod. With his jeans, thick flannel shirt and backwards baseball cap he looks like a farmer which is so different from who he was when he played for Nashville.

“Easier said than done.” There is no way I can focus when I am about to come face to face with my one night stand. The anthem plays and we all stand. I watch Brett standing tall and my heart stutters. Damn he’s a handsome guy. Memories from the night we met flood my mind once again.

Brett asking me to dance.

“I’m okay thanks,” I replied to him.

“Oh, I know you’re okay, honey, that isn’t what I was asking, now do you want to go relieve some of that tension you’re holding onto on the dancefloor?” How could he tell I was tense after just meeting me? How was he so damn good looking? He had an ego to match, clearly. His light brown hair was slicked back and he was wearing a suit that hugged his

body perfectly. It looked like one of those fancy suits the players wore when they show up to the arena for a game looking all spiffy. The top button on his dress shirt was left open showing a small smattering of hair on his chest. Brett is a big guy but it wasn't only his size that was large, it was his personality, it was the way when he was near me all air seemed to be sucked out of a room and all I could do was look at him and find the air I needed. I had never felt so attracted to a man before but after dating my share of the wrong guys I was intent on not making another mistake.

"I'm not tense." I shot back.

He cocked a brow giving me a look that said who are you kidding. "Fine, I may be a little tense but I have my reasons."

"I bet you do. How about I help you forget whatever it is?" he offered extending a hand to me. My friends had already left the table one by one for the dance floor.

"Sounds like trouble," I replied as the pulse of music filled the air begging me to move along with it.

That comment bought me a panty dropping grin and by that, I mean I literally wanted to drop my panties and have Brett do dirty things to me.

"Trouble is fun, honey, trust me," he retorted still holding that hand out to me. A hand that was large and calloused. A hand that gave a good indication of just how big this man was and my mind went there. Penis size. This man must have been packing. I pressed my thighs together.

"When a guy says trust me, I was told to run in the other direction," I say to him, and it isn't a lie. Growing up with five brothers meant I was well aware of all the suave moves they used to get a girl but in my case they warned me off men. I was oldest of the Heaton kids but they still watched out for me.

That comment causes a loud laugh to escape him. His shoulders shake from the movement and his mouth parts perfectly showcasing nice teeth for a hockey player.

He licks his lips. "Who gave you that advice?"

"I've got five brothers," I said dryly.

“Five huh, that’s a lot of brothers. I better be on my best behavior tonight. I got one sister and my brother and I were pretty much her bodyguards growing up. We still are,” he confessed, and I find his comment sweet. “What do you say Willow? I’m not used to working so hard for a dance.”

“Shit, you’re cocky,” I said bobbing my head but I smile playfully.

“I’m confident. I know what I want,” he confirms. His blue eyes rake over my body leaving a trail of heat behind. Damn him and damn my body for being so attracted to him.

“I’m just not up for dancing Brett but I appreciate your effort,” I reply shooting him down.

He seemed shocked. I’m guessing this had never happened to him before.

I watch as his teeth dig into that juicy lower lip of his and he contemplates for what feels like a few seconds. “How about we go to the bar and I buy you a drink? You said you were tense. A good shot may ease that.”

“I won’t say no to a shot.” I stood. Brett took a step back not realizing how tall I was. He once again allowed his gaze to eat me up and by the look on his face I could tell he appreciated what he sees. I come from tall parents but I’m the shortest in the family at five nine.

I follow Brett to the bar. We do one shot of tequila together, but it isn’t enough so another two follow. When I’m feeling warm and less tense I give in and follow him to the dance floor.

Jacob groans beside me pulling me from the past. At the start of the first period Evan scores a goal. I stay seated in my chair despite wanting to cheer the Rangers on. I don’t think my brother would take too kindly to that. Brett was a sweet talker. That much I know. I just hadn’t pegged him for being a royal asshole. The way he didn’t answer my calls and finally replied to my text message was so cruel. The only thing keeping me calm now is the fact that things don’t add up. I’m a logical thinker. It’s my job to fix problems and get to the

bottom of complicated scenarios and my friends are right. Things don't add up.

“Get into the game Willow,” Jacob urges. I come from a home that watched a lot of hockey. Jacob grew up playing hockey and so did my second youngest brother Jack.

“I'm trying,” I reply. I keep my focus on the game. The Rangers are a strong team so there is a lot of back and forth going on. Kaleb steals the puck from one of the guys on Nashville's team he passes to Brett who takes it across the ice back to Nashville's net where Evan is ready and open to take the shot. Brett passes the puck and Evan shoots and scores.

There are fans of the Rangers here tonight and they stand and cheer but most of the arena is filled with Tigers fans. Jacob hisses beside me. A part of me wants to stand and cheer because that was a sweet assist Brett just pulled off. The buzzer goes and the teams break for intermission. All the players skate off the ice. I stay seated in my seat and Jacob begins to scroll through his phone. My eyes are glued on Brett. To how handsome he looks in his gear. My mind remembers the night we were together, but my body also remembers and a familiar heat consumes me. I've never had such hot sex before. It was... I swallow hard then pause as Brett's eyes lock with mine. He's taken his helmet off so there is no mistaking he is looking straight at me.

“Jacob, I've been spotted,” I say shifting in my seat.

“Huh,” Jacob asks. I lose my words as Brett skates back onto the ice sans helmet. He crosses the ice and opens one of the rink doors. With his skates on he walks right up to where Jacob and I are seated.

“You have a real nerve,” he begins, and I feel like I've been slapped.

Jacob stands to his full height beside me, ready to defend me. These two men are huge and strong. I would not want to see them fight because they both have the capacity to cause each other a lot of damage..

I move between Jacob and Brett.

“What do you mean I have a nerve?” I ask Brett feeling very confused. I’m suddenly worried one of my girlfriends accidentally let it slip that Maylee is Brett’s daughter.

“I thought after the night we shared you would at least answer my call,” he says flooring me.

“You never called,” I snap back thinking he’s lost his mind.

“Like hell I didn’t,” he retorts his body vibrating and angry. “I left you a message. I wanted to make sure we were good.”

“Are you crazy? You never called me. Maybe you accidentally called one of your puck bunnies.”

“Don’t mess with me Willow. We said we were going to keep things cordial,” he says, and I don’t know what is happening right now.

Jacob hisses beside me.

“And you showing up to my game with another man after all this time is super low,” Brett continues. My head is spinning as his words process but before I realize that he’s somehow jealous of Jacob he’s pulling on my brother’s collar. “You should leave buddy,” he insists his features are rigid and taut nothing like the man I remember hooking up with. That Brett was easy going, charming...

“Do you know who I am?” Jacob retorts watching Brett like he has a real nerve.

“Jacob Heaton, I’m no airhead. I know you played on this team, and I know you got hurt but you have no right showing up to this game with this woman,” Brett tells him. I am so confused and thrown off my tongue is tied. Jacob is not phased though, and he throws Brett’s hands off him.

“You fucking idiot. She’s my sister,” Jacob spits. “Put hands on me again. I will end you.”

“Jacob,” I chide. His cocky demeanor isn’t helping.

“Fuck that, Willow. This guy is a dumb hot head,” Jacob says like he wants me to walk away now but I can’t walk

away. Why is Brett so worked up? A part of me is trembling that he knows about Maylee and he's angry I've withheld her from him. Another part of me remembers that he told me to go bark up another tree and maybe he's angry that I've come to look for him anyway because he wants nothing to do with our daughter. My stomach churns at the last thought.

"Who are you calling a hot head asshole?" Brett retorts his gaze burning into Jacob.

The last thing I need is these two fighting.

"Guys please. Would both of you just relax?" I say standing between these two hulky men. Next to them I actually feel short, and I am not short.

"Get to the point Willow," Jacob urges. I shoot daggers at my brother with my gaze.

"What point?" Brett asks.

"The reason she is at this game in the first place," Jacob clarifies.

"Jacob, I love you, but I need you to shut the hell up and let me do this my way," I say to my brother.

"Sorry," he mutters, and he turns away.

"Where have you been all this time?" Brett asks. "Did you leave the country? Why weren't you at Connor and Ellie's wedding?" The way he spits those questions throws me off.

"Why do you care Brett? When I told you I was pregnant you told me to go bark up another tree," I spit back.

Brett's blue eyes turn round, and he leans forward pausing and watching me like I'm a weird alien. "What did you just say to me?"

"You heard me," I say losing my steam.

"I didn't. I didn't hear..."

Kaleb skates across the ice and then he is climbing the few steps to get to us.

“Everything good here?” Kaleb asks but he’s looking at Brett.

“Willow, what did you just say?” Brett says slowly ignoring his friend.

“You know what I said Brett, so I don’t know what your angle is,” I say watching him carefully.

“Things seem a little heated here,” Kaleb says. “Whatever is going on can it wait until after the game?”

“No Kaleb,” Brett says his voice cool and even. “Willow what did you just say?” he’s calmer now and he seems laser focused on me. Something is off. My friends were right.

“Oh, there you guys are,” Ellie and Eden say walking up to us.

Shit. This night is going downhill by the seconds.

“Everything okay?” Ellie asks.

But everyone is silent as Brett watches only me. “Repeat what you said please.” His voice is monotone. I don’t even think the guy is breathing.

“I said you told me to go bark up another tree when I told you I was pregnant,” I repeat. Everyone around me stays quiet even though there is a hum of movement vibrating in the background from the busy arena.

Brett’s eyes squeeze shut. His hand rakes over them and then his face morphs into what looks like a pained expression.

“That isn’t possible. I never got a message like that from you,” he finally says. “About three weeks after we were together, I lost my phone in Vegas. I was hoping to find it, so I didn’t cancel it,” he explains. Then he blinks. “Are you telling me you had my baby?” He seems angry now.

“Shit, I think we’ll give you guys some privacy,” Ellie says, and she starts to back away.

“Stop,” Brett says, and he points at her his mouth dropped open. “Did you know?”

Ellie’s face scrunches. Eden looks wide eyed.

Brett returns his focus on me. “I called you. I left you messages,” he grits his jaw.

I wince. “After you told me to go bark up another tree, I went to my brother crying and showed him the message. He threw my phone and it shattered. Broke into pieces. I decided to get a new number,” I explain and now I see what is happening here. Brett lost his phone.

“Who the hell told me to bark up another tree?” I ask Brett.

He shrugs. “Whatever fucker stole my phone.”

“Oh shit,” I say, and my head begins to spin.

The last thing I hear is she’s going down...

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XOXO

RC

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