



ETHAN

A BILLIONAIRE'S GAME NOVEL

SAMANTHA WHISKEY

Ethan

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*For those that don't believe in themselves. You are amazing,
you are worth love, you are enough.*

Ethan

The sound of clay chips knocking against each other filled the private room in the back of the hole-in-the-wall restaurant, which served the absolute best burgers in the city.

I'd already devoured my favorite—a beast of a meal with their signature barbecue sauce slathered all over it—before the game started. Gareth had two before we'd even sat down at the poker table.

Hang gliding over Folly Beach did wonders for our appetite, even though the event was less strenuous compared to our normal monthly adventures. I'd take sailing through the air over hiking a volcano any day, even when Wes gave me shit about not following through on the lava-chasing any chance he could.

“Is no one going to bring up the massive shit-show Berkley is in?” Doyle O'Brien—the most recent and unwanted addition to our monthly game—asked while Asher dealt the cards.

Anger spiked in my blood, a low simmer that often built to an outburst. My anger issues weren't a secret, and there was shit all I'd been able to do about it...until now.

“Figured you got all you needed to know from the media coverage,” I said, shooting him a glare across the table.

“I’ve watched the video at least a dozen times,” the prick said, his chest puffing out as he chuckled. “I just want to know what the innocent fan said to set you off.”

I swallowed hard, gripping the chips I’d been playing with a little too hard.

Innocent fan my ass. He’d shot a derogatory slur at one of my players, not that anyone cared to report on that. All the media wanted to do was crucify me as the asshole they’ve always painted me as. And yeah, I have a fucking short fuse and maybe words aren’t supposed to be met with physical violence, but sometimes the situation calls for it.

“Back off,” Crossland warned from his seat right next to Doyle.

Gareth didn’t need to voice a warning, he simply leveled a don’t-fuck-with-me look in Doyle’s direction to get his point across. Asher and Weston remained quiet as they watched the scene, but I knew they had my back—our little chosen family was a tight-knit one, even with the newest addition of Asher’s fiancé, Daisy. Their support helped quell the growing anger in my chest, and I took a steadying breath. Doyle definitely wasn’t worth the effort.

“How is Declan handling the coverage?” Asher asked as he finished dealing the cards.

The coverage was my friend’s very polite way of referring to the video captured of me climbing over the Hurricanes’ stadium walls and breaking a fan’s jaw. There were at least a hundred different videos of the incident circulating across social media sites right now, all showing different angles of me knocking the guy out.

I flexed my right hand, my knuckles still sore.

What the video didn't show was what he'd called my player.

"He's handling it in the way any publicist handles these things." I shrugged, glancing discreetly at the cards I was holding. A pocket pair of kings.

"Has he prepared a statement for you?" Weston asked, sharing a concerned look with Asher on his right.

"He tried," I admitted. "But I wouldn't approve it. It wasn't the truth. And he said my statement would only make the public hate me more than they already do. They're already calling for my head, let alone my position."

The public couldn't unseat me as owner of the Charleston Hurricanes, but the league commissioner sure as hell could, especially if our sales dropped because of any bad press I brought down on us. Plus, the other MLB owners had a say too.

I'd really fucking stepped in it this time.

"So what's the strategy?" Asher asked.

I sighed. "I have to complete anger management therapy with a life coach or whatever they're calling it now. And be super public about it."

Wes and Asher nodded, the others sending much of the same sympathetic looks my way. All except Doyle, of course. He stared at his cards like he wanted to toss them. Fucker was easier to read than the daily news.

"When do you meet this life coach?" Crossland asked.

"Tomorrow morning," I answered.

"Maybe it'll be a good thing," Asher said, always the optimist.

“Sure,” I said. “Maybe he’ll snap his fingers and I’ll suddenly *not* be who I’ve always been.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Asher said.

“I know,” I said, sighing.

It wasn’t any of their fault. I’d gotten myself into this mess, and despite my firm belief that the fan deserved what he got, I knew it was wrong. Didn’t undo the situation. For the first time since becoming the Hurricanes’ owner, I kind of wish I was like the other MLB owners and just stayed in my box where I belonged. But I was involved and committed to my team in a way that demanded my time be spent closer to the action. Not always, but most of the time.

Weston cleared his throat, shifting in his seat. “I’m surprised you didn’t invite those two girls from the beach back here,” he said, obviously changing the subject.

I laughed, flashing him a grateful look at the opportunity to talk about literally anything else. “Night is still young,” I said while tossing in my blind before immediately glancing through the one-way window across the room that gave me a clear view of the small but busy restaurant beyond.

The woman was still there, sitting alone at a two-top table, checking her phone every few minutes while sipping on what looked like a soda water. I’d spotted her the second we settled in the private room, the view from my seat at the table making her impossible to miss.

Long black hair fell over her shoulders in effortless waves that made her bright blue eyes stand out in a breathtaking way, but it was her full lips curving into a smile she tried to hide any time she glanced at her phone that made her irresistibly beautiful. Her knee bounced slightly under the little table, like

she couldn't contain either excitement or anxiousness as she waited for whoever it was she was meeting.

"Your call, Ethan," Asher said, drawing me back to the game.

Gareth glanced over his shoulder, noting the woman I'd been shamelessly staring at before turning back around in his seat. "She more interesting than your hand?" he asked.

"Maybe," I said as I called his raise, eternally grateful my friends had dropped the more sensitive subject of my current shit-show and moved on to simpler things.

"That's a first," Crossland said, folding his cards.

"I call Gareth's raises all the time."

"Not that," Crossland said before waving toward the window and the blue-eyed beauty beyond. "You've brought multiple women to these games, some of them electing to perch on your lap the entire time, and *they* never distracted you, let alone a stranger who doesn't even know we're in here."

Doyle folded his cards, more interested in his drink than the hand.

Weston followed, more interested in my hand than his.

"I'm not distracted," I said, watching Asher as he folded his cards and then dealt the flop.

Two hearts and a spade came out, but nothing that would beat my pair of kings yet.

"Bet," I said, tossing in a chip worth my 1963 Rolex Daytona.

“Call,” Gareth said immediately, throwing in an equivalent chip.

Asher burned and turned another card.

Six of clubs. I was still safe, so I bet.

Gareth called.

Light, effortless laughter filled the space in the corner of the room where Daisy and Brynn sat chatting. Asher and Weston looked like absolute fools as they glanced over at their fiancées, their eyes going all glossed over like they did every time they saw them.

“Now who’s distracted?” I asked, and Asher blinked out of his love-daze.

I didn’t blame either of them. I’d been there once before—a love-struck man with nothing on his mind but the girl of his dreams—right until the point she stabbed me in the fucking heart.

Love was a painful game I’d decided never to play again.

Easier to stick to poker and material bets that didn’t hold the same value as matters of the heart. But even knowing that, I was happy for my friends. They were lottery winners, matching up with partners who fit and loved them, who had no intentions of ever betraying them.

Not everyone was that lucky. Some of us had to take love for what it was—harsh, cruel, and not worth the pain. That’s why I kept myself away from the relationship games and stuck with consensual, agreed-upon nights of fun. Nothing more. And that’s why, just like now, they constantly gave me shit about it.

Asher dealt the river, the last card on the board turning up a heart.

Shit.

If Gareth had been hunting for the heart, he'd hit his flush, which would fuck my pair, but he wasn't usually one to chase. He was cold, calculated, and methodical in every aspect of his life, including poker. He most likely had a high pocket pair too and was hoping *I* hadn't been chasing the hearts.

I tossed in a moderate bet to see where I stood.

After a few seconds of studying each other, he pulled out a blank chip, twirling it between his fingers while he contemplated what to raise me with.

Movement flickered through the one-way glass, catching my eye. The woman had stood up to take off her jacket, placing it over the back of the chair.

Fuck me, she was gorgeous. A soft black shirt hugged her generous curves, a pair of jeans cinched tight against hips that begged to be gripped, and that fucking smile she gave her server was so damn bright—all ease and hope and light.

“Don't,” Weston said. “She looks way too nice for your asshole nature.”

I laughed, shaking my head.

“It's true,” Asher agreed. “I don't know how you get so many women when you're out there breaking baseball bats and getting yourself tossed from games left and right.”

“That was *one* time,” I argued as I took a sip of my drink.

They were treating me like they always did, despite the deep shit I was in, and I appreciated that. The stakes were

high. If I didn't get my anger in check, I could lose the team I worked my ass off for.

“And the umpire was being a dick. Besides,” I continued. “I'm not an asshole to women. They know where they stand with me from the start, and most are more than happy to abide by the boundaries I set. It's not my fault you two fell head over heels with the first women you saw,” I teased, winking back at Daisy and Brynn, who shook their heads at me. “Cross, man, back me up here.”

Crossland raised his hands. “You know I'm with you,” he said. “No need for relationships when you have endless entertainment at your fingertips.” A smug as hell smirk flashed over his face as he looked at Gareth, who was still working on his bet. “But,” he continued. “I would be shocked as hell if you could get a woman to actually like you,” he said.

“They all like me,” I argued.

“No, I mean *actually* fall for you for more than just a night.”

I scoffed. “If I wanted that, I could easily make a woman fall for me for weeks, months even. I've just never tried.” Not since my heart was torn to shreds. What was the point of letting someone else get that close again only to open myself up for that kind of pain?

“That sounds like a bet,” Crossland said, eyeing Gareth, who cocked a brow at me.

“It *did* sound like a bet,” Gareth said, tilting his head. He finally scribbled something over the blank chip and tossed it right in front of me.

I furrowed my brow, taking a second to read his handwriting. “You're fucking kidding me,” I said.

“You don’t have to call,” Gareth said, smirking. He leaned back in his chair, folding his arms behind his head, showing off more of the ink over his muscles like that was supposed to intimidate me.

It didn’t. But only because he was my friend. I’d never want to be on the wrong side of his opinion.

“You’re serious?” I asked, wanting to clarify. “This isn’t a usual bet.”

Gareth shrugged. “Maybe I’m bored.”

“Our monthly games getting a little slow for you?” Crossland asked, sipping his drink. “I can see how betting millions and flying with no safety net is pale compared to your previous life.”

Gareth shot Cross a warning glare, but Cross just smiled right back at him. The guy was fearless, maybe recklessly so, but there was no danger here. Not between us.

Doyle, on the other hand? Gareth had his number since the second he’d weaseled his way into our game, and maybe that was the reason Doyle shut up about my very public mistake the second Gareth had shot him a look. Maybe he’d learned that we wouldn’t put up with his bullshit.

“What’s the bet?” Brynn asked, curiosity flickering over her features as she hopped up from her spot and leaned over Weston to read the chip. She gasped.

“What is it?” Daisy asked, following her to read it. “Oh, this game just got *really* interesting.”

“Really?” I asked, looking at them. “I figured you two would be absolutely against this.”

They shared a glance, the women already having some secret connection that none of us could ever interpret.

“It’s giving *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* vibes,” Daisy offered, and I cocked a brow at her in question. “It’s a rom-com,” she explained. “You should absolutely watch it. But this bet is one-sided,” she continued. “Making a woman fall in love with you in three months or you have to give ten million to Gareth’s favorite charity? It seems like a win-win to me.”

“This isn’t one of your romance novel plots, Daisy,” I said, a laugh coloring my tone. “It’s my life. It’s someone *else’s* life.”

“You seem to be under the impression that I believe you can make her fall for you,” Daisy fired back, a playful smile on her lips. Asher grinned, smoothing his hand down her back in approval.

“Brynn,” I said, turning to focus on her. “Surely you’ll be my voice of reason.”

Brynn studied me for a moment, then grinned. “Let me ask you something,” she said, raising her brows at me. “Would you act differently?”

“What do you mean?”

“Would you put on a façade to get the girl in question to fall for you?”

“Do I look like the theater type?” I asked.

She laughed, shaking her head. “Never have been since I’ve known you.”

“Then that answers your question,” I said. I wasn’t one to hide a thing—not my temper, my passion, or my weakness for milkshakes, and I wouldn’t start now.

“Jesus Christ,” Doyle grumbled, pushing away from the table. “If I could call a clock on you, I would. This is ridiculous.”

“No clocks in this game,” Crossland fired back. “Get the fuck out if you can’t be patient.”

Doyle waved him off, grumbling about going to get a drink. Serenity, his dutiful daughter, wavered in her customary seat behind him.

“You don’t have to follow him,” Gareth said in that low and stern way of his, as if he had the authority to tell her what she could and couldn’t do for her father.

Doyle was an old school, misogynistic prick who treated his only daughter like a possession meant to obediently serve him, and that was just what *we* saw. I couldn’t imagine how he treated her when there wasn’t anyone watching, and Gareth looked like he thought the same.

Serenity locked eyes with Gareth, something shifting between them that even had me looking away. I wasn’t sure if she was terrified of him or intrigued by him. I could only tell it was powerful. Either way, it wasn’t any of my business until Gareth or she made it my business, so I focused back on Brynn, but couldn’t *not* hear Gareth’s disappointed sigh as Serenity left the room, most likely heading after her father.

“What if you fall first?” Brynn asked, drawing attention away from whatever that moment with Gareth and Serenity had been.

“I don’t fall in love.” I cocked a brow at her. Never again. “Which makes this bet seem entirely unfair.”

“What if you did?” she asked, rolling her eyes.

I leaned back in my chair, contemplative. There was no part of me that wanted that life again—the one where I couldn't wait to see the other person, couldn't wait to please her, couldn't wait to make her proud, only to be crushed by her in the end. Granted, I'd been in college, but the scars still rubbed me raw on nights I felt lonely even when I tried not to admit that to myself.

“I don't even think I'm capable of falling in love,” I admitted. “But if I did, I'd tell her. I'd be honest about it.”

Brynn nodded, flashing me a sympathetic look. I knew Weston and Asher kept nothing from them, and they likely knew all about my tragic past, but that was fair. I wouldn't expect them to keep secrets for me. Besides, it had been a pretty public break-up that only gained more attention in how I responded in the aftermath.

I swallowed hard, hating the flickers of old pain that radiated up my chest. The doubt that crept into my mind in hollow moments where I questioned if I was someone who was worth loving in the first place.

“If she falls for you,” Brynn continued. “Would you give it a chance? Would you be open to the relationship, or would you just be in it for the bet?”

“I get what you're saying,” Weston chimed in. “But I'm not liking where this bet is going. This isn't a penthouse in London, it's an actual person's life.”

“All is fair in love and war,” Gareth said, tension ticking in his jaw that I knew had nothing to do with the bet and everything to do with the beautiful innocent blonde that had just left the room.

“I’d be open to it,” I blurted out the answer to Brynn’s question before I could give myself more time to think about it.

I wasn’t lying. I would be open to it, but the chances of me finding someone I could trust again, someone I could give my wrecked heart to again...they were slim.

Brynn gave a *see* look to Weston before smiling at me. “Then I say go for it.”

I laughed, shocked that the girls were in support of a bet like this, but to their credit, they’d made sure I was sincere about it before giving their blessing.

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” I said after studying Gareth for a couple more minutes, scribbling down my agreement to his bet on one of my blank chips. “I’m going to beat him anyway,” I said, tossing in my chip and turning up my cards. “I don’t put you on aces,” I said, showing my pair of kings. “And I highly fucking doubt you were chasing the hearts.”

Gareth grinned like the ruthless fucker he was, turning over two hearts.

“*Dick*,” I snapped.

“You’re right,” he said, raking in the chips. “I rarely chase.”

“But you did tonight,” I said, shaking my head. “Why?”

“Like I said,” he answered, grinning at me. “I’m bored.”

“Omigod,” Daisy said, bouncing up and down behind Asher. “You have to...*omigod*.”

“Remember what we talked about,” Brynn warned. “Don’t be nefarious.”

I laughed at that, shaking my head. “I should just give your charity the ten million now.”

“What happened to your confidence?” Crossland mocked me.

“I still have it,” I fired back. “But let’s be real. I’m going to stick to my word and be myself.”

“No one could ever actually love you.” My ex’s words rang loud and clear in my head, threatening to steal all the bravado I’d worked up for my friends. The same mask I liked to hide behind so no one would truly see how lonely I was.

“Who’s it going to be?” I asked, pushing away from the table, sliding my hands in my pockets as a drop of adrenaline slid down my spine.

Fuck, was I really going to do this?

Gareth glanced over his shoulder. “Her.”

“Oh, shit,” Weston said as Gareth pointed out the beautiful woman who’d held my attention all night. “Gareth,” he continued. “She looks so...”

“Sweet.” Brynn finished for him.

I gaped at both of them. “I’m not a monster.”

“I believe I hold that title,” Gareth said, arching a brow at us.

“I never said you were,” Brynn said.

“I have full confidence in you,” Daisy added, a wide smile on her face. “Also, give me *all* the details whenever you want. This stuff is gold to me.”

I shot her a warning look, and she returned the gaze with an unabashed challenge that helped ease some of the tension

gathering in my chest.

Fine. This would all be fine.

It was clear none of them believed I could hold a woman's interest longer than a night anyway, so even if I managed to entertain her for a week, it would be a win. Not a technical win, since I had to make her fall in love with me, but even I didn't believe I was capable of that.

Not that they needed to know that.

"Clock is ticking," Crossland egged me on, and I flipped him off before I slipped on my suit jacket and smoothed it out.

I leaned down in front of Crossland. "You know I'm going to repay you for putting this idea in his head, don't you?"

"I look forward to it." Cross raised his drink. "Good luck."

I laughed, shook my head, and made my way out of the private room.

The atmosphere immediately shifted the moment I stepped into the busy restaurant. Music pumped from hidden speakers combining with chatter from the patrons, filling the space with an excited energy that was drastically different than our calm, quiet room.

I couldn't take my eyes off the woman as I walked straight for her table. I wasn't sad Gareth had chosen her as the subject of this bet, especially since I'd been thinking of excuses to speak with her all night.

But then again, the thought of allowing her—or any woman—to get to know the real me was about as terrifying as the lava-chasing Weston wanted me to do last year.

"Is this seat taken?" I asked, motioning to the empty chair across from her.

Her blue eyes fluttered up to mine with a curious, confused glance before she checked her phone. “You’re not Tray Rollins,” she said, furrowing her brow, which made the cutest little wrinkle form between them.

“Can’t say that I am,” I said.

She looked from her phone to me and back again. “Definitely not blonde or six feet.”

“I’m six-four actually,” I said, gripping the back of the chair. “It looks like Tray is late.”

“More than,” she said with a sigh.

“His loss is my gain,” I said, and she arched a brow at the line. “May I sit?”

“That depends,” she said, sitting her phone face down on the table.

“On?”

“If you can correctly answer three questions.”

A laugh ripped from my lips, and I folded my arms over my chest. “What is this, a riddle to get across a private bridge?”

“Are you saying I’m a troll?”

My mouth parted open, shock slashing through me. “Of course not,” I hurried to say. “I only meant—”

Her laugh cut over me, warm and rich and absolutely addictive. “God, you should see your face. I’m fucking with you,” she said.

I blinked a few times, laughing as I tried to keep up.

“Anyway,” she said, her smile brightening so much it took my breath away. “Ready?”

“Fine,” I said. “Shoot.”

“Cats or dogs?”

“Dogs,” I said, nodding at the rapid fire. “Nothing against cats. I just like an animal that can go on a run with me or save me if I’m drowning.”

She pursed her lips. “Romance or true crime?”

“True crime,” I answered honestly. “Romance after as a palate cleanser.”

Something flickered in her blue eyes at that response, and I instantly wanted to put that look on her face as often as possible.

“Okay,” she said. “Ready for the most important one?”

I swallowed hard, shifting where I stood, wondering what the hell was going to come out of her mouth next and loving that I didn’t have a clue.

“Hurricanes or Braves?”

My eyebrows shot up at the reference to my team. She didn’t know who I was. How was that possible with the media fire I was currently under?

“Hurricanes,” I said. “No question.”

Her smile widened, and then she nodded.

“Did I pass the test?”

“You may sit.”

I sank into the chair, unbuttoning my suit jacket as I leaned forward. “Are you a Hurricanes fan?”

“Absolutely,” she said. “It’s a *must* for my questions list,” she continued after taking a sip of her drink. “It’s okay if

you're not a baseball fan, but it definitely hinders conversations if you don't like my team."

"Your team," I said, laughing as heat slashed through my veins. Who the hell was this woman?

"Yes," she said without hesitation. "The Hurricanes and I have a long-standing relationship. Something I rarely do."

Another laugh stumbled from my lips. "If you're not one for relationships, why were you waiting on a date from an app?"

"Judging?"

"Not at all," I amended. "Just curious."

"Dating apps aren't always for relationships," she said. "They're for whatever your profile says you're looking for."

"And what are you looking for..." I tilted my head. "What's your name?"

"You first."

"Ethan," I said.

"Alexandra," she answered.

"Alexandra," I said, testing the name out on my tongue.

She visibly swallowed, reaching for her drink again.

"So, Alexandra," I said again. "What is it that your profile says you want?"

"Are you actually interested?" she asked.

"Wouldn't be sitting here if I wasn't."

She studied me for a second, then the smile returned. "I don't do relationships," she said. "Not for longer than thirty

days, usually.” She shrugged. “Think of me like a nice apartment you lease month-to-month.”

I laughed at the joke, knowing a defense mechanism when I saw it. “If you want me to leave you alone, all you have to do is say so.”

“I wouldn’t have let you sit if that was the case,” she said. “Why did you come over here, anyway, Ethan?” she asked, propping her chin on her fist, looking at me with rapt attention. It was cute as hell.

“My friends bet me ten million that I couldn’t make you fall in love with me,” I said bluntly, and she laughed so hard her head tipped toward the ceiling. She wiped beneath her eyes as she returned her focus to me.

“That’s a good one,” she said, reeling in her laughter. “You’re surprising,” she said. “I’ll give you that.”

I couldn’t stop the grin that shaped my lips as I looked at her. She was so free, so unapologetically her, and we’d barely spoken over ten minutes.

“Can I call you?” I asked after a few seconds passed.

“In the effort to make me fall for you?” she asked.

“Absolutely.”

“I wasn’t joking,” she said, swiping her phone and pushing it toward me. “It’s only fair you read this before I answer. Tray knew the rule because he read the profile, probably the reason he stood me up.” She shrugged, finishing her drink as I picked up her phone and zoomed in on a specific section of her dating profile.

Looking For: Nothing serious. I don’t do long-term. The only relationships I’m interested in are fun, easy, real, and are

on a month-to-month basis. My job and volunteer work consume most of my free time, but I'll give you what I have. Not looking for love, just companionship. Preferably someone who loves dogs, baseball, and milkshakes.

Holy shit.

She wasn't kidding. She actually had that written in her dating profile.

"I—"

"It's okay," she said, plucking the phone out of my hand and pocketing it. She'd stood up while I was reading. "No harm, Ethan," she continued. "My style isn't for everyone." She winked at me. "Happy hunting."

She spun on her heels, disappearing through the doors without a second glance, leaving me sitting there with my mouth parted open, completely baffled. She'd even left cash on the table for her drink.

What were the odds Gareth picked someone who seemed to be anti-love in all the ways I was, too?

This was going to be harder than I thought.

But fuck me if I didn't want to try, anyway.

I reacted without thinking, chasing after her and catching her just outside the building. "Alexandra!" I called after her, and she halted at the corner of the building. "Wait," I said once I caught up to her. "What do I have to do to get your number? Answer more questions?" I smiled down at her, loving the way the light of the moon cast her blue eyes in an alluring silver glow.

She tilted her head, but her full lips were trying and failing to hold back a smile. "I won't fall in love with you," she said.

“Shouldn’t you look for someone else for your fake bet?”

“It’s not fake,” I assured her.

She gave me a *yeah, okay* look. “Sure, everyone bets ten million on a whim.”

“My circle does.”

“Interesting,” she said. “Money means nothing to me, so the line is falling flat.”

Fucking hell. “What do I have to do to not fall flat?”

I was prepared to stand here all night and answer every question she threw at me if it earned me her number.

She studied me for a moment, her eyes tracing the lines of my face and down over my chest, then back up again. “Here,” she said, something clicking behind her eyes as she handed me her phone. “Put your number in there. If you pass the next test, I’ll call you.”

I typed my number in her phone at rapid speed, then added my contact info to her favorites list. “Done,” I said, handing back her phone. “What’s the next test?”

“Kiss me,” she said.

“What?”

“Kiss me.” She shrugged. “We may as well see if we have chemistry now. No need to waste each other’s time if we don’t.”

Holy shit. She was a spitfire, and I was shocked as hell at how much I liked it.

I glanced around for any spectators who may have spotted me. The last thing I wanted was for her to be recorded just because she was speaking with me.

“You afraid of a little PDA?” she asked. “Because that’s totally fair,” she said, then gently grabbed my hand. “Here.” She tugged me around the corner of the building, the small alleyway there covered in shadows. “Better?”

“Are you sure?” I asked, the blood pumping hot in my veins. This girl had immediately worked her way under my skin in the best way. “One kiss and I might win the bet.”

She laughed again. “Only one way to find out.”

Fuck, I’d never been so put on the spot before or been met with such open, carefree honesty before either.

“Tell me again,” I said, walking into her space until her back gently touched the brick wall of the building.

“Kiss me,” she said, tipping her chin up to meet my gaze as I placed an arm on either side of her, caging her in. She glanced down at the phone in her hands and clicked something on the screen. “Thirty seconds,” she said. “That’s all we need.”

Heat streaked through my veins, anticipation pulsing through every inch of my body. This wasn’t normally how I did things, but I suppose there was nothing normal about this bet either. And besides, she seemed just as certain she wasn’t capable of falling in love as I was sure I wasn’t someone who could be loved.

But that didn’t stop me from sliding my hand across her cheek, reaching around to gently grip her neck, drawing her flush against me. A little surprised gasp escaped her lips, and I inched mine down toward hers, never losing her eyes, gauging her reaction as I held us both there. Electric charges crackled everywhere our bodies touched, and even though we were fully clothed, I could feel how fucking pliant she was against me.

I worked my fingers into the strands of her long black hair, gently tugging until her mouth met mine, slow at first, soft and explorative.

Then her fingers gripped my shirt and pulled me closer, and I lost all restraint.

I crushed my mouth against hers, and she parted her lips, opening for me. I licked into her mouth, relishing the taste of lime on her tongue. She whimpered as I pressed my thigh between hers, my free hand snaking around to hold her lower back as I kissed and licked and sucked every inch of her lips and mouth I could reach.

Fuck, she was like a shot of pure ecstasy. Her little whimpers and frantic fingers clenching my shirt had my dick aching to sink into her. And this was just a kiss. Where the hell did my control go?

Alexandra had stolen it, plain and simple. With her soft, full lips, and her fast, no-holds-barred attitude that had me dying to know what she'd do next.

I teased the roof of her mouth with my tongue before gently sucking her bottom lip—

An alarm rang, the shrill sound breaking us apart.

She pulled her phone from her pocket, silencing the alarm before smiling up at me. “Time’s up,” she said.

I smoothed my thumb over her flushed cheek. “Are you going to call me?”

Her smile deepened, but she ducked under my arm, walking back toward the main sidewalk along the building. “We’ll see,” she said, but the fire in her eyes told me everything I needed to know.

I followed her out of the alleyway, sliding my hands into my pockets as I watched her wait for the crosswalk light to change.

“Are you sure I can’t buy some more time?” I asked.

She glanced over her shoulder, flashing me a challenging look. “You can’t buy time,” she said.

“Want to bet?” I asked. “Name your price.”

She laughed, shaking her head. “Still trying to get me to fall in love with you?”

I swallowed hard as anticipation blazed across my skin. Fuck, just standing here talking to her was like waiting for an explosion to go off. One I wanted to be a part of.

“What if I am?” I finally asked.

The crosswalk light changed, and she walked backward across it. “Then you’re playing a losing game.” She winked at me before spinning around.

“You’re going to call me!” I called playfully after her.

“If I have *time!*” she called back, all tease and just the hint of desire in her voice.

I stood there smiling like an idiot as I watched her until she was out of sight.

She’d call.

And I couldn’t fucking wait until she did.

Alexandra

“He stood you up?” Nora—one of my best friends—asked as we sat at my small dining room table.

I shifted the coffee mug in my hand, bringing it to my lips.

“Yes, he did,” I answered before taking a sip of the hot liquid. I took a deep breath, using the first sip to center myself for our early morning ritual.

“What a prick,” Ella—my other best friend—said from where she was crunching on a celery stick across the room, raiding my fridge like she always did. She came to sit down next to Nora and me. “Did you set up a date with someone else?”

“Not exactly,” I said, peeling the wrapper from my cinnamon muffin.

We had exactly fifteen minutes before Nora and Ella would head to school and I’d start my work-from-home day. Nora was a third-grade teacher, Ella a nurse at the same school, and we all lived in the same apartment complex. Having coffee together was a daily ritual of ours we rarely broke, and since our schedules were always packed, it was the only time we could catch up.

I took a bite before shaking my head. “I didn’t have time for him anyway,” I said. “It was silly for me to think I could

manage a date, especially when the next few months are packed for me with a new client and the ASPCA.”

Except I would’ve made time for the date, if he’d shown.

But I wasn’t all that surprised. Sometimes my relationship boundaries weren’t what people were looking for, and I could totally respect that. That’s why I was up front when I’d created my dating profile after Nora and Ella had talked me into it a year ago. I’d been single for three years before that, thanks to my last very toxic and abusive relationship. The very thing that gave me no interest in ever allowing myself to get lost in a man ever again.

“Wait,” Ella said. “What do you mean, *not exactly*?”

A pair of light gray eyes flashed in my mind followed by a confident smirk and a kiss I could still feel the remnants of on my lips.

Damn it, that was the *tenth* time I’d thought about Ethan—the mystery man who’d entertained me for a few blissful minutes after I realized I’d been stood up.

Heat flowed through my veins at the memory of his laugh, the shock in his eyes every time I lobbed a question at him, as if he wasn’t used to people surprising him. The way he filled out his no doubt two-thousand-dollar suit in a way that should be illegal.

He’d given me his number, and I was definitely going to use it tonight, and not because he was mouthwateringly gorgeous, but because he’d met my rapid-fire conversation without hesitation. He’d kept up and didn’t stumble, even when I’d thrown the kiss-test his way, which he passed with flying colors. Plus, he was funny and a Hurricanes fan. All wins in my book.

“Whoa, what is that look?” Ella studied me, her eyebrows raising.

“What look?” I asked, scraping up the empty muffin wrapper and carrying it to the trash.

“You have a look,” Ella said, turning in her chair so she could keep her eyes on me.

“And you’re not answering her question on purpose.” Nora furrowed her brow, then grinned. “You *do* have a look.”

“I don’t have a look,” I argued, but even I knew it was pointless. Every time I thought about the mystery man, I got butterflies, complete with a goofy grin on my face. God, we’d spent only ten minutes together and shared *one* kiss, and I couldn’t get him out of my head. What was wrong with me?

“Don’t lie to us,” Ella said. “Especially when we only have two minutes left before we have to leave for work. Spill.”

I rolled my eyes, grabbing my mug from the table, draining the rest of the contents before washing it in the sink. “It’s nothing,” I finally admitted. “A guy.”

“That’s not nothing,” Nora said, joining Ella as they met me by the sink after clearing their trash. “Who was he?”

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. “His name was Ethan. He was incredibly gorgeous. Like, just walked off the pages of GQ gorgeous.”

Nora and Ella sighed with appreciation.

“He was funny,” I said, unable to stop my grin. “He said his friends had bet him ten million that he couldn’t get me to fall in love with him,” I continued, chuckling. “I’ve never heard that line before. It was cute.”

My friends laughed too.

“One minute,” Ella said. “Finish the story.”

“I might have given him the kiss-test,” I said sheepishly.

“Omigod, he must’ve been intriguing,” Nora said. “You haven’t done that in forever.”

“No guy has made it that far in forever,” I said. Both my friends knew the reasoning behind my rules surrounding relationships.

“What happened after the kiss?” Ella asked.

“Nothing,” I said. “I went home.”

“Alone?” Nora teased.

“Yes,” I said. “Very much alone.”

Even though every cell in my body had begged me to drag him home with me. God, he’d made me melt with just a kiss. I could still feel that raw ache inside me right now, begging to be soothed. I had an amazing imagination, and I’d played out several scenarios on just what else Ethan would be capable of with a mouth like that.

“He got to you, though,” Ella said. “I can tell.”

I shrugged. “He was a Hurricanes fan.”

Nora laughed. “So is all of Charleston, there’s more.”

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. “There was something about him. Maybe it was the fact that he showed up and saved me from a waste of one of my free nights. You know I don’t have many of those.”

And for good reason. The busier I stayed, the more I could help others. Plus, if I didn’t stand still for too long, the memories didn’t come back to haunt me as often. Even acknowledging the thought now had my throat closing a

fraction, panic trickling through me as if my ex would stomp through the door and remind me of my proper place.

“Time’s up,” Ella said, and we all took a collective deep breath. We absolutely loved our jobs, but there was something to be said about micro-meditation right before the day started. “You’re going to call him tonight, aren’t you?”

I bit back my smile.

“Oh, she totally is,” Nora said before I could answer. “Look at her. She has stars in her eyes.”

“I do not!” I said, opening my door for the two of them. “You’re both going to be late.”

“We’re right on time,” Ella chided as they headed into the hallway outside my apartment. “I want all the deets later.”

“Same,” Nora said.

“We’ll see,” I said. “I have to meet my new client at the coffee shop down the road in thirty minutes. My company flagged it as a high-profile case, hence the in-person meeting as opposed to online. I may be too exhausted to even remember last night.”

“Oh, high-profile this time? That’s intense,” Ella said, wrapping me in a hug. “Deep breaths. You’re the best, that’s why they assign you the tough ones.”

I squeezed her back, then Nora. “You two are the actual heroes,” I said. “Have fun with a room full of eight-year-olds and a school full of kiddos.”

They both saluted me, and I closed the door behind them, slowly finishing my morning ritual of getting ready. I was out the door with ten minutes to spare, showing up at my favorite coffee shop so I could peruse the profile my company had sent

over for my new client. I hadn't had a second to read it last night, knowing my brain was nowhere near focused enough to give it the proper attention it deserved. Armed with a clear head and a coffee being made by the barista now, I headed to a two-top table and swiped open my phone to read.

“Alexandra?”

Every nerve in my body stood at attention at the sound of that voice—smooth, deep, and a dash of surprise.

“Ethan?” My lips parted as I found him striding toward my table, looking as expensive as his jokes in a navy-blue suit that looked specifically made for his body. God, who looked like that at seven-thirty in the morning?

“What are you doing here?” I asked, suddenly wondering if he'd somehow followed me here. I immediately dismissed the idea, not sensing any of my well-tuned red-flag gauges going off.

“I have a meeting,” he said, brow furrowed. “I'm early—” His phone rang, and he gave me an apologetic look that I waved off as he answered it. “Declan,” he said. “Yes, I'm here. What was the name again? Mr. Kinder?”

Shock jolted my system at the sound of my last name.

Oh no.

No, no, no.

“*Ms.* Kinder?” he asked into the phone.

Jesus in a rainbow hat. I hurried to open my phone, frantically opening the file my company had sent me last night. A short-notice case that was given top priority for a Mr....

No fucking way.

Mr. Ethan Berkley.

“Thanks, Declan,” Ethan said, hanging up and pocketing his phone. “Sorry about that,” he said. “Are you all right?” he asked, clearly noticing the absolute shock playing out on my face.

I laughed.

There was nothing funny about this, but I laughed because I was nervous as hell.

Shit, laughing at the situation was wicked unprofessional, but so was fantasizing about my new client fucking me against a wall.

Shit, shit, shit.

I cleared my throat, straightening my spine.

“I’m fine,” I said, giving myself a few seconds to breathe and adjust to the situation. The one where the man who I’d kissed last night, who I’d gone home and fantasized about last night, the one I’d had every intention of calling tonight, was my new high-profile client.

Someone who needed my help because of his inability to control his anger.

God, I could sure fucking pick them.

I let go of any romantic notions, or at least I told myself I did, as I smiled up at him.

“Can I get you a coffee?” I asked. “I just need a few minutes to read through something and then I’ll be ready for the meeting.”

Ethan’s brow furrowed, his gray eyes churning as he tilted his head.

“Kinder,” I said, reaching out my hand in offering.
“Alexandra Kinder.”

He stepped away, eying my hand like I pointed a gun at him. “No.”

I pressed my lips together, offering my most sympathetic smile. “Yes.”

“You’re...” He shook his head, glancing behind him at the coffee shop’s doors as if a camera crew would bust in and say this was all a big joke. “You’re Ms. Kinder?”

“You can still call me Alexandra,” I said. “Or Alex. Whatever you prefer.”

He huffed a laugh, his shoulders dropping a bit.

“I’m going to get you that coffee now,” I said, studying him with eyes trained for emotional reaction. I’d gotten so good at it I could usually spot an outburst—or a lie—before it happened. He wasn’t at risk of an outburst, but he looked like he might bolt at any second.

“Black,” he said, still stunned as he sat at the table I’d been sitting at when he walked in.

“Got it,” I said, and a few minutes later I handed him the steaming cup before taking my seat across from him.

“I really do need the extra time to read the file,” I said. “But if you want to call the company and have someone else assigned to you, I’ll totally understand.”

His eyes met mine, hesitation written all over his features. After a few seconds, his expression smoothed out in a practiced way that showed me he was more than used to schooling his reactions in front of people.

Interesting.

I'd note it later.

"My team said you were the best," he said by way of answer. "Is that true?"

I shrugged. I wasn't one to lie or sugar coat things, but I was humble. "I'm pretty good at what I do."

"Don't be modest, Alex," he said. "I was told that there is no one with your particular talents in all of Charleston."

The way he said my name had warm shivers dancing over my skin.

Stop it. I chided my body, trying like hell to tell it that Ethan was no longer available in that regard. He was a client. That's all he could be...unless he wanted me in a different way and asked to be assigned to someone else. Then we might, possibly still—

"So, no," he continued without me responding. "I'm fine with proceeding, if you are."

He was fine with it?

Wow, I didn't expect that to hit me so hard in the stomach, but okay.

It was only one kiss, after all. Maybe he'd been drunk and barely even remembered it. Maybe it hadn't been as cosmic for him as it had been for me.

Fine, that was fair.

"All right," I said. "Let me just read—"

"Could you not?" he asked, showing just a small fraction of vulnerability. "Read my file in front of me?"

"Sure," I said, pocketing my phone and wrapping my fingers around my coffee cup. "I'm sorry. I didn't have time to

read it last night. I was—”

“Busy,” he said, his gray eyes churning with streaks of heat that made me shift in my chair.

I laughed, nodding. “Busy,” I said. “With your tongue in my mouth.”

Ethan spit the sip of coffee he’d just taken back into his cup, a nervous laugh tumbling from his lips. “Jesus,” he said.

I passed him a napkin. “*Alex*,” I clarified, which only made him laugh again.

He dabbed at his lips with the napkin, and damn it, I hated how my eyes lingered there, remembering exactly how he’d felt pressed up against me, his muscular thigh between my legs, pressing all of my buttons in exactly the right ways.

“You’re like this, even with clients?”

I raised my palms innocently. “Blunt honesty is the best way to build a foundation in any relationship,” I said. “Friendly, professional, or otherwise. It saves time.”

He nodded, studying me for a moment. “I’m gathering that’s what you care about most,” he said. “Time.”

“It’s a precious commodity,” I said. “More valuable than money.”

“To *you*.”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m well aware some people place money in higher regard. I don’t. Speaking of,” I said, glancing at my watch. “We’re officially on the clock.”

“Are we though?” he asked. “You haven’t even read my file.”

I pursed my lips. “That’s fair,” I said. “I was going to,” I continued. “Before you spotted me.”

“Ten minutes?” he fired back. “That’s all you need to analyze me?”

“God, no,” I answered. “I need way more time than that. We’ll need to fit me into your regular schedule,” I explained. “I’ll have to shadow you to learn your emotional triggers,” I said more sensitively. “It’s the only way I’ll be able to help create a plan and customize a tool box to help you.”

He blew out a breath, his eyes turning down toward his coffee. The move showed just a hint of shame. It was super common in people who struggled with anger issues, but they were harder on themselves than they should be.

“Wow,” he said, nodding more to himself than me. “All right,” he said. “Can we do one thing before we officially start? I mean, you still don’t know who I am.”

“Right. Like I said, I would’ve read your file this morning —”

“No, that’s not what I meant,” he cut me off. “I like that you don’t know who I am right now. Can we live in that moment a little longer?” he asked, lifting his coffee mug. “Treat this like...”

“A friendly coffee meeting?”

“I was going to say first date, but sure,” he teased.

I laughed, shaking my head. “Still trying to get me to fall in love with you?”

“Always,” he said instantly, and we both laughed.

“Not that there was a chance before,” I said, leaning over the table a little closer to him. “But now that’s definitely not a

possibility.”

“Not one to mix business with pleasure?”

“Never,” I said. “The client/coach relationship is intimate on its own without involving romantic feelings,” I explained. “I’m here to help you, Ethan. Help you heal and learn and grow into the version of yourself you want to be. I take that seriously, and would never let any feelings I may or may not have for you get in the way of that.” I sighed, leaning back. “If that’s an issue, the offer to assign you to someone else still stands.”

Ethan visibly swallowed, then shook his head. “I don’t have time to be reassigned to someone who isn’t the best.” He gave me a broken smile. “I need help.”

The admission looked hard to get past his lips, and warmth spread through my chest that he’d trusted me with it.

“That’s what I’m here for,” I said.

Silence stretched between us, the moment tense and crackling with all kinds of energy—charged, reserved, worried, excited. It all swirled together until this totally felt like a first date.

“Okay, so this is awkward,” I said, and Ethan laughed.

“Not at all,” he said sarcastically.

I took another drink of my coffee, then waved my hands. “Okay, let’s work on easy stuff.”

“Is anything easy with you?” he teased.

“Everything is easy if you adjust your mindset.”

“Should I be taking notes?” He grinned.

“Not today,” I said. “So, easy stuff. I’m Alexandra Kinder. I’ve been a life coach specializing in anger management for four years. I have a background in behavioral psychology and have helped over forty clients regain control of their lives. I love what I do, but I also volunteer as much of my free time as I can to charities I support, including the ASPCA. And during the season you can find me either at a Hurricanes home game or in front of my TV watching them on the road.” I took a breath and let it out slowly. “Okay, now you go.”

He shifted in his seat, undoing the button of his jacket like it was a nervous tick. “I’m—”

“Omigod, you’re Ethan Berkley!” A young boy jerked his hand out of his father’s and raced over to our table. “Dad! Dad! He owns the Hurricanes!”

“What?” I blinked a few times, feeling like I might fall off my chair.

Ethan gave me an apologetic look, then turned to smile down at the boy, then at the father who’d hurried over. “That’s me,” he said, and shook the little boy’s hand, then the father’s.

“We’re looking great this season!” the boy said. “Maddox Porter is going to pitch a no-hitter, I know it!”

“I love to hear that,” Ethan said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out his wallet. He handed the boy a small card, but I couldn’t make out the writing. “Next time you’re at a game, hand that to anyone at a concession stand and you can get anything you want.”

“Thank you!” the boy said, practically jumping up and down as his father gave his thanks as well before steering them away.

Ethan sat back down, silent as I stared at him.

“Say something?” he finally asked.

I didn’t know what to say. I had no idea the man I’d kissed last night had been the owner of my favorite baseball team, let alone my newest client. What TV show was I living in because whoever was scripting it had a fucking cruel sense of humor?

“Well, it’s a good thing we already established how much I can’t fall in love with you,” I said. “Because if we hadn’t, that little fact certainly would’ve done it.”

Ethan shook his head. “You don’t strike me as someone who falls for someone just because of what they do for a living. Besides, you said money doesn’t matter to you.”

“But baseball does,” I said, smiling at him.

He laughed, the sound rich and full of life in a way that made me wonder how he could ever have anger issues hiding beneath this approachable, irresistible surface.

“Falling for me is still on the table,” he teased.

“It’s really not,” I said. “So, Ethan, owner of *my* team, what else do you want to tell me about yourself? Feel free to be honest, blunt, whatever you need. I can handle it.”

He leaned over the table, lowering his voice. “You have the most kissable mouth.”

My heart hiccupped in my chest before I flashed him a chiding look.

“What?” he said, smirking as he settled back in his chair. “You said you could handle it.”

“Oh, I assure you, I can handle anything you throw at me,” I said confidently, even though my knees felt weak just from the way he’d shaped the words. “But you’re definitely trouble.”

“How can you tell?”

“Just one of my many talents.”

That smirk turned wolfish as he held his coffee before his lips. “I can’t wait to see what other talents you have.”

The flirtation hit its mark, making anticipation flare through the side of me who’d kissed him last night, but the professional side of me saw it for what it was—deflection. I hated how the two versions of myself battled for dominance, knowing that my professional side needed to win.

Because he’d said he needed help.

And I couldn’t do that if I was swooning over him every five seconds.

“We should go over your schedule,” I said, trying to bring us back to common ground. “When can I see you next?”

“How long do I have you for again?” he asked. “I don’t remember what my team said.”

His team. God, I thought he’d been joking when he said that, when he’d mentioned the ten-million-dollar bet to get me to fall for him. It seemed like a ridiculous pickup line, but now that I knew he was the owner of the Hurricanes, it didn’t seem so far-fetched.

“Three months,” I finally answered him.

“Three months,” he repeated. “We can start tomorrow. My publicist gave me your phone number,” he said. “I’ll text you.”

We both stood up from the table, tossing our empty coffee cups as we headed out the doors and lingered on the sidewalk.

“Do me a favor?” he asked as he headed toward a silver Aston Martin parked on the side of the road.

“What’s that?”

He opened the driver’s side door, leaning against it. “Google my name tonight before you read my file.”

“Why?”

Something dark flashed across his eyes before he slipped on sunglasses to hide it. “You might not want me as a...client anymore.”

I furrowed my brow. “You think I’m so easily scared off?”

He had no idea the shit I’d dealt with in my past, things no one should ever have to deal with. I highly doubted Ethan’s demons were anything close to the ones I still suffered with daily.

“We’ll see,” he said, falling behind the wheel. “Text me if you change your mind.”

“**W**here are you headed?” Crossland asked, his voice filtering through the speakers in my car as I navigated the roads.

“I’m not exactly sure,” I said. “A club, I think. What’s up?”

“You think? How do you not know?”

I shook my head, gripping the wheel as I made a right turn. “Because Alexandra didn’t give me the name of the club. She only texted an address, but she said we’d be dancing.”

Which didn’t make any sense at all. What kind of anger management coach used dancing as a method of control? I’d gotten her text earlier today and had been shocked as hell when she was giving me an address to meet her at as opposed to the text I was expecting—her telling me she’d assigned me to someone else.

Either she didn’t care about the shit-show that was my life right now or the kiss hadn’t meant enough to her to ask me to see someone else so she could keep seeing me.

And fuck me, that stung. Because I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about the kiss since the moment she left my sight that night. Seeing her the next morning as the life coach I’d

been assigned in order to keep my position as owner of the Hurricanes? That had been a blow I wasn't prepared for.

But she was the best—that's what the league commissioner and my team had found, and I needed the best if I was going to save my reputation, my career.

"It's five o'clock," Cross said, drawing me back to the conversation. "Who the fuck goes dancing at five? Isn't she supposed to put you on a leather couch and talk you through some breathing exercises?"

I laughed, nodding like he could see me. "That's what I assumed."

"Fucking what are the odds that the woman Gareth picked was your assigned coach?"

"Astronomical," I said.

"You could've immediately fired her in the hopes of dating her," Cross said.

"I considered it," I admitted. "Even gave her the option to pull the plug so we could keep exploring what we started."

"Damn," Cross said, a harsh laugh in his tone. "And she chose working for you over dating you? That's cold."

I didn't need him to remind me.

"It's fine," I said. "Three months will go by, I'll appease the league commissioner, and Gareth's favorite charity will be ten million richer. All a win."

"It's not over yet," he said. "You never know. Maybe she'll fall for you while fixing you."

I laughed at that. "I don't know if I can be fixed."

“Personally, I love your little outbursts,” Cross said. “Fucking entertaining as hell.”

“Glad I can amuse you,” I said. “Tonight certainly should be interesting.”

Honestly, I didn’t care if she wanted me to dance my anger issues away or if she wanted to analyze me—I just wanted to see her.

Which was inherently strange, seeing how originally she was supposed to be nothing more than a bet. A bet she’d *laughed* at when I told her about it the first night we spoke. She’d thrown her own boundaries at me right away, her blunt way of delivering things quickly working under my skin.

I liked it.

Liked the way she held nothing back. Most people walked on eggshells around me—minus my inner circle—and it was hard to get a read on where they truly stood with me.

Not Alexandra. She didn’t give an inch, and she seemed like she couldn’t care less about how much money I had—she’d barely even blinked at the sight of me getting into my Aston Martin.

It was refreshing, especially when most of the women I met were solely interested in what I could give them rather than what I offered as an individual. Not that I could blame them. As long as they were upfront about their interests, I was all for it. Always had been.

Well, not always, but since my ex, that’s the only way I’ve operated. Which was the exact reason I told Alexandra about the bet on night one. She may have laughed, but she had her own set of extreme rules for dating—rules that directly

conflicted with the goal of my bet. But I guess it really didn't matter now, since the dynamic had changed.

She was the key to me keeping my position as owner of the Hurricanes. That outweighed any bet I had with Gareth, despite how much it stung.

Not to mention the memory of her mouth beneath mine, her body soft and pliant against me, the way she'd whimpered when I'd slid my tongue between her lips haunted my every waking thought. I took things further in my dreams.

I needed to stop that shit now.

"Did you call to check on me, Cross?" I asked when he hadn't said anything else. "Or was there something you actually needed?"

"Wanted a progress report on the bet," he said, laughter in his tone. "This is the most epic of our bets, after all," he continued.

I rolled my eyes, turning left down another street. The navigation system was taking me south and a few blocks west.

Feminine laughter trilled in the background on Cross's end, and I furrowed my brow. "Where are you?"

"*Lucid*," he said. I recognized the name of one of Charleston's most popular clubs. "I was going to see if you wanted to meet up. Bring your date here. Let us meet her."

"It's not a date," I corrected him. "This is a session. Who's with you? And what the hell are you still doing here? Shouldn't you be back in Calgary?"

"I extended my stay," he said. "Visiting Bristol. Her and Briggs are here, and Gareth too. Ash declined my gracious invitation."

Damn. The offer was tempting. Crossland's sister was an amazing designer, but I'd always liked her for her ability to check Cross any time she could. It wasn't often Cross hung around longer than he needed to after our monthly games. Our responsibilities—teams, franchises, business deals—took us all over the place at any given time.

Missing a chance to hang with my friends definitely stung, but I wasn't ready to toss Alexandra into that part of my world just yet, despite her mentioning she'd have to monitor me in my environment soon. Like I was a fucking science experiment. Jesus, hopefully she'd keep that up and my fantasies revolving around kissing her other places would cease to exist. It would make it a hell of a lot easier if she did.

"Maybe next time," I said.

"You're not going to be able to hide her from us forever," he said. "Life coach or no."

"Let me get past the first few sessions before I subject her to your bullshit," I said.

Cross laughed. "Afraid she'll be more interested in me? I mean, you wouldn't really be able to blame her."

"Dick," I said, but I was smiling. We had a strict code—don't mess with each other's potential interests—and we stuck by it. But Cross enjoyed playing the field even more than I did, and sometimes he couldn't help himself. Women were naturally drawn to him, sometimes more than one at a time, and he somehow juggled them all and left them smiling, with no hint of developing a reputation as an asshole.

Nope, that title belonged to me. But there were worse things to be called, I suppose, and besides, I was only an asshole when it called for it—which was usually every other

day during the season. Or when bigot fans ran their mouth a little too loudly around me.

“If she deems you a lost cause early, meet up with us,” Cross said.

“Will do.”

I ended the call, shaking my head at my friend. He’d pay for this bet he concocted—regardless if I was destined to lose or not—and it would be so fucking funny when he did.

“What in the hell?” I asked aloud, my brow pinching as I followed the navigation system into the parking lot of a community rec center. I blinked a few times, double-checking the address before navigating through the crowded lot, finally locating a space near the back to park.

I slipped out of the car, locking it behind me while I scanned the area, realizing it had been ages since I’d been anywhere without valet. The notion made my stomach twist, and I made a mental note to check myself.

I hadn’t come from money, hadn’t inherited my wealth. I’d scraped and bled and worked my ass off to get where I was today. I would not become one of those out-of-touch billionaires who couldn’t relate with the real world.

My first job had been at a concession stand at Shipyard Park, for fuck’s sake. I could park my own damn car.

Nodding to myself, I straightened out the lapels of my suit jacket and walked confidently toward the building.

Butter-yellow streamers decorated the entrance, a few glittering green strands interwoven with the yellow to create an arch over the glass double doors. I cocked a brow, curiosity overtaking all other thoughts as I stepped inside.

What kind of anger management session was this? From what I'd read about, most were one-on-one sessions that operated almost like therapy, but with a focus on breathing and regulating emotions. Most certainly not whatever this was... but I suppose nothing with Alexandra was predictable.

"You came," Alexandra's voice sounded in the entryway, where she stood at a little table covered with blank nametags and a few spare markers.

A shoe box sat next to the markers, decorated with bright green construction paper with the word *donations* scrawled across the front, a little piece of paper explaining the donations were for iPads for the third-grade classes and new football uniforms for the seventh-grade classes.

"I was invited," I said, confusion still holding strong to my tone.

I glanced around the corner, the space blending into a gym illuminated by colored lights, music filtering through a little set of speakers resting on a fold-out table.

There were kids everywhere. Dancing or lingering against the walls. Running around, giggling and wild.

The woman had invited me to a middle school dance.

And I couldn't stop the laugh that left my lips as I turned my attention back to her. "This is the dance you were talking about?"

"My best friends are hosting," she explained, waving toward the gym where her friends must be. "Nora is a third-grade teacher and Ella is the school nurse."

"And this is a session?" I asked, utterly confused.

“Of course,” she said. “What else did you think it would be?”

I shrugged. “Dancing screams date to me.”

She visibly swallowed, her cheeks flushing slightly. Okay, so she wasn’t totally unaffected by me. Good to know.

“Still trying to get me to fall in love with you?” She grinned.

“Always,” I replied in the same way I had in the coffee shop. I’d be an asshole to pretend like I wasn’t, whether I thought the bet was moot now or not.

She laughed, shaking her head as she leaned over the table to write something on one of the blank nametags.

Fuck me, she looked stunning in a simple black dress that cut off just above her knees, revealing long legs, her delicate feet tucked into a pair of glittery pink flats. A little jacket covered her shoulders, her long black hair falling in waves over it.

I swallowed hard as she rounded the table, her bright blue eyes hesitant as she scanned my suit.

“Shoot,” she said, her hands dropping in front of her.

I noted my name written on the sticker and took it from her, peeling it off the protective backing.

“No, you can’t,” she said, trying to reach for the sticker. “That suit looks custom. It’s probably worth more than my car.”

“Hand-crafted Italian,” I said proudly, flashing her a smile as I stuck the name tag just beneath my right shoulder.

“Wow,” she said, biting back a smile. “Okay, then.”

I looked over my shoulder again, then back at her. “You said your friend teaches third grade.”

“Yes, I did,” she said, leaning casually against the little table.

“Those are not third graders,” I said, motioning to the dance happening behind me.

“Those are seventh graders,” I said. “They’re from Nora’s sister school.”

I pursed my lips. “Are you on a planning committee with them?”

She shrugged. “Yes, and no.” I raised my brows for her to elaborate. “I don’t have an official title,” she explained, and we had to move aside as two more kids came barreling through the doors, grabbing name tags and racing into the dance.

“I volunteer. A lot,” she continued. “Mainly wherever my friends need me, which is usually their school or other spots in the district. My job is fortunately super flexible. I also spend a ton of time at the local animal shelter. Anyway,” she said. “I don’t like sitting still.”

I scanned the gym, noting the two folding tables covered with green tablecloths and piled with snacks, drinks, and little gift bags. Two women were tending to it that I assumed were her friends. I didn’t spot many other volunteers. Something tugged at the center of my chest as I turned back to her.

“You did all of this for your friends?”

She nodded, a silent look like *of course* flashing in her eyes. “It’s a bonus for the guardians too,” she said. “Gives them a safe space to drop off their children for a few hours on a Friday night.”

“You weren’t kidding,” I said. “About not having a ton of free time.”

“If you haven’t noticed, I’m annoyingly honest,” she said, something like sadness flashing over her features for an instant before she smoothed it away.

I stepped closer to her, enough that I could reach down and tip her chin up where she’d dropped her eyes, urging her to look up at me.

“I don’t find it annoying,” I said, making sure she knew it. “And I’m not going anywhere.” Sure, I could’ve bolted at whatever unorthodox session this was and headed for a night at *Lucid* with my friends, but this was the only place I had an interest in being. “So, tell me how this first session works. How does this play into anger management?”

Her answering smile was worth whatever she was about to ask me to do.

“Like I mentioned at the coffee shop, I need to shadow you in a variety of environments,” she explained. “Your own normal routines and then, clearly, places you’d likely never be.” She motioned to the school dance happening in the gym. “It’s how I’ll be able to find your triggers.”

Fuck, wasn’t talking clinically about me supposed to turn me off? Then why the hell was I hanging on every damn word that left her luscious lips?

Get a grip, man.

“I know my triggers,” I said, my voice low. Something like shame coated me, making me feel uncomfortable in my own damn skin.

“You might know some of them,” she said, sympathy in her blue eyes. “But more often than not, I help people find

what's lying buried that is the source of the problem. Finding it will help us learn how to navigate it."

I glanced down at her skeptically, but folded my arms over my chest and shrugged. "Okay," I said. "What do you need me to do?"

"How do you feel about public speaking?"

"I'm fine with it," I said. "I've never had an outburst while in a board meeting."

"Noted," she said, nodding. "Still, would you mind running a game for me?" she asked. "Nora said she needed the help. She has everything set up over there," she said, pointing to a pile of ropes and a basket of yellow bandanas. "I just need you to get on the mic and help explain the game."

She quickly went over the game rules, which basically was to divide the kids into groups, blindfold them, and give each group a rope. The goal was for the teams to communicate to each other to create a perfect shape, whichever they agreed upon.

"I can do that," I said once she was done explaining.

"Awesome." she said, beaming. "Let's head over there." She squeezed my forearm as she brushed past me, her steps as bubbly as her tone. It was infectious as I followed her into the gym, the anticipation building in me as if I were about to hit a private, invite-only event—not an assignment constructed to test my anger trigger. Did she really think being around a bunch of kids would set me off?

I guess, it might for some people. It was insanely loud in the gym, with everyone trying to be heard over the other person. But nothing about this situation bothered me. She didn't have a clue about me, and maybe I wasn't her typical

client, but if this was how she needed to learn, then I'd do it. I'd do whatever it took to make the league commissioner happy. I couldn't lose my team. I'd worked way too hard for the position as owner, and it was by far my favorite job out of the many I held daily.

She introduced me to her friends—who were grilling me like I was a date instead of a client—before handing me the mic and the supplies, and we all got to work.

By the time the game was done, my head was buzzing with how many voices had spoken at once, but the kids did surprisingly well. It was a great team exercise, and I half-wondered if I should make my team do it. They'd been butting heads more often than not recently, and it was a real pain in the ass. These seventh graders seemed to have more composure than the twenty-six active players I had on the Hurricanes.

Even so, not one second of it—even when it had gotten intense—made me want to rage. I hadn't even balked under the scrutinizing gaze of Alexandra, intently watching me throughout every situation, her eyes calculating and cataloguing every little thing I did. I swear, in any other situation, I'd be extremely annoyed feeling like I was under the microscope, but the truth was, I *liked* her eyes on me.

Alexandra and I watched as Nora and Ella passed out prizes to every student, something they'd clearly planned regardless of the outcome of the game, and then after two more last dances, guardians started showing up in droves to pick up their kids.

After another thirty minutes, Nora and Ella went outside to say goodbye to the students and parents leaving the building, leaving Alexandra and me as the only two left in the gym,

staring at the aftermath of what was shockingly a really fun party.

Most everyone got their trash in the bins, but some was scattered along the gym floor, along with fallen streamers and crushed cardboard decorations. The snack table was a mess, with at least half of the drinks ending up soaking the vinyl tablecloths, little bits of the liquid dripping on the floor.

Alexandra headed toward the stray pieces of trash on the floor, bending to scoop them up and carrying them to the bin.

“Shouldn’t the cleaning crew do that?” I asked.

She laughed, a wonderful, bright sound that had heat snaking through my veins.

“I am the cleaning crew,” she said. “Why do you think my friends always invite me to these things?” she asked, holding up the trash before tossing it in the bin. “Free help,” she continued. “Plus, getting to use their stomping grounds as a session is a double bonus.”

“How’d I do?” I asked, peeling off my jacket and laying it over an empty chair so I could help.

“You really don’t have to help,” she said, her eyes locked on where I unbuttoned the sleeves of my shirt, rolling them to the elbows.

“I want to help,” I said, gathering the rest of the trash and tossing it in the bin.

“And there is no grade scale on the sessions,” she explained as we fell into a peaceful rhythm. “This is a how I get to learn more about you.”

“Throwing me into unexpected scenarios?” I asked for clarification.

“Yep,” she said. “In most cases, people would be overwhelmed by being forced into a gym full of wild kids.”

I furrowed my brow. “What if it had? Wouldn’t the guardians of the kids be upset to know you’re using their dance as an experiment?”

“Ouch,” she said. “But fair. I cleared it with all of them before I invited you. No one objected. I’ve volunteered in their classes often enough, doing presentations and sessions on emotion regulation. They knew I would never put their kids in danger.”

“Jesus,” I said, rolling my eyes. “I’m not dangerous.”

She raised her eyebrows at me. “The fan you assaulted might say differently.”

My lips parted, her words stealing the breath from my lungs. She stepped closer to me, not a hint of judgment in her features. “Do you regret it?”

I swallowed hard. “Do I regret punching a bigot in the mouth for spewing his hatred at one of my players?” I tilted my head, honestly thinking about it. “No.” I shrugged.

Alexandra pursed her lips, nodding. “So you think the cause justifies the reaction?”

“I think I can’t take it back, so it doesn’t matter.”

“Would you take it back if you could?”

I replayed the scene in my mind, hearing the fan spit his bullshit at my player, and I curled my hands into fists on instinct. “Nope.”

“Not even if it lost you the Hurricanes?” she asked.

I shook out my hands, blowing out a long breath. “I’m going to hunt down a mop,” I said instead of answering.

Because I didn’t have one. Obviously, if I lost the Hurricanes, it would be a blow I wouldn’t know how to recover from. But I was here—with *her*—to ensure that didn’t happen.

I heard Alexandra telling Nora and Ella that she’d lock up the building for them, telling them to go enjoy the rest of their Friday night as I found a mop in a custodial closet down the hall. I returned quickly and mopped up the mess of the drinks so the floor wouldn’t be sticky. We fell into a silent but comfortable rhythm, cleaning alongside each other, and before I knew it, we were done.

“So the owner of the Hurricanes is not only awesome with kids, but stays calm under unexpected pressure. He can also clean like the best of them,” she said, her tone all tease. “What else can you do?”

Kiss you and leave you panting.

Fuck me, I couldn’t stop the memory from forming in my mind. Couldn’t stop my eyes from falling to her full lips.

“Depends,” I said, instead of voicing my thoughts. This wasn’t a first date where terms had been set and I knew what I was getting at the end of the night. This was different. This was an anger management session and quite possibly still a betting situation, too.

Was I still hanging onto the notion of the bet? Of getting her to fall for me?

Maybe.

But it felt like more than that, had felt that way since she’d opened her mouth the second I’d walked up to her table. Had

felt that way since I'd spotted her laughing while helping her group of kids with the game, me unable to take my eyes off how free she looked, and how much joy she brought the people she'd dedicated her time to helping.

“On?”

I stepped closer to her, unable to stay across the room. “What you need me to do?”

Her lips parted open just slightly as she looked up at me, then something flashed behind her blue eyes and she spun *away* from me.

Shit. Real smooth, Ethan.

Life coach. Key to my success and gaining back a good reputation. That's what I needed to think of her as.

A slow tune played through the still connected speakers, and despite the pep-talk I'd just given myself, I asked, “Didn't you say one of your experiments with me included dancing?”

I opened my arms, flicking my fingers at her in a come-hither motion, and fuck me if she didn't fall right into my embrace. Jesus, the action was enough to send fire licking through my veins, but feeling her against me? That was enough to make my fantasies turn up another notch.

“I suppose I did,” she said, tipping her head to look up at me. “I owe you.”

She didn't hesitate to bring her body flush against mine as I moved us to the music, and she felt so warm and soft in my hands. She had this natural floral and woody scent that had me dipping my head to get a better breath of her, my mind racing with how well she fit against me, how easily we danced to the music. There was nothing awkward between us, no veiled movements or curious glances—we moved like we'd

done it a thousand times, and when her eyes met mine, they were open and inviting.

I splayed my hand on the flat of her back, holding her other hand with my free one before dipping her as the song came to a close. I held her there too, just because I could, just because I wanted to drink in the curves of her face, the way her lips were merely a breath away from mine.

Lips I wanted to explore again.

Lips I craved like my next breath.

Tension coiled between us as her eyes fluttered from mine to my mouth and back again, and I knew in that moment that there were zero thoughts of our client-coach relationship. This was a consuming chemistry I didn't fully know how to handle.

I quickly drew us upright, clearing my throat as I released her.

"How'd I do?" I asked.

"You did all right," she said, a clear tease in her tone.

"Just all right?" I asked. "Do you need me to show you again?" I held out my arms as another song started playing, but just as quickly, a soft alarm overtook the music on her phone.

"Time's up," she said, heading to the table and grabbing her phone. "I told Nora and Ella I would lock this place up."

I nodded, grabbing my jacket and the speakers, carrying them to her car. After stowing them, I couldn't help but lean against her opened driver door, bending slightly so I could hold her eyes from where she sat behind the wheel.

"What kind of situation are you going to put me in tomorrow?" I asked, dying to know.

I couldn't wait to see her again. Hell, I didn't even want to leave her side right now. The night was still young. We could absolutely track down a coffee shop and keep the night going. And knowing how badly I wanted to do just that was the exact reason I needed to let her go. To not ask her to stay with me.

"I get a more genuine reaction and experience if you don't know." She started her car.

"And when are you going to shadow me in my world?" I asked.

"Soon."

"So informative," I said, backing away enough to close her car door, but she had her window rolled down.

"I'm sure your team prepped you on my style," she said.

They had, but it was nothing like experiencing it in person. Her methods were unconventional, but they produced results. That's why she was so sought after.

"You really were amazing in there, Ethan," she said. "Thanks for helping my friends."

I nodded, knowing I should end the conversation, walk to my car, and try my best to stop the lingering need to be near her.

"But," she continued, and my heart clenched in my chest.

I'd heard way too many *buts* in my life for them to ever be a good thing.

I want to do this sponsorship with you, but your outbursts on the field make you and your team a liability.

I love you, but I'm sleeping with someone else.

“I need you to understand one thing very clearly,” she continued.

“Okay,” I said, my voice scraped raw. “What is it?”

“I mean this in the most respectful way...I won’t take it easy on you because you happen to own my favorite baseball team.”

A relieved sigh ripped from my lips, and I almost laughed, but there was nothing but seriousness in her eyes.

“I have to treat you like I would any other client, understand?” she asked, and the way she was determined to make this point crystal clear had something warm growing in my chest. “You don’t get special treatment because you’ve got money for days. I want to help you. I want to give you my best, and taking it easy on you wouldn’t be doing that.”

“Understood,” I said, smiling down at her. Fucking hell, this girl. She took the gloves off...hell, never put them on in the first place. And I loved it. I didn’t want to be coddled, didn’t want to be pet.

I needed help, and she was the one to give it to me, regardless of how badly I wanted to bend down and capture her lips between mine right now.

“Good,” she said, winking at me before she reversed out of her spot, leaving the parking lot without another word.

Alexandra

“**W**hat in the world?” I asked as I hurried to answer the pounding on my front door.

“Finally,” Ella said. “Took you long enough.”

I moved out of the way, allowing Ella and Nora to come in.

“It’s five-thirty in the morning,” I groaned. “We aren’t supposed to meet for a half hour.”

Ella waved off my point, pouring herself a cup of coffee that was on a timer to brew.

“Tell her,” Ella said, eyeing Nora over her coffee cup.

“Tell me what?” I asked, then raised my palm. “No. Coffee first.”

Ella rolled her eyes, but quickly poured Nora and me a cup. I took it, sipped the scalding hot liquid, and settled at my little kitchen table. “Okay,” I said, a little more awake. “Go.”

“I just got the most interesting call from Christina,” Nora said.

I furrowed my brow, searching my brain for the name. “The receptionist at your school?”

“Yep,” Nora said, all smiles.

“You’re way too excited for the sun not even being up yet,” I teased her, taking another sip of coffee.

“Oh, she has a reason to be,” Ella said, looking at her conspiratorially.

“What did she say?” I asked when Nora didn’t continue.

“She went in early today and there was a huge shipment waiting for all the third-grade classes,” she said.

“Oh, yeah?” I asked, settling back into my chair. “What was it?”

“iPads,” Ella answered for her.

Nora practically bounced in her chair. “Enough for *every* student.”

“What?” I asked, suddenly understanding all the way-too-early-morning excitement. “That’s amazing! Who? How?”

“That’s where it gets really interesting,” Ella said, wagging her eyebrows at me.

I looked between them. “What?”

“Ethan Berkley sent them. And if I had to bet, I would say the middle school got what they needed for their uniforms, too.”

My mouth parted open, shock and disbelief streaming through me. “You’re sure?”

Nora nodded, finally drinking her coffee.

“Holy shit,” I finally said, my heart expanding in my chest.

“Language,” Nora chided me with a laugh.

“It’s merited,” Ella said. “I thought you said he was going to be strictly a client now?”

“He is,” I assured them both, but they looked at me skeptically. “I swear.”

Then I cringed a bit, the memory of our dance flashing through my mind. It hadn’t exactly been an intimate dance, but it hadn’t been strictly professional either.

“Okay,” I admitted. “I’m still figuring out how to turn off my reaction to him.”

“Reaction?” Ella laughed, shaking her head. “That sounds like you’re allergic to him.”

I chuckled. “You know what I mean! Before he waltzed into the coffee shop and proclaimed himself as my latest client, I was more than ready to climb him like a tree,” I admitted. “Those feelings don’t just vanish because I want them to.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t ask him to be reassigned,” Nora said.

“I can,” Ella countered. “Did you see him in that suit? I’d want to spend as much time with him as I could, too. Hell, he comes with prizes and she’s only kissed him.”

“Omigod, it’s not like that,” I groaned. “I’m not exploiting him for his money. I didn’t ask him to do this.”

“We know,” Nora said, chiding Ella with a look.

A sudden burst of guilt hit me right in the stomach, and I sucked in a sharp breath. “Wait, did I unknowingly guilt him into this? Did me choosing this dance to test his reaction response for our first session somehow make this happen?”

“No,” Ella said immediately.

“There’s no way,” Nora added. “This is full proof of the saying *if he wanted to, he would.*”

I bit my lip, going over every exchange we had Friday night, wondering if my passion for helping the school bled over the socially acceptable norms and transformed into *begging*.

No, there was no way he'd interpreted it that way, right? I mean, I knew he had money even before I found out about him being the owner of the Hurricanes—his car and his immaculate suits were clues enough. But I would've never asked for this. And I'd told him his status wouldn't earn him any special treatment from me, so this couldn't be a bribe either.

That meant he'd done it purely out of the goodness of his heart.

The same man that I'd watched knock a fan out cold when I'd Googled his name last week.

"I can't believe the mystery man from the burger place ended up being Ethan Berkley," Ella said.

"The owner of the Charleston Hurricanes, and your client," Nora added.

"I can't either."

"How did you not recognize him that night?" Ella asked.

"How would I? I watch the games, not the owner's box."

"He's all over social media," Nora said, then tilted her head to the side. "Which you're not on."

I swallowed hard, nodding. I hadn't been on social media since a video went viral a few years ago that showed my then fiancé explicitly with another woman. And now that he had been drafted into the NFL, it was hard to not accidentally see him if I was on social media.

An old, throbbing pain radiated over my body at the memory, but I shoved it away. I would never be that girl again.

“You know I don’t have time to keep up with all the social sites unless it’s necessary to research a client,” I said, and they flashed me equally sympathetic looks.

Ella scrunched her brow. “You *did* do your research on him, right?”

“Yes,” I answered. “A little,” I said. “I didn’t get much farther than the hundreds of videos of him hitting that fan. Do you know of any more viral videos of him?”

“I saw one the other day,” Ella said, swiping on her phone, pulling up her app and typing Ethan’s name into the search bar. There was an older video underneath the trending ones, and she selected it, scooting closer to me so I could see properly.

It was a Hurricanes game, and Ethan was stomping onto the field, dressed in a casual pair of athletic pants and a Hurricanes T-shirt, his muscles bulging as he curled his hands into fists while he yelled at an umpire.

Heat built beneath my skin, pulsing through my veins as I watched the muscle in his jaw tick while the umpire spoke. I’d seen this scene play out dozens of times during games, but it was usually with coaches, not owners.

The video did some fade transition, showing Ethan stalking back toward the player dugout, scooping up a stray bat off the ground and swinging it—

“Oh!” I gasped as he smashed the thing so hard against a pole the bat cracked in half.

“Why did that sound like you liked it?” Ella asked, laughing.

I shook my head, lips parted as the clip started over. “I...”

I couldn’t deny it.

Not even a little.

Not when flames licked down my spine as the clip showed him breaking that bat again.

Clinically, I knew that meant Ethan had a hard time regulating his emotions and that he clearly expressed his anger physically, which wasn’t the best sign. *Clinically*, I filed the scene away, noting that two of his outbursts had occurred during Hurricanes games.

Personally?

Personally, I didn’t clock the reaction as a giant red flag I should stay away from, client or no. Because Ethan didn’t give me the abusive vibe, and I knew abusive pretty damn well.

Ella scrolled through a few more videos, most publicity shots of him and other sports franchise owners attending red carpets events, and good *God* Ethan wore the hell out of those suits, but nothing compared to the way he’d looked on the Hurricanes field.

“Omigod,” Nora said. “He knows the owner of the Carolina Reapers!”

“And the Cougars and Raptors too,” Ella said, and I was suddenly grateful the NFL team my ex had been signed to hadn’t popped up in Ethan’s friend circle. “Wow. No wonder he could send the iPads over without a second thought. He runs with billionaires.”

We all burst out laughing at Ella’s joke, and she pocketed her phone as we finished up our morning dish session which included a rousing debate about which apps she’d be able to

convince the school to allow Nora to put on the tablets for her students, and a twenty-minute discussion on Ella's newest celebrity crush and the TV series we were all watching. By the time they were leaving to get to school on time, my heart was full and the tension revolving around Ethan as a client had lessened.

"Have I told you both how much I love you?" I asked as I lingered in my doorway, smiling at my friends. These morning coffee dates with them were invaluable to my mental health.

"Not enough," Ella teased, while Nora just winked at me.

"So, when is your next session with him?" Ella asked. "That bat crushing video didn't seem to scare you at all."

"If anything, it makes me more determined to help him." Ethan was good to his core. I could easily tell that. I knew abusive assholes like the back of my hand, and he wasn't one of them. But he clearly had some trauma he needed help working through.

"Plus, he's like a billionaire," Nora said.

"You know I don't care about the money," I said, and they both nodded with understanding. They knew all the dirty details about my past—well, all the ones I'd had the courage to share with them. Some details remained tragically just for me. "And I'll see him later today for our next professional session. Strictly. Professional."

Ella laughed. "Sure," she said. "Be careful," she added. "He may have my vote because of the donation stunt, but he still clearly has a short fuse."

"Agreed," Nora said.

"You know me," I said. "I have a sixth sense about angry episodes." Cultivated from living with my abuser for over a

year. “It won’t get to that.”

Ella smirked. “Well, after he’s no longer a client or hell, while he is, he may be one to give an exemption to your thirty-day rule,” she said, bringing the conversation back to a lighter side. “He seems like a good time. Maybe worth a few months at least.”

“Yeah,” Nora agreed. “Especially since the anger thing seems contained to the field.”

They weren’t wrong. He was smart, funny, kind, all the things that would make me want to break my no-long-term rules.

But it didn’t matter.

“He’s a—”

“Client,” Nora and Ella said at the same time, waving me off.

“We get it,” Ella said, grinning at me as they headed down the hallway.

As I got ready for the day, I’d picked up my phone at least a dozen times to text Ethan, only to set it back down.

I needed to schedule our next session, but I also needed to thank him for what he’d done for my friends.

But what could I possibly say to encompass the gratitude I felt about his donation?

Finally, unable to stall any longer, I picked up my phone. He’d probably be asleep anyway, since it was before seven in the morning. It would be at least a few hours before I got a response.

Me: I honestly don't know how to thank you, but I hope you know how grateful I am for what you did for my friends.

I sent the text before I could delete it, knowing it paled in compared to his gesture. I was about to sit my phone down, but three little bubbles appeared immediately, and it sent my heart straight into my throat.

Ethan: I'm the one who wanted to thank you.

Me: I'm not sure I earned that.

I hesitated a few seconds after sending, then typed out another fast text.

Me: And I hope you didn't feel obligated after I rambled about my volunteer time.

Ethan: Oh no. You didn't. I promise. I was just blown away by your commitment. It checked me. I need to pay more attention to things like that.

My heart kicked up a few notches, excitement trilling through me as I read his text.

Me: Well, thank you either way.

Ethan: You're welcome.

I moved from the kitchen and into my bedroom, settling into my mattress as it was still incredibly early in the morning. I was ready for the day, but taking a quick break wouldn't hurt.

His last text could've easily been a dismissal, but I wasn't ready for the conversation to end yet.

Me: I figured you'd be asleep.

Ethan: Funny, I was thinking the same about you.

Me: Nora and Ella got me up before the sun to tell me about your generosity.

Me: I'm in bed, but wide awake.

I added the extra text before I could stop myself, a thrill rushing through me at my eagerness to flirt before I remembered I wasn't really supposed to. But it was so damn hard with him. He made it too fun, too easy.

Three bubbles appeared and disappeared several times, like he was writing something and then deleting it. Tension built in my body, wondering if I'd crossed a line.

Who was I kidding? Of course I'd crossed a line.

Why did I tell him I was in bed? Why paint that visual? He was a client.

A client who I'd kissed.

A client whose kiss haunted my dreams every night in the best way.

A client whose laugh made my skin warm and heart flutter.

I was blunt and honest for a reason. I couldn't stop that just because he was assigned to me. I'd learned that—for me in particular—being coy and quiet and submissive got my heart broken in the end. Not that Ethan had my heart, but he definitely had my attention.

Ethan: Same.

The text came through, and I was shocked after all that typing at the one-word response. I wondered what he had deleted? Heat rushed to my cheeks as I pictured what he

looked like right now—a pair of silk pajama pants covering his long, muscled legs, as he laid shirtless in a giant bed.

I pressed my lips together as anticipation flared through me. God, it'd been too long since I let someone into my bed. I was practically aching for a release. And his kiss hadn't helped anything in that department. That had to explain the desire coursing through me with just the thought of him casually lying in bed, right?

Just when I was about to give up on the conversation, certain he'd moved on to a morning routine, another text came through.

Ethan: When's our next session?

I couldn't hold back my smile.

Me: Today. After 12.

Ethan: Meeting on your turf or mine?

Me: Mine.

I still needed to shake him out of his routine, get to know him while he's out of his comfort zone. It was the way I'd had the most success in getting honest answers from clients. Putting them in unexpected places helped them get their guard down, which helped me understand them on a deeper level. The deeper we went, the easier I could help them.

Ethan: Just tell me the time and place.

My heart fluttered in my chest at his determination, even when I reminded myself that he was obligated to complete these sessions with me. His ownership of the Hurricanes

depended upon it, but my heart didn't seem to tell the difference.

I texted him the address of where I'd be volunteering.

Ethan: I'll see you there.

Me: Can't wait.

I sent the text quickly, then cringed.

Can't wait?

Super smooth and professional on my end, for sure.

* * *

“Easy, Bruno,” I said in a soothing voice as I scrubbed the coarse fur of a puppy, who was shaking as I guided him into the walk-in tub. I scratched behind his ears, massaging in a slow, comforting way until his shaking subsided.

Once he was comfortable, I turned on the water to warm, and coated him in slow passes with the showerhead before giving him a good shampoo.

By the end, he was warm, fluffy, and licking my face. It was amazing to watch the transformation in shelter dogs after you'd earned their trust. It was just like I tried to do the first few sessions with my clients—earn their trust—but it's not like I could do so by giving them a bath.

Heat struck my core as the image of Ethan and me in the shower hit me so hard I could barely breathe. All those toned muscles, dripping wet, that wry smirk as he tugged me flush against him—

“He ready?” Stacy—the manager of my local animal shelter—asked, eyeing Bruno.

“Yes,” I said, slightly breathless from the fantasy.

Stacy happily took him back to his room, and I forced myself to focus.

I hoped the fresh bath would help Bruno with his adoption possibilities. He had an interview today, and my fingers were crossed.

I retrieved the next pup that needed a good scrub, returning to the washing station room only to stop short.

“Ethan,” I said, surprise coloring my tone. “You came.”

“I was invited,” he said, echoing the same response from Friday.

I cringed at my obvious shock, trying like hell to shake it off. “Sorry,” I said. “I don’t know why I’m surprised. I guess I keep expecting you to request someone else as your coach,” I admitted.

“Everyone confirms you’re the best.” He shrugged, the action paired with an endearing smile that had my heart flipping in my chest. “That’s a good thing,” he said, stepping closer. “And maybe I enjoy surprising you.”

The small yorkie-mix I was holding on a leash jumped up, scraping his shin while wagging its tail.

“Lacy,” I chided lovingly while gently pulling her away. I scooped her up and put her in a tub while glancing over my shoulder at Ethan, studying his suit. “Do you own anything other than thousand-dollar suits?” I asked. “That isn’t exactly pet-washing friendly.”

“A thousand?” He smirked. “That’s just for my tie. But I don’t mind.”

“Right,” I said, nodding slowly. “Because money isn’t a problem for you.”

“Ouch,” he said, hissing slightly. “That kind of sounded like an insult.”

“I didn’t mean it that way.” I flashed him an apologetic look and hurried to focus on washing Lacy.

“So, where can I get a dog to wash?” he asked. “I’m guessing that’s part of the session today? Seeing if I can handle a shelter animal?”

“Today’s session is still explorative,” I explained. “I’m still trying to get to know you.”

“I’m an open book,” he said.

“I hear that a lot from people,” I said.

“Do they always mean it?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Most times, people think they’re being open when in reality they’re saying things they think the other person wants to hear.”

“Probably even more with life coaches they want the approval of?” he asked.

“You got it.”

“That’s not me,” he said.

“We’ll see,” I replied, then I introduced him to Stacy, watching as he headed out to talk with her about what dog needed washing next.

A few minutes, and he was back with Sherlock—a stunning wolfhound mix that was barely a year old.

“Let me take Lacy back and then I’ll help you with him,” I said, heading down the hall, Stacy intercepting me as she took Lacy.

“Interesting volunteers you’re bringing in,” she said. “Owner of the Hurricanes? How the hell did he wind up here?”

“He’s a client,” I laughed.

“Whatever he is, we can use the help, so thanks.”

“Always,” I said before heading back to the washroom.

Ethan had guided Sherlock into the walk-in tub, having shed his suit jacket across the room and rolled his sleeves up to the elbows.

And goddamn him, why was that such a sexy look? Was it because it showed off the muscles in his forearms while he scratched Sherlock’s ears? Or was it the combination of him taking care of the dog and giving me a hint of what rested beneath those amazing suits and dress shirts?

“Here,” I said when I saw Sherlock’s hesitance to move in the tub so Ethan could reach the shower head. “Sherlock,” I said in a familiar tone. “Turn for me,” I said, gently encouraging him to move to the side.

He did, and Ethan reached for the showerhead, turning on the water and guiding it over Sherlock’s thick, black coat.

“He’s a friend of yours,” Ethan said.

“The best,” I answered, scratching Sherlock’s ears and accepting his neck kisses while Ethan got him wet. “He’s a favorite of mine,” I explained. “I fell for him the second he was turned in here a few months ago. Stacy saved him from an abusive breeder.” And I couldn’t help but empathize with the

dog, who had been used and discarded the second he was deemed worthless. “I’m saving up for a house,” I continued. “But I’m in a third-floor apartment now, and while I know he could handle not having a yard, the stairs would be hell on his hips. If not for that, I would’ve already taken him home.”

“Damn,” Ethan said, lathering Sherlock with shampoo. “Poor dog.”

“Yeah, but I get to spend a lot of time with him here,” I hurried to add. “I take him on walks five times a week, along with a handful of other dogs that need the exercise while waiting on adoption.”

“Busy woman,” Ethan said.

“I’m sure being you is just as much of a time crunch.”

He laughed. “Being me?”

“Billionaire. Owner of the Hurricanes. Rescuer of women who’ve been stood up by their dates.” I cleared my throat. “High-profile clients.”

“I rescued you, huh?” he asked.

“Moving on,” I said, ignoring the question. “Your life has to be busier than mine.”

“Similar,” he said. “If you’d asked to see me on my turf this session, I could’ve just as easily been taking you on a work lunch in order to squeeze you in.”

I raised my brows, a little jolt flaring through me at the idea of him *squeezing me in* anywhere. God, this man had me in knots and he was just washing a dog in a Gucci suit while flashing me smiles that had my knees going weak.

Sherlock shifted, leaning into me a little before Ethan worked on his paws. “Yeah, tell me about all that,” I said.

“The Hurricanes. How did that happen?”

“They were the first big purchase I made after I earned my first billion.”

My lips parted, shock racing through my veins. First billion. *First.*

“That makes sense,” I said, barely able to hold back my laugh. This wasn’t exactly something that came up naturally in conversations I had. “And how did you do that, exactly? The usual way? Started in the mail room of *Billionaires-R-Us* and moved up from there?”

“If only,” he said, chuckling as he moved to Sherlock’s other paw. “I didn’t grow up with money. My parents are divorced, but it was amicable, and my father came into his first million with a start-up right before I went into college. I was lucky enough that my father put me through Harvard, and I busted my ass to learn everything I could about the market, start-ups, domains, money in general.” He shrugged. “I used what I learned to grow my wealth from the ground up, and here I am.”

“And here you are,” I said. “Impressive. You make it sound like anyone can do it.”

“No,” he said. “I sacrificed a lot to get where I am. It takes dedication, the willingness to learn, and more than that, a *shit-ton* of luck. My mom runs a small business here in Charleston. She’s always been an entrepreneur, so I guess you can say it runs in my blood.” He moved to scrub Sherlock’s side. “What about you?” he asked. “Did you always want to be a life coach?”

My stomach sank the way it always did whenever I got asked this question. It was a natural response, my body

working its way through the emotions any time I was reminded of my trauma, but it never got any easier.

“No,” I said, knowing the client-coach relationship needed to be honest on both sides. “I actually wanted to be a teacher. Like my friend Nora. I almost was.”

“But?”

I swallowed hard. “But,” I said. “While studying in college, I was in a relationship that I didn’t realize was toxic, to say the least. By the time I realized I was so entrenched in it, I didn’t think there was a way out.” I shook my head, that familiar sensation of shame coating me like an oily grime. I forced my voice to work around the emotion clogging my throat.

“I became very good at reading body language, emotions, everything that comes with that environment. Halfway through college, I made a change from teaching to psychology with an emphasis on behavioral studies.” I laughed darkly to myself, gripping Sherlock’s fur as he leaned farther into me, as if he could sense my anxiety. “I think when I switched my focus, I thought I could help him. Even my desire to learn revolved around him.” I hated looking back on who I’d been then, so submissive, so quiet, so willing to let him tell me who I could be and what I could do.

“Anyway,” I said, blinking out of my memories. “I realized I wanted to help people in a different way than teaching.”

“You got out,” he said, gray eyes equal parts angry and sympathetic.

“I did.”

“And instead of using your talents to help people like you, on the other side of it, you decided to help those who struggle with anger control.”

“Yep,” I said. “I know there are some people who don’t want to be helped or don’t need it. I’m not one of those people who wants to fix everyone. In reality, I can’t fix anyone. It’s up to the person to do that. They’re the ones with the power. But...” I searched for the right way to explain what I felt in my heart. “Sometimes, people who struggle with emotion regulation were simply never given the tools they need to effectively do it. It’s as simple as that. Me offering them what they need, teaching them things they didn’t know, it can help. And that means they can live their lives free from the strain of not being able to control their responses.”

“You’re fucking incredible,” he said sharply, then cleared his throat. “I mean, you took a shitty situation and rose above it, grew from it.” His eyes flashed down toward Sherlock, going distant for a moment, his features drenched in regret.

“You built something from nothing,” I said. “It looks like that worked out for you.”

Another shrug.

“What?” I asked, trying to read the hint of bitterness on his face. “Do you not like where you ended up?”

“Who wouldn’t enjoy being a billionaire?” he asked, but I could hear the sarcasm in his voice.

“Money isn’t everything,” I said. “It’s not the only thing that matters.”

His eyes met mine, his movements on Sherlock’s coat slowing. “It’s usually the main thing that matters to a lot of people.”

It was my turn to shrug. “Not to me,” I said. “Money can buy things that matter, absolutely. Like the tablets you donated, but money isn’t the key to happiness. Money can’t buy *time*.” I motioned to Sherlock and the animal shelter we stood in. “Time is a priceless commodity.”

“Not everyone shares your mindset,” he said. “Unfortunately.”

There was something in the way his features shifted, something about the darkness that clung to his voice that had my stomach clenching. We were getting somewhere now. I could feel it. I was dancing dangerously close to a truth he didn’t look very willing to lay bare.

Which was fair, but in the effort of helping him heal, I needed to know.

“Who?” I asked.

“Who, what?” He smoothed his features, returning to rinse and lather Sherlock with the conditioner.

“Who’s the person who doesn’t share my mindset? I can tell you’re referring to someone specific.”

“Jesus,” he said at the end of a laugh. “My PR team was right. The rumors about you reading people are spot on.”

“I’m just really good at body language.” I cleared my throat, unable to stop the onslaught of memories that forced me to be good at reading people.

Ethan sighed.

“You don’t have to tell me now,” I offered. “But the more I get to know you, the better I’ll be able to help you.”

He continued washing Sherlock before starting the final rinse.

“The one and only time I was in love,” he said, and I held my breath. “It ended badly. I was blindsided, hurt I’d never felt before.” He visibly swallowed. “She cheated on me with someone more controlled, someone wealthier, and then married the guy. I bought his family’s team so that he could feel what it’s like to lose something you love.”

My lips parted open on a gasp as his story settled into me. Damn, he knew what it was like to be betrayed, to be so thoroughly hurt you wanted to do nothing but hurt them back. I knew that kind of pain. Had been working for years to regulate and understand myself better because of the aftereffects of such an event.

“You see why I think you’re incredible?” he asked. “You got hurt and made a career of helping people. I got hurt and building my wealth was birthed from my need for revenge. I bought the Hurricanes because his family owned them.”

Damn. There was more to that story, I could sense that, but he didn’t need me prodding further right now. The harsh set of his features, the rawness in those gray eyes told me that much.

So instead of pushing, I reached out and slid my free hand along his back, unable to stop the motion.

“Fuck her,” I said with all sincerity, a little of the bite coming from my own similar experience.

“Fuck her?” Ethan brightened as he turned to look at me. “Not, *I’ll teach you to do better? Be better?*”

“Nope, fuck her and fuck him too.”

Ethan laughed, shaking his head. “Why did I assume you’d scold me? Tell me I should’ve been the bigger person?”

“Sometimes being the bigger person is overrated. Besides, you may think your wealth came from revenge, but I bet

there's more to it. And you worked for it, so who am I to say what is and isn't right to spend your money on?"

Ethan grinned at me, a little mischief sliding over his features. "Are you saying that because you're a Hurricanes fan?"

"Oh, absolutely," I teased, the laughter slowly dying out of us as I held his gaze. "But more seriously?" I took a deep breath. "I understand. I know plenty of people probably say that, but I actually *do* understand that kind of pain. It sucks. It lingers. And I'm sorry."

"You said your relationship was toxic." A crease formed between Ethan's brow as he finished rinsing Sherlock and turned off the shower-head, moving to face me, study me more intently. "But from the look on your face, it was more than the cheating I dealt with. Was he physically abusive or emotionally? Not that either outweighs the other. I just need to know."

"Both." I swallowed hard. "At first, I didn't really consider what he did as physically abusive because he wasn't outright punching me or backhanding me like you hear horror stories of. It was little things. Bruises from being gripped too hard or..." I stopped, not having the courage to go any further.

My heart thundered with Ethan's gray eyes on me, like he was peering into places I wasn't ready for him to see yet. But he'd shared something hard with me, and this was part of the process of gaining trust. I just hated that for some reason, with Ethan, I didn't want him to look at me and only see my past. See someone who had so terribly, horribly misjudged her ex. Someone who couldn't spot the red flags right in front of her?

Ethan dried his hands on a towel before reaching up and gliding his fingers along my cheek—both of us pretending like

it was a normal thing to do during a session.

“Who?” he asked, his voice rough and low. “Tell me.”

I parted my lips, slightly breathless with how close he'd gotten, how gently he held my face that was such a contrast to the anger in his eyes.

Anger that wasn't aimed at me, but at my *past*.

“Abridged version,” I said, sighing. “The one and only man I've ever been in love with,” I said, mimicking him. “Like I said, he was abusive in subtle ways I didn't realize until we were already engaged. And even then, I found ways to explain it away. It wasn't until he cheated on me that I was able to wake up to what was happening and get out.”

A muscle in Ethan's jaw ticked. “What's his name?”

“Why?” I asked, a tease returning to my tone as I tried to backpedal to easier ground. “You going to break a bat over his head?”

Shock flashed in his eyes, and he shifted even closer, his hand still cupping my cheek. “Maybe,” he said, the threat raw in his voice. “Doesn't that break the rules of why I'm here with you?”

“Yes,” I said. “I wouldn't want you to, but not out of any sympathy for him.”

“Then for who?”

“You,” I said honestly. “These episodes you have,” I said, my tone soft. “The ones I've seen on camera and the ones you've yet to tell me about, what do you gain from them?”

A muscle in his jaw ticked. “I don't know. Nothing. Doesn't change that they happen.” He sighed. “Does that make me...scary to you?”

The breath stuttered in my lungs at the vulnerable question, and fire laced through my veins.

“No,” I answered honestly. “I feel a lot of things when it comes to you, but fear definitely isn’t one of them.”

Desire. Curiosity. Need. Those were all *very* present as he claimed me with just a look.

Relief flickered over his features. “Alex,” he whispered my name, leaning closer, lips inching down toward mine—

Sherlock shook rapidly, ice cold drops of water splashing over us, shocking us apart.

“Sherlock,” I said, laughing at the sight of Ethan’s dress shirt covered in water, the fabric clinging to his muscled chest. “Silly dog,” I playfully chided, reaching for a towel and handing it to Ethan so he could dry off.

And as I scrubbed Sherlock’s fur dry, I secretly and silently thanked him for his perfect timing. Because the lines between Ethan and I were so damn hard to see, but the last thing I wanted to do was ruin my chances at really making a difference in his life.

Ethan had been assigned to me because I’m the best at what I do, and I wouldn’t let him down. Not even if it meant silencing my heart in the process.

Ethan

There were two places you could usually find me on game day—the first was in the locker room listening to the coach pump up the players before the game started, the second was in the dugout or the owner’s box.

It most certainly wasn’t lingering outside the east entrance of the stadium, anxiously waiting for someone in particular to show up. And attending a game had never been about a life coaching session either, so I was in entirely unfamiliar territory, despite the familiar setting.

I scanned the busy sidewalks to the stadium crowded with Hurricanes fans desperate to get inside before the game started.

Where was she?

She’d texted me yesterday, asking if I was ready for her to shadow me in my regular routine. I’d sat on the text for two hours before I answered her. I knew it was inevitable, but having her shadow me at a game was going to be a new experience, especially since this was the first game since the incident. I didn’t know how the crowd would react to my presence—if they recognized me. I’d opted for a pair of athletic pants and a Hurricanes T-shirt and a baseball cap, in a poor attempt to hide my face.

Nerves tangled in my stomach, making my heart pound harder against my chest. What if I snapped, and it scared Alexandra off? We'd gotten pretty deep with our quid pro quo at the animal shelter, and I knew she'd been hurt in the past by someone with an anger problem.

Adrenaline snaked through my blood, and I curled my hands into fists. Fuck, I'd like to run into whatever asshole thought he could lay his hands on her and break them. The idea of her being physically harmed made an unstoppable desire to protect her creep up inside me, even though I knew she'd already taken care of herself and the problems of her past.

It didn't matter. Not to the instincts that roared every single time I thought about the way she'd looked when she'd shared little pieces of her story—her eyes shifting from the confident, non-sugarcoated bluntness to shades of fear and shame. The way her shoulders had dipped in just slightly, like some instinct ingrained into her whenever she even thought about her ex.

Fuck, I'd thought I had it bad. And sure, I knew painful pasts were relative, but I'd never been physically abused. Emotionally? Hell yeah, I knew all about that. But Alex...

I took a deep breath. She didn't share her story with me so I'd look up her ex and beat his ass like we were in high school. And it'd taken all of my willpower not to use some of Asher's fancy background tech to hunt the prick down, but I'd kept myself in check. She'd shared her story with me as an offering, a bridge to trust between client and coach, or maybe even between friends. I couldn't waste that.

What if she didn't come?

What if after the charged moment between us in the animal shelter she decided I was too much like the asshole from her past and she had me reassigned?

Fair. That would be absolutely fair.

But why did it make this wide, gaping hole open up in the pit of my stomach?

Because it would mean I definitely lost the bet? No, not that. I'd already contended to that the second she became my anger management coach.

Was the hollowness because I'd be losing the best in the business to help me get my reputation back in good standing with the league commissioner?

No, that wasn't it either.

It was more than that.

More than a bet or a contract between us.

It'd been more than that since the night of the dance. The night I unknowingly volunteered with seventh graders and had more fun than I've ever had at a club or VIP event. It changed the second I realized Alexandra was the first thing I thought about when I woke up and the last thing I thought about when I went to sleep. I had this churning, almost desperate need to hear her voice, to hear whatever unhinged, beautifully blunt words would leave her lips.

Desperate to kiss her again, to feel her against me again.

But I couldn't.

We couldn't.

Not now. Maybe not even after I completed my sessions with her.

I just had to make my heart, brain, and dick understand that.

“I’m here!” Alexandra’s voice carried over the crowds of excited fans filing into the stadium. My heart lifted in my goddamn throat at the sound, at the relief barreling through me at the sight of her rushing through the crowd, politely saying excuse me as she rushed toward me.

“I’m here,” she said again, slightly out of breath as she reached me. “I am *so* sorry I’m late,” she continued, shaking her head. “Traffic was awful. I legit almost abandoned my car so I could run here.”

“I’m glad you didn’t do that,” I said, my voice almost failing me as I took her in.

She was *breathhtaking* in a pair of blue jeans and a Charleston Hurricanes jersey, the soft material hugging her curves in all the right ways. Her long black hair was tied back in some sort of fancy style that left every inch of her smooth face exposed, her bright blue eyes sparkling in the midday sun.

Goddamn, I thought she looked beautiful in the little black dress she wore the night of the dance, but this? This might be my favorite look. There was something about seeing the logo of the team I owned on her back that opened up this primal need inside me, like I owned a little piece of the happiness that was dancing across her face as she glanced excitedly at the stadium.

“You’re right on time,” I said, smiling at her as I opened an arm to lead her through the ticket stands and into the stadium.

“We’re sitting behind the dugout?” she asked, her voice a little breathless.

“You told me to do what I normally do,” I said, a bit of pride streaking through me and making my chest puff out just a bit at how impressed she looked. “I have the owner’s box, but I enjoy being close to the team, and being behind the dugout is where the actions at.”

“It must be nice to be this close to the team,” she said as we made our way down the concrete stairs toward our seats.

“It is—”

“Hey, Berkley!” someone shouted from above and to the left. “You gonna knock out any more fans, you fucking prick?”

I spotted the culprit and clenched my jaw so I wouldn’t respond.

“Go back to your penthouse and leave us to watch the game in peace!” the man next to the first guy shouted.

Adrenaline crashed down my spine, the urge to smash something washing over me like a tidal wave. I took a steadying breath, rationalizing that these two weren’t worth my time, and blew the air out of my lungs slowly.

Alexandra watched me with careful, sympathetic eyes, but made no move to speak or interfere. I knew she was cataloguing my reaction, as she should, but it was hard knowing she was clocking my every move. Either way, I did what I’d normally do—I grabbed the nearest staff member walking the stands offering concessions to fans, and pointed out the two men to them.

“Everything they want is on me,” I instructed the staff member, and they nodded, recognizing me easily. “Enjoy the game guys,” I called up to the pricks, then turned my focus back to Alexandra. “We’re there.” I pointed at two empty seats right behind the dugout.

She nodded, and we both did our best to ignore the round of *boos* lobbed my direction as we headed to our seats.

Fucking hell, the baseball cap was doing shit to hide me from the people closest to us, and they weren't pulling any punches.

Not that I had either when it'd come to that bigot.

"Maybe coming here today was a bad idea," I said, settling into the seat next to Alexandra.

"If you're uncomfortable, we can go," she offered.

I studied her. "You'd leave a prime spot like this?" I motioned to the field, to the players in front of us.

"In a heartbeat," she said without hesitation. "I love the Hurricanes, you know that. But this isn't about a game for me. If those assholes are getting to you," she said, motioning to the crowd across from us that had finally let up on their angry shouts toward me. "Then let's go. They're not worth your time."

"Those assholes," I repeated her words. "Isn't that what you should call me?"

She pursed her lips. "I call it how I see it," she said. "Haven't you learned that by now? If you were being a dick, I'd let you know."

I barked a laugh, never ceasing to be amused by her mouth. "Noted."

"Do you always buy jerks drinks and snacks?" she asked. "Or was that for my benefit?" She didn't look like she was judging, just seriously curious.

"I've done it more than a dozen times," I said, shrugging. "Some of the fans can't stand me, and after the incident, that

percentage has drastically gone up.” I motioned to the crowd. “As you can tell.”

“Why do you respond that way to them? Those guys were out of line.”

“Were they?” I asked. “In their minds, I punched out an innocent fan.”

She tilted her head back and forth. “Why not tell your side of the story? Set the record straight? Your team made a statement, but it focused on you hiring an anger management coach”—she pointed at herself—“but not the reasoning behind your reaction.”

“I didn’t want to give the asshole the satisfaction of me giving him any more media attention,” I explained. “And honestly, with the way the public vilified me, they’d likely think my explanation was an empty excuse. At least explaining that I’m attempting to get better is honest, even if I think I’m a lost cause.”

She gaped at me. “*Offended*,” she said, playfully tapping my forearm that rested on the armrest that connected our chairs. “I’m the best, after all. Do you really have so little faith in me?” she asked with a tease in her voice.

“Weren’t you the one who said it wasn’t up to you to fix me? That you could give me all the tools in the world but I’d have to do it myself?” I cocked a brow at her, and she opened and closed her mouth a few times. It was fucking adorable. “See, it has nothing to do with my faith in you.”

Sadness flashed over her eyes as my words sunk in, but she quickly forced that away, replacing it with a challenging look that made my heart rate spike. “You have more insight to

yourself than you realize, Ethan,” she said. “You’re going to come out of this just fine.”

“So confident,” I said.

“I’ve done this a time or two,” she said, shifting in her seat to face me more directly. “And that reaction you had to those two jerks? That was a wonderful display of regulation. You felt the anger. I saw it. But you breathed through it and altered the situation to your advantage.”

“It’s not the first time a fan has verbally attacked me,” I said. “It won’t be the last.”

“And you’ve adapted,” she said, studying me. “It’s interesting,” she continued. “You seem to have absolute control when it comes to insults thrown your way, but when it comes to those you care about...” She stopped herself there, pressing her lips into a line.

Tension coiled between us as she held my gaze, looking at me like she really saw me, in a way no one ever had before. She wasn’t looking at me like a project she needed to complete, but like a person she *understood*.

Fuck me, I could stare into those blue eyes all damn day and never feel the need to look away. Not even when it felt like she was flaying me open.

“Speaking of people I care about,” I finally said, shifting out of my seat. “I’ll be right back.”

She smiled at me before I headed over to the dugout, working my way around so I could see the players. I had to resist the urge to roll my eyes as I found more than a handful engaged in a very serious dance-off competition as they waited for the game to start.

Baseball players were as unique as they come, especially with superstitions. Several of these players always started home games this way, dancing, making each other laugh, telling the same jokes, whatever it was they did before the last game they won. And I didn't care, as long as it put their minds on the game and their focus on winning. Not that winning was everything, but it certainly didn't hurt.

I slipped past a field guard, easily heading into the dugout and navigating my way around players that I knew as well as the coach did. When I acquired the team, I made sure I knew each of them personally, and that they knew me. I may not know all the intimate details about their daily lives, but I knew their names, their superstitions, and their game day habits as well as the next person.

I wasn't a sit-back-and-be-silent owner, and while I had the reputation of being an asshole on this playground that I called home, it was only because I *cared* about the team so fucking much, like Alexandra was getting at a moment ago. This team was my crown jewel, my prized possession in my claim to wealth. The fans could hate me right now. That was fine, as long as they still loved the team.

“Berkley, *please* tell me that the woman you brought today isn't a date because *damn*.” Maddox Porter stared up at where Alex sat. She grinned when she spotted the two of us looking up at her and waved enthusiastically.

I waved back before turning to Maddox. “Don't even fucking think about it.”

Maddox stretched his arms behind him, using a bat for leverage as he gave me a skeptical look. “I always think about it.”

I flashed him a warning look, but I couldn't stop a laugh either. "I know," I said, shaking my head. "She's my..." Fuck, why was saying she was my anger management coach so damn hard? Everyone already knew that I was getting one, and after this public outing today, I'm sure the media would easily put two and two together. "She's with me." There, that was the truth, at least half of it.

"Like *with you* with you?" he prodded. "Because I thought you were a one-night kind of guy."

"If I didn't know any better," I said, eyeing Maddox, "I'd say you were sticking your nose where it didn't belong again. Doesn't that get you into trouble more often than not?"

"Trouble isn't new for me," Maddox said as he shook out his muscles. "I have a talent for working my way into places I don't belong. It's so much more entertaining than sitting unaware on the sidelines. It's why you pay me so much."

I laughed, shaking my head. "Have I ever told you that you're the most obnoxious pitcher I've ever dealt with?"

Maddox's smile deepened. "Only every other time we speak," he said. "Good thing you're just the owner and not my coach, or you'd have to deal with me on a daily basis."

"That's the truth," the coach—Jake Levi—said, overhearing us. "Any chance you're just going to play the game today and not start any drama?" Levi asked.

"Me?" Maddox asked innocently before pointing a finger at me. "What about him?"

"Both of you," Levi said, eyeing me too.

That was fair. I raised my hands in defense. "I'm sitting up there today," I said, motioning to where Alex sat. "I'll do my best."

Levi cocked a brow at Maddox. “And you?”

“Let’s just see where the day takes us, gentlemen,” Maddox said, clapping his coach on the back as he went to chat with some of the other players.

Levi and I shared an equal look of exasperation and admiration, because we really had to hand it to Maddox, he was worth every bit of money we paid for him and *continued* to pay to keep him on the team as the star pitcher. He was invaluable to the team, even if he came with a boatload of drama that resulted in countless public relation fees. Not that I could really talk, because I’d been making my fair share of headlines recently.

“Have a great game today, guys,” I said, raising my voice so all the players could hear me. I clapped my hands together, nodding enthusiastically as I smiled at them. “I know you’re going to crush it.”

“Don’t let this nice-guy act fool you,” Maddox said. “He’s just on his best behavior because he brought a date to the game. If we don’t win, he’ll definitely crush *us*,” Maddox taunted from where he leaned against the pole on the opposite side of the dugout. “Are you planning on breaking any of our jaws today? Or just asshole fans?”

I cocked a brow at Maddox, feigning annoyance, but really? I respected that he wasn’t treating me any differently. He was still being the same asshole he always was to me, and I really fucking appreciated that right now. The last thing I wanted was for my team to start being timid around me.

“Try me, Maddox,” I said. “You don’t need your jaw to pitch.”

Maddox laughed, rolling his eyes at me as the other players joined in on the fun. It was all jokes right now, but I hated I couldn't promise that I wouldn't have an outburst if an umpire made a shitty call on my players or another fan spewed some hateful, vile shit again. I lost myself in the game a little too much, and sometimes—despite my show of control earlier—I fucking snapped.

That's why Alex was here.

To help me figure out the difference between the two.

I made my way out of the dugout, more than ready to head back to Alexandra, but stopped short at the sound of another round of *boos* at my appearance.

Fucking hell, this was embarrassing, not that I hadn't expected it, but the shit wasn't really something I'd wanted Alex to see—

“Oh, give it a rest!” Alex shouted at the group of fans *booing* me, standing so they could clearly see who was yelling back at them. “Save your breath for the game!”

My lips parted, shock soaring down my spine at her response.

One of the guys from the group flipped her off, and I furrowed my brow, stepping that direction on pure instinct.

“Fuck you too!” She flipped him off in return, and the guy rolled his eyes before waving her off. “Ethan,” she called my name, snapping me out of my internal debate to stomp over there and educate the man on who not to speak to like that—which included my girl.

Shit, not my girl.

“Ethan,” she said again, and I let out a breath and headed toward her, taking my seat as she settled in hers again. “Tell me what you were thinking just now,” she said. “When that guy flipped me off.”

I swallowed hard.

“Be honest,” she said. “There is no judgment from me, you know that.”

“I was thinking he needed to be educated.”

Her eyebrows raised. “On?”

“On how to treat my—” I stopped short, shifting in my seat. “On how to treat to people.”

“Anything else?” she asked. “Any physical urges?”

I uncurled my fingers, which were balled in a fist. She tracked the move, her eyes flashing from me to my hand and back again. “Maybe,” I finally admitted.

My knuckles ached from clenching a fist so hard.

“Maybe,” she said, reaching down and smoothing her fingers along my palm until she reached the spot between my thumb and forefinger, gently massaging the aching muscle there.

Fuck, it felt good. Her touch wasn't hesitant or fearful, it was confident and assuring.

“Yes,” I confessed. “I may have thought about breaking that finger he held up at you.” God, I sounded like such a possessive asshole.

But she didn't look at me like I was one. She just kept massaging my aching hand, and nodding like she understood everything I was saying, that everything made sense.

“Do you still feel like doing that?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said, my answers short, clipped as I tried to get my adrenaline in check.

“But you didn’t when those first two guys called you a prick?”

I shook my head, and she nodded, reaching across me for my other hand and repeating the soothing action. Jesus, if she kept it up, I was going to draw her across the seat and put her in my lap and kiss the breath from her lungs. Show her with my mouth and tongue how much I appreciated her lack of judgment and careful understanding.

Her blue eyes flitted across my face, the line of my jaw, all calculating and likely easily reading how worked up I still was. How her hands on mine were what was keeping me in this seat when I could still hear the rowdy group across the way, talking shit and running their mouths like the drunken bastards they were.

“You know what I love most about baseball?” Alexandra asked, continuing with my hands. “It’s not just about the game. There are so many things that go into baseball that make it the iconic sport it is. The smell of freshly popped popcorn from the concession stand,” she continued, her touch altering from soft and hard, depending on what muscle in my hand she was working on. “The smell of fresh condensation on the green field. The white, fluffy clouds, floating slowly across a crisp, blue sky. The sound of cleats on concrete as the players walk toward the field, the sound of a bat cracking against a ball or the smell of a leather glove. The sound of cheers as players race around the bases.” She grinned at me. “Baseball brings people together. Family, friends, people who wouldn’t normally get along but come together under the same flag of

the team they fly for.” She nodded toward the loud group. “They’ll be high fiving me when Taylor knocks it out of the park,” she explained, naming one of our best hitters. “Baseball isn’t just a sport, isn’t just something to watch on TV, it’s a relationship builder. It’s a sense of camaraderie that can’t be found anywhere else.”

My heart rate slowed as I listened to her list all the reasons that she loved the game as much as I did.

“Better?” she asked after I’d just stared at her, awestruck, for a few seconds. She released my hands, and I took a deep breath, checking myself.

The urge to walk across the aisle and teach that guy a lesson was completely gone. I could still feel the irritation toward the stranger, but I no longer felt the undeniable need to rip his head off.

“Better,” I said, shaking my head. “Did you use some kind of Jedi mind trick on me?”

She laughed, the addictive sound only helping ease the lingering tension in my muscles. “I wish,” she said. “Wouldn’t that be cool?” she nodded toward my hands. “I grounded you.”

I furrowed my brow. “Like a punishment?”

She chuckled again. “Grounding is one of the many tools you can use to gain control over your emotions,” she explained. “Friends can help you do it too,” she continued. “People who are close to you who can catch the signs. Basically, you use your surroundings to focus your mind. You could catalogue the seats in front of us—how many there are, the color, the writing on the back. You could note all the smells you can make out in the air or search the crowd for anyone in a yellow shirt. Things like that.”

I glanced down at my hands, now relaxed on my thighs. “Or I could listen to what you love about baseball so much,” I said. “And the hands?”

“Physical touch can work as grounding too, but only if it’s someone you trust. I took a chance that you trusted me. Also, you could do the motions yourself.” She reached for my hand again, applying a gentle pressure to that same muscle between my thumb and forefinger. “This pressure point helps relieve stress and anxiety, which are fuel for anger.” She released me, and I did my best not to immediately reach for her hand again. “Grounding can help with panic attacks too,” she continued. “Do you ever have those?”

“I’ve had them,” I said. “But it’s been years.” I shook my head. “When I get like...like I just did, it’s different.”

“I get it,” she said. “Our emotional response system is complex, but we can figure out what you need most. From what I just saw, I know you’re fully capable of beating these outbursts that are taking control of your life.”

“I’m not so sure,” I admitted.

“I am,” she said, unwavering confidence in her tone. “The more time we spend together, the more we’ll learn together. Deep breaths. You have everything you need to figure this out, and if you need extra help, there is better living through medicine.”

I nodded. “I’ve explored the idea of medication before, but we’ve stayed away from it mostly because the anger isn’t omnipresent in my life.”

“That’s understandable,” she said. “And we’ll get there. We just have to take this one step at a time.”

“I can do that,” I said, feeling for the first time in my life that I actually could. With *her*. “Alex—”

The crowd roared as the singer for the national anthem was announced and took the field, stealing whatever I’d been about to say right out of my mouth.

Which was probably a good thing, since I was feeling so out of control when it came to her. My anger management coach. The one person in the world who seemed totally on my side right now, with an understanding of who I was like she could read my mind.

It was as unnerving as it was addictive, with an extra dash of hope.

She made me feel like I wasn’t broken.

And I’d felt broken for longer than I’ve ever admitted to anyone, even my inner circle.

After the national anthem ended and the game started, we stood and clapped for our team, Alexandra glancing up at me with pure excitement in her eyes.

“Thank you so much for bringing me here,” she said.

“Anytime,” I said. “Even if it’s not a session,” I continued, leaning down to speak into her ear so she could hear me over the crowd. “You want to come, you say the word and a seat is yours.”

Our eyes locked, hers widening slightly as she tried to determine if I was serious or not.

I was beyond serious. If it got her to look at me like that? I’d buy or sell anything, including my soul.

Holy shit. When did I start spouting poetry?

“I might hold you to that,” Alexandra said, her smile soft and endearing.

Need surged through my veins, blending with the hope pulsing beneath my skin.

“I look forward to it.”

Three hours and two home runs later, the Hurricanes won against the Blue Jays, and Maddox had graciously signed every piece of merchandise any of the kids waiting near the locker room hallway put in front of him.

The stadium slowly emptied of all the fans, and that beautiful quiet hush that fell over every completed game settled over the arena.

“That was amazing,” Alexandra said. “Even the *boosers* had a good time.”

“A win can put anyone in a good mood,” I said, nodding toward the now empty field. “They did good.”

“You picked a good team,” she said, walking slowly across the aisle and down the few sets of stairs to lean against the railing that edged the field. “I’ve never been this close before.” She turned, leaning her back against the railing to look up at me.

I headed down the stairs, stopping in front of her.

“I guess you don’t know what that’s like,” she said, her eyes never straying from mine. “Are you able to still appreciate this?” she asked, with no hint of arrogance or accusation in her voice.

I glanced over her, my eyes trailing across the now empty field and the stadium seating behind it. I took a deep breath,

inhaling through my nose all the scents that were signature to baseball, and let it fill me in the way it always had before.

“Yes,” I answered honestly. “Naturally, being an owner comes with its perks,” I said, motioning to the empty stadium around us. “But I’ve been a fan of the game since I was a little kid. Just like you said earlier, there’s something infinitely nostalgic about the game. It’s like a calling. You either love it or you don’t. Either have it in your blood or you don’t. I have it in my blood. Being an owner doesn’t change that. The fans hating me right now doesn’t change that. Every day I’m able to watch those players take the field, I appreciate it.”

“Even when it may be a trigger for you? Might pose a challenge for you?” she asked, tilting her head.

“Some of the best things in life are the things that challenge us,” I answered, noting the way she wet her lips as I inched closer to her.

“Some would say that’s an excuse to misbehave,” she said.

“Would you categorize anything I did today as misbehaving?” I asked, leaning one hand on the railing opposite her. She didn’t shy away from the nearness, instead she shifted toward me, almost instinctually so.

“No,” she answered, looking up at me. “You did amazing considering the circumstances, but I wonder what you would’ve done if that fan had kept it up?” she asked. “What would you have done if he’d continued to shout at me? Or if an ump made a bad call? Or one of your players made a careless mistake?”

Something knotted in my chest that was hard to swallow around.

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. “I won’t lie to you. I’m protective of my team. You’ve seen that. Saw it firsthand in the footage all over the media right now. You know the truth behind my reaction, even if it doesn’t excuse it.” I sighed, moving another inch closer to her. “And I’m feeling... protective of you, too. I know I shouldn’t, but I am. So that guy flipping you off...”

“It triggered you.”

“Yes.”

Understanding flashed over her features.

“I appreciate your honesty,” she said, nodding as she reached out and laid her hand over my forearm in a comforting gesture that made my muscles tight with need.

“I think you invented honesty,” I said, and her soft laughter was a reward that made my heart expand in my chest, but just as easily, there was doubt hitting me, crashing over me. “With what you saw today, what I’ve told you, do you think I’m in danger of becoming...worse?” I lived and breathed that fear every damn day. Every time my control slipped.

“No, Ethan,” she said, shaking her head. “You’re not going to get worse. Regardless of what social media is trying to paint you as right now, you’re not that guy. I’m very good at sensing those types of people, and I don’t feel that with you.” She shrugged, meeting my eyes again with a silent encouragement and acceptance radiating from them.

Something warmed inside me, something shifting to make room for the words she gave me.

A gift, really. One she didn’t have to give me. We’d only had a few sessions, she didn’t owe me anything. We could have a hundred sessions and she wouldn’t owe me anything,

especially not these kind, accepting words that made me feel seen in a way I hadn't in so many years.

A charged spark flared between us, tugging on me, begging me to get closer despite her already touching my forearm. I needed more, and from the look in her eyes, she felt it, too. I shifted closer, bringing my arm to the other side of her, caging her in between me and the railing.

“What *do* you feel?” I asked, my voice coming out rough and raw.

Her full lips parted, a shaking breath escaping them as her eyes darted across my face, almost like she was searching for an answer there.

“What do you feel when you're with me?” I asked again, desperate to know that I wasn't the only one feeling this chemistry, feeling this explosive need to be around her in every way I could be.

“I feel...” She visibly swallowed, the corners of her mouth turning up just slightly as she met my eyes. “Safe.”

Relief barreled down my spine at that singular word.

She wasn't afraid of me, despite the truths I'd laid bare.

“Wanted?” she added on a shaken breath.

Lava streaked through my veins.

“Why did that sound like a question?” I asked. Did she *doubt* that I wanted her?

“You could've asked for anyone else to be assigned to you if you were interested in further exploration of that kiss we had the night before I found out you were my client. You didn't—”

“I told you,” I said. “I need the best. You're the best.”

A sigh left her lips. “That’s fair,” she said. “The professional relationship has to take precedence over whatever personal one would’ve developed.”

“Sure,” I said. “That doesn’t mean I don’t want you.”

Her eyes fluttered up to mine.

“It doesn’t mean I don’t think about that kiss every single second of the day, every time those lips of yours curve into that smile that drives me wild.”

“Ethan,” she whispered my name like a plea.

I leaned down a little, lowering my voice between us. “Do you ever think about it?”

A visible tremble shook her body, but the flush creeping along her skin told me it had nothing to do with the cold.

“Yes,” she admitted.

“How often?”

“All the time.”

Fucking hell, her admission had every muscle in my body tightening with need.

“But,” she added, and the breath stalled in my lungs. “I can’t really remember it all that well.” She smirked up at me, nothing but a playful, teasing challenge in her eyes.

Oh, she wanted to play? I was so fucking game.

“Do you want me to remind you, Alexandra?”

“Please,” she said on a released breath.

“Please what?” I asked, trailing my fingers up her arm and lingering on her neck.

“Please,” she whispered again. “Remind me what it was like. Just this once.”

Relief shot across my skin at her words, at the needy way she uttered them. Just this once. I could handle that, accept that.

I moved my hand behind her neck, gently gripping it, and tugged her closer until our bodies were flush. My other arm snaked around her lower back, and she tipped her head, her eyes hazy as she looked up at me.

I held her there, my mouth a breath away from hers, stretching out the anticipation that radiated between us like a lit flame.

Fuck, she was so gorgeous and felt so good against me. My heart raced in my chest, the blood pumping in my veins at an accelerated rate as I brushed my lips over hers in the barest of kisses. Electricity crackled down my spine, every instinct inside me roaring at the innocent touch.

More.

Goddamn, I needed more.

And when her hands moved up my chest, fisting my shirt to bring me closer to her? It snapped all my restraint. If I only had this once...if we could only exist in stolen moments, then so fucking be it.

I kissed her again, and this time I didn't hold back.

This time I crushed my mouth against hers, tearing off the leash I'd held myself on since the first moment I laid eyes on her. I took her mouth with sipping kisses, relishing the way her lips parted for me, allowing my tongue to slide in and rub against hers. I explored the inside of her mouth with a sort of

starvation, my senses soaring as we clashed together again and again and again.

This was better than the first time, every second more thrilling than the next.

I held her tight against me, relishing each little whimper and moan that escaped her mouth with every pass of my tongue against hers. She trembled as my fingers wound their way around her hair, using it to gently grip and dip her head back so I could kiss her at a deeper angle.

Her body melted into mine, shifting to make room as I slipped my thigh between hers. She gasped, clenching my shirt tighter, holding me right where she needed me as she kissed me back as hard as I kissed her.

This wasn't like our first kiss. It wasn't explorative and testing.

This was an unleashing.

This was a revelation.

Kissing Alexandra was more intense than anything I'd ever felt before, and we were fully clothed, for fuck's sake. Something I wanted to remedy right the hell now.

"Ethan," she said my name on a sigh between our clashing lips, and I swear I was ready to drop to my knees and worship her right fucking then. Just the sound of my name on her tongue in that breathy tone had me seeing stars. Had me singing romance ballads in my head as I cupped her face in my hands and pressed my thigh harder against her heat.

And goddamn, she rocked against my muscles there, using it to make herself feel good. It had me rock hard and aching as she let instinct rule her body, gave herself over fully to the moment, the sensation of us clashing together.

This was combustible.

This was connecting on every single level—physically, mentally, emotionally, and fuck me, I'd never felt anything so intense.

She tasted as sweet as she looked, and her lips were as soft as silk as I crashed against them over and over again, moving my tongue along hers in a way that told her exactly what I would do to her if she let me between her legs.

“Fuck, Alex,” I groaned into her mouth when she nipped at my bottom lip. “Baby, let me —”

My phone blared from my pocket, the shrill ring jerking us both back to reality.

The reality where we were very much still in the stadium, regardless of it being empty or not. And while I was ready to take her right here against the railing, I refused to let the first time I made her come be in a fast, furious attempt at release.

Because I *would* make her come, just this once be damned. Alex felt like mine, and despite the position we were in, despite what we were to each other, I couldn't ignore that.

“It's okay,” she said, her cheeks flushed and her lips swollen from my kiss. There wasn't regret in her eyes, but something churned there I couldn't place. “You can get that.”

“It's not important,” I said, shaking my head as I didn't make a move to let her go.

“I'm pretty sure everything involving you is important, Ethan,” she said, smiling up at me. She patted my chest a couple of times before shifting out of our tangled embrace. “Seriously,” she said. “Answer it.”

I held her gaze as I answered the phone, my assistant Doug on the other end.

“Hi, sir. I’m just confirming your six o’clock dinner reservation with Hilton?”

Shit. I’d completely forgotten about the meeting with the CEO of the eastern hotel chain. Totally forgotten about the very important meeting where I wanted to buy several of those hotels for myself, always looking for ways to expand and continue growing my wealth.

Forgotten everything outside of Alexandra.

What was this girl doing to me?

“Thanks, Doug,” I said into the phone. “I’ll be there shortly.”

I looked down at Alexandra apologetically as I hung up and pocketed my phone. “I’m sorry —”

“You have no reason to be sorry,” she said. “You know my schedule,” she continued, smoothing her hands along my chest with a sense of ownership that made me ten times harder. “If anyone understands the demands of your time, it’s me. And besides, this session ended a while ago.” She winked at me. “Have a good meeting,” she said as she headed toward the stairs. “I’ll text you tomorrow for our next one.”

I stared up after her, my lips slightly parted as I searched for the right words.

But the woman had left me stunned. Easily shifting right back into the roles we had to play—coach and client—except the heat lingering in her eyes was anything but professional.

Normally, the women I dated were aggravated if a meeting I forgot popped up and rightly so, but not with her. Not with

Alexandra.

Not that I was dating her.

Fuck. I needed to get my head on straight.

“I’ll meet you with coffee,” I called after her, needing to say something, anything.

She turned and looked down at me, her position on the stairs making her look like a fucking goddess, and I was ready to drop to my knees for her.

“Still trying to make me fall in love with you?” she teased.

“Always,” I said, gripping the railing so I wouldn’t chase after her. Because I wanted to. So fucking badly. But that wouldn’t be good for either of us.

She laughed, heading up the stairs. “See you tomorrow, Ethan.”

Damn. She was so understanding, but also so easily able to leave me standing here, hard and panting and questioning everything I thought I ever knew.

Because as I watched her disappear through the exit, I realized something incredibly terrifying.

I thought one kiss was all it would take for *her* to fall for *me*.

But now?

With the feeling spreading through my heart, through my fucking veins?

I was the one who just jumped into a free fall.

Which meant I was absolutely and totally fucked.

Alexandra

“**Y**ou’ve been avoiding talking about Ethan the entire week,” Nora said before sipping from her coffee mug. She sat across my small dining table, Ella on her left, me across from them both.

“He’s my client,” I said, even though that wasn’t really the reason. I would never reveal details about any of my clients’ sessions when it came to what I was coaching them on, but Ethan was...different. The lines weren’t as hard-set as they’d been with others.

“We’re not asking you to tell us about his triggers,” Ella chided. “And you know it. You’ve been off all week. We can tell something is bothering you. And it’s not the amount of volunteer work you’re taking on, despite how much you keep talking about that this week.”

“You two are nosy,” I teased, and they laughed.

“We *know* you,” Nora corrected me. “And if there is nothing you need to get off your chest, then fair. But if there is, you may as well stop trying to bury it and tell us.”

I blew out a breath, shaking my head before I glanced at my watch. “You have fifteen minutes,” I said. “I don’t know if that’s enough—”

“Fourteen now,” Ella cut over me. “Spill.”

I shifted in my seat, nodding. “I think I’m in trouble,” I admitted. “I’m developing feelings for Ethan—”

Ella gasped in feigned shock, and Nora gently swatted her arm in reprimand.

“Forget it,” I said, waving them both off.

“I was kidding,” Ella said. “I’m sorry. That fact has just been obvious since you came home from the burger restaurant the night that blind date stood you up.”

“She’s not wrong,” Nora said. “I swear there were stars in your eyes.”

“Maybe that’s the problem,” I said. “I liked him before I knew he was a client. And I thought I could switch it off,” I continued. “You know my rule. I rarely date anyone for over thirty days. So it should’ve been easy, right?”

They both looked at me with empathy, but remained silent, urging me to continue.

“It’s difficult. Especially when he’s so open about his interest in me, too. And last week...I kissed him.” I hid my face behind my hands. “After a session,” I groaned into them.

“Omigod,” Nora said.

“Hell yeah,” Ella said at the same time.

“Not hell yeah,” I said, dropping my hands. “He’s my client. It was after a session. I totally abused the system—”

“Did you use the intimate details of his emotional struggles to manipulate him into kissing you?” Ella fired at me.

“No!” I shook my head. “Of course, not. I would never do that.”

“Then how did you abuse the system?”

“I don’t know,” I said, stumbling over my words. I gripped my coffee mug just for something to ground myself. “It just feels wrong.”

Nora flashed me a sympathetic look. “You could still reassign him. Pursue dating him with a clean conscious.”

I nodded. “I should. I know I should. But there is something about his case—strictly the case—that makes me desperate to help him. He’s not someone who was born naturally irritable,” I explained. “His anger isn’t constant. It’s more complex,” I continued, without giving away any personal details about his situation. “And I’ve learned so much about it over the last two weeks. About him. I really think I can help him.”

Nora nodded.

“Plus, he keeps telling me his team said I’m the best, so he needs that to get cleared and get the league commissioner off his back. He needs me, but makes no attempt to hide that he wants me too. He even jokes he’s got a bet with his billionaire friends going that he can make me fall for him. It’s hilarious, but also exhausting because the feeling is so damn mutual.”

Ella arched a brow at me, and I laughed. “Not the falling for him part,” I hurried to say. “I mean wanting him. I do. The kiss...”

Holy hell, the kiss.

It was so different from the first trial kiss we’d shared outside the burger restaurant that first night. We knew each other now—maybe not every little detail about each other—but enough to *feel* it. Feel that chemistry I couldn’t deny radiating in my bones, feel it curl and tighten inside me until I could barely breathe around it.

No one had ever kissed me like Ethan had—all consuming and tender, deliberate and explorative. He kissed me like there was nothing more important than making me tremble against him with just the efforts of his lips. He kissed me like he was starved for my touch. He kissed me like I was *his*.

Just the thought of it made heat streak beneath my skin, awakening a desire in me so intense I wanted to scream.

“Maybe you should just sleep with him,” Ella said with a shrug. “Get him out of your system.”

I laughed. “I don’t know if that would work.”

“Why not?” she asked. “You have your rules. They’ve protected you in the past. Who’s saying it won’t work with him?”

“Unless,” Nora said, eyes widening at me. “Unless you really are falling for him?”

“What?” I furrowed my brow. “No, of course not.” I couldn’t be falling for him. “It’s only been a couple of weeks. I barely know him.”

Then why couldn’t I stop thinking about him? Why did it feel like the time we were apart it was hard to breathe, but once I saw him again, I found my lungs filled with air? No one got to me like this. Ever. What was wrong with me?

“I still vote sleep with him,” Ella said. “One and done.” She tilted her head, smirking behind her coffee cup. “Maybe one night and done,” she amended. “He looks like he can handle an entire night of non-stop frolicking.”

We all laughed, and I shook my head. “You did *not* just say frolicking.”

“My filter is firmly engaged,” she said. “School day and all that.”

“Right,” I said, sighing.

“What are you going to do?” Nora asked more seriously.

“I’m resolved to helping him,” she said. “He’s a good person, despite what the media is trying to make him out to be right now. He deserves help. Deserves to get his life back.”

“Holy shit,” Ella said. “You are falling for him!”

“I am not,” I chided her. “Your fourteen minutes is up.”

They laughed, taking their empty coffee mugs to my sink before heading toward the door. I held it open for them, leaning my head against the frame.

“Consider it,” Ella said, lingering in the hallway. “It may help clear your mind so you can really focus.”

“And I say wait,” Nora said, and Ella rolled her eyes but gave her an affectionate smile. “You’ll be done coaching him in another two and a half months, right?” she asked, and I nodded. “That’s not that long,” she continued. “If you’re still interested in him by then, that will be sign enough that he’s worth the try.” She shrugged. “But if you go with Ella’s advice, I’ll support you.”

“Do it,” Ella joked, and I hugged them both.

“You two are the best,” I said, releasing them. “I’ll be at the school tomorrow to help you with grading,” I said to Nora.

“Cool, love you,” she said, heading down the hallway with Ella.

“Love you both,” I said before shutting the door, my apartment instantly too quiet.

I swallowed hard, trying to distract myself from the anxiety tightening my chest by cleaning up my already clean kitchen. I hadn't felt so interested in a man in years, and the last time I let myself actually fall for someone...

Being grabbed so hard I yelped, simply because I'd come home late from a girls' night. Fingerprints left on my arm, a purple dusting that matched his hand perfectly. Broken dishes thrown in fits of rage because I'd corrected him on something trivial. Fist-sized holes in the wall because I'd embarrassed him.

God, I'd let myself believe he only acted the way he did because he loved me so much, because he was such a passionate person.

I breathed around the panic clawing up my throat, assuring my brain we were no longer in that situation, so there was no need for the damn flight response. Because that's all I'd had when it came to him—flight. There would be no fighting him, regardless of how hard I tried sometimes. It had only made the situations worse, but when comparing my story to countless others, I'd been lucky. He'd never hurt me in a way that was drastically obvious to the outside world. Never put me in the hospital.

I'd gotten out.

He'd cried too, begged me to stay despite the fact that he'd been the one to cheat on me—the act giving me the wake-up call I needed. It showed me he didn't treat me like that because of passion or a feral sense of love. He was just a toxic, narcissistic asshole.

And I'd fallen in love with him before I knew the truth.

Never again.

That's why I had to stop whatever was developing between Ethan and myself. Had to stop this longing I had every damn second of the day to see him. Because that path led to nothing but heartbreak.

Maybe Ella was right. Maybe it was purely physical between us, born from the fantasies I dreamed up before I knew he was a client. It could be the same way for him, a tease left unexplored. Maybe if we gave in just once, it would all relax and be normal for the rest of our professional time together.

I filed the possibility away, resigning myself to focus more on the coaching he needed rather than what my body was begging for—my heart too, even if I wouldn't ever admit that aloud.

* * *

“Will I ever get used to this?” I whispered the question into Brynn's—Weston's fiancée's—ear.

She'd become a confidant over the last week, along with author Daisy Lewis—Asher's fiancé. Ethan had a delightful inner circle, not that I'd met them all, but was about to tonight at yet another event. This one was black tie, so I was in my most expensive dress—a simple black one with sparkling details that hung gracefully over my strappy black heels. If Ethan had me shadow him at any more things like this, I would need to go shopping.

“No,” Brynn said, looking radiant in a midnight dress that made her look like royalty. “And I've been doing it for years. I'm originally from small-town Virginia, but this kind of thing is something you don't really ever get used to.” She waved her

arm to indicate the room before us—a ballroom immaculately decorated and packed with celebrities, athletic stars, and Ethan and his billionaire friends, all sipping champagne while answering questions from the intense presence of the media or mingling with all the other fancy people.

“Okay, good to know,” I said, nodding as I waved off the third offer of champagne from a server who walked by us.

Brynn happily took a glass, eyeing me. “You don’t want any? It’s really tasty.”

“So good,” Daisy said as she waltzed up to us. “This is my second,” she said, shaking the now empty flute in her hand.

I laughed, waving them off. “I’m technically on the clock,” I explained, my eyes easily spotting Ethan across the room as he chatted with his friends.

Asher and Weston I recognized, the other two—one with dark hair, dark eyes, dark tattoos covering his forearms, which were visible thanks to the sleeves he’d rolled to the elbow, and one with light brown skin, a five-o’clock shadow that somehow made his strong jaw look sharper, and an effortless smile that screamed trouble for all the women around him—I had yet to meet.

“That’s right,” Daisy said, nodding.

“How is that going?” Brynn asked. “If we’re allowed to ask that.”

“Good,” I said. “Ethan and I work well together,” I said, trying and failing to bite back my smile. It wasn’t a lie, despite the tension that seemed to tighten every second we spent together. It was affecting him too—I could see it every time he reached for me, but then thought better of it. Every time his

eyes lingered on my lips long enough for me to feel heat melt into my core.

Ethan glanced over his shoulder then, almost like he could feel me thinking about him, and pinned me with a smile that I felt down to my toes. Goddamn him, did he have to be so handsome? So intuitive? I hadn't just been shadowing him and helping him learn about anger control techniques, he'd also been studying me just as closely. He noted anything that made me laugh and smile and made a point of doing those things as often as possible. And he genuinely listened whenever the focus shifted to me, which mostly consisted of me talking his ear off about all the volunteer programs I was involved in at the moment.

"It certainly appears so," Brynn said, flashing a knowing look at Daisy.

I surveyed them for a moment, noting the conspiratorial way they were flashing giddy eyes at the way Ethan was looking at me.

"You two know about the bet, don't you?" I asked.

Brynn spit her champagne back into her glass, nearly choking on it as she cleared her throat. "He *told* you?"

I laughed at their wide-eyed stares. "He did," I said, shaking my head as I glanced back over at him.

He flashed me a curious glance, but I smiled at him and waved off his concern.

"Wow," Daisy said. "I didn't see that coming."

"It's never going to work," I explained. "I'm not a long-term kind of girl." Both of their shoulders dropped. "Sorry," I added, then sighed.

“That’s all right,” Brynn said. “It was a ridiculous bet, anyway. But he’s a great guy, we just wanted him to...step outside of the box he traps himself in.”

“You’re still hanging around, though,” Daisy said, tilting her head at me. “Just because he’s a client?”

I pursed my lips. “He’s definitely easy to be around,” I said, and they both looked shocked at that. “What’s with those faces?” I asked, motioning between the two.

They immediately smoothed the expressions.

“Nothing,” Brynn said, shrugging. “It’s just the women we’ve seen him with usually run at the first sign of his temper.”

“They don’t take the time to really get to know him,” Daisy added. “Not that he really ever allows anyone outside our little circle to get close.”

“That’s a shame,” I said, looking over at him laugh with his friends. He looked so at ease, so comfortable, more than I’d ever seen him before. “For them,” I added. “He’s worth the time it would take to get past all his walls. Not that I have,” I quickly added. “Professionally.” I cleared my throat, failing miserably at containing my feelings for him. They were definitely driven by our physical chemistry, but there was more to it than that, even when I tried to deny it every chance I could.

“Well,” Brynn said. “I’m glad he told you about the bet and gave it up. He’s lucky to have you helping him—”

“Oh, he didn’t give up,” I said, laughing. “He’s still trying very hard to win, even though I’ve told him I’m not a long-term girl.”

“Wait,” Brynn said. “What? He says he’s still trying to get you to fall in love with him? Even after you know about it? Even after he found out you were his coach?”

“Yep,” I said.

“This is gold,” Daisy muttered to herself. “Pure. Gold.” She grabbed another champagne flute, waggling her brows at me. “I love it. The proximity. The stakes. The forbidden boundaries.”

“Daisy,” Brynn chided, but she just shrugged.

“Sorry,” Daisy said to me, tapping her temple. “Can’t turn off the author brain.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “Honestly, I don’t mind. I’m glad you two are here. I’m all for shadowing him, but that circle looks intimidating as hell to penetrate.”

Brynn shook her head. “They may look intimidating, but they’re teddy bears.” She tilted her head. “Maybe not Gareth.”

“He’s most certainly not a teddy bear,” Daisy said. “More like a scary jungle cat you want to pet because he’s alluring, but he could just as easily bite your head off if you try.”

Brynn laughed. “Omigod, he’s not that bad.”

Daisy shrugged, sipping her drink.

“Is that the one with the tattoos?” I assumed.

“That’s the one,” Brynn said. “Honestly, he’s not as scary as he looks.”

Daisy looked skeptical but didn’t add anything.

“And the one standing next to him?”

“That’s Crossland,” Brynn answered. “He’s harmless. Cocky and pure trouble, but nothing to be afraid of. If you

need to be over there with Ethan, you'll be okay. I promise. They're a wonderful group to be a part of."

"Can't argue with that," Daisy said.

"Okay," I said, assured. "You've convinced me. I'll go back to work." I winked at the two, and they laughed as I left them and crossed the room.

The nerves in my stomach tightened the closer I got to Ethan. He looked like he was in casual conversation with his friends, his stance relaxed, the muscles beneath his tailored black suit showing no signs of tension. Despite that, what if I interrupted something important? Like a billion-dollar deal?

I slowed my pace when I was an arm's length away, suddenly feeling like an idiot for coming over here at all. It wasn't like I was his date—I was his anger management coach, for goodness's sake, and he was showing no signs of having an episode where he'd need my guidance. And the mere fact of who I was to him might be a touchy subject for his other friends—sure, Asher and Weston had accepted me with open arms last week at a casual lunch, but who knew about the other two?

God, why had I come over here at all? Why had I left the safety and comfort of the girls? Why—

"Alex?" Ethan said, cocking a brow at me as he turned away from the group to face me, a drink in one hand and the other casually resting in his pocket. "What are you doing standing over there?" He motioned for me to come over, the ease with which he did untangling some of the nerves in my stomach.

I sighed, resisting the urge to roll my eyes at myself as I stepped into the circle he and his friends had formed.

And *Jesus*, it was an intense circle, regardless of what the girls had said. I was standing among five devastatingly gorgeous billionaires, all of whom were now looking at me with studying, appraising gazes.

“Cross, Gareth,” Ethan said, motioning to me. “This is Alexandra,” he continued. “My appointed life coach and savior of my reputation.” He pointed out Crossland and Gareth, and I did this weird ass dip thing like I was curtsying to royalty.

Smooth.

“I wouldn’t go as far to say, savior,” I finally said.

“I don’t know about that,” Asher said, indicating Ethan with his drink. “It’s been a whole two weeks with no videos taking the media by storm. I’d say you’re on the right track.”

Ethan pursed his lips and flipped Asher off, who immediately laughed before eying me. “Does he lose points for that?” he asked.

“At least ten,” I said, which made him laugh again, Weston and Crossland chiming in. Gareth gave a twitch of his lips before taking another sip of his drink, and I took that as a win.

“We were wondering when we’d get to meet you,” Crossland said, elbowing Gareth in the ribs.

I raised my brows at the casual way Crossland interacted with a man that looked like he could crush his windpipe with one well-placed move. Not that Crossland wasn’t big—he was, they all were—but Gareth had some kind of energy radiating off of him that made him appear bigger. Scary alpha indeed. I instinctively stepped closer to Ethan, our arms brushing as I managed to not break away from Gareth’s appraising stare.

“It is good to finally meet you,” Gareth said, his voice as deep as I was expecting. “Ethan hasn’t been able to stop talking about you.”

Ethan cleared his throat, but didn’t deny it.

A flush worked its way across my cheeks. “I’m guessing he’s vented to you about the barrage of breathing techniques I’ve been torturing him with,” I teased.

“Among other things,” Ethan said, taking another sip of his drink.

“So, we know you can tame the beast,” Crossland joked, handing off his empty drink to a server who passed by and asked if we needed anything. “But can you dance?” He offered his hand, cocking a brow at Ethan. “Is that all right?”

“I’m not her keeper,” Ethan answered before I could. “If she wants to get her feet stepped on, she’s more than welcome to make that choice for herself.”

I grinned, eager to get to know the people who were closest to Ethan as much as possible. I slipped my hand in Crossland’s and let him lead me onto the dancefloor.

“That was easy,” he said, eyes behind me, no doubt on Ethan.

“Were you expecting him to have an episode?” I asked, falling into a slow waltz with Crossland.

He kept one hand in mine, the other lightly on my hip, so light he barely touched me, and he kept a good eight inches between us. It was cute as hell, the way he was being respectful.

“Maybe,” Crossland said, drawing his gaze down to mine. His smile was infectious, confident, and this side of reckless.

“Why does it look like you want that?”

He moved us around in a slow circle. “I don’t want that,” he said. “But if an ‘episode’—as you call it—is going to happen, it’s much better to happen around us. We actually care about him and will do our best to help.”

I furrowed my brow. “Are you implying that I don’t care about him?”

He smirked, dipping me slightly. “Why? Does it bother you if I am?”

I scanned the features of his face, then laughed as he drew me upright. “Omigod,” I said. “You’re fishing for details.”

“Damn it,” he said. “How could you tell?” he teased.

I shook my head, moving with him on the crowded dance floor to the soft instrumental music. “You’re easy to read,” I said. “But, to be fair, I’m great at reading people. I’m not falling for Ethan,” I clarified. “But I do care about him. About helping him.”

He eyed me, a skeptical look flickering over his features. “Is he okay?” he asked more seriously.

“I’m not allowed to discuss personal details of our sessions,” I explained.

Crossland nodded, shifting us to the beat, the hand on my hip moving to the small of my back to make the spin necessary for the melody.

It was fun, no doubt about it, but I found myself shocked by the *lack* of my body’s physical response to him. He was gorgeous, there was absolutely no denying that. And funny, definitely adventurous, and brave enough to poke not only the terrifying man that was Gareth, but Ethan as well with this

dance. But there was nothing sparking beneath my skin, no thrill of excitement that I was in his arms when any girl would be over the moon to be given any hint of attention—

Oh, no.

No, no, no.

If I wasn't even having the barest of thrill at Crossland's attention, but my heart leapt at the mere sound of Ethan's voice...

That meant...

No, not going there.

"He seems better," Crossland said, looking down at me. "These past few weeks."

"How so?" I asked, wondering if Ethan had left out some stories about him having episodes so constantly that our short amount of work on his anger would be noticeable by his friends.

"I don't know," he said. "It's not like he Hulks-out around us or anything, but there is just something different about him. I've known him for years now, and he's never seemed more content."

I swallowed around the sudden lump in my throat. "That's good to hear," I finally said. "He's been very open to our sessions."

"Somehow, I think it's more than that," Crossland said, spinning us again. "And—"

A commotion across the room stole the words from his mouth and stopped me dead in my tracks.

Maddox Porter was being openly yelled at by another man in a suit, and Ethan was storming across the room.

“Shit,” Crossland and I said at the same time.

I released Crossland, and rushed across the room, but not in enough time to intercept Ethan, who had already forced himself between the two men.

“You don’t get to talk to my players like that, Jepson.” Ethan’s voice was elevated, the muscle in his jaw ticking as he glared at the man.

“You talk to me like that all the time,” Maddox interjected, and I cringed.

“Fuck off, Maddox,” Ethan grumbled.

Maddox laughed, eyeing the other man. “Jepson here is just pissed I said no to his trade offer,” he said.

“You’re going to regret it,” Jepson said. “You milked me for four dinners and tickets to a Broadway show, you little son of a bitch. All while you *knew* you were going to say no. You’re going to fucking regret it. I’m going to make you regret —”

“Threaten my pitcher again,” Ethan snapped, his voice carrying across half the room. He stepped up so close to Jepson, their chests about touched. Ethan’s hands were fisted at his side, the muscles in his neck tensing.

“That prick deserves it,” Jepson said, unaware of how dangerous it was to poke Ethan while he was in this state.

I surveyed the scene, my heart racing. Ethan was seconds away from an episode. I could see it in his tense muscles, in the chilling set of his gray eyes.

“He’s a mooch,” Jepson continued. “A low-life, low-on-talent, lying mooch. You know it, Berkley. He uses people. You know how he is—”

“Ethan,” I gasped his name as he drew his fist back, barely getting there in time to lay my hand over his coiled forearm.

Maddox maneuvered his way in between Ethan and Jepson.

“It’s fine,” Maddox said, turning his back on Jepson. “It’s fine.”

“Ethan,” I said again, keeping my tone even. His eyes finally met mine, shame and regret and enough anger there to blow up this entire scene. And help. He was asking for help, but didn’t know how to voice it.

Triggered. His protective instinct, the one so ingrained in him he couldn’t recognize when it surfaced, had been massively triggered by Jepson’s blatant verbal attack on Maddox.

“Come here,” I said, urging him by tugging on his forearm. He followed me effortlessly, the move shooting relief through my veins the farther away I got him from the scene.

And it was a fucking scene. One the media presence was practically salivating over their phones discreetly out and pointing the direction we’d just left.

Vultures.

“What color are my eyes?” I asked when I felt his muscles tremble beneath my hand.

“What?” he asked, blinking at the question.

I kept moving, only stopping when we’d exited the ballroom and slipped into a private alcove just around the

corner.

“What color are my eyes?” I asked again, turning to face him.

“That’s a hard question.” He practically bit out the words, taking a step away from me. “Alex, you should go. I don’t...I can’t...”

I reached for his hand, timidly taking it in mine. “My eyes.”

He looked down at me, hesitance all over his features as he tried and failed to leash the adrenaline coursing through him. “Blue,” he ground out the answer. “But that isn’t really a good enough description. They have different dimensions of blue depending on what light you’re in,” he continued, and my heart skipped. “Like now, in the partial dark, they’re deeper, like sapphires, but when we’re outside, like at the stadium, they’re crystalline, almost like blue diamonds.”

My lips parted open, and I continued to rub his hand, massaging the muscle between his thumb and forefinger. “Still angry?”

He nodded.

“What do you smell right now?”

He nodded again, understanding the process I was walking him through. We’d talked and experimented with grounding extensively the last couple of weeks. It was one of the best tools I had for him right now, knowing what I did.

“You,” he said, inhaling deeply and holding it for four seconds before releasing it slowly, just like we’d worked on. “Woodsy and floral and—” He stopped himself, wetting his lips as he let out another long breath. “You,” he said again.

My pulse skittered beneath my skin. I wasn't fishing for these answers in my attempts to ground him, but I couldn't stop my reaction to his words, either.

"Your dress is black with flecks of silver," he continued, and I switched to the other hand, massaging there. "The walls around us are white marble, and it's at least ten degrees colder out here than it was in there." He jerked his head toward the ballroom. "I can see the chills raising across your skin," he said, stepping closer like he wanted to envelop me in his warmth. "And Jepson was wearing an atrocious yellow tie, and I wanted to knock his teeth in."

I paused in my massaging, a laugh ripping from my lips that wasn't at all professional. I quickly covered my mouth with my hands, shaking my head. "I'm sorry," I said. "You just surprised me with that direction. It's not funny—"

"I know," he said, his tone evening out, his shoulders dropping a fraction as the tension left his body. "Your laugh," he said. "God, it's wonderful."

A shock radiated through me, awakening things that should so not be awake right now. Shit, I was dancing on a very dangerous line. I was grounding him, for fuck's sake. How could I want him while I was actively working on him?

"How are you feeling now?" I asked.

"Better," he said, then shrugged. "Slightly embarrassed." He sighed. "I thought all the work we've been doing...I thought I wouldn't slip like that."

"You didn't slip."

He eyed me.

"You didn't."

“Only because you were there.”

“That’s not true,” I said, and he cocked a brow at me. “We don’t know that’s true. You would’ve breathed, I know it. You would’ve grounded yourself. That’s why you were already noting the ugly tie he wore.”

He shrugged again. “Maybe.” He cocked a brow at me. “You still felt the need to whisk me away and into this private space.” He smirked. “Or have you just been looking for an excuse to get me alone again?”

“Deflection,” I said. “Super cute.”

“Can you blame me?”

“Never,” I said. “We’re getting there, Ethan,” I said. “I promise. You’re doing great.”

“Because of you,” he said, making my knees weak with the intent way he was looking at me.

With how little space rested between us.

With how hot my skin felt despite the chill in the air.

“Still trying to make me fall in love with you?” I teased, trying to fall into jokes and banter rather than anything serious.

“Always,” he whispered, leaning closer. “I haven’t stopped thinking about that kiss.”

A lightning strike snapped down the center of me with his directness. “Oh, really?” I asked, breathless.

“Really,” he said, leaning an arm against the wall behind me, partially caging me in.

“Ethan,” I tried to warn, but it sounded more like a plea. “I just grounded you. We’re...working.”

“What if we weren’t?” he asked. “What if the session is over? Would it make a difference?”

“Maybe,” I breathed the word, and internally chastised myself. God, this was wrong, but I couldn’t stop the draw, the pull, the longing.

“What if I want to thank you?”

“Thank me for what?”

He drew up his free hand, gently sliding it along my jaw. I leaned into the touch, instinct taking over. “For not looking at me and seeing an asshole, seeing someone you should be afraid of.”

I reached up and held his hand in place. “Never,” I said again. “I could never be afraid of you.”

Something guttered in his eyes, something dark and aching from his past. I filed it away, not able to think clearly with him so close.

He inched closer, his lips a breath away from mine. “Tell me no,” he whispered. “Tell me you don’t want this.”

I held his gaze, heat pooling between my thighs.

“I can’t,” I whispered back. “I don’t lie. I can’t lie to you. Ethan, I want you. But we shouldn’t.”

He closed the distance between us, timidly at first.

The first brush of his mouth against mine had me forgetting every reason I had for him *not* to touch me.

I fisted his jacket, drawing him closer so I could kiss him harder.

He groaned in response, shifting to cup my face in his hands, tipping my head back so he could kiss me at a deeper

angle—

“Yo,” Maddox’s voice drew out the word, and we instantly broke apart. “I’m sorry,” he said, clenching his eyes shut as he held up a hand. “I didn’t see anything. Except maybe your tongue in her mouth. It’s dark out here. Anyway,” he continued, backing up with his eyes still closed. “Jepson left. Security made him. And I just wanted to say thanks, Ethan,” he said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. “I’ll just be going.”

He disappeared back into the ballroom, and Ethan and I just stared at each other, my chest heaving from the breath he’d stolen with his kiss.

The tension crackled between us, sharpening to the point of pain.

“I should...” Ethan’s eyes trailed the length of my body as his words trailed off.

“Go,” I finished for him. “You should go back to your friends. Enjoy the rest of your party.”

He nodded, almost reluctantly, like he wished he could stay tucked away in this alcove with me all night.

We were on the same page in that regard.

But we shouldn’t.

Couldn’t.

“Will you stay with me?” he asked.

“Of course,” I said, and breathed out a sigh as I looped my arm in his. “You think I’d leave behind all this five-star food?” I asked once we were back in the ballroom.

He laughed, the sound open and vulnerable and real. “The food,” he said. “Of course, that’s why you’d want to stay.” He

smiled down at me as I reached for one of the appetizers, popping it into my mouth for good measure.

“Would there be any other reason?” I teased.

“None that I can think of,” he said, dipping down. “After all, our session is over, isn’t it?”

“Mmhhh,” I said, unable to speak coherently while his lips nearly brushed the shell of my ear. “Definitely over.”

“Let’s feed you then,” he said, winking at me before he filled a glass plate with everything I’d been eying.

“**H**as the commissioner backed off yet?” Crossland asked from his seat directly across from Asher at the poker table.

We were in Nepal, having just completed the most intense whitewater kayaking I’d ever experienced only a mere four hours ago. It had taken us all that long to recuperate, shower, and make it back to the table in time for our monthly game.

“Somewhat,” I said, folding my cards. “It’s not just him, it’s the other owners, too.” Owning an MLB team wasn’t like other franchise sports—if enough of the other league owners complained to the commissioner, they could come together to veto me out. Just like if enough of them stood with me and supported me, they could make the commissioner’s threats obsolete.

“How many are complaining?” Asher asked, dealing the flop for the three players still in the hand—Wes, Gareth, and Doyle.

“Not enough to give me the axe,” I answered. And thank fuck for that. It wasn’t like I was in the MLB owner club for the money—I had a shit-ton of other endeavors for that, which now included a chain of hotels I’d recently purchased that would only continue to grow my wealth.

The Hurricanes weren't about money for me. What started off as a revenge purchase had soon become my place of pure joy and freedom, and I was on the verge of losing it because I couldn't keep my anger in check.

Yet.

For the first time in years, I actually felt hope swelling in my chest. With Alexandra's help, I had a shot at finally taking control of my life, and I hadn't felt that kind of hope since before my ex had broken my heart.

"The commissioner has noticed my efforts," I continued after the guys had thrown in their bets, and Asher dealt the turn. "He's not an asshole. He texted me to say the reports he's received from Alexandra's company have been positive."

Doyle laughed, folding his cards after Gareth placed a massive bet in front of him. "Who gives a shit about the commissioner?" he grumbled. "Have you made the dumb broad fall for you yet?"

Breathe. In for four seconds, hold for four, then out for four. Alexandra's voice filtered into my mind, which threatened to turn red at the vile shit that came out of Doyle's mouth with every other word.

I took the damn breaths, feeling the surging adrenaline slow.

"Easy," Gareth warned, not to me, but to Doyle, before I managed to open my mouth. "The rest of us aren't like you," he continued while he waited to see if Weston was going to call his bet or not.

"Smart, loyal, and willing to do whatever it takes to get what I want?" Doyle asked, shaking his empty drink behind him, the ice clinking in his daughter Serenity's face.

She hopped out of her seat, her face void of emotion as she took his glass and headed to the bar across the room to refill. She looked like a robot, trained to respond accordingly.

“We don’t treat people like property,” Gareth said, his tone low and sharp. He rolled a chip along the backs of his fingers, not bothering to give Doyle his attention as he focused on the woman returning to the table. Something flashed in his gaze as he met Serenity’s eyes, some kind of silent question I couldn’t make out but Serenity seemed to, dipping her head just slightly as if to say she was okay before she handed her father her drink and sat back down.

“And you’re not smart,” Gareth continued, finally allowing his eyes to skim over Doyle dismissively. “If you were, you would’ve opted out of this game months ago.”

Doyle shook his head. “I earned my spot. I’m not going anywhere. Even with the shit company you can be, Maxfield. Christ, you’re all so serious. I wasn’t the one who came up with Berkley’s bet, you and McClaren did.” He rolled his eyes, sipping from his fresh drink.

“She’s a delight,” Asher said, clearly trying to diffuse the growing tension between Gareth and Doyle that had been building since the moment the guy won his way into our game. “Alexandra,” he clarified.

“Definitely,” Weston agreed, finally folding his cards. Asher pushed the chips toward Gareth, who stacked them meticulously. “She has something that your previous dates haven’t. She’s genuine and doesn’t filter her responses on our behalf. I like her.”

“Same,” Crossland said, cocking a brow at me. “She’s a wonderful dancer too.” He eyed me with a challenging look that made me laugh.

He was ribbing me to see if I'd have some primal jealous reaction, but I shook my head. "Way better than you," I said. "I saw the two of you. She practically had to lead you."

Cross flipped me off, but grinned. He knew I was full of shit. Cross had many talents, dancing being one of them, but there was no real threat with him, not that Alexandra was exactly mine to be worried about.

Even though she damn sure felt like it. Especially when we kept ending up with my mouth on hers. Did I know all the reasons we shouldn't keep exploring that insatiable draw we had?

Yes. Absolutely.

Did I really care at this point?

Not at all.

Alexandra held my ownership standing and reputation in her hands, especially with the weekly progress reports she was required to submit on my behalf, but my attraction to her went beyond what she could offer me professionally.

I loved her tenacity, her raw honesty, her huge fucking heart and the way she dedicated every second of her free time to helping others. She was a powerhouse of a woman, but she also possessed this beautiful understanding and compassion that I knew I'd never be worthy of. I was desperate to earn it anyway.

And fuck me, the chemistry between us was electric. Every time my mouth grazed hers was another shot of gasoline to a fire that had started the second I'd laid eyes on her. Soon, I'd be absolutely consumed by it. She felt it too. I knew that by the way she'd pull me in, even as she expressed the reasons we shouldn't cross that line between us.

Not that I'd ever push if she set up boundaries, but we were careening toward each other like a derailed train. We were bound to collide, each time we were together only making it that much harder to stay away.

I hadn't invited her to shadow me on this trip for that very reason. There was no way we wouldn't cross those lines if I had her all to myself in our own private suite. We could barely keep our hands off each other in public, let alone a secluded suite in Nepal.

"I'm out this round. Serenity, play the next hand properly if I'm not back by the time it's dealt," Doyle said, pushing away from the table and drawing me back to the present. He drained the rest of his drink, then looked down at me. "Sounds like you need to try harder," he said. "I didn't pick you for bending over and taking it for Gareth, but hey, to each their own." He flashed me a sour smirk and then headed out the door.

My hands balled into fists, but I took a deep breath.

The felt is green and feels like velvet.

It smells like lemons in here.

I have a jack of hearts and a ten of spades in my hand.

"Call," I finally said, tossing in my chip.

Asher's brows raised as he shared a look with Weston before he dealt the flop.

"Holy shit," Crossland said, giving voice to obviously what Ash and Wes were keeping silent. "She's a magician."

I laughed, thankful that Cross never tried to tip-toe around me. Not that my other friends did, but Cross had this way of never bullshitting me that I appreciated.

“Jedi is more like it,” I said. “I’ll be the first to tell you I thought her methods would be pointless for me to try, but I think she might have brainwashed me...in a healthy way,” I added.

My friends laughed at that, the entire table relaxing like we always did whenever Doyle left. It was a much-needed reprieve from his constant bullshit. Even Serenity seemed more at ease, sitting in her father’s seat, her shoulders less tense and a small, almost hidden smile shaping her lips.

“Gareth?” Asher asked, eyebrow arched. “You in or not?”

Gareth snapped his eyes away from Serenity, who was in his direct line of sight in Doyle’s seat.

“I’m in,” he said, tossing in the blinds. He hadn’t even looked at his hand.

Serenity hesitated, then folded her cards.

“Damn,” Cross said, taking a swig from his drink. “I was hoping we could see you two battle it out again.”

“Next time,” Serenity said, her voice soft as she looked at Gareth, not Cross, when she answered.

Gareth shifted in his seat, focusing harder on his cards.

Seems I wasn’t the only one who was struggling under the spell of a woman he wasn’t supposed to want.

* * *

I knocked on Alexandra’s door, my fucking heart in my throat. What the hell was this? We had sessions all the time, we texted constantly, and I’d taken her to at least three formal events since we’d met...so why was I anxious to see her?

Usually with the women I dated—not that I was dating her—there was a calm sense of formality with just a hint of shaking things up to keep the lonely weeks interesting. But with her? Fuck, it was like I was a teenager again, racing home from school to go to my favorite job—working at the stadium and watching the games.

“I’m almost ready!” she said, slightly breathless as she opened the door. “I’m sorry. This is the fanciest dress I’ve ever put on in my life,” she continued, backing up to let me inside. Her hands were behind her back and her face was scrunched in a clear struggle. “I can’t get the zipper,” she said, almost like an apology. “We’re going to be late because of me.”

I couldn’t fucking breathe.

She was stunning, the sapphire blue silk clinging to her sumptuous curves and shivering all the way past her ankles as she moved.

“You wore it,” I said.

“You sent it,” she said, still struggling with the zipper. “Of course, I wore it.” She looked up at me, dropping her hands. “I need help.”

My lips curved into a smirk. “That sounded like it was hard for you to admit,” I teased, twirling my finger for her to turn around.

She did, and the sight of the silk split at her shoulders, baring her back to me, was a test of fucking willpower. I reached for the zipper, but I was desperate to slide my finger along her spine, to see if she’d arch into my touch the way she did when my mouth was on hers.

“It *was* hard,” she said. “I normally can do everything on my own. I don’t like depending on people.”

I gently tugged the zipper upward and clasped the top of the dress to keep it in place. “Hence, your thirty-day rule,” I said as she spun back around. “It keeps you from getting used to someone being around.”

Her eyelids fluttered as she looked up at me, but she nodded. “It’s easier that way.”

“And yet, today marks thirty days I’ve known you and have been spending time with you.” I cocked a brow. “Are you ready to get rid of me?”

She visibly swallowed, her bright blue eyes never straying from mine. “It’s different with us,” she said. “You’re my—”

“Client,” I said, nodding. Tension heightened between us, her breath catching just slightly as I took a step away from her. “You look stunning,” I said.

“So do you,” she said, eyeing the dark suit I wore.

“Are you ready?”

She nodded and took my offered arm as I led her to the car I had waiting outside her apartment complex.

“A limousine?” she asked, eyeing me. “I didn’t think that was your style.”

“It’s not,” I said, nodding at the driver, who held the door open for us. “But Asher’s head of charity for the Carolina Reapers insisted she send one over for us.”

“Wow,” she said as the driver closed the door behind us.

“It’s a bit of a drive to the event,” I said as she settled next to me. “So at least we’ll be comfortable.”

“That’s one way to describe it,” she said, taking in the spacious backseat and the closed partition separating the driver

from us, as the car started moving. “So,” she said, surveying me. “You said Nepal was uneventful, which I somehow don’t understand since you went whitewater kayaking for *fun*, but has anything come up since we last saw each other?”

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

“No incidents or episodes?”

I sighed. “There was a moment at the poker game with Doyle,” I admitted. “He was being crass, as usual. I shouldn’t let it get to me, but he said something about you.” I shrugged. “I did my breathing, my grounding, and I was fine.”

A bright smile shaped her full lips. “I’m so proud of you.”

My chest puffed out just a fraction, pride swelling through me at the happiness shining in her eyes. “It’s all because of you,” I said. “If it weren’t for you and what you’ve been teaching me, I might’ve flown across the table at him.”

She shook her head. “I don’t believe that,” she said. “And this is all you. I’m merely...like an assistant. You’re doing all the hard work.”

I flashed her a soft smile. She wasn’t wrong about doing hard work—I was learning things about myself I hadn’t realized before. Like my triggers. Without her careful observance, her shadowing me for weeks, I would’ve never realized that I was most likely to have an outburst when something or someone I loved was threatened. There was this deep, protective instinct in me that I never noticed until it was too late.

“What did the prick say about me?” she asked, nudging me with her shoulder.

“It’s not worth repeating,” I said.

“That bad, huh? He’s never even met me. Sounds like he was just trying to get under your skin.”

“That’s a definite,” I said. “He does that with everyone.” I shrugged. “He was pressuring me about the bet.”

“Ah,” she said, smirking up at me. “Still trying to get me to fall for you, Ethan Berkley?”

“Always,” I responded to the little question that had become our secret thing.

“Hmm,” she said thoughtfully. “I’m so sorry that I’m responsible for that inevitable loss.”

I grinned down at her. “Don’t be. You’d like Gareth’s charity. There is no loss here.”

Except for the fact that we were denying everything between us for the sake of my mental health, which, yeah okay, that was important, but why couldn’t we have both? Why couldn’t she help me work out my issues while also building something real for the future?

Holy shit, did I want that? A future with her?

I furrowed my brow, seriously considering what my life would look like without her. I’d gotten so used to her presence, her infectious compassion, her steady hand and understanding when I felt like I was breaking. How could I go back to the way I’d been before? Aimlessly dating with no intention of making a genuine connection, working myself into the ground, the only real joy I had being my team and my inner circle.

“What’s that look?” she asked gently after a few moments.

“What look?” I asked, my heart already flinching at the prospect of going back to a life without her.

I was so fucked.

Alex reached up and traced her fingertip between my brows, which were still furrowed. She smoothed out the lines there as I released a deep breath.

“Honestly?”

“Always,” she answered.

“I don’t want this to end,” I admitted. “And I’m not just talking about how you’re helping me professionally.”

Her lips parted open. “Ethan...”

“I know,” I said. “You told me to be honest. I am. I like you. I’ve liked you from the moment you grilled me that night with questions and gave me a kiss test. I like you more every day, even when you’re texting me ridiculous yoga sessions that I do, regardless of how terrible I am at them.”

She smiled up at me. “Mindfulness is one of the key factors in emotion regulation—”

“I know,” I said. “Tell me I’m wrong,” I said, shifting so I could face her. “Tell me I’m the only one who feels this between us, and I’ll drop it.”

Her eyes flashed, darting from my eyes to my mouth and back again. “You know I can’t.”

Relief rushed through me so quickly it almost hurt.

“Then give me thirty days,” I said, the idea suddenly hitting me over the head—a safe way to explore what we could be to each other.

“What?”

“Give me thirty days, Alex,” I practically begged. “Thirty days. That’s it. Your rule. Thirty days where we don’t have to

just be client and coach. Thirty days where I don't have to fight to keep myself from reaching for you."

Her breaths came quicker. "What happens at the end of the thirty days, Ethan? What happens when I'm still your coach? We'll still be working things out by then. We'll have two weeks left."

"Whatever you want to happen, happens. And not just at the end of thirty days. If you want to stop, we stop. You're in control. Always."

She studied me for a moment. "Is this your stealthy way of still trying to beat Gareth?"

"No," I answered honestly. "This is me trying to ease my constant need for you. To help both of us focus. You can't tell me you're not distracted by whatever this is."

A flush raked over her skin. "I can't."

I waited, my breath held, as I saw her think about my proposition.

"Thirty days," she breathed the words. "You...you want that? You're okay with it not being more than that?"

"Fuck yes," I said. "You know I understand the reasoning behind your boundaries more than anyone."

"I know," she said, biting back a smile. "You're sure? You won't fall for me either?"

"I've never been more sure," I said, only electing to answer the first part of her question. I didn't want to lie to her. While I didn't think I could give my heart to anyone ever again, I couldn't deny the fact that she'd shifted something in me in a way no one else ever had. Was it love? I didn't know, but I knew I couldn't go on pretending I didn't want her.

Her smile deepened. “Okay,” she said. “Let’s do it.”

“Thank fuck,” I groaned, closing the distance and crushing my mouth against hers.

She was surprised for all of two seconds before she melted into my kiss, her hands splaying on my chest, slipping beneath my suit jacket.

I tilted her back slightly, shifting us so her spine kissed the leather seat stretched beneath us.

“Now?” her eyes flared wide, breaking our kiss momentarily as my hand slid up her leg.

I raised up, looking at her with an amused wonder. “You think I’m trying to fuck you right now?”

She trembled beneath me. “Maybe?”

“You’d let me, wouldn’t you?” I grinned, my cock hardening in my pants.

“Yes,” she breathed the word, and fuck me, I wanted to sink between those thighs and feel her flutter around me.

I bent down, capturing her lips again in a bruising kiss that had her arching against where my thigh rested between hers, the silk of her dress hiked up around her hips.

“We don’t have time for me to do all the things I intend on doing with you, Alexandra,” I said against her lips before kissing down her jaw and over the globes of her breasts that were threatening to spill right out of the top of her dress. “Right now, all we have time for is to make you feel good.”

She gasped as I kissed my way back up her neck, spending a good amount of time on the spot beneath her jaw that made her breathing heavier. I slid my hand under the pooled fabric of her dress, teasing the inside of her thigh.

“Do you want me to make you feel good, Alex?” I asked once I’d reached her mouth again.

She nodded, her fingers reaching up and tangling in my hair to bring my lips back to hers.

“Baby,” I groaned against her mouth as she bit my bottom lip. “I need to hear you say it.”

I needed everything to be in her control, her hands, her comfort zone.

“Please, Ethan,” she said. “Please. I’ve been aching for weeks. I need...I need you.”

I glanced at the closed partition, knowing the driver was well-trained and wouldn’t look back, even so, she may have forgotten about—

“I don’t care,” she said, following my line of sight. “I don’t care. Just touch me.”

Fuck me.

That was all the confirmation I needed. I shifted my hand between her thighs, cupping her heat, my hand meeting lace that was wet.

“Fuck, Alex,” I groaned against her mouth as I shifted the lace to the side. “You are so slick already.” I slid my fingers teasingly through her heat, and she arched into my touch. “So fucking responsive for me.” I captured her lips again, swallowing her little moans as I stroked her.

“Ethan,” she whimpered into my mouth, arching her hips to get the friction she needed. “You feel...God, your *fingers*.”

I grinned against her mouth before licking my way between her lips, thrusting my tongue against hers as I plunged two fingers inside her heat. She gasped, clenching my shirt to

hold me close, the tip of her heel digging into my back as she hiked her leg up higher to give me better leverage.

Fuck, she was on fire beneath me, all breathy and arching her hips into my touch. She wanted me just as badly as I wanted her. All it would take was one quick unzip from me and I could be buried in her heat, surrounded by all her slick warmth as I fucked her into oblivion.

God, I wanted to draw this out. Wanted to squeeze every last drop of tension out of her before I sent her flying, but the rational part of my mind knew we didn't have time. The last thing I needed was us pulling up to the event and the driver opening the door for the entire world to see me making Alex come on my fingers.

I had to be quick.

"I need you to know," I said, pulling back enough so I could catch every emotion playing across her beautiful face. "That later, I'm going to take my time with you." I pumped my fingers into her heat, faster, curling them when she whimpered. "Later, I'm going to explore every inch of your body." I gave her a punishing kiss before pulling back again, relishing the way she was trembling beneath me as I held her poised on the edge of release. "I'm going to tease you until you're begging for my cock."

"Ethan," she said, her brows drawn together as her thighs clenched on either side of me. I stilled my relentless pumping, relishing the feel of her heartbeat around my fingers. Her eyes flew wide, lust-hazy and filled with frustration.

"Do you understand?" I asked, my entire body aching at the sight of her prone and on the edge, begging me to push her over.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes. Please—”

I pumped my fingers into her, grinding the heel of my palm against her swollen clit with enough pressure that she moaned, her head arching back as she bucked her hips into my hand, chasing her pleasure with an unabashed sense of urgency. Her pussy fluttered around my fingers as she rocked into my hand, drawing out her orgasm as her nails dug into my chest.

She was the most beautiful thing I’d ever fucking seen—all flushed and pleasure ridden.

I worked her down slowly, kissing her with languid, possessive laps of my tongue, sweeping into her mouth just like I intended to do when I got between her thighs.

Later.

I had to wait.

And it would be so beyond worth it.

I kissed her softly, gently pulling my hand from between her thighs, bringing my fingers to my mouth. Her eyes flared when I sucked her flavor off of them.

Jesus fucking Christ, she tasted like a dream—all salt and sugar and *mine*.

For the next month, she was fucking mine.

I groaned around her taste. “No wonder I’m starved for you,” I said, relishing the way her hazy eyes fluttered at my words. I gently shifted us back up to sitting, helping her smooth her dress back in place, and she straightened my jacket.

“Maybe we should skip this,” I said, stealing another kiss from her swollen lips. Thank God she didn’t have lipstick on

or it would be beyond obvious what we'd just done. The flush on her skin and the look in her eyes was already giving a lot away. Not that I gave a shit who knew.

But I wanted her to be comfortable, and the lines we were crossing were anything but simple.

"I have to fly out tomorrow. I don't want to waste a second of our time together," I continued.

"This is important to Asher," she argued. "You told me it was. You can't bail on your friend."

"I would for you," I said with all honesty. I could explain later. Asher would get it—

"No," she said, fixing her hair from where it had gotten a little unkempt. "You bought me this dress," she continued. "Don't you want to dance with me in it?"

I smirked. "As long as I'm with you."

She pressed her lips together, fighting another bright smile. "Plus, I'm still shadowing you, Mr. Berkley."

"Fuck," I said. "When you speak all professional like that, it really makes me want to skip this party."

The car slowed to a stop, and the flash of over fifty cameras burst outside the tinted windows.

"You promised me later," she whispered. "I'll hold you to that."

The door swung open, and I took her hand to help her out of the car. The media was out in full force, snapping pictures as we walked the red carpet into the event, passing more than a few Carolina Reapers who'd stopped to answer questions on our way.

“An hour,” I whispered into her ear. “That’s all I’ll be able to wait.”

Alexandra

My heart raced for an entirely different reason than the flashes from the paparazzi's cameras, and despite having gotten somewhat used to their presence whenever I went out with Ethan, I don't think I'd ever fully become accustomed to it.

Jesus, I hope the cameras didn't pick up on the lust no doubt blistering my skin or swirling in my eyes. My heart still throbbed with the aftereffects of what Ethan had just done to me in the car.

Oh God, what have I gotten myself into?

I'd agreed to thirty days with him, just like I would have with any other potential date, but everything was different with Ethan. Our professional relationship made this way more complicated than it needed to be. He knew it, I knew it, but for some unknown reason, we both didn't care.

My heart ached, and I took a deep breath to try and soothe the stress there. I'd made my thirty-day rule as a way to protect myself from ever getting in too deep again, but I couldn't lie to myself. Ethan wasn't my ex. He wasn't like any of the other casual relationships I'd had since. He was warm and kind and perceptive. He was funny and passionate and yes, he had his own trauma he was dealing with—trauma I

was assigned to help him deal with. God, I was crossing so many damn lines with this man, personal and professional.

I shoved the thoughts down, focusing on the ballroom he guided me into. It was similar to the events we'd went to before, only this one wasn't just for professional athletes and their team's owners—this ballroom was packed with all sorts of other social elites, celebrities, charitable organizations, and more. It was just overwhelming enough to distract me from the internal battle currently raging war inside my heart. And my body. If my body had its way, it would ask Ethan to take me back to his place so we could finish exactly what we'd started in the back of the limousine.

A tendril of desire curled down my spine at the thought, at the promise he'd made me.

Later.

I wanted it to be later so badly, but my mind cautioned me on that eagerness.

He's flying to New York tomorrow for business. You'll wake up alone.

A pit opened up in my stomach.

He'd keep you up all night until he had to leave for his flight, though.

That was my body talking, and holy hell, did it take over most of my rational thought. I could still feel the slickness between my thighs, coaxed by his fingers with an expert's touch. His kissed had burned through me, his touch had melted me completely. I could only imagine what having all of him would do to me.

“So, he made you come.” Crossland's words punched me right out of my fantasies as he approached us, that signature

cocky smile shaping his lips.

I sputtered, my eyes flaring wide for a second.

Could he tell? Was it that obvious?

“I didn’t exactly have to drag her here, Cross.” Ethan chuckled softly, smoothing an assuring hand along the small of my back. “She’s shadowing me,” he said, and the breath rushed from my lungs.

“Right,” Crossland said, eyeing us both. “Well, I’ve already made my annual, standard donation to Doctors Without Borders,” he continued. “Asher too. You better hurry before Weston and Gareth beat you.”

“Good call,” Ethan said, tugging me through the crowded room before stopping at an elegant booth set up that was clearly the main charity organization of the night. Ethan spoke to the host of the booth for a few minutes while I stood silently by, watching him work.

It was incredible to watch. It wasn’t every day I was able to witness a man writing a check for over a million as easily as if he were buying a box of Girl Scout cookies.

“Last one to donate has to throw in a blank chip in our monthly poker game,” Ethan explained as he led me away from the booth after he’d completed his business.

“Ah,” I said, nodding. He’d explained the unique rules regarding his monthly poker game with his inner circle, but it seemed like there were always new ones being added. “I can’t wait until I get to see that someday.”

His eyes met mine, a hopeful smile shaping his features as he looked down at me. “Really?”

I swallowed hard, nerves tangling beneath my skin. “I mean, I wasn’t trying to invite myself.” I cringed. “I just meant it sounds interesting.”

Ethan stepped closer, dragging his knuckles lightly down my cheek. “I’ll take you,” he said. “I’d take you to New York with me tomorrow,” he continued. “If your schedule wasn’t so packed.”

My lips parted open, shock washing over me. “You’re saying if I wasn’t booked solid at the animal shelter this weekend, you’d whisk me away for a fun getaway to NYC just like that?” I snapped my fingers for emphasis.

His grin deepened. “Just like that,” he said, his voice lowered between us. “That’s how it works in my world.”

“Wow,” I said, unable to stop my smile. “Still trying to get me to fall for you?”

“Always,” he said.

And damn him, the joke we had between us was starting to feel less and less like a fun rapport we’d developed. He sounded sincere, and the way he looked at me?

I needed to breathe.

Just breathe.

One step at a time.

I was still here to help him, shadow him, learn what he needed most, and help him find the path to success. That shouldn’t change because of our new agreement, and it shouldn’t change just because he’d had me riding his hand like a lust-starved woman a mere twenty minutes ago.

Focus.

Right.

“Am I the last?” Gareth asked as he hurried over to where we still stood near the charity booth.

“Nope,” Ethan said. “You made it before Wes.”

Gareth nodded, a mere twitch of his lips looking somewhat like a smile? I wasn't sure. I didn't know him well enough yet and the only emotions he let show to the outside world seemed to be centered around a cold, calculating intimidation that I'm sure worked wonders for him with all his enterprises.

“Good,” Gareth said. “Last thing I need is another blank chip floating around out there.”

Ethan smirked. “Who got your last one again?” he asked, but from the look on his face, he already knew. “Has that come into play yet?”

“Careful,” Gareth warned, but there was just the barest hint of playfulness in his dark eyes that shone through. It was gone in a millisecond as he spun around and started speaking to the host of the charity.

“What was that about?” I asked.

Ethan shook his head. “Gareth lost a blank chip recently,” he said. “Part of the agony of blank chips is waiting for the winner to call in the favor of their choosing.”

“Oh?” I asked, eyebrows raising. “Are there any limitations on favors?”

“Not really,” he explained, guiding us over to the bar and ordering us a couple of drinks. “The obvious—nothing illegal, nothing that will harm someone, that sort of thing.”

I laughed, sipping from a fruity mocktail he'd ordered for me because he knew I didn't drink while technically on the

clock with him.

“It’s like you’re genies,” I teased.

“Not quite,” he said.

“May as well be with the capabilities you have,” I said. “Look at this.” I motioned to the event around us. “You’re able to do more with your checkbook in one night than I can with a year’s worth of hours of my time.”

“That’s not fair,” he chided me. “You give away a different commodity that helps more than some zeros on a check.”

I flashed him a challenging look. “How do you figure?”

“It’s personal,” he said. “Dedicating your time and offering your physical labor to those in need is something that has more of an impact than the money we donate.”

“I understand where you’re coming from,” I said. “But I think it’s amazing what you and your friends can do.”

“Just like I admire you for all the volunteer work you do.”

“Thank you.” I smiled up at him. “I’m excited about the adoption drive this weekend,” I continued, my heart dropping a little bit.

“But?” Ethan asked, noticing my shift in mood. He always noticed.

“But,” I said, sighing. “Am I a monster for saying I’ll be devastated if Sherlock gets adopted?”

“You love that dog,” he said, shaking his head. “That doesn’t make you a monster.”

“I want him to find his forever home. I *do*,” I said. “I just wish it was me.” I shrugged. “I’ve asked for a different apartment unit on the main floor,” I continued. “In the hopes I

could adopt him, but the complex manager says there won't be any available main floor units for at least a year." I swallowed hard. "It would be cruel of me to hope that he remains in the shelter that long. Even with how much time I spend there."

Ethan's brow furrowed. "See," he said. "Personal. The work you do, the way you put your heart into everything, it's so much more than writing a check."

"And yet, that check probably saved countless lives," I countered. "I'm not saying money can buy everything. It can't. It can't buy time, but you should give yourself more credit."

"Maybe we're more alike than you think," he said.

"Maybe." I grinned up at him.

"Dance partner!" Crossland called from behind me, and I laughed when I spun around to see him calling me over to the dance floor. "Come on!"

I glanced back at Ethan, who shook his head at his friend. "You better go," he said. "If you don't, he'll only get louder."

"Can't have that," I said, handing Ethan my half-full glass before heading over to Crossland.

He immediately swept me into his arms, whisking us away to the melody from the string quartet playing a take on a popular song. "I wasn't stealing you away from anything interesting, was I?" he asked.

"Everything with Ethan is interesting," I answered.

Crossland laughed. "I suppose that's true."

We moved to the music with a friendly ease I was more than happy to realize had developed. I'd spent more time with Crossland than any of Ethan's other friends, which was

surprising since Crossland didn't live here. But Ethan said he'd extended his stay in Charleston to see more of his sister.

Which was super cute, and fascinating to me—to have the ability to just decide to vacation somewhere for weeks on end, with no worries about budgeting your time or money.

What world had I fallen into?

“When are you going to bring an actual date to do these dances with you?” I asked.

Crossland spun me dramatically, and I laughed as he righted us. “I have two here tonight, actually,” he said, shifting us to the music before nodding to a beautiful woman across the room in a silver gown.

“Wasn't she on the cover of *Vogue* two months ago?” I asked, shocked.

“Yep,” he said, spinning us again before nodding to another gorgeous woman in a black gown in deep conversation with a few celebrities I recognized from a super popular TV series on Netflix. “And her,” he said.

“They're *both* here with you?”

“Yes.”

“And they both...know that?” I stumbled over the question.

He laughed again. “Yes,” he said. “I'm not an asshole.”

“I never said you were—”

“Ah, but you assumed it since I have two dates.”

“No, I was just clarifying,” I countered.

“They're both just fine with attending this event with me,” he explained. “It's as much a networking opportunity for them

as it is a date with me. Besides,” he said. “Every woman I date knows I don’t do relationships.” He cocked a brow at me. “I thought I heard you were the same way?”

I swallowed hard, the instant denial on my lips fading away. “I am,” I said, even though it felt like a lie. “I mean, I won’t pretend I can juggle two or more men at once, the way you seem to with partners just fine, but yes, I have a thirty-day rule.”

He pursed his lips, nodding as he continued to lead us around the dancefloor. “Thirty days,” he said. “That’s an interesting rule. It gives you just long enough to really get to know the person, but not grow too attached.”

“Exactly,” I said, my eyes flashing around his shoulder, locking onto Ethan like I had a sixth sense about where he’d be. Because he’d moved, settling into a little half-circle with Gareth, Asher, and Weston, all of them looking too gorgeous to be real.

“What if you *do* become attached?” he asked with mild curiosity. “What do you do on day thirty?”

“That hasn’t ever happened since I put the rule into place,” I answered. “The dates I’ve had that agreed to the terms are usually in it for the same reasons I am—casual companionship.”

“I get that,” he said, then he laughed and shook his head. “Gareth sure picked a winner in you. Ethan was doomed to lose the bet before he even started.”

I playfully batted his arm. “Like he had a choice,” I said. “Gareth picked me without knowing a thing about me.”

“True,” he said. “But, in his defense, Ethan had been staring at you all night.” He cringed. “Not in a creepy stalker

way.”

“He had?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “I think you’re the reason Ethan lost the hand in the first place,” he continued. “He was distracted because he kept glancing over at you.”

Shivers danced across my skin at the thought of catching Ethan’s eye before he’d come over to my table that night. He hadn’t told me that part.

“But trust me,” he said, moving us to the music. “I get it. Casual is safe. Setting up terms is safe. And it’s fun.”

“Have you ever been tempted to invest time in someone for longer than a few nights?” I asked.

“Not yet,” he said.

“What if you were?”

He furrowed his brow. “What, you mean if I actually felt something beyond a fun fling?”

“Yeah,” I said. “What would you do?”

He considered. “I guess I won’t know until that happens,” he said, glancing behind me in the area I knew Ethan was. He smirked, bringing his eyes back down to mine. “What about you?” he asked. “What would you do?”

Fuck, I’d walked right into that one.

“I honestly don’t know either,” I answered. “It’s kind of terrifying,” I continued. “Entertaining the idea of actually giving my heart to someone again.”

Crossland glanced behind me again, his smirk deepening. “Well,” he said, slowing us down. “If the person was anything like my friend, I’d say give him a chance.”

I laughed. “Real subtle.”

“Subtle isn’t really my thing,” he said. “I don’t hand out personal recommendations on the reg either,” he said, voice lowered.

“Are you saying this because you’re admitting you like me or because you want Gareth to lose his bet?”

“Oh, I like you,” he said. “Especially since my dates refuse to dance with me and you never do.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “You need to find you a woman who will happily dance with you then.”

“I’ll get to work on that,” he said, and twirled me—

Right into Ethan’s arms.

“I’m cutting in,” he said, not missing a beat as he picked up where Crossland and I had left off.

Only now, with Ethan’s body flush against mine, my heart was in my throat and heat was simmering down my spine. Such a contrast from the easy, platonic way I’d danced with his best friend.

I glanced over my shoulder, flashing Crossland a smile as he headed off the dance floor and toward one of his dates.

“You two seemed chatty,” Ethan said.

“Chatty?” I teased. “Crossland definitely loves to talk.”

Ethan chuckled. “Do I need to worry?”

I tilted my head, surveying him. There wasn’t a trace of tension in his features, only playful teasing that made my breath catch.

“Getting protective of me, Mr. Berkley?”

“I think I’ve already proven that,” he said.

He had proven that. Proven that he was fiercely protective over anything he loved.

But he didn’t love me...he couldn’t. It was way too soon. We’d only just crossed that line between us...

“But,” he said, spinning us to the music, his hand sliding low on my back. I couldn’t help but arch into his touch, like a cat begging for more attention. My body felt starved for him. “I’m getting better,” he said. “You should be proud of me.”

“I am,” I said without hesitation, but his shoulders dropped.

“I meant about what I’m about to do.”

“What are you about to do?”

“I’m going to *not* insist you leave with me right now, board my plane, and come with me to New York.”

I tilted my head. “I thought that wasn’t until tomorrow morning?”

“I just got a call,” he said. “My meeting was pushed up. I have to leave within the hour.”

“So that means *later* can’t happen,” I said, understanding. My heart dropped into my stomach, which was really a silly thing. I shouldn’t be disappointed.

Ethan pulled me closer until his cheek was against mine and his lips were at the shell of my ear. “The first time I make you come on my cock will not be rushed because I have to take off.”

Warmth ghosted over my skin, deepening when it hit my core.

“I need hours, days, nights,” he pulled away enough to meet my gaze. “Do you understand? I want more than something quick because I have to leave.”

“What if I want both?” I teased, loving the way his pupils dilated.

A muscle in his jaw ticked, but a smile shaped his lips. “*Hours*, Alex,” he said. “You deserve that.”

I pursed my lips, but nodded. “I suppose I’ll settle for a good night kiss,” I said, my heart racing in my chest. “Take me home?”

“I can do that,” he said, and guided us off the dance floor, offering a quick wave to his friends.

We were almost at the double doors before a reporter and his cameraman stopped us. “Ms. Kinder,” the reporter called, shocking the hell out of me as he stood directly in our path. “A few questions, please?”

Out of all the times the paparazzi had taken shots of Ethan and me during our meetings, they’d never once called out to me. I was totally out of my element and looked up at Ethan in a panic.

“Up to you,” he whispered.

“Um, sure?” I answered, but it sounded like a question.

“Great,” the reporter said. “Les with SocialiteNews.com here, we’d love to know who you’re wearing tonight?”

Relief fluttered through my tight lungs. “Dolce,” I said, smoothing my hands down the immaculate gown Ethan had sent for me.

“Stunning,” he said, nodding. “And are you here with Mr. Berkley in a life-coach capacity or is there something more

happening here?” he wagged his eyebrows, and there wasn’t anything malicious in his eyes, just pure thirsty curiosity.

Ethan shifted his weight, his lips poised with an answer, but I hurried to speak.

“As the media has countlessly reported on,” I said with a smooth voice. “I’m here as Mr. Berkley’s life coach.”

Ethan gave me a supportive, approving nod.

I wasn’t lying. I’d come to this event to shadow Ethan, to learn more about his anger triggers, as I had with every meeting we’d had since we started working together. The media didn’t know there was more to it than that. Plus, the more the media showcased how well Ethan was doing, the better for him.

And he was doing really well.

“How is that going, if you don’t mind me asking?” the reporter asked.

“Mr. Berkley is more than what a few thirty-second clips on social media show you,” I answered effortlessly. “It’s in my professional opinion that the media is painting him in an undeserving light. And I hope we can prove that to you as we move forward.”

“Love that,” the reporter said, glancing from Ethan to me and back again. “And this professional opinion of yours, Ms. Kinder,” he continued, and for some reason, my stomach tied itself into a knot. “Did your aspirations to become a renowned life coach with a focus on anger management stem from your previous publicly toxic relationship with none other than Jarred Meer, UC’s then star football player and current NFL running back?”

Shock, shame, and a heaping dose of panic clawed up my throat, stealing the breath from my lungs and practically suffocating me at the sound of my ex's name.

“And that's our time,” Ethan said firmly, interlacing our fingers and tugging me around the reporters and out of the building.

“You're so fucking stupid! How could you wear that to a game? You embarrassed the fuck out of me!” he shouted before slamming his fist into the wall a mere inch away from my head. He dug his fist out of the wall, showing me bloody knuckles. “This is your fault! This is going to fuck up tomorrow's practice. All because you—”

“Alex?” he asked once he'd secured me in the limousine. “Baby, breathe.”

I forced out a breath, my fingers shaking. I rubbed them together, but the tremor just worked its way up my body.

Ethan slid next to me, wrapping his arms around me and enveloping me in his warmth.

My heart rate slowed as I leaned into him, hating that I needed his solidness to keep me from spiraling.

“I'm sorry,” I said, shaking my head.

“What for?” he asked. “You did nothing wrong.”

“I wasn't prepared to hear that question,” I asked. “I shouldn't still be affected like this.” I blew out a breath. “Damn it. I hate it when this happens.”

“I should be the one apologizing,” he said. “Being with me in any capacity prompts the media to dig up your past.”

“It's not your fault,” I said. “It's been years. I shouldn't still panic—”

“You can’t possibly control something like that,” he said.

I looked up at him, tilting my head. “Maybe not the panic attacks, but the question shouldn’t have spiraled me. I’ll work on it.”

“Hey,” he said, cupping my face in his hands. “You don’t have to work on it. You’re allowed to feel how you feel.”

I laughed a broken laugh. “Isn’t that my line?”

“You’re a fantastic coach,” he said, then tilted his head. “Is...never mind.”

“What?” I asked.

He hesitated.

“Honesty,” I said. “You know that’s how I operate.”

He sighed. “I was just realizing something,” he said. “That’s why you stay so busy, isn’t it? Not just because you love it, but because you don’t have time to think about the past. Don’t have time to heal...”

I locked eyes with him, stunned down to my core.

“I know you love your volunteer work,” he hurried to continue. “But I’m just realizing it’s more than that. Isn’t it?”

“How?” I asked. “How do you see me so clearly?”

Ethan’s eyes guttered, some emotion churning there I couldn’t read. He leaned his forehead against mine. “It’s easy for me,” he said.

It’s easy for him.

Because somewhere between coaching and joking and flirting, we’d developed something. A connection I didn’t want to put a label on because if I did, it would mean something. Something I wasn’t ready to handle yet.

Ethan held me, quietly and without judgment, the entire ride back to my place. He didn't push for answers, didn't constantly ask me if I was okay as my adrenaline subsided and I quieted the memories threatening to leave me a shell panicking in the corner. He was just there for me. This solid, warm, encouraging and hopeful being that just let me work myself through it.

It was the kind of thing I'd expect from my best friends—that silent understanding and support.

And as he walked me up the three flights of stairs to my apartment, I was beyond wrecked. Not only by the panic, but by *him*.

Because I'd said thirty days, and I'd meant it.

But he was making me want all sorts of things I shouldn't.

"Do you need me to stay?" he asked as I lingered in my open doorway.

I looked up at him, my heart in my throat. Because I knew he meant it in a non-sexual way. He meant it in a way that he'd hold me all night if I needed him to, just to keep me together.

"You have to go," I said. "Your meeting, your business trip —"

"I'll cancel it," he said. "For you. If you need me."

My heart expanded in my chest, the old sensation almost painful. "No," I hurried to say before my heart could convince me to let him. "Thank you," I continued. "As much as I'd love for you to stay, I want you to go. I want you to get to your meeting. We'll see each other as soon as you get back."

"Promise?" he asked, like he needed the reassurance.

"I promise."

He stepped closer, dipping his head down to brush his lips over mine.

The kiss was soft and sweet and so very different from the way he'd kissed me on the way to the event. It was everything I needed in that moment, and I hated how aptly he could tell the difference in my needs. Hated how much he could read me, how much he cared.

Hated it...because it made me *need* him in a way I'd promised myself I'd never need anyone again.

Day One:

Me: What would you say is your biggest accomplishment?

Alex: Oh, we're diving into the deep end, are we?

I grinned down at my phone between meetings, wanting nothing more than to be chatting with Alex face to face, not through text.

Alex was different than any woman I'd dated, not only because of the effortless way we got along, but because she *couldn't* simply pick up and jet off on a business trip with me. She wasn't a freelancer or someone with a trust fund; she didn't work from home. She had people who counted on her time, even if I was her main client right now. Could she have come with me and called it work? Yes. But she would've had to cancel all her volunteer efforts, which wasn't something I was going to force on her.

We had FaceTime sessions every night that were strictly professional, but the texting? *That* was part of our timed relationship agreement.

Thirty days.

I had that much time with her without professional restrictions, and the first week of it would be burned on a damn business trip.

Alex: My instinct is the fact that I got out of the relationship with Jarred before I messed up and married him.

Anger bubbled in my veins at the sight of his name in the text, but I took a deep breath and focused hard on the three dots indicating she was still typing to help ground me.

Knowing her asshole ex's identity—thanks to the overstepping reporter last night—was a double-edged sword. On one side, knowing who he was gave me the possibility to track him down, especially with every instinct in my body screaming at me to repay every hurt he'd ever delivered to Alex. And on the other side, it presented an opportunity to practice my self-control with the emotional growth Alex and I were working so hard on, because I *could* ruin his life. It was within my very privileged hands.

But I wouldn't.

Couldn't.

Because that wouldn't impress Alex, and getting revenge on a toxic ex started my spiral downward into my episodes in the first place—something else Alex had helped me realize after all her work with me.

Alex: But I don't want my greatest accomplishment to be tied to him, because he sure as hell doesn't deserve any credit. So, I'd say beyond the clients I've had the honor of helping in the past, the accomplishment that brightens my heart the most is my volunteer time at the animal shelter and the adoption drives I help organize that led to over sixty animals finding their forever homes last year.

Me: That is something to be proud of. You're amazing in so many ways.

Fuck me, the woman had a heart bigger than I'd ever be able to fathom, and I was lucky as hell just to be a part of her life in even the smallest way.

Alex: Thank you. What's your biggest accomplishment?

Alex: Take your time too. I know you have an entire book of accomplishments to choose from 😊.

I shook my head, leaning farther back in my chair in the makeshift office I'd set up in the hotel. I glanced out the window, taking in the impeccable view of NYC.

Me: Getting you to agree to give me thirty days is on the top of my list right now.

I fired off the text before I could question it or hold it back. It was the damn truth, and that terrified me. Did I build an empire from scratch and ensure my position in the billionaires club? Absolutely. But that seemed to pale in comparison to the sense of honor and pride I felt in managing to be worthy of Alex's attention outside of professional obligation.

Did that make me a sucker for her? Maybe, but I didn't give a fuck, as long as I was hers.

Alex: LOL. You're in NYC right now negotiating a multi-million-dollar deal, the Hurricanes are on a winning streak, and you just donated a fat check to Doctors Without Borders last night, but you're choosing thirty days with me as your all-time?

Me: Everything you listed are things I'm proud of, but that's business. You're not. I know a win when it's a win.

Alex: Wow. No pressure on me or anything. Who can live up to that?

Panic stormed through me, making me sit up straighter in my chair as I typed furiously on my phone.

Me: That's not what I meant.

Me: You don't have to top, live up to, or surpass anything in my life. You're perfect the way you are.

Me: I'm just happy you're in my life at all.

Fuck, I was messing everything up. How could I explain to her that she didn't need to compare herself to anything else in my life? How could I explain she was what I was most excited about without scaring her off?

Alex: Relax, Ethan. I was joking. Mostly. 😊

I blew out a breath, my nerves easing.

Me: Tone is hard to interpret through text.

Alex: But it makes it more fun for sure.

Me: I'm going to cut this trip short. I don't want to be away from you for an entire week.

Alex: Don't you dare! Do the business. Then you can come home and do me.

My lips parted open, shock and heat slicing through my veins. Fucking hell, the memory of making her come on my fingers in the back of the limo hadn't left my mind for a second. I needed more.

Me: Are you saying I have to earn it?

Alex: I'm saying I want all your attention when you come back. That won't happen if you've left unfinished business in NYC.

Me: Are you sure you can handle all of my attention?

Alex: 100%

Me: Careful what you wish for.

Day Two:

Alex: Can you guess how many times a day a third grader says bruh?

I barely covered my laugh with a cough during a conference call at Alex's random text. I waited a half hour until the call was over before texting her back.

Me: Four?

Alex: Try forty-two.

Me: You actually counted?

Alex: Yep. It's super cute the first twenty times.

Me: Say hi to Nora for me.

Alex: She says she owes you a batch of her famous cinnamon muffins for the iPad donation.

Warmth spread through my chest, a sense of satisfaction rippling through me. I'd made a difference for Alex's best friend. I loved helping by donating funds to larger charities in need, but there was something inherently wonderful about helping people in my community first-hand. It made me realize why Alex enjoyed all the volunteer hours she physically put in—the sense of pride and compassion was unmatched when you saw the results in real time.

Me: She doesn't owe me anything.

Alex: Never say no to her muffins. They're the best.

Me: Okay, but only if you eat one with me.

Alex: Deal.

Day Three:

Me: Have you ever noticed how judgmental Netflix is?

Alex: How so?

Me: If you watch so many episodes in a row, it stops and asks you if you're still watching. It's like a passive-aggressive way to say you should be doing more productive things.

Alex: LOL. I've never watched enough to get to that point, I guess.

Me: Of course you haven't.

The woman never sat still for long.

Me: New goal. Get you to relax and binge long enough to see that message.

Alex: You want me to be judged by an app?

Me: I just want you.

My heart thudded against my chest as I waited for her response. I fucking missed her, even with the constant texting between meetings and the scheduled FaceTime sessions.

Alex: How many more days?

Me: Three.

Alex: When you get here, you're going to force me to sit and watch Netflix?

Me: If that's what you want.

Alex: What if I wanted to pull a couple of extra volunteer shifts?

Me: I'd come with you.

Alex: What if I wanted to tour a haunted building?

Me: Whatever you want, as long as I can be with you.

Alex: Still trying to make me fall for you?

I shifted on the bed where I was stretched out, the joke between us hitting differently because of how fucking badly I

was already falling for her.

Me: Always.

Me: Is it working?

I hated the jolt in my chest as I let the question hang there. Hated how damn much hung on her answer. Hated that I knew she couldn't fall for me and I wanted her to anyway.

Alex: Everything about you is working.

Me: Nice non-answer.

Alex: We're only on week one of four.

Me: Long fucking week.

Alex: Three more days.

Me: I'm counting them down.

Day Four:

Alex: I think he misses you. He keeps looking behind me, like you'll show up any minute.

I opened the picture she texted, a smile tugging at the corner of my mouth at the sight of her walking the giant hound she loved so much.

Me: I'm easy to miss.

Alex: True. I miss you more.

My chest puffed out at the declaration. I loved the little pieces she gave me through text since she was all professional during our FaceTime sessions.

Luckily, I hadn't had cause for incident on this trip, not that negotiating a deal this huge was easy, but I honestly believed her lessons were helping me navigate my life in a whole new way. I felt more in control than I ever had before, even when our sessions dove into much deeper topics. We'd danced around my ex's role in my motivation for revenge and being the birth of my episodic anger, but we were still working out the unresolved issues I had surrounding that old hurt. It was difficult to get into, especially when Alex was all I could think about.

Me: Two days.

Day Five:

Me: Everyone talks about New York pizza, but the city has one of the best burger places that is so underrated.

Alex: Jealous. I had crackers and a yogurt for dinner.

I frowned down at my phone.

Me: Just because you're busy doesn't mean you should skip on a proper meal.

Alex: I drank more water today.

I laughed, shaking my head in between bites of my dinner. The meetings had run late all day, but I'd finally made it to my favorite spot.

Me: Good girl. You can't live off iced coffees.

Alex: Watch me.

Me: I'll watch you do anything.

Alex: You're certainly easy to please.

Me: Are you at home?

Alex: No. I'm at the school helping Nora grade papers.

Me: Still?

She'd been there when we did our session an hour ago, conducting it from an empty classroom.

Alex: It was an extensive project. More intense on the grading scales.

Me: Did Nora eat the same thing as you?

Alex: Yes. Why?

I clicked a few things on my phone before responding.

Me: I sent food your way. Will be there in a half hour. You need to eat.

Alex: You're so demanding.

Me: You need to fuel that perfect body of yours.

Alex: Jesus. Now I'm blushing.

Me: Just imagine what I would've said if you weren't in a school right now.

Day Six:

Alex: What would you have said?

I tilted my head at the late-night text. I'd been swamped all day, finalizing the deal, and was now thankfully packing up my stuff. I had one final networking lunch to handle tomorrow, then I'd be on the first flight back to her.

Me: When?

Alex: Yesterday. When I was at the school. What would you have said if I'd been at home?

I shut my suitcase and tucked it near the hotel door before heading back through the suite and stretching out on my bed.

Me: Are you at home now?

I never knew with her. She was constantly on the go unless she was working with me.

Alex: Yes.

The blood in my veins heated in a flash.

Me: I would've said you need to fuel that perfect body of yours because when I get back to you, you're going to need all the energy you can.

Alex: Is that so?

Me: It's a guarantee.

Alex: Why am I going to need energy, Ethan?

Oh, fuck yes. My girl wanted to play. I shifted back on the bed, my dick already growing hard from just the thought.

Me: Because I'm going to finish what I started in the back of that limo.

Alex: I can't stop thinking about that night.

Me: I can't stop thinking about what all I'm going to do to you when I get home tomorrow.

Alex: Like what?

Me: Like how I'm going to use my tongue instead of my fingers this time.

Alex: Now I'm definitely blushing.

Me: Are you in bed?

Alex: Yes. It's a hot night too.

She sent a picture of her in her bed wearing this silky blue pajama short and tank top set, and I went from half-hard to full on aching.

Me: Fucking hell, baby. You're so damn gorgeous.

Alex: Wish you were here.

Me: Pretend I am.

Alex: I already am.

Holy shit. This woman had fire streaking through my veins, the visual she painted with those three little words filling my head so much I could barely think around it. I wanted to ask her to FaceTime me, to let me watch, but I knew that would cross a line—we FaceTimed as client and coach, not two consenting adults who had it bad for each other and had agreed to thirty-days of no-strings fun.

Me: You little vixen.

Alex: Want me to stop? Want me to wait for you?

What I wanted was to be there in that bed with her right fucking now. Wanted to feel how slick she was, wanted to watch her make herself come, learning every inch of her pleasure so I could replicate it and take her even further.

Me: Fuck no, baby. I want you to pretend that your hand is mine and tease yourself until your hips buck out of need before you let yourself come.

Alex: Oh, God.

Damn. I wanted her so badly I joined in, fisting my cock and stroking it, all the while pretending it was her.

Alex: One more day?

Me: One more day.

* * *

It was after ten o'clock in the evening by the time I made it to Alex's apartment. The luncheon in New York City had run long, delaying my arrival much longer than I'd wanted, and even though I'd texted Alex time updates, I was half-afraid she'd be asleep.

She assured me she wouldn't be, but I wouldn't blame her if she'd given up.

I bounded up the three flights of stairs in a hurry. I hadn't even bothered to stop by my house and change out of my suit.

I'd come straight here.

Straight to her.

Anxious nerves twisted inside me as I knocked on her door. We'd been texting easily the entire week—diving deeper into who we were at our core more than ever before. I felt like I knew her and she knew me on a level that no one else ever had. And we'd teased and flirted so much that I went to bed wishing my hand was hers and woke up just as desperate for her.

So why was I nervous now?

I wasn't exactly inexperienced when it came to sex. I loved sex and in the past had it as often as possible, but my partners were always consensual, casual hook-ups.

Which is exactly what this *should* feel like thanks to Alex's rule.

But it wasn't casual.

Nothing with her would ever be casual.

"You're here," Alex said the moment she swung open her door.

"You're awake," I said, taking in every glorious inch of her. She wore a pair of loose cotton pants and a tank top, her curves filling out every inch of the fabric. Her black hair hung down in waves over her shoulders, and she looked up at me with uncertainty.

Apparently we could talk a big game during texts, but now here we were with nothing standing between us. This wasn't a heated moment of passion that was rushed because of an event like last time.

Now we'd talked about it. We'd agreed on boundaries and rules.

We just had to take that leap.

What if she'd changed her mind?

What if she didn't think I was worth taking the leap for, even if it was just for thirty days?

"Are you worn out from your trip?" she asked, tilting her head.

"No," I answered. "Why?"

She worried her bottom lip between her teeth. "Did you change your mind about me? About our agreement?"

"Fuck no."

"So, you still want me?"

"Badly."

Her worry shifted to a bright, powerful grin before she grabbed the lapels of my suit jacket and jerked me inside.

"I missed you," she said, reaching up on her tiptoes to bring her lips to mine.

Oh, hell yes.

I scooped her into my arms, and she locked her ankles behind my back as I spun her, using her closed door as leverage.

Our mouths collided in a hungry frenzy, my blood spiking with her soft whimper as I slipped my tongue between her lips.

"I missed you," I breathed the words between our desperate kiss as I used one arm to hold her up and the other to roam over the luscious globe of her ass.

She arched against me, wrapping her arms around my neck as her thighs squeezed my hips. I kissed my way across her lips, down the line of her jaw, and to her collarbone, savoring every inch I could reach.

“Ethan,” she said my name on the end of a loosed breath. “Put me down,” she demanded.

I immediately lowered her and took a step back. “I’m sorry,” I said, chest heaving. “We don’t have to—”

My words immediately died as she dropped to her knees in front of me.

“It’s my turn,” she said, undoing my pants and freeing my cock in a matter of seconds.

“*Fuck,*” I groaned as she took me in her mouth.

No preamble.

No hesitation.

She wrapped her lips around me, slicking my head with her tongue before dragging it down my shaft.

“Goddamn,” I said, my fingers sliding into her hair as she took me deeper.

She moaned around my length, alternating between taking me deep and pulling me out to suck the tip. It was a lethal combination built to bring me down, but there was no way I was coming in her mouth.

Tonight.

“Baby,” I growled, tightening my hand in her hair just enough to keep her there while I gently pulled out of her mouth. The sight of my cock gliding out of her mouth set me on fire, and while I couldn’t wait to watch her do that again,

right now wasn't the time. "The first time I'm coming with you is going to be inside your pussy, not your mouth."

A tremble shook her body as I tugged her to standing. We'd already had the important conversations about birth control and being clean, so I was fully ready to take her with no barriers between us.

"I thought you said I could have whatever I wanted," she teased, her eyes lust-ridden and pure challenge.

I backed up a few steps, peeling off my suit jacket and laying it neatly over one of her kitchen table chairs. After loosening and discarding my tie, I slowly undid the buttons of my dress shirt, watching her eyes track the move.

"You can have anything you want," I said, and I fucking meant it. This woman had me in any way she wanted me.

My shirt joined the jacket, then the rest of my clothes until I was standing there naked and rock hard before her. I stepped up to her, dragging my thumb over her bottom lip.

"And I'll fill that pretty mouth of yours with my come all you want," I said, and she trembled against me. "But not until I make you come on my cock first."

"Promises, promises," she teased as she pulled her shirt off, then dropped her pants, revealing nothing but her beautifully bare body beneath.

"Fuck me," I growled, eyes raking over her hungrily. "You're so damn beautiful."

She gripped my length in one hand, pumping me a few times before she released me and walked right past me, giving me the most amazing view of her ass.

“Follow me,” she said, a wicked smile on her lips as she glanced over her shoulder.

I hurried to follow her into her bedroom, taking all of two seconds to survey it before I caught up to her. I gently gripped her shoulder, drawing her back flush against my chest. I kissed and nipped at the seam of her neck, lava streaking through my veins when she tilted her head to give me better access.

“You enjoy telling me what to do?” I whispered against her skin, groaning when she arched backward, dragging her ass over my aching cock.

“You tell me,” she said, her voice breathy as I slid my hands around her body, massaging her sumptuous breasts before plunging one of my hands between her thighs.

“Fuck, baby,” I said, gliding my fingers through her slick heat. “You’re so wet.”

She rocked against my hand. “It’s been a week,” she said. “I need you.”

God, those words were my undoing.

“Did you touch yourself like this?” I circled my fingers around her swollen clit before gliding them through her slit and back again.

“Yes,” she answered, her head arching back against my chest, her hands flying to my forearm now banded around her chest to keep her right where I wanted her.

I kissed her neck, then the spot beneath her ear. “Did you think about me while you did it?” I asked, slowly sliding two fingers inside her.

“Yes,” she said again, shivering around me, her grip tightening on my forearm.

“Did you make yourself come?” I continued my line of questioning, upping my pace based on her rocking against my hand.

“Yes,” she whimpered. “Ethan. God, yes.”

“Show me, baby.” I smiled, looking down her body, watching as she dropped a hand over mine between her thighs without a second thought. She pressed my hand harder against her, urging me to up my pace, to go harder, faster.

Fuck me. She was perfection. All fire and wild abandon and brutal honesty as she chased her pleasure.

“Ethan,” she gasped my name, her pussy clenching around my fingers as her release approached.

“That’s it, baby,” I said, curling my fingers, her hand now just gripping mine for stability rather than direction. “Let go.” I pressed the heel of my palm over her swollen clit while pumping inside her, relishing her strained breaths as her entire body shook with her release.

I didn’t hesitate after she came, quickly pulling my fingers from her heat before scooping her up and carrying her to the bed. I gently laid her on her back, kissing my way over her breasts, the softness of her stomach, and lower.

“Goddamn,” I said from between her thighs. I licked up her slit, the taste of her bursting on my tongue like a shot of lightning. “I’ve been craving your taste all week.” I licked at her again, her body jerking with the contact, everything oversensitive and glistening for me.

“Omigod,” she moaned, her fingers tightening in my hair. “I can’t...Ethan, please...” Her words were broken up by the sweetest whimpers, all fuel for the instincts roaring in my body.

“You can,” I said, not bothering to take my time devouring her.

I speared my tongue into her pussy before dragging it out and circling around her clit. Her thighs tightened around my head, and I couldn't stop the grin on my lips as she lifted her hips, riding my tongue with a greedy need that had pre-come beading on my cock.

“Come for me again,” I said against her.

I slid my hands beneath her ass, gripping it as I licked and lapped and sucked until she was panting, until she was shaking. Until she came, drenching my tongue.

I licked up her flavor, relishing every drop as she slid down my throat.

Goddamn, I could do that for hours.

I pulled back, raising up on my knees between her thighs as I stared down at her, a satisfied smirk on my lips. “Look at you,” I said, admiring her. “All pliant and ready for my cock.”

“Yes, please,” she said, a little plea in her tone.

I cocked a brow at her, smoothing my hands down her deliciously thick thighs. “You want more?”

“You,” she said, her eyes needy as they locked with mine. “I want you, Ethan. All of you. *Please.*”

Damn. She had me. She had no fucking clue how much she had me.

I leaned over her, bracing my elbows on either side of her head so I wouldn't crush her. She reached between us, gripping my length before dragging me through her slick heat.

“Fuck,” I groaned at the tease, pumping my hips instinctually.

She kept me hovering around the edge of her entrance, slipping me inside an inch before pulling me out again, her thighs squeezing my hips tight to keep me where she wanted me.

“Alex,” I plead against her mouth.

She smirked, kissing me deeply, slowly.

Too slow.

I was going to fucking combust if she didn't let me go soon, and yet I didn't want her to ever stop doing what she was doing. I could die here and I'd be the happiest man on the planet.

She pumped my cock, arching her hips to let me sink an inch inside her warmth before drawing me back again. Every muscle in my body clenched, desire coursing through my veins like a drug that made my head spin. I'd never needed anyone this bad in my life.

I sucked her bottom lip, drawing back enough to catch her gaze.

She was gorgeous, her lips swollen from my kiss and her skin flushed.

“Alex,” I begged again, pumping into her hand.

She grinned up at me, all fire and mischief and pleasure.

“*Alexandra*,” I growled her full name, and she gasped a little at the sound.

She released me, loosening her grip on my hips so quickly I plunged deep inside of her.

“Fuck,” I groaned, filling her to the fucking hilt, her warm pussy pulsing around my cock.

“Omigod,” she whispered, adjusting to the size of me before urging me to move by arching her hips.

I drew all the way out of her before bottoming out again, watching her every reaction as I did. She moaned softly, her nails digging into my back as I did it again.

And again.

“Faster,” she begged, capturing my mouth with hers in a desperate kiss.

“I don’t want to hurt you, baby,” I said, holding myself back as best I could. This was our first time, and I wasn’t exactly small.

“You’ve already made me come twice. I can handle you,” she said. “Can’t you feel that?”

She rolled her hips for emphasis, and a tremor rocked down my body.

“Fuck, yes,” I said.

“Faster,” she said again, and this time, I obeyed.

I took her fast and hard, lifting myself up on one arm so I could watch every fucking second of it. I looked down between us, watching as I slid in and out of her before glancing up at her face and losing myself entirely at the way pleasure radiated from every inch of her.

Every moan, every surprised gasp, every smile had me going faster and harder, chasing all the moves that made her do those things. I sank into her repeatedly, giving myself over wholly to the demands of our bodies as we clashed together like we’d done this a dozen times.

“Ethan...God,” she said, moaning as her pussy clenched around my cock in the best fucking way. “I’m...Ethan. I’m coming.”

She fluttered around me, slicking me to another degree as I pumped her from one orgasm into another until her body was trembling beneath mine and her nails marked my back. The base of my spine tingled, my eyes going black for a few seconds as I found my release right on the tail ends of hers.

I leaned my forehead against hers, our bodies slick with sweat and heaving as we came down.

“Worth the wait?” she asked after a few moments.

I smiled down at her before kissing her, softly this time. “More than.”

Alexandra

“**B**reathe in again,” I said softly from where I sat across from Ethan on the yoga mats we’d laid out in his home gym. “Good,” I continued when he’d done his breathing.

This morning’s session was centered on mindfulness, and Ethan was meeting the new techniques the same way he’d tackled every task I’d thrown at him—with an uncanny sense of determination that was something to marvel at.

Not to mention, he looked sexy as hell in his Hurricanes athletic pants and a simple white T-shirt that hugged his muscles in all the right ways. I’d be lying if I said conducting a yoga session followed by mindful meditation was easy when he looked like that.

Especially since we’d spent the last three days wrapped up in each other, either in his bed or mine. Or the stairs. Or the kitchen island.

A flush raked over my already heated body, the yoga pants and crop top I wore doing nothing to help quell the warmth. Ethan had taken me to new heights the last few days, spending every second when we weren’t technically on the clock learning every pleasure button I had and then pressing the hell out of them.

God, the man made me wet with a simple look, and I'd never been so insatiable before, always wanting more.

I forced my thoughts away from all the ways Ethan could make me moan and focused on my *client*. Because that's who he was right now—a client. Not my current thirty-day boyfriend.

“Another deep breath,” I instructed, following my own guidelines, my chest rising and falling with much-needed focus. I took my time studying him as he sat cross-legged in front of me with his eyes closed, his body relaxed. “I want you to continue your visualization,” I said, my voice low and soft. “Wherever you chose for your calm space, I want you to continue to construct it in your mind. Focus on the fine details, the colors and smells and the sensation it brings you. Ground yourself in this place so it's easier to draw up when you face a situation where you feel yourself slipping toward an episode.”

Ethan nodded slowly, so deep in his focus he didn't even speak. Pride fluttered in my chest at the realization, and hope flared in my heart. The sessions were getting better and better, with Ethan learning something new about the root of his anger every time. With deeper understanding came better chances of control, and adding the tools we'd been practicing—grounding, meditation, mindfulness—I had no doubts he'd be able to redirect his anger healthily the next time he faced a difficult situation.

Of course, we'd never really know until that moment came.

If that moment ever came.

Not that I wanted him to be tested. I'd be happy if he never found himself in another situation like he had with the awful fan at the Hurricanes game, but that was one of the hard things

about my line of work—sometimes I didn't know if the tools I gave my clients were helpful until something happened that caused them to use them.

“If you find yourself in a situation and grounding doesn't work or deep breathing doesn't work, closing your eyes and focusing on this place in your mind can do wonders in managing your reactive response,” I continued. “There is nothing wrong with feeling angry. It's a valid and useful emotion. The methods we're working on are all about channeling that anger into a calm state so you can think and react clearly. Using the anger instead of letting it use you.”

He breathed deeply on his own, his chest expanding and deflating in a steady rhythm.

“When you let anger use you, you're allowing it to steal all your power and energy. It may feel good at the time to let it take over, but in the end, there's often way more backlash than productivity. Finding this sense of calm during an intense situation will give you the time you need to be slower to react, which will serve you more in the end.”

Ethan breathed again, his entire body loose and calm as he hopefully let the words sink into his conscience. I wanted to give him all the control I could, not because I thought he needed fixing, but because he deserved to be in full control of his life. Punching out that fan probably felt good, but in the end, Ethan lost.

And I was doing everything in my power to help him get back to where he needed to be—publicly and mentally.

“All right,” I said calmly. “Let's take one last deep breath, and then slowly come back to the present.”

Ethan and I matched our breathing, and after a few more moments, he slowly opened his eyes.

“How do you feel?” I asked.

“Relaxed,” he said. “I’ve never done meditation that deep before. It’s always hard to quiet my mind.”

“You did amazing today.”

“I think it’s your voice,” he said, stretching out his legs as I shifted to the opposite mat to do the same. “Very soothing. Hypnotic even.” He grinned at me.

“Do you think it’ll help whenever another episode strikes?” I asked, reaching down to grab my toes for a deep stretch.

Ethan mimicked my moves. “Honestly, I won’t know until it happens.” He shrugged. “The grounding helped that night with Maddox,” he continued. “I feel like I’m getting better.”

“Me too,” I said. “I’ve been reporting as such, too.”

He cocked an eyebrow at me. “That’s strictly your professional opinion, right?”

I laughed at the teasing implication. “You know I’m more than professional when it comes to our sessions and your life-coaching needs.”

“No one could deny it,” he said, locking eyes with me as we came out of the stretch. “But this session is over, right?”

My heart fluttered in my chest, and I glanced down at my watch. “As of two minutes ago, yes. This session is over.”

“Thank fuck,” he said, reaching across the mat and pulling me until I had to straddle his lap. His lips instantly met mine,

and I sighed as he held me close. “I missed you,” he groaned, his hands roaming up and down my back.

I smiled against his kiss, pulling back to look at him. “I’ve been here all morning.”

“Not like this,” he said, and playfully smacked my ass for emphasis.

“You mean like this?” I asked, rolling my hips over what was *so* not hidden beneath the thin fabric of his athletic pants. I kept doing it until he was hard as granite beneath me as I rocked against him and kissed him like I’d wanted to all morning.

“Fuck, yes,” he said, his hands falling to my hips, his firm grip urging me to move harder against him.

Warm tendrils of desire made me shiver as I slipped my tongue between his lips, his meeting mine in a desperate need.

“Have I told you how fucking sexy you look?” Ethan asked, leaning back to survey me atop him.

“I’m in yoga pants and a crop top,” I said. “Pretty sure my hair is a mess, too.” I pointed to the top-knot I’d thrown it in that morning.

“Perfection,” he said before drawing me close again, his mouth claiming mine in a way that had me gasping for breath.

Or maybe it was the way he held me that had butterflies wreaking havoc on my insides.

Or it could be the way he’d looked at me while he said *perfection* as if he really meant it. As if he loved my messy appearance, my blunt honesty, my firm lines when it came to separating our professional and personal life.

Ethan gripped the globes of my ass, the dominant claim on my body sending a streak of lightning down my spine.

“As beautiful as you look in this outfit,” he said, kissing his way down my neck as his hands roamed up to the hem of my shirt. “I’m going to strip you down now.”

I trembled above him as I lifted my arms, letting him get rid of the top. “You don’t want to shower first?” I asked. “Our yoga session before meditation made me sweat.”

“You taste like heaven,” he said, sucking at a patch of skin above my collarbone for good measure. “I promise I’ll clean you up after I get you dirty.”

The words made my heart skip, and then he was hefting me up, hooking his fingers in the band of my pants before dragging them down. I stepped out of them in a hurry, my hands frantic as I rid him of his clothes too, until there was nothing left between us. I reclaimed my spot, straddling him, my hands braced on his shoulders as I gasped as his cock slid through my aching slit.

“Fuck, baby,” he said, gripping my hips again and urging me to glide over his thick length. “You feel so damn good.”

“This is what you do to me,” I said against his mouth, taking his kiss as I rocked against him, not shifting to take him inside me just yet. This felt too good right now, all fire and teasing and anticipation.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, drawing close until our bodies were flush, our mouths a tangle of tongues and teeth and pure carnal need. He shifted beneath me, using one hand behind him for leverage as he thrust upward, teasing my clit with his cock so much it throbbed.

“Ethan,” I whimpered, more than ready to end the game I’d started. I moved on top of him, situating myself so he was poised at my entrance. “I need you.”

“You have me,” he said between our kiss. “Take what you want.”

The raw truth in his words made me shudder, but the instincts driving my body flushed out what my heart was screaming. I moved, drawing back just enough to watch him as I sank down on top of his cock, taking him in to the hilt.

I sighed, my hold on the back of his neck tightening slightly as I adjusted to the size of him. We’d had sex half a dozen times in the last three days, and I still wasn’t used to the breathtaking way he filled me. It wasn’t just his size, but the entirety of *him*. The way he held me, kissed me, touched me, as if each action were an act of worship, of pure devotion.

He made me feel like the most important thing in the world to him, and it was intoxicating.

I lifted before sinking back down again, relishing the way his eyes guttered with the move. I did it again, rocking against him to soothe that deep ache of need inside me.

Ethan kissed along my jaw and down my neck while I rode him, letting me take full control while he explored every inch of my body he could reach. He cupped my breasts, massaging them before rolling my nipples between his fingers until they were peaked for him. He pinched before dipping down to tongue the small hurt that had me upping my pace, pleasure rippling beneath my skin as it built and built and built.

“Fuck,” he groaned, kissing over my breasts before making his way back up to my mouth. “I love the way you ride my cock.”

“I love the way you talk,” I said, tangling my fingers in his hair. “I love the way you feel—oh, god, yes...” My words broke off in fractures between moans as he gripped my hips and took control of my pace, using his strength to lift and seat me over and over again, each time his cock stroking me deeper and deeper. “Ethan,” I gasped his name, my orgasm coiling tight in my core, poised on the edge.

He leaned back just slightly, smirking at me as I trembled from the new angle. “Fuck, you’re gorgeous,” he said, his brow furrowed, his eyes churning with lust. “I love watching you come.”

My breaths came quick and stuttered as I rode him. As he urged me faster, the new angle had his pelvic bone hitting my swollen clit with each thrust until I combust.

“Ethan!” I moaned as my orgasm tore through me, sending a thousand tiny volts of pleasure shuddering across my body.

“There she is,” he said, all satisfied and cocky as he grinned at me.

I barely had two seconds to catch my breath, the aftershocks still rattling through me, before he gently lifted me up and maneuvered me around until I was on all fours before him.

He smacked my ass again, the sweet sting zinging straight up my spine as he gripped my hips and aligned himself with me, gliding his hard cock through my wetness. Bending over me, he planted kisses down the line of my spine, drawing out the tension until I was sure I would snap.

“You want it hard and fast, don’t you, baby?” he asked, but he knew the answer.

“Yes,” I said, nudging my hips backward, glancing over my shoulder with a pleading look.

He grinned at me, looking hotter than hell on his knees, towering behind me, his hands on my hips as he made me wait. He leaned over me again, bringing his mouth to the shell of my ear. “Tell me if it’s too much,” he whispered, all tease gone from his voice as he slammed home inside me.

I arched at the sudden contact, at the sharp way he filled me that made me shiver.

He pulled all the way out and did it again, his thrusts hard and fast and totally consuming, just like him. My palms smacked against the yoga mat as I braced myself, my knees cushioned as he took me from behind.

His hand roamed over my back until he reached my hair, undoing the tie until my hair spilled over my shoulders. He wound it around his hand just enough that my chin turned upward, the claiming sensation sending electricity crackling over my entire body, my pussy clenching down on his cock.

“You like that, baby?” he said, dipping down to kiss my neck before nipping the sensitive flesh there. “You like it when I take control?”

God, I did.

I really fucking did.

“I trust you,” I sighed the words, breathless from the pleasure ramping back up in my body as he took me again and again.

His ruthless pace slowed, and I whimpered as I glanced over my shoulder. Something flashed in his eyes as our gazes locked, something vulnerable and raw, and it *did* things to my heart.

He pumped into me with a hard, long stroke. “Say it again.”

“I trust you,” I moaned the words, the intensity in his eyes, the way he held me completely at his mercy turning me absolutely liquid.

His eyes guttered, his muscles clenching as he thrust into me again, harder this time.

I moaned, the delicious combination of pleasure and pain rippling over every nerve I possessed.

“Again,” he demanded.

“I trust you,” I groaned as he upped his pace, my heart expanding in my chest right along with the pleasure taking up every inch inside me.

Trust meant everything to him. I’d learned that through our sessions, through his past, where he’d been betrayed. Maybe me saying it was more terrifying for him than if I’d said the *L* word, but I couldn’t hold it back.

Wouldn’t take it back either.

Because I *did* trust him with everything that I was, and he deserved to know that.

“Goddamn, Alexandra,” he groaned when I used my position to push back against him, taking him faster and harder. He met me, surpassed me, consumed me, his free hand sliding around my hip and between my thighs to stroke my throbbing clit.

The combination was fire, and I clenched down around his cock, my orgasm slashing through me with the force of a sudden storm. I cried out, and he pumped me through it,

groaning when his own release took him over the edge with me.

I trembled beneath him as he released my hair, bending over me to plant gentle kisses over my back that were such a contrast to the way he'd just fucked me. It made my heart expand in my chest, making room for him in ways I told myself would never happen again.

After we caught our breath, he gently pulled out of me, and it was all I could do to not collapse on the floor in a puddle.

"I've got you," he said, shifting before he scooped me off the floor and up into his arms.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked, a post-orgasm bliss falling over me.

"I promised I'd get you cleaned up," he said, walking into an enormous bathroom attached to his home-gym. The shower was bigger than my master bedroom closet.

"Do you always keep your promises?" I teased as he turned on the hot water, letting it run for a few moments before he set me on my feet beneath the warm, steamy stream.

He dragged his thumb over my lip, his eyes scanning every inch of my face. "For you, I do."

* * *

"I fucked up," I blurted out the words as I glanced across my table at Nora and Ella.

"Jesus," Ella said, setting down her coffee. "It's not even six a.m. yet. What could you have possibly—"

“I think I have actual feelings for Ethan,” I cut her off, and both my best friends’ eyes went wide.

Ella furrowed her brow. “It’s only been a week since your thirty-day thing. Is the sex that good?”

I blew out a breath, my entire body going hot just thinking about it. “It’s not just the sex,” I admitted. “I wish it was. At least then I’d know it was a physical craving, but...”

“There’s more,” Nora said, helping me when I couldn’t find the right words.

“Yes,” I said. “He’s funny and smart and listens...like really listens. He doesn’t just wait for his turn to talk. And you’d think he’d be this arrogant, stuck-up person because of the wealth he has, but he’s not. I mean, yes, he’s cocky, but only where it counts.”

“How is having feelings for him fucking up?” Ella asked. “I know he’s your client, but he won’t be forever, and you two have seemed to work out a good balance between the two.”

“Yeah, is it the anger issue? Are you afraid he’ll hurt you?” Nora asked.

I gasped, shaking my head. “No, not at all,” I clarified. “He’s not like that. He would never hurt me physically.”

“You’re afraid he’ll break your heart,” Ella said.

“Does he have your heart to break?” Nora asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, but even it tasted like a lie. “Maybe? He’s starting to...and I’m scared. My thirty-day rule has always protected me from catching feelings, but he’s different.”

“Honey,” Ella said, looking at me with nothing but love in her eyes. “Your rule is great, but you know it isn’t the reason

you haven't caught feelings."

I sighed, knowing she was right. "The men I've dated in the past, after Jarred—they were great guys, but casual and surface-level fun. We'd agreed to that. But Ethan..."

"He doesn't feel casual," Nora said.

"Not at all."

"Is that because of the work you're doing?" Ella asked, always the voice of logic I needed. "Because of the thorough analysis you've had to do with him as his coach?"

I seriously considered this, then shook my head. "I've been thinking about that for weeks," I said. "It's not. I haven't been able to stop thinking about him since he approached me when I got stood up on that date. And the more I get to know him, the more I really, *really* like him."

"And the sex helps," Ella said, and we all laughed.

"Yes," I said, taking a deep breath. I was so damn grateful for my friends, knowing I could talk to them about anything without them judging me. "I mean, omigod *yes*."

"Damn," Nora said, fanning herself. "I can only imagine. I mean, the way he looks at you, the way he looks after you." She sighed dreamily. "Did Alex tell you he sent food to us while we were grading papers the other night?"

"What?" Ella asked.

"Yes," Nora said. "He found out she hadn't eaten anything but crackers and sent over a feast. It was awesome and super sweet."

"I'm so fucked," I said, cradling my head in my hands.

“You’re not fucked,” Ella said. “Well, I mean, you’re *getting* fucked, but you’re not fucked.”

I laughed again, groaning. “What am I going to do? I can’t fall for this guy. I don’t do that. I can’t do that. After Jarred...”

Old panic crept up my spine, making my heart palpate.

“He’s not him,” Nora said.

“I know that,” I said. “I really do. But...” I didn’t know how to explain it. “You know I never wanted to be that vulnerable ever again.”

“You can’t control that,” Ella said. “No matter how many rules and boundaries you put in place. If you like someone, you like someone.”

I sighed. “I know.”

“What are you going to do?” Nora asked.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I agreed to thirty days, so I guess I should treat it like any other time. See what happens on day thirty? Right?”

They both looked skeptical and this side of pitying me.

“I like him,” Nora said, shrugging. “But you know I’m here for whatever you choose to do. Just because you said thirty days doesn’t mean you have to stick to it. If you think it’d be better to end it now, then end it now.”

My heart rebelled at just the thought of ending anything with Ethan—personal, professional, or otherwise.

“I don’t want to,” I said. “I love being around him. Everything is so easy with him.”

“Not something I’d suspect from a man who punched out a fan at a ballgame,” Ella teased.

“Right?” I shook my head, unable to argue with that. “He’s so much more than that,” I explained. “And I know he has a history of episodes, which is what brought me to him in the first place, but he’s working on it. And he’s never even raised his voice to me.”

“You’ve got it so bad,” Ella said.

I groaned. “What am I going to do?”

“Take it one day at a time,” Nora said. “That’s all any of us can do.”

I nodded, sipping my coffee. “I love you both,” I said. “Seriously.”

“Ditto,” Ella said.

“Same,” Nora said.

“And hey,” Ella continued. “If this all blows up tomorrow, at least you can say you had a fun, wild ride with a billionaire.”

Nora playfully smacked Ella’s arm, and we all laughed, the tension completely broken, and my heart soothed of the worry.

They were right.

One day at a time. I could manage that.

And most importantly, my *heart* could manage that, because the more time I spent with Ethan, the more I realized he was dangerously close to doing what he’d set out to do in the first place—make me fall.

Ethan

“**T**hat was a nice changeup,” Crossland said from where he sat next to me in the owners’ box. We were in the sixth inning, and Maddox Porter had just struck out his second hitter.

“He’s talented,” I said, perched on the edge of my seat.

“He’s about to do it again,” Hudson Porter said from where he stood leaning against the floor-to-ceiling glass overlooking the field, Asher hanging out on his other side.

Maddox Porter’s older brother had an open invitation to this box whenever he wanted to attend a home game—as stated in Porter’s extensive contract demands. This particular demand had been an easy one to comply with, because I genuinely liked Hudson. He was a no-nonsense guy who was fiercely protective of his family, something I deeply understood. He could come to the games as often as he liked, which was more frequent now that he’d retired from the NHL.

“How can you tell?” I asked Hudson, striding from my seat to stand next to him.

“He’s my brother,” Hudson said. “I know all his tells.”

“Lucky you’re not the hitter,” I said.

“Never had a knack for this game like Maddox,” Hudson said, shrugging.

“How is retirement?” Asher asked, watching as Maddox did exactly what his brother said he would, earning us another strike. One more and we’d be up to bat.

“Fantastic,” he answered. “Except for all the sixteen-year-old boys I’m now chasing off my doorstep,” he grumbled. “Elliot thinks it’s hilarious.”

I smiled, knowing enough about Hudson to recognize his adopted daughter’s name.

“Can’t be harder than a fight on the ice every other week, can it?” Crossland asked, joining our little group.

Weston and Brynn watched from a row of cushioned seats behind us, chatting and laughing in between plays. They were so lovestruck, constantly giving each other casual touches or intimate looks that definitely weren’t something we all wanted to see, but I couldn’t really fault them. They’d danced around each other for years. It was about time they owned their happiness.

“You would think,” Hudson answered Crossland. “But I’d take a fired-up rookie on the ice any day over these desperate teenagers. I get it though. Elliot is amazing, but just because they show up at my door doesn’t mean they deserve her attention.”

Crossland laughed.

“And he’s out,” Hudson said, clapping for his baby brother.

I returned my attention to the field, joining the mini-celebration as I watched Maddox fist-bump the air as he ran toward his catcher, Brooks Cameron. They slammed into each other, clearly screaming their excitement before rushing off the field together. They were best friends, and Brooks got into

trouble almost as much as Maddox—like the time Maddox was doing an interview in his hotel, only to have Brooks pop out of his closet in a horror costume and scaring the shit out of Maddox and the camera crew. Maddox retaliated by setting one of Brooks’s shoelaces on fire when he wasn’t paying attention during spring training. They were a combined but necessary headache for my team.

“You can leave it there,” I heard Gareth say, and turned at his tone.

Our server—a young man who had done an amazing job at meeting our every need during the game—nodded rapidly, his eyes barely able to meet Gareth’s gaze as he sat down a drink with shaky hands.

“Is there anything else, sir?” the server asked, his voice cracking.

“No,” Gareth said without taking his eyes off the game from where he sat, his drink untouched on the table next to him as the kid nodded and ran off.

“Jesus,” I said, heading over to stand next to Gareth. “You could at least smile so the kid knows you’re not a monster.”

“No point in faking anything,” Gareth said, but smirked up at me as he grabbed his drink.

I shook my head. “I swear you get off on scaring people.”

“Sometimes,” he said without hesitation. “Some people need to be scared.”

“Speaking of,” Crossland said, heading over to join us. “Where is Doyle?”

I scoffed, falling into the seat next to Gareth, Crossland doing the same on the other side. Wes and Brynn were to his

left, while Asher remained chatting with Hudson near the glass. “I must’ve forgotten to send his invitation to the game.”

“Surprising,” Gareth said, sipping his drink.

“Surprising or disappointing?” Crossland asked, flashing Gareth a challenging look.

“Seeing Doyle every month is more than enough,” Gareth said.

“Ah, Doyle yes, but what about his delightful daughter?” Crossland hedged, and I cocked a brow at him. I loved the guy, but *goddamn* he loved to stick his foot in his mouth.

Gareth lingered behind his drink, eyes contemplative before he met Crossland’s amused, shit-eating grin with a lethal look. “I don’t care for any of the O’Briens,” he said. “But I’d take Serenity over her father any day.”

“I bet you would,” Cross said.

“Why isn’t Alex here?” Gareth asked, tossing the spotlight on me.

“Nice deflection,” I said, and he shrugged. “She had a conference call with the league commissioner today and then she’s volunteering at the shelter. I’m seeing her later.”

And I couldn’t fucking wait.

Not only because I loved seeing her, but because I had a massive surprise for her. I hoped she’d like it...I thought she would, but I couldn’t stop the nerves making my stomach hurt, either.

“How is that going?” Cross asked.

“I really like her,” Wes added his two cents before I could answer.

“She is super nice,” Brynn added.

“The girl can definitely hang,” Daisy added where she sat perched on Asher’s lap after he’d sat down. “I hope you bring her to the next poker game.”

“Yes, please,” Brynn agreed.

“He hasn’t even answered the question,” Asher pointed out, and I gave him a thankful nod, but laughed at the same time.

“We’re taking it slow,” I finally answered.

Slow emotionally, at least. There was nothing slow about us in the physical sense. Fucking hell, I couldn’t keep my hands off of her unless we were technically in one of her coaching sessions. Outside that? I was fucking starved for her and showed her that on a second-to-second basis.

“Slow?” Gareth asked. “You don’t normally operate that way.”

“Nothing about Alex and my...situation is normal,” I countered. The bet, our professional obligations, the chemistry. None of it was normal for me.

“I know,” Cross said. “You haven’t kept a woman around this long since your ex.”

A thick silence fell over the group, and I waved them off.

“It’s fine,” I assured them. They all wore equal looks of pity and just a hint of caution—like they were afraid the mere mentioning of my past would set me off.

And that was fair. It certainly had in the past, and I couldn’t guarantee it wouldn’t ever trigger me again, but working with Alex had changed the emotional reaction when I thought about it.

“Alex has helped me work through some dark shit,” I explained. “I know I could be a dick about that stuff,” I continued. “And I’m sorry. I’m working on it.”

“Holy shit,” Cross said. “You’re falling for her, aren’t you?”

I swallowed hard, shaking my head, outwardly denying what I couldn’t possibly acknowledge inwardly. “I don’t fall in love anymore, remember?”

It felt like a lie, but also at the same time didn’t. Because I remembered loving my ex, remembered proposing to her and remembered the pain that came when she betrayed me, but what I felt when I was with Alex? It was different than before, different from anything I’d ever felt. And I didn’t know if that was because we had an intense friendship coupled with a crackling chemistry we couldn’t deny, or if it was something more.

Something whispered in the back of my mind that I knew exactly what it was, but was too much of a coward to define it.

Either way, I couldn’t linger on it. Not when it would waste the time I had left with her—a couple of weeks if we stuck to her terms. And if she changed her mind and gave me more time? Then maybe I could take a closer look. Right now, I’d enjoy the pieces she gave me and not ruin it by trying to unpack it.

“So you’re saying I’m going to win the bet,” Gareth said, breaking the tension.

“I think you’ve already won,” I said. “I may as well give you—”

“Nope,” Crossland cut me off, wagging his finger at me. “Those aren’t the terms of the bet. You still have a month

before the deadline. We'll decide who won and who lost then."

I laughed, shrugging. "Suit yourself," I said, turning my attention back to the game. "I'll have the check ready," I said to Gareth, who smirked.

"You're so sure she's not going to fall for you?" Asher asked. "From the look of it at the gala, I'm not so sure."

"Funny thing about Alex," I said. "She's a lot like me. Her past is riddled with a pile of shit. She's worked through it, but it's made her just as squeamish about love as me. Not just love, but anything long-term."

"How do you feel about that?" Brynn asked.

"I respect it. Understand it probably more than anyone."

Brynn nodded, compassion shaping her features.

"Does this pile of shit have a name?" Crossland asked.

"Yep," I said.

"And?" Asher prompted.

"And..." I took a deep, steadying breath, doing my best to quell the adrenaline that spiked in my blood every time I thought about the prick. "He's her past. I can't dig him up. Even if I want to break his jaw."

"Fuck," Cross said. "Who is he?"

"He's an NFL player," I said.

"Tell me he's not one of mine," Wes said.

"Or mine," Gareth added.

"Why?" I asked. "Would either of you terminate his contract if I said he was?"

“Depends on the level of assholery,” Wes answered honestly. “Are we talking run-of-the-mill-douchebag or file-charges-prick?”

“File-charges-prick,” I said, gripping my glass a little harder than necessary.

“Shit.”

“Don’t stress,” I said. “He’s not either of yours.”

“Thank fuck,” Wes said.

“Doesn’t change the past,” Gareth said. “If you want to handle him, let’s handle him.”

We all turned our attention at the declaration, and I wondered if my friends were wondering the same thing as me—just what did *handle him* mean in Gareth’s world? We all knew the rumors surrounding his past, not to mention his general terrifying exterior, but in reality, we only knew the Gareth he allowed us to see.

“As of right now, he’s a non-issue beyond a general haunting sense,” I explained. “Trust me, if he pops back into her life in a way she doesn’t want, I’ll let you know.”

“I sure hope he doesn’t,” Daisy said, motioning between me and Gareth. “Between the two of you, I don’t think he’d survive, and we need you two to...you know, *not* be in prison for the rest of your lives.”

Gareth and I laughed at that. “I have no intentions of going to prison,” I said. “Or losing my team.” I took another deep breath. “Like I said before, I’m working on it. And Alex’s help has been invaluable. If things keep going as they are, I’ll have the other MLB owners and the commissioner’s faith restored and this will be a thing of the past.”

My friends raised their glasses to that, and we clinked them together in a small cheers of hope.

Hope that I could truly stay on this newfound path of calm and mindfulness.

Hope that I could become the man Alex kept saying I was.

And hope that in the end, I'd be worth her time.

* * *

Alex: I'm almost to your place, but I have to warn you, I don't know if I'll be good company right now.

I frowned down at the text before calling her.

“Are you okay?” I asked the second I heard her pick up. I paced the space of my living room, adrenaline shooting through my veins. I'd just been talking about her ex with my friends earlier today, and if that fucker reached out to her and hurt her again, I was going to—

“Physically I'm fine,” she said, her tone so damn dejected. “Emotionally I'm hurting.”

I blew out a breath, calming myself as I took a seat on my couch. “Want to talk about it?”

“Maybe?” she said, but it sounded like a question. “I don't know. I don't want to bring down Netflix and Chill night.”

“You won't,” I said. “I promise. Come over. I have a surprise for you, anyway.”

“I'm on my way,” she said. “I just wanted to warn you. You can still tell me to go home until I'm done being pouty and whiny.”

“You can do that here and tell me what’s the cause of it. Maybe I can help.” Fuck, I hoped I could. She always helped me when I was spiraling, even if it was technically in her job description.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes,” I said. “Talk to me. What’s going on?”

“I feel ridiculous even saying it.”

“It’s not ridiculous. Whatever hurt you, hurt for a reason. Tell me. Did something happen at the shelter? Or with the commissioner?” Anxiety sliced through my chest. Shit, had he grilled her? Had he told her to stop the coaching because I was a lost cause in his and the other owner’s eyes? Tell her I was going to lose my team? That would sure as hell put her in a tough situation—

“Oh, God, I’m a jerk,” she said just as the gate dinged, announcing her car’s motion at the end of my long driveway. I pushed the authorization button, letting the gates swing open to let her in. “I should’ve said that first. The call with the commissioner went great,” she hurried to say, and some of the tension in my chest lessened. “He was happy with the progress we’re making.”

“That’s good,” I said, glancing down at her surprise before heading toward my front door and swinging it open.

I hung up the phone once I saw her.

“Baby,” I said once I set eyes on her. She’d been crying. “What is it?”

She fell into my open arms the second she reached me, burying her face in my chest as we stood on my front porch, the door wide open behind me.

“Someone adopted Sherlock,” she said, a small cry at the end of her words.

“Oh fuck,” I said, shifting her against me so I could look down at her. “I’m sorry. It’s my turn to be the jerk.”

“What?” she asked.

I parted my lips to explain, but a surprised yelp came out of her as she looked behind me.

“Sherlock!” she released me, hurrying past me as she dropped to her knees before the giant hound. He wagged his massive tail, licking her face.

“Surprise?” I flashed her an apologetic look. “I shouldn’t have kept it from you,” I said. “I should’ve realized how much it would hurt—”

“You adopted him?” She stood back up, and the massive dog leaned into her side.

“Yeah,” I said, scrambling with panic. “I thought since I have a house and he likes me almost as much as he likes you and you’re here a lot anyway...” Fuck, now I was rambling. “I should’ve told you. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt—”

Her lips slammed into mine as her arms wrapped around my neck. “You...” She kissed me harder. “Are the most amazing, incredible man I’ve ever met.”

I folded my arms behind her back, lifting her off her feet so she was at my level, and kissed her back, matching her in intensity.

“I...” She pulled back, and the smile shaping her lips stole the fucking breath from my lungs. “I can’t...I don’t know how to thank you.”

“You don’t need to,” I said. “I know how much you love him and now you can see him as much as you want.” I set her back on her feet, and she released me to pet him.

“You really don’t mind having a giant dog in your house?”

I motioned to my multi-level home, sitting on over ten acres of privacy. “Do you think it’s not big enough for him?” I asked, following the pair inside. “Cause I can get a bigger space if you think he needs it.”

She laughed, the sound filling my home with much needed joy. “You’re ridiculous,” she said, spinning to face me as Sherlock ran though the hallway like he owned the place. He’d gotten comfortable the past two days, him and I falling into an easy rhythm that made me wonder why I’d taken so long to get a dog in the first place.

“I’ve been called worse things,” I said, grinning down at her. The happiness in her blue eyes was worth everything. “But I am sorry you spent the day thinking he was out of your life for good. I didn’t think about that part.”

She shook her head. “It’s fine,” she said. “I’m blown away.”

I intertwined our fingers, tugging her down the hallway to the living room. “I just want to make you happy,” I said.

“You did,” she said. “You do—” Her words broke into a laugh as we rounded the corner and into the living room, finding Sherlock stretched out and dominating the edge of my sectional.

“He’s made himself at home,” I said.

She plopped down next to him and he immediately laid his head on her lap.

I sat next to her, and she leaned into me as I wrapped an arm around her with one arm, pulling up Netflix with my free hand.

“Good surprise?” I asked, glancing down at the two as she stroked the hound’s ears.

“The best,” she said, turning to meet my gaze. “Were you worried?”

“I was,” I answered. “I didn’t want you to think I was trying to steal him from you or bribe you for more time. I genuinely just wanted to give him a good home while also allowing you to have as much access to him as you want.”

“Wow,” she said. “Are you still trying to get me to fall for you?”

I swallowed hard, the seriousness in her gaze doing everything to take the humor out of the running joke between us. “Always,” I said, my voice low between us. “Is it working?”

She reached up and kissed me, slow, sweet, and tender, before pulling back. “If I said yes, you’d think it was all about the dog.”

I laughed at the brutal honesty in that answer. “Would that be so bad?”

Her eyebrows raised. “Thinking that I fell for you solely because of what you *give* me?” she asked, flabbergasted. “Yes. That would be bad.” She tilted her head. “You have way more to love than your bank account and all the perks that come with it,” she said, motioning down to Sherlock.

“If you say so,” I said, a knot forming in my throat. My ex had left me for a man who could offer her everything I couldn’t monetarily, and for a long time, I thought that was the

only way I'd be able to keep someone's interest, someone's love.

Alex was proving to me every single day that that wasn't true.

"I do say so," she said aggressively, looking cute as hell with how determined she was. "The question is, are you listening to me?"

"I'm listening," I said. "It sounds like you don't want me to give you gifts, but from the look of that hound laying over your lap, I'd say I did good."

She laughed, shaking her head. "You're impossible."

"And you love it."

"I do," she said, and the moment settled into something beyond teasing and banter. Beyond desire and friendship. Beyond any coaching or client relationship.

This felt domestic...her in my home, our dog snoring peacefully next to us as we binge-watched a show, crunching on snacks that I half-burned before she came over.

This felt comfortable.

This felt real.

And it felt like something I needed to hold on to with everything I had, because the more time we spent like this, the more I realized thirty days with her would never be enough.

Alexandra

“I ’m getting used to seeing you in ball gowns,” Ethan whispered into my ear after we’d spent an hour at yet another luxury hotel, hosting yet another amazing charity event that he was at the center of. “I love it,” he continued, grinning down at me, his eyes trailing the length of the long sapphire gown I wore.

“Strangely enough, I’m getting used to wearing them,” I said, shaking my head. “I certainly never thought I would be, especially since my volunteer work attire usually consists of whatever I don’t mind getting dog hair all over.”

“You wear both stunningly,” he said.

“Still trying to get me to fall for you?” I asked.

“Always,” he said, navigating me around the throngs of elite who had gathered here in Philadelphia for their annual Children’s Hospital event.

Ethan explained the hospital gets a good chunk of their funds from this event, and it blew me away to see all the donations happening between sipping champagne and mingling. I’d been to half a dozen of these things and it never got less astounding what people could do with wealth and how many people they helped along the way. And the fact that

Ethan did it regularly, without a second thought as to what he got out of the situation, made my heart freaking melt.

And we were at the end of our thirty-day agreement today, yet neither one of us had mentioned it when we'd boarded his private jet and flew here for the weekend. I knew my rules, knew he respected them too, but where I usually was more than prepared to initiate the break-up for my short-term relationship contract and move on, I had no desire to let Ethan go.

Besides, we still had a month before our sessions were finished, so it's not like we wouldn't be seeing each other every other day, anyway. I'd resolved myself to ask him about it later when we were alone. If he'd slaked his desire for me in the past thirty days and didn't want any more time with me romantically, then we'd call it quits and I'd go back to being his life coach. It would hurt like a bitch, but I'd respect his wishes.

Did I desperately hope he'd want to continue? More than I wanted to admit.

Did I realize that meant I was absolutely and totally too far gone for him? Yes.

Despite my best efforts to protect my heart, I couldn't do anything about it now. I was committed, tangled, and totally wrapped up in all things Ethan Berkley.

"Oh, fuck me," Ethan grumbled under his breath, his hand tightening in mine.

"What's wrong?" I whispered the question, noting the drastic shift in his body language—his once loose muscles were tight, the one in his jaw ticking as he looked across the room, eyes locked on a gorgeous woman with golden hair and

a bright smile in a crimson dress. She gripped the arm of a tall, lithe man in a tux. The couple spotted Ethan and instantly made their way across the room toward us.

“*Ethan*,” I emphasized his name when he didn’t answer.

He turned to face me, visibly swallowing as his eyes churned with equal parts hurt and anger. He took a deep breath, and I noted the beats he counted: four in and four out. Shit, he was trying to stop whatever was barreling through him.

“That’s my—”

“Ethan fucking Berkley,” the man in the tux said, stopping just in front of us, the woman pursing her lips in a satisfied way that didn’t fit the moment. “How is the team-stealing bastard?”

My spine straightened at the man’s tone, and I parted my lips to say something, but Ethan shifted to face the couple, keeping his hand firmly in mine as he did.

“I’m fantastic, Edmund,” he said, his voice so much smoother than it had been seconds before.

“I heard you’re about to lose my team,” Edmund said, a cocky sneer shaping his features. “It’ll give me my opportunity to get them back. How does that feel?”

“You heard wrong. *My* team is doing wonderfully,” Ethan fired back. “And don’t worry, they’re in excellent hands with me and I have no intention of giving them up anytime soon.”

Edmund huffed, and the woman kept flashing me scathing looks while somehow holding onto that too-sweet smile of hers.

“Would’ve been too ironic,” Edmund said. “Having the team you stole from me get stolen from you.”

“I bought the Hurricanes fairly,” Ethan said. “Your father was more than happy to hand them over to me for the price I offered. Nothing was stolen.”

“Well, not *nothing*,” Edmund said, glancing down at the woman. He slid his free hand over her arm that was still looped through his. “I did manage to take Aubrey from you. Was that five years ago now? Where does the time go?”

My heart dropped into my stomach, all the pieces falling into place. This was the ex who betrayed Ethan, his once-upon-a-time-fiancée who left him for...this guy? God, she’d taken a major step down and broken Ethan’s heart in the process.

“You’ve looked better, Ethan,” Aubrey said, giving him a pitying once over. “I saw the video,” she continued. “Punching out a fan. You’re the same hot-head you’ve always been, eager to react with fists instead of using your mind. One of the many reasons I had to escape you. Probably the same reasons I haven’t seen your name in the marriage announcements in Forbes. Who could love someone so violent? You haven’t seemed to have grown at all over the years, so sad.”

The building anxiety and anger inside me burst out in a too-loud laugh that made the pair jump.

“Sorry,” I said, reeling in my laughter. “I just realized who you were.”

“And there’s something funny about that?” Aubrey asked.

“Oh yes,” I said, my voice calm and even, and I made sure to keep it that way. I wouldn’t cause a scene. “I always find backstabbing bitches quite amusing.”

Ethan covered a surprised laugh with a cough.

“Excuse me?” Aubrey gaped at me, that fake-as-hell smile slipping right off her lips.

“Yes,” I said. “You’re definitely excused.” I shook my head. “It’s sad. I’m normally very team-women-supporting-women, whether you’re an ex or not. But from the vitriol that just came out of your mouth, there isn’t one redeeming quality in your body, is there?”

She floundered, her lips parting and shutting a few times.

“You both could’ve come over here and acted like adults, greeting someone from your past with a respect and dignity that proved an emotional growth over the last few years, but no, you two sauntered over here like you owned the place and for what? To poke Ethan about a silly little video and bring up the past? God, are you two really that miserable together that you need to stir up old shit just to feel alive? Ethan isn’t anything like what you said. He’s brilliant, funny, and more composed than either of you ever will be.” I sucked my teeth. “*So sad*,” I said, mocking Aubrey’s prior tone before turning to look up at Ethan. “There’s a penthouse calling our name, *darling*,” I said. “Shall we?”

“Indeed,” Ethan said, amusement shaping his tone as he nodded to the stunned pair and we headed out of the event and toward the elevators that would take us back to our room.

The second the elevator doors closed, all my bravado slipped away. Ethan inserted the key card that would take us to the penthouse, pocketing it with eyes that were distant, withdrawn. Aubrey’s cruel words no doubt spilling through his mind in a spiral that dug up every other vile thing she said to him in their past.

The doors opened, and I followed him into our room, silent and observing as he loosened his tie and tugged it over his head, tossing it over the back of the couch in the living area before he sank down on it. He dropped his head in his hands, his elbows braced on his knees, and I watched as he focused on his breathing, his back rising and falling with each exhale and inhale.

My heart felt like it might break watching him hold himself together, watching him use every technique I'd taught him.

"Thank you," he muttered, not bothering to look up at me. "You didn't have to say those things about me. Didn't have to defend me like that."

The defeat in his voice broke something in me, some wall I'd built to protect my heart from all things *him*.

"Ethan," I said, moving around the couch and dropping to my knees before him. I tugged on one of his hands so I could look him in the eyes. Eyes that were begging for an acceptance he didn't even need to ask for. "I see you," I continued. "You are nothing like what she said. She's the one with the issues, clearly."

He blew out a breath, leaning into my hand on his cheek. "She once said that my temper was what made me not worth loving."

A sharp sting radiated through me at his words, at the pure hurt in his eyes. "And you believed that, didn't you?"

"For a long time," he said. "Sometimes even still—"

"Don't," I said. "Don't you dare believe that, Ethan." I swallowed hard, my heart racing against my chest. I shifted closer to him, positioning myself between his muscled thighs,

garnering all his attention. “You are worth love,” I said. “You’re worth time and passion and *love*. Your anger is a natural part of you, and it doesn’t diminish your ability to be loved at all.”

He huffed a dark laugh and shrugged. “So you say,” he said.

“I *do* say,” I said.

“We can’t really know though, can we?” he asked, more to himself than to me, his eyes still half in the past and half here with me. “Not really.”

“I know,” I said, determined to make him understand. To make him realize how amazing he was.

“How?” he asked. “You may be an expert on body language and emotions, but this is one thing we can’t know.” His voice rose an octave, and he gently shifted away from me, standing and crossing the room as if he needed to ensure the distance between us as his emotions swung from sadness and regret to anger and adrenaline.

“Fuck,” he snapped, raking his fingers through his hair. “It’s been years. *Years*. How the hell can she send me right back into that pathetic, heartbroken bullshit state?”

“Ethan,” I said, standing to cross the room. “Trauma like that doesn’t just go away. It’s a constant task to work through. Healing takes time.”

“Right,” he said, his voice clipped. “I hate that I have no control over it. Hate that what she says can still affect me. She’s nothing to me. Nothing but a painful reminder that no one will ever be able to see past my short fuse and take the time to really get to know me.”

“That’s not true,” I argued, stepping before him. “Ethan—”

“You can’t know that,” he said. “You may be one hell of a life coach, and you’ve definitely helped me get a grip on my emotions and my outbursts, but you’re not a physic. You can’t tell me that someone will love me like this...never knowing when I’ll have another *episode*. Never knowing if that episode will damage more than my career.” He spun away from me, as if he couldn’t bear to say the words while looking at me.

“Yes, I can!” I fired at his back, tears coating my eyes at the way he treated himself, the way he spoke about himself.

“How?” he asked again.

And this time...this time, I couldn’t hold back the answer.

“Because *I* love you!” The words rang out between us, and Ethan slowly turned around, shock coloring his features. I let out a breath. “I know it’s fast. I know today is technically the end of our thirty-day agreement. I know it makes zero sense with how quickly it happened, but I can’t lie. You know I *don’t* do lies.”

He tilted his head, the only movement breaking his statue-like stance. “You love me?”

I nodded. “And I don’t want you to say it back,” I clarified. “I know it’s too fast. I know it’s reckless of me, especially with the way our pasts have treated us. I’m not trying to trap you or make you feel obligated. Me telling you that I wake up with you on my mind and go to bed aching for you has nothing to do with forcing your feelings. I love the way you help people without asking for anything in return. I love how perceptive you are, taking the time to listen and learn and take that information to make the other person happy. And I love how protective you are of the people you care about most. It’s not a weakness, Ethan, it’s a fierce quality that makes you...you. And I love every piece of you.”

Ethan took one step closer to me.

Then another.

“Say it again,” he whispered.

I smiled up at him. “I love you—”

His mouth crushed mine, cutting off anything else I might’ve been about to say. He kissed me like his life depended on it, like I was the deep breath he needed to settle his soul.

We were a tangle of lips and touches and tossed clothes as we made our way to the bedroom, a silent show of how much we meant to each other.

Ethan pulled me onto his lap, our bodies flush as our eyes locked between kisses. I sank atop him, desperate to feel every inch of him against me, inside me. His powerful arms enveloped me, holding me there as we drank each other in, drawing out the anticipation until we were both shaking.

Slowly, I moved on him, rolling my hips and relishing the way his eyes churned every time I did it. I kissed him just as slowly, knowing this time was different. It wasn’t a desperate and starving need to clash against the other. No, this was about him. About me showing him how much I’d fallen for him, despite all my best efforts not to.

I rocked against him in a show of absolute appreciation and devotion. I lifted myself until he was almost out, only to sink back down in a wave of need that I was sure he could see and feel and taste in the air. I kissed his lips as I rode him, my arms wrapped around his neck as I clung to him, as we clung to each other in a moment of pure, uninterrupted bliss.

“Alexandra,” he groaned against my lips. “I...*Fuck*, baby.”

My pleasure built and tangled beneath my skin as I rocked against him, rolling my hips and taking him inside me repeatedly, kissing every inch of him I could reach while working us both up, all he had to do was hold on, all he had to do was trust me with his heart, with his pleasure.

And he did, his hands roaming over my bare back as he kissed me back just as intently.

“Ethan,” I sighed against his mouth as my orgasm built to a precipice between my thighs. “God, Ethan, yes,” I moaned when his hands gripped my hips and helped guide me, pulling on me and urging me harder toward my release.

“Alex,” he groaned, kissing his way down my neck as our speed increased, driving us both toward the edge.

I felt him harden inside me another degree, my entire body clenching around him as my orgasm tore through me, making me flutter around him until he spilled inside me.

“I love you,” I gasped, my head dropping over his shoulder as my body went limp above him, all pleasure-wrung and satisfied.

Ethan ran his fingers through my hair as we caught our breath, only shifting us apart when he moved to clean us both up before tucking us under the covers. He held me, the silence heavy and thick but in a comforting way.

“I’m guessing this means you’ve extended my thirty-day contract?” he asked in a teasing voice.

I laughed, shifting against his chest to look up at him. “Yeah,” I said, grinning. “You’ve definitely earned yourself another thirty.”

Ethan

“I can’t believe you have a dog,” Crossland said as I tossed a now well-loved tennis ball in my backyard, chucking the thing as far as I could and marveling at how fast Sherlock ran after it.

“I can’t either,” I said, warmth radiating through my chest as the silly hound galloped back toward me with the ball firmly between his teeth. He dropped it at my feet, his massive tail wagging back and forth. I scooped up the wet ball and threw it again. “But he’s not really mine.”

Cross cocked a brow at me. “He lives in your house, sleeps on your couch, eats your food. Looks like yours.”

“He tolerates me,” I said. “But he’s fully committed to Alex.”

“He’s not the only one,” Cross said, flashing me a knowing look.

I love you.

Alex’s words whispered through my mind, the sound on repeat since she said them a few days ago. Since she saved me without even knowing, helping me face my ex without putting myself in more trouble.

“Your silence only further proves my point,” Cross continued as I threw the ball for Sherlock again.

“I can’t deny it,” I finally said. “I’m wild about her.”

Then why didn’t I say it back?

She’d told me not to, which only made me love her more, but it was more than that.

I was terrified.

“Holy shit,” Cross said, shaking his head. “I never thought I’d hear that.”

I nodded. “Me either.”

Cross patted Sherlock’s side as he came up to lean against him, already accepting my best friend into the pack. “Has she told you she loves you yet?”

I swallowed hard, then nodded.

“And did you say it back?” he asked, and I appreciated that he didn’t immediately reference the ongoing bet I had with Gareth.

“No,” I said. “She told me not to, but...”

“Would you have said it back?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “You know my history with Aubrey. You know I’ve had no intention of loving anyone ever again.”

“Well, from the way Asher and Wes tell it, you can’t really control that. Not that I’d know,” he added. “And I’m more than happy about that. I love the way my life is. But you, you love her, don’t you?”

I studied the ball in my hand before letting it drop, Sherlock panting happily as he stretched out in the grass at our feet.

“Fuck,” Cross said.

“Yeah,” I said, finally looking at him. “But I don’t like opening myself up to the kind of shit that happened in my past.”

“She’s not Aubrey, though,” he said.

I huffed a dark laugh. “Not even close. Alex is everything I never knew I wanted, needed. She’s blatantly honest in the most endearing way, and she understands me better than I understand myself sometimes. And the woman is so damn selfless, almost to a fault. She gives every ounce of her time and her whole heart to those in need, without looking for anything in return. And we laugh. Fuck, we laugh so much together. She’s...”

“Perfect?” Cross offered when I couldn’t finish.

“For me...I think so.”

“Damn man,” he said. “I never thought that would happen. With the bet stuff, I never actually thought you’d fall for the girl. I thought you’d both mutually have a good time and then move on like usual. I didn’t realize it would get this complicated.”

“I know,” I said. “I didn’t expect it either.”

“And you haven’t told her because?”

“I’m terrified,” I admitted.

What Aubrey had done to me had stuck around for longer than I’d like to admit, and her betrayal had been the source of some serious trauma I’d never truly acknowledged before Alex had come around.

“Looking back,” I continued. “Comparing what I felt for Aubrey to what I now feel for Alex...” I sighed. “I loved Aubrey in the way you love your first serious girlfriend. But

Alex?” I shook my head, struggling to put into words what I felt for her. “I could spend every day of my life being the best man I know how to be, and I still wouldn’t be worthy of her. She runs deep in my veins, in a way that is addictive and consuming, which gives her all the power to destroy me that would make what Aubrey did look like a silly little prank.”

“Fuck,” Cross said. “Love sounds awful.”

I laughed, and he did too, helping lift the weight hanging over me. “It’s not,” I said. “I thought that too, before Alex. But she makes me feel like the risk of getting broken all over again is worth it. She’s worth it.”

“Sounds like it,” Cross said. “Have you told Gareth yet?”

I shook my head. “I haven’t told anyone.”

“Aww,” Cross said in a mocking tone as he covered the center of his chest with his hands. “I feel so special.”

“Fuck off,” I said, but chuckled.

“Seriously though,” he said. “Life is short. You love her, she loves you, just go for it. You’re one of the strongest guys I know. She doesn’t seem the type to hurt you, but you said yourself she’s worth it.”

“I know,” I said. “I’ll tell her, but when it feels right. I don’t want her to think it’s out of obligation. Plus, there is every chance she could see me for the asshole I am and hit the road.”

Cross snorted. “She’s certainly already seen your asshole self,” he said. “Hell, you can Google that shit.”

I rolled my eyes.

“She would’ve run already. You know that. She even broke her thirty-day rule for you.” He sighed. “Sounds like you’re in

the Asher and Wes club now. All love-struck. I swear if it's an epidemic, I'm going to punch you in the throat."

"Trust me," I said. "None of us expect seeing you with anyone regular. You can hardly keep it to just one a day, let alone one for a few months."

He shrugged. "I'm upfront about my intentions."

"No one said you weren't."

He took an obvious step away from me, and I tilted my head.

"Just in case it *is* an epidemic," he said.

I laughed and flipped him off.

* * *

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I shouted, my blood absolutely boiling at the call the ump had just made. "Is your head buried in your ass? He was out!"

The umpire spun around, fastening me with a look that I recognized easily. One more fucking word and I'd cross a line I wouldn't come back from. But fucking hell, the guy had been on our ass all game, and we'd just gotten the runner out, but he'd called him safe.

I raked my fingers through my hair, pacing the dugout. The angle gave me a perfect view of Alex hurrying down the stadium stairs, just arriving at the game. She looked amazing in a pair of blue jeans and a Hurricanes baseball tee, her hair half-pulled back, the rest hanging over her shoulders, her full lips a bright red.

Fuck, had she heard me yell at the ump?

I took a deep breath, turning back to where the ump was still waiting to see if I'd blow up, likely wanting to record it and capitalize on the scene.

I waved him off, and he nodded, returning focus to the game.

"He was out," Alex said the second I'd climbed the steps to greet her.

I smiled at her. "You're the perfect woman."

"Still trying to get me to fall for you, Ethan Berkley?"

"Always," I said, planting her lips with a quick kiss.

"Well, it's working," she said.

"I was being a dick," I said, motioning behind me toward the field.

"Yeah," she said, but smoothed her hands over my chest. "But you reeled it in. It was amazing to watch. *You're* amazing."

My heart expanded ten times in my chest, filling the space so much it was hard to breathe.

"Sorry I'm late," she said before I could respond. "A pipe burst in my apartment, but I've got the super on it."

I furrowed my brow. "Shit," I said. "Do you need anything? I can cover the repairs."

She laughed. "It's covered by the apartment," she said. "It's an old ass pipe. I didn't break it, so they have to fix it. I'll have to find somewhere to stay for a few nights. It's no big deal, but it's the reason I'm late to the game."

"Stay with me," I said.

She bit back her smile. “You think you could stand me for three whole days and nights in a row?”

“More than that,” I said, an idea forming in my mind so naturally it was almost comical I hadn’t voiced it already. “Stay with me... forever.”

“What?”

“Move in with me.”

Her laugh was rich and full and skirted across my skin. “You’re ridiculous.”

“I’m not,” I said. “I want you in my home, in my bed. Plus, Sherlock would love it—”

“Don’t you dare use the dog to coax me into moving in with you!”

I grinned down at her. “I have to coax you now?”

“Again, you’re ridiculous. I love you, but I won’t break my lease and rush things between us. If I really needed a place to live, I could easily move in with Ella or Nora.”

“But they don’t have *me*,” I said. “Or Sherlock.”

“That’s true,” she said, reaching up on her tiptoes to kiss me again. It was quick and public-friendly, but goddamn, it made me want more. “But no, I’m sorry. I can’t move in with you. I would love to stay with you though, while it’s getting fixed.”

“I’ll take that.”

“And,” she continued. “I would be open to hearing your proposal in a few months when my lease is up.”

I drew her closer against me, bringing our bodies flush. “Really?” I asked. “You’re planning to continue to renew my

month-to-month contract?”

“It’s crossed my mind.”

I bent down and crushed my mouth against hers, the words I wanted to say building like a storm inside me. “I—”

The surrounding crowd roared, leaping from their seats. I whirled around, putting the pieces together. Maddox had just made a double-play, ending the Jay’s chance of getting another run in.

“Yes!” I released Alex, the two of us clapping and cheering for my team.

Our team.

And as we continued to watch the game, I couldn’t help but wonder how the hell I’d gotten so lucky to find someone like her.

Alexandra

“**Y**ou sure it’s okay that you’re here?” I asked for probably the sixth time since Ethan showed up to help me walk the dogs from the shelter.

“I promise,” he said, not a hint of annoyance in his tone at my repetitiveness. “Doug shifted my schedule around. He’s kind of an expert at it by now. He wouldn’t have told me I was free if I wasn’t. And Declan, my publicist, keeps trying to send camera crews over here to film it in some hopes of helping my reputation, which I of course say no to every time. And besides, I’m the boss. I can push meetings if I want.”

I smiled, shaking my head. “It must be nice to be the boss.”

“It has its perks.” He switched one of the four leashes he had in his right hand to his left, the dogs in front of him eager and sniffing rapidly as we walked along the trail in the wooded area near the shelter.

I had three of my own, including Sherlock, who was more than happy to see some old friends and make a few new ones. We fell into this easy silence as we walked and appreciated the beautiful day.

I kept stealing glances at Ethan, unable to resist admiring him in this role. He wore a pair of slacks and a simple T-shirt,

so different from the expensive suits he normally wore. He looked incredible in both, but it was the fact that he was here, with me, volunteering his time that made him downright irresistible. Especially since his time was quite literally more valuable than mine—he could negotiate million-dollar deals within the hour that I walked these dogs.

One of the many reasons why I'd fallen for him so fast—he was compassionate and caring and perceptive.

A sliver of doubt crept up the back of my throat, but I swallowed it down. It had been ten days since I'd admitted I'd fallen for him—like he'd so hoped for the bet all those weeks ago that we met.

He hadn't said it back.

I'd told him not to, and I'd meant it. I didn't want him to say it out of an obligation to make me happy. When he said it, *if* he said it, I wanted him to mean it. I knew his history, had met his ex and seen the trauma it brought back to him when he'd seen her again. I knew it wouldn't be easy, just as it had felt nearly impossible for me, too.

But I hadn't been able to hold it back. I was nothing if not honest, and I would never lie to him.

Jarred had done a number on me, emotionally and physically, and I would've probably responded the same way Ethan did if I ever ran into him again. But that didn't stop me from falling in love with Ethan. When I was with him, my past felt so far away, my heart totally oblivious to the risks, with only one focus.

It was fast, probably too fast. I'd tried and failed to protect my heart against Ethan, but I wouldn't take it back.

Whatever happened between us, I wouldn't take it back.

“You’re uncharacteristically quiet today,” Ethan said as we rounded a bend in the trail.

“I know,” I said.

“Want to tell me what’s bothering you?”

Did I? Would admitting my self-doubt, my worries over telling him I fell for him too soon help anything?

No. It would put pressure on him. Pressure he didn’t need.

“Not right now,” I admitted. “Is that okay?”

“Of course,” he said. “But if I can help, you know I want to.”

“I know,” I said. “And it’s not a big deal, just some internal stuff I’m working through.”

“I respect that,” he said. “Just let me know when you need me.”

“I will,” I said.

And I think I would always need him, which made things more scary than they probably were. I’d come to depend on him in ways I’d promised I never would again, but I loved him. Genuinely, whole-heartedly loved him.

And he might not love me back.

Might not be healed enough to do that, and I had to be okay with that.

But he’d asked me to move in with him...that was something. A big something, really.

“I wanted to ask you something,” he said, and I gave him my full attention. “My dad is coming into town in a few weeks,” he said. “And Mom is always down for dinner when

he's in town. I was hoping you'd join us, if you're comfortable?"

I grinned, my heart lifting with much needed hope. "I'd love to."

"Great," he said. "And the poker game is next weekend. I'd love for you to be there too."

"Really?" I asked. He'd told me a little about the monthly game he had with his inner circle, and it definitely wasn't something I'd ever be able to buy into. "Even though I don't have a buy-in?" I teased.

"You can play with my chips if you want," he said without hesitation.

"Rich people are strange," I said. "You're so ready to let me lose your money."

"Who says you'd lose?"

"Against people like Crossland and Gareth? I definitely would lose. I lose at go-fish."

Ethan laughed, the sound stirring up all kinds of butterflies in my stomach. I *lived* to make him laugh.

"Will Daisy and Brynn be there?" I asked.

We paused where the trail opened up, revealing the fenced in dog park we loved, and we let the dogs wander off the leash for a bit.

Ethan tilted his head. "Does your answer depend on their presence?"

I popped my hands on my hips. "Does withholding information from me really make me inclined to go?"

He pursed his lips. “Touché,” he said. “I just want to be your reason for going.”

My heart flinched. Even though he’d delivered the words with a joking tone, there was a seriousness that struck home with me. Fucking Aubrey. She’d made him feel like he wasn’t worth spending time with, wasn’t worth loving unless he had magnificent wealth and status to offer.

I stepped into his space, reaching up with my free hand to gently grip the back of his neck. “You’d be the *only* reason I’d go,” I said. “Not for the free trip or the chance to hang with Brynn and Daisy. I only asked so I could text them for advice on what to pack.”

The smile that shaped his lips was slow and endearing and took my breath away. He bent down, wrapping his arms around me and lifted me to his eye level. The moment built between us, a glimmer of the future we could have if we allowed ourselves to have it.

He leaned his forehead against mine, breathing deeply as he held me close. “You’re the perfect woman,” he said. He’d said it so many times I could almost believe him.

But I laughed again, because I was so far from perfect.

“I’ve already fallen for you,” I teased. “You won. You don’t have to keep trying.”

“I’ll always keep trying,” he said. “I’ll never be done making you fall.”

Ethan kissed me, deep and searing. Heat streaked beneath my skin, almost making me forget where we were and what we were doing.

The barking brought us back to reality. Our little horde of doggos had spotted a squirrel.

Ethan quickly set me down and we hurried to snag all the leashes and gather the dogs before we had a chaotic chase on our hands.

“So you’ll come with me?” he asked after we’d started on the path again toward the shelter.

“Yes,” I said.

“And I won’t be pulling you away from anything important?”

“No,” I said. “I’ll make sure everything is good at the shelter, and I still have two weeks before I have to have my final meeting with the commissioner regarding your progress.”

“And after that, our sessions are done,” he said.

I loved that he didn’t immediately ask what my report to the commissioner would be. He knew I’d be honest, knew that’s the only way I operated, but I’m sure he was fully aware of the amazing progress he’d made in regulating his emotions, especially anger. He’d learned his triggers, those old traumas and his deep instincts to protect those he loved, and he’d learned how to navigate them.

“If you want them to be done,” I said. “I’m available for freelance coaching too, you know.” I playfully bumped into his side.

“Are you trying to pitch me, Ms. Kinder?”

“Maybe.”

“Do you think I need more coaching?”

“That’s a tough question,” I said. “I think there is always a need for life coaching, but if you’re referring to your anger episodes, I think you’re doing amazing.”

“So, in theory, I could have you all to myself, no professional obligations?”

“In theory,” I said, grinning up at him as we walked.

“As long as I don’t fuck it up before then,” he added, and I hated the genuine concern etched into his features.

“You won’t,” I said.

He shrugged. “You never know.”

My heart deflated at the uncertainty in his voice.

“Hey,” I said, making sure he looked at me. “There is nothing you could do that would make me walk away from you.”

“That’s a bold claim.”

“That’s me,” I said. “Bold, blunt honesty. I’ve been that way from the beginning. You think I’m going to start sugarcoating things for your benefit?”

His smile came back, and he shook his head. “No, I guess not.”

“Good,” I said, nodding at him as if that settled every shred of doubt clouding his eyes. “Now, tell me more about this poker game. I can’t wait to see how you gamble away penthouses and sports cars and make ridiculous bets with your friends.”

Ethan

The minute we touched down in New York City and de-boarded the jet, Daisy and Brynn looped their arms through Alex's and headed off in front of us, laughing the entire way as me and the guys held back.

"Wait a second," I said when Asher and Wes moved to follow the girls' path.

"What's up?" Wes asked, Gareth and Cross stopping near him.

"I need your help."

"Shit," Cross said. "Did you lose a seat in the game like Wes did to Doyle?"

"I can only apologize so much, dick," Wes fired his way.

"You could convince him to bet his seat back to you," Gareth grumbled.

"Oh, yeah, I haven't thought of that." Wes rolled his eyes and flipped him off.

"You wouldn't really want him to leave anyway," Cross fired Gareth's way. "If he leaves, then Serenity—"

"Don't," Gareth cut him off in a lethal tone. "Doyle gone would be best for everyone."

“While I agree,” Asher interjected. “I highly doubt that’s what Ethan is about to ask for help with.”

“Thank you,” I said, shaking my head. “I need your help. I’m...spiraling.”

The energy immediately shifted, my inner circle bouncing from banter to serious concern in a matter of seconds.

“I’m in love with Alexandra,” I admitted.

A collective breath loosed from my circle of friends.

“No shit,” Cross said. “Jesus, man, I thought you were confessing to another pummeling or something. Don’t do that to us.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I just, I don’t know how to tell her. When she told me—”

“Oh, fuck,” Gareth cut me off. “She told you she loves you?”

“Yes,” I said, but waved him off. “I’m not collecting on the bet. It wouldn’t be right.”

Gareth raised his dark brows, scanning my features. “Fuck, you really do love this girl.”

“I do,” I said and meant it with my whole heart. “I’m just fucking scared, man.”

“She’s not Aubrey,” Cross said.

“From the way Daisy tells it, she’s wild about you,” Asher said.

“Brynn says the same.”

“I don’t know why,” I said. “I know it’s not for my money. She loves me for me, sees me in a way no one else ever has before, but I’m terrified I’m going to fuck it up. Explode at the

wrong time. I don't know. I just need your support this weekend. She's a week out from having her final meeting with the league commissioner on her opinion of my status, and I don't want her to think I'm telling her this because I want her to speak highly of me so I keep my team, but I also don't think waiting until that's done is a good idea either."

"She won't think that," Cross said.

"She's bluntly honest," Asher said. "She wouldn't lie to the commissioner on your behalf."

I breathed out slowly, comforted by my friends' assurance. "So you think it's a good idea to tell her? To open that door? Because after I do there is no going back and I'm so sure I'll fuck it up."

"Maybe you will," Cross said, and my shoulders dropped. "But no relationship is perfect. I think. Asher?"

I laughed at the utterly confused look on Crossland's face as he looked to Asher for help.

"He's right," Ash said. "Daisy and I had our differences to overcome in the beginning, and even now we have disagreements. That stuff comes with the territory. What matters is that you love her and she loves you and at the end of the day, you're on the same page."

"I can second that," Wes said.

"I think love is dangerous," Gareth said. "And reckless. But I've got your back in whatever you need."

I nodded. "Thank you," I said, making sure they all heard my gratitude. "This is unfamiliar territory for me. I'm out of my league here."

“Oh, one-hundred percent,” Asher said. “But that’s all of us.” He gestured to Weston and himself. “None of us are actually worthy of the goddesses around us, but we *try*. That’s the whole point—showing up every day knowing you’ve earned a jackpot of a woman and fighting every day to keep her.”

“You can do this,” Weston said. “I know it’s hard. It’s terrifying. But she’s seen you at your best and at your worst. If she were going to run for the hills, she would’ve already.”

“Thanks,” I said. “You’re right.”

“And if you do fuck up,” Crossland said, clapping me on the shoulder as we headed off toward the two black SUVs waiting on the tarmac to take us to our resort. “There’s always flowers and make-up sex. I haven’t ever had it myself, but I hear it’s amazing.”

I shook my head, laughing. “You have to be in a relationship to actually have it.” I laughed.

I piled into the back of the car with my friends, feeling more confident than I had that morning.

Tonight, I’d tell her I loved her.

I’d put my heart on a fucking platter and serve it to her.

I just hope I didn’t give her a reason to rip it to pieces.

* * *

Adrenaline crackled through my veins as I pulled the stock racing car to a halt behind the five others lined up in front of me. I may have been the last to make the final loop around the track, but there was nothing dampening the rush the race had given me.

I carefully stepped out of the car, taking off the helmet and looking over to where Alex stood with Brynn, Daisy, and Serenity in the stadium seating off the track. They were cheering for us, leaning over and sharing secrets with one and other, bright smiles on their faces. There were a couple of other girls I didn't recognize, but I assumed Crossland had invited them. Maybe even one of them Gareth had brought, but I sure as hell knew Doyle hadn't invited anyone other than his security detail and his daughter. I doubted anyone would be desperate enough to date him. He was such a miserable dick.

"How does it feel to come in last, Berkley?" Doyle said as we lingered in a group outside the lines of cars, all hyped up and practically buzzing from the rush.

"Feels just fine," I said, my eyes continuously cutting over to Alex. She was impeccable, all bright blue eyes and red lips.

"Wouldn't catch me back there," he continued. "I don't lose races, do I, Weston?"

A muscle in Weston's jaw ticked, and I stepped up to his side. "Easy," I said in a low voice. "He's not worth it."

Wes let out a breath, shaking his head.

Doyle had the audacity to look disappointed that neither one of us was taking the bait for a fight.

"That was incredible!" Brynn said as she rushed over to Weston, leaping into his arms. He caught her easily, his demeanor instantly shifting as he grinned down at her.

"I about lost it when you passed Asher," Daisy said, sliding into Asher's side easily.

"I wouldn't have bumped his car," Wes assured her.

“I know,” she said. “Cause I would murder you if you tried.”

Brynn laughed, but Wes’s eyes went wide for a moment.

“In a book, of course,” she said, and Wes chuckled.

“I have to say, these racing suits might be my favorite thing about today,” Alex said as she hurried up to me, her eyes raking me up and down as she studied the way the tight black racing suit covered my body.

Brynn and Daisy muttered their agreement.

“You like this better than my regular suits?” I asked, extending my arms.

“Hmm,” she said, her features shifting into a serious, studious gaze. She twirled a finger. “Turn around for me?”

I laughed, but did as she said. She had me wrapped around that finger she’d just twirled.

“Definitely,” she said, her eyes firmly on my ass.

“I’m not a piece of meat,” I teased as I turned back around to face her, and she slipped beneath my arms with an effortless grace that had my blood running hot. I held her against me, wrapping my arms around her lower back to hoist her to my eye-level. I pressed my lips against hers in a semi-acceptable public display of affection.

Alex kissed me back, then moved her lips to the shell of my ear. “Take me somewhere,” she whispered, and the need in her voice had me half-hard in an instant.

I set her on her feet, suddenly not giving a shit what was next on the agenda. I interlocked our fingers, stepping away from the group—

“I see you’ve succeeded,” Doyle said, stepping in front of us before glancing at Gareth, who stood silent and stoic as ever, not even noticing a quiet Serenity lingering to his right. “Have you paid him yet?” he asked Gareth.

Gareth’s eyes narrowed.

“Look at her,” Doyle motioned to Alex. “She’s definitely in love with him.” He shook his head, a smug smile on his face as he focused on Alex.

I didn’t fucking like it, and every one of my muscles clenched in response to the way he studied her.

“Am I wrong?”

Alex furrowed her brow. “On this one instance,” she said, tone laced with fire. “No, you’re not wrong.” She looked up at me with need churning in her blue eyes. “I love him.”

“Ha!” Doyle said. “First Berkley loses the race, and now Gareth loses the bet. It’s my lucky day.” Then he focused on Alex again. “Not yours though, is it, sweetheart? Falling for someone who only cared about you within the confines of a bet?”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Cross voiced the words I couldn’t. If I opened my mouth...no I couldn’t talk. Not when every instinct barreled inside me to use my fists to shut him up.

“What?” Doyle asked innocently. “She deserves to know.” His eyes twinkled with the possibility of a fight. Jesus, this guy. “She shouldn’t be left standing there looking stupid—”

I took a step forward, fist clenched and seeing red, but a burst of laughter cut through the adrenaline that begged me to break Doyle’s nose.

Asher stepped up to my side, his hand gripping my shoulder in case I launched into a fight.

But Alex's laugh slowed me.

"You're a piece of work," she said, tilting her head at Doyle. "You thought I didn't know about the bet and wanted... what? A reaction? A tearful fight? Maybe me slapping Ethan across his beautiful face?"

The color drained from Doyle's face, and he spluttered his words. "Well, I...uh..."

"Well, you, *uh*, are going to be disappointed," she continued, releasing my hand and stepping into Doyle's space without an ounce of hesitation or fear.

Serenity gasped, moving like she could draw Alex back, but Gareth not-so-casually moved into her path.

"You should ask yourself why seeing other people's pain or losses gets you off so much," Alex said in a low almost understanding tone.

I moved closer to her, Asher and Cross following me like we were all connected. But I was breathing, and I was grounded. I'd already counted each of our helmets resting on a bench off to the side, and the amount of crew now checking on the cars. There were six of each.

"Watch your fucking mouth, sweetheart," Doyle fired back. "Go back to the sidelines where you belong."

Breathe. They're just words. Breathe.

God, I wanted to punch him.

Alex smirked at him...she actually fucking smirked.

“That’s the thing about my mouth, *doll*,” she said, and Doyle turned a sickening shade of purple. “You’ve got no business worrying about it. You say what you want, then I do too. And trust me, you don’t want *me* to start analyzing *you*.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “It would be embarrassing in front of everyone if I laid out all your tells.”

Gareth snorted in what I could swear was an almost laugh, which was enough to shock me even more out of the spiral that was making my hands shake.

“You stupid bitch,” Doyle said. “You have no idea—”

“I have all the ideas,” she cut him off. “I’ve dealt with worse than your kind before. Take a breath and try to save your day before I ruin it.”

My lips parted, and Crossland cooed out a long *damn* before Alex spun around, grabbed my hand, and pulled me off the track herself.

“Holy shit,” I said once we were back in the stadium building.

“Are you okay?” she asked, nothing but concern shaping her features.

“More than,” I said, grabbing her off the path around the hallway and dipping into a private room. I locked the door behind us. “You’re fucking incredible,” I said before crushing my mouth against hers.

She gasped between my lips, but pulled away enough to look up at me. “Seriously,” she said. “That was a lot. How are you feeling?”

“I wanted to break his nose for talking to you like that.”

Something shuddered in her gaze, but she nodded. “You didn’t.”

“I didn’t.”

“You’re the amazing one,” she said, then reached up on her tiptoes and kissed me.

“I’m sorry,” I said between frantic kisses.

“Why?”

“Because he’s an asshole,” I said, walking her back until her spine hit the closed door. “And you were subjected to it.”

She shrugged, reaching for the zipper on my racing suit. “Like I said,” she said, pulling the zipper down and down. “I’ve dealt with much worse.”

A spike of hatred for her ex flared through me, but it was quickly washed away when she slipped her hand into my now opened suit and gripped me.

“Fuck,” I groaned as she stroked me up and down.

“Before we were so rudely interrupted,” she said, nipping at my bottom lip. “This is what I wanted to do to you.”

She slowly dropped to her knees before me, and I was fucking struck at how beautiful she looked in the position as she freed my cock and instantly took it in her mouth. Her red lips wrapped around the tip and sucked so hard I twitched inside her.

“Fuck, baby,” I groaned, my hand flying to her hair and tangling there as she bobbed up and down on my dick. Pure, undiluted need snapped inside me, joining the already high adrenaline pumping through my blood. My instincts screamed to fuck her hard and fast, so much so I couldn’t take another second.

I gently tugged on her hair until my cock slipped out of her mouth. Then I kept tugging until she stood up, a little delighted whimper releasing from her lips at the move.

“I’m coming inside you,” I said, my voice raw like it’d been scraped over concrete. “Take off your pants,” I commanded, stepping back to drop the rest of the suit clinging to me.

She wet her lips, instantly taking off her leggings and tossing them to the side. I scooped her up, and she locked her ankles behind my back, claiming my mouth as I pressed her back against the door.

I held her there with one hand, using my free one to drag my cock, slick from her mouth, through her center, teasing her clit with my head.

“Ethan,” she sighed against my mouth, her thighs clenching tighter around my hips every time I made a circle around the sensitive bundle of nerves.

“I need you, Alexandra,” I groaned, my entire body flexing with how wet she was for me.

“Then take me,” she said before kissing me again, sliding her tongue between my lips and dragging it over the edges of my teeth. She clung to my shoulders, using me as leverage to rock against me.

“Goddamn,” I said, but still held myself back. If I sunk into her right now, I would go harder and faster than I ever had before. “Baby, I’m trying to go slow here.”

“Don’t,” she countered.

I groaned again. “I’m still riddled with adrenaline. If I sink inside you right now, I’m going to fuck you until there isn’t an inch of your body I haven’t claimed as mine.”

“God, yes, please,” she begged, kissing her way down my neck and nipping at the flesh there with enough force to sting.

My hips jolted forward, and I gripped her beautiful ass with both hands, maneuvering her over my cock so I slid through her heat.

“Is that what you want, Alexandra?” I asked, kissing her hard as I held her just poised over my cock. “You want me to fuck you?”

“Yes,” she said, slightly breathless. Her lips swollen from my kiss, her cheeks flushed. “Please, Ethan. Take me how you need me.”

The words broke something inside me, some hold I had on myself.

I speared my cock inside her heat, sinking into her to the hilt before pulling all the way out and doing it again.

And again.

And again.

Each time I pumped into her was harder, longer.

Each time, she gasped and clenched around me in the sweetest fucking way.

“More,” she begged. “Faster.”

“Fuck, baby,” I groaned, gripping her tighter as I pounded into her, driving us both toward the pleasure building under our skin. “You’re amazing. I fucking love you, Alex.” The words ripped from my lips, ringing true, but my body was too wrapped up in her for my mind to stop and wonder how she felt about them.

I pushed inside her harder, faster. Each time we connected I made sure I rubbed against her swollen clit, pushing her closer to the edge I could feel winding up between us.

“I love you,” she said, her head falling back against the door, her lips parting as she gasped. “I’m coming,” she gasped. “Ethan, I’m—”

“*Fuck,*” I growled as her pussy clenched around me, all slick, searing heat as she pulsed, drawing my release from me with hers.

Our bodies shook as I held us there, our breathing rushed and uneven as I slowly rocked us through the aftershocks of it all.

Alex tangled her fingers in my hair, and I met her eyes. “You love me?”

“I do,” I whispered.

Her smile was bright and breathtaking before she lowered her lips to mine.

“Where the hell did Ethan go?” I heard Cross’s voice ring outside the door, and we both laughed out of our kiss. “The car is waiting!” he yelled, which only made us laugh harder.

“We’re coming,” I called out, loud enough that he could hear me.

“Yeah, I’ll bet,” I heard him grumble.

We chuckled again before I gently lowered Alex to her feet, helping to clean her up as best I could before we got dressed.

“How’s my hair?” she asked, hurriedly running her fingers through it.

I playfully cringed at the slight mess it was in, and she gasped, a blush rising to her cheeks. “Omigod, they’re going to know.”

“Baby,” I said, smiling down at her. “They already know.”

She shook her head, her face falling into her hands. “I’m so bad for you,” she said.

I furrowed my brow, reaching to peel her hands from her face. “What do you mean?”

She shrugged. “Wanting you so bad I stole you away from your friends and fucked you in a public place.”

God, her mouth.

“I fucked you,” I countered. “And I don’t give a shit if they heard us.”

“Still, this is your poker weekend. I shouldn’t have taken you away. What if someone was watching? Like those paparazzi that follow you around sometimes? What if someone recorded you coming in here with me and then another video came out? I should’ve thought about that before —”

“Alexandra,” I said, cutting off her panicked ramble as I cradled her face. “You are the best thing that’s ever happened to me. No one was recording us, but even if they were, I don’t care. They would’ve seen me going into a room with the woman I love. You don’t have to worry about me like that.”

“But I do,” she argued. “I have to worry.” She chewed on her bottom lip. “I’ve been worrying about it. Worrying about how I might make you look in the media if we really do this.”

“I don’t care how I look in the media—”

“But you do,” she said. “You almost lost your team because of people recording you. What if I mess up and make you look bad?”

“That could never happen,” I said, and she looked like she was going to argue, so I shook my head, trailing my thumb over her bottom lip. “You love me?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“And I love you.”

Her eyes glittered with unshed tears. “Really?”

“Yes,” I said. “And you know my history. You know I don’t say that lightly.”

She nodded.

“So, don’t worry about the rest of it, okay? We’ll figure it all out. One step at a time. Okay?”

“Okay,” she breathed the word, the tension melting out of her as she wrapped her arms around me.

“Dinner!” Crossland yelled from outside. “I’m starving.”

We both laughed, but I glanced down at her with a studying gaze. I could see the worry behind the humor in her eyes, but she didn’t say anything as she spun around and unlocked the door before stepping into the hallway.

“Sorry, Cross,” she said. “Wardrobe malfunction.”

“Uh huh,” he said, smiling at her. “I don’t care. I just need *food*.”

Two hours later, I was practically fucking glowing, and it had nothing to do with the amazing dinner we’d just eaten or the race cars we’d driven earlier. It had everything to do with the fact that I was in love with Alex. The woman who sat by

my side and joked with my friends and loved me for the flawed individual I was.

She was my world.

I'd given her my heart, and she'd taken it without hesitation. Sure, she had her worries, but those would fade over time.

Everything was perfect.

"Have I told you how beautiful you look tonight?" I asked, one arm looped around her as we waited for our car outside the restaurant.

"Still trying to get me to fall for you?" she teased.

"Always," I said.

"It's working." She gripped the lapels of my suit jacket, drawing me down to her level for a kiss.

My phone vibrated in my pocket and I grabbed it, glancing down at the text from Cross. "Shit," I said. "I left my sunglasses at the table." I kissed Alex quickly. "Be right back."

"No worries," she called after me as I headed back into the restaurant, an unmovable smile on my lips.

Alexandra

A light breeze rippled by as I waited outside the restaurant for Ethan to get back. Traffic was a crowded mess, so we already knew the driver was going to be a bit, and knowing the guys, I'm sure they'd keep Ethan at the dinner table longer than necessary to pick up his glasses.

Knowing that, I walked down the sidewalk a bit, window shopping the stores sandwiching the restaurant. I was gazing longingly at a pair of heels, contemplating how many coaching sessions it would take to buy them—

“Alex?”

My body recognized the voice before my brain did, my blood running cold as every muscle locked up.

“Fuck, it's really you. What are you doing in the city?” Jarred's voice, my *ex's* voice, hadn't changed much since I'd last heard it, but there was something just different enough in his tone that I could turn around and face him. Shame? Regret? I couldn't place it.

“Jarred,” I responded, panic clawing its way up my throat and threatening to close off my airways. Memories of our horrid past barreled through my mind, a series of flashes filled with fear and hurt and tears. My eyes darted toward the restaurant, wanting nothing more than Ethan to walk back out

the door. I made to step that direction, but Jarred stepped in my path.

“You haven’t returned any of my calls,” he said, and where there would normally be accusation or anger, there was a pleading sense of desperation in his tone that gave me pause.

“Why would I?” I asked, looking up at him. He was definitely more fit than the last time I’d seen him in person, but being a star running back in the NFL would do that to a man I guess.

“I know,” he said, shaking his head. “You don’t owe me anything.”

My brain felt broken, so taken aback by the sight of him here.

“What are you doing here?” I managed to ask.

“Vacation,” he said. “Boys’ trip before pre-season starts.”

I nodded, nerves tangling in my stomach as the moment stretched uncomfortably between us.

“This is bad,” he said. “I had no idea I’d run into you, but I’ve been trying to reach you forever, so maybe it’s fate.”

I took a step back, and he quickly raised his hands.

“Not *fate*, fate,” he said, then cringed. “Look, I’m sorry.”

I gaped at him.

“I know. Sorry doesn’t cover it. What I did to you when we were in our relationship—”

“What the hell is happening right now?” I asked, seriously so confused a headache formed at the base of my skull. Or that could just be the panic.

“I’ve been trying to call you,” he said. “You have to know that.”

Yeah, I knew it. I also hadn’t played one of his messages because *fuck that*.

“Anyway, I promised myself if I ever saw you again, spoke to you again, I’d tell you.”

“Tell me what, Jarred? We’re no longer in each other’s lives. At all. There’s no need—”

“There is a need,” he cut me off. “I know I never actually hit you, but I did some damage. I know that now. I was an asshole.”

“You were an abusive prick who gaslit me and then cheated on me.”

“Fuck,” he said, loosing a long breath. “I know. I mean, I didn’t know. I didn’t realize...fuck. This is going all wrong.”

“It always does.” I shook my head. God, I wished Ella and Nora were here. Wished Ethan would come back. Someone I trusted to tether me back to the real world.

“I know. It took me getting my ass handed to me before I realized how fucked up I was,” he said. “Getting drafted into the NFL was good for me in more ways than just my career. I went into therapy and uncovered some deep shit. And that’s not an excuse for the way I treated you, but I need you to know I’m really, truly sorry for it all.”

I felt like the sidewalk had fallen out from under me and I had to shake my head to clear my mind of the shock. “Wait, what?”

“I’m sorry for being an abusive toxic boyfriend, fiancé, whatever. I’m sorry for every single thing I did to you.”

My lips parted open, only a wisp of air escaping them. In all the times I'd pictured...no *feared* running into him again, this was never one of the scenarios that ran through my mind.

"I'm with someone," I said, the words coming out slowly like my brain couldn't really articulate what was happening. Fuck, I needed to get a grip.

I took a deep breath, and focused on my surroundings, using the sounds of the busy city streets to ground me.

"That's great," he said. "I'm not trying to win you back or anything," he said. "Not that you're not worth it," he hurried to add. "I mean, you are. You were. The best." He cringed again, and the sight of him so torn up brought a laugh to my lips.

"Sorry," I said, reeling it in. "I've just never seen you so..."

"Human?" he filled in for me.

"Yeah," I said, shaking my head. "So, therapy? It's working for you?"

Some tension left his shoulders. "Yes," he said. "It's intense, and it's harder work than running drills in a hundred-and-ten-degree weather, but it's good. I'm learning things about myself I never knew. Bad things. Good things. In between things." He shrugged. "I know an apology is pointless, but I really am sorry."

I swallowed hard. "I don't really know what to say to that," I admitted. "But I am glad you're getting the help you needed. I think everyone deserves that."

"It's why you're a great life coach," he said, and I tilted my head. "I've seen you," he continued. "On social media. With your...boyfriend?"

I nodded. “Yeah. I guess I have you to thank for going into that field.”

“I wish to fuck that wasn’t the case, even though from what I’ve read about, you’re the best there is.”

I shrugged. Wild. This was absolutely wild. I never expected to see him again, let alone like this...on some path to recovery. I hope it stuck, but that didn’t mean I was about to befriend him. I may have healed most of the wounds he’d inflicted, but I wasn’t wholly healed. I didn’t know if I’d ever be.

Pedestrians hustled by us, hurrying to and from the shops all around us, and I moved out of the way, as close to the store window as I could get to not be in the heavy foot-traffic path.

“I won’t keep you,” he said. “I just saw you and couldn’t *not* say anything. Not when I knew I’d never get a chance again. I didn’t deserve your time or attention, but I really appreciate you hearing me out. If I could take back... everything, I would.”

Jesus, I’d fallen into the twilight zone. But in my career field, I was always the one boasting the hope for healing from trauma, the hope for second chances. Hadn’t I told Ethan a dozen times that he was more than the aspects he had a hard time controlling? Not that he was anything like Jarred, but if anyone could appreciate the power of healing through better mental health and education, it was me.

“You sound good, Jarred,” I said. “I really hope you keep at it.”

“I will,” he said, determined. “And I hope you—”

Someone stumbled into Jarred, flinging him forward and crashing into me.

I yelped as his muscled mass shoved me into the window, Jarred trying to brace himself against the glass so he didn't crush me entirely.

The person yelled *sorry* without stopping, and Jarred glared at him over his shoulder, but glanced back at me.

“You okay—”

“Get your fucking hands off her!” Ethan's voice was lethal, sharp enough to cut.

One second Jarred was there, the next he wasn't.

Ethan ripped him away from me, his eyes narrowed as he didn't hesitate to swing. His fist connected with Jarred's jaw, the audible crunch turning my stomach.

“Ethan!” I yelled, but he didn't hear me. Didn't see me. Didn't feel my hands on his back as I tried and failed to stop the second hit. “Ethan, stop!”

“You fucking did enough to her you piece of shit,” he growled, swinging again. Jarred didn't fight back, only tried to block him, but Ethan was relentless. “You never get to talk to her again, you hear me? Never.”

Crunch.

Blood splattered the pavement from the hit, and Jarred went slack, his eyes rolling back in his head as he hit the ground.

“Omigod,” I gasped, kneeling down to check on Jarred. “You knocked him out.” I looked up at Ethan, but he wasn't there. He was somewhere else, lost and distant behind cold eyes as he looked down at Jarred.

I scanned the crowd around us, tears filling my eyes as I noted the dozen or more phones out and aimed at the scene.

Shit, shit, shit.

I breathed a sigh of relief when I spotted a familiar face forcing their way through the crowd.

“Cross!” I shouted, and he upped his pace, downright shoving people out of his way, Gareth on his heels. They both took in the scene in a matter of blinks.

“Are you okay?” Cross asked.

“I’m fine,” I assured him. “Please, get Ethan out of here.” I eyed the phones, and Cross and Gareth nodded, immediately grabbing an arm each and tugging Ethan backward.

“*Alex*,” Ethan said, blinking a few times as the fog cleared from his eyes. My heart broke at the utter devastation that rippled there. “Alex...”

“Just get him out of here,” I urged Cross and Gareth, not wanting anything else to happen, anything else to trigger Ethan, to create another scene he couldn’t come back from.

I’d already triggered enough damage for him tonight.

Damage I might not be able to fix.

Damage that could cost him the thing he loved most—his team.

My fault, it was all my fault.

And as Cross and Gareth moved him out of sight, I had the sinking sensation that I’d lost him forever because of it.

Ethan

“**O**kay, thanks, Declan,” Asher said from somewhere across the room. “I’ll let him know.”

Cross sat beside me, forcing a bottle of water into my hand. “Drink this.”

Robotically, I opened the bottle and took a swig, barely noting the pain in my right hand. I glanced down after a few swallows, spotting the blood there.

Not my blood, but his.

Alex’s ex.

Everything crashed into my mind, flashes of the episode I hadn’t been able to stop. I’d walked out of the restaurant and immediately recognized her now-famous ex, saw his arms on either side of her, caging her against that shop window—

The rest was fuzzy—bursts of images of her screaming my name, telling me to stop. My knuckles aching from hitting him over and over. The rage that spilled into my blood knowing what he’d done to her, what he’d put her through.

“How bad is it?” I finally asked, finally coming back to myself fully. We were in Asher’s penthouse at the hotel. Cross and Gareth had gotten me here. Ash and Wes met us soon after.

“Declan tried to catch the video before it went viral,” Asher said, his tone apologetic.

“*Tried*,” I said, shaking my head.

“Couldn’t. He’s doing damage control.”

I killed the rest of the water, then set it down on the coffee table in front of me. I rubbed my forehead, wincing from the pain in my hand. Gareth came around the corner, an ice pack in his hand.

“For the swelling,” he said, shoving it into my good hand.

I flashed him a grateful look, then laid the pack over my right hand. “Where’s my phone?” I asked, feeling around my pockets but finding them empty.

“I have it,” Weston said, bringing it over to me from where he’d been chatting with Ash. “It fell out when...”

“When I lost my shit,” I filled in for him as I took the phone from him. I glanced at the screen, my heart fucking breaking when I saw there was nothing from Alex on my screen, just a million missed calls from my assistant, my lawyer, and my publicist.

“We saw what happened,” Cross said. “But the crowd was hard to get through. We didn’t have time to stop—”

“It doesn’t matter,” I cut him off. “It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have...I fucked up.” I shook my head. “The look on her face...” God, she’d looked so devastated. So disappointed. “I lost her.”

“You haven’t lost her,” Cross argued, and I fastened him with a look.

“Where is she then?” If I hadn’t lost her, shouldn’t she be here with me?

Cross's eyes flashed to Asher's across the room.

"Where is she?" I asked, foreboding building along my soul.

"Brynn is with her," Weston said.

"And Daisy."

"*Where?*"

"She went to the hospital with the running back," Gareth said. Cross shot him a glare, and he shrugged. "He asked."

"She's not *with* the running back," Wes said, rolling his eyes at Gareth. "She only went to make sure he wasn't going to press charges."

"Is that what Brynn said?"

"Yes."

That was something, but it didn't explain why she hadn't tried to call. My chest felt like it was cracking down the middle, a hollow pit opening where my heart should be.

"She'd be smart to stay away from me," I said, leaning back with the ice pack on my hand. "Cut things off before we're in too deep. Before she can't save her career. I mean, who would want to work with a life coach who clearly failed with me?" Not that it was her fault. It was mine. Just me.

"Well, this party just switched to a pity theme, didn't it?" Cross said.

I flipped him off with my left hand.

"Don't go down this self-hatred road," he said. "It's not a good look on you."

"That could've been any of us," Asher said, coming around the couch I sat on to sit on the chair across from it. "I

would've done the same thing if I saw one of Daisy's exes doing that to her," he said.

"Yeah," Wes agreed.

"Maybe," I said. "But you two aren't under fire for your outrageous temper right now, are you?"

The room fell silent.

I hated myself in that moment, not because of the team I was sure to lose, but because of the notion that I'd lost Alex. That I'd let her down. Replaying the scene, I knew he hadn't touched her. He was only caging her in. I could've stopped when I threw him off of her, when I'd freed her from whatever he'd been about to do.

If I would've taken my breaths. Would've grounded myself. Would've done anything but lose myself to that instant protective trigger that resulted in broken bones.

Fucking hell.

She'd taught me better. She'd helped heal me in so many ways, had been so patient with me, and how had I repaid her? I always knew I wasn't worthy of her love, but now it was a proven fact for the entire world to see.

I was hopeless.

Destined to live my life on a hairpin trigger, looking over my shoulder for my next big fuck up.

And despite all that, despite knowing and understanding all that, I still wanted her, still wanted to be a man worthy of her time, her love.

I swiped open my phone and texted two words: *I'm sorry.*

After five minutes went by with no response, I pocketed my phone and looked around at my friends.

“Thanks for helping me,” I said. “For getting me out of there, but I need to be alone.” I pushed off the couch, not even bothering to tell Cross to stop following me when he walked behind me out of Asher’s room, only stopping when we reached the door to mine.

“We’ll be right across the hall if you need us, man,” he said, and I nodded at him before closing the door.

Alone, I let myself feel it. The disappointment, the failure. I let myself remember all the reasons I never wanted to fall in love again.

This pain right here was one of them.

The pain of wanting to be good enough for a person, even knowing I never would be. Wanting to be the better version of myself even when I knew losing control was only a second of poor judgment away.

I sank onto my bed, staring at the ceiling, wishing like hell I could take it back.

Wishing I could turn back the clock.

Wishing I could go back to the bliss I’d felt right before I’d ruined the best thing to ever happen to me.

Alexandra

“I understand the late hour,” I said, holding my phone against my ear and trying to keep my voice at a calm level as I lingered in the hospital waiting room. “But this is urgent. Please express that to the league commissioner.”

My phone vibrated, and I pulled it away just enough to see the text from Ethan, and tears built behind my eyes again.

“I’ll let him know, Ms. Kinder,” the commissioner’s assistant said. “I’ll text you at this number if he can hop on a FaceTime call.”

“Thank you,” I said, breathing a sigh of relief as I pocketed my phone. It had taken me an hour to track down the right number, seeing how this was a weekend and beyond after hours.

“Did you get ahold of him?” Brynn asked from where she sat in one of the waiting room chairs, Daisy on her right.

“Not yet. His assistant is trying to set up a call for me.”

“That’s good,” Brynn said. “What can we do?”

I smiled at them as best I could. “Nothing. You’ve both already done enough.” They’d refused my insistence that I was fine to be here on my own, sticking by my side the entire time. Ella and Nora would definitely love them. God, I wished they were here. Not that I didn’t love Brynn and Daisy, I *did*, but

my girls back home knew the full extent of how hard this night had been because they knew my history.

I'd texted the group chat on the cab ride to the hospital, typing out a frantic recount of the story, and had been met with ferocious support and offers to fly out here to get me, which I declined. I had no intention of leaving...

Unless he asked me to.

"How is he doing?" I asked, looking at Daisy, who I knew had been texting with Ash.

"He's..." She flashed me an apologetic look. "Not his best right now."

I nodded, the knife in my chest twisting. "I should've walked away from Jarred the second I heard his voice," I said. "If I'd gone and got Ethan first, explained what was happening, none of this would have happened."

"Don't do that," Daisy said. "You can't play the what-if game. This isn't your fault."

I arched a brow at her. "Ethan would've never reacted that way if he hadn't thought I was in trouble."

"Right," Brynn said. "Which isn't your fault. It was a misunderstanding. It will be all right."

"Will it?" I asked, sinking into the chair. "What about the next time something like this happens? What if he loses his team?"

"What if he doesn't, and this all is a learning lesson on the path to success?" Daisy offered. "See," she said. "I can do it too."

I chuckled a dark laugh. "I don't want to be...a burden in his life."

“You’re so not a burden,” Brynn said. “He’s responsible for his own actions, Alex,” she continued. “And he’s healing. Learning. Thanks to you, he’s doing so much better than ever before.”

I blew out a breath, thinking about his text.

I’m sorry.

He didn’t need to be sorry; *I* did. No matter what they said, no matter what my friends kept texting me, I should’ve reacted better to the situation. I’d just been in shock at the sight of Jarred, at his apology, his newfound grasp on his mental health.

“You can talk to him now,” a nurse said, cutting into my thoughts.

I stood up. “Wish me luck.”

“You’ve got this,” Daisy said.

“Want us to go with you?” Brynn asked.

“No, thank you. I’m good,” I said, even though I was so far from good. The sole reason I was here, waiting on Jarred to get stitched up, was to beg him not to press charges.

I followed the nurse into the examination room, finding Jarred with a swollen lip and black eye but otherwise looking alert after being knocked unconscious.

“I’ve been hit harder on the field,” he said by way of greeting, and the nurse left us alone in the room. “And they ruled out a concussion.”

“That’s good,” I said, sticking close to the door.

“You didn’t have to come check on me,” he said.

“I’m not here to check on you.”

“Oh,” he said. “Then what are you here for?”

I sighed. “After you broke my heart, I promised myself I’d never beg you for another thing in my life. I’d never beg *anyone* for anything in my life. But I’m breaking that promise to myself today.”

“I’m not following.”

“I’m here to beg you not to press charges against Ethan.”

Realization dawned on his features. “He’d deserve it.”

“Yeah,” I said. “And you would too, if I had ever decided to press charges against all the *accidents* you had around me.” Gripped arms, shoves against the wall a little too hard, holes in the same wall.

Jarred visibly swallowed. “I’m sorry.”

“I get that,” I said. “I see that you mean it. And I really hope you mean it, really hope you’re changing, but I’m not going to be around to find out.”

“Fair,” he said. “I wasn’t going to press charges. I’m not really in the place to do that, but I will press charges if I have to.”

“What do you mean?”

He shifted off the small hospital bed, the thing creaking under his massive weight. “Does he act like that toward you? Hurt you?”

I gaped at him. “You’re joking.”

“I’m really not. Do I know I have absolutely zero right to ask that? Yep. That doesn’t mean I’m not going to. Not after what he did to my face. You know I never did anything like this to you. Not that it excuses the other mistakes I made,” he

said, pointing to his face. He took a breath. “Does he do this to you?”

“You have some fucking nerve,” I said, shaking my head. “You and Ethan are *nothing* alike. Nothing. He’s never even raised his voice toward me, let alone physically hurt me.”

He studied me for a moment, and then nodded. “Good,” he said. “You don’t deserve to deal with anyone like me ever again. I know I fucked up with you. I’m sorry. I really am doing everything I can to fix myself.”

I blew out a breath. “Are you going to press charges?”

“No.”

“Thank you,” I said, shocking the hell out of myself that I could even offer him those words. “Do better, Jarred,” I said as I opened the door to the room. “I hope that for you. To just be better.”

“I will.”

I shut the door behind me, my nerves shot, my mind fraying at the edges. I had one more thing to settle before I faced Ethan, before I went to him and begged him to not push me away. Because I no doubt knew that’s what he was going to do—if not for some misplaced belief that I would be better off, then for his own desire to not be tempted to fly off the cuff to any man who paid me any sort of attention. Not that I thought he’d do that for anyone that wasn’t Jarred, but still.

Everything was an absolute mess.

Another text rang through once I got back to the waiting room, and my heart flew into my throat.

“All good?” Brynn asked.

“Yes,” I said. “He’s not going to press charges, and I have a call with the league commissioner and several of the other MLB owners in five minutes.”

“Holy shit,” Daisy said. “Deep breaths, babe.”

I nodded at them both, spending the entire five minutes trying like hell to get my shit together.

My phone rang, and I swiped to open the FaceTime call. “Thank you for taking my call so late, commissioner,” I said.

“I was told it was urgent,” he said, then motioned to the laptop screen in view beside him. A Zoom call was up with a dozen of the MLB owners’ faces in little boxes filling out the screen.

Fuck me.

“I’ve seen the video,” he said before I could utter another word. “You have fifteen minutes to convince me not to expel him on the spot.”

My stomach dropped, but I didn’t dare let the dread show on my face.

“I only need ten.”

Ethan

I'd lost my girl and my team in the span of ninety seconds.

How the fuck does that happen?

How the fuck could I ruin the two loves of my life so thoroughly in such a short amount of time?

I contemplated the questions while doing my best to resist the liquor cart that had been stationed in each of our suites in the hotel. I wanted to pour myself two fingers of whiskey, but I knew that wouldn't fix the mess I'd created. It might numb the ache in my heart, but it would come roaring back once the alcohol burned off. Might as well skip that part and sit here in my misery like a proper pathetic person.

I raked my fingers through my hair, unable to *not* stare at my phone, desperate for any sort of response from Alexandra. It was well past midnight, and I was still sitting here hoping she'd call or text back. Hoping that she'd give me a chance to explain, to apologize, to ask for help.

Because I needed it. She'd already helped me so much, but it was clear I still had a ton of work to do when it came to my triggers. And I think tonight had been the biggest test of all—one I'd failed miserably.

Though, if I was being honest with myself, I don't know what would make me react differently. Knowing that asshole's

history, knowing what he'd put her through, and seeing him trapping her like that? How was I supposed to take a deep breath and work through that?

With control.

With calculated control.

Fuck. Yeah. That's what I needed to find. That unflinching, cold, calculating control that Gareth seemed to radiate on a daily basis. I'd ask him for some tips, but not tonight. Tonight, I was content to wallow in my own—

Three knocks on my door jerked me out of my thoughts, and I left the comfort of the couch, dragging my feet as I made it to the door.

"I told you, I'm fine," I grumbled at whichever friend of mine had drawn the short straw to come and check on me as I flung open the door.

"You don't sound fine," Alex said, the sight of her standing there stealing the breath from my lungs.

She looked as beautiful as she had at dinner. Only her eyes were red, like she'd been crying, and that fact pierced my chest like a knife.

"Are you all right?" I asked, knowing that mattered more than any breaking she needed to do to me now. I *had* to know she was okay.

"Yes," she said. "I'm okay. Is it okay that I'm here?" she asked, lingering in the hallway like this hadn't been her room too when we'd arrived. Like I hadn't made her come three times in the king-sized bed in the master that morning.

"Why wouldn't it be?" I asked, trying to keep my voice even despite the breaks fracturing in my heart. I assumed she

was here to get closure, to finalize things between us after ascertaining the risks of staying with me versus returning to her non-committal relationship practices.

I stepped out of the way, giving her as much space as she needed to walk by me without being forced to touch me. It was a physical pain not to reach for her, not to pull her into my arms and beg her not to leave, beg her to be patient with me.

She moved into the room, and I shut the door behind her, lingering near it with my hands firmly in my pockets so I didn't do anything stupid, like grab her wrist and haul her against me.

Alex turned around when she noted I wasn't following her, and furrowed her brow.

Great, she didn't even know where to start with me.

Fine then, I could help her out.

"It's okay, Alexandra," I said, mustering all the strength I possessed. "You don't have to give me a big speech. I get it. I fucked up. I failed. I'm an asshole and will always be an asshole till the day I die. I get angry, I react. I'll keep working on it, but I can't lie to you and say I wouldn't do it again. I would. I saw your abusive ex caging you in and I snapped." I shrugged. "It may have cost me my team, but I can get over that. I just wish it wouldn't have cost me you."

I sighed, swallowing hard as I wondered how we were going to handle the Sherlock situation. I'd move out and give her my house and the dog, just so they wouldn't have to be separated.

"You're fine with losing your team?" she asked, a bit of fire sparking in those blue eyes.

Good, she should be angry with me.

“I never wanted to lose them, but since that mistake of mine months ago, I’ve known it was a possibility. I love that team, but it’s a team. I can still watch them, cheer for them.” Fuck me, it did hurt, though. The thought of losing the pride I felt over being the team’s owner...shit, I’d deal with that grief later.

Alex popped her hands on her hips, and I instinctually shifted my weight, preparing for the blow that she was about to deliver. She was nothing if not boldly honest. It was one of the things I loved about her.

“And what part of tonight makes you think you’ve lost me?” she asked, her tone careful and calm as she took a step toward me.

“I saw the look on your face, Alex,” I said. “There was nothing but disappointment in your eyes. Maybe a little fear. You have rules for a reason. We’ve barely gone over your thirty-day contract. I get it. I’m not worth the constant worrying of the next time I’ll explode.”

She took another step toward me, stopping an arm’s length away. “That’s the reason?”

I looked at her, slightly baffled. “Do I need anymore?”

“It’s not because you don’t want me around?” she asked. “Because I’m a trigger for you? Because who knows the next time something like that will happen to me and you’ll be set off.”

Confusion and something like anticipation flared inside me. “Of course not,” I said. “Alex, I *love* you. Do you think I said that lightly?”

She tipped her chin slightly, her eyes scanning my face. “So, you still want me?”

“Always,” I said. “You could finish breaking my heart right now, walk out that door forever, and I’ll still love you. Every. Fucking. Day. For the rest of my forever.”

Her eyebrows raised, and she bit back a teary smile, closing the distance between us until we were almost touching. “Then you should know, that look of disappointment in my eyes, the fear? That was because I’d thought I’d lost you. Because I figured there was no way you’d want to stay with me after realizing what me being in a sticky situation would trigger for you. I was scared *for* you, because I knew that the people recording were seconds away from uploading it to social media.”

My chest tightened. “What?” I shook my head. “You’re not afraid of me? Disappointed in me?”

“I could never be afraid of you,” she said. “And I understand your reaction. There were a lot of factors that led to it, and I’m sorry for my hand in that. For my past, for my lack of action when he approached me.” She shook her head. “But I’m not disappointed. You’re healing and working on it, Ethan. You’re doing so amazing too. Tonight...tonight was bad. And I’m so sorry about it all. It was a giant misunderstanding.”

Hope filled me like a balloon ready to burst, but I held it at bay. “Why did you go to the hospital with him? Were you worried about him?”

“No,” I said, then tilted my head. “No more worry than from one human to the next.” She sighed. “It was an accident,” she hurried to explain. “Him getting that close to me. A guy bumped into him and it was like a domino effect. Before that, he’d been apologizing to me, explaining he was going to therapy.”

Fuck.

“That’s good,” I said, but that hope deflated inside me, and my eyes dropped to the floor.

Did she want to work things out with him now? After everything?

“I only went there to make sure he didn’t press charges,” she said, reaching up to cup my face, forcing me to look down at her. “I went there for you. The last thing you need is charges brought against you, and the last thing he has is a right to do so after everything he put me through. He got that. Understood that. He’s not going to, and we’re not going to have any further contact. He said what he needed to say to me, and me to him. That’s it.” She wet her lips, eyes glistening.

“I love you, Ethan. I know I put my rules into place to try to protect my heart from ever being hurt again, but I know now that it was all bullshit. That when the right person comes along, it doesn’t matter what your plans were before. You’ve changed my entire world, and I don’t want a life where you’re not in it.” She took a deep breath. “But if you want me to go, if you think life will be harder with me around, then I will. It will hurt like hell, but I’ll do it.”

“You...you love me.”

“I do,” she said. “I love you for your heart, your humor, your ability to track the best cheeseburger down in every city we visit.” She laughed, and I did too. “I love you for your raw emotions, for your passion, for your desire to always improve. You’re worth everything to me, Ethan. You’re my *reason*. My person.”

Her words broke me, and she was in my arms, her mouth under mine in seconds. I kissed her frantically, pouring every

ounce of love and emotion I possessed into the kiss. Using it to say all the things I didn't know how to articulate. She clung to me, whimpering slightly as we clashed together in a starved sort of way.

I pulled back, holding her face in my hands as I scanned her features. "You really want to do this with me?" I asked. "I can't guarantee there won't be more times like this."

"I want all of you," she said. "And if there is a next time, don't think I'm running away just because I'm handling things on my end. Promise me," she urged. "Promise me you won't jump to drastic conclusions before talking to me."

"I promise if you promise."

"I promise," she said, then chuckled. "Now that we've said *promise* way too much."

I kissed her again, scooping her off her feet and cradling her against my chest before I pulled back again. "Wait," I said, and she furrowed her brow, her arms wrapped around my neck.

"What is it?"

"Will you still love me even if I'm not the owner of the Hurricanes?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yes," she said, and I crushed my lips against hers again, drinking in her taste, my heart somehow putting itself together with every assured word from her, every little sigh and swipe of her tongue against mine.

"But," she said against my mouth, her turn to pull back this time. "You're still the owner."

I tilted my head, and her smile brightened.

"What did you do?" I asked.

“I told the commissioner the truth,” she said. “Asked him to put himself in your shoes. Asked all of the other owners who were on the call to do the same. Told them about your progress, about how amazing of a human you really are.”

“And they...they’re letting me keep my team?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Fuck, you’re the perfect woman,” I said, walking us through the suite’s living room and into the bedroom.

“Perfect for you, like you’re perfect for me,” she said as I gently laid her on the bed, settling myself between her thighs.

“Tell me right now if you’re tired, Alexandra,” I said, kissing my way down her neck and over her chest. “Because I’m going to love every inch of your body until the sun comes up.”

She giggled, but arched into my slow, teasing kisses. “I’m not tired,” she assured me as I made my way back up to her lips. “I love you.”

“I love you,” I said, then kissed her again.

And I didn’t stop kissing her until we were both exhausted and spent and she fell asleep in my arms.

Epilogue

THREE YEARS LATER

Alexandra

It was well after seven by the time I'd made it home, and even though I'd prepared to miss bedtime, I was still sad as I walked into our quiet home.

Sherlock greeted me, giving me much needed kisses before leaning his massive frame against my hip. It'd been a long day, one filled with a tough session with a client, followed by hours at the shelter. I'd cut way back, but today had just been...a day.

After giving our hound all the pets he deserved, I tiptoed through the house, making my way to the nursery. My heart expanded ten times when I found Ethan standing in front of the crib, lovingly holding our six-month-old daughter, swaying back and forth as he hummed her a soft lullaby.

I didn't say a word, just leaned against the doorframe and appreciated the view, wondering how the hell I'd gotten so lucky to fall in love with the most amazing man on the planet. My husband, my best friend, the best father to our daughter I could ever dream of.

Ethan swayed a few more times before putting her in the crib, lingering a few seconds to ensure she was truly asleep before he turned around, smiling when he spotted me. I turned

around, heading down the hall to our bedroom, him following silently behind.

“How was she today?” I asked once we were out of earshot of her room.

Ethan closed the door behind us. “Perfect, as usual,” he said, and I arched a brow at him. He laughed, then shrugged. “What? You had a rough day,” he said, strolling past me and heading into our bathroom. I heard the water turn on in the bathtub before he returned. “I’m not going to tell you how much she cried because of her new teeth coming in.”

I sighed, rubbing my palms over my face. I was torn between my career and wanting to be at home with her full-time. I’d already cut back to only one client a month, and shortened my hours at the shelter to a mere four a week. But I missed her every second I was gone.

“Hey,” Ethan said, drawing me into his embrace and planting soft kisses over my forehead, cheeks, then lips. “You’re amazing. You’re home ninety percent of the time. When you’re gone, it gives me that quality daddy-daughter bonding time.”

I blew out a breath, knowing he was right.

He kissed me again, slower this time, longer, until I was breathless and loose all over. Then he pulled away, hurrying back into the bathroom to shut the water off before returning.

“Now,” he said. “You go get in that bubble bath, and I’ll heat you up some dinner. After that, if you’re up for it, I’ve been waiting all night for my dessert.”

I swear I might’ve melted into a puddle on the floor right in front of him.

“What’s for dessert?” I asked, shedding my clothes and tossing them in the hamper.

His eyes lingered, slowly trailing my body with a hunger that hadn’t dulled over the past three years. Even with my new post-baby body, the man treated me like a queen.

“You,” he finally said, a smirk shaping his lips that made warm shivers dance down my spine.

He followed me into the bathroom, and I about cried at how he’d set it up—the clawfoot tub was brimming with lavender scented bubbles and he turned the lighting to a soft, blue glow. Gentle, instrumental music filtered through the speakers in our ceiling, and he’d already put my towel in the warmer.

God, could he be more perfect?

He watched me sink into the steamy water, then bent over to kiss me. “Food,” he said. “It’ll be ready when you get out, but take your time.”

I leaned back in the tub, stretching out and sighing as the hot water soothed my tired muscles. “Ethan,” I said, and he stopped in the doorway.

“Yeah?”

“Still trying to get me to fall in love with you?” I asked, heart full and soul singing.

Ethan grinned. “Always.”

THE END

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Samantha Whiskey is a wife, mom, lover of her dogs and romance novels. No stranger to hockey, hot alpha males, and a high dose of awkwardness, she tucks herself away to write books her PTA will never know about.