



AIMEE RIVKIN

*From good girl  
to "good girl"*

# Expanded Roster

*Expanded Roster*

A WHY CHOOSE SPORTS ROMANCE

AIMEE RIVKIN

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*To all the oldest daughters, overachievers, and the ones who the world usually says no to...*

*This a reminder to say yes to yourself.*

*(And to three guys who want to rail you should the situation arise.)*

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## *Expanded Roster*

**A good girl who needs the money, two members of the college baseball team she works for—and her jerk ex-stepbrother—get down for the cameras in this steamy, angsty why choose romance.**

In retrospect, putting up a flier advertising that I was planning to lose my v-card on camera—and was looking for a partner—isn't the best idea I've ever had. I'm the Type A one, the person who does all the work on the group project. I've never even thought about doing something like this, but I don't have a choice: I need fast cash so my sister can have the future she deserves.

No one even answers my ad until I'm sitting at an off-campus café, looking over the questions I prepared like this is a job interview —

And *he* shows up.

I can't do this. We shouldn't do this. He's on the college baseball team that I work for. I could lose my job. He could get cut from the team.

We shouldn't do this...until we do. And we definitely shouldn't get his best friend—who might have a crush on me, who might have a crush on *him*—involved. Or my ex-stepbrother, who's threatening to take custody of my sister.

And I shouldn't get involved with them all at once. Suddenly, I'm involved in a group project of an entirely different kind, one that definitely can't last. I said yes on camera—a lot of yes—but do I have the courage to say yes to my happily ever after?

**Content notes can be found [here](#).**



## CHAPTER ONE

### *Victoria*

IN RETROSPECT, putting up a flier advertising that I want to lose my virginity on camera—and so am looking for a partner—isn't the best idea I've ever had.

Especially not when I'm sitting at a café just off campus, looking over the questions I prepared like this was a job interview, which it kind of is —

And *he* shows up.



## TWENTY-FOUR HOURS EARLIER

Today starts out bursting with possibility. I wake up at dawn. Six a.m. runs are the best. All I have is music in my ears and grass under my sneakers. A few other runners are out, jogging around the baseball field that sits in the center of our San Diego college campus.

I don't recognize anyone else—it's a big campus, and I'm not exactly the most social. None of the baseball players are here yet, though a few are probably inside for early weightlifting. Meaning I'll come back after my organic chemistry lab to a locker room full of sweaty clothes, all of which I'm responsible for washing. Yay.

I'm the first person there for my eight a.m. lab. Piece of advice: Never sign up for an eight a.m. lab. Even with frequent breaks to step into the hallway and chug coffee from my travel thermos—I pay for fancy coffee

once a week and today isn't that day—it's never-ending. My lab partner mostly just does her own thing. Right now, she's sitting on the stool next to mine, watching me attempt a crystal nucleation and popping her gum.

"We're not supposed to chew gum in here," I say.

*Pop*, she responds.

"Do you want to get in on this?" I gesture to the glass beaker. The solution we're supposed to be using to generate crystals remains, frustratingly, a solution. I stir it with a glass rod again.

*Pop*, she says.

"Okay." It's fine. I can do this. Around the lab, other lab groups are bent over their respective work. Some are chatting, some are laughing, a few are obviously goofing off. No one else has one person doing all the work and the other person, none of it.

So I do the work. That's my role: the person who does all the work on the group project. It took a long time in high school to realize that people didn't want to work with me as a friend, but because they were guaranteed an easy A if I did the whole thing.

My phone buzzes. We aren't supposed to have them out, or gum, or thermoses. Technically, I'm not drinking in here. I glance around again. Everyone's occupied. The TA is answering someone else's question. One little glance won't hurt, even if I'm hit with a wave of guilt. *Victoria the rule follower*, my sister Elizabeth calls me. No, just "Victoria who knows what happens when you get in trouble."

And it's Elizabeth who's texting me.

Me: Aren't you in English class?

Because today is an A day on her high school's block scheduling—on a B day, she'd be in Spanish. On Wednesdays, when they have electives, she gets to spend most of her day in robotics, which is where she really wants to be.

Elizabeth: Can you come home tonight?

Me: Emergency?

If she's asking, it probably is.

Elizabeth: I just want to see you

So, definitely an emergency. I cycle through everything it could be: Mom has a new boyfriend; Mom has a new ex-boyfriend; Mom didn't pay a bill on

time—which is always true. Usually, utilities send letters before they shut anything off. Maybe she’s been hiding the letters. It wouldn’t be the first time she’s kept things from me.

Whatever it is, my pulse starts beating faster. I stir my solution with the glass rod again. Glass grinding faintly against glass is supposed to trigger the reaction.

Me: I’ll be there

Elizabeth: Love you, Victoria

Me: I love you too

I put my phone away. My thoughts are elsewhere, certainly not in this chemistry lab.

*Pop.*

I guess I should get to it.



BUT I CAN’T GO HOME YET. I HAVE TO WORK. IT’S APRIL, THE HEART OF college baseball season, and there’s always things to do at the clubhouse. On a big-league team, we’d have a whole group of clubhouse attendants and tailors and people to do the laundry. Here, there’s just me and two other people who come in on days when I don’t.

I get into the clubhouse and drop my bag into the desk drawer in one of the coaches’ offices. It’s a tight fit. I carry one of those bags with a little bit of everything. Who knows when you’ll need a pack of Kleenex, or a bottle of hand sanitizer, or an extra phone charger? My travel thermos sits in one pocket, my water bottle in another.

On a good day, I’d have a smoothie with me—I never have time to eat in the morning. Today, my stomach grumbles at me. I should have a protein bar in here somewhere. I dig around for a while. No protein bar. It’s fine.

I grab my water bottle and shut the drawer, then lock it with a little metal key. A clipboard hangs from a nearby hook with all my tasks for today—a neat, printed-out list in a clear sheet protector so I can check things off with a dry-erase marker. There’s something really satisfying about that.

Task one: laundry.

Fortunately, most players hang their dirty clothing outside their stalls on

laundry rings that look like canvas utility belts. I push the squeaking laundry cart around, grabbing rings containing practice jerseys and, ugh, sliding shorts. For someone who's never slept with anyone—never really hooked up with anyone—I've handled a lot of guys' underwear. I don't giggle at that. Too much.

Mike's stuff is there, nice and neat, though his stall has a funk from his catcher's gear that he Febrezes over.

But when I say most guys hang their stuff outside their stalls, I meant... most. Jonathan's stall is a different issue.

I don't take it personally. Jonathan's our star pitcher. It's not like he's leaving his stall a mess on purpose. His gear just always looks like it's been hit by a hurricane. I've asked him to use the laundry ring before, and he's apologized before, and put his stuff on the ring...for a few days. But he also once left me a Starbucks gift card with a note that said, *Thanks for always being so on top of things, Vicky*. I kept the note.

I dig through Jonathan's stall and toss anything dirt-streaked or grass-smudged into the cart. A few things are so bad that I have to pull my bottle of stain remover from the cart's side pocket and spray them down, working the fabric back and forth to break up the stain. Spray—*scrub*—spray—*scrub*. If I do that enough, I won't think about what's going on at home.

I finish my laundry rounds and chuck everything in the big industrial washers, enjoying the *swish-swish-swish* of fabric. That's probably weird, but I like the noises the machine makes and the smell of detergent, the way the jerseys come out all clean and sparkling white. I can't check *laundry* off until it's back at their stalls, but I'm most of the way there.

Cleats next. For those, I pull rubber gloves over my nitrile ones, then grab scrub brushes, a pick, and a bucket. Doing laundry is satisfying; cleaning cleats is just a lot of work.

I sit with my bucket and grab the first set of cleats. Baseball cleats are basically athletic shoes with a series of metal spikes around the edges. Dirt gets stuck *everywhere*. These are from Saturday's game—they're easier to clean when they've had a full day to dry out. I take the first set, Mike's, and tap the dirt out into the bucket. A few clumps require the pick. Catchers spend all game kneeling in the dirt, so his cleats are always a mess. I give them a quick rubdown with a bristle brush, then set them to the side and grab the next set.

Only about thirty more sets to go. Music makes this process faster. Did I

spend too long making the playlist over the weekend? Yes. But it is a really good playlist.

My music is loud enough, and I'm working fast enough, that I almost don't hear them come in. Instantly, my back goes stiff. Players vary in how they treat me. Most just see right through me, and that's fine.

Two of them clatter in—Jonathan, walking quickly, followed by Mike, who's doubling the length of his strides to keep up.

Jonathan goes to his stall, peels off his T-shirt, and throws it—hard—into his other clothes. *Great, more laundry.* He starts to pull off his nylon athletic shorts that he has on over exercise tights, then spots me and stops.

Still, he's shirtless as he sinks onto the bench running the length of the room. He glances over at me again. I try not to make too much noise as I pick dirt from another set of cleats into the bucket. He doesn't say anything, but his shoulders are tense, his face splotched red. He swipes at his cheeks a few times the way guys do when they're brushing off sweat—or when they're upset and trying to pass it off as brushing off sweat.

Mike squats next to him. He's short for a player—so he's still half a foot taller than I am, with slick black hair and eyelashes somewhere between dark-with-no-mascara and outright unfair.

He says something to Jonathan too low for me to make out. I turn my music down. I probably shouldn't be eavesdropping—it's rude, for one thing. But I can't help it.

Jonathan does the hand-swipe thing again. Mike reaches back, roots around in his stall, and gets out a pack of tissues that he places on the bench near Jonathan's hand. Not offering them, exactly, but just leaving them there.

Mike also does a little hand gesture, a wave with his palm that undulates up-down, up-down. After a second, Jonathan laughs and does the same thing.

"Thanks, Papa," Jonathan says. *Papa.* What half the team calls Mike when they're not busy calling each other *bro* or sometimes *baby*. Whatever mood Jonathan was in is seemingly gone, like the cartoon storm cloud over his head has become a rainbow.

"Hi Vicky!" Jonathan waves like he's seeing me for the first time. "Cleit duty, huh?" Also *Vicky*—a nickname I don't love, but it's fine. At least he knows it. Some of the other players call me *Equipment Girl*. Which is not a nickname anyone wants.

I wave back. Then he unfolds himself from the bench and starts walking my way.

I'm sure some people look good after doing a bunch of physical work—Jonathan, for instance—but my hair is sticking to my face; my cheeks are probably bright red. I tug the elastic of my sports bra away from where it's biting into my rib cage. I hope he doesn't think I'm flashing him sideboob from the armhole of my tank top. That would not be appropriate.

I should be used to how tall he is—six-five or six-six, so a full foot taller than I am. I should be used to his face—brown hair, brown eyes, a straight nose and slightly crooked smile. I should really be used to his body. But he's currently not wearing a shirt, and his shoulders and chest are glazed in sweat. My entire vocabulary is replaced by thinking the word *glisten*, possibly loud enough for him to hear. Especially when he sits down next to me.

“Hey,” I manage.

“Great weather this morning.” He wipes a hand across his sweaty forehead, disrupting his sweat-darkened brown hair.

Impossibly, I go redder. “Um, yeah, San Diego. Good weather every day.” The weather. We are talking about the weather. Great. Scintillating.

“Sure is. You think this'll hold for the game on Friday?”

*The game.* Of course that's what he's thinking about. “If it was gonna rain, it'd be on the news,” I say. Because rain in San Diego is rare enough to make headlines. “Or on your weather app.”

“The news—I should've thought of that.” He knocks a hand—a large hand—against my biceps. “You're so smart, Vicky. Just like my sister.”

I don't sigh. Audibly. “Yeah, I get that a lot.” It's true, I do get that a lot, mostly from guys who tell me I remind them of their sister—even if Jonathan's sister has been gorgeous and funny and smart when I've met her. It's not like I'm trying to date him.

For one thing, it's very against clubhouse rules. What the coaches told me when I first took this job: *Don't fraternize with players.* But what I heard was: *Be silent and useful.* It'd just be nice, every once in a while, to not be reminded of that.

For some reason, Jonathan laughs. He's got one of those laughs that starts in his toes and works its way up. The muscles in his abs quiver. Not that I'm looking. If I am, it's because I'm going to be a nurse and knowing musculature is important.

“You are smart,” he says, like I didn't believe it. “Are you gonna watch the game?”

*You don't have to be polite and make small talk with me.* Even though he

looks genuinely interested in my answer. I scooch away from him on the bench where I'm sitting. It's easier to think from six inches away. "I have to be in the dugout."

"Yeah, but are you gonna watch *me*?" Jonathan does actual puppy eyes at that, like he wants me there. Of course, I've seen him do puppy eyes at everyone—at most of his teammates, and most especially at Mike—so it's not like he's doing them *at* me. It's probably a reflex.

"Mostly, I have to watch the equipment." Broken bats don't replace themselves; buckets of baseballs don't carry themselves. That I get to stand in the dugout and enjoy a game is a nice perk, but it's not what they're paying me for.

"Oh yeah, equipment," he repeats. He motions for one of the cleats I've been cleaning. "That looks like fun."

I'm sure I look... Well, I'm wearing rubber gloves and scraping dirt into a bucket.

"Can I do one?" he asks.

"Uh." *Very articulate, Victoria.* "You don't have to."

"So," he says, as if I didn't tell him no, "what am I doing?"

"You really don't have to help me."

He frowns and reaches for a set of cleats, then the bristle brush. "Do I just kinda brush them?"

It's not like he can hurt the cleats. I don't know why I don't want to say yes. Except I do. My pulse is doing a *tick-tick-tick* thing. My face is glowing red, and my neck, and possibly my chest. I'm pretty good at hiding what I'm thinking, but I blush *deep*. Having light blond hair does not help. At all. "Brushing them is fine," I say.

Even though I moved, Jonathan's still sitting close. He's also still not wearing a shirt. He smells like clean sweat and grass, not the cloying body spray that other players douse themselves in. Somehow, I flush even deeper.

I shouldn't be doing any of this. I knew taking this job meant being around athletes. I *was* an athlete back in high school in that year we had money for sports. I should be unfazed by him sitting next to me, happily cleaning dirt off shoes.

"So," Jonathan says after we've been brushing them in awkward silence for a minute, "any big plans this weekend?"

"It's Monday," I point out.

"I thought you were a planner." He jostles my shoulder like we're friends.

He's right. I am a planner—I have my entire life mapped out: get a nursing degree, get a college scholarship for Elizabeth, and get the heck out of East San Diego. Which means my plans for this weekend are studying and rewarding myself with an hour-long Sunday morning break. “Probably getting brunch with a friend.” Because Savannah and I do that every week.

“Ooh, brunch.” Jonathan considers. “How come we call it brunch but there's no such thing as *linner*? *Dinunch*? You know, dinner and lunch, together?”

“Lupper?” I offer. “Like, lunch-supper.”

Jonathan laughs. This close, I can feel him. It wouldn't take much to reach out a hand and put it on his chest or his shoulder. He saves me the effort because he does that shoulder-brush thing, the bare skin of his arm against the fabric of my shirt sleeve. Somehow, a hundred butterflies take up residence in my belly.

I don't get crushes easily—or I do, but on unobtainable men who I can look at through the distance of Instagram. Jonathan's unobtainable, too, but in an entirely different way. I gulp. The butterflies don't settle.

“Lupper,” he says. “That's a good one, Vicky.”

And he says my name so *much*, in such a teasing way. “Most of my friends call me Victoria.”

“Victoria.” He sounds like he's chewing on it. “Yeah, you seem like a four-syllables person.” He counts my name off on his fingers, and I am not noticing his fingers, or any other part of him, really, but pitchers have really big hands. His fingers are long. *Thick*.

I scrub the next cleat with a little more vigor. “How'd practice go?” I ask, then immediately regret it. Because he came in upset and is now doing cleat-therapy with me. “Um, never mind.”

Now it's his turn to scrub harder. “It went okay. We're working on some stuff.”

“I'm sure it'll be good for Friday.”

“Especially with you there.” He laughs. The butterflies were just resting, because there they go, *flap flap flap*.

This time, when he nudges my shoulder, I don't flinch back. He's just being friendly. He compared me to his *sister*. Guys only do that with women they think of platonically. If he even thinks about me when we're not in the same room, which is doubtful.

Our laughter fades. I'm just about to pick up another pair of cleats when I



notice Mike watching us from across the room.

Jonathan raises a cleat. “You want to get in on this?” Like doing this is a privilege instead of a chore.

Mike shakes his head. “I’m good.” His voice is deeper than Jonathan’s, with a roughness texturing it. It sounds the way I imagine his stubble might feel.

*Not a work-appropriate thought. Remember rule one: Do not think about sleeping with the players.*

Based on what players say when they think I’m not listening, they aren’t exactly difficult to sleep with. For people other than me, anyway. Not that Jonathan talks like that. He has that *a gentleman never tells* thing going on. Mike doesn’t talk much to begin with. Even if I’ve heard...rumors.

Jonathan shrugs. “Suit yourself.”

I expect Mike to leave, but he sits instead. He doesn’t take out his phone. He doesn’t take out a textbook or put in headphones. He just watches Jonathan brush dirt off cleats while I pound them into a bucket, the corners of his mouth deepening further as if he’s not sure he likes what he sees.

With Jonathan and me working together, we get through the cleats in no time. He even helps me push the laundry cart around as I return players’ clothes to their stalls.

We get to his stall and it’s its usual mess. “Aw, hell,” he says. “Looks like I owe you another gift card. Sorry about that, Victoria.”

*Victoria.* The butterflies aren’t going anywhere.

But I need to leave. I’ve checked everything off my list. There’s no reason for me to stay in the clubhouse longer than I have to. I get my purse and give Jonathan a little half wave, not expecting anything back.

“Are you leaving already?” he asks.

“Yeah, I need to—” *Go deal with the ever-present drama that is my family.* But Jonathan is looking at me, sweet and open. I don’t want to sully whatever impression of me he has. “I mean, I have stuff to do.” Maybe that will make me sound mysterious. “See you Friday.”

“You mean you’ll be watching me on Friday?” He laughs.

I wave again. “See you later.” And I hustle out before I say something foolish like yes.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Victoria*

AFTER I LEAVE THE CLUBHOUSE, I drive the twenty minutes home. Elizabeth hasn't texted again. That could mean anything.

The house looks like it always does: a single-level two-bedroom with a yard that's mostly rocks. Our neighborhood isn't exactly rich—in San Diego, you're either rich or someone who works for rich people—but the houses around ours are well kept.

I add *Do something about the yard* to my mental list.

Inside, Elizabeth is in our kitchen with a math book—AP Calc, and she's in eleventh grade—laid out on the table. The lights are all off. No music is playing. The curtains are drawn.

"Is Mom home?" I whisper. Because she works the late shift as a security guard, and because she sometimes—*frequently*—goes out after, so doesn't get up until it's almost dark.

Elizabeth nods.

"Talk outside?"

Another nod.

We go to our back deck. Elizabeth and I used to lie out here when we were kids and pretend we were somewhere else. I almost succeeded—I got my tuition paid for, patched together scholarships from various local nonprofits to cover room, board, and books. I was lucky. I had a high school counselor who knew a lot about financial aid. Elizabeth is even smarter; she has to end up somewhere even better.

Elizabeth sits on the wooden planks of the deck. They need to be weather-sealed. Some of the wood is beginning to splinter. Another item for the list.

"What day is it today?" she asks.

I look at her, confused. “Monday?”

“Right, what date?”

“April third.”

“And what’s usually due in April?”

I think for a minute. “Taxes. I brought over all my stuff for Mom weeks ago.” Just like I had last year, and the year before that.

Elizabeth swings her legs over the edge of the deck, knocking her heels against the side. “They did this whole thing at school about what we needed to apply for colleges next year. Like our parents’ tax information. So I went looking for Mom’s. Want to know what I found?”

My heart drops. My stomach sinks. I grind my nails into the palm of my hand. “What’d you find?”

“Mom hasn’t paid her taxes in three years. Not since you went to college.”

The world goes very very quiet. A yell builds up inside my body. I want to scream. I want to go inside and open all the curtains and turn the radio on full blast. I want to cry. I can’t do any of those things—no matter what, Elizabeth can’t know how furious I am. “I mean, she should be getting a refund, right?” I say.

Elizabeth shakes her head. She reaches into her back pocket and hands me a letter.

I read it, then read it again. “The IRS is mailing her?”

“For the past couple years.”

I look at the letter like that’ll change what it says. “How does Mom owe nine thousand dollars in back taxes?”

Elizabeth shrugs and winds her arms around her knees. She has a scab on one knee, something that reminds me that she’s just a kid. I’m the one who’s supposed to be taking care of her.

“I guess she never filled the stuff out correctly to have it taken out of her paycheck,” Elizabeth says.

Right, because that would require Mom to do things like planning. “Yeah.”

“If Mom doesn’t file taxes, I can’t get financial aid.” Elizabeth hugs herself tighter.

*And no financial aid means no college.* And no college means she’s stuck here for who knows how long? “Yeah,” I say again, like it’s the only word I know.

“What’re we gonna do?” Elizabeth’s voice comes out thready.

I wrap an arm around her. “We’re gonna figure something out.”

“I could wait to go to college until I’m twenty-four,” Elizabeth says. “Then I wouldn’t need her tax info.”

Of course she googled it. Of course she considered all her options. She’s sixteen and shouldn’t be thinking about any of this stuff. “Absolutely not,” I say. “You are going to college, and some place is gonna roll up a big truck full of money for you to do it.”

“But what if...”

I cut her off. “And then you are going to build the best deep-sea diving robots in the world, and you are gonna become the world’s expert in those weird deep-sea fish with the jaws and the teeth and the lanterns.” I make a chomping motion with my hand like I would when she was younger.

Elizabeth laughs, then nestles her head against my shoulder. “What are we gonna do?” she says again, quieter. She sounds so sad. My chest aches. I can handle a lot of stuff, but the thought of Mom’s BS affecting her is too much.

“What we’re gonna do,” I say, “is go get pedicures.”

“We owe nine thousand dollars to the government.”

I shake my head. “Mom owes nine thousand dollars to the government. We owe it to ourselves to fix your gnarly runners’ feet.” Despite us looking pretty different—Elizabeth has olive skin and darker hair than I do—she’s like me, a runner. Running is one of the cheapest sports you can do, but it’s not kind to your toes. “Let’s go,” I say.

Elizabeth doesn’t move. “You know who we could ask for money...”

I sigh. I do know. “We are *not* asking him for money.”

“Tyler would give it to us.”

Yes, I know our stepbrother—*ex*-stepbrother—probably would float us the money. Which is why I won’t ask him. Tyler is...*Tyler*. I don’t want to owe him anything for good reason.

“We’ll figure something else out.” I keep my voice firm, even as my heart beats against my ribs. *What’re we gonna do?*

I have no idea. But I have to think of something.



TWO HOURS LATER, I'M BACK IN MY DORM APARTMENT, MY BULLET JOURNAL open, making a list of things I could do for fast cash.

- Sell your car. *It's not worth that much and you need it.*
- A rich relative. *You have one of those and he's an asshole.*
- Become a dancer. *You'd have to talk to men. Flatter them. Put up with them. Not your skill set.*

There is something else I could do.

The possibility barely occurs to me before I bat it away. I couldn't. No. I need to think of something else. Money is like those mythological grapes—always just slightly out of reach. I could just get a second job. *For minimum wage? With what time?* I could just donate plasma. *A lot of plasma.*

Still...research couldn't hurt.

So I suck in a deep breath and open a private browser window. Type *How do I OnlyFans?* with my eyes closed and my cheeks blazing hot, then hit enter.

When I finally pry my eyelids open, advice—a lot of advice—appears.

Thinking about this like homework makes it easier. I'm just studying.

Most of the advice is about slow audience growth. I don't have time for slow audience growth—not with this year's taxes due in two weeks. The letter from the IRS was clear: paying something is better than paying nothing.

If I want this money, I should probably know what I'm getting myself into. I start a fresh page for notes, then make a burner account and scroll through various creators' channels, resisting the urge to cover my eyes with my hands like I shouldn't be looking. I didn't realize how many options there were. DMing, selling pictures...dick ratings. Huh.

*First times.* That's consistent. People like watching first times. They're willing to pay for them and pay quickly. Sweat blooms across my back. I haven't slept with anyone. I'm twenty-two. Dating always felt like it would come *after*. *After* I graduated high school. *After* I survived freshman year of college. Now it's *after* Elizabeth goes to college. *After, after, after...*

The moment was never right. I should have, before, just to get it out of the way. It's not like sex is that big a deal.

But now I need money. Money...and a partner. My breath goes short in my lungs. *Someone else could help me.*

Before I can stop myself, I open a document. Type out a message. What

font do you use for a flier that says, *Come have sex on camera with me for money?* I try a font. No, that looks like it's for a bake sale. Another font. Oh, that's more for a wedding invitation. My heart hammers against my chest. I wipe my sweaty hands down my thighs. It's possible I'm panicking.

Eventually, I compose a flier that says I'm starting an OnlyFans channel and want a partner. I can't bring myself to type the word *virgin* but I put a few cherry emojis beside the text and hope they can put that together. Then I print out a few fliers on the stuttering old printer I brought with me to college—there's no way I'm doing this in the computer lab.

I need to hang these up somewhere before I lose my nerve. Posting things online never feels anonymous. What if someone can see my IP address and knows it's me? With a flier, I can always say it's a prank.

*No one's going to answer anyway.*

My stomach swoops—disappointment? Or the hope that maybe, just maybe, someone will?

*Who?* Beggars can't be choosers. Really, anyone who's nice, who'll wear a condom, and who doesn't hate being on camera will do. Maybe someone who'll be respectful, the kind of respectful where if I asked him to stop using a nickname, he immediately did... No, I can't think about that. I just need someone with a willing dick who isn't too much of one.

That's what I want, right? Some part of me whispers that this is supposed to be at least a little special. Maybe not *a hundred candles and rose petals* kind of special, but nice. Easy. With someone I like.

I push those thoughts down. *Be practical, Victoria.* That's who I am. Smart, practical, buttoned-up Victoria.

What I need to do is go post these fliers. And I know just the place.



THE STUDENT UNION BULLETIN BOARD HANGS AT THE END OF THE HALLWAY BY a set of elevators. Students pass by on their way to class, loudly discussing their plans for that night. I should have anticipated this as a problem. *Of course the student union is full of students.* Some of whom I know.

I could just go back to my apartment. Think of a plan B. The problem is I don't have one. *If this doesn't work...* I'll need a plan B. And C. And possibly D, E, and F. Who knows how long it'll take to come up with the

money?

Here goes...something. I dig through my bag for the folder with the fliers. I grab it and am about to pull it out when I hear a gravelly, "Hey Victoria."

I almost jump out of my skin. When I turn around, Mike is standing behind me with a half-opened backpack on his shoulder.

I grip the folder tighter. The edges wrinkle.

He motions to me, like he's ceding the bulletin board space. "You first."

"That's okay," I say, trying to stall. "I don't want to hold you up."

He smiles. He doesn't have Jonathan's wide grin, but something about his mouth is kind of...lush. Is that the right word? His lips look like he'd be good at kissing. My face starts to heat. *Get it together, Victoria. You're about to do that on camera.*

"I don't mind," he says finally.

I flip open the folder and glance at it briefly, then crouch down, pretending to riffle through my bag. "I must have forgotten my flier back in my dorm. Whoops."

"Right." How he manages to get so much skepticism into the word *right*, I don't understand. I also don't blame him. I'm not really the *forgetting stuff* kind of person.

"So," I say, "you go ahead."

Mike reaches into his bag and pulls out a flier advertising a study group for a high-level math course, then pins it to the board. Huh. Wasn't expecting that.

He turns back to me. "Earlier, with Halpy," he says—it takes me a second to realize he means Jonathan, that *Halpy* is baseball terminology for *Halperin*, Jonathan's last name—"thanks."

"Thanks?" I repeat. "What for?"

Mike shrugs. "The thing with the cleats."

"You mean when we were cleaning them?" I can't imagine why he's thanking me, but I'm also not sure why Jonathan was so intent on cleaning cleats.

Mike blinks at my question. "I know he appreciates talking to you."

Like it's some kind of *prize*. I feel like we're having two different conversations, or it's possible I'm using English and he's using calculus.

"Sure," I say, "no problem."

Mike nods like he's said whatever he meant to convey to me. "Have a

good night.” Then he walks off.

Quickly, before I can run into anyone else, I pull the flier from my bag and pin it up right next to the math study group one.

I included an email address—a burner—at the bottom of the flier in precut tabs that people could tear off if they wanted more info. Cutting those tabs felt silly, like something I can control, even if today is rapidly spinning out of my grasp.

Okay, mission accomplished. All I have to do is wait.



I GO BACK TO MY ROOM, CHECK THE BURNER EMAIL. OF COURSE, NO ONE HAS seen this yet. I study, check again. I set my phone timer for an exactly ten-minute long break, then text Savannah.

Me: this ochem lab makes me want to melt

Savannah: did you get an A-?

Me: ha ha

Savannah: that class was an ass kicker

Me: did you get an A-???

Because Savannah has a perfect GPA without having to study much. It'd be infuriating if it wasn't also kind of impressive.

Savannah: Come out with us on Saturday

Me: Can't. I have some stuff going on.

Maybe by that time I'll have plans. *Like having sex on camera.* God, this is a terrible idea.

Savannah: Be young. Have fun.

Me: I'll be young when I'm older.

Savannah: ha ha

Me: I have to work.

Savannah: Come after and bring your baseball boys with you

Mike's comment pops into my head: Jonathan appreciates talking to you.



*Yeah, like he would a sister.*

Me: They're not mine.

Savannah: Not with that attitude

After I'm done studying, I'm about to go to sleep—but I check the burner email address one more time to confirm that this was a futile effort.

I click the inbox, then refresh the page to make sure I'm not hallucinating. Because there sits a message, also from a burner: I'm down if you are.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Victoria*

I SPEND the next morning worried about what I'm supposed to wear to meet a potential sex partner. *Business* partner. Too bad most of my clothes look like they're owned by what I actually am: a pre-nursing student who's twenty-two going on seventy-four.

Eventually I pick a T-shirt and jeans, put on some subtle makeup, do my hair in waves. I probably should have gotten my nails done when I got a pedicure, but they'd just get ruined between typing and chem lab and working in the clubhouse.

I don't have a lot of info about whoever I'm meeting. I just sent a time, a location—an independent coffee shop that's usually quiet after the morning rush and that I'd have a laptop with a hot pink cover sitting on the table with me as a signal.

I get a drink—a brown sugar oat milk iced latte because today is a splurge day—then sit at a back table, facing the door, and pull my laptop from my bag. I glance around. *Is he here already?*

The door has one of those bells on it. It opens and clangs. I practically jump out of my skin.

My hand goes to my laptop. I could just slide it back in my bag, close the burner account, rip down the flier. Pretend I haven't lost my whole grip on this situation.

*And then do what?*

I leave the laptop where it is.

The café door opens and closes again. A group of women enter, along with another person I can't make out. The women flock toward the counter, revealing...

*Mike.*

He looks around for a minute, then spots my laptop on the table. His eyes go wide. He walks over and puts his hand on the back of the chair opposite mine.

This has to be a coincidence. *Has to be.* But his knuckles are ridged white.

“I heard it was going to snow this Friday,” he says. The code phrase I sent, which felt very clandestine at the time—a way to prevent me from having an inappropriate conversation with a stranger.

Except Mike definitely isn’t a stranger. “I heard it was, uh, gonna hail,” I say, my voice caught in my throat.

Mike doesn’t answer for a long minute. He looks broader in non-baseball clothes: a T-shirt, joggers, and a pair of clean Air Force 1s. Usually I see him in workout clothes and shower shoes with socks, because ballplayers all love shower shoes with socks. *Did he worry about what to wear too?*

Finally, he nods to my now-depleted cup. “You want another?”

“Um, sure.” Not exactly what I thought he’d ask.

“What’re you drinking?”

“A brown sugar oat milk iced latte, but just regular coffee is fine. Or not. I’m okay without.”

He nods, once. “Got it. Brown sugar oat milk iced latte.” Then gets in line.

A few minutes later, Mike sits down at the table and passes me a cup. I drink. He drinks—a coffee served in a mug, like he intends to be here a while.

He’s studying me. His eyes are deep brown. Those eyelashes only make it worse. The curve of his lips around his coffee cup makes it hard to tell what he’s thinking. He doesn’t seem like one of those churchy guys who might try to *minister* to me as some kind of fallen woman, but you never know.

“I need the money,” I blurt. “For...” It feels like too much to admit the stuff about my family: that we’re broke, that my mom works nights, that she’s been married three times, that nothing ever seems to stick except *for* being broke.

I shift in my chair, jittery. My heart is doing a fluttery thing in my chest. I just downed two lattes. I could blame those, but I know it’s nerves. I don’t want him to notice. That would be embarrassing, even if I’m attempting to recruit him for a naked cash grab, literally. “I need the money for personal reasons.”

Mike nods. "I figured."

Great, there must be some kind of signal I'm emitting that says, *Victoria, fancy name, not fancy anything else*. I grind my teeth.

"Jon wouldn't like this," he adds. *Jon*. Not Halpy or whatever, but *Jon*.

"It's not really any of Jonathan's business." My cheeks go warm. It could be Jonathan sitting across the table from me, all muscles and bright smile. It'd be difficult to kiss him—I might need to stand on a chair. Difficult...and easy. The way certain people just relax you.

Unless what Mike means is that he's going to *tell* Jonathan about this. I should have, I don't know, brought a nondisclosure agreement. Pinky-sworn Mike to secrecy. "Please don't mention this to him," I say.

Mike's forehead creases. "I wouldn't." Like it's obvious.

"I can't tell if you're gonna report me to the team," I say. "Like, I get that you probably don't want to do this, given that we know each other. And you know, you probably need to be"—I lower my voice—"attracted to the person you're doing this with."

He blinks. "That won't be a problem."

"That we know each other?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "The second one."

*Oh*. Mike doesn't look embarrassed by that. What am I supposed to do with that? "You never said anything."

He lifts his shoulder in a half-shrug. "Didn't seem appropriate in the clubhouse."

"And this does?" I ask.

He laughs at that, brief and low—I imagine what that would sound like against my skin. "I could ask you the same thing," he says.

I've been staring at the tabletop. Now I drag my gaze up to him. He isn't exactly the face of the team. He wears a mask when he's playing. Stands in the shadow of some of the bigger-named players, the ones who might get drafted into the majors. I don't know how much time I've spent looking at him, but I spend time now: at the strong bridge of his nose, his black hair, and almost-black eyes.

"It won't be a problem." I take another long drink of my latte, sucking the coffee from the ice with sudden thirst.

The edge of his mouth curves up. "Good to hear it."

"So, you're in?" I ask, then go so red that my face is burning.

Another laugh, this one louder, and he puts his hand on the table. Not

touching mine but...close. Something about it reminds me of how he crouched down to talk with Jonathan. “Yeah,” he says, “I guess I am. What do you need from me?”

For the next few minutes, I lay out the plan: Make an OnlyFans account and promote it as *Blonde virgin’s first time* or something like that. Get enough subscribers to make about \$15,000 each—enough to pay off my mom’s taxes with some left over—then close the account. “Easy-peasy.”

“Easy-peasy?” Mike looks at me, eyes amused, smiling without smiling. “I think you’re forgetting some stuff.”

*Yeah, that I don’t know what I’m doing.* I try for false confidence. “Like what?”

“Teaser content.” He leans forward. “Stuff you can put on social media. Little clips of whatever.”

*Whatever.* And oh, he means previews. I assumed this would be a one-time thing, but why would it be? The second word in *sex work* is *work*. “What did you have in mind?” I ask.

“That depends.” He looks at me, too hot, too focused for an off-campus café at eleven in the morning. “What kind of stuff do you like?”

I should look away. I will, in just a second. If his eyes didn’t catch mine. “I don’t...” I breathe, digging for courage. “I don’t actually know.” Now, I really do have to look away, down to the tabletop where my cup has left a ring of condensation. I draw my finger through it.

When I look up again, he’s studying me again like I’m a puzzle—no, a calculus problem he wants to know the answer to. “I guess that’s step one,” he says. “We’ll have to find out.”

My breath goes short in my lungs. *Find out.* “Can we find out in, um, the next two weeks?” I ask.

Mike raises his eyebrows. “Sure. Did you want to start right now?”

I look around. People are mostly minding their own business. *Mostly.* “Not here,” I whisper. My face must be flame red.

He smiles. “How about I text you?”

“Yes. Texting is better.” I start to get up—there, business meeting wrapped, action items established, when Mike says, “You’re forgetting something else.”

I scroll through my mental checklist and can’t think of anything. Then again, right now my brain is caffeine and panicked anticipation and not much else. “Um, what?”

Mike smiles. “Give me your phone number.”

Oh. Right. That. He holds out his phone, and I type my number in. I glance around, wondering what people will think—I’m not supposed to fraternize with baseball team members, but we can be friends, right? *Friends who’re going to have sex. On camera.*

A second later, I get a text.

It’s Mike.

I save his number. Usually I put in however I want to remember someone as their last name. *Jesse Study Group. Savannah Netflix Password*—because she offered me hers the day we met, with pretended outraged that I’d never seen any of the *Real Housewives* franchise. *Mike...OnlyFans?* No. *Baseball team?* There’s another Mike who’s an outfielder. So I save his name as *Mike Business Partner*. That’s what we are.

“Got it,” I say.

“Okay.” Mike pushes his chair out.

“Wait!” I say way too loud. People glance our way.

Mike presses his lips together like he’s trying not to smile. “Sure.”

“One more thing.” I grab a napkin from the pile of them I got with my coffee, unsheathe a pen from the penholder in my bag. Scrawl out something on the napkin and hand it to him.

He reads it over, then looks at me in question.

“It’s a contract,” I clarify. *Be safe, split the money fifty-fifty, don’t tell anyone else about this without checking with each other.* Under it I write my name.

Mike puts out his palm. “Can I borrow your pen? All I have are drafting pencils.”

*Are you an artist?* I bite my tongue. That’s a personal question. I hand him the pen. He signs his full name—*Michael Pappalardo*, written out next to mine. *Victoria Brown*.

And then he copies out a second napkin for himself and signs and passes it to me.

“I should get going,” Mike says, after I’ve signed. Right, *business partner* meeting over. And he’s barely through the café door when I slide the napkin off the table and tuck it away like a promise.



IT'S SURREAL TO GO FROM THERE TO MY FIRST CLASS OF THE DAY. MOST OF the class is frantically studying for the quiz we're about to have. Savannah has her phone out, scrolling and double tapping on her Insta feed. She looks up when I slide into the seat next to hers. "Damn, you look great."

"Do I?" I say, quickly. Too quickly. "You're just saying that. You always look great."

Savannah preens, a toss of her chestnut brown hair. "I do, don't I?" She *does* look great—curvy like she's unafraid to take up space. "Any particular reason you dressed up for class?"

*Just having a business meeting with our baseball team's catcher where he asked me what kind of sex I liked having.* Totally normal. I won't giggle. A little bit of laughter escapes my lips. "I'm getting my nails done later if you want to come."

"Nails"—Savannah does one of her *best friend* stares like she knows something's up—"sure."

"Great." I swallow. I want to tell her about all of this, but I can't—shouldn't. Two people can keep a secret, right? Two people and a potential audience of millions. *If I'm lucky.*

My phone buzzes. I slip it from my bag, check it under the shield of the folding desk that's attached to the seat.

Mike: thinking about what you're gonna look like

I try not to smile at that, or blush, or think about what it'll be like to be with him, even if it's just for the cameras.

Mike: Do you have a ring light?

All the butterflies in my stomach settle. He means what I'm going to look like in an actual literal sense. *I'll order one*, I write back and tell myself I'm not disappointed.



OVER THE NEXT TWO DAYS, I CHECK THINGS OFF MY LIST:

Nails. Tanning. Highlights.

STI testing. I make an appointment at the campus health clinic and try not to go scarlet when the nurse asks me if I've been safe with all my previous

sexual partners. “Yes,” I manage. It’s not even a lie.

She gives me an uninterpretable look. “Have you considered birth control options?”

I tap my arm. “I have an implant.” Which I do, one of those hormone-dispensing rods I got put in when I was sixteen and replace regularly. “All safe.” Even if this whole week feels distinctly dangerous.

I text Mike my results the next day. I get a picture back with his while I’m in class next to Savannah as we’re going over a test. She aced it—she’s the only one in class who did.

“Do you think there’s something going on between the professors?” she whispers. A joke she makes every week—because our professors don’t like each other not in a sexy-flirty kind of way but in a *I’ll burn your house down* kind of way.

“Sav, I’m trying to listen...”

“What? No, you’re not, you’re looking at your phone.”

Which I was. I scramble to cover the screen with my palm.

“Did someone text you something spicy?”

“No”—I swallow—“nothing like that.”

And she laughs like she doesn’t quite believe me.



BY THURSDAY, THE ONLY UNCHECKED ITEM ON MY LIST IS THE ONE I’M LEAST looking forward to: waxing. I lie on the aesthetician’s table, trying to look anywhere but at her face while she moves around the room with businesslike efficiency. I resist the urge to cover myself with my hands, even with one of those paper modesty sheets lying over me. I’ll need to do this on camera. I dig my heels into the table and tip out my chin.

“First time?” she asks.

My heart kicks up. “*What?*”

“Is this your first time getting waxed?”

Oh. “Um, yeah, it is. Can you tell?”

She smiles. “You want a bottle of water, honey?”

So yes, she can tell. “Water would be great. Thank you.”

She hands me a plastic bottle of water. I have to navigate my newly done nails to open it. I drink. My heart rate slows down—not quite normal but



better.

“Sorry, I’m a little nervous,” I say.

She pulls on gloves and manages to not rip them on her manicure. “Whoever this is for,” she says, “don’t worry, they’re gonna love it.”

*He doesn’t need to love it.* But some part of me—a part I shush—wants him to, at least a little.



WHEN I’M BACK AT MY APARTMENT, I STAND AT MY BATHROOM COUNTER, phone camera open, ring light on, trying to take a decent picture to send to Mike. *It’s just to test the lighting.* I’m in a tank top and sleep shorts, but my new tan and hair still look okay, and I haven’t washed off my makeup. Finally, I settle on one where I don’t look too bad and send it.

Mike: nice

Me: Nice??? That’s all you got? Nice just cost a whole lot of money.

Mike: but you saved your receipts

I laugh, because I did, and I send him another picture pretending to scowl, expecting another *nice* in return.

Mike: send me another picture

Me: Like what?

Mike: take one without your bra on

I type *no* almost reflexively. *No.* What I’ve made myself say so often. *No* to getting bad grades. *No* to getting in trouble. (*No* to having fun.)

We’re not on camera. This isn’t for an audience. Just him, an audience of one. If I can’t do that, there’s no way I’ll be able to do the rest of it.

I erase my *no*.

My bra unhooks easily. I slide it through the armhole of my tank top and take it off. My tank top is white, and my nipples are visible through the fabric. I check to make sure the door is locked. Yep, the button is still pressed down. I run my palm over my nipples, and they get even harder, pushing up the fabric. A hot bright feeling rushes through me. Maybe I shouldn’t like this. It’s just business, right? This is bravery—or possibly foolishness.

I try a couple poses. Sexy-face is really hard to achieve. I settle for pouting like I'm objecting to Mike bossing me around. Parts of me are not objecting. At all.

I send him the photo on Snapchat. At least I'll know if he's screenshooting it and showing his friends. I trust Mike...I just don't trust myself right now.

Mike: good

*Good.* That shouldn't do anything for me. It isn't even that different from *nice*. Not even a *that looks good*. Just *good* like he knows what I want to hear.

That little *good* definitely shouldn't make me pull my tank top down to send him another picture showing just the tops of my breasts. Nothing scandalous, except for how my nipples don't need any more help in pressing against my shirt.

But that's what I do. I hit send and I wait for something, for the picture to fade. For my body to dissolve into the ether in a flash of my own embarrassment.

Mike: take a picture for real

We can use that for a promo

How...practical.

But I take a picture. I lean over the counter and arch my back and peel down my tank top, then I snap a few. He's right. The pictures are good. We can use them. We can get money from this. We're business partners, not any other kind of partner.

Maybe he should be doing the same thing, though guys' solo stuff seems mostly like it's for other guys. That might be fine. I don't actually know why Mike is doing this—if he needs the money or if he's just an exhibitionist. Maybe he secretly dreamed of being a porn star. It's a more practical career than baseball, probably.

Me: I took some pictures

Mike: good

rub your thighs together

That shouldn't be anything. Except I'm waxed. Practically, but not

entirely, bare. Everything feels different. I'm not new to touching myself, but I usually just do that in the shower or when I'm in bed. Not here in the bright bathroom lighting.

If I touch myself, I'll be wet. I imagine his fingers working between my legs pressing against me or bending me over the bathroom counter and...I rub my thighs together again. Heat slides up the back of my neck. I'm sweating all over, warm, sensitive.

God, I need to relieve this tension thrumming through me. I grind the heel of my palm against my sleep shorts—just once. Too much. Not nearly enough. I take another picture. Snapchat it to him with color up in my cheeks, my hair a little tousled, my tank top inched even lower.

Mike: good

did you like that?

Like what? Undressing? Being told what to do? Being told I was good? Touching myself, if only briefly? All of it?

Me: yes

Mike: so that's one thing we know

Me: are you making a list?

Mike: yes

I don't know why that's so much, but it is. A list of things I like. Something he's keeping track of. *Checking off*. I'm about to ask if he's adding more to that list when he messages again.

Mike: see you tomorrow

Right, tomorrow. When I'm working during a baseball game that he's playing in. At a clubhouse where the first rule is that I'm not supposed to even think about sleeping with players. And now somehow—impossibly—I'm supposed to think about anything else.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Victoria*

“DID you do something with your hair?” Jonathan asks when we’re in the dugout at the bottom of the fourth inning.

I try not to go warm at that. I look over at Mike, who’s seated on the bench, frowning at something on a tablet, probably reading through information on the next few hitters on the opposing team.

“I felt like it was time for a change,” I say.

“Is it blonder or less blond?” A *Jonathan* question. Two days ago, that might have made me tongue-tied with awkwardness. Less so now that I sent those pictures last night.

“It’s both,” I say.

“It looks good.”

*Good.* A word I’m apparently broken for, because I glance back at Mike, who’s watching us over the tablet. “Don’t you need to do game stuff?” I ask Jonathan.

Jonathan frowns. He has one of those faces where even a frown is friendly. In his uniform, with his cleats, he looks even taller. Climbable. *Victoria, breathe.*

“Mostly the coaches and Mike just tell me what to do,” Jonathan says.

*I will not go red. I will not go red.* “Mike’s good at that.” Yeah, there’s the tongue swallowing. “I mean, he seems like he’s a good catcher.”

“He is,” Jonathan says a little softly. He peels off the edge of the dugout, then sits on the bench with Mike. “Whatcha got for me, Papa?”

The inning stretches out. That’s good—we’re winning, by a lot. College baseball games can get a little out of hand. Mike just batted in the previous inning, and as a pitcher, Jonathan doesn’t have to bat, but almost everyone else in our order hits. Which leaves me plenty of time to watch him and

Jonathan and pretend I'm not. Did they always sit that close together, or am I just noticing it more?

They're friends. Close friends. I must be really distracted, because for a minute I imagine them on either side of me: the scrape of Mike's stubble, the wall of Jonathan's body. What would it be like to kiss them both—to be shared between them? A thought that makes me glow hotter than an outfield light.

A shout from the umpire indicates the inning is over. Right, Victoria, get your head in the game, literally.

But I lean on the dugout railing while Jonathan jogs out, ascends the mound, and waits for Mike to tell him what to do.



AFTER THE GAME, I WAIT BEFORE I GO INTO THE LOCKER ROOM TO GIVE THE guys some time to strip down and shower before I collect laundry. There's cleanup to be done in the dugout. I pull gloves on. My hair's already back in a braid. My T-shirt has a high neck. I look like the *Victoria* the team all knows. *Vicky. Equipment Girl.*

I grab bats from the bat racks, then return any stray balls to my bucket, careful to separate the fresh ones from the game-used ones that are only good for batting practice.

The dugout is gross. I wear closed-toe shoes to games for a reason. Ballplayers love to spit sunflower seed shells and little pools of Gatorade everywhere. I step carefully through the mess, then twist the spigot of the hose so I can spray down the floor.

None of this is glamorous work, but it's work, and I do it. Every time I step, my thighs rub together a little, and I get a little flick of...something. I glance around. Well, no one's paying me any attention, anyway.

I finish spraying the dugout, then grab the bucket of balls to carry it back to the clubhouse. The bucket is heavy. I have to carry it with two hands, and it thumps against my thigh.

And I'm so caught up in thinking that I almost run face-first into Jonathan. He's showered already, and he's in a tank top with his normal postgame ice pack strapped to his shoulder.

The word of the day is apparently "muscles." *Stop that, brain.*

“Here”—he motions to the bucket—“let me get that.”

“You really don’t have to,” I say. But the bucket is heavy. When he puts his hand out, I slide the handle into it.

He takes the bucket and drops his shoulder a little teasingly. “Wow, you must be pretty strong.” Then he carries it one-handed. “Are you gonna come out with us?”

“Out?”

“You know, we won.” He shrugs like he wasn’t the reason we won. “I think there’s a party everyone’s going to.”

I shouldn’t. Because I need to clean the clubhouse, then prepare for my new and exciting job having sex with the team’s catcher on camera. “I need to finish up here,” I say, and Jonathan actually looks sad about that before I add, “I could meet you.”

“Great.” Jonathan smiles, then digs in his pocket, withdrawing his phone. “Give me your number.”

I do, typing it in, and I didn’t exactly wake up this week expecting to have two players input their numbers into my phone, but I don’t entirely hate it. “Who else is coming?”

Jonathan waves a hand. “You know, all the boys.” He rattles off the roster, most of them...except one person.

“Mike’s not going to be there?” I ask.

Jonathan’s eyebrows rise a little. “I think he is. I must have just forgotten.”

Like that was somehow a test. “I have to put this stuff away.” I nod toward the clubhouse.

That gets a laugh out of Jonathan. “Yes, boss,” he says. “Sorry, yes, *Victoria*.”

It’s not fraternizing if I’m supervising. So I make sure to supervise his back and his thighs and the bright curve of his smile while he makes my day a little easier.



“VICTORIA!!!” SAVANNAH YELLS MY NAME AS SOON AS I GET INSIDE THE house.

I can practically hear her exclamation points. Her volume only increases

as I make my way through the crowd toward where she's standing, can of hard seltzer already in hand, a ring of people around her.

She actually spins me around. "Is that a tan? Are those new highlights? Are you wearing"—she shout-whispers at me—"lashes?"

"Um, yeah." Because I am. The lashes are so I can make sure I don't have some kind of adverse reaction to the glue that makes my eyes swell up on camera. And because when I took a picture of myself wearing them, my eyes looked good, like someone turned up the color on them, darkening them from watery gray to more intense blue.

I also read through Mike's messages again. *Rub your thighs together*. If I can do that, I can anything.

"You look so fucking good," Savannah says.

"Stop, you're making me feel like the ugly duckling."

"More like the hot-ass swan." She goes to a cooler, plucks out a can of hard seltzer, then hands it to me.

I crack the seltzer. Drink. It's sugary and refreshing. My shoulders loosen. "Jonathan told me the team was coming."

Savannah gives me the eye. "Oh, *Jonathan* did, did he?"

"It's not like that," I protest. *Not with him. And only kind of, sort of, with someone else*.

"They're in the other room"—Savannah gestures to an equally packed back room—"holding court or whatever."

Which could mean anything from beer pong to an orgy. I don't really want to push half the student body out of the way to get there. Anyway, parties are easier next to Savannah. I stand for a while, drinking, while Savannah yells to various people and shows me stuff on her phone and tells me gossip about people I don't know. But she somehow makes interesting.

"All right," Savannah says, "I'm getting an aura."

Instantly, I go into nurse mode—Sav's migraines can last for days. "What do you need? We can leave."

She shakes her head. "I'm gonna *dark little room* it for a while, but you're not going anywhere. So enough wallflowering. You're gonna dance." She scans the room, gaze alighting on someone. "Hey, c'mere." She waves them over.

I turn to see who it is. Mike. Of course. I hope a tan, some makeup, and being flushed from being in a packed house covers up my face going slightly—more than slightly—warm.

Savannah pushes us together like we're not taking the hint. "C'mon, you're dancing with Victoria," she commands.

"Sav," I say, "I should help you get home."

"Have a good time—that would help me." And she slips off through the crowd.

I turn to Mike. "You don't have to."

"I don't mind," Mike says. "If that's what you'd like."

*What I'd like.*

He's doing that on purpose. My face goes even hotter. Knowing that doesn't make it any easier to look him in the eye, but I drag my gaze up to his. Muster my courage. "Yeah, I think I would."

He winds his fingers loosely around my wrist and pulls me into the next room. The lights are dimmer here. Someone brought an actual fog machine. Everyone's sweating and glittery and pressed together. No one's paying us any attention, so I wind my arms around his neck.

"You look good." He has to lean down in order to say it, breath hot in my ear.

"Thanks, business partner," I counter.

He laughs, and I can feel it. "Yeah, well, you look really good for business right now," he says.

*Business.* The business where we're naked on camera for money. "I set up the accounts today." Which I did, earlier: the OnlyFans account and matching handles on other social media sites.

"You post anything on them yet?"

I shake my head. I considered putting up the pictures. There's what it takes to send a slightly risky text—and what it takes to do this for real.

"You want to do that now?" he asks.

I'm pretty sure posting to our newly minted sex accounts should happen when we're both sober, when we aren't in a press of other people dancing, when he's not surrounded by his teammates. There's probably hashtag research or whatever I need to do. I should approach this like I do everything else: by making a careful plan and checking each step off along the way.

I should...but I don't want to hold off any longer. "Yeah," I say, "let's go."

I expect him to grab my wrist again, but he doesn't. Just ducks a little. My arms go tighter around his shoulders. His mouth comes very close to my cheek. We're not dancing really, just swaying to the low steady beat of the



music like a pulse.

He's strong, something I knew but didn't feel before, like he could pick me up the way Jonathan had that bucket earlier—effortlessly. If I were someone else, someone braver, someone who didn't need the job with the team he plays for, I could kiss him.

As it is, we shouldn't even be dancing like this. I don't need anyone thinking that I'm sleeping with anyone on the team—especially the person I'm planning to sleep with. Still, we don't stop dancing.

The music changes, getting faster. Mike's hand goes to my wrist as we slip our way through the crowd. "There's a bedroom this way." I don't ask how he knows. I don't even know where he lives. He's a senior, a year ahead of me, and a lot of seniors live off campus.

He goes to the bedroom while I stand watch in the hall. Various people drift around, some obviously drunk. There's a burst of noise every time someone opens the back door to the porch, where more people are dancing.

Mike emerges a minute later. "Coast is all clear."

So we go into a stranger's bedroom and shut the door behind us.

The only place to sit is the bed. I seat myself on the edge of it, not wanting to mess up the comforter. Mike sits next to me, close enough that I can smell him: shampoo; the detergent we use at the clubhouse. Now I won't be able to do laundry and not think about him.

His hands are on his knees. Except for his fingers at my wrist and the contact of our bodies while dancing, we've never touched. I want to remedy that—we shouldn't do that for the first time on camera—but things can't get complicated before we get this money. Even though things already feel way too complicated.

"Can I see the accounts?" he says when I haven't said anything for a minute.

I take out my phone, thumb open various apps. I used one of the photos I took yesterday as an icon, a photo of me with only the point of my chin, my neck, the slope of my shoulders.

"And the pictures?" he asks.

"You've seen them." But I open my photo roll, where I have them saved in a hidden folder that—I checked about a dozen times—doesn't get backed up to the cloud, so they can't be leaked if I get hacked. It was one thing to send these. Another to sit while he looks through them in the half dark of someone else's bedroom.

I get up, pace, examine the objects on the dresser without really seeing them. “If those aren’t any good, I can take others.”

I don’t know why I need his approval so much. It’s not like we’re friends. Maybe that’s better: two people with a business deal and a café napkin contract who can do this together, then remember this as a weird episode in our lives.

Mike looks at me. His eyes are even darker in this lighting. “These’ll work.”

“Great,” I say, way too loud. “Pick one and I’ll post it.”

He shakes his head. “You should pick.”

“Okay.” Slowly, I move back to the bed where he’s sitting. Take my phone when he offers it. Scroll through the photos. In one, my face is only visible from the tip of my nose down. I’m smiling. My shoulders are set back. My nipples are dark buds through my shirt. I don’t know what there is about that, but I can’t stop looking at it. “This one.”

Mike leans over to see it. “Why that one?” His voice is low, like he can tell I’m unsure.

“I don’t know. I guess I look sort of powerful.” I flush. Chew my lip. “I’m not explaining it right.”

In my peripheral vision, I can see the edge of his smile. “That’s the one I would’ve picked too,” he says.

I don’t gasp, exactly, but I make a definite sound, something that would be faintly embarrassing if Mike didn’t reach up and brush my hair from my face. Hair doesn’t have any nerve endings. I shouldn’t be able to feel that beyond the barest movement on my scalp. But I do, all over.

“Post the picture,” he breathes. It’s less an order than a permission, like he knows that’s what I need to hear.

I nod, then tap a few things. There, a post with a picture and a handful of keywords. It’s nothing: one little image flung into the algorithm, indistinguishable from the millions of others that get posted. Except that’s me, on display. Desirable, or at least wanting to be desired. I check my phone.

“Has anyone liked it yet?” Mike teases.

“No.” But I refresh various feeds to double-check. *I want people to like it.* A want that burns inside me. My mom calls me a *people pleaser*—not generally a compliment. But that’s what I’m after, that sense I’m doing something right.

Mike catches me staring at my phone. He taps its case, fingers avoiding mine. *You can touch me*, I practice saying.

“Don’t worry,” he says, “they’ll love it.” As if Mike knows for certain.

I don’t want to sit here and wait for approval that may or may not come. “We should get back to the party.”

“Yeah,” he says. If I didn’t know better, I’d think he sounds disappointed. Mike levers himself up. One of his knees clicks, audibly. He winces.

“Are you okay?” But it’s clear he isn’t.

“I tore my ACL a couple years ago and it messed up my knee pretty good. It comes and goes.”

“Is there stuff you need for it?” I ask. “Jonathan wanted a specific kind of ice pack and we got that for him.”

For some reason, that makes Mike smile. “I can’t imagine anyone saying no to him.” He doesn’t say it meanly, more like a statement of fact. “But I’m good.”

*Who takes care of you when you’re hurt?* I can’t ask that. Mike can take care of himself. If he needs something, he’ll ask. Probably. But I can’t remember him asking for anything—not even a different flavor of Gatorade.

“Are you the oldest one in your family?” I blurt.

He laughs. “I have three younger brothers. How could you tell?”

*We can recognize our own.* “Um...” I scrounge for a reason. Maybe I can blame being drunk, even if I only had half a can of seltzer a while ago. “Everyone on the team calls you *Papa*.”

“Yeah, I guess they do.” Mike studies the door. “All right, wait here, and I’ll see if anyone’s coming.”

He slips out, and I’m about to follow him when I hear him say, “Halpy! My man!” loudly enough that I can tell he’s pretending that he’s drunk. *Jonathan*. Of course.

I press myself to the wall next to the doorway. If Jonathan opens it, I can probably escape unnoticed.

Jonathan and Mike are still talking in the hallway. Mike, trying to keep Jonathan from coming in and discovering...what? That I’m here, fully clothed? I check myself with my phone camera. I look like I’ve been dancing in a crowded room—hair a little messy, lipstick a little smeared. Like I’ve been dancing...or making out.

*We weren’t doing anything*, I practice saying. Which sounds like we absolutely were. We were. Just not the way anyone would think.

“Nothing, nothing, just hanging out, bro,” Mike is saying. His voice has a strange brassy tone. Maybe that’s just how he normally sounds when he’s been drinking.

“Everything all right?” Jonathan asks. So *not* how Mike normally sounds when he’s been drinking.

“Yep, all good.” Mike says something else, too low to fully make out. The conversation goes on a while. What are they still doing in the hallway? I pull out my phone.

Me: Can’t you get him out of here?

Mike: no

Me: I could climb out the window.

Mike: definite no

Me: Is he talking about pitching or something?

Mike: he is not talking about pitching

Maybe I could just walk out, pretend that I just wandered into the bedroom because I was lost and—what? Found Mike in here by himself?

A knock against the door throws me from my contemplation. Jonathan? Mike? Are they fighting?

Me: What was that?

Mike: don’t worry about it

“Who’re you texting?” I hear Jonathan say.

“No one,” Mike says. “You want another beer?”

“Are you sure you haven’t seen her?”

“Told you, I think she left.” Followed by the fade of footsteps as they both leave the hallway.

Mike: all clear

I slip out of the bedroom. Distantly, the party’s still going, but I’m done for the night, the tiredness from the week catching up with me. From Mike’s *no one*. I know he just meant it to get Jonathan away from the door. We aren’t anyone to each other—just business partners. The best I can probably hope for is to end up as friends.

And I tell myself that’s enough as I say my goodbyes, then go home

alone.



I'M IN MY SUITE BEDROOM—HAVING PEELED OFF MY LASHES AND SCRUBBED off my makeup and messaged Savannah to check on her—when the text comes in.

Mike: you up?

Me: ha ha

Mike: your picture got a bunch of likes

I open up Insta. The picture did, a few from fake accounts, but some from obviously real ones. A handful of users left flame and heart eyes emojis.

Me: Thanks for telling me.

Mike: you should take another

*I already took my makeup off.* But, of course, the picture doesn't have to include my face. I could say no, could leave him on read. I could spend tomorrow taking pictures with whatever clothing changes necessary to make it look like they were taken at different times. That would be the *business* thing to do.

I could blame the hard seltzer or dehydration from dancing or even how late it is—but I know it's none of those that make me type, *what do you want to see?* I want him to tell me. I want the excuse, to give permission to the parts of me that already want to do this.

A response comes in. *It's not up to me.*

That makes me push back my covers. I consider a few poses, the lighting, the composition. I'm in a tank top, a pair of sleep shorts. I tug at the neckline of the tank, lowering it. No, that looks funny at this angle, so I raise the hem of my tank top, exposing my waist, my stomach, the curves of my breasts. I fold the hem a few times, forming a band across my nipples, making it thick enough that they're not totally visible, but thin enough that they still show through.

I repeat the same process with the waistband of my shorts, rolling them down. And it shouldn't feel any more naked than what I might wear to the beach but it does, somehow. I shiver, gooseflesh pebbling across my newly

tanned skin. In the lens of my phone camera, my body looks like it belongs to some other hotter person—like someone I could be.

I take a few pictures. Send them to Mike. Wait.

Mike: good

*Good.* I'm officially wrecked for that word.

Mike: what about video?

Video requires the ring light tripod that's sitting in the corner of my room. Screwing in the clip holder for my phone shouldn't ratchet up my pulse, but it does. I tap my video on. I look unfiltered. I flip on the ring light. Better.

Mike wants a video...for promo. Obviously. Obviously, the only reason Mike is asking me to do this is to make a video for promo. I point the camera so it's shooting from my chin down and hit record.

For a second, I don't say anything. My chest rises and falls with each nervous inhale. My breasts press against the fabric of my shirt. What would I say if I was confident? What would I send if I was someone else doing this—not another person, exactly, but who I want to be?

It helps to close my eyes. To square my shoulders and imagine myself brave. Maybe that's what being brave is—pretending confidence until it's true.

“You wanted a video?” I say to the camera, a little teasing. I run my hands over my body, carefully palming each breast. My back arches. My legs widen. “If you were here...” I stroke a finger down between my breasts, lower, tripping over my navel, lower, tugging briefly at my sleep shorts. “You're always asking for things. If you were here, you wouldn't need to ask.”

I widen my legs even further, body on display except for a thin strip of tank top, the soft cotton of my shorts. I sink my fingers down past my waistband even farther, fingers almost but not quite there. Then pull them away. Put a smile into my voice as I say, “What else do you want?” And press stop.

I can't send this to him. I can't send this to anyone. Have I lost my mind? Did the aesthetician rip out sensible, careful Victoria too? I shouldn't...but I want to. The thought puts a flush in my cheeks. Mike will see this and—what? Like it? Get hard from it? Come over and prove me right?

It'd be easy to send him my address. My roommates are both shut up in their rooms: Kaleigh because she has a boyfriend she's with twenty-four seven and Xiomara because she's in a committed relationship with her gaming system. To be fair, she is very good at video games.

Mike could come over and we could shoot video. I want Mike to come over to shoot video. I want Mike to come over, with or without video, and that's probably (definitely) a problem, but it's a problem for tomorrow-Victoria.

I hold my breath. Send the video.

Me: Does this work?

A minute goes by. Another. Not that I'm watching the red glare of my alarm clock's display. Not that I'm worried that Mike will watch that, realize he's gotten himself into something he doesn't want to, and call the whole thing off.

Mike: we're gonna make so much money

No emoji to accompany it. No sweat droplets or red face. Just that bare statement. That's good, I guess? It's what I should want. Just not what I do. We need to get this done, get this over with so we can go back to being two people who work in the same space and nothing more. It's that—and definitely not because I'm in a hurry to sleep with him—that makes me send another text.

Me: We should talk tomorrow.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Victoria*

WE HAVE a game the next day. College baseball doesn't have the same grind as the majors, but there are usually still three games a week. I go in early to get everything set up. My list is still there, hanging from its comforting hook. I pull it down and begin cycling through what I need to do.

What I need to do is not think about Mike. Not think about his messages from the night before, or the way he danced, or brushed my hair back from my face. I'm so caught up in that that I almost don't see the envelope hanging from Jonathan's stall, labeled *Victoria* in slightly messy handwriting.

I glance around to see if anyone's watching me, then pull it down and slide a finger under the envelope flap. Inside, another gift card, this one for the off-campus café that I met Mike at. Did Jonathan see us there? Worse, did he overhear us? Was this some kind of veiled message? He doesn't really seem like the veiled message type, but people surprise you.

If it is a veiled message, it's also a gift card for a lot of money. Quick math says this would support my once-a-week coffee splurges for the rest of the school year. With it, another note: *You're the best, Vic...toria.*

Something in my chest, adjacent to my heart, goes mushy. Maybe if things were different—if I didn't need this job, or the money with Mike, if I got to have the kind of collegiate experience that other people do—things might've been different.

But they're not.

I'm in the process of slipping the note into my pocket when Jonathan comes in.

"Oh, hey!" he calls, like he's happy to see me specifically.

I wave, then hold up the card. "Thank you. You didn't have to do that."

"You're not used to other people doing nice stuff for you, huh?" he says.



“And I figured, since you had to pick up all my laundry...” He reaches over to his stall, taps his jersey, now washed, still hung up on its ring. Next to it, a taped-up index card: *Hang your shit up.*

“Is that for me too?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “For me. Mike suggested it. He’s helpful like that.”

“He is,” I manage.

“He also said you liked that coffee place.”

I cough—I can’t help it, like my panic has gotten lodged in the back of my throat.

“You okay?” Jonathan asks. “I could get you some water.”

“No, I’m all right.” I seat myself on the clubhouse bench. After a second, Jonathan sits with me and runs his palm up my back. It’s one thing to know how large his hands are, another to feel his fingers spanning the distance between my shoulder blades.

“Really, I’m fine,” I say.

“If you’re sure...” He withdraws his hand but doesn’t move away. “I was gonna ask, if you’re free some time, maybe we could get coffee.”

Which sounds like not quite a friend thing. But it has to be. He looks like that, and he’s the star of this team, and he has to know that I can’t fraternize with players. Complicating things, I’m about to *fraternize* with his best friend. On camera.

“The team should do a coffee run there sometime,” I say, pretending to misunderstand.

Jonathan’s smile slips the slightest bit. “Yeah, the boys’d love that.”



I’M IN THE LAUNDRY ROOM, TOSSING GAME-WORN UNIFORMS INTO ONE OF THE washers, when I hear, “Hey.”

Mike, standing in the doorway, wearing a half-unbuttoned jersey. He tugs at the hem. “Got caught up after the game. I need to throw this in the wash.” He says wash like *warsh*, an extra letter lurking in there.

“Oh, right.” I grab his laundry ring from the bin and hold it out.

“Let me just...” He undoes the rest of the buttons.

I’ve seen him without a shirt on before. Technically, I’m not supposed to be in the clubhouse until after all the players have changed, but guys

sometimes linger behind. Athletes tend to be pretty unfussed about bodies, generally.

That's entirely different from him standing in the laundry room while his teammates' clothes spin away. He slides his arms out of his jersey, then slips the strap of the laundry ring through one of the sleeves before fastening it. He has chest hair, a line that thickens between his belly button and waistband. I want to put my fingertips against it. I want to put my *mouth* against it. I'm staring and, for once, I don't pretend I'm not. In his clothes, he's broad, with a coating of muscle. Out of them...

Mike catches me looking. A smile edges up the corner of his mouth. He reaches around me to drop the clothes into the bin, his arm brushing by my side. We're standing closer than we need to be. It wouldn't take anything for me to trace my fingers up his pec, to find the plates of muscles there, to see if he'll kiss me or do that same gruff *good* when I do something he likes.

We shouldn't be standing here like this, a shout's distance away from his teammates. Usually, no one comes back here but me—no one pays attention to what I do. Except for the way Mike's watching me now, eyes aglow. We absolutely shouldn't be doing this here—or at all.

"Close the door." My voice is barely above a whisper.

For a second, Mike doesn't move. Maybe I misjudged. Maybe he came back here to talk *business* and I'm the one being weird. Slowly, he goes to the door, kicks the doorstop out, and lets it swing shut.

"We're not locked in here, right?" he asks.

I can think of worse things. "I made sure it was unlocked before I came in. It's not locked from the outside either."

He walks toward me slow, like I might spook. I haven't ruled that out entirely, not with how my heart is knocking at my ribs. Close, the difference in our heights is more noticeable. He takes another step toward me. The metal spikes of his cleats scrape against the floor, impossibly loud.

"You wanted to talk," he says. It's not quite a question, though his eyebrows are raised.

*Talk.* I did want to talk. "We need to figure out when we're doing this."

His smile deepens. "Doing what?"

I tap him on the chest. It doesn't shift him as much as a sliver of an inch. I should move my hand, my fingertip against his sternum like a bright point of contact. God, he's good-looking. God, I want to kiss him. God, I want him to want to kiss me back. I should call this whole thing off, if only to save myself

from wanting someone I shouldn't have.

"You know what I mean," I say belatedly, forcing my finger away, but not before I drag it down the muscle of his chest.

"Say it anyway." A command, like the ones he texted to me, except now I won't be able to hear those in anything but the deep rumble of his voice.

"When we're going to..." I swallow around the word *fuck*. Even the sound of it inside my head feels filthy. "Sleep together."

Mike hums. "Just send me a calendar invite whenever you're ready."

"A *calendar invite*." I laugh. "How organized of you."

He shrugs. "You know how engineers are."

But I didn't know that he was one. There's a lot about him I don't know. "I was thinking...we should probably know each other better before we film."

He stares at me long enough that I squirm. The Victoria who sent him the video last night is nowhere to be found. Or maybe she's here, just below the surface, because Mike lifts his hand, almost but doesn't quite touch my jaw.

"You can," I breathe, and get the rough catch of his fingertips against my cheek.

He tilts my face up to his. "What do you want to know about me?"

"I don't even know where you're from," I say, as if that's what matters right now. This close, warmth pours off him, and it wouldn't take anything for me to touch his chest again, to wrap my hands around the rippled muscles of his shoulders.

"Or," I continue, "what you do when you're not playing baseball. Or..." I try to find the me who pinned that flier to a bulletin board, who has a clear plan that leads toward freeing myself. Who wants things even when she shouldn't. *Especially* when. "Or what it's like to kiss you."

Mike laughs, not meanly, a laugh I can feel. "All right." His tone is casual. Less casual is the arm he winds around my back, the way I'm suddenly caught up against him, a hand at my waist, the other at the back of my neck. He leans in, kisses me, a press of his lips to mine, nothing, nothing, except that it's a prelude, because he does it again, teeth against my lower lip, tongue insistent, and then my arms are around his shoulders.

My legs part of their own accord. He takes that as an invitation and picks me up just as easily as I imagined before he places me on the high ledge of the counter, then steps between my thighs. Another kiss, the brush of his tongue followed by the slight grasp of his hand in the back of my hair. I gasp

against his mouth.

He pulls away, resting his forehead on mine. “That okay?”

*Okay.* An understatement. I nod.

He tugs my hair again, this time sharper, and my legs fall open even more, and he kisses me, deep, like he’s been thinking about me the way I have about him.

After a second, he winces and steps back. I’m about to ask what’s wrong—what I did wrong—when he reaches down and adjusts himself through his uniform pants. “Forgot I was wearing a cup,” he says, a little aggrieved.

I shouldn’t laugh, but I do, a giggle that he answers with a smile, even as he clenches his eyes briefly shut with discomfort.

At some point, the first load of laundry finished. It’s quiet enough that we just breathe at each other. His hair is messed up, and I want to mess it up more. There’s very slight color high in his cheeks.

“Did that tell you what you need to know?” he asks.

“Yes.” A word I practice saying.

“Yes?” Mike asks, as if he knows there’s more to that sentence.

*Yes, I want to kiss you again.*

Scrapes against the concrete floor stop me from saying that. Footsteps approaching—someone in cleats. I jump down from the counter. “There’s someone in the hallway,” I whisper.

I have no idea what my hair looks like. Maybe like his or worse. I don’t have time to dwell on the curl of his fingers at the base of my ponytail, the way he asked if he could pull my hair. *Yes, I practice saying.*

The footsteps have stopped. Someone outside the door. “Is anyone in there? I need to wash my jersey.” *Jonathan.*

Mike is still standing there, still shirtless. He doesn’t look panicked so much as unsettled. “No,” he says, overly loudly, “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with the lock.” He opens the door.

Jonathan’s standing there, hand raised like he was about to knock. He registers Mike, then me. His eyes widen. He is not smiling.

“Sorry,” Mike says, “Victoria thought there was an issue with the door.”

“The door?” Jonathan says. He looks at me. I can feel every second that Mike and I kissed: every residual scratch of stubble against my neck, every loose stitch at the collar of my shirt when he tugged at it. Jonathan must know there’s something going on—how could he not?

“Yeah, I thought the thing up there”—I gesture to indicate the metal arms

on the top of the door—“wasn’t working.” A lie. A bad lie.

“And you asked Mike to take a look at it?”

“He’s an engineer,” I say.

Jonathan’s not-smile intensifies. “I don’t think he’s that kind of engineer.”

I wince. Digging through the laundry cart distracts me. I can feel Jonathan’s stare on my back, on the hem of my rucked-up shirt. Pulling it down will only draw more attention to it. And I can’t find his laundry ring. “I think your stuff’s already in the wash.” Because I must have tossed his in without realizing it wasn’t complete.

“He can use my ring,” Mike says. “I came back to put my jersey in the wash.” *Warsh*, another *warsh*, and has he always said it that way? It’s not sexy at all—except now that I’ve started noticing things about him, I can’t seem to stop.

I pull out Mike’s laundry ring and hand it to Jonathan.

“I need to give you my pants too,” Jonathan says. “And socks.” He looks at Mike, pointedly.

“Right,” I say. “Both of you go change and bring me the laundry. I’ll make sure your stuff gets in the next load.”

“Great.” Mike heads toward the door, still carrying his laundry ring. “See you in a minute.”

Jonathan is less quick to leave. He stands in the doorway. “You want this open or shut?” Said like he’s asking me something else.

“Open’s fine,” I manage.

He nods once, then exits down the hallway in a scrape of cleats, the noise of which almost but doesn’t quite cover up him repeating, “*Open’s fine.*”



A TEXT COMES IN LATE THAT NIGHT. I FUMBLE FOR MY PHONE ON MY nightstand. “It’s too late for this, Mike,” I mutter to myself. Even as my heart beats with an eagerness to answer.

When I open the text, it isn’t from Mike. Or Jonathan.

Tyler: Talked to Lizzy

Your mom didn’t file taxes. Again.

*Tyler*—my mom’s ex-husband’s stepson from a previous blended marriage. James got Tyler in his first divorce, for some reason, probably because Tyler decided to live with James, and James was too softhearted to say no.

James and my mom got married when I was fourteen. For about thirty seconds, I thought having an older brother might be cool. Until Tyler walked through our house while we were moving out of it and into James’s and sneered, “Why is it so small?” in front of Elizabeth and me. But of course, out of the adults’ hearing.

The house was small—a snug two-bedroom with my mom’s room and the room Elizabeth and I shared. But he didn’t need to say it like that. Or speculate equally loudly that my mom was only marrying James for his money. My mom was marrying James because she was dopily in love with him.

And James was also dopily in love with her right back. For a whole year.

It’d be one thing if their marriage ended for obvious reasons—if James cast my mother aside the way rich men do with toys they tire of. But no: It was Mom who pushed him away, Mom who couldn’t keep it together. So after a year, we packed up, moved back into that small house.

Me: Mind your business, Tyler.

And you know she hates being called Lizzy.

Tyler: sure Vicky I’ll remember

I grit my teeth. Of course, he’s doing that on purpose, teasing me about my mother’s insistence that she’d named us after queens and that no one called Queen Victoria by a nickname. By the time I found out that wasn’t true, I was old enough to hate *Vicky*. We’re queens—right. San Diego royalty.

Tyler: Anyway, your majesty, the IRS really comes after you when you owe more than 10k. Your mom could lose her house

Her *small* house, I mentally edit.

Tyler: her house, her car, her savings if she has any

You know the court would grant James custody of Lizzy

Me: She’s not his daughter.

Tyler: It won’t matter if your mom can’t take care of her

Lizzy would be happier living with him

Me: She'd have to transfer schools.

We're not doing that senior year.

Her friends are there and her robotics team.

Tyler: if you can even call it that

Me: WTF does that mean?

Tyler: Anyway it's a good idea

Me: Funny, feels more like a threat.

Tyler: Prep school and living in a mansion. I'm truly nefarious

That means sneaky. In case that didn't make your vocab list in high school

By now, my teeth aren't just clenched. Tension runs down my jaw into my back and neck. Of course Tyler is here, swooping in and trying to take Elizabeth. Of course he's being an *asshole* in the process. If I tell him that, he'll just laugh.

Me: She's not living with you and James.

Tyler: So you have the money?

Me: I'm taking care of it.

Tyler: how?

Me: I have it under control.

*Control.* What I had when I decided to make out with a player on the team in an unlocked room in the clubhouse. It's good that Jonathan is polite enough not to barge in. *Control.* What I have over this entire situation, obviously.

Well, I can control getting the money. I can control when Mike and I sleep with one another. For some reason, I think of his hand in my hair, his soft question checking if that was okay. How might that translate to the two of us together? I want to know, a want that burns through me.

I glance at the clock. It's late enough that sending a *come fuck me on camera* calendar invite will probably get read as *come fuck me now*.

I type out an invite for Wednesday—subject line: *come over*—and send it to Mike. My nerves swoop in my belly, especially when he doesn't immediately respond. I cycle through possibilities. It's late, he's tired from

the game, he's with someone else.

It's not like we're dating. It's not like we're exclusive. I don't have a right to demand anything other than being safe. Still, my stomach churns. Maybe he's just the kind of guy to make out in laundry rooms with anyone who seems willing.

A notification arrives a second later—*Mike has accepted your invitation*—followed by: *You sure you're up for this?* As if he can hear my nervousness in my texts.

*We can get this over with*, I type out but don't send. Because that's not right. That's what old Victoria might say.

I want to do this, and that want is somehow even more terrifying. *Or thrilling*. So I just write back, *Yes*.



## CHAPTER SIX

### *Victoria*

THE FIRST FEW days of the week, I feel like I'm swimming through taffy. Monday, I jump every time my lab partner pops her gum. "You okay?" she asks.

No. "Yeah."

Tuesday is somewhat better. At least I have a clubhouse routine. Laundry, check. Cleats, check. Panicking when Mike comes in early for the game—definite, definite check. Panic and another sensation: something fluttery that turns to nerves when other players arrive.

"Hey, Papa," one calls, "any big plans for the rest of the week?"

Mike shrugs. "Just the usual."

For some reason, that makes the rest of the team howl with laughter.

Wednesday morning comes. I get up. Check my ring light and tripod. Move anything identifying out of the way of where the camera will be set up. Strip down and change my sheets.

Me: You're not allergic to certain kinds of laundry detergent, right?

Mike: nope

I pick out various outfits—what can be taken off with minimal fuss on camera—then try on the lingerie I bought. Send Mike a picture just in case he has an opinion about how it'll appear on camera.

Mike: I am in circuits class

Me: whoops

Mike: it's gonna be fine

So obviously, my jitters are radiating through my phone.

Me: sorry

Mike: don't be

But I'm a mess the rest of the day. I shave and nick myself with my razor. I do my hair and manage to burn my neck with my curling iron. There's a chip in one of my nails—it's *gel* polish. My mascara smudges. My toes are literally cold.

My roommates are also home—I can hear the thump and swear that accompanies Xiomara playing video games. Maybe I should just devote all my time to becoming a competition-level gamer. That brings in money, right?

Kaleigh is shut up in her room with her boyfriend. Telltale thumps emanate through the door. How many times had I resented her for that—for those kinds of noises and her look of contentment when she padded into our kitchen in his shirt and with obvious sex hair?

Well, I wasn't going to get that, not the shirt and certainly not the contentment. Mike is coming over, we'll do this, I'll post it, then...we'll see, I guess.

A few minutes later, Mike texts. *I'm outside*

My heart is practically beating out of my chest, but I manage to type, *Be right down.*

Walking downstairs does nothing to settle my heart rate. Nor does seeing him outside my door. He's wearing actual jeans, a shirt that looks like it's been ironed. Those same sneakers he wore to the café. He holds something out—a bag.

“What's this?” I ask, as if he brought me a present. Then I open it. Condoms, right. Along with...a candle? Because the bag is also holding a scented candle that's a tier nicer than what you might get at a convenience store. “To set the mood?”

Mike shrugs. “You seemed like you like candles.”

“I do.” I study it more closely. It's supposed to smell like fresh laundry. Probably what he associates me with: Victoria, perpetually pushing a laundry cart with a squeaking wheel.

“You should come in,” I say. We're standing in the doorway. People might see us together and draw the correct conclusion.

Mike braces the door where I'm holding it open, then follows me inside. “This building is nice.”

“Is this your first time here?” I ask like I might any other guest.

“Yeah. Moved off campus last year.” Mike considers the hallway around us. “It was cheaper.”

*Do you have money issues too?* Maybe I should ask that. Maybe I should know more about someone who I’m about to let into my literal body. No, people do this every day, and they don’t need to know the entire financial situation of the person they’re with.

We climb the stairs in relative silence. My hands shake as I turn the lock. Mike’s standing close behind me. This was easier in the clubhouse, when I didn’t have time to think about making a bad decision. I’ve had nothing but time since I printed out that flier and hung it up. I can’t steady myself; my keys jingle.

Mike caps a hand over mine. “You know, we don’t have to do this.”

“I kind of have to.” I swallow. Lower my voice so no one overhears. “I need the money.”

I push the door open and gesture to our apartment. “Here’s our stuff.” I get Mike’s laugh in return. I pull him into my room, then shut the door behind us.

I cleaned earlier—possibly overcleaned because my response to stress is to start scrubbing. The place looks sterile. Unsexy. My bed is pulled taut. The only thing that indicates that we’re doing anything is the tripod sitting on one side. I try to think of what to say to cut the tension. Maybe I’m the only one who’s tense.

I’m still holding the bag with condoms and the candle. I put them on my desk; the candle clunks against its surface.

We’re standing awkwardly across from one another. I’m sure I know what to do with my hands under normal circumstances. Now I hover them, then try to tuck them in the nonexistent pockets of my shorts, then go back to hovering. I take a deep breath, let it out slowly, and sit on the edge of my bed.

After a second, Mike sits next to me, our legs almost but not quite touching. “Here.” I fiddle for a second, clip my phone in the tripod, then toggle to my camera app. “I figured we record everything and, I don’t know, edit it later or something.”

Mike nods.

I take another deep breath and hit the camera’s record button. Try to forget it’s there.

“Can I tell you something?” Mike says once I sit back down.

“Um”—possibilities race through my mind—“sure.”

“I’m nervous too.”

Whatever I thought he was going to say, it definitely wasn’t that. Until I remember him in the dugout a few weeks ago. “I know what you’re doing,” I say. “You say that to Jonathan to calm him down before games.”

Mike smiles. “Did it work?”

“I’m not a pitcher.”

“But did it work?”

I shove Mike’s arm, playfully, at the muscle of his shoulder. A strand of hair falls into my face. Before I can shake it away, Mike brushes it back, tucking it gently behind my ear. His thumb caresses the bottom of my lower lip. I shift. The loose collar of my T-shirt slips down my shoulder, along with the strap of my bra.

His hand leaves my face, trails over my neck. Finally, he runs his finger under the strap. “That picture you sent earlier,” he says.

“Sorry, didn’t realize you were in class.”

“Now everyone thinks I’m really into circuitry.”

It takes a second to register—right, engineering. I laugh, shift closer into his space. Make myself meet his eyes. “You thought I looked okay?”

Another stroke of his finger on my shoulder, a slow drag of it, too much to bear. “It was sort of hard to tell in the photo,” he says. “You should show me.”

Doing that will make this whole thing even more real. I can’t ignore how the camera’s staring into my back. I turn and start to peel off my shirt.

Mike stills me, his hands at my waist. “Let me see”—he nods to the camera—“before they see.”

My heart rate steadies. I want him to see. I want him, period, especially as he’s looking at me like he is now—with heat in his eyes like he wants me right back.

I pull off my shirt, careful not to brush the collar against my makeup. My bra is lace, with embroidered flowers that sit hard over my nipples. Lace and see-through, and suddenly I’m aware of his gaze as it rakes over me.

I want to cover myself with my hands; I want to arch into it. I want to kiss him and forget about the camera.

His hands are still on my belly, thumbs stroking gently, drawing gooseflesh. “Am I the first person who’s gotten to see you like this?” he asks.

He’s not, but I can’t remember the last time I felt this exposed—this

excited to be half-naked with someone else. “Yes,” I say, and it doesn’t even feel like a lie.

“What do you want?” he asks.

“We agreed that”—I glance back at the camera—“you’d be my first.”

“Yeah,” he says, low, “but what do you *want*?”

*What I want?* To do this. To like it. To have him press against me until I don’t have to think. To have something I want and to have it feel good. “I want to come with you inside me.”

His eyes go even hotter at that. His hands move up to the sides of my bra, where the elastic digs. Slowly, he slips a finger under the band, to where the skin is a little puckered. Strokes there, gently. “You want my fingers?” he asks. “My cock?” He bends, face almost to my breasts, breath hot against the lace. “My mouth?”

“Yes,” I gasp. “All of it.”

“Good,” he says, and pulls me onto his lap.

He’s hard. There’s something gratifying about that, about the way he grinds me unthinkingly against him.

“I’m gonna give you everything.” He grinds again, hands on my breasts, thumbs at my nipples, stroking through the lace. “Every last goddamn drop.”

Fuck. *Fuck*. I kiss him, hard, and suck on his tongue when he pushes it into my mouth. It’s overwhelming—his size, how he smells, how he’s rubbing my nipples, how he’s pushing his cock against me.

“Your tits are amazing,” he says, and there’s something so silly and dirty about that word. About how he tongues them through the lace of my bra, how he uses his teeth, a scrape across my nipple. “You kept sending me those pictures.”

“Did you jerk off thinking about me?” I ask.

“You got me so wound up, then left me hanging. Thought I was gonna get an invite over. Have you all wet and ready for me.”

*I could have.* If this was real. If we were actually dating and not just doing this as business partners. I can’t tell if he’s pretending—if he’s saying that not as *Mike the catcher* but *Mike the future OnlyFans star*.

I comb my fingers through my hair and put on my best *for the cameras* expression, so I can pretend what I’m about to say is just acting. “I thought about it.”

“Really,” he says. It’s not quite a question—like he has more riding on my answer than just a good video. He bites my nipple harder, just on the edge

of it hurting, then soothes it with his tongue. “You wanna make it up to me?”

“Yes.” A word I can’t stop saying. How everything in my life before now has been *no*. What I can’t have, what I haven’t allowed myself. “Yes.”

“Then be a good girl and let me fuck your tits.”

My face goes hot. For that, I get another plunge of his tongue in my mouth, the demand of his fingers in my hair. He pulls off his shirt, then makes quick work of his shoes and socks and pants, until he’s standing there in clinging boxer briefs, his cock pressing against the fabric.

I can’t stop staring at it—hard, thick like the rest of him. From where I’m sitting on the bed, I’m eye level with the damp patch at his waistband. My mouth goes dry. No, my mouth goes *empty*. “Can I…” I ask. I trail off like the rest of the question is stuck somewhere inside me, waiting to be unlocked.

His hand goes to the back of my neck. With his other hand, he pushes my mouth open with his thumb, stroking the wall of my cheek. “Get it wet,” he says.

I suck, helpless, trapped, held here. Distantly, there’s a camera. Distantly, there’s the rest of the world, but none of that matters, not when he starts to slowly fuck my mouth with his finger. It isn’t sex, but it feels like sex, like something racier than if we’d just banged and gotten it over with.

Especially when he says, “Good. You’re doing so good. But…” Like he knows that’ll get to me. Like he knows I want to do better, be better. “You need my cock in your mouth.”

I nod, still sucking his finger.

He withdraws it, laughs as I mouth after it. “Tell me,” he says.

“I need…” The words are there, just out of reach. I dig for them. “I need your cock in my mouth.”

He pulls down his boxers, just a little, enough to expose the head, already wet. “That’s all you’re getting for now.”

And I have no idea of the angle, the shot composition. All I know is I take his cock into my mouth, sucking, licking, wanting more.

His hand is in my hair. “You wanna get your mouth fucked, baby girl?” he asks.

I pull off. Nod. Get the disciplinary grip of his hand.

“So say it,” he says, low.

*Fuck*. A word I could barely think a few days ago. Now it forms across my tongue. “Fuck my mouth,” I echo.

He doesn’t let go of my hair. “What else?”

Like he's going to make me say it before I get it. But the next request comes easier. "Then my tits."

That gets his smile. "Then your pussy?"

I rub my thighs together, remembering that first day, how nervous I was. How I'm soaked now. "Fill me up."

His hand tightens its grip, returning me to his cock, holding me in place. Fuck, it's so much—too much. I breathe through my nose, widen my jaw. Spit rolls out of my mouth, and I should be embarrassed that I'm a mess.

Until he starts talking. "Good, that's good, that's so good."

I whimper, and his thrusts slow, pulling back, just until he can smear the head of his cock against my lips. I whimper again, chasing his taste. Chasing the feeling gathering between my legs. I want—need—something else there.

He taps his fingers on my face. "You can suck me again later," he says, like it's a privilege, like we'll get a *later*. Then he crawls back on the bed, stripping his boxers off in the process. His cock sits against his belly, balls drawn up. "Turn around."

I do, facing the camera, my bra stuck to my nipples, wet, teeth marks already pinkening up into rings. The world's going to see me like this. I should hate the idea of it...but I don't. Not when he pulls me back onto his lap, facing away from him and toward the lens. He palms my breasts, circling my nipples. His hand dives down, a straight, uncompromising path into my shorts, past the waistband of my panties, the tip of his finger pushing in, giving me only a fraction of an inch.

"Oh, you're wet," he says, his mouth right up against my ear. "I knew you would be. Good girls like to get fucked, don't they?"

This time I say it without his prompting. "Good girls like to get fucked."

For that, I get a push of his fingers between my folds, almost but not quite on my clit. I whine, try to roll my hips, try to press back.

"No," he says, "not yet. Not until you earn it."

"How?" I ask.

"Play with your tits."

I do, palming them, pushing them together, pulling the cups of my bra down and showing off the hardened points of my nipples.

I get the tap of his palm on my thigh, not hard, just enough to feel it. "Such a slut," he says, and it sounds like a compliment.

"I'm a slutty virgin?" I laugh.

"You're not gonna be a virgin for much longer," he says, "but slut is a

state of being.” He brings his hands up, replacing mine with his, massaging my breasts. “That’s okay, I’m a slut too.”

“I thought you were gonna fuck my tits.” I pout. “All you’re doing is talking.”

And I don’t have time to register it before I’m flipped onto my back on the bed, sprawled out.

“Take your bra off,” he says, and I scramble to comply.

The elastic leaves little red marks all over. He mouths them like he’s soothing them. Something about that almost feels like it’s not for the cameras. Like it would be what he did if we were alone together. Until he plants a knee between my thighs, and laughs when I immediately rub myself against it, seeking sensation. I didn’t expect to laugh this much or at all, but I can’t help it, a giggle at the pressure of his mouth, at the bite mark he leaves on the underside of my breast, something I’ll look at in the bathroom mirror tomorrow in wonder.

He pulls back, then spits, once, in the dead center of my chest, a string of saliva that he runs his finger through like he’s tracing something out. Like he’s claiming me. “If I do this, you gotta tell the people how it feels,” he says.

The camera. I turn, blink, try to keep the surprise from my eyes. “C’mon,” I say. “Stop making me wait.”

He doesn’t, just kneels, stroking himself slowly. “I’m not the one who’s stalling.”

I sit up, angling myself so his cock is between my breasts, pushing them together, sliding up and down. He’s still wet from my mouth, from the pre-come he’s leaking.

It should be humiliating being used like this, being made into a channel for his cock—but it isn’t. Like, despite him bossing me around, I’m the one in control.

He fucks my breasts again. I dart my tongue down to catch the head of his cock.

“You look incredible.” he starts. “Everyone should see you like this.”

*An audience.* The thought sends heat up my spine—like instead of feeling watched, I’m showing off. “Would you do this in front of all your—” I catch myself about to say *teammates*. “Would you do this in front of all your friends?”

His eyebrows go up, but he looks pleased. More than pleased. “You want



me to put you on your knees? Let all the guys take a turn?"

Do I even want that? Yes, something in me shouts. A bright, clear yes. I should be ashamed to even think that but somehow I'm not. My face is flushed, but it isn't with embarrassment. "Maybe."

His smile goes wicked. "Oh, we'd wreck you, baby. Send you home dripping."

"Show me," I say.

He tips me back onto the bedding, throws my bra to the floor, and pulls off my shorts, leaving me in just my panties. He'll probably reach for the condoms, and then we'll get to it, I guess. He doesn't. Instead, he looks at me, long enough to make me squirm.

He slaps me softly, fingers against the damp fabric covering my pussy. A noise, not entirely voluntary, escapes the back of my throat. I get another soft slap, the push of his fingers through the fabric. "Could you come like this?" he asks.

"I'm not sure," I say, honestly. "No one's ever tried."

Something about that makes him growl, makes him pull me to the edge of the bed, feet hanging over, thighs opened wide, as if I'm on display.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Trying." He drops to his knees and kisses me through my panties, long and slow and aching. I bear down, whimpering when he pushes my underwear to the side and strokes me with one finger.

"Is this for me?" he asks.

"Yes," I say. "It's yours. Take it."

He licks me messily, applying pressure through his jaw. That hollowed feeling expands. I want his fingers inside me, his tongue; I want him to roll me over and to bury himself in me. I want to scream down the walls I've so carefully built around my entire life. I settle for whimpering, for laughing when he hits a ticklish spot.

For a second, I worry he'll think I'm laughing at him. Until he looks up, hair in disarray, a smile at the edge of his lips. "Here." He takes my hand and places it on his hair. "Put me where you want me." Then he presses his face to my pussy and all I can do is hold on.

Whatever few threads of my restraint that are left snap. I push against his face, desperate, seeking, cycling my hips. I'm saying words, I think, or possibly crying, a *please please please* like I'm begging. I *am* begging. Pleasure unfurls like some hot glowing place inside me, a pressure in my

back, in my belly, in the emptiness between my legs.

“More,” I grunt, and get his laugh, a soft bite on the inside of my thigh. Another thing I’ll feel tomorrow.

I grab his hair, move him, scramble as he tongues me, as he gives me two fingers, thick and demanding inside me and not nearly enough.

“That all you got?” I ask, riling him.

He pulls back. “You want more?” He holds up three fingers.

I shake my head. “More.”

“We’re not gonna be vague here.” He sounds so in control, except for the shine to his mouth. How he’s looking at me like he’ll give me whatever I ask.

“I want you to fuck me.” There, simple. My face flushes hot as I say it. But at least I said it. *Want it*, despite my embarrassment.

He nods, slow, and gets a condom from the box. The foil is impossibly loud. He slips it on, pumps his cock a few times. I didn’t expect sex to smell vaguely like a chem lab—like latex gloves. I giggle.

His eyebrows rise. “How do you want to do this?”

Right, because there’s positioning, and the camera, and what we’re supposed to show people. After all, this is what people are paying to see. “What’s easiest?” I ask.

“Here. Lie on your back.” Once I do, he peels off my panties until I’m bare in front of him. “You’re so...,” he says, then shakes his head. “We can start like this.”

Something about *start* makes me gasp. Carefully, he crawls over me until we’re chest to chest, until we’re a breath apart, nothing between us but a slim pocket of air. “Hey,” he says, soft, like he doesn’t want the camera to pick it up, “you say *stop* and we stop, okay?”

I nod. “Okay.”

“I say *stop* and we stop, okay?” he adds.

I nod again. “Okay.”

He traces a hand up my side, brushes my hair back from my face.

“I’m probably a mess,” I say, thinking about makeup smudges and the camera and how this will look when I have to review it the way he does game footage.

Mike’s fingertips slide softly on my cheek. “You look fine,” he says, and I’m about to protest *fine* until he adds, “You really don’t know how lovely you are.”

*Lovely*. A word that sounds...delicate. More delicate than I normally feel,

hauling stuff around, making sure everyone's taken care of. Except now, on my back, covered—sheltered—by him, I feel delicate, like he's holding some part of me that I didn't know I wanted another person to have.

There aren't a hundred candles around us—just the shine of a ring light and the way Mike's smiling at me, a molten kind of smile. He kisses me again, slow, careful. It takes some maneuvering—Mike between my legs, positioning himself, taking himself in hand. He doesn't ask again, just presses his cock at my entrance and pushes in slowly, letting me breathe through it. It's nice. Blunt, full, the latex dulling some of the sensation. He doesn't move; his arms tremble from holding himself above me.

“You good?” he asks.

I nod. “Let me be good for you.”

He shuts his eyes, briefly, the way he had when we were kissing in the laundry room. The way he does when he's overwhelmed. That's a strange thing to realize: I was so worried about everything that I didn't realize he might actually be nervous too.

That glow inside me is back, different, softer. I wrap my arms around him, pull him closer until we're skin to skin. For a second, it's just him and me. For a second, this is *real* and the rest of the world doesn't exist. My contentment turns to urgency. “C'mon, let's go,” I say, and I can feel his laugh all over.

“So needy.”

I push out my lip, fake pouting. “That a problem?”

He laughs again. “Not when your pussy feels like this.”

He moves slowly, carefully, then less slowly and carefully when I push back, urge him on. Noises fill the room—the slap of skin, Mike's breath in my ear. It feels good, different than how I expected, less a diffuse sort of pleasure and more like watching a firework ascend in the sky, ready to burst. I cant my hips, and he drives deeper, his fingers digging at my arms. We kiss, occasionally, kisses that are more like desperate presses of our mouths.

The camera is still hovering nearby, and I can't forget about it even if I want to. I imagine how the footage must look: the roll of the muscles in his back, how his hair is starting to gather sweat at his temples. Little parts of him I don't want to share with anyone, but I have to.

“Let me be on top,” I say.

He stills, holds himself steady for a second, then pulls out. My pussy throbs and I rub it absently.

“Are you okay?” he asks, like he’s worried he’s hurt me.

“Just reminding you that you’re not done.”

He laughs at that, then reclines on my pillows, our bodies perpendicular to the camera.

I climb over him, legs on either side of his hips. It’s different this time around. I have to hold his cock, to position myself over him, to decide how to bear down. I do, bringing his cock inside me, shifting as I adjust, until he’s all the way in.

“You feel so big.” The words slip out of me.

“Say that louder. Make sure the people hear you.”

“Say what—that your cock is so big?” I moan semi-theatrically. I don’t know where any of this is coming from, other than the fact that his cock does feel big, that I feel full, yet not filled enough, like I’m about to chase something right over a cliff. I pump myself up and down on him, the muscles in my thighs beginning to burn. “You’re in me so deep.”

“That what you like?” He grips my ass, pulling me down tight on him, thrusting even deeper.

“Yeah,” I gasp, “do that again.”

He does a few times, until I can feel my pleasure dripping out of me in rivulets. “You’re so fucking wet,” he says.

“Is this good?” I ask. *Tell me I’m good. Tell me you want to fuck me again. Tell me you like me the way I like you.*

“You’re good, but…” Mike trails out the word, winding me up. “You’d be even better if you came on my cock.”

I don’t wait. I put a hand on my pussy, my fingers against my clit, rubbing frantically, fucking him, and clenching around him. Pleasure builds, that glowing place, that firework, fizzing at the edges, growing until it’s a burst of light. I’m saying words, possibly shouting them through the thin apartment walls, a *fuck fuck fuck* as I finally come that leaves me boneless and soaked and panting.

He’s right—he doesn’t last much beyond that, just a final rhythmless push inside me, followed by a sound that’s not really a word, whispered into my neck. It lasts longer than I expect, like he’s pouring himself out of himself, until he collapses back onto my pillows with a *fuck*, then tucks me against him and kisses my hair.

I don’t know how long we stay like that, with him holding me, his fingers softly tracing my spine—too long. Not long enough.

“Hit the camera,” he says after a while. His voice is hoarse.

Right, I need to do that. I stop the video. What if it didn’t record? What if we had to do this again because of...technical difficulties? The thought makes my heart race. But no, this was a one-time thing. We’re both doing this for the money and for absolutely no other reason. So I unclip my phone from the tripod and put it on my desk.

By the time I’m done, he’s already sitting up. He frowns vaguely at the condom before he pulls it off and knots it.

“Here.” I hold out a wastebasket.

“Thanks.” He drops it in.

We stand there like that for a second. I’m still naked. I grab my robe off the hook on my door and pull it on. It’s pink, fluffy, comfortable, probably the least sexy thing in the world. I go back to being *me*, that other Victoria already on the shelf somewhere.

“I should probably get cleaned up,” he says, but what I hear is *I should probably get cleaned up and leave*.

“The bathroom’s right outside the door. Um, wear pants.”

He does, pulling on his boxers, followed by his jeans, but doesn’t bother with a shirt. I have no idea what my roommates are going to think about any of this.

Mike slips out and returns a few minutes later. “You probably want to do that too.”

“Yeah.” Because I googled *how to clean up after sex* a few days ago. Peeing is important. Given the way my legs already feel like rubber, an ice pack probably wouldn’t be totally out of line. Reality starts to filter back in. That it’s Wednesday. That I now have to edit a bunch of video. That people on the internet are going to see us do all that.

That Mike’s still standing there, hands in his pockets, like he’s not sure what to say either. Five minutes ago, it felt like we could say anything to each other like two actors playing our roles. Now we’re Mike and Victoria, who’ll have to see each other in the locker room.

“Do you want me to iron your shirt?” I ask. Because it’s sitting in a heap on the floor.

He shakes his head. “I should head home. I have class early tomorrow.”

“Yeah, me too,” I lie. “I’ll let you know when the video’s posted. Anything I should edit out, I guess?”

He thinks for a second. “That part about me talking to Jonathan in the

dugout, probably.”

*Right.* Because we’re not ourselves on this video—can’t be anyone but two anonymized people having sex for money. “Yep, will do.” I’m not sure how I’m supposed to say goodbye. If I should hug him or simply let him leave. I get the absurd urge to punch him in the arm. “I’ll get the door for you.”

I open door to my room, then the one to the apartment, letting Mike out into the hall. I tighten the belt on my bathrobe. Somehow, I feel more naked than when I was naked.

He pauses right outside the door. “Hey, Victoria, thanks.” For a second, I think he’s going to kiss me.

Instead, he leaves, and I wait until he’s walking down the stairs, then go back to my apartment to clean myself up.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Mike*

I'M GOING to catch hell for this.

The best part of being a catcher is you have command of the game—I'm the only player who gets a full picture of the entire field of play. That means I get a front-row seat when shit goes wrong. In baseball, a lot of shit frequently goes wrong.

That also means that when I fuck my personal life up this completely, I know exactly what I'm doing and do it anyway.

I leave Victoria's. I get in my car, drive back to my place. I don't bother rolling down my windows. I don't listen to the radio. I have five whole minutes of this not being a problem, and then it's gonna be a big fucking problem.

When I get back to my apartment, there's already a strip of light coming from under my door. I pull out my keys, but I don't need them: Jonathan left the door unlocked. Because he has a spare set of keys. Because he comes over most nights. Because he's my best friend and next-door neighbor.

He's also on my couch, a beer set on a coaster, a textbook for a business class in front of him. When we first met—when he was a freshman and I transferred after two years at a junior college, then had to repeat sophomore year because of credit issues—I asked him why he bothered studying. He could have been drafted out of high school; there are no circumstances in which he will not receive several million dollars to play baseball. Jonathan being Jonathan—he laughed. Said he *liked* studying, even if he wasn't very good at it.

“Hey, Papa,” he says, when he hears me come in.

“Hey.” My voice sounds rough.

Jonathan's eyebrows shoot up. “Fun night?”

I know what I look like. My shirt's a mess. I definitely have a couple hickies. I need a long shower. I need some time alone to not text Victoria. That's a whole other mess I can't deal with right now. But Jonathan will know if I'm lying. "Yeah."

"Who were you out with?" he asks.

"A friend." I don't give him time to ask anything else. "I'm gonna shower."

I spend too long rinsing off. Unlike the dorms that use passively heated water, at least our apartment building has an actual hot-water heater. One of the many reasons I moved out. This place isn't that nice, but it's cheaper than paying inflated dorm rates. I got to pick my apartment. When Jonathan decided he wanted to live off campus too, he moved in next door. The perfect setup.

Or it was until about two weeks ago, when Victoria put up that flier. I waited down the hallway until she was done, then went back and read it, then read it again in disbelief. I considered pretending I hadn't seen it. Victoria's business is her own. But another part of me wanted to know. Another part of me wanted her in whatever form that took. Still wants her.

So I pulled the flier down and wrote an email and told myself I was going to that café just to see if she was all right. Even after I agreed to sleep with her on camera, I tried to check in with her along the way—to give her a chance to tap out if it all got to be too much. I told myself that I was supporting her in whatever way I could.

That's all this is. Me *helping* her.

I wash my hair, soap up, and rub myself down. My knee is fine tonight, but I test it out anyway. Nothing would have stopped me from dropping to kneel on Victoria's floor. If she wanted me to carry her up four flights of stairs to her room, I would have. There isn't much she could ask for that I won't do.

Which is the problem.

There's also not much she could ask Jonathan for that he wouldn't give her—and he's got a lot more to give.

Which is the other problem.

I get out and dry myself off, tuck the towel at my waist. Sit for a few minutes, inhaling steam. Fuck, this stuff with Victoria...

The sex was hot. *Hot* is an undersell. I didn't lie when I told her I was nervous—about hurting her unintentionally. About if she'd regret doing this.



About if I'd regret this—not the sex but the circumstances. A worry that became more acute when she was resting against me. All I wanted to do was hold on to her. And then I had to get up and leave.

*Business partner.* That's what she keeps calling me. Other people can probably have sex like that and go back to being *business partners* or whatever. I thought I could. But here I am, sitting on my closed toilet seat, trying to catch my breath. *Be safe* was one of the rules. What we did felt about as safe as standing on the edge of a cliff: exhilarating, so long as you don't tip over and fall.

From outside the bathroom, Jonathan shouts something. I've been in here too long, anyway. I stand, twist myself to look at my reflection in the mirror. Scratch marks crisscross my back.

There's no way to leave this bathroom without Jonathan seeing, but there's no avoiding it either.

When I get into the hallway, Jonathan's eyes go a little wide. "You got a wild friend, huh?"

*Don't talk about her that way.* Even if he wasn't being disrespectful. "Yeah. What were you asking about?"

"I was gonna get second dinner if you want something." Because Jonathan has to eat constantly to maintain his weight.

I am hungry and probably should eat. *Maybe you should have stayed with Victoria and gotten takeout.* A great suggestion, except that would make it a date, and it wasn't a date.

When Victoria started working in the clubhouse, we got a very stern lecture from our coaches about not trying any dirtbag ballplayer shit with her. Because dating a team employee—or a teammate—is against the rules.

After Jonathan and I left that meeting, he said, *Too bad, she's really pretty.* Over the next few weeks, he added other adjectives—*hot*, even if she mostly dressed like she wasn't aware of it. *Smart*—because you have to be smart to be a nurse.

*Lovely*—the worst one, because it was true. And because when I asked him about it, he actually said, direct quote, that she reminded him of "like, a Disney princess or something."

He's still looking at me. I'm still only wearing a towel and a sense of guilt. The marks on my neck are beginning to throb.

"Sorry," I say, "I'm a little out of it. I can make something."

"We can order if you want." Which would mean Jonathan paying for it,

which would be all right if this were a normal evening.

“No, it’s fine.” *I could use the distraction.* I go into my bedroom, throw my clothes into my laundry basket. I usually do laundry on Wednesdays. I should probably put a load in, but I can’t make myself do that right now. Even from a distance, my clothes smell like sex and Victoria, the floral-and-clean-linen scent that clings to her like an atmosphere.

I shouldn’t be selfish. I know this is about the money for her, even if she doesn’t trust me enough to tell me what’s really going on. (Even if I haven’t told her what’s going on with me.)

I pull on fresh clothes, return my towel to the rack, then go to the kitchen. My fridge has enough to figure out dinner. Jonathan is sitting on my couch, eyebrows pinched together in concentration. I should be used to all those things by now—not having to share a bathroom with five other people, not having to worry about if I have groceries.

I should be used to having Jonathan here with a highlighter smudge on his cheek and his hair falling in waves. He looks up when I start pulling stuff out for dinner. “Whatcha making, Papa?” he asks.

*I should be used to him calling me that.* My last name’s Pappalardo—my family insists it’s pronounced *Papa-yard-o*, even though there’s only one *L* and we’re Italian. Either way, the nickname just kind of happens. Other guys call me that too, but usually not with Jonathan’s... sincerity. Whatever implications that nickname could have, he doesn’t mean anything by it. No matter how easily or often he says it.

“I’m making sandwiches.” I pull out lettuce, tomatoes, containers of mayo and mustard, along with a package of beef bologna—Jonathan doesn’t eat pork, so I stopped buying it.

Making sandwiches should distract me. But at each step, I’m hit with memories in flashes.

Wash lettuce. *Victoria on my lap, kissing me.*

Slice a tomato. *Victoria saying something dirty and laughing at her own daring.*

Toast bread. *Victoria, after. How she wrapped herself in a cute pink bathrobe and kicked me out.*

“Is something burning?” Jonathan calls from the living room.

“Shit, the bread.” I pop the toaster, dump the charred bread in the kitchen trash. If Jonathan wasn’t here, I’d just have eaten those—you can’t outgrow not wasting food, apparently. But I don’t want to eat that in front of Jonathan,

who's probably never eaten burned toast in his life because he was worried about grocery money.

As it is, I have more bread. I dial down the toast settings and put in another two slices.

When things are good, you should say they're good, because they're not always that way. Having more bread is good. Being about to graduate is good. So I'm good...just not good enough for Victoria.



WHEN I WAKE UP THE NEXT DAY, THE SCRATCH MARKS ON MY BACK HAVE faded. My room smells like my room. The only evidence I have of last night are the hickies on my neck that, in the morning light, could be razor burn.

I also have several texts from Victoria, telling me to check my burner email. I do—and find a link to a Dropbox.

Of course, she's already edited the video and segmented it into clips she saved with descriptive file names. *Making out. Oral. Me on top.*

I scan through them. With the camera only in one spot, they look amateurish, not in a bad way. *Like we're a couple doing this for fun.* Most of the shots don't have a clear view of our faces, but for the few that do, she's applied some kind of filter that make us harder to recognize. Without microphones, the sound goes in and out—Victoria on my lap while I whisper something inaudible in her ear that makes her eyes go bright.

All the clips are there: her going down on me. Her rubbing my cock between her breasts. Me going down on her, though the angle could be better. *Next time, have her ride your face.* If there is a next time.

From there, it should be the two of us together, her under me. But there's the shot of her asking me how we should do this, followed by a swift cut to her on top of me, easing herself onto my cock.

I draft a response. *Looks good.* Erase that. *You edit fast.* Erase that too. *What happened to the part when...* What? When she gasped the first time I slid inside her, when she clutched me to her, and when, for that moment, I forgot about the camera?

It's possible the sound was hard to make out for that section. It's possible subscribers have no interest in shots that are largely my back and ass. It's possible she didn't like that clip for whatever reason. That's her choice.

That's the most important part of this.

*Videos are fine, I write back.*

*I'm gonna post these today. Hope I look good ha ha.*

*Good.* An understatement. Because she looks beautiful and sexy and playful. She looks how she should always look, free from the sometimes-wary expression she gets in the clubhouse. *Except for when she's around Jonathan.* Two things I shouldn't say. *You have nothing to worry about, I write.*

Victoria doesn't respond. Which is good. Because I don't know if I could stop myself from telling her she's lovely a second time.



NOTIFICATIONS ROLL IN THAT DAY AND THE NEXT. VICTORIA POSTS THE videos and adds clips and stills on social media. All things that would be easier to process if I wasn't sitting in the locker room about to catch Jonathan in a game. If Victoria wasn't there, pushing her laundry cart.

I haven't seen her since Wednesday. Somehow, I expected her to look different, but she looks how she normally looks. She's got a runner's body—slim shoulders, strong legs. *Strong when they wrapped around your waist.* Her hair is back in a braid. She's wearing shorts and a tank top that occasionally flashes the rim of her sports bra. Pushing that cart is work, and she already has a faint glow to her cheeks. *The same way she looked when...*

I am staring. Openly. Obviously. Enough that I really shouldn't be. *No dirtbag player stuff in the clubhouse.* I know the rules and I know the reasons behind those rules.

I should be concentrating on Jonathan's start. He's already in his uniform—he changes almost comically early—and he's sitting on the locker room bench with his headphones in.

“You feeling locked in, Halpy?” I ask.

He nods. He looks nervous, but on a scale of one to *Jonathan nervous*, he's maybe a five. I motion with my hand in waves, our signal to keep steady even as the game around you doesn't.

He does it back. “Thanks, Papa.”

I make a purposeful scan of the room—the team is humming along happily, giving Jonathan his day-of space. *Good.*

“Here you go, *Equipment Girl*,” Cooper, one of our infielders, calls. He

tosses his laundry ring at Victoria. It misses the cart and lands on the floor, forcing her to pick it up. *Less good.*

Jonathan is tracking the whole thing, clearly about to intercede. He can't have a reputation as a clubhouse *problem*, though shaking the hell out of Cooper wouldn't really be a problem.

I wave him off, then snatch the laundry ring from the ground and put it in the cart before Victoria can. "Good throw attempt," I call to Cooper. "Maybe work on that before the game."

"It's fine." Victoria's voice is barely a whisper, like she doesn't want anyone to notice she's there at all. "I got this." And she pushes the cart toward the laundry room hallway double-time as if making an escape.

I follow her up the hallway into the laundry room. It's loud back here and warm with the washers already going. Humid enough that she has little flyaways from her braid, framing her face. *Lovely.* A word that's not even mine, but that's what I called her. What I want to call her again.

"Hey," I say.

She chews on her lip. "Hi."

"Big day."

She lets out a sigh. "Yeah, should be a good game."

"I didn't mean the game."

Another bite at her lip, and I don't think she's wearing more than ChapStick, but her mouth is pinked up.

"Right," she says.

I glance behind myself. The door's still open. I don't trust myself to close it, not after the incident with Jonathan. Not after she demanded that I kiss her, then melted against me.

"What's the response looking like?" I ask.

She pulls out her phone, checks it, thumbing through various screens. "Okay-ish?"

"What's *okay-ish* mean?"

She shrugs, slim shoulders up toward her ears. "People like the videos but I guess they're not really doing anything different from what's already out there."

Meaning whatever amount of money we're making isn't enough. "Give it some time," I say. "Maybe it's just gotta pick up steam."

Something about that makes her face shutter. She removes her teeth from her lip, squares her shoulders. "I don't need you to *catcher* me through this or

whatever.”

“Hey.” I step toward her cautiously, my hands up. “Let’s say it doesn’t work. What else do we need to do?” *What else can I do with you? For you?*

“We don’t need to—” She cuts herself off. Despite her glare, her chin starts to wobble. “I’m figuring stuff out.”

I know that look. I’ve felt it, even if I don’t know the specifics. I move close enough to see the sheen on her gray-blue eyes. The filter she put on the videos made them bright blue. Some part of me is happy I get to see her as she really is—and our audience doesn’t. A part of me that I can’t be feeling in this clubhouse. That I shouldn’t be feeling at all.

I put my hands on her shoulders, expecting her to shrug me off. She curls into my touch. “Give it the weekend,” I say. “Maybe people just need to have free time.”

She laughs, a laugh with a few tears inside it. I want to reassure her, to kiss her and have it mean something other than a performance.

Above the sound of the washing machines, noises are starting to emanate from the clubhouse.

“It’s almost game time,” I say. “After, maybe we could celebrate?”

“You haven’t won yet,” she says.

“I meant your—*our*—first videos.” Though *first videos* makes it sound like there’ll be *more* videos.

She bites her lip. “We don’t have to.”

What I’ve learned is Victoria for *Yes, but I don’t think I should*. “Now we definitely do,” I say.

“Maybe we should wait until after the game—see how you’re feeling?”

“Nah,” I say. “We’ve got this. Halpy’s got this.”

“If you’re sure...”

“Come find me after,” I say. “We’re gonna pop some champagne.”

She laughs, and I remember how that laughter felt when I stroked my hands on her stomach. I want to feel that again. But first, we have a game to win.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*Mike*

TWO OUTS into the top of the ninth inning and Jonathan's about to throw his hundredth pitch. This game... Sometimes it feels like we're talking past each other—like the pitches I'm calling, relayed from our coaches in the dugout, never quite work. Every once in a while, though, things click.

Today, they click: I barely need to indicate what Jonathan should throw before he nods his agreement. His fastball is working. All his pitches are working. You don't get to be the starting pitcher still on in the ninth inning if they aren't.

All we need to do is to retire one last batter and he'll have a complete game shutout—his best game of the year so far. Scouts are in the crowd, probably texting their teams, telling them to increase whatever signing bonus they'll offer Jonathan when he's drafted.

If we can get this batter out. The coaches are calling for a fastball. I punch that into the communication system that sits just under my leg guard and talks to a speaker in Jonathan's hat. He shakes his head, disagreeing. I look to the dugout. They're still telling me to call a fastball.

*Nah.* I punch in a different code, the one for a curveball, and smile behind my catcher's mask when Jonathan nods. He winds up to pitch.

I don't know if I'll play after this year—major league teams usually don't draft catchers in their midtwenties who've already had an ACL tear—but I get a front-row seat to watch Jonathan play every Friday. If nothing else comes of my career, I can say I caught a guy who's this talented, this *good*. All I have to do is get down on my knees and let him work.

From his windup, Jonathan sends the ball toward me in a gentle eighty-mile-an-hour arc. The batter swings and knocks it into the middle infield, where our shortstop intercepts it, then tosses it to first base for the out.

Meaning we didn't just win—we *won*, decisively. A *fuck you* of a win that has my heart against my ribs. I leap up from my crouch—if my knee hurts, I can't feel it—and jog out to the mound. The infield's already around Jonathan, slapping him on the back, yelling his name. I wade in, ready to add my slaps.

Except he leans down and hugs me—not a bro-y, one-armed hug. He's taller than me with a larger wingspan, all of which gets wrapped around me. And shit, he's picking me up.

“You fucking did it,” I yell.

“We fucking did it,” he counters.

I laugh. “Yeah, we really did.”

He puts me back down but doesn't let go of me. Leans down and whispers, “Thanks, Papa. Love you, bro.”

Both things he says about a hundred times a day. They shouldn't do anything for me beyond just being bros, but they do.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, Jonathan pulls back and wipes the sweat from his face onto his sleeve. “We should celebrate,” he says.

Celebrate, right. Except I already have plans to celebrate with someone else. And it must be the high of the game—and no other reason—that I say, “I might have an idea.”



AN HOUR LATER, I'M SHOWERED, CHANGED, AND SQUATTING IN THE WINE-  
and-beer aisle of a nearby grocery store, handing Jonathan bottles of  
champagne to load in the cart.

“Hey, remember that changeup in the seventh inning?” he says.

“That was a good pitch.” I hand him a bottle and he preens.

Eventually, we fill the cart. I come up a little stiff—I felt good all game, but my knee doesn't always love hard floors.

“You okay?” Jonathan asks.

I bounce slightly on my toes. My knee is fine now that I'm standing.  
“Yeah, all good.”

“Maybe I should've done the kneeling part.”

And standing in an overbright supermarket, talking with Jonathan, is a spectacularly bad place to get a flash of dropping to my knees in front of



Victoria. Of her grabbing my hair, then grinding her pleasure out on my face.

Especially when she's in the next aisle over, picking out snacks. Because we're all going to party on the beach together: her, Jonathan, me, the rest of the team, and whoever else shows up. But especially her, Jonathan, and me. Not my best idea, but I wasn't gonna disappear on either of them.

"I'm fine," I say belatedly. "Let's get out of here."

I text Victoria that we're heading to the register. She arrives, pushing a cart that Jonathan immediately takes over for her. We dump our stuff on the self-checkout. Jonathan begins scanning things. When he's done, he pulls out his credit card before I can even offer. "I got this." The way he does when we go grocery shopping together and he says it's too much work to separate what's his from mine in the cart.

Except now, in front of Victoria, it's different.

*I could've paid.* But not without checking my account balance. *I could've paid...but I didn't.*

I settle for carrying the bags to the car—we all drove together—the strap of the reusable shopping bag digging into my shoulder where I cut the sleeves off my T-shirt. I'm not trying to impress Victoria, exactly, but I don't hate the glance she throws me as we're loading stuff into the trunk of Jonathan's SUV.

"I can sit in the back," Victoria offers once we're done.

I shake my head. "Nah, you grab the front." I need to message a bunch of people about party specifics anyway.

I climb in the backseat as Jonathan opens Victoria's door, waits until she slides in, then closes it and goes around to the driver's side. It shouldn't surprise me. Jonathan's idea of doing ballplayer dirtbag shit is not bringing someone coffee the next morning. He turns back to me. "You all set, Papa?"

*Yeah, all set to be a third wheel.* I give him a thumbs up.

"So," Jonathan says to her, once he starts to navigate out from the parking lot, "what'd you think of the game?"

For that, he gets Victoria's laugh. "It was all right."

He fluffs up with pretend irritation. "Just all right?"

She laughs again, and I imagine the beginnings of a pleased flush on her cheeks.

*Yeah, but I fucked her.* A mean thought. One I swallow around as I bury my face in my phone, answering texts.



IT'S NOT A LONG DRIVE TO THE BEACH—SAN DIEGO IS NEVER THAT FAR FROM the beach. It's cool out near the water, girls in loose jeans and swimsuit tops, a few huddling in oversized sweatshirts. Someone has set up lanterns that burn against the darkness. Someone else brought a sound system.

I was worried it was going to be just the three of us—that my *third wheel* feeling would extend all evening—but Jonathan's immediately pulled into a swirl of people. Guys clap him on the shoulder. Women hang onto his arms. Why shouldn't they? He's a star, bright as a lantern, and it doesn't take any special power to see that.

I'm about to find myself a beer when he turns back to me. "No disappearing on me tonight. We got some business to attend to." He holds up a bottle of champagne.

I can't help it. I grin back.

"There we go." He hands me a bottle of my own. "Hey, where's Victoria?" he asks.

I spot her by one of the lanterns, trying to recede into the shadows. "One sec."

I snag another bottle of champagne, not a large one, but a split with crinkling pink foil around the top. When I get to her, she smiles at me nervously. "This is a lot of people," she says.

There are a lot of people, most of whom are already dancing or drunk or both. "C'mon," I say, "you're with the VIP section now." I hand her the champagne.

She undoes part of the foil, peeling it back enough to reveal the little wire cage over the cork. "You don't have to hang out with me."

"I promised you a toast." I hold up my own bottle, make quick work of the foil, and chuck it in a bucket that's being used as a trashcan. "Let's do this."

That gets the slight rise of her eyebrows. "Together?"

It's noisy around us: music, shouted conversation, the beat of waves. I lean in and whisper in her ear. "You first. You earned it."

We're close enough that I can feel her inhale. Her eyes widen. In the lantern light, they're particularly gray. *Lovely*. She really is. Some part of me wants the people watching our videos to see that.

Jonathan's waiting on us. His stare is practically boring into the back of

my neck. I can't help myself. I wrap my fingers around the throat of Victoria's champagne bottle, just below where she's holding it. "Pop that," I say.

She does—pulling off the wire cap, yanking out the cork. It gushes over our fingers. She puts her hand to her mouth and drinks some of the champagne off, smiling. A droplet clings to the lower curve of her lip. *Do you want to make another video?* I almost ask.

"What about you?" she says.

I'm still holding my bottle. I shake it a few times, then uncork it. It arcs and foams and I get the gush of it and Victoria's delighted laugh. "Shouldn't we toast to something?" I ask.

"Like what?" She says it low, teasing.

"To first times." I extend my bottle, inviting her to clink the neck of her own against it.

"To first times." She taps my bottle with hers, and she waits until I've taken a healthy swallow of champagne, then adds, "And friends with some pretty *big* benefits."

I choke, and she rubs her hand on my back. "You okay?" she asks innocently.

"I'm good," I rasp out. "Jonathan wanted to know where you were."

Victoria frowns. "Is that why you came over here?"

*I wanted to see you before you discovered you had a better option.* "I promised him I'd celebrate his win."

Her smile returns. "You're sweet to him." She flushes, like she's embarrassed to have said that.

"I'm really not," I say. *Because I slept with you and lied to him about it. Because the sweet thing would be to tell you both you like each other so you can live out your happily ever after without me.* I reach for her hand, my fingers easily circling her wrist. "C'mon, let's dance."



ACROSS THE BEACH, JONATHAN'S STILL SURROUNDED BY PEOPLE. I SHOULDER my way through the crowd. Holding Victoria's wrist is awkward—it feels too much like tugging her along—so I slide my palm against hers and intertwine our fingers. It's nothing. *Logistics.* The beat of my heart against my ribs must

also be logistics.

“Wait here,” I tell her.

Eventually, I post up next to Jonathan, who’s caught up in conversation with a guy who’s motioning about something—pitching, from the look of it.

“—I would’ve gotten drafted if I’d stuck with it,” the guy says.

Jonathan smiles, though his eyes are hard. “I’m sure.” He takes a meaningful sip of his champagne. Then he spots me and Victoria, and his smile lights up. “’Scuse me, bro,” he says to the guy, then brushes past him.

“You good?” I ask Jonathan when he gets to me.

Jonathan glances at the guy, who’s holding up his phone like he’s filming us. “Yeah, you know,” Jonathan says, “he played in high school.”

So, one of *those*—guys who’re never that good, except in their own recollections, who’re eager to tell Jonathan how they would have made it to the big leagues if not for circumstances outside their control. As if his success is an accident and not because he lives and breathes the game.

“You want me to fight him?” I ask, mostly to make Jonathan laugh.

“Do not punch him. We need those hands of yours.” And Jonathan rubs his palm over my knuckles for emphasis, a nothing of a gesture, except for how it feels like champagne bubbles in my blood.

I’m still holding the bottle, and I drink, then laugh when Jonathan bats it out of my hands and takes his own swallow, bottle carefully held out from his lips.

“I brought you a friend,” I say. I glance around. It takes a second to find her, standing in pocket of space apart from everyone else. The lantern light picks out glimmers in her hair. She really does look like a princess, like someone too good for me.

“You think she’d dance with me if I asked?” Jonathan says.

“Yeah,” I say, even though it aches a little, “I really think she might.”

I turn—I have a whole bottle of champagne, a whole crowd of people who I’m not prohibited from sleeping with, some of whom I have actually slept with and probably could again—when Jonathan grabs my sleeve. “Where are you going?” he asks.

“I figured you wanted to...” I fumble around for something that doesn’t sound jealous. “That you might want your space.”

“Come hang out,” he says. “I need a wingman.”

I take another necessary swig of champagne, letting it fizz on my tongue. “Sure, of course.”

We get over to where Victoria is swaying slightly to the music. The party flickers around us: the flash of moonlight off the ocean, people buzzing with laughter.

“Hey,” Jonathan says, voice pitched low in a way that I’d razz him about if not for how Victoria smiles up at him, “you wanna dance?”

She glances around like she’s checking to see if anyone’s watching us. Sure enough, the bro Jonathan was talking to still has his phone out and is broadcasting the party on Insta.

“The team is kind of strict about me fraternizing with players.” Her voice trips on the word *fraternize*.

“What if you dance with both of us?” Jonathan says.

Victoria blinks. “Um,” she says, like she doesn’t know how to explain the concept of threesomes to a college baseball star. Not that he and I ever have. Other guys on the team do, occasionally—they’ll come into the clubhouse high-fiving one another about it. But he and I don’t...because, well, we don’t. It’s fine. I tell myself it’s fine.

Jonathan seems to realize his error. “As friends, I mean.”

Victoria nods. “Okay, sure.”

Nearby, people are clustered by a speaker, some dancing, some just making out to a beat. It’s darker over here, outside the cast of lanterns, the air thicker with seawater. We dance. For a while, it’s easy—all of us a little apart, Jonathan goofy and enthusiastic, Victoria laughing as he spins her around.

Until the music slows to something deeper, *romantic*. If I were the type of guy to make sex playlists, this would be on it.

Jonathan and Victoria are still dancing together. I should go. Except I don’t want to leave them—either of them. So I position myself at Victoria’s back, held apart by the slimmest distance.

She looks up at me. For a heartrending second, I think she’s going to—politely—send me away. Until she leans against me and rolls her hips and offers me a languid smile.

We dance together. My hands end up at Victoria’s waist, just below Jonathan’s. Our fingers brush occasionally. Jonathan whispers something that makes her laugh, a sound I can feel more than hear. Her hair falls softly against my chest. It’d be nothing to lean down and kiss her on the nape of her neck. Except I shouldn’t, and the *shouldn’t* makes me want to do it more.

Eventually, the song ends. As the sound fades, something triggers in my

peripheral vision—that guy, still videoing the party. I pull myself away from Victoria. “Let me go deal with this asshole,” I say.

“Don’t,” Jonathan calls, but I’m already walking toward the guy.

“Hey,” I yell, “what the fuck are you doing?”

“Say hi to the people at home, Pappalardo.” And he says it *Papa-lardo*, because of course he fucking does.

I give him a hard look. “Knock that off.”

“C’mon, aren’t you a streamer too?” he asks, not putting down the phone.

Panic washes over me. *How the fuck does he know about me and Victoria?*

Until he adds, “Well, I got more subscribers than your little YouTube channel.”

Right, right, because I made a few gaming videos when I first got to San Diego, when I didn’t know anyone and needed a way to fill the time. *Before Jonathan.*

The guy’s still videoing me, possibly zooming in on whatever my face is doing.

“Say bye, ’cause you’re done.” I grab his phone, ignoring his yelp of surprise, then X out of Instagram Live. The video processes for a minute. A notification comes up that it’s posted. I scroll through it—mostly shots of the beach, a few of Jonathan patiently nodding as the guy explains pitching like Jonathan doesn’t know a thousand times more than he does.

Then the three of us dancing together...an implication that we’re doing more than that in the slide of our hips and the way Victoria’s looking at Jonathan. The way I’m looking at both of them.

Victoria’s not wrong: She could lose her job over this. Fuck this guy.

I delete the post. Delete where it autosaves to the guy’s archives. Toggle to his camera roll and delete where it backed up there too.

“Mind your business.” I throw the guy’s phone down the beach. It falls into the wet sand right as a wave delivers itself on shore. “Better go get that before the ocean does.” And I laugh as the guy takes off running.

When I turn back, Jonathan is scrubbing a hand over his face. “You didn’t need to do that.”

“No, *you* didn’t need to do that,” I say. “You know teams wouldn’t like it.” Because the draft is in two months. Right now, Jonathan’s projected to go high in the first round. Most teams won’t blink at him getting in an *altercation* at a party, but some might.

“I could say the same to you,” Jonathan says.

*No one’s going to draft me.* Too serious a thought on a nice night.

We go back to where Victoria’s still standing at the edge of crowd, looking slightly overwhelmed.

“Hey,” I say to both of them, “you want to get out of here?”



WE END UP ON A STRETCH OF BEACH A WHILE DOWN FROM THE MAIN PARTY. Jonathan snags a lantern, then grabs a couple blankets from his SUV. He lays one out on the sand, and we all sit. It’s late, well past midnight, and the air has gotten as cold as San Diego ever gets. Victoria shivers.

“Do you want to go back to the party?” Jonathan asks. He’s lying next to where she’s sitting, and they’re not leaning on each other, exactly, but not sitting very far away either.

“I’m good.” Her teeth chatter.

“Here.” Jonathan reaches into the pile of blankets and pulls out something—a jersey of his—and offers it to Victoria. She takes it and puts it on, buttoning it. It’s long on her, practically a dress, covering her shorts.

“You just happened to have this with you?” she asks.

Jonathan shrugs. “I figured I’d bring it in case anyone got cold.”

Victoria smiles, then slides over to where he’s sitting. He drapes a casual arm around her. Or almost casual. He looks like he did when he finished the game earlier: lit up.

Especially when she leans against his chest, hair glowing against the dark blue of his T-shirt. They’re beautiful together in a way that makes it hard to look at. In a way that makes it hard to stop. Especially when Jonathan leans down and whispers in her ear, purposefully loud. “Mike threw a guy’s phone in the ocean for you.”

Victoria laughs, then stage-whispers right back. “Mike threw a guy’s phone in the ocean for *you*.”

Jonathan’s Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. “Um,” he says, like he’s deliberately changing the subject, “we never toasted the game.” He picks up Victoria’s bottle of champagne, hands it to her, then retrieves his own while I pull mine from the sand. “What are we drinking to?” he asks.

“To friends?” I suggest.

And Victoria gives a neat little cough at that, as if remembering our previous toast.

Jonathan glances between us, then raises his bottle. We both tap it. “To friends,” I say, and we all drink.

After she drinks, Victoria settles back against Jonathan; I take another long swig of champagne. Maybe I should get out of here. They look...cozy.

*In love.* Or like they could be. I try not to grind my teeth.

“That was some game you called, Papa,” Jonathan says, not for the first time tonight. He caps it with a long, sincere swallow of champagne. From the way he tilts his head back, most of the bottle is gone.

“I just call what Coach tells me to call,” I say.

“Not that final pitch.” Jonathan grins at me, and something about that reminds me of how our fingers brushed when we were dancing.

“We’re probably boring Victoria,” I say.

From against Jonathan’s chest, Victoria murmurs. “That’s okay. I know how it is. I played softball for a year in high school.”

Something I didn’t know about her. Should I have known that? What else don’t we know about each other?

“Where’d you go to high school?” Jonathan asks, and I gear up for them to play Southern California geography, because he’s from Santa Monica.

This should be an easy question—except Victoria chews her lip. “Nearby.”

“I probably played against you guys at some point,” Jonathan presses. “There were tournaments all over.”

Victoria shifts away from him, sitting up and hugging her arms around her knees, obviously reluctant to answer.

I clear my throat. “Halpy, not all of us went to prep school.”

Jonathan’s forehead scrunches, like it never occurred to him that you could be judged for where you went to high school, even if he went somewhere that costs more per year than our college. He nods, absorbing it. “Sorry.”

Victoria gives him a faint smile. In the moonlight, her eyes look especially gray. I wonder if that diminished Jonathan’s *princess* notions of her—or enhanced them, Victoria as his Cinderella with a laundry cart.

“So,” Jonathan says, “you wanna dance?”

Victoria’s grin broadens. “Here?”

“Why not?”



He pulls his phone up, thumbs through it for a while. “You’ll probably think I have really bad taste in music.”

I expect Victoria’s gentle reassurance that he doesn’t. “Hmmm, yeah, probably,” she says.

Jonathan laughs. “We’re not gonna listen to whatever Mike suggests.” And he pauses long enough for me to go “Hey!” and toss a handful of sand at him without hitting him.

Victoria turns to me. “What do you listen to?” she asks.

*Nothing conducive to dancing on a beach.* “Dealer’s choice.”

Victoria frowns over her phone for a minute—even her frown is cute, a pinch of her dark blond eyebrows—before she arrives on something. “How about this?” A song plays tinnily from her phone speaker, low and sultry.

Jonathan offers her his hand, and they both rise. Victoria fits into the breadth of his chest, like he can surround her. Protect her. His hand traces the small of her back. She looks up at him and...

I should clear out of here, for real. Take myself someplace where looking at them won’t make me feel like I’m twisted up inside. Not jealousy, exactly. I want them both to be happy—I just don’t understand how I fit into any of that. *You probably don’t.*

Until Jonathan says, “Hey, Mike, come cut in, I’m going for more champagne.”

I get up, wipe the sand off my legs, and take Victoria’s hand when he offers it. His fingers brush mine. *Stay*, I don’t say. As if that’s a possibility, the three of us together.

He jogs off toward his car, leaving Victoria and me to look at each other. She’s still in his jersey. Standing, it falls to almost her knees.

“You don’t have to dance with me,” she says.

“That’s *Victoria* for ‘I want you to dance with me.’”

That gets her laugh. “Yeah, you’re right.”

I tighten my hand at her waist. “I like you better when you’re not afraid to ask for the things you want.”

Her eyes go hot. She looks over to wherever Jonathan disappeared to, probably padding across the parking lot in his bare feet to bring her more champagne. “Is he always like this?”

“Pretty much,” I say. “I feel bad sneaking around on him.”

She bites her lip. I can almost hear her think, *It’s not sneaking around if there’s nothing real between us.* “Me too,” she says.

“You want to tell him?” It’s a spectacularly bad idea—if this gets out, Victoria will lose her job and I’ll probably get cut from the team. Three people can’t keep a secret.

Victoria shakes her head, emphatic. “I don’t know that he’d get it.”

*He might not, but he’d probably try.* “You should go out with him,” I say. “If you want.”

That frown reappears between her eyebrows. I want to kiss her there as if we do that for real and not just for an audience. “You don’t have to say stuff like that,” she says.

I try to parse that in *Victoria*. So she wants to but doesn’t know how. “He’s getting drafted in July,” I say. “No one would blame you if you did.”

“I don’t want to get fired.”

I don’t know why I’m pressing so hard. If they start dating, they’ll probably both leave me behind. “He’d take care of you,” I say, “money-wise.”

She blinks, once, a prolonged blink. Her nostrils flare slightly. She steps back, smoothing her hands down the length of Jonathan’s jersey. “I can take care of myself.”

*You wouldn’t have to.* Something I can’t give her.

“Hey!” Jonathan is running back, holding a bottle of champagne in each hand, wearing a grin. “Everything good?”

Victoria smiles at him. “All good. You wanna open those?”

He does. We toast again. “To fucking baseball, man,” Jonathan yells, because he’s semi-drunk and loud and happy.

“You’re ridiculous.” I reach for his bottle.

He holds up a hand, then drinks deeply. He passes the bottle to Victoria, who takes a neat little sip, then passes it to me. The mouth of the bottle is warm from their lips. I drink, as close as I’ll get to kissing either of them right now.

After I’m done, I wipe my mouth with my hand. “Anyone want to go swimming?” And laugh when Jonathan rips off his shirt.

## CHAPTER NINE

*Mike*

“YOU REALLY DON’T HAVE to help me carry him,” I say when Victoria pulls up in front of Jonathan and my apartment building.

She puts the SUV in park. “It’s fine.” She was quiet on the drive over: tiredness, pensiveness, something else?

But she jumps out and helps me haul Jonathan into the building.

Getting up the stairs with Jonathan is even harder. Mostly because he keeps rubbing his face on my hair. “Stop,” I say with a laugh.

“You guys are...” He trails off.

“The best?” I prompt. “Since we’re hauling your enormous drunk ass around.”

“My ass is really big,” he agrees cheerfully. Of course, he rubs his face against my head again. “Your hair’s all slippery.” He leans over and does the same thing to Victoria, face in her hair, gentle. “You smell really nice.” And Jonathan’s got a lot of talents, but making that not sound creepy is pretty remarkable.

“Thanks,” Victoria says, smiling back, “you too.”

“I smell like the ocean.” He wrinkles his nose. “I’m gonna wake up smelling like the ocean.”

“You gotta get to bed first,” I say.

We finally reach his apartment. I unlock it with my spare key. Jonathan’s place is very...Jonathan. He clearly had people to pick up after him when he was younger. Now he pays a cleaning service every once in a while, so his apartment exists in one of two states—ruthlessly neat or total chaos. Right now, it’s the latter. Navigating through this with him will be like fording a river.

“Actually,” I say, “let’s bring him into my place.”

Once we're in my apartment, Jonathan is steady enough to make it to my couch, but not so steady that he doesn't stumble on his descent while I'm still kicking my shoes off by the door.

"Are you gonna puke?" I ask.

"No!" he says. "But if there's a bucket around..."

I grab a wastebasket and a Gatorade and set them next to him, then hand him a bottle of water.

Jonathan cracks it open and takes a sip. "I'm good. Well, I'll be good when the walls stop moving."

"Put your foot on the floor so the room stops spinning," I say.

Obligingly, he puts his foot on the floor.

"There's a blanket if you want." I don't know why I'm telling him this; he's slept on this couch plenty of times.

But he pulls the fleece blanket from the foot of the couch and nestles under it, eyes closed contentedly. Some of his hair drifts onto his forehead. I push it back from his face.

He blinks up at me. His eyes are very brown and very wide in the dark. "Hi," he says.

"You are very drunk."

"I won the game," he says, with the sincerity of the very drunk, "because of you."

"No, you won because of you."

That gets him to smile. I suppress the urge to push his hair off his forehead again. It's one thing if he's asleep and another if he's awake and looking at me. A compromise I made with myself when we first met. Jonathan and I are best friends—*just* friends, no matter what else I might want. A want that doesn't usually bother me but now simmers close to the surface.

Especially when he smiles at me, soft and a little uncertain. "I'm really glad we did that together." And it's unclear if he means the game or the party or the dancing. I don't have a chance to ask before his eyes slide shut in sleep.

When I look up, Victoria is still standing there, still in his jersey, watching us.

"I can drive you home," I say.

"It's fine, I can walk." She plucks his jersey away from her body. "Maybe not wearing this."

“Here, I can lend you something.” And I lead her down the hallway to my bedroom.

“Your place is so much cleaner,” Victoria says when she gets into my room.

“Yeah.” *Clean*, not exactly what I want to hear when I have Victoria—or anyone—in my bedroom for the first time. I dig through my dresser and pull out a hoodie, checking to see if it has my name on the back. It doesn’t. I tell myself I’m not disappointed. Having her walk home wearing something from the team is practically an advertisement that she’s sleeping with me.

“I can walk you home if you—” And I swallow around the word *want*, because when I turn around, Victoria is leaning against my shut bedroom door, the top few buttons of the jersey undone so the collar drapes apart.

She’s looking at me deliberately, different from when we were dancing on the beach. Slowly, she draws her hand down the side of her breast, a stroke across the fabric.

My mouth goes dry. I swallow. “You like wearing that?”

She smiles. “Almost as much as you like seeing me in it.”

It takes exactly three steps to cross my bedroom floor, to back her up against the door, to cup the point of her chin in my hand. “I like seeing you wear that,” I say. “But I’d like it better if it was mine.”

“Would you?” She raises a challenging eyebrow. “You said you liked me better when I told you what I wanted.”

*I like you always. That’s the problem.* “What do you want?”

“We need more videos.” She plays with the fabric at the neck of the jersey. “So we should make some videos.”

*More videos.* What I want. What I shouldn’t have. “Jonathan could hear us,” I point out. It feels like a splash of cold water: Jonathan, who she might actually want to date—whose jersey she might actually want to wear.

“Jonathan could hear us.” She shrugs teasingly. “So we’ll have to be quiet.”

Fear clenches my belly. “This isn’t a good idea.” Because it isn’t. I should say *we shouldn’t*. I should say *no*. Instead I say, “Let me get my ring light.” So I unearth it from the back of my closet, set up the tripod, turn on the light.

“Use my phone,” Victoria says. She hands it to me, and I clip it in.

I scan the room. “Where should I set this up?”

“Point it at the door.”

I set it by the foot of the bed, camera stationed back far enough to include the majority of the doorframe in its field of view.

Victoria examines the set up like she's considering camera angles. "Maybe a little off to the side?"

I scoot it about a foot or so over. "What now?"

She points to my desk chair. "Pull that out and sit. And don't interrupt me until I tell you to."

I do as I'm told.

She leans against the door, eyes shut. Carefully, she kicks off her shoes, slides her hands underneath the hem of the jersey, then strips off her shorts. The jersey is long, but when she rolls her hips, the barest outline of her underwear shows through. They're different from what she had on the night we fucked: plain cotton, practical. I want to soak them, then pull them off with my teeth.

I shift in the chair.

Victoria notices. "You okay?" she asks, amused.

"I'm fine." Though my voice is hoarse.

She unbuttons more of the jersey until it's a deep V, revealing the fabric of her tank top. Her nipples are hard, her eyes intent.

I shift again.

She does a series of maneuvers—unclasping and sliding off her bra, peeling off her tank top. Seeing her naked from the waist up should be a surprise. Last time, she was shy. Apparently, I fucked the *shy* out of her. Or she fucked it out of herself.

I'm about to see if she'll let me kiss her, or suck her tits, or drop to my knees, when she pulls the jersey back on, the fabric sitting loose over her chest. Our team logo. *His* number, a stitched-on 18 that Jonathan specifically requested. Not like mine, a 52 without any meaning: what the team gave me when I showed up and that I never wanted to bug anyone about changing.

I'd like that jersey better if it were mine...*right?*

I've fucked men before, a few times. The last time didn't go so great. But I've never put anyone else gently on the couch and run my fingers through their hair. I've never wanted anyone else to date the girl I have a crush on just so they'll both be happy.

I can't think about that, not with Victoria here. Not with Jonathan asleep in the other room. I'm sure tomorrow he'll wake up hungover, straight, and asking me to make him toast.

Victoria notices my distraction. She opens the jersey, cups her breasts in her hands, pushes them together like I need a reminder of the last time. How she asked if I'd do this with her in front of all my friends. *Just the one, and he's not interested.*

"I can tell you're thinking." She points to the floor in front of where she's standing. "Think from over here."

I walk to her slowly, shucking my shirt along the way. If I don't get everything, I can at least have something I want. I trace my hand down her body and slide it between her legs. Her panties are wet, but they could be wetter.

And I'm sure to look her in the eye as I kneel.

Of course, my knee cracks. Pain lances through the tendons around my kneecap. "Fuck." I clench my eyes shut. "You can edit this part out."

When I look up, Victoria is studying me, teeth against her lip in thought. "We don't have to do this."

"Just give me a second."

Victoria nods.

The throbbing in my knee recedes. "I'm good."

"Are you sure?" she asks. "Do you want a pillow or anything?" Said in the same tone Jonathan used earlier when he suggested that maybe he should have done the kneeling part.

"I got this." I clasp her waist, part the jersey where it's clinging by a button, press my mouth to the narrow curve of her belly. She makes a breathy little sound, an *ah* I feel more than I hear, so I do it again.

This close, her underwear has a floral pattern—pale gray on white. I rub my knuckles against her pussy through the fabric. She's warm, wet like she's been thinking about me. Or about someone, at least.

I tug down her panties. She balances her hand on my shoulder as she kicks them off, and then it's only her in that jersey, barefoot, hair around her face in loose waves.

"Open your legs. Wider." I give her a tap—not even a spank, just the open palm of my hand at her hip. Another shiver. A discovery for another time. If we get one of those. "What do you want?" I ask, though it's obvious in the hitch of her breath and the twist of her hand in my hair.

"Kiss me," she says.

I kiss her pussy, sweeping my tongue through her taste, stroking it across her clit.

She cries out and slaps her hand against the door.

“Shh, Jonathan’s gonna hear you.” Then I do it again.

She cries out, louder, like it’s too much, and I’m ready to pull back when she yanks my hair and cants one leg over my shoulder and arches her back.

“You’re gonna wake the whole neighborhood, baby girl.”

She practically growls. “Not if you don’t stop talking.”

I lick her again, giving her my mouth to ride on. She swears, low, an un-princess-like *fuck*, and grinds herself on my face, her thigh pushed against my ear.

“That feel good?” I say, pulling back. I trace her entrance with my finger. “Or are you feeling empty?”

She squeezes her thighs and nods. Her hair has begun to stick to her forehead. She looks fucked out and not fucked enough, and I don’t do anything else until she cracks a resentful eye open at me.

“I need...,” she begins.

I stand and push down my pants, leaving my boxers, and take my cock in hand. “You need this?”

“I need you,” she says simply.

It’s enough to send me back to my knees, frantic, tongue inside her, fingers stroking the wetness trailing her inner thighs. She’s shaking, a shake that accelerates as I lick her, as my world narrows to the heat and smell of her.

I press my thumb against her clit, not harshly, but enough that I’m met with a gush of wetness, and she cries out like something’s being torn out of her and sinks to my bedroom floor.

“Was that good?” I ask, to rile her up, and get her soft laugh.

“Everything feels so...” She clamps her legs together, still rolling with aftershocks. “...so much.”

“Yeah?” I turn back to the camera. “Think the people want to see you have another?”

She startles like she forgot her phone was there, then nods. “I don’t know if my legs will hold me up.”

“They don’t have to.” I pull her to standing, drawing one leg, then the other around my waist until I’m balancing her weight between my body and the door. She’s still in that jersey—now rumpled with sweat and the combined friction of our bodies.

I push the flaps of the jersey apart, lick the points of her nipples, rub my



stubble against her chest. I want her to feel this tomorrow, to touch herself and know I was there.

A knock reverberates from the other side of the door. “Hey, Papa...”  
*Jonathan.*

Victoria’s eyes go very, very wide. She clamps a hand over her mouth. I can’t put her down, not without the thump of her feet hitting the floor being obvious to Jonathan, drunk as he is.

“Did Victoria get home okay?” Jonathan calls.

Victoria’s eyes go even wider. She tightens her legs around my waist like she’s worried I’m going to drop her, brushing my boxer-clad cock in the process.

I grunt and try to cover it. My heart is going from holding her up, from how I’m breaking something in his and my friendship. It beats loud in my ears. For a panicked second, I imagine he can hear it through the door. “Yeah,” I manage, “Victoria’s okay.”

“Good.” He rattles the doorknob like he might try to come in.

My heart kicks up even faster. I scramble for something—anything—to say. “There’s more Gatorade in the fridge if you want it.”

He might refuse. I might need to tuck Victoria into the closet or below the bed. And *fuck* how am I going to explain the camera if he comes in...?

Finally, Jonathan clears his throat like he’s about to say something. Every bad possibility spins through my mind.

“You’re the best,” he says then pads his way back down the hallway, footsteps heavy on the floor.

For a second Victoria and I don’t say anything. I’m still breathing hard. Gradually, Victoria peels her hand away from her own mouth, looking spooked.

“We could stop,” I offer.

“Do you want to?” she whispers.

We should. I should put her down. Slip her out the door and walk her home like a gentleman. I thrust my hips against hers like a claim. Like I’m making a point about who she’s here with.

She smiles, slow, filthy. So I kiss her, hard, and groan as she sucks my tongue. My hands go to the jersey, fingers gripping Jonathan’s number across the front.

It takes some doing—I push down my boxers, then hitch her up again. She helps, gripping me with her strong thighs, adjusting until I’m at her

entrance. She's wet—from my mouth and fingers, maybe from my words—but I don't push inside. "I need a condom," I say, about to put her down in search of one.

"I have a birth control implant." She says it softly, like she doesn't want the camera to pick it up, then motions with her arm. The inside of her bicep has the slightest telltale bump. "You can fuck me bare."

And I can't stop my reaction, an electricity that crackles through me. "You sure?" I ask.

"I want to feel you," she says. "Unless you want to use a condom." She casts a look over my shoulder. "I know they make things less messy."

*Less messy.* Right. Like any part of this isn't messy: us together, with Jonathan in the other room. "Maybe I want to make a mess of your tight little pussy." I shift her again, letting her feel how hard I am, dragging my cock at her hip. "You're gonna walk past him with a cunt full of my come and he won't even know."

"*Fuck,*" she says, a single clear syllable.

I push into the wet heat of her, letting her breathe through it. "Same rules as before," I whisper. "You say stop, we stop."

"What if I say *more?*" she asks.

And fuck, I stroke into her again, helped by the weight of her body, her roll against me. She locks her ankles behind my back, braces her hands on the door. I'm in her deep, and I drive myself deeper, chasing the desperate noises she's making, her punched-out cries that almost sound like my name.

The only thing between us is the fabric of that fucking jersey, damp with sweat. I grip a handful of it. "Can I take this off?" I ask.

Victoria shakes her head. "You jealous, seeing me in his jersey?"

I thrust in hard. "Jealous of him? No." Yes.

She curls so she's whispering in my ear, inaudible—I hope—to the camera. "He wants to fuck me."

"Baby, the whole world wants to fuck this pussy. But only I get to."

She shakes her head like I misunderstood. "You want him to fuck you too."

It's too much, it's too much—her cunt around me, her words echoing in my ear. I don't bother to deny it. "Get off me," I say.

Immediately, her legs loosen their grip. Her feet return to the floor. "Are you all right?" she asks.

*Maybe.* "Turn around."

She faces the door with her hands braced against it and widens her legs. Sends me a teasing glance over her shoulder.

The jersey is staring at me, his name between her shoulder blades, his number on her back. It's nothing to push it up, to slap her ass firmly enough to draw an *ah*, to put my hand between her legs, cupping her pussy.

"Hmmm," I say assessingly, "doesn't feel like his."

She laughs. "It's not yours either."

"Maybe not." And I slide back inside her. "But it will be when I'm done with you."

I fuck her hard, hands on her tits, then on her back, arching her further, gripping the letters of his name until they're a scrunch in my fist. I want her to come apart, to wake him up so he can hear what I'm doing to his *princess*.

She pulses around me, pleasure building. I drop the jersey and work my hand against her clit, hurtling toward that edge with her, barely able to contain myself when her cunt starts to spasm.

"Come on," she gasps. "Give me everything."

And so I do—an orgasm like the pop of champagne, my face pressed to her back, against the letters of his name as I empty myself into her.

By the end of it, she's dripping, her own slick, my come. I slide to my knees and press a final kiss to her pussy, spearing her with my tongue, mindless of the taste, relishing the unsteady shake of her legs.

"Stop," she laughs, "stop." Then goes down to the floor with me, collapsing with her head on my chest.

We breathe like that, together, and then she waves a vague hand. "The camera."

I turn it off and resume my position on the floor, sitting cross-legged. After a second, she arranges herself with her head in my lap. Her hair fans across my thigh.

"I think I really get why people are into sex," she says, "if it's like this all the time."

*It's almost never like this.* "Good, huh?"

She laughs. "You really like saying that."

I blink. Right. All those *goods* I texted her when she was sending me pictures, when she wanted things she didn't know how to put into words. This was *good*. Hot and rough and frantic, for an unseen audience. Too many things to be thinking about while she drifts to sleep on my leg.

I offer her a hand. "We should get cleaned up." Once standing, I unbutton

the last button of that jersey and help her slip it off.

“We should probably wash it,” she says. “Stains tend to set in that fabric.”

I laugh, then fold the jersey neatly into my laundry pile like it’s more than a shirt.

By the time I’m done, Victoria is gathering her clothes from the floor, staring at them like she doesn’t want to put them on. “Can I borrow a shirt so I can walk home?” The question that got us into this—or that I’m pretending got us into this.

“You should sleep here,” I say. “You can shower if you want.”

“I don’t want to impose.” Victoria shifts from foot to foot, like she’s torn between wanting to be comfortable and asleep—it’s almost three a.m.—and not wanting to admit that’s what she wants. “Okay,” she says, finally, “that probably makes more sense.”

I find her a towel, play lookout as she slips from my room to the bathroom, do the same in reverse when she comes back a few minutes later with her damp hair piled on her head, smelling like my shampoo.

“Here.” I hold out the shirt and boxers I grabbed for her in case she wants to sleep in clothes.

She takes the shirt, then unfolds it and reads the back. “This has your name on it.” For a second, she looks like she wants to say something else. She slips the shirt on, dropping the towel; the shirt hangs to her mid-thighs. Her hair just beginning to dry. She looks sexy in an entirely different way than when I had her against the door.

I swallow. “I’m gonna shower. You don’t have to wait up if you’re tired.”

And as I’m leaving, she slides into my bed like that’s where she belongs.



AFTER I SHOWER, I HUSTLE BACK INTO MY ROOM. AS I’M PULLING ON MY boxers and hanging my towel on the drying rack, I contemplate where I’m going to sleep. My bed and couch are occupied. I could go next door, but sneaking by Jonathan is a bad idea.

There’s a blanket at the foot of the bed. I unfold it and drape it in the center of the floor. “Can you hand me that?” I ask Victoria, motioning to the spare pillow wedged between her and the wall.

She doesn't hand me the pillow. "What are you doing?"

"Going to sleep."

Her eyebrows knit. "On the floor?"

"Jonathan's on the couch."

"What's wrong with the bed?"

"I figured you might not want to share."

"Mike"—she sets the pillow beside the one she was using—"come here."

I slide in beside her. Victoria shifts over. My bed is queen-sized. Plenty of room without us having to touch. My sheets smell like her already. She's wearing my shirt and nothing else. If things were different, I could push up the hem of her T-shirt and rest my hand on the curve of her belly. Pull her close to me and sleep with her hair against my nose.

It's only for a few hours. I switch off the bedside lamp. We lie there for a minute in the pale dark.

"I was wondering," Victoria says, low, "why you have a ring light."

The light, now shut off, is still standing by the foot of my bed. "It's sort of embarrassing—I used to make gaming videos."

Victoria laughs, and I can feel it through the layers of fabric separating us. "Like for YouTube?" she asks.

"Yeah. They were pretty bad."

She turns to me. Her hair has come loose from the messy braid she put it in. It falls in a tumble on her shoulder. In the dark, her eyes are very blue. "Can I see them?"

"The videos? Absolutely not." And I must be imagining it when she slides closer to me.

"Is that what you really want to be doing?" she asks. "Making gaming videos?"

I frown. "Instead of baseball?"

"Instead of engineering."

I shake my head. "I like engineering."

That gets her to smile. "What kind of engineer are you? I realized I don't know."

"Electrical." I shift, the smallest fraction of an inch, until the blanket is canopied between us. "My uncle had ALS and they got him this thing where he could draw using eye tracking. I want to build things like that, I guess."

Victoria kisses me, not the biting kisses we shared earlier, but something gentler, the barest brush of her lips at my cheek. "You'll be so good at that."

I shouldn't wrap my hand around her waist—the cameras are off, Jonathan's in the other room—but I can't help it. Can't help but kiss her forehead and watch her eyelashes fall across her cheeks. "Yeah, I mean, if I can't play ball," I say.

She settles closer to my chest. "Why wouldn't you?"

"I'm turning twenty-four in May. With my knee, there's no way I'm getting drafted." I shrug. "But I kind of want to try. That's what I was gonna use the video money for." *Video money*. Not *sex money*, though that's what it is. "A team might let me walk on undrafted. I'm not exactly getting a signing bonus." *Not like Jonathan*. It feels raw to admit. I'm chasing a dream that might be out of reach but that I can't help going after—the same way Victoria might be out of reach, if not for the way she's in my arms.

She doesn't say anything. For a second, I think she's fallen asleep. "I don't want to be a nurse," she says softly.

I kiss the top of her head. A kiss that should feel like nothing...but it doesn't. "Then why do it?"

She takes a long inhale. "My family doesn't have a lot of money. I just wanted security, I guess."

"Yeah," I say, "I know what that's like."

She doesn't seem surprised. I guess we recognize our own. She shifts against me, closer, fingers drawing vague circles on my chest. Something about it reminds me of pushing Jonathan's hair back from his forehead.

"The money's for my sister," she says. "It's complicated—my mom owes taxes. She has to pay them so my sister can get financial aid for school." She looks up at me, and her eyes are blue-gray and weary beyond it being late at night. I know that feeling—like the world is asking too much from you.

"So we'll make some money," I say. "However much you need. For your sister. And for you."

"You promise?" she asks.

I hold out my pinky, waiting as she solemnly interlocks hers with mine. "I promise."

And we fall asleep like that, our hands still clasped together.

## CHAPTER TEN

### *Victoria*

I WAKE UP EARLY—OR I think it's early. My phone is somewhere over there, and Mike doesn't have an alarm clock. *Mike*. Who's wrapped around me. He's breathing slowly, his face slack with sleep.

When I shift, trying to slip out, he tightens his grasp, then blinks awake. "Morning," he says.

"Hi." I stiffen, suddenly awkward.

The only thing I'm wearing is his shirt, which has ridden up past my hips. My hair is a rat's nest—Mike's shampoo-conditioner hybrid functions as neither. My breath is probably gross. This doesn't exactly feel romantic.

Except Mike's fingers play with the fabric at my waist. He drops a kiss to my hair. I guess we do that now, the way I kissed him before we went to sleep.

"Are you leaving?" He doesn't sound surprised.

"I figured I should before Jonathan wakes up."

Mike kisses the crown of my head again, like he can't help it. "Or you could stay. I'll make breakfast."

A *morning after* offer. Like we can have coffee together and cuddle on the couch before he kisses me by the door. In my grander visions, he sends me flowers later that day, and promises to call and keeps that promise. Even if we made a promise of a different kind last night—that we'll each do these videos for the other.

"If we're going to tell Jonathan," I say, "we shouldn't do it like that."

"Yeah, you're right." Mike tightens his arms, and I've seen him without a shirt, felt his strength when he picked me up. This is different. Everything about this is different, and I probably need to process how *different* it is. "Also," I say, "you actually have to let me out of bed."

This time, he kisses the side of my face. “Nah, stay here. It’s better here.” It’s playful, something I’ve never seen him be before. *Except with Jonathan.* When he lets me go, I’m reluctant to get up.

I manage to get out of bed. My clothes are neatly folded on the dresser like Mike did that while I was showering. I re-braid my hair so that it’s not too obvious what I was out doing. What’ll my roommates think about me being out all night, if they even noticed I was gone?

By the time I’m done getting dressed, Mike’s sitting up in bed, his sheets pooled at his waist. Should I kiss him goodbye? Maybe I shouldn’t, but I go over to him anyway. Kiss him at the corner of his mouth until his jaw lightly scrapes my cheek, and watch him smile, and find that I’m smiling too.

“You’ll be at the game later?” he asks.

I shake my head. “I’m only doing setup.”

“You could come and watch,” he says.

“You want me to watch you?” I tap my finger against my cheek in faux contemplation. “Which position do you play again?”

He laughs. “Catcher. The guy who’s actually in charge.”

“Funny,” I say, “I thought that was the guy who spends most of the game on his knees.”

“Can’t it be both?” And he winds his arm around my waist and kisses me. “You should go. Jonathan’s a light sleeper.”

I kiss him again, then walk to the door. The creak of it opening is loud. My steps down the hallway are loud. I pause, take off my sandals, and tiptoe. But when I get back into the living room, Jonathan isn’t there. The blanket is folded semi-neatly; emptied bottles of Gatorade sit on the table—Jonathan’s attempts at cleaning.

He probably just went back to his apartment, all of fifty feet away. Still, I slip out the door and rush down the stairs, then go outside for my first walk of...not shame. Because I’m not ashamed. Not of those videos, not of anything we’ve done. I roll my shoulders, then make my way to campus, in the stare of the morning light.



I WAS RIGHT: MY ROOMMATES DIDN’T NOTICE I WAS GONE. I UNLOCK THE door, and Xiomara, who’s sitting at the kitchen table, practically jumps out of



her skin.

“You must have gotten up early,” she says. “I didn’t even hear you leave.” Then she looks at me, eyes narrowed. “Or were you out?”

“I’m going to make some coffee,” I say.

Because the walk home established a few things: I need caffeine, another few hours’ sleep, possibly to stretch. My muscles are sore in a good way, a diffuse, all-over ache that’s a reminder of how Mike held me against that door, of how we drove each other on. We click. Something I wasn’t expecting out of any of this.

It’s a complicated feeling. Caffeine is easier. Changing out of my clothes and into my pajamas is easier.

I put my phone on the charger. The videos are there. I need to edit and upload them. I should probably review them, just to make sure they came out okay. *And if they didn’t, we can just make them again.* That shouldn’t make me as giddy as it does: Mike, who wrapped his finger around mine and promised me that we’d look out for each other.

I slide into bed, relaxing into my sheets, then cue up the video, watch it with the sound turned low. Me, against the door, dressed in Jonathan’s jersey, as Mike sinks to his knees. The camera mostly caught the back of his head, his neck and shoulders. Not the way he looked at me in slight awe.

That will make this easier to edit. Unlike the previous video, when I had to spend time clipping around that first moment of us together, Mike covering me, holding himself steady. Mike whispering, *If you say stop, we stop.* A moment that was too personal to show strangers, even ones who paid for *hot blonde loses it on camera.*

Me: How do I know if I actually like someone or if it’s just oxytocin?

Savannah: Who are you oxytocin-ing?

Me: You want to get brunch?

Savannah: On Saturday??? That dick must really be good

*The rest of him is too,* I don’t write. Which is the problem.

So I send back an emoji with its mouth zippered and can practically hear Savannah’s howl of delight through the phone.



SAVANNAH WAITS UNTIL AFTER WE PUT IN OUR BEVERAGE ORDERS BEFORE SHE turns to me. “Coffee, water, a mimosa...and cranberry juice?” she asks.

“What? That’s what I normally have.”

“It absolutely is not. That’s a morning-after order if ever I saw one. Meaning”—she ticks her fingers—“you’re tired, dehydrated, hungover, and worried about a UTI. So, good night, huh?”

“Um,” I say, “yeah.” Because it was. Romantic, in retrospect: dancing between them, Mike throwing that guy’s phone in the ocean. Dancing again. Later, sipping champagne while Jonathan splashed in the ocean, the sparkle of water on his shoulders and the gleam of his smile in the dark. Mike holding me up against the door, then holding me while we slept. I’m smiling. Not just smiling, I’m full-on grinning, and Savannah smiles right back at me.

“So, tell me about him,” she says.

My brain autocorrects *him* to *them*. Both of them—Mike kissing my hair; Jonathan racing up the beach to bring me champagne. Neither of whom I can tell Savannah about. My smile fades. “You know, just a guy.”

That gets her attention. She accepts her drinks when the waiter brings them over—water, a mimosa—and waits while I have my four drinks. She raises her mimosa. I pick mine up too.

“To the baseball boy you’re banging and can’t tell me about,” she says.

I clink my glass. It’s a confirmation, but there are more than two dozen players on the team. I’m not saying who, exactly. But I should probably change the subject.

“I’m worried about the ochem lab practicum,” I say, just as she says, “So he’s got you spun up?”

“I—” I start. “I’m just preoccupied, I guess.”

“Good.” She sips her mimosa. “You deserve some preoccupation. If it’s the good kind of preoccupied, not the *promises to text and then doesn’t* preoccupied.”

“Definitely the good kind.” I get a flash of Mike kneeling in front of me. My face heats.

“He must be if you’re blushing like that.”

My phone buzzes. I grab it. *See, he’s not a fuckboy, he’s texting me*, at my lips. Not Mike. Not Jonathan either.

Tyler: Lizzy’s gonna come live with me and James.

Me: Don’t call her that.

Tyler: Sure, Vicky, I'll keep that in mind

Me: You can't just do this. There wasn't even a custody hearing.

Tyler: Why would we need a hearing when Lizzy agreed that it made sense?

I blink. Once. Twice. Count from one to ten and ten back to one.

Me: You mean you told her it makes sense.

She'll still need my mom's info for financial aid.

Tyler: Why would she need financial aid?

Me: You still need to fill that stuff out even when you're on scholarship. But I guess they don't cover practicalities like that at prep school.

*Take that, you asshole.* I could put my phone away, but my face is hot, my pulse going in my temple. I watch Tyler type and type, like he's about to put an essay in my messages, then only:

Tyler: She won't need a scholarship if we just pay for her college.

Right. *Right.* Because of course he and James can just...do that. It's not like they did that for me, but it's also not like I asked. If they offered, I would have turned them down. I don't like the idea of owing anyone anything. Especially not Tyler.

I won't let him get to me. *I won't.* The burning in the back of my throat is obviously from my combination of beverages.

Discreetly, I open my bank account app on my phone and check my balance. I need to post more videos. I need to answer my OnlyFans messages. Mostly, I need to talk with Elizabeth directly—to see if she's really making this choice.

After a minute of me frowning at my phone, Savannah taps the table. "You're doing it again," she says.

"What?"

"Worrying." Her mouth turns down in sympathy.

I could tell her—but explaining this stuff to her...She went to a school like Jonathan's, like Tyler's. She's becoming a nurse to help people, not because she has to.

"I'm fine," I say. "I have it all under control."

Savannah's too good a friend to tell me I'm lying, so she pats me on the hand and calls for another round of mimosas.



I'VE SOBERED UP BY THE TIME I GO INTO THE CLUBHOUSE TO PREP FOR tonight's game. The day after a raucous game is always pretty quiet.

Today's main task is rubbing down game balls with the "mud" that allows pitchers to grip them better. I lug a bucket of balls to the dugout and sit on the long, low bench. The mud comes in a tin—it's from some secret part of a riverbed in New Jersey, and it's smooth to the touch. I dip my fingers in, then grab the first ball, still gleaming white from its packaging, and get to it.

This is practically meditative. Dip, rub, toss ball into a separate bucket, repeat.

Which is why I startle when Jonathan appears in the dugout.

"Hey," he says, "you mind if I join you?" He sits—not too close, but not that distant—when I nod. "Can I help with that?"

Like he's eager to get his hands covered in literal dirt. "You know you can't," I say.

"Right, right, the rules." Because there are rules about players touching the baseballs before the game—concerns that they'll damage or manipulate them in some way for a competitive advantage. "You can't break the rules, not even once?" he adds.

I lower my voice. "I think I sort of broke them last night."

He grins at that. "That was fun."

*Fun.* A word that doesn't exactly encompass us dancing on the beach or what came after. "I had a good time," I say.

"Me too." He brushes his shoulder against mine, slightly, but enough.

*You're fucking his best friend. You're fucking his best friend who also wants to fuck him.* "How's Mike doing today?"

The corners of Jonathan's lips turn down. "I think he's going to sit this game out." Jonathan lowers his voice. "His knee's acting up."

I think of Mike, kneeling on his bedroom floor, refusing a pillow. "Is it serious?"

Jonathan shrugs. A yes in all but words. "I hope it wasn't bothering him

during the game.” As if he’s blaming himself.

“I’m sure he would have said something if it had,” I say.

Jonathan shakes his head. “He wouldn’t have, but that’s okay.” He reaches for a mudded ball, rolling it between his palms. It settles there easily.

He looks down, like he’s surprised to find himself doing that, then drops it back into the bucket. “Whoops.” Then tucks his hands under his thighs like he doesn’t trust himself not to do that again. “Let me know when I can move.”

I get a vision of that—Jonathan, in bed, his hands immobilized as I ride him. I go a color that must be desperation pink.

“Do you need some sunscreen?” he asks. “It’s pretty bright out here.”

What I need to do is put all these sex thoughts back into their containers, ones I mentally padlock shut. “Um, sure,” I say.

He grabs a can of sunscreen, the spray-on kind that you have to rub in or else it sits there like a film.

My fingers are still covered in mud—I hold them up demonstratively. “I’m going inside in a sec. I’m probably fine.”

“I could spray some on you,” he offers.

No, I start to say. He can’t touch me the same way he can’t touch the baseballs filling various buckets. Rules exist for a reason—they’re just not always good reasons. I glance around to make sure no one’s looking. “Sure.”

He picks up the can, tilting it to the side.

“Are you reading the instructions?” I ask.

He grins. “I want to make sure I get it right.”

That shouldn’t do anything for me. I should not be thinking about anything other than this half-full bucket of unmudded balls. But I hold still as he positions the can at my arm, spraying me gently. Sunscreen drips down my biceps; he smooths it in. His fingers are callused the way Mike’s are, but in different places. Little details I should not be noticing but can’t help myself.

He repeats the process on my other arm, on my neck and shoulders. *Spray, drip, rub. Spray, drip, rub.* The third time, he doesn’t withdraw his hand immediately, touch lingering.

“I was going to do your face,” he says. “Can I?”

“Yes.” A word that hangs in the air. *Yes.*

He sprays sunscreen on the tips of his fingers then brushes them on the bridge of my nose. It tickles. A giggle rises from my throat, and I get

Jonathan's smile as a reward. He cups my jaw, thumb under my chin, tilting my face upward. It's hard not to notice our relative positions: him standing, me sitting, face level with his waist, if not for the way I'm looking up at him.

Once, he strokes a finger along the edge of my lower lip, the same way Mike did right before we kissed in that first video. Did they learn that from each other? I've heard rumors—guys who share everything. *Everyone*. I shiver.

Slowly, Jonathan withdraws his hand. "Is that better or do you want more?"

*I want all of you.* A greedy thought. I swallow. "I probably need to finish these." I indicate the bucket next to me. It's the right thing to do, the *good* thing to do, a word I hear in Mike's voice. A word I might be ruined for.

"Are you gonna stick around for the game?" Jonathan asks.

He isn't playing and neither is Mike. I shake my head. "I'll probably skip it. I need to study." Though that feels distant now—that I have an academic career I need to worry about, though I should.

"Studying on a Saturday night?" Jonathan says. "You're better than me."

*I'm really not.* "Yep, just gonna have a quiet night in." Except as I say that, I'm already making other plans.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### *Mike*

I'M HALF-ASLEEP on the couch—maybe more than half—when the knock comes.

“Whoever it is, I’m not interested,” I call.

“Mike, it’s me.” *Victoria*.

I sit up. My knee shifts. A spike of pain drives through my kneecap. “It’s open.” Just saying that takes effort.

Victoria comes in, lugging a few reusable shopping bags and a backpack slung over her shoulder. “Jonathan said you weren’t feeling well,” she says.

Like I have the flu and not an injury that didn’t heal right. That might never heal right. “I’m okay.” Another bark of pain. I make a noise I can’t help. “If you want to do more videos, not sure if I’m up to that right now.”

She gives me a look, then carries the bags into my kitchen. I hear things moving around. When she returns, she’s holding a bottle of water that she sets down near me. My mouth is dry—I’d been summoning the energy to walk to the kitchen before I fell asleep. I take it and drink. “Thanks.”

“Are you hungry?” she asks.

“I have food.” Which I do. In the same far-off spot as my water.

“Well,” she says, “I brought more.”

The pain in my knee doesn’t stop, but now it’s competing with a feeling in my chest that’s equally hard to ignore. “You didn’t have to do that,” I say.

She gives me another of those piercing looks, like she can see past my bluster. “I know.” Her jaw clenches determinedly. After a second, she softens. “I can leave if you’d rather be alone.”

Across the room, the TV is still on because I was trying to follow the plot of a procedural and not think about my knee. It only semi-worked. “We could watch a movie,” I say.

She smiles. “You pick. I’ll grab some food—I brought pasta.” She goes into the kitchen. After a few minutes, the microwave beeps. She comes back with two plates, each bearing what looks like dining hall pasta. “Sorry, I know it’s not that great,” she says. “I had extra meal blocks for the week.”

I take the plate, then the fork she hands me, wrapped in a folded paper towel to use as a napkin. No one’s ever done something like this before for me. Well, no one but my family and Jonathan, and he occasionally burns stuff in the microwave. “This is great,” I say.

“Do you need anything else?” Victoria eyes me—I’m sure I look like hell. I’m wearing my oldest sweatpants, a gray that’s faded at the knees, and a T-shirt that’s seen better days.

A now-warmed ice pack sits on the end table. “There should be another one of those in the freezer,” I say. Something about that feels worse than her bringing me water or a plate, like an admission my body isn’t working like it should.

She grabs the ice pack, ferries it to the kitchen, then brings me back another. I hiss as I apply it to my knee. It helps almost instantly, dulling the pain enough so I can eat and not think about it.

I pick up my plate along with the remote. “For a movie, I don’t actually know what you like.”

“Whatever’s fine.”

Slight annoyance creeps up my neck. “You don’t have to do that. It’s just a bad knee. I’m not totally out of it.”

“My sister and I used to watch a lot of movies.” Victoria looks vaguely over my shoulder like she doesn’t want to look me in the eye. I know that feeling. The *here’s how it was for me growing up* that makes things hard to talk about. “We had a DVD player and the library, I guess. Sometimes we got stuff out of clearance bins. Most of what I’ve seen is kind of random. Savannah gave me her Netflix password, but I don’t have that much time anymore.”

Well, now I feel like an asshole. “Sorry,” I say. “I’m in a bad mood.”

“You’re in pain.”

“Doesn’t excuse it.” I pull up various streaming apps. “What kinds of things do you like? We can figure it out from there.”

When I look over at her, her face has gone pink right at the tops of her cheekbones. Oh, right. What I said to her in that café, when I felt practically drunk with the idea that no one had touched her before. Something that hasn’t



worn off since, not with the way she kissed me last night or came apart against my mouth or how I woke up in sheets that smelled like her.

“Movie-wise, I mean,” I add, very belatedly, and get the ring of her laughter.

“Suggest a few things,” she says, “and I’ll be sure to let you know what sounds good.”



VICTORIA’S PREFERENCE IN MOVIES TURNS OUT TO BE COMEDIES THAT AREN’T mean, so we end up watching one of those. Or she watches, seated on the other end of the couch, giving me enough room to stretch out. Mostly, I watch her. Her hair is back in a braid. Her mouth is glossy from ChapStick. She laughs occasionally and darts me little glances when she thinks I’m not looking.

It’s not a revelation, exactly, but I’m glad that she puts that filter on our videos to change our faces. I don’t trust what mine is doing now—if I look as wrapped up in her as I feel.

“Do you want another ice pack?” she asks when we’re done eating, when I have the movie paused. She has her plate in hand, and she grabs mine from the end table, squeezing past me. She knocks against me, a little deliberately, with the side of her hip. A tease. Perhaps an invitation.

My hands find her waist on the narrow point right below her ribs. I tickle her gently, relishing in her laugh.

She giggles. “Stop, I’m trying to do the dishes.”

“Is that what you should be doing?” I ask.

She rolls her eyes playfully, and puts the plates down, and lets me pull her until she’s sitting on my lap, our bodies magnetized together.

And I’m so occupied with that, I don’t hear the turn of the doorknob or the creak of the door —

Until Jonathan is standing there, holding a bag of what’s obviously takeout and looking at us with an unreadable expression.

For approximately ten seconds.

He turns around and walks out. The door swings shut behind him. Apparently, Jonathan is too polite to slam a door, even when he’s this angry. Or *hurt*. Distantly, the door to his apartment opens and shuts, followed by a

*bang* like he slapped his hand against a wall.

Victoria rolls herself off me, blinking like she's trying not to cry.

*Fuck.* I have fucked this all up and it's up to me to unfuck it. I get up. My knee hurts less than it did earlier, but still enough to spear pain through my thigh. I probably deserve this. Scratch that, I definitely deserve this.

I put enough weight on my knee to see if it'll hold me. It will, at least right now. "I'll talk with him."

Victoria nods. She still looks like she's in shock. "I can leave."

"Don't." I press a kiss to her hair. "I'll see if he'll come back. We should probably all have a conversation."

"Okay," she says, "I'll wait."

Slowly, I move out of my apartment and toward Jonathan's. I have my keys, but when I try the door, it's unlocked. His apartment isn't any cleaner than it was last night. I'm not sure how to navigate through this with my knee feeling like mush.

Jonathan is at the other end of the hallway, leaning against the wall. His eyes are clenched shut and he's breathing purposefully, the way he does during bad games when he doesn't want to lose his temper. He's flexing one of his hands—not his throwing hand, thank fuck—like his palm still stings from where he smacked it.

"I'm sorry," I call down the hallway. "I didn't want you to find out like this."

"You didn't want me to find out *at all*," he yells.

I don't want to have this conversation from a distance. "Can you come here so we can actually talk?"

For a second, he looks like he's gonna tell me to go fuck myself. But he grabs an empty duffle bag from the floor, then starts shoving stuff into it as he walks toward me.

"What"—he picks up a pile of discarded workout clothes—"is there"—he scoops up three empty Gatorade bottles—"really"—he grabs a spare glove in its glove case and delivers it to the entry hall table—"to say?"

By the time he gets to me, the hallway is clear enough for me to walk. I put a steadying hand against one wall and start to walk.

"C'mon." He slides a hand under my shoulders, taking some of the weight off my leg.

We move carefully down the hall. His bedroom is off of his living room. He guides us there until I can sit—*collapse*—on his bed. Sweat beads on my

forehead and the back of my neck. I'm breathing hard.

Jonathan gives me a hard look and stomps off, then returns with a bottle of water that he thrusts at me. "The team needs to rest you more."

"I'm resting right now."

He glares. I drink. After a few sips of water, I feel better.

Jonathan's room looks like the last time I was over here: mildly chaotic. His bed takes up most of the room—a Texas king size, because he can't sleep in anything smaller. Clothes spill on the floor. Various knickknacks decorate the dresser, including photos from last year: our team at the College World Series, along with a separate one of Jonathan and me, our arms around each other.

I've fucked up. I've really fucked up. "I'm sorry I lied to you about Victoria. The situation's kind of complicated."

"Because she works for the team?" he says.

"Yeah." I take another sip of water. "But not just that." I pull my phone out, type a quick *Can I tell him about OF?* to her. Wait for a long five seconds until she answers *yes*. "We're not really together."

"You looked pretty together." Jonathan frowns. "If you're just hooking up with her, does she know that?"

"I am not doing dirtbag stuff to Victoria, all right? I *like* Victoria. We're working together. Kind of." There's no real easy way to say it other than to say it. Still, I wait, in case he slugs me for how bad of an idea this is. "We're both having some money issues and are exploring other income streams."

Jonathan's frown deepens. "What kinds of money issues? And what income streams?"

Time to rip the Band-Aid off. "We have an OnlyFans."

For a second, Jonathan breathes so purposefully, I can practically hear him counting down from ten. Or possibly a hundred. It's possible he's going to slap the wall. Or order me out of his apartment.

"What money issues?" he asks again, as if that's the most important question.

"Victoria's business is her own," I say. "But I was thinking for next year, I want to keep playing, if my knee allows it. I'm not getting drafted —"

And he makes an objecting noise at that.

"I'm not getting drafted but I want to try. That's what the money's for. Otherwise, I can't afford to play."

Jonathan doesn't say anything for a long minute. His face cycles through

a few expressions—anger that softens into something else. “How much do you need?”

“We’re trying for about fifteen thousand each.” The number we calculated out on café napkins: a cut that includes enough to cover expenses and to pay any taxes.

Another long silence. “I would have taken care of you,” he says finally.

Something in my chest goes tense. No, it squeezes, which is worse. “I wouldn’t ask you to do that.”

“It’s not a lot—” Jonathan begins, then realizes his mistake. It’s not a lot until you don’t have it. “I would have lent you it.”

“From your signing bonus?” I ask. “You shouldn’t offer that to just anyone.”

Jonathan presses his lips together. “I’m not. But I thought you trusted me enough to ask.”

However I thought this conversation would go, this definitely isn’t it. He has every right to be angry at me for lying to him. At both of us for sneaking around. Anger would hurt less than this feeling digging its way into my chest—that I underestimated him. “I should have. But it isn’t just about me.”

“If that’s her choice”—Jonathan heaves a shrug—“then I don’t understand it, but I guess I have to accept it. I just thought...” He tilts his head like he’s deciding if he should say something. “I thought she liked me. I guess not, huh?”

“She does. That part was all real.” *Including when we talked about you while we were fucking.* “It’s funny, I thought the same thing about you and her.”

A line appears between Jonathan’s eyebrows. “What does that mean?”

“Who wouldn’t pick you over me, if they had the choice?” The question slips out, then hangs in the air between us.

“I wouldn’t,” Jonathan says quietly. “I’d pick you.”

I ease my hand across the bedspread. I want to touch him—as a friend, as more than a friend; I should not touch him. “We should discuss this,” I say. “Together.”

Jonathan lets out another of those breaths. “What’s to discuss?”

*Do you want to date her?* But that isn’t the real question—the real question is something I’m only just beginning to see the shape of. How this could work if we let it. “I get the sense,” I say, carefully, “that we might come to an arrangement involving all of us.”

Jonathan's eyes go wide at that. He blinks, as if cycling through possibilities. "Would you want that?"

Yes. The kind of *yes* that's in time to the beat of my heart. *Yes, yes, yes.* "It's Victoria's decision."

A slow smile comes over him; I want to kiss that from his mouth, to see him smile as he's sprawled across my sheets. I settle for taking the arm he offers me as he stands.

I lever myself upright. Test my knee.

"Better?" Jonathan asks.

"Yeah," I say, because it is. I nod toward my apartment. "C'mon. Victoria's waiting for us."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### *Jonathan*

MIKE MOVES STIFFLY as we walk from my apartment back to his. I slide my hand under his shoulders, expecting him to shrug me off. Something about him at my side just feels right—the way it felt right my freshman year when we first met, when he found me in the clubhouse bathroom before practice.

I was hunched on the floor, trying not to throw up from nerves. I thought he might ignore me or laugh. Instead, he slid down the wall to sit next to me and said, “So does this entire city smell like the ocean or what?” to get me to laugh. We talked about...I don’t even remember. I just remember the sound of his voice and the hand motion he did—a series of waves with his palm—a reminder to keep an even keel no matter what.

He’s been my best friend ever since.

My best friend, who I had an agreement with: Victoria was off-limits. A coach once told me the worst word someone can have in their scouting report is *entitled*. I’m not entitled to anything—not to a large signing bonus and not to a pretty clubhouse worker. Even if she’s beautiful and smart and funny and doesn’t seem to mind that I’m awkward around her most of the time.

Only Mike broke that agreement and lied to me about it.

And they’ve been together. On camera. For a paying audience. The idea of that should repulse me—he lied, she demurred, and I got left out. It *should* repulse me, but somehow, it doesn’t.

He and I walk out of my apartment and to his front door. I still have a hand under his shoulders.

“I’m good,” Mike says, “if you want to let go.”

“Oh”—I drop my arm—“right.”

He opens the door. Victoria is sitting on his couch. She has her knees

tucked up under her, the same way she did when I was pestering her about where she went to high school. She glances between us, clearly trying to gauge what's about to happen. *Whatever money, I would have given it to you.* But I can't buy her. What I want from her can't be bought.

Mike's the first to speak. "I told Jon about our business arrangement." *Jon.* Not Halpy, or any of my other nicknames. What he calls me when stuff is serious.

Victoria waits like she expects me to say something—to explode again or slap the wall. To call her a name I never would. I don't know what it's like to need money that bad, but I know what it's like to go after a dream. Whatever her dream is, she should have it.

"I'm not going to tell anyone else," I say, "if that's what you're worried about."

She nods, then smooths her hand over her hair. It has the opposite effect, sending up little flyaways that halo her, the same kind she had when I was dotting her face with sunscreen earlier. When I nearly kissed her in the dugout, then forced myself to step back, because kissing her would be *inappropriate*. I almost laugh.

"Maybe we should all sit," she says. Right, Mike's knee still hurts. Another thing we pretend isn't happening until we can't ignore it.

We sit: the two of them at opposite ends of the couch, me in the armchair I once helped Mike rescue from a curb and spent several hours decontaminating, Mike laughing as I fumbled with the vacuum.

Silence hangs in the room. It's probably up to me to break it. I have no idea how. *I hear you've been sleeping together. I hear you've been sleeping together without me.* "Do you have a lot of subscribers?" I ask.

For some reason, that makes Victoria go absolutely pink. Mike tilts his head back and laughs at the ceiling. Some of the tension in my back loosens.

"We're doing all right," Victoria says. "It takes a while to grow a business."

That makes me pause. *Who wouldn't want to see them together?* "People should get on board."

"I appreciate the vote of confidence." Mike's tone is light, teasing.

Now that I'm thinking about it, I can't *not* think about it. What they might look like. What they might feel like. What Mike means when he says an *arrangement* with all of us. "Can I, uh, see?" I ask.

Victoria's eyes go wide, like I've managed to shock her. Her cheeks are

still pink: embarrassment, or something else? Does she hate the idea? She turns to Mike, who gives a slow, assenting nod.

Victoria rises. “Let me get my laptop.”

We end up all sitting on the couch, Victoria with her laptop open, with Mike and me on either side of her. She pulls up their OnlyFans account. I thought *seeing* would be them giving me their user handle. That I’d go back to my apartment and watch them together like a stranger would. Not here, with them watching me watch. My body goes hot all over, especially when Victoria selects a video thumbnail for a video clearly shot in Mike’s bedroom—last night. Because Victoria is wearing...

She blurred out the logos, but that’s my jersey. She’s unbuttoning it, her hand sliding between the fabric and the tank top she’s wearing. She’s looking at someone off-camera—Mike—like she wants him to come finish the job.

*I shouldn’t be watching this.* It feels too intimate, even if it’s for an audience. Even if Victoria is sliding off her shorts. Even if she’s unbuttoning the jersey and stripping out of her bra and tank top, my jersey still buttoned around her waist. The camera’s kind of far away, but I just make out how her nipples tighten, the slight bounce of her breasts as she shifts around. As she shows them off for the camera.

This was a mistake. I’m getting hard.

In the video, Victoria pulls the jersey back up. The fabric slides against her bare body. She points to the floor in front of her as if summoning Mike, who appears, his shoulders taking up much of the frame. He drops to his knees.

My cock gets impossibly harder. There’s a cut in the footage, subtle but present, and then Mike’s stroking her belly, pulling off her underwear. They’re saying something. I can’t hear it over the rushing in my ears. He’s kissing her, at her thigh, at her pussy, and she’s tilting her head back, loose, uninhibited, then she slaps her hand against the door.

On video, Mike stops briefly.

From across the couch, Mike breaks the silence filling the room. “We woke you up.”

“This is when I was in the living room?” I ask.

Mike nods.

*You could have woken me up on purpose. I could have...Done what? Objected? Joined in?*

Sweat pricks over my skin. I’m hard, undeniably. “You were thinking



about me?”

“The whole time,” Victoria whispers. She pulls up another video—Mike, pinning her to the door, her legs around him, pleasure clear on her face as he fucks her. They’re talking to each other, low enough that the camera only catches murmurs.

“Even then?” I ask, a little dazed.

Victoria folds the laptop, then sets it on the coffee table. Turns to me with certainty in her eyes. “Even then.”

I shift again. By now, it’s obvious how turned on I am. Victoria glances at my lap. She smiles, indulgent, and I want to pull her close to me, to feel what Mike felt on that video. I swallow around my apprehension, my arousal. “You need more people to subscribe?”

Victoria nods.

“Would it help...,” I begin, but the question is lodged in my throat. I swallow again. “Would it help if I was in the videos too?”

Neither of them says anything for a minute, a silence that seems to echo. It’s possible that this is their way of telling me *no*—that whatever *arrangement* Mike mentioned is something else entirely. It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve missed something.

“Jon,” Mike says, finally, “are you sure what you’re offering?”

“No,” I admit, “not really.”

Mike laughs, not meanly. A smile plays at the edge of Victoria’s mouth.

I like her so much—like both of them in ways I can’t articulate, only that being around them feels like being in the sunshine. “Maybe you could tell me about it,” I say.

I expect, I don’t know, an explanation. For Mike to draw one of his sketches like he does circuitry diagrams. Instead, he gets up and roots around in his bookbag until he pulls something from one of the pockets, which he hands to me—a paper napkin.

Slowly, I unfold it to display a note. *Be safe, split the money fifty-fifty, don’t tell anyone else about this without checking with each other.* Below it, the spikes of his signature and the neat curving loops of Victoria’s.

“It’s a contract,” Victoria says.

“Ground rules?” I tease. *Be safe.* This doesn’t feel safe—the way the top of a roller coaster doesn’t feel safe, like I’m about to tip over into something exhilarating. Two of the provisions are fine, but... “I don’t want the money.”

Mike frowns. “Then what do you get from this?”

*I get to be with you both.* “I just want to help out.”

“This isn’t charity. It’s a business,” Mike says.

“How about this? You hold on to my portion until after the draft. Then we’ll settle up.” A *keep the money* in all but name, but Mike’s proud and stiff-necked. For a second, I wonder if he’s going to tell me to go screw myself.

Instead he nods.

“Do you have a pen?” I ask.

“You don’t have to sign.” But he holds out a pen.

I want this—want them. The rest is just details. I write my signature on the napkin—my real one, not the one I use for autographs with an oversized *J* and *H* and *18*. I stare at it, how all our names look together. Swallow audibly. “So, what should we do next?”



A HALF AN HOUR LATER, I’M PACING IN MIKE’S BEDROOM WHILE HE GOES through the stuff on his dresser to remove anything identifiable. Victoria went back to her apartment to change and do her makeup. I think. I don’t know. I can’t think about anything else other than what’s about to happen.

Mike pauses in his inspection of something—a baseball in an acrylic case that he tucks in a drawer. “Hey,” he says, “breathe.”

“I’m breathing,” I say, hoarsely.

He comes over to me. Sometimes I forget how different we are in height. Next to him, I’m oversized, my hands too big for anywhere but a ballfield. Right now, I feel like I’m about to trip over myself, even standing still.

Mike’s hands go to my arms, just above my elbows, what he does before games when my heart feels like it’s going to stutter out of my chest. “If it helps,” he says, “I’m nervous too.”

I smile. “You always say that.”

“Doesn’t make it not true.” His hands tighten on my arms in reassurance.

“I want to do this,” I say, in case he thinks I’m looking for an out.

Mike smiles. There’s something sharp in his grin. “Then we’ll get you there.”

We start out on Mike’s bed. Mike sets up a tripod, a ring light. “Don’t look directly at it,” he advises, but I can’t help my stare.

“Should I do anything?” I showered after the game. My hair looks all right, I think. Mike has out a box of condoms—the *be safe* until I get tested, and I toggle my attention between those and the camera.

Victoria’s not back yet, but she group-chatted an *on my way* that does nothing to settle me.

Mike slides himself next to me on the bed like he would in the dugout. Our thighs touch. “You want to fuck her, right?” he asks.

I’ve heard him say *fuck* approximately a million times, the conversational glue that holds together most sentences in a clubhouse. *Fuck* the opposing hitters, *fuck* the umpires, *fuck* our coaches, sometimes.

Now I won’t be able to hear it in anything but the sandpaper of his voice. *Fuck*.

Mike digs out his phone. On it, he displays a picture Victoria took. The message reads: *Show this to him*. Her hair is down, her makeup done. She’s wearing a loose white T-shirt, thin enough I can see the lace patterning of her bra under it. Her nipples are hard little points. She’s thumbing her waistband, dragging it down.

“What does she like?” I ask.

Something about that makes Mike smile. “What she wants from you might be different than what she wants from me.”

On video, they were hot with each other. Confident in a way that I’m faking most of the time.

Mike cups his hand over my thigh, higher than it normally would be, at my knee and moving upward.

*Don’t get hard*. My cock doesn’t really get that message.

“What do you like?” he asks.

I don’t answer for a second, even if it’s just us, Mike and me, the way it has been for the past three years. “I want to make you both happy.”

I train my eyes at the bedroom floor, where the carpet still has marks from a vacuum. Mike, who knows how to take care of things. Who’s careful with them.

When I look up at him, he’s studying me. “Okay.” His voice is low, rough, like a thing I can feel. “If—” he adds, and my pulse speeds at that *if*. “If you don’t like something, you shake me off, okay?”

“Sure.” I laugh. “I can do that.” His hand is still on my leg, fingers a band across the muscle, grounding me. The camera’s not on. There isn’t even a phone in the clip-on holder yet. There’s no reason for him to be doing this.

Unless...

A buzz. Mike's phone. "Victoria's outside. I'm gonna let her in." He gets up, turns to face me, hands on my knees. "You breathing?" he asks.

I laugh again. "Sort of."

He smiles. "Good." And I wait until he leaves so he doesn't see me adjust where I'm hard in my pants.

They both come back a minute later, Victoria carrying her backpack and Mike a few bottles of Gatorade.

*Hydrate*, I think. I'm not gonna crack up at that. I feel strange, untethered, like I might float away. Except for how Victoria clips her phone into the tripod, all business.

Mike holds out the napkin to her. "He signed."

She examines it, then nods. "I'm on birth control." She taps part of her arm. "An implant."

I blink, a few times. That isn't where I thought this conversation would go.

She must notice my surprise because she adds, "We're business partners. I'm not looking for anything else."

Right. I got that lecture from every coach and advisor—that I need to be careful. That people will want more from me than I can give. But there isn't much I wouldn't give either Mike or Victoria.

"Okay." My throat is dry. "You can turn the video on if you want."

Victoria taps her phone. She kicks off her shoes, comes over to the bed where I'm sitting, sliding up next to me. She looks different with makeup, with her hair done. My fingers find the ends of her hair, a soft brush against the pad of my thumb. I know she's not *delicate*—I've seen her haul around stuff that makes our coaches gasp with its weight—but something about her makes me want to touch her gently.

I stop when Mike clears his throat. Victoria looks over at him.

"We came to an agreement," he says. "He's gonna let us take the lead."

"Really," Victoria says, and it's not quite a question. "And where are we leading him?"

Mike sits, then pulls her toward him. She goes, easily, seating herself on his lap.

His hands slide to her waist, holding her casually. "I was thinking," Mike says, and he tugs the widened collar of her shirt until it drapes down one shoulder, thumb playing with the lacy edge of her bra strap, "since we know

he likes to watch, we should give him something to look at.”

Victoria smiles, different from her usual smile, like it’s for the camera recording nearby. She rocks forward, her weight on her knees, not entirely out of Mike’s grasp. “Sure,” she says. “But he can’t touch himself until you tell him to.”

Slowly, with my eyes on them both, I tuck my hands under my thighs. It only makes it more obvious that I’m already hard.

“Good,” Mike says, and Victoria makes a noise at that, like that word has the same effect on her as it does when he says it to me during games. “Let’s give him a show.”

She strips off her shirt and throws it to the floor. Her bra is lace with little flowers, transparent enough I can see the pink of her nipples, and Mike wastes no time in touching her there, palming her breasts, pushing them together, and groaning as she rubs his lap with her ass.

“She’s got great tits,” he says, like he’s asking my opinion. “The first time we were together, she let me fuck them. Maybe if you ask nicely, she’ll let you do that too.”

*I’d rather watch you do it.* A sentence that rises suddenly and threatens to spill out. I shift, pressing my thighs to the tops of my hands, and Mike grins.

At least he doesn’t make me wait. He abandons playing with her breasts to slip his hand into her shorts, past the waistband of her panties.

Her eyes slide shut. She gasps.

“That’s it, baby,” he says.

Victoria elbows him playfully. Something about that makes my heart stutter: that they’ve had this and I wasn’t part of it. That they invited me now.

She grabs his wrist, angling it, seeking her own pleasure. Her cheeks are flushed, her nipples are tight against her bra.

My hands strain against my legs. My cock presses against the fabric of my sweats. Heat spreads over my skin.

“C’mere,” Mike says to me, and I crawl across the bed. He slides the hand he’s not fingering her with up her bra. “She wants your mouth,” he says.

And he takes her nipple between his middle and index fingers, presenting just enough that I can lick between them... but there’s no way to do that without my lips on his hand. Maybe he doesn’t care. Maybe he’s lost in Victoria, in the roll of her hips and her little pleased *ahs*. Even if he summoned me over.

I have to kiss her—at the lacy edge of her bra, between her breasts. I suck

on her nipple as Mike rolls it between his fingers.

She moans, breathy, and wraps her hand against the back of my head.

I lick her and add the slight friction of my teeth, my tongue tracing the rough edges of Mike's fingers. My cock goes from hard to unignorable.

"Stop," Mike says.

I stop. Sit back. Breathe. Tuck my palms back under my thighs.

Mike laughs, low but not mean. "Any more of that, and you were gonna come in your pants."

It's true, but no less embarrassing for it, how I'm already close. He withdraws his hand from Victoria's panties. "She gets so wet. I can breathe on her, and she'll already be soaking. Here"—he taps her lips with his fingers—"taste."

She does, her eyes shut as he slides his finger slowly in and out of her mouth, fucking her with it for a few strokes.

"You're ready," he says to her, then nods to me, "but he's not."

Victoria tilts her head. "He looks ready."

"He'd be more ready if you got him all wet with that pretty mouth."

And if I wasn't hard before, just that thought would have me aching.

Victoria slides off his lap, then pulls her shorts down and tosses them away...somewhere. I can't think about anything except the soft fall of her hair, the weight of her breasts, her little shiver when Mike palms her ass.

Eventually she makes her way to me, then straddles my lap. Even from this angle, I feel overly large, my palms still stationed under my thighs.

"You can move your hands," she says. "Take your shirt off."

I do, peeling it over my head.

Once I'm shirtless, Victoria looks me over. We're close enough that her breasts brush my chest, the lace slightly wet from my mouth. She leans over, her hair a curtain between our faces and the camera. "What do you want?" she whispers.

I think of every possibility, every filthy thing I've ever imagined. "Would you kiss me?" I whisper back.

She smiles, and nods, and brushes her hair back from her face. Her lips are soft, her hair slippery when I run my fingers through it. It's easy to get lost in her, in the small drag of her tongue against mine, in how she rests more and more of her weight on me, finally sitting on my lap against where I'm hard.

Her eyes widen. She glances down in surprise, then back up at me. "Um,"

she says, “wow.”

Mike laughs from the other end of the bed. “He’s pretty humble, right?”

She adjusts herself—wiggles, really—on my lap. “Feels like you got a lot to be humble about.”

I laugh, then kiss her again, once, just to have her against me. *I’m not looking for anything else.* I don’t think about that, not with how every kiss makes me want to kiss her more.

Finally, Mike clears his throat.

Victoria casts a look back at him, sarcastic but with an air of affection. The same look they were giving each other when I walked in earlier, before they both startled apart. I’m a guest here—possibly a tourist. My role is to help them get where they want to be.

I stuff my hands back under my legs. Breathe deep as she eases the waistband of my sweatpants down, along with the elastic of my boxers, exposing the first few inches of my cock.

I’m hard, leaking. Pressure is building behind my balls. I want to ease it, if only so I don’t embarrass myself all over Victoria’s face. I leave my hands where they are.

Especially when Victoria gathers her hair in her hand so it doesn’t obscure the shot. Her breath is warm and wet across my cock, her lips pink and smudged from where we’ve been kissing. She kisses the head with a slow stroke of tongue, then sucks me into her mouth.

I make a noise, somewhere between a groan and a sigh, another when she licks a circle, when she takes just a little more.

Another noise shakes me out of it. Mike, across the bed, spitting on his palm like he might jerk off watching us, before he thinks better of it. “That good?” he asks.

I nod.

“Tell her she’s good,” he says.

“It’d be better if I could touch her,” I say.

Mike moves over toward us. He traces a hand up Victoria’s back, to her hair, giving her time to adjust to the feeling. “Not too much, baby girl,” he says. “Wouldn’t want you to choke on it.” He winds his hand up through her hair, tugging slightly, waiting until she nods, then adds, “Not yet, anyway.”

And starts moving her head up and down, fucking her mouth with my cock.

It’s hot and wet and tight, and I almost lose it right there. From how she’s

drooling down my shaft, a pool of it that stains the tugged-down waistband of my sweats. From how Mike's talking. "That's it" and "so good" and "such a slut," that I almost bristle at if not for how that gets Victoria's smile.

Pressure keeps building. If we don't do something, I'm going to burst. "Hey"—I tap her shoulder, attempting politeness—"I'm close."

She sits up. "Take off your clothes."

I strip off my pants and boxers until I'm naked and she's in her underwear and Mike somehow is fully dressed, though he now ditches his shirt.

Impossibly, I'm even harder than before, my cock wet with spit and pre-come.

"You wanna suck him more?" Mike asks. "Or do you want to ride him?"

She smiles at that, wicked.

"Um," I say.

They both look at me, and we probably should have had a signal for *stop* other than *um*.

"That position isn't always, uh, comfortable for people given..." There's no real way to say, *how big my dick is* without sounding like a jerk, so I don't.

Mike laughs, then scrubs his hand over his face. "Christ. Well, I guess that's something to consider." He walks over and taps the button on the camera to pause the recording. "Okay, so what does work?"

However I imagined being naked and in bed with my best friend and the woman we both have a thing for, this isn't it. This feels closer to how we work together—to how we fit together, something that's felt right since the first he talked to me in a way I needed to hear.

Victoria gives a slight cough. "It's up to me, right?"

Mike turns to her, the command gone out of his expression. The same way he looked at her when we were dancing together on the beach, like if she ordered him to his knees, he'd be happy to stay there. An expression I know, because I'm making it too.

"Of course," he says.

"How about on my back?" She chews her lip. "That way I can say when it's enough." And she goes even pinker.

A minute later, she lies down on her back with a pillow tucked under her so she's still visible on camera. I slide on top of her, trying to hold most of my weight. My cock, now wrapped in a condom, bumps against her hip.



“Let me know what you like,” I say.

She giggles at that, and I want to kiss her, not for the camera, but the way I might if we were seeing each other first thing in the morning. If we were together for real.

I don’t have to wait. Her arms come around my neck—she kisses me, lips soft against mine.

I glance over to the camera. “I don’t think we hit record yet.”

Victoria laughs, and I can feel it, a buzz that makes me want to feel it again. “You should know”—and her voice is low, almost inaudible—“I haven’t slept with a lot of guys.” She bites her lip, then draws me closer until she’s breathing in my ear. “You’ll be the second.”

Which means Mike must have been her first. A wave of something—heat, possessiveness—goes through me. That we’re doing this, together. That it’s her and Mike and me, bound up in ways I didn’t even realize. She’s *ours*. This isn’t technically real. It feels real, with how she’s looking at me. Her eyes are the grayish side of blue; I swallow the urge to say how they remind me of the ocean.

Instead, I press my lips to hers. “I’ll try to make it good.”

She smiles at that. “We can start whenever,” she says, louder, and Mike taps the button.

“Can I kiss you again?” I ask, and she wraps her arms around me again and does just that. The only thing between us is the slight scratch of her bra and panties, the latex of the condom. Sometimes I feel like I’m looming over everyone—I’ve been this size since I was eighteen. Even in the clubhouse, I’m the tallest there by several inches. Now I just feel solid as she clings against me, as she kisses me, and sucks my tongue, and laughs as I grind myself against her.

“Has anyone ever told you that your cock is really big?” she asks.

I laugh, too, then kiss her neck. “A few people. Maybe.”

“Well,” she says, “are you gonna fuck me with that big cock or what?”

“Depends.” I kiss her long and slow and dirty. “You ready to take it?” And I pull back from her enough that I can fit my hand between us, my weight on my knees and other elbow. She’s wet through her panties, even wetter when I slide my hand into them. I nod toward Mike, who’s sitting in his boxers on the other side of the bed, watching. “This from him?”

Victoria shakes her head. “From both of you.”

“You gonna let him fuck you after I do?” I ask.

“Depends,” she says, mirroring my tone. “You gonna send me back to him unsatisfied?”

“He better not.” Mike slides next to where we’re lying, close enough that I can feel the warmth coming off him. Then he leans and whispers something in her ear, the way he did in their videos.

Whatever it is, she flushes even deeper, and I’m almost annoyed at that—that they’re keeping things from me, even here—until Victoria says, “He told me that I better be dripping by the time we’re done.”

Challenge fucking accepted. I tug her to the end of the bed, pull her panties down and past her ankles, then nudge her legs apart.

She’s wet, visibly, and I add to it, using my thumbs to expose her pussy. I spit, once, gently, and lap at her with my tongue. She tastes incredible, slick and hot, and I know we were supposed to fuck, but for a minute all I want is to stay right here.

She grabs my hair and starts making noise. Above me, Mike is sliding his hands over her breasts, playing with her nipples, kissing her neck, and whispering in her ear.

We work her until she’s panting, until she’s whining up high in her throat. “Please”—her voice is desperate, like she’s about to break open—“please.”

Mike kisses her again, at her cheek, then pinches her nipple, hard enough that she writhes against my face. “Ask.”

“One of you needs to fuck me,” she says.

I stop what I’m doing and kiss the inside of her thigh, then low on her belly, then at the rise of her breast, then, finally, on her lips, my mouth still slick from her. She kisses back, scrabbling at my shoulder, digging in her nails, rubbing her wet pussy against my thigh, and I’m about to push inside her with my cock, when Mike says, “Wait.”

I wait.

He turns her face, now wet from mine, and kisses her deep, his hand weaving through her hair.

*Kiss me too.* A strange, sudden thought. That I want his face on mine, his hands all over me the way they were with Victoria a second ago. “Can I do it now?” I ask.

Mike grins. “You better fuck our girl good.”

And my heart trips on *our* as I line myself up and slowly push inside her.

Her eyes go wide—pleasure, I hope—but I pause anyway. She pulses around me, and I grind my fingernails into my palms and clench my eyes shut

in an effort to keep my control.

“How’s that feel?” Mike says, loud enough to be caught by the camera.

I’m holding myself up, my chest above hers, our mouths close but not touching. I lower myself in increments until we’re skin on skin. Her mouth is wet from mine and Mike’s, her pussy warm and tight and slick and a hundred other words just beyond my reach. “Incredible,” I gasp.

Mike laughs. “I was asking her.” He kisses her neck again, our breath all commingling. “She was made for this. That pussy wasn’t meant to be left alone.”

Victoria widens her legs and I slide in a little deeper, cycling my hips as she clenches around me. “I thought you were gonna *fuck* me,” she says, pushing out her lower lip.

Mike snorts. “You heard the lady.”

And so I do. Slowly, teasingly, with sweat dampening my arms and forehead. She moans, and rakes her nails down my back, and opens up little by little until I’m almost all the way inside her, until my balls are tight weights against my body, until she snaps her hips once in answer to my own.

Until I feel another hand on my lower back—Mike, his hand outstretched, encouraging me, moving me, the way he did Victoria when she was sucking me.

“She’s stronger than she looks.” His voice is at my ear, his hand drifting lower, lower, onto my ass, pressing, setting our pace.

“Arch your back, *princess*,” he says, rough, and Victoria does, finally drawing me in all the way, moaning as I hit a certain spot inside her, our rhythm going frantic.

She’s biting back words, cries that eventually stretch into a long, continuous noise.

“Look at you, taking him so well.” Mike kisses her neck. “Look at him, giving you what you need.”

Victoria smiles, hair sweat-stuck to her forehead. “What if I need more?” she asks. “What if I want you both—together?”

*Together.* The word that lights up something in my brain until I come, my orgasm like a starburst behind my eyes as I bury myself into her and spill and spill.

I come out of a minute later, dazed, my cock softening inside her. This part is always awkward. I ease myself out and dispose of the condom, then watch her for any sign of discomfort.

“You okay?” I ask, and she gives a fucked-out nod.

Mike’s obviously hard in his shorts. He pulls her up, gently, and settles her onto his lap, face down on the bedspread, petting her ass with one hand. “Let’s see.” He dips two fingers into her pussy, slowly. “Hmmm...” As if she’s not dripping. He taps a hand against her ass, a barely-there smack, and she rolls her face against the wash-pilled fabric of his comforter.

“If you’re gonna do that,” she says, “then do it right.”

Mike strokes his fingers into her again, smearing her wetness on the back of her thighs. “You been screwing around on me?”

Victoria laughs, stretching out languidly. “I found someone who could fuck me how I want to be fucked—nice and deep.”

“Oh, it’s like that?” Mike taps her, again, the flat of his hand against the curve of her ass, then again when she makes a pleased noise, when she pushes her ass back into his hand for another few smacks. “You’re gonna feel this tomorrow,” he says. “Every time you sit, you’re gonna remember what a little slut you were. How you begged for his cock.”

“You jealous?” Victoria asks.

Mike huffs at that. “Of him? I got there first, baby.”

She smiles, sharp. “I didn’t mean jealous of him. I meant jealous of —”

Mike slaps her again, no harder than he had before, but something about it looks...intentional. “Why would I be jealous, anyway? You’re ours.”

*Ours.* A word that runs through me in time to my pulse. *Ours.* What Victoria is—even if this is fake. Even if it’s against the team rules for us to date. For her to date me, or Mike, or for us to date each other.

My brain is still somewhere else—from the orgasm, from the sensation of rightness that comes from being here with them—but my heart must be a liar because all it’s telling me is *What if?*

“If that’s true,” she says, “prove it.”

He tips her off his lap onto the bedspread, loose-limbed enough that she rolls easily. Victoria’s hair is everywhere, a blond, sweat-dampened spread, and Mike gathers her hair, taming it back in a gentle braid like he’s done this before. She smiles up at him, then glances back at the camera. Slowly they turn, like they’re dancing, until they’re at an angle the camera will see best.

“Get me out,” Mike says.

She does, dragging his boxers down. I’ve seen him naked before, in the locker room, on that video, but never in this kind of focus. He’s hard, the head of his cock darkened, a line of pre-come trailing down the shaft. I’m not

really into size comparisons—I'm listed at six-foot-five even though I'm an inch taller than that—but my hand shapes itself into an involuntary circle like I want to hold him in my fist.

Victoria does just that, closing her hand around the base of his cock, working her tongue over the head. Mike's hand drifts to her hair. The video might not capture the noises her lips make, the soft drag of his knuckle down her cheek, but I do, entranced.

Mike tugs her hair. "You want to watch me fuck her mouth?" he asks me.

Not really a question, since I can't seem to wrest my eyes away from. Do I want to watch them? More like I never want to stop. "Yeah," I say, hoarsely.

He looks down at Victoria. "You wanna be a good girl and show off for him?"

Victoria pulls off and wipes her hand against her mouth. Her lipstick is smudged and her eyes are bright. "Make sure he's watching when you come." She returns to Mike's cock, taking more of it, deeper, her lips touching the ring of her fingers.

Mike must have already been on edge because it doesn't take long before his thrusts turn erratic. He's talking, a stream of words, *so good* and *slut* and *sweetheart*.

"I'm close," he says, and his hand releases Victoria's hair. "Baby, I'm so close."

She pulls back, releasing his cock from her mouth. "On me." She holds her tits on display for him. "Show me I'm yours."

And he comes in a long, groaning splash on her skin.

For a minute, they both pant at each other, smiling, like neither of them can believe what just happened.

"Hey," Mike says, and it takes me a second to realize he's talking to me, "you wanna get her cleaned up?"

Which probably means a washcloth or a swipe with an abandoned T-shirt, and not what I actually do, which is reach for her across the bed. I pull her toward me, then close my mouth over the swell of her breast, still wet with his come, and clasp her nipple with my teeth. *This is for Victoria*. Something that feels not quite true.

She giggles at that, a giggle that goes breathy when I work my hand against her pussy. "If you wanted to taste him, you could just ask," she says, and laughs when I suck her nipple harder. When I don't bother to deny it—

how I'm chasing after something I can't name, only that I want to do this again, with both of them, as soon as we can.

I coax an orgasm from her with no more than a few strokes of my fingers. She falls apart softly, flooding my hand, then finally collapses against me, a boneless weight on my shoulder.

Carefully, I wrap my arms around her. I'm not sure if that's allowed—if I should ask—even as she leans against me. Holding her is... Words I shouldn't be thinking. This is a business relationship. She snuggles against me, her hair a tickle under my nose. *Business relationship.*

Across the bed, Mike has the same expression: a fondness that drops from his face when he catches me looking. He reaches over to the nightstand—turns out that Gatorade was actually a good idea—and hands me a bottle.

"I got the camera," he says, low, then switches it off.

We're all moving slowly: it's late, but not that late. We had an afternoon game that I cut out from in order to grab Mike some food. I don't know where that ended up. "Where'd the takeout get to?" I ask.

Victoria laughs faintly. There's something about her that's different, back to being more Victoria-ish, even though she's still naked, still...messy. "I put it in the kitchen."

"Oh," I say, "thanks."

That gets her up. She shifts away from me, making a slight *oof*, then hops to the floor. "Can I use your shower?" she asks.

Mike nods. "You can grab a shirt out of the dresser if you want."

"I brought some extra clothes, but thanks."

From there, it's almost mundane: Victoria goes into Mike's bathroom with an actual travel toiletry kit. I start pulling my clothes back on to head back to my apartment but stop when Mike clears his throat.

"You coming back for dinner?" he asks.

It's possible he wants to be alone with Victoria. Or it's possible that he wants me to come back. Or it's possible he's making small talk, though Mike isn't exactly the small talk type. "Would it be cool if I did?" I say.

Mike shrugs, like it doesn't matter either way. "She might appreciate it."

*Just Victoria might appreciate it?* I don't ask. "Sure, let me get cleaned up."



I SHOWER, THEN CONSIDER MY WRECK OF AN APARTMENT. I NEED THE cleaning service. Scratch that. I wrap a towel at my waist and start grabbing things: I toss clothes in the hamper, drop dishes in the sink, chuck drink bottles in the recycle. Not good, but better.

I once asked Mike where he learned to clean up after himself—the way my parents do, and my sister does, and Mike does, and Victoria does—and he shrugged. Said that no one was going to do that for him. *The way they do that for you*, he didn't add, but I heard it anyway.

I don't know why I'm thinking so much about this now. It's possible that I'm stalling. That when I go back to Mike's apartment, he and Victoria will be snuggled up on the couch, watching a movie and eating the food I bought.

The mature thing would be to not let it bother me. The immature thing is probably not tossing empty bottles into my recycle bin with a little too much force—my jump shot's pretty good—but at least now Mike won't give me vaguely disapproving looks when he comes over.

The last place I clean is my bedroom. Mostly it's clean, though my sheets are...I don't know the last time I washed them. I change them just in case. *In case we all end up back here?* I need to stop. It's a business relationship.

Which means, when I take out my phone and order a few things online, those are just sound investments.

Finally, I go back to Mike's. Victoria's on one end of the couch and Mike on the other, his leg propped up on the coffee table, draped in an ice pack. A whole cushion sits between them. Victoria is wearing pajama pants with little ducks printed all over them, a T-shirt with a sports bra under it. Her hair is pulled back in a braid. Minus the PJs, it's how she looks when she comes to the clubhouse. Distractingly pretty, or at least I find myself distracted by her.

Mike's hair is also damp. He usually puts stuff in to smooth it out, but now it's drying in slight waves. My fingers get that same feeling as when we were in bed, a desire to reach out and touch.

I anchor them on my pants. "You all eat yet?" I ask.

They both turn toward me. Mike's face is impassive—purposefully? Like maybe he didn't want me to come back after all. They're not doing anything other than sitting here watching some reality show. Victoria goes a slight pink, and I'm not going to be able to see her do that again and not think about what just happened.

Mike starts to remove his ice pack from his knee. "I can get you something."

“I got it,” I offer, then hustle to the kitchen. I know Mike’s place pretty well. That’s what comes from spending most of our days together. I check his fridge. He has a few sandwich things: lettuce, tomatoes, the beef bologna that he buys for some reason, even though he grumbles that it’s more expensive than the pork kind. A few things but not much else.

I’ll drag him to the store tomorrow. If I put everything in the same cart and claim it’s a pain to separate it, he’ll let me pay.

The food I brought is still in its bag—containers of sushi from the place Mike likes. We went together for the first time three years ago, after our first win, and Mike was hesitant enough about eating sushi that I gave him a hard time about it. Until he admitted he’d only had the premade stuff from the supermarket before.

He’s my best friend, and I know so much about him, the way he knows so much about me. Except what we just did. That felt entirely new.

I grab the sushi, mine, his, another that I got just so that I could not-so-accidentally leave extra. I have no idea what kind of sushi Victoria likes. I carry all three containers into the living room. They’re still sitting on the sofa, and I could take the armchair, but it’s inconvenient to eat away from the coffee table. Or so I tell myself.

So I drop down between them.

Victoria tucks herself against the arm of the couch. Mike doesn’t bother to move. His leg settles against mine. I hand him his food. He takes the plastic lid off his container of sushi, then separates his chopsticks—which he couldn’t use that first time, so he fumbled around with them until I told him it wasn’t that embarrassing to eat sushi with a fork.

But he learned. The next time we went out, he pulled them apart like he’d been doing it for years.

We eat. Mike’s arm brushes mine every time he picks up a roll. He’s left-handed—he has to catch and throw with his right, but for everything else he uses his left—and his left shoulder and my right arm touch more often than not.

On my other side, Victoria is looking at her sushi container a little skeptically.

“I wasn’t sure if you liked that,” I say. *Because I didn’t buy that thinking we’d all end up eating together after we had sex.*

“It’s fine.” But her chopsticks are still in their little paper sleeve.

“Here”—I hold up my container—“let’s go halvesies. Thirdsies, if Mike



hasn't eaten all of his yet."

We do: I pop a few rolls of mine into the container Victoria holds out, and she does the same for me, and Mike gives us some of his.

Finally, Victoria unsheathes her chopsticks. "Thanks."

"No problem." I indicate the TV. "Are you watching this?"

Mike shrugs. Victoria shakes her head slightly. I try again. "Do you mind if I switch it to something else?"

"Sure," Mike says from around a mouthful of food, "if that's okay with Victoria."

"It's okay with Victoria," she says.

"I was gonna find a movie." I pull up the on-screen menu. "What do you like?"

For some reason, that makes Mike cough around his sushi and Victoria bite her lip and look away.

Okay...I scroll through the menu until I find a comedy that's actually funny and not just ha-ha cringe. "How about this?"

"We were watching that earlier," Victoria says.

Right. What they had on when I walked in. Even though it was only a few hours ago, it feels like I'm a different person now. Like we all are. "You mind if we watch it from the beginning?"

Both of them agree.

The movie plays. After she's done eating, Victoria leans against the arm of the couch and tucks her feet under herself. Her arm occasionally brushes mine. This feels—if not cuddly, at least cuddle adjacent.

On my other side, Mike's pace of eating slows. He stretches out, his arm against mine. And we didn't do anything, really—we didn't touch beyond the contact of my mouth on his hand, his hand on my ass. But we could. Possibly. Maybe.

If there's a correct thing to do after you have a threesome on camera for money with your best friend and the girl you both like, I'm not really sure what it is.

We get an hour into the movie when Mike adjusts the ice pack on his leg.

"How's the knee?" I ask.

He shrugs. "It's all right."

"You should get one of the physical therapists to take a look at it."

"Yeah"—he plucks the last piece of sushi from his container—"maybe."

I try not to sigh. Knee pain isn't uncommon with ACL reconstruction. I

spent a few days googling things after he first mentioned that his knee was hurting after surgery. “We’re supposed to tell the team about stuff.”

Mike gives me a pointed look. “There’s a lot I can’t tell the team about.”

Right. *Right*. Like that we’re doing this. “That’s different.”

Mike folds his arms across his chest, frowning. “They’d sit me either way.”

I fold my arms and frown right back. “Just seems like it’s getting worse.”

Victoria slides off the couch and heads toward the kitchen. “Would either of you like something to drink?” And we both shake our heads.

“You don’t need to hide when it hurts,” I say, after she’s left to the other room.

“It comes and goes.”

“That’s bullshit.” My voice rises. There’s no way Victoria can’t hear us—there’s something personal about this, different from when we were all naked together. From when *I licked his come off her chest*. The thought that puts heat in my face I hope Mike mistakes for anger. “We have access to physical therapy,” I say, “so you should do physical therapy.”

He tightens his arms across his chest. “I graduate in a month.”

*Don’t remind me*. Because we both know the clock is ticking until he graduates and I’m drafted, and then who knows when we’ll see each other. “Shouldn’t your knee be fixed before you start talking to professional teams?” I say.

Mike blinks, a slow blink that means he’s angry. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Mike...,” I begin. His shoulders are stiff. Even without Victoria on the couch, I haven’t moved over. Our legs are still touching, and I want to reach out, to grasp his leg the way he did mine earlier, to get him to promise that he’ll take care of himself when I’m not around. That there will be someone who makes sure of it, even if that person can’t be me. But I leave my hands where they are.

A grinding noise echoes from the kitchen, the *chunk-chunk-chunk* of the built-in fridge ice maker.

Mike starts to pull the cold pack from his leg.

“That thing still busted?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

“I got this.” I stand before Mike can object. From this angle, it’d be easy to lean over and press my lips to his hair. I don’t.

But I’m thinking about it as I go to tell Victoria where to find things in a

kitchen I know better than my own.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### *Victoria*

I DON'T SLEEP over at Mike's again. Instead, I drive home in my pajamas. When I walk in, Xiomara, on a break from her gaming cave, gives me a significant look. "Were you at a slumber party?" she asks.

I do not—will not—giggle. *Yeah, just banged the ace pitcher and starting catcher of our baseball team on camera in order to make money.* Normal, normal stuff. "I was watching a movie with some friends."

A technical truth, even if that was a postcoital hangout followed by them having a fight about Mike's knee. I knew they were close friends—but that's different from overhearing something they don't talk about in front of other people.

Xiomara's eyebrows rise. "Seems like you had a good time."

"I did. I'm gonna turn in." *I have an hour of spicy video to edit.* "Night."

I dump my bag in my room and drag myself to the bathroom to wash my bra and panties in the sink. There's a purpling patch on my neck—a hickey, stubble burn—and, yeah, that's what Xiomara was probably looking at. I wish...I wish that smirk was over something real, as if I'd had come from an actual boyfriend's house.

I wring out my underwear, then hang it on a drying rack in my room. This video won't edit itself. I open my laptop and cue up my video-editing software. I need to filter our faces, particularly Jonathan's—I just blur his entirely—and check for anything identifying: our names or logos or stuff in the background.

One of Mike's tattoos is a generic scrawl up his ribs and chest, but he has another on his back, a set of initials and dates on the wing of his shoulder blade. I haven't asked what they are. His uncle, who died? Someone else? It felt like an invasion of his privacy, even as I watch Mike work his hand in my

panties as Jonathan sits across the bed, his attention rapt. From this angle, it's hard to tell who he's looking at. If he and Mike are close friends or *close* in a way that feels like asking about Mike's tattoo: too personal.

After I blur and fix the sound as best I can, I scan for clips to excise. Me and Jonathan, making out—how I whispered in his ear that he'd be my second. How he was slow and careful when we actually had sex. How he looked at me like I was special to him.

I add those to the folder I don't share with anyone. Inside it sit three other videos: Mike and me, when he slid inside me that first time; and Mike, wincing in pain when his knee hurt. When we stopped as Jonathan pounded on Mike's bedroom door. Stuff that's too real for me to look at except here in the dark.

Once I edit the rest of the video, I segment it and ready it for upload.

All that's left to do is stare at my ceiling and think about them. Mike's not my boyfriend. Jonathan isn't either. But what's the harm in imagining? No, I need to keep myself rooted in reality. They're not sending flowers. If they text, it'll probably be about business. *You danced with them on that beach.*

I need to do a lot of things—answer DMs, queue content, text Elizabeth and tell her I'm coming by the house tomorrow. For a minute, I close my eyes and remember the sand under my feet, Jonathan smiling at me, Mike at my back. How we moved together seamlessly to the thrumming beat of music. How the outside world fell away.



THE NEXT DAY, WHEN I PULL UP TO MY MOM'S HOUSE, I HAVE TO PARK ON the street because there's already a vehicle in the carport—a new, freshly detailed SUV. *Tyler.*

I march in the house, gripping my phone. I double-checked my bank balance on the way over: There's enough sitting in our OnlyFans account that I can pay down some of my mom's tax bill.

Except I walk in to find boxes stacked in the living room. My heart, already going fast, kicks up even more.

Tyler's standing in the kitchen, reading something off his phone. He's wearing shorts and a long-sleeved T-shirt, both with branding I don't

recognize. His hair gleams in the kitchen light. He looks like he always does: Blond. Rich. *Insufferable*.

Noises emanate from up the hall that sound like stuff is being thrown around.

“What’s going on?” I demand.

“Vicky, you came for moving day!” Tyler says with exaggerated enthusiasm. He sweeps an arm toward the boxes, most of which are closed. One isn’t. It has a few books, an academic medal and...Mr. Snuggle, the soft stuffed rabbit that Elizabeth slept with until she was eight that now has a place of honor in her room.

The back of my throat burns with frustration. That Elizabeth is leaving. That he’s *taking* her. “You can’t do this without my mom’s permission,” I say.

“Victoria”—and he drags out the syllables in *Victoria*, packing in condescension like an overflowing box—“whose idea do you think this was?” Then he tilts his head. Looks at me like he’s studying me. I cross my arms. That does nothing to stop his stare.

Normally, I’d roll my eyes and complain to Savannah about him. Now, I stare right back. “So money gives you the right to do whatever you want?”

Tyler’s laugh makes me want to smack him. “Everything? No. But this? Absolutely.”

I don’t think, I just walk across the kitchen and poke my finger against his chest. It doesn’t move him an inch. Why should it? Jonathan recalibrated my notions of *tall*, but Tyler’s probably around six feet and muscly in a *gym bro*, *protein powder*, *my abs have abs* way. He closes my finger in two of his like he’s plucking me off.

“You can’t just take her.” My voice has a desperate edge.

“And yet...” He hasn’t moved his hand from mine. Are those calluses? *Focus*. “Go ask Anne. She’ll tell you the same thing.”

For a second, there’s just silence. A noise from up the hallway interrupts it, the sound of packing tape being ripped. This feels like that sound: Sudden. Unmendable. My mom *giving up* on being a parent. I suck in a long breath. “Fine.” And storm off down the hallway, chased by Tyler’s laugh.

When I try the handle to my mom’s room, the door’s unlocked. I knock anyway and receive a faint “Come in.”

Her room looks like the last time I was in it: cluttered, dusty. Music plays on the stereo. She’s lying in bed with the covers pulled up over her.

I sit next to her, not moving the bedspread. It's strange how certain smells can hit you—instantly, I'm ten years old and trying to coax my mom out of bed. It wasn't always like this. But occasionally, there'd be a bad week, and then she'd be back up as if nothing happened.

"Do you need anything?" I ask. A glass of water sits on her nightstand, fresh enough that the glass is sweating with condensation. Maybe she really is just taking a nap.

She pulls the covers off her face. "I'm good, sweetie."

"Elizabeth's moving out," I say, because I don't know what else to say.

My mom sighs against her pillow. "I know."

"Why didn't you tell me this was happening?"

"Tyler said he did."

*No, Tyler threatened me with this.* "He said it was a possibility."

My mom sits up. She's wearing an old, oversized T-shirt. There are shadows under her eyes that aren't mascara smudges. Despite that, she looks young—she's only in her midforties, and every year, we feel closer in age.

"It's for the best," she says.

"Are you sure Elizabeth will be okay living with them?" *Will you be okay without her here?*

"Victoria, I know you like to be in charge of things, but Elizabeth has thought this through."

"She's a kid." *She's your kid and you don't even seem to care.*

"If she's old enough to think about student loans, she's old enough to decide where she's living." My mom reaches for her water, sipping it. The ice cubes clink faintly.

"She shouldn't be—" *thinking about any of this.* I bite my tongue. "Don't you want her to live here?"

She shrugs.

That shrug makes me want to scream. Tyler, I can fight with—if I push him, he pushes right back—but this is worse. A lump forms in my throat. I swallow around it. I've been working so that Elizabeth can have whatever she wants, and it turns out that that all Tyler had to do was to check his bank account.

"I'm sure she'll be back by fall," my mom adds.

I blink. "Why?"

"James is, you know..." She waves a vague hand.

My brain fills with the worst possible endings to that sentence. "No, I

don't know."

"He has a short attention span." Another one of those shrugs. "She's a resilient kid. She'll be fine."

*Resilient*, a word I hate. What people call you when you've been through something hard instead of wondering why you had to go through it in the first place. "I have the money," I blurt. "For taxes." Which I do, some of it, anyway, once I account for Mike's cut and taxes and I guess Jonathan's share too. Enough to show the IRS we're serious about making payments. What I marched in here proud of—that I did what I needed to do. What I told myself I had to do.

My mom pats my cheek. "Thank you, but that's not necessary."

*Aren't you going to ask where it came from?* But no, of course she isn't.

"We'll be fine, my little worrier," she adds.

What she used to call me as a kid. *Victoria, the queen of worries*. Worries like if she'd remember to bring her wallet to the store. (No.) Or to sign Elizabeth's permission slips. (No, but I'm a decent forger.) Or to buy Christmas presents. (I bought Elizabeth's and ones for myself, then pretended to be surprised when I opened them.) *Worries. Right, Mom.*

The lump in my throat expands and expands some more. "Great. Perfect." And I hustle out into the hallway.

Of course, Tyler is at the doorway to Elizabeth's room, taking boxes she's handing him and laughing.

I'm not going to cry—not in front of him. "Could I please speak with Elizabeth?" I say, voice clipped.

Tyler's eyes go comically big, enough to make Elizabeth giggle. He pretends to drag his feet on the hallway carpet as he retreats to the kitchen.

Elizabeth's room is mostly packed, though a few things remain she apparently doesn't want to take. There's no use for a souvenir snow globe when you have a family who can just take you skiing.

I breathe, trying for some semblance of control. "I guess you're moving, huh?" I say.

Elizabeth wipes a hand across her forehead, feigning exhaustion. "I didn't know I had this much stuff."

"Are you sure this is what you want to do?"

"James says I can go where Tyler went to school." She grins. "And that he'll pay for college. I think it'll be good for me and Mom to be apart for a little while."



Have they been fighting? Have I been so preoccupied with all the stuff with Mike and Jonathan and videos and dancing on a beach that I missed this? “Is Mom...?” *Is Mom okay? Has she ever been?* Questions I know the answers to.

Elizabeth wraps her arms around me, a *kid* hug tight at my ribs. “You worry too much.”

As if everything can be easy. *You don’t know what I’ve done for you.* That’s the point: she shouldn’t have to know. “Love you, Elizabeth,” I say, dragging out her name.

She squeezes me harder. “You should come too.”

She can’t possibly mean that I should move in with Tyler—with her and James, but especially with Tyler. We tried living under the same roof once and it did not go well. “Come where?” I ask.

“Tyler says they have a lot of extra rooms.” She pulls up a text and hands it to me: her message chain with Tyler. Mostly logistics related to the move. A few times when he was asking about the date and location for her robotics tournaments. Weird.

“I think I’ll probably be here for the summer,” I say. “I have to work at the clubhouse.” And...my second job. The one I guess I technically don’t need. *But do you want it...?*

Elizabeth interrupts that train of thought. “You can do all that at James’s house.” She wrinkles her nose at the packed-up room around her, as if she’s better than this place already. “C’mon, Victoria, please, don’t make me move there alone.” She does actual puppy eyes with it.

She’s right, she shouldn’t be there alone. Not with James’s short attention span and Tyler off doing whatever it is he does when he’s not annoying me.

Elizabeth might be old enough to move out, but she’s too young to know there are different kinds of inattention—and they all hurt.

“I’ll talk to Tyler,” I grit out.

Elizabeth grins. “You’ll have to be nice to him.”

“I’m very nice to Tyler,” I say. *As nice as he deserves.*

For that, I get Elizabeth’s laugh, a teenaged eye roll. “Come help me do this box,” she says.

So I kneel on the floor and hold the flaps while she applies the tape.



## TYLER

Victoria stomps up the hallway with anger in her eyes. “Fine,” she snaps, “I’ll move in with you this summer.”

I ease myself off the counter where I’m reading the file that James sent from his doctors. “Don’t remember asking you to,” I say.

Victoria’s angry flush extends from her cheeks down her neck, brightening her already blush-brightened cheeks. She has on more makeup than I’ve seen her wear before. Her eyelashes are darker, her lips pinker. *Who’s that for?*

This blaze of anger has nothing to do with her makeup. Something I realized early on: Victoria has a temper like a righteous volcano. It makes me want to see her erupt. Something I did when we first lived together. Until James pulled me aside and told me in no uncertain terms that I was to be an *older brother* to her and Elizabeth.

With Lizzy, it’s easy. She’s a kid. She likes robotics and running track and reading books about dragons.

Victoria is harder to ignore. I shouldn’t wind her up, even if she’s looking at me like I’m something stuck to the bottom of her practical shoe. *Especially because...*

She clears her throat impatiently.

So I do what I normally do when Victoria is like this: I smirk. “Aw, I didn’t know you wanted to be my roommate.”

Her face goes a nuclear shade of pink. She draws herself to her full height of not very tall. “I am moving to be near Elizabeth,” she says imperiously. “You are incidental.”

*Just as long as you’re there...* But no, I don’t want her to know that them moving in is exactly what I wanted, what I’ve been working to put together for weeks. “Great...” I drag the word out, trying to mask my actual satisfaction with pretended eagerness. “So let’s talk rent.”

Her mouth hardens in contempt. “Rent? Are you seriously charging Elizabeth to live there?”

“I would never charge Lizzy anything.” I smile. “But you’re not Lizzy.”

She crosses her arms angrily in front of her chest. If I squint, I can almost make out the pattern of her bra that I caught a glimpse of earlier—definitely not one of those thick sports ones she wears to go running. Her makeup could

have been a coincidence. But makeup *and* new lingerie? Interesting.

She catches me looking, then rolls her eyes and uncrosses her arms. “How much?” she asks, as if she just has the money lying around. *Even more interesting.*

“I don’t need your money,” I say and wait until she snorts. “What I need is a few things done around the house.”

That gets her attention. “What things?”

“*Things.*” I wave a hand airily, mostly to piss her off. “You want to live with Lizzy? Then you’re not really in a position to say *no.*”

Victoria’s hands ball into fists by her sides, emphasizing the length of her manicure. What’s she been up to these past few weeks that she’s dropped her good girl act? She tilts her chin up and looks me dead in the eye. “No.”

She’s so much fun to wind up. It’d be easy to stay here and do that, but I really do have things I need to have done and she’s the person to do them. She’s smart, she’s organized; she’s almost a nurse. Better, she wants something I have—proximity to Lizzy—and I can use that to my advantage. “That’s a good opening offer,” I say. “How do I turn that into a yes?”

“We are not bargaining.” Her eyes are practically glowing with anger, but she isn’t backing down. Almost as if she likes this back-and-forth the way I do.

“I think you’ll find we are,” I say.

“What do you actually want, Tyler?”

I scoff in mock offense. “Gosh, Vicky, isn’t it obvious? I just want all of us to be a family.”

“If you’re gonna be an asshole, I’m leaving.” She doesn’t budge an inch. She raises a hand like she might poke me in the chest again. Or possibly slap me. After a long second, she lowers it then surveys the boxes stacked in the living room. “How’re you moving all that?”

I shrug. “I’ll drive it over.”

“Will it all fit in your car?”

I almost laugh. Trust Victoria to go from anger to logistics. That’s why I want her around. “Lizzy really doesn’t have that much stuff.”

That makes Victoria’s shoulders go stiff. “Sorry, we can’t all have walk-in closets. Some of us have to make do with our *small* houses.”

*Yeah, she’s still mad about that eight years later.* What I said the first time we lived together, when I couldn’t understand how Victoria and Elizabeth and Anne lived practically on top of each other when I’d never

lived closer than the next wing over from my mom. Even now she's somewhere—France, going by her last set of Insta photos, with husband number whatever. And the situation is obviously different with James. I'll move out when he's better. *If*.

It's easier to think about the sharpened point of Victoria's glare. "I'm getting Lizzy some stuff for school next year," I say. Which I was—another thing in a list James asked me for. I sweep my gaze purposefully. "Let me know if you need me to buy you anything."

Her mouth purses frustratedly. "No, thank you. I don't need your money."

"Yeah, why are you so flush with cash all of a sudden?"

I expect her to tell me to screw off, to haughtily inform me that she secured a plum research gig. Something *Victoria-ish*. Not the uncomfortable red she goes, like she's hiding something. "That's absolutely none of your business."

Maybe it isn't. But with her standing here, hot with anger? Now I want to make it—*her*—my business.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### *Victoria*

I LEAVE my mom's house with a lump in my throat that doesn't dissolve by the time I get back to my apartment. It doesn't dissolve during my lab the next day or during my clubhouse shift.

After I'm done cleaning, I go back to my dorm. Monday afternoons always have that slightly dazed feeling, like all I want to do is take a nap.

Mike hasn't texted. Jonathan hasn't texted. I saw them two days ago. I don't have a reason to text them anymore outside of my work at the ballpark. We only have—*had*—a business relationship and we don't need to any longer. The bra and panties are still hanging from the drying rack in my room. They're dry, so I put them away, buried under my more practical underwear.

I get out my textbooks. I read. Then reread. Then re-reread. Words blur on the page in front of me. Finally, I give up. Send a text. *Can you come over?*

And get a swift, *Be there in ten.*



SAVANNAH TEXTS ME WHEN SHE'S DOWNSTAIRS, AND I JOG DOWN TO MEET her. She's holding her large class-going purse and a bottle of champagne and wearing a concerned expression. She gives me a hug. "You okay?"

I could lie. Do the Victoria thing and wave it off. "Not really."

She holds up the bottle of champagne. "I brought reinforcements."

"I don't know if champagne will solve this."

"Let's go drown those sorrows anyway."

We climb up the stairs to my apartment. My limbs are heavy. For once, I understand my mother's urge to crawl into bed and pull the covers up, and that scares me more than I want to admit.

When we set up at the kitchen table, she pulls a bottle of peach nectar from her bag.

"Were you just carrying that around?" I ask.

"From your text, it sounded like an emergency. So I emerged."

I hiccup a laugh and wait as Savannah makes a bellini in a coffee mug, then hands it to me before she pours herself a peach-nectar-only drink.

"Alcohol might be one of my migraine triggers," she says a little ruefully. "So enjoy it for the both of us."

She holds up her cup and I clink mine against hers in a mock toast. "So are we going to text mean things to whatever man is doing this to you?" she asks when we've both drunk.

I don't want to admit that the issue is money—that the issue is *always* money—but I can't seem to hold it in any longer. "My mom owes back taxes." I swallow. "I was getting the money, but Tyler swooped in."

Savannah—possibly because she can sense that I'm on the edge of crying, possibly because she's a good friend, possibly because, in her world, money can just kind of appear—makes a sympathetic noise. "Do you want to egg Tyler's house?"

I laugh. "I'd need a gate code."

"How hard could it be to scale a fence?" she says, and my laugh dissolves some of my worries.

We drink. I study, and Savannah shows me what she's buying off Instagram ads. Life settles back to normal. I'll need to talk with Mike and Jonathan...at some point. Maybe just give Mike the money since he's the only one who really needs it now. I don't know how that conversation will go, but for once, that's a problem for future Victoria.

Xiomara comes out of her room a while later, headphones slung around her neck. "Oh, hey Victoria." She disappears back into her room, then reemerges with a paper slip from our mailroom. "I was down there, and they said they had a package for you."

"You mind waiting while I go?" I ask Savannah. "I'll be back in a few."

She holds up her drink. "I'm good."

Our mailroom is in the next building over. I don't remember ordering anything, and I'm not exactly the retail therapy type. Maybe something got

sent to me by mistake.

When I pick it up, my name's printed on the package all right, but it's otherwise plain, with a nonspecific return address.

Back at my apartment, Savannah looks up from phone. "What was it?"

"No idea." I grab the kitchen scissors and run them under the tape binding the package. Inside there's another box—black, with pale pink lettering—and a gift receipt.

Whatever it is can't be what I'm thinking—that someone bought me a present. There's no way for anyone to get my address from OnlyFans...right?

"Maybe I should do this in the other room." But I pull the lid off the box. Inside sits a nest of pink tissue paper. On top of that, a note card in a creamy black envelope. I take the card out. It's printed like it was done through the little *add a gift message* field.

*Victoria—*

*Hope you like this. Thanks for always being so on top of things.*

*—Jonathan*

I blink. Blink again. So, not a secret admirer. A very known admirer. A business partner. Who I was *on top of* two days ago. My face doesn't just go hot—it blazes.

Savannah begins chanting. "Open it, open it, open it." She drums her hands dramatically on the tabletop.

I peel back the tissue paper to reveal a bra and panty set, though the bra is one of those kinds that extends down your torso and fastens with a bunch of straps. Both are a soft dove gray embroidered with blue floral patterning. They feel expensive, the fabric fine without being scratchy. Not flowers, exactly, but something about them feels similar. My face goes impossibly hotter.

Next to me, Xiomara's pressing her lips together like she's trying not to laugh.

"Those are really nice," Savannah says.

"Um," I manage, "they're from a friend."

Savannah elbows me. "Was this for any particular occasion?"

*I fucked him and his best friend on Saturday night. On camera.* "No...?" I say, but it comes out more of a question.

Savannah howls a laugh. "You should send your *friend* a picture." And it's possible that my face is actually on fire, that the rest of me is as well, somewhere between delight and embarrassment.

“Was your friend the one who was over the other day?” Xiomara asks.

“Xiomara”—Savannah wraps an arm around her—“tell me more about this friend.”

“The walls are pretty thin,” Xiomara says. “Good thing I have these.” She points to the noise-canceling headphones around her neck. “I guess they don’t help with this.” And she hits her hand rhythmically on the table to indicate banging.

I go absolutely red. “Um, that’s not who sent these.” I realize my mistake as soon as I say it.

Xiomara’s suppressed laughter spills over.

Savannah’s eyebrows shoot up. “I’m gonna need a lot more detail. Like so many details.”

I sit, pull out a random textbook, open it. “I need to study.”

“That book’s upside down,” Savannah says. “Now let me order some dinner because it’s time for you to ’fess up.”



WE END UP SITTING ON MY LIVING ROOM COUCH, EATING TACOS. AS MUCH AS I’m trying to get out of San Diego, you can’t knock the tacos or the sushi or the weather. Xiomara takes her meal back to her room, which is just as well. I like her as a roommate, but I don’t even know how I’m going to explain this to Savannah.

Especially with our napkin contract still in my purse. *Don’t tell anyone else about this without checking with each other.*

“So,” Savannah says from around a taco, “do you have two boyfriends?”

“Technically, I don’t think either of them is my boyfriend.” Because they’re not. Even if I might want them to be. “They know about each other.” That feels important to clarify—that I’m not cheating on either of them. “They’re friends.”

“So, just to recap, you’re dating two guys? And they’re on the baseball team together?”

“I didn’t say that,” I protest.

“Do you think I don’t remember what my best friend, who used to blush when she even thought about a guy, tells me?” Savannah taps her own temple. “And they’re cool with you dating them both?”



“I mean”—I think back to both of them, in bed, riling each other up—“I think so?”

Savannah snorts. “That gift isn’t an *I think so*. That’s an *I’m one-upping my bro* present.”

“No, J—*He* wouldn’t do that.” I swallow. “And the situation is kind of complicated.”

Savannah smiles, like she’s managed to unlock yet another piece of information. “You know how I would clarify the situation? Get everyone together—and I mean...*together*—and hash the whole thing out.”

“Um.” I attempt to take another bite of my taco, but the whole thing collapses in my hand.

Savannah’s eyes go even wider. “Did you already... *With* them? Together?”

“It didn’t really clarify anything.” Other than I don’t want to pick between them.

“*Fuck* clarify. Was it hot?”

“Yeah.” I smile. “I really like them. And I guess they have their own stuff to work out.”

“You should help them work that out. As much as they like.” She knocks her shoulder into mine, and for a second, everything feels kind of simple.

Until I examine my spilled taco in its container. Everything is kind of a mess. “It doesn’t really matter. It’s not like we can all date each other long-term. One of them is graduating and the other is...not going to be here next year.” And that probably confirms I’m talking about Jonathan, but I need advice.

“That’s all this summer,” Savannah says. “It’s May now.”

“Yeah, probably time to just call it quits.”

“That’s not what I meant at all,” Savannah says. “Think of it like—you go on vacation. You meet two guys who both want to bang you. So you make some memories and when you look back at your life, you feel like you had some fun once upon a time.”

Laying everything out like that kind of terrifies me. Who knows if they’ll like me not on camera? Who knows how much of this is for *business* and how much of it is for *real*? I don’t need the money anymore. But something in me wants it, wants the confidence that comes from telling Tyler that he can’t use his bank account to control me.

I want to pay off that tax bill and have two boyfriends and see whatever

else the universe has in store. A *clarification* like a bright path forward.

But of course I can't tell Savannah the whole truth, so settle for saying, "Thanks, Sav."

"It's good that you're living a little," she says.

"I've been living a *lot*."

And when she laughs, big and loud and free, I laugh along with her.



AFTER SAVANNAH LEAVES, I GO FOR A RUN IN THE EVENING COOL, THEN shower and blow out my hair. The box from Jonathan is sitting on my bed. I take out the bra, letting the straps dangle. Except for the embroidery, the cups are completely sheer. I can imagine Mike's hands sliding inside them, readying me for Jonathan's eager mouth.

I wonder why Jonathan picked this one—the color, the pattern, the cut. If he put much thought into it or if this was what he buys all the girls he sleeps with, and he just needed to input my address from the campus directory.

I have to know.

It doesn't take long to do my makeup. I emerge from the bathroom wrapped in my fuzzy pink bathrobe with fresh lipstick on. Xiomara isn't around, but the thought of her—or anyone—knowing what I'm doing doesn't shock me the way it used to.

Back in my room, I pull on the bra. It'd be easier to fasten with someone else here, but I manage. The underwear slides up my legs. It was one thing to know they were sheer; another to see them stretched taut over my skin, the netting of bra and panties studded with flowers. Enough to almost—*almost*—cover my nipples. I don't have to do anything to harden them. Just the thought of them seeing me like this is enough.

I get out my ring light and pose in front of my full-length mirror. Throw my shoulders back and cock my hip, then laugh at myself. The camera—I have it on video so I can just grab stills—catches all of it.

I pick a few: me smiling, then pouting teasingly, then looking sultry through a combination of the light and the lingerie and a feeling almost like confidence, something dangerous and new. *Thanks for the gift*, I type. *You should see it in person*.

And send the messages to our group chat.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*Mike*

VICTORIA TEXTS me as I'm sitting on my couch next to Jonathan. Texts *us*, rather. Our phones vibrate at the same time. I glance at the notification, then look harder. Victoria, in lingerie she calls a gift. Not from me. So they must be from him.

I'm not jealous. I won't be jealous. This sensation rising within me is *not* jealousy. My hand just happens to be curled into a fist.

Next to me, the thick lines of Jonathan's eyebrows knit together—the same vaguely guilty expression he makes when he throws a wild pitch that I have to go scrambling after. “I figured she might want something else,” he says. “For the videos.”

“For the videos.” I can't keep the edge out of my voice. “Right.”

Outside of when he's pitching, Jonathan doesn't have a temper. Or much of one, because now I can see it awakening. His mouth turns down. His shoulders square. “Yeah,” he says, “it'd be shitty of me to do something with a girl my best friend liked and not tell him about it.”

“It's not like that.”

“It's not like you slept with her behind my back and lied to me about it—*several times*? And now that I did something actually nice for her, you're pissed at me?”

“Something *nice* for her—that just happens to involve money I don't have.”

Jonathan's mouth goes even tighter. “I'm not—” He takes a deep inhale like he's trying not to lose it. “I'm not doing it to show you up.”

*But you did.* “Right, well, if you want to sleep with Victoria, don't let me stand in your way.”

“No, I want to *date* her, and I don't know why you're so mad at me about

that, because it's not like that's something you do." He gets up, strides out of my apartment on his long, functional fucking legs. It's Jonathan, so he closes the door quietly, and that's somehow worse—how the snick of the latch sounds like something broken between us.



OF COURSE, WE HAVE A GAME THE NEXT DAY—AN AWAY GAME, SO WE ALL troop on the bus.

I grab a window seat. Usually, Jonathan sits next to me so he can extend his legs out in the aisle. Now he walks up, bag slung on his shoulder. He motions to the empty seat. "Can I sit here?" A question he hasn't need to ask since becoming my de facto seatmate.

I could tell him no and we'll spend the drive silently seething at each other. "Yeah."

And he slides in next to me.

Even in the broad bus seats, he has no choice but to spread out. His knee rubs mine. I flinch back. He does it again. Why wouldn't he? He's encroaching on everything else.

I'm not being fair. I know I'm not being fair. Jonathan is acting like he always does—unthinkingly generous. Emphasis on *unthinking*.

He shifts. His shoulder brushes against mine. Something I usually don't bristle at. Something I usually seek out, the way his mouth found my hand when we were all in bed together: Jonathan, as ever, eager and open. How he let me slide my hand down his back. How he listened when I said *You better fuck our girl good* and did just that.

*You can't be mad at him for being oblivious.* Not when I've spent the last several years reconciling him as my best friend—my *straight* best friend. Not when his obliviousness is one of the reasons I like him.

I also cannot get hard on a team bus. In sweatpants. I pull my leg away, cross my ankle on my opposing knee. If that shoves Jonathan over a little, I don't hate that.

"Hey," Jonathan says, about an hour into our ride.

I brace myself for whatever he's about to say—him calling me a bad friend, which I guess I am. Him telling me that he and Victoria have decided that they're better off without me.

He taps his iPad. On screen is a hitter from the team we're about to play. "How do you want to approach this guy?"

I can't tell if there's anything behind the question—if he's trying to make peace with me, or if he's just worried about the game. *About if that will affect his draft position in less than two months.* I push that down. He's my friend; I want him to do well. So I lean over the iPad. "Here's what I think we should do..."



IN RIVERSIDE, WE OFFLOAD THE BUS AND FILE INTO THE LOCKER ROOM. Jonathan and I claim stalls next to each other. He shucks his bus clothes and pulls on his uniform before most of us have a chance to even get settled, sliding his headphones in his ears.

"You feeling locked in, Halpy?" I ask.

He nods. He looks a little pale under his tan.

I motion with my hand—up, down, up, down. Jonathan looks at me for a second. His hands stay stationed on his thighs. It's silly, but it hurts: that I've screwed up things between us this much.

Normally, we'd talk about the game. Now, I sit in the padded folding chair in front of my stall and screw around on my phone. Maybe he'll change his mind.

Victoria didn't send any other texts. Why should she? Neither of us responded beyond a *heart* (Jonathan) and an *exclamation point* (me). Or maybe Jonathan has but not on our group chat. I don't text her. Instead, I scroll through my contacts, find the number for Avital, an old hookup, and text her.

Me: hey

Avi: Mike, it's Tuesday afternoon. I am not coming over to fuck you

Me: not that kind of hey

Avi: k

What's up

I type and erase a few things then land on: *Are you mad we never dated?*

Avi: no.

Written with a finality that makes me blink: *no* with a period at the end.

Me: ok

Avi: you weren't interested

And fuck, I am clearly going to keep digging a hole for myself.

Me: I could have been.

She sends three eye roll emojis.

Avi: You were clear that we were just hooking up. It was better that way. Some guys are real assholes about this kind of thing.

Though I feel like a real asshole right now. I try to tally how many people I've slept with and give up when it hits a fairly large number. I try to tally the people I've dated and come up with...Well, Jonathan wasn't wrong. I don't really date.

I've never been in the kind of relationship where I see someone every day, or text them stupid stuff they find funny, or cook for them, where they fuss over me if my knee is hurting or...

I toggle to my texts with Jonathan. A string of random bullshit—engineering jokes he doesn't understand but tells me anyway. Him asking if I want to go to the store. An article he sent about treatments for people with anterior knee pain like mine.

Oh, fuck. *Fuck*.

I glance over to him. He looks up, smiles, remembers he's pissed at me, and resumes his version of a scowl.

I want to apologize. Scratch that—I *need* to apologize. Possibly get down on my knees and beg him to forgive me.

But I can't do that now. We have a game to play, so we have to go play it.



BY THE THIRD INNING, THINGS AREN'T GOING GREAT. I GET THE SIGNAL FROM the dugout for what to pitch to call for—a curveball—then punch in the code on my pitch communication device and wait for Jonathan's acknowledgment. He shakes his head. I glance at the dugout. They issue the same signal. I

punch it in. He shakes his head again.

All right. If he wants to throw something else, it's not that big a deal—when he's drafted and playing in the minors (and the majors), he'll have more say in what pitches he throws. I push the button for a fastball.

And he shakes his head.

I push it again in case he missed the signal. Another head shake. The batter is getting restless. The umpire is getting restless. I'm getting restless.

I stand, wave to the umpire for time, then indicate the device sitting on my leg guard. "We're having some communication issues." It isn't even a lie.

I walk out to the mound. Jonathan's pregame pallor isn't entirely gone.

"Hey," I say, "you good?"

"Yeah." But he obviously isn't.

"What do you want to throw?"

He wipes his face with his jersey sleeve, then scans the stands around us that are no doubt filled with major-league scouts, the kind who roam Southern California to watch big-name baseball prospects like him. At this point, there could be front-office executives—the ones who make final draft decisions and dictate players' signing bonuses. None of whom should see Jonathan doing...whatever this is. Especially when it's my fault.

Over at the sidelines, our coaches are studying us. If I take much longer, they'll be out here too. "Off the field stuff stays off the field, okay?" There, nice and vague in case our infielders are listening. I want to say more—a lot more.

Jonathan does another swipe of his face with his sleeve. Looks at me for a long second. "Yeah, okay."

"What do you want to throw?" I ask.

He smiles. "Fastball."

I won't laugh. Except I do, and he doesn't laugh, exactly, but his smile comes back. "Great," I say. "Let's throw a fastball." And jog back toward the mound lighter than when I walked out.



BY THE TIME I LOAD UP ON THE BUS BACK TO SAN DIEGO, JONATHAN'S already asleep. Or at least he's claimed an entire bench of seats. His sweatshirt hood is pulled up. He probably has his headphones in. A few

strands of hair are hanging onto his forehead. I want to push them away like I did when he was drunk.

I must be staring. He rolls over and tucks his face against the seat a little pointedly. So not asleep. *Faking.*

There aren't any empty rows on the bus, so I slide into an aisle seat next to Gabe, one of our outfielders, who is humming along to whatever's playing on his headphones. He twists to see where Jonathan is sitting. "Trouble in paradise?" he asks.

"Halpy wants to sleep."

"Sure, sure."

The bus pulls out of the parking lot. Two hours is a long time to think about things. A long time and no time at all. I wish I had a hoodie, or at least had gotten a window seat. Instead I sit, and watch the seatback, and try to put everything into words. But the problem with being the guy who doesn't talk much is now I don't know what to say.



IT'S MIDNIGHT WHEN THE BUS PULLS INTO THE PARKING LOT; A LOT OF GUYS are already grumbling about having to get up for classes at noon. I have a nine a.m. circuits class. I keep that to myself.

I pretend to look for my stuff while Gabe slides past me. Guys file off the bus. Well, most guys. Jonathan hasn't moved. Once the aisle is clear, I head to his seat, expecting to find him still sulking.

He really is asleep this time. His mouth is slightly open. His eyelashes brush his cheek. For whatever reason, the only word that pops into my brain is *lovely*. He is.

Not delicate exactly—guys who are six-foot-six and have shoulders like his generally aren't delicate. But he feels that way to the ache in my chest.

I lean over and tap his arm. "Hey."

He blinks his eyes open.

All the words I spent the past two hours thinking of catch in my throat. "We're here," I say, unnecessarily, since we're stopped.

"Thanks for waking me up." His voice is thick with sleep.

I step back, and he stands, ducking to avoid banging his head on the bus ceiling.



We both shuffle off, grab our bags from where the clubhouse worker—not Victoria, because Victoria doesn't do road games—has piled them on the asphalt. A pile of two since we're the last ones to pick them up.

Jonathan's still moving sleepily, like our arrival caught him in the middle of a dream. That feeling in my chest expands, threatening to push its way up from my lungs.

"I can drive," I say, "if you want to get your car tomorrow." For a second, I worry he might refuse. That we'll drive back separately and go back to our own apartments. That tomorrow, he'll get breakfast on his own and won't text me a dozen things before his first class.

He gives me a long look, then says, "Yeah, all right." He climbs into the passenger side when I unlock my car, then reaches for the bar under the seat to move it back, before realizing it's already as far back as it'll go. Because he's the only person who's ridden there in a while.

I navigate out of the parking lot and through the five-minute drive between the ballpark and our apartment building. If I glance over to watch bars of light from the streetlamps cross Jonathan's face in slow ribbons, it's only because...I want to.

We get out at our building and climb the stairs to our apartments, not quite side by side—Jonathan slightly ahead like he's still avoiding me.

When we get to our floor, I dig out my keys and Jonathan does the same for his. It's late. We should sleep. I'm going to be a zombie during class anyway, and it's a tough class. But I know if I don't do this now, I might not.

Jonathan already has his keys in the lock when I say, "Wait a sec."

He turns to me, looking less asleep than he did a second ago, arms crossed at his chest. "Yeah?"

"We probably need to talk."

Jonathan blinks slowly. The weird yellow hallway lighting deepens the circles under his eyes. I should let him get some rest. I'm the one who screwed things up. I shouldn't be the one to set the terms for an apology.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I've been an asshole." There, as plain as I can make it.

Jonathan blinks again and doesn't say anything. His arms tighten across his chest.

"I guess I haven't been dealing well with you being drafted," I continue. This feels like too much to say out loud. But that's been part of—*most of*—the problem: me not gutting up and saying what I need to. "I didn't realize

how hard it was going to be for us not to play together anymore.”

A small line digs its way between Jonathan’s eyebrows. “This is about the draft?”

I shove my hands in my pockets and stare at the carpet just to the left of where he’s standing. “I guess I’m like every other guy who says that he could’ve been drafted too, if not for, you know, my knee. I was jealous—I *am* jealous. And you don’t deserve that.” I turn my attention back to the lock. My keys rattle in the otherwise quiet hallway. “Anyway, I should let you sleep. I’m sorry.”

I don’t have time to turn my keys in the lock. Jonathan can cover ground quickly when he wants to. Now he eats the space between our doors in a few quick strides. His hand comes over mine, palm against my wrist where I’m still holding the keys, fingers against my pulse. Which is racing.

“This is about the draft?” he says again.

“This is probably the last month I’ll get to play for real. But I shouldn’t have taken any of that out on you.”

“No,” Jonathan says, and I wait for his *you shouldn’t have*, which is what I deserve, “this isn’t going to be the last month you play.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna try, I guess.” *If we can get the money. If you or Victoria will have anything to do with me after this.* “Maybe an independent-league team or something.”

“You shouldn’t have to settle for—” Jonathan begins, then shakes his head, but I can autofill what he was going to say: for low pay, thin crowds. For giving up even before I get started. “Teams should give you a chance.”

“It doesn’t always work out that way.”

“It should.” Jonathan’s hand is still on mine. “Teams should know you’re smart. And you make sure we’re all doing okay—on the field, I mean. We all play better when you’re there.”

*We.* But to my foolish, hopeful ears, it sounds a lot like *I*.

I look up at him, at the sincere lines of eyebrows and smooth curve of his lower lip. I want to put my thumb there. I want to kiss him. I want him to want to kiss me, and it feels like entirely too much to feel in a hallway on a Tuesday. “Teams should know all that, huh?” I say.

Jonathan nods. “They really should.”

It’s a nice thought, but the reality is that the draft isn’t based on feelings. It’s just like Jonathan to ignore my apology and gas me up instead.

“It’s still probably not going to happen,” I say. It takes me a few breaths

before I say the next thing. “You should date Victoria. For real. If that’s what you want and what she wants.”

The edges of Jonathan’s mouth pull down like he’s actively thinking. His hand drifts away from mine. “Do you not like her?”

As if whatever I’m feeling can be condensed into *like*. “I do.” Enough to remember how she whispered that she didn’t want to be a nurse but had to for the money. “She needs someone who can take care of her.”

“Victoria seems like she can take care of herself.” Jonathan’s frown deepens even more. “And who do you think takes care of everyone? Who do you think takes care of *me*?”

“It’s different.” I wave my hand dismissively.

He catches my wrist. He’s the kind of big that’s easy to forget—until he casually presses me against my front door. Until he grips the fabric of my shirt, trapping me between the solid line of his body and the door’s cold metal. “Is it that you think I’m better for her?” Jonathan tightens his grip. “Or is it that you don’t think you’re good enough for either of us?”

Yes. I push that down, but it just rises again to the surface. I’m not good enough for them, and I know it, and he should know it too. I shake my head, barely.

He doesn’t move away. We’re touching, all over, his chest pushed against mine. He raises a hand to my face. This close, I can’t look anywhere but at his face, at his slightly parted lips and the gold flecks in his brown eyes. “Well, you are good enough,” he says, simply, then drags his thumb right below my bottom lip.

*Kiss me.* As if he wants that. As if I deserve that. His thumb hasn’t moved. It wouldn’t take much for him to sweep the pad of it against my lower lip—the way he did with Victoria right before he kissed her. When I wasn’t sure which of them I was more jealous of.

“We should...,” I begin. *We should talk about this more. We should not be doing this in a hallway where our neighbors could see.* “We should probably call it a night.”

For a second Jonathan doesn’t move. He’s still looking down at me like he’s thinking the same question. *Do you want to kiss me the way I want to kiss you?*

“Right.” He pulls himself away, then makes quick work of the door as if he’s desperate to get away from me. Fuck.

I stand there blinking in the yellow hallway for a second, then shove my

key in the lock.

Inside my apartment, it's as I left it that morning: neat, empty.

Except for the hair tie Victoria left on an end table and the ring Jonathan left on my coffee table the first time he put a beer there without a coaster.

I pull out my phone and send a message to our group chat. *We need to talk.*

And get two almost instant thumbs ups.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### *Jonathan*

Mike: We need to talk.

A MESSAGE I fell asleep looking at. When I wake up, I look at it some more. No matter how I do my cooldowns, I'm always sore the day after my starts. I spend a while in bed just lying here. It's possible that Mike is doing the same thing on the other side of our apartment walls.

Wait, no, it's Wednesday. I think he has class. Circuits, maybe? One of those ones with the wires. When I said that to him once, he laughed and scrubbed his hand over my hair.

*We need to talk.*

I don't really want to *talk* to Mike. Not after last night. Not after he confessed he was jealous about the draft—or not jealous, exactly, even if that's the word he used.

I should probably be pissed at him, but a lot of my anger floated away during the third inning when he came out to the mound and didn't let me fall apart. Most guys who give me a hard time have an undercurrent of *that should've been me instead*. Mike just wants to be there too and tied himself up in knots feeling bad about it.

I thought I knew what my type was: Victoria with her wide, blue-gray eyes. Then he looked up at me last night.

*Talk.*

I don't want to talk to Mike, or if I do, it's the kind of talking he did when we were all together. Mike doesn't talk that much, but when he does, he knows what to say. Even thinking about that night...

I watched the videos when Victoria first made the clips, at double speed, mostly checking to see if Victoria blurred my face completely.

Now, I pull my laptop off my nightstand, then queue them up, not on the private Dropbox link she sent, but on OnlyFans. It's probably weird to subscribe to a porn account of yourself, so I'm not going to think about it.

I navigate to Victoria's account—*our* account. Victoria only posted the videos Monday but...Holy shit. Holy *shit*.

There are about four times the subscribers there were before. The comments section has blown up. I scroll through. People are into us. Like, really into us. Into Mike and Victoria and, well, my dick. Which stirs now.

Subscribing to your own OnlyFans account is weird; jerking off to it is something else, something I'm going to contemplate after I'm done.

I watch the first clip, watching Victoria as she writhes on Mike's lap. In the video, Mike's gaze keeps flicking over to me, like he wants to know I'm getting off on it too.

I slept in boxers. I tug them down, grab a palmful of lube from my nightstand drawer, stroke myself, watching him watch me. I should probably be freaking out about this more than I am. I'm straight. I've only been with women. Being not-straight isn't something I have an issue with, obviously, but it's just not for me.

Or hasn't been.

On screen, I move toward Victoria, my tongue at her nipple, my mouth on Mike's fingers. I search myself for an objection. The thought of his hands on me...I don't hate that. Sometimes midgame he'll do that—brush his palm at my belt or curl his fingers at my ribs to tell me I pitched well.

I increase my pace, my entire body coiling tighter. On screen, we're all doing something, a blur, sound going in and out. I shut my eyes, imagine that it's the three of us together again, but in this bed, no one watching us but each other.

I come, an orgasm like a swift sudden fall, leaving streaks up my chest and stomach. I fumble for a handful of Kleenex and wipe myself off with them. Spend a few sweaty minutes breathing at my ceiling, then tap out a text to our group chat: *talk tonight?*



EIGHT HOURS LATER, I'M GREETED BY THE RATTLE OF MIKE'S KEYS IN MY apartment lock. My pulse kicks up. My hands go damp the way they do right

before I pitch.

I need someone to calm me down.

Someone who would normally be Mike, but when he makes his way down the hallway into my living room, my nerves do just the opposite.

“Hey,” I say, then hold up the bottle of beer I’ve been nursing for the better part of an hour. “You want one?”

He nods.

I grab one from the kitchen, then hand it to him where he’s sitting on the couch. Our fingers touch briefly, the way we’ve touched any of a thousand times...and not.

Even after I step back, I study him. He looks different today, his dark hair settled behind his ears. Normally, he keeps it shorter, but for the past few games he’s been pushing it back with an elastic headband underneath his catcher’s helmet and mask.

Have we been friends for years and I just never noticed what he looks like? He’s slept with a lot of people. He has kind of a reputation for it. For some reason, my brain never clicked those two facts into place—that Mike is hot and that a lot of people want to sleep with him. *Are you one of them?*

I might be staring at him, because he says, “You cleaned,” he says, like he’s repeating himself.

I glance around. “Oh, yeah, trying that out, I guess.” Mostly what I tried out was picking stuff up while contemplating what could happen tonight. Mike and Victoria will come over. We’ll...talk. Somehow, I’ll convince them to make more videos. Or something. “I used too much bleach,” I say. “I had to open a window.”

Mike laughs around the lip of his beer.

“I think I got the hang of the vacuum,” I add. “And put new sheets on the bed.”

I did—an extra set I found in my closet and spent far too long trying to get them to lay evenly. Just in case I’m not the only person who sees them.

Mike takes a particularly long swallow of beer. “Good to know.” So maybe he’s thinking the same thing. Or maybe he’s come over here to do what he did last night—let me down gently.

A knock at my door interrupts that thought.

I answer. Victoria is standing in the hallway, holding a reusable shopping bag. Her hair falls in soft waves at her shoulders; she’s wearing a color of lipstick that makes me want to kiss her.

My mouth goes dry. Somehow my nerves get even nervier. Because it's possible Victoria came over here to talk—but it's also possible she came over for other reasons.

“Hey, let me get that.” I take the bag from her, and we hug briefly before I lead her inside. The bag clinks as I put it on my now-cleaned-off coffee table.

Victoria reaches in and pulls out a six-pack of champagne splits. “I thought we could celebrate.”

And just as Mike says, “What exactly are we celebrating?” I blurt, “You mean all the new subscribers?” and they both turn and look at me.

“Um,” I say, “I checked the account—your account, I mean—this morning.”

Mike smiles, the half smile he does that's more in his eyes than his mouth. The tension in the room eases.

“Do you want glasses for the champagne?” I ask.

“The bottles are fine,” Victoria says.

Which, good, because I washed my glasses earlier, but didn't know how to get off all the water spots that appeared once they were dry.

Victoria rummages in the bag and pulls out a box of straws. She opens it, dispensing one, then takes the champagne bottle from the six-pack.

“Shouldn't we toast?” I ask. “Or maybe...” I motion like I'm shaking a bottle. Without an actual bottle in my hands it looks, well, not like I'm shaking a bottle.

Victoria goes an amused red. Mike's smile widens.

“I mean shaking the bottles up,” I clarify, and they both laugh.

“Not after you actually cleaned,” Mike says.

I tsk. “Don't tell Victoria I don't clean.”

Mike turns to her. “He does clean. He let me know he changed his sheets. Specifically.”

Victoria arches an eyebrow. “Really?” Said like we're all sharing the same secret, though none of us is saying it quite yet. “Here, let's toast.” She peels the foil cap off her champagne bottle and works out the cork.

So we clink bottles. For a second, I think about suggesting a toast like *new partnerships*—something easy and obvious that doesn't quite sum up how I feel. That I can't think of the exact words to describe that we're friends and business associates and something else.

It doesn't matter because they both drink. I do, too, bubbles tickling the



roof of my mouth.

“I should probably tell you both”—Victoria draws in a long breath—“but I don’t need the money anymore.”

All the bubbles on my tongue evaporate. So, this is *thanks* champagne, not *to the first of many* champagne. I shouldn’t be disappointed. No, it would be selfish to be disappointed.

“That’s good, right?” I manage.

Mike’s mouth is tense at the edges. “Do you not want to make any more videos?”

“I guess that’s kind of up to you both,” Victoria says.

“Is everything okay?” And Mike glances at me before adding, “I mean with your family.”

Victoria shrugs. The neck of her T-shirt shifts, falling over her shoulder to reveal the line of her bra strap. Which looks a lot like the one I bought on impulse on Saturday.

The one Mike must recognize from the picture she sent us, because he studies her. “You shouldn’t feel like this is something you have to do,” he says. “For any reason.”

“Why would she feel like she had to...,” I begin, then trail off when Mike’s shoulders go stiff. Right, because Victoria doesn’t need the money, but he still does.

He sets his half-drunk champagne down on the coffee table, removing a coaster from the stack I found while cleaning—his gift when I first moved in.

“I don’t want you to do that for me,” he says. “I’ll figure something else out.”

Victoria makes a soft noise, like she disagrees but doesn’t know how to tell him.

And she and I probably need to talk without Mike. “You, uh, want a tour?” I ask her. It’s not really subtle, not from the way Mike’s shoulders are creeping up toward his ears. But sometimes what he needs is space, and that’s one thing I can give him.

Victoria must pick up on it because she smiles at me. “Sure.”

“You coming too, Papa?” Though Mike’s been at my apartment enough that he can probably navigate it in the dark.

“I’m good here.” His face is hard to read. Maybe he’s going to take off while we’re in the other room. I tell myself that it’s fine. He should do what he’s comfortable with.

I lead Victoria down the hall into my kitchen. “This is the kitchen.” I extend my arms like a *ta-da*.

Victoria steps closer to me, cupping her hand. I bend down so she can whisper in my ear. “I still want to do this,” she says.

I smile, and our faces are close enough that I’m almost kissing her. “Me too.”

“Do you think Mike wants to?” she asks.

“Yeah, I really think he might.”

Victoria nods; her hair brushes my jaw. “You remember that time in the locker room when Cooper dropped his laundry to make me pick it up?”

“You mean, when Mike stopped me from, uh, interceding?”

Victoria laughs like she knows *interceding* means I would’ve decked Cooper. My arms find their way around her waist. Practically platonic if not for the smile in her eyes or the faint outline of what she’s wearing—of what I sent her that she decided to wear over here.

“After he did that,” she says, “guys stopped giving me a hard time.”

I stroke my fingers over her shirt, looking for any sign she doesn’t want me to, but all I get is the slow roll of her hips.

“He takes care of us,” I say. “But...” I rub my thumb over the bottom curve of her ribs. “But you don’t *have* to make more videos if you don’t want.”

She smiles. “I know.” Her palm drifts down the front of my sweatpants, where I’m already half-hard. “If it was just the two of you, would you still want to be together?”

A question that should scare me more than it does, one that contains a hundred other questions. *Am I sure about Mike? Do I want him the way I want Victoria?* I swallow, then take a necessary gulp of air. I want him. I want her. I want both of them, and the rest is just details. “Yes.”

She smiles. “Good.”

A thought occurs to me—that I want Mike, but Mike might not feel the same way. What’s the difference between hope and wishful thinking? “If you asked him that,” I say, “what do you think he’d say?”

Victoria’s smile expands, soft and knowing. “I think you should try it and find out.”

Which isn’t a *yes* but definitely isn’t a *no*. “I bought a ring light,” I say.

“You should get that out.”

But when I walk back to the living room, Mike isn’t there anymore.

Maybe he's in the bathroom. *Maybe he just went home.*

I go into my bedroom to where I stashed the ring light. Mike is there, holding the double picture frame with the photos of our team at the College World Series and a close-up of the two of us, sweaty and victorious.

"Hey," I say, just loud enough to get his attention, "I thought you left."

He shakes his head, less like he's denying something and more like he's clearing it. His fingers are tight at the edge of the frame.

"That's my favorite picture of us," I say.

He looks down at the photo. "It's a good shot of the team."

I take the frame from him, then lay it on my dresser face down. If we film in here, we can't have that in the shot. "I didn't mean the one of the team."

He smiles, not a sardonic *Mike* grin but something faintly embarrassed. I get the same urge as when I was in the kitchen with Victoria. I want to wrap myself around him, to pull him to my chest.

"I came in here to get my ring light," I say, "if you still want to do this."

For a second, I expect his *no*, for him to tell me and Victoria to have fun, for him to go home, a place both on the other side of the wall and impossibly far away.

Until he presses his lips together, the way he did on the beach when I told him to cut in when Victoria and I were dancing. "Yeah," he says, "I'm in."

"You don't have to."

That gets another smile. "Are you trying to talk me out of it right after you talked me into it?"

"I just mean we'd stick around, either way."

Mike's mouth ticks up at the corner. "It's your apartment."

Either he's not getting this at all or, more likely, he's doing this to wind me up. "That's not really what I meant." I reach out and graze my palm along his side, the way he does to me sometimes during games. He inhales sharply when I brush my thumb at his ribs.

I want to kiss him, not on camera, a want underpinning all my other thoughts, something new and buzzing.

I don't know if he feels the same way, but he isn't stepping back. "You should get out that ring light." His voice is low, rough. It was the first thing I noticed about him, years ago. Now I want it across my skin.

I settle for retrieving the ring light. Before I pull it from the box, I text them my results from the campus health clinic. *Negative. Just so you know.* Something about that feels impossibly adult, even more than having

sex on camera for money.

The ring light takes only a minute to set up—I adjust the tripod, then screw on the light. “Victoria’s probably wondering where we disappeared to.”

“No, I’m not.” Victoria appears in the doorway to my bedroom. She hesitates, not entering.

“You can come in,” I say.

She steps inside, her feet small and bare against the carpet, her smile open and unhesitant. “So, how do you want to do this?”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### *Victoria*

LAST TIME we were together felt like an accident. Or not an accident, a dream, with the kind of floating logic that dreams have. Now, it's me and Mike and Jonathan, and too many choices.

I distract myself by checking the ring light, by unclipping and lengthening one of the poles. I secure my phone to the holder, then angle the whole thing so it'll capture most of the bed.

*How do you want to do this?* What Mike asked our first time together. When he was slow and careful with me until he realized I wasn't going to break. Until I realized I wasn't going to break either.

Now he's standing there, shifting his weight nervously from foot to foot. "You should tell us what you want," he says.

*Us.* Him and Jonathan, who're looking past one another. Like whatever I walked in on wasn't just Jonathan incorrectly setting up a ring light.

I think of that old Victoria, who was so jittery my hands shook that first time Mike told me to do something. Who was afraid that if I put things into words, they'd disappear into the air.

*What I want.* The two of them. A future that's not dictated by what I have to do but what I go after for myself. I clear my throat and shake my hair back from my shoulders. "I want to make so much fucking money."

Mike laughs, then laughs again when I tap my phone to start recording. Things are different on camera. I stand up a little straighter, sending my shirt collar down my shoulder, along with my bra strap.

Mike takes the hint. He runs two fingers up my arm, replacing the strap, but he doesn't pull away. He tugs at my collar until he can see down my shirt, and I use my arms to push my breasts out a little, to show off my tits in this new bra.

“That’s nice,” he says. “Where’d you get it?”

I look at Jonathan. “He got it for me. I think he wanted to make you jealous. Did it work?”

Mike’s face shutters briefly, a flash that says *yes*, Jonathan got this to make him jealous, and *yes*, it definitely worked. “Depends.”

“On what?” I ask.

“If he’s fucked you in that getup or not.”

I laugh. “He hasn’t.”

“Then I’m not jealous.”

I turn back to Jonathan. “Would that make you jealous if he fucked me in an outfit you bought?”

Jonathan doesn’t laugh or go red. Instead, he crosses the room in two strides, then picks me up. My arms settle around his neck. My legs wrap at his waist. He’s hard already; he shudders when I writhe against him. “I bought that,” Jonathan says, “so I could watch him fuck you while you’re wearing it.”

He deposits me at the edge of the bed, then slips two fingers into the waistband of my shorts. “This okay?” he whispers and eases them down when I nod, leaving me with my legs spread in panties he sent me.

“How do they look?” I ask.

“Lovely”—Jonathan drags a finger lightly across them—“but not wet enough.” He rummages in a drawer, then pulls out a box with a vibrator pictured on the side.

“How much stuff did you buy?” I laugh.

Jonathan shrugs amusedly, then opens the box and pulls out the toy.

The vibrator is about the length of my palm, with the teardrop shape of a beauty blender and an extension at the bottom that’s supposed to feel like a tongue. “What’re you gonna do with this?” I ask.

Jonathan hands me the vibrator, grinning. “*I’m* not going to do anything.”

“If this works,” I tease, “I’m not sure what I’ll need you for.”

Jonathan palms the front of his sweats a little pointedly, which is the closest he’s come to bragging about having a big dick, though I guess guys who actually have big dicks don’t need to brag.

I laugh, then switch on the toy and press it to myself, enjoying the rumbles of its vibrations. “Oh, that’s...” With my eyes closed, it’s easy to forget about the camera, to chase after this feeling, a scattered sense of pleasure that’s slowly coalescing.

The bed dips next to me—Jonathan, and I hide my face in the wall of his chest. He cups my cheek, turning me gently. “Let everyone see.”

I do, sighing for the camera, for Mike who’s still standing a few feet away, clearly hard in his pants, watching us but not moving.

“He got me these panties.” I point to Jonathan, then turn back to Mike. “What are you going to get me?”

That shakes Mike out of his stupor. He sits on my other side, then strokes his hand over my stomach. His fingers dip lower, under the waistband of my panties, right to where I’m wettest. “Seems like you want to get fucked,” he says.

I clamp my thighs together, trapping his hand. A spark of pleasure flares through me. I deactivate the toy, strip off my shirt. This bra is too nice for everyone not to see it. “I want to ride you.”

Mike does as he’s told, shucking his pants in the process, pulling down his boxers to show off the leaking head of his cock. I reach for him, getting my forefinger wet with his pre-come, then suck my finger into my mouth.

“You’re such a slut for it,” he says, praising.

“So are you.”

“Baby, I’ll be a slut for you any day,” he says. Which feels different than what he’s said before, even if he’s just saying it for the camera. “Now let’s show the world how good you take it.”

It takes some positioning: I shimmy my panties down my thighs, then I straddle his lap, my back to his chest, his cock at my entrance.

Mike’s mouth is close to my ear. “You want something?” He drags his cock against me, a slow, wet tease, like he’s going to make me beg for it.

“I do want something.” I shift until we’re at the edge of the bed. “I want you behind me”—I point to Jonathan—“and I want him on his knees.”

Jonathan doesn’t wait. He drops down on the carpet. He’s tall enough that he still has to duck to reach me, to lay a kiss on the bare skin of my upper thigh. “That bra looks nice.”

“It does,” Mike agrees. “You’re gonna get a front-row view to her tits as I fuck her.”

A rile, or an attempt at one, but Jonathan just smiles at that. “That’s not what I’m getting a front-row view of.”

“Are you guys going to fuck me or are you going to flirt?” I ask, then almost immediately regret it. It’s too much, too far—the thing hovering in the room that none of us is allowed to say in front of one another.

Neither of them responds for a second. Mike drags his cock against me again, then slowly pushes inside. His hands grip my waist. He bounces me up and down on his cock, once, before he stills. “For that, you’re going to do all the work.”

I rise higher on my knees, driving myself down, and it feels deeper than how we’ve fucked before, the angle of his cock like I can feel it in my throat. He’s bare, nothing between us—nothing except Jonathan, who’s looking at us from his knees. He licks me, sloppy, and his tongue catches my pussy, the crease of my thigh. Mike’s cock.

“That’s it, that’s so good.” Mike’s voice catches on *good*.

Jonathan glances up. “Put your hand in my hair.”

I don’t, but Mike does, slowly, his fingers threading into its strands, not tugging but...directing.

Jonathan smiles, a quiet, grateful smile. He kisses me—us—right where Mike’s cock is inside me, around the edge of where I’m most stretched out. Slowly, tenderly, so I feel every movement of his tongue.

Mike tightens his hand, his knuckles going white. Jonathan groans, tension dropping from his shoulders, as if in relief. His licks grow broader, sloppier, wetter, like he’s drinking us in, like he’s content to stay here as long as we want.

He hits a particular spot. Pleasure shoots through me like a lone firework. I come, suddenly, undeniably, squeezing around Mike, a hard clench with my pussy. An orgasm that leaves me sweaty and panting, with Jonathan groaning against my clit.

Behind me, Mike sucks in a breath like he can’t believe this is happening either.

Jonathan looks up at him again. His lips are shiny. Wetness trails down his chin. “I want to kiss her,” he says.

“So kiss her,” Mike says, a smirk in his voice.

Jonathan draws himself up and kisses me, his mouth soft against mine. He’s blocking the camera, but I don’t care, not when he gives me his tongue to suck on, not when Mike thrusts into me right then, deep, like he’s making a point.

“What else do you want?” Mike asks when Jonathan draws back. Like he knows there’s more to this. Like he wants there to be more to this.

“You should kiss her,” Jonathan says.

Mike turns my face and kisses me deep, like he’s chasing traces of my



pleasure off my lips, like he's kissing Jonathan by proxy. He turns me back to Jonathan, then thumbs open my mouth, thrusting when I casually suck one of his fingers.

"Seems like she's making a suggestion," Mike says. "How about that, baby girl—you're so eager for it that you want both of us at once?"

A question beyond the sex we're having. If I want them—and want the entire world to see. *Yes*. A word that I could hardly say before that I can't stop thinking.

"I guess that'll work." I squeeze my pussy, getting his gratified hiss. "For now."

Mike laughs, then tips me forward. "Move the camera over," he says. "I want to get it all in the shot."

Jonathan moves the camera, then stands in front of me. His cock is no less huge at eye level, but he holds onto the base like he's trying to restrict how much I can suck.

"Let her have as much as she wants," Mike says.

Jonathan settles a hand softly in my hair, pulling the strands back with one hand as he guides his cock with the other. "Um, say when."

I can't help it; I crack up. And it surprised me that first time with Mike—how sex could be fun and funny and something people do just because they enjoy one another. "*Say when?*" I laugh.

Mike laughs, too, a rumble at my back. "Bro, really?"

Jonathan scrubs his hand over his own face, then glances at the camera. "Can we try that again?"

And I'm laughing a little as I suck Jonathan's cock into my mouth.

He strokes his hand over my hair. "You look incredible," he says.

Mike picks up speed, pumping faster. I try to squeeze around him, to wring him out. "Shh," he says, "just let us take care of you."

I go limp against him, or almost limp, letting him fuck his way deeper into me, letting Jonathan tilt my chin and use my face. I should feel degraded, or embarrassed, or any of the things that previous Victoria worried about, but mostly I feel...safe. Held without being trapped. Fucked and something beyond that, like I belong to both of them.

I moan and shudder and drool and cry out and it'd go on forever if not for how Mike's pace is going erratic, if not for how he's saying, "That's it, that's it," like he doesn't know other words, like all he can think about is my cunt around him, and Jonathan in front of him, and all of us together.

I pull off Jonathan's cock and rub my face on it, letting him leak all over my mouth and neck.

"How's that feel, baby?" Mike asks.

"He's got a nice cock," I say.

Mike laughs. "I was asking him."

And when I glance up, Jonathan's eyes are wide, and he's looking at both of us like a revelation.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*Mike*

I PAUSE. No, I freeze. I like to run my mouth during sex. It's easy; it gets people amped up. Generally, it doesn't mean anything other than we had a good time.

*Except this is being recorded. Except Jonathan is watching us.*

For a second, neither of them moves. Then Jonathan sweeps Victoria's hair back from her face where pieces of it are stuck in sweaty tendrils. He kisses her again, a deep, declarative kiss, and they pull apart with a small gasp.

*See, he's straight and making sure I know.* Whatever contact we've had must be incidental. His hand at my ribs, his mouth on my fingers, the way our hands overlapped as we were moving Victoria between us.

Until he says, "Can I try something?"

Victoria laughs, sweet and warm, and rolls off me, sprawling into Jonathan's bed. She presses her thighs together, like she misses me already. I could slide back into her. We could pretend there's nothing else going on.

Jonathan sinks to the bed in front of me, knees divoting the comforter. "Hey." He slides a palm up the back of my neck, slow, impossibly slow, like he can hear the beat of my heart in my chest. "I'm nervous too."

"Yeah?" I don't have any other words, not for how he's watching me, for how his tongue wets his lips, or the way his eyes are flecked with gold in the half light. "About what?"

He laughs and brushes his thumb against my lower lip, and I've thought about this in a hundred different ways. None matches the press of his lips or the fall of his breath on my cheek.

Whatever restraint that remains between us finally crumbles. He tips me over on my back. His thigh parts mine, our cocks brush together, his hand

threads its way in my hair. He kisses me, then kisses me again, then kisses me again until I'm drunk with it, until we part only to come back together.

Next to us, Victoria is watching us with a small smile.

"Sorry." I pull back. Because we were fucking. Because I don't know how much the audience will want to see this. Because I'm not sure how much I want the audience *to* see this.

She raises a dark blond eyebrow at me. "It's fine. Me and li'l buzzy here"—she holds up the vibrator she's running idly between her legs—"are having a good time."

"You keeping yourself nice and wet for me?" I ask and get the thrust of Jonathan's cock at my hip, like hearing me talk gets him going too. "Or is that for him?"

"It's for you both, in whatever way you want it." She opens her legs, one hand manipulating the vibrator, the other rubbing one nipple. "But if you don't decide soon..." She gives the vibrator another click, buzzing filling the room.

Jonathan looks down at me. His hair is a mess; his mouth is wet. He has that look he gets, that light in his smile that makes me smile right back. "Whatever you say, Papa," he says, then frowns, like he knows we shouldn't be using names on camera. "Uh, whatever you say, daddy."

It's not the first time someone's called me that—in bed or as a joke on my last name. But it's definitely the first time *Jonathan's* called me that. My cock pulses. My breath catches in my throat.

"For that," I say, "you both can get down and suck me off."

Jonathan smiles and hurries down the bed, and Victoria does the same, letting me drape myself out on the sheets. They meet, kiss a few times, Jonathan running his hands over her tits, which she presses around my cock, the faint scratch of the fabric the only thing keeping me from coming right then.

Victoria grabs the base of my cock, then works me into her mouth, and she turns to Jonathan, who's studying the whole thing with a seriousness he usually reserves for actual studying. "Do you want to...?" she asks.

"I've never been with a man"—Jonathan looks up at me through his eyelashes—"before, I mean."

I clench my eyes shut, trying to hold on to the very last scraps of my control. "Do what feels good."

When I open my eyes, he's smiling at me, a smile he presses to the

muscle of my belly, to the lowest part of my hip as it transitions into my thigh. To my cock, the side of it, and Victoria joins him. For a minute, there's nothing else in the universe but the wrap of their mouths around me, the unashamed lines of their spit. It doesn't take much, not when Victoria sucks me while Jonathan pumps me in the tight circle of his fist.

"I'm gonna come," I say, though I'm already there, and they kiss each other around the head of my cock, and laugh, silly and free.

I come in long ribbons, an orgasm that feels like it's never going to stop. My heels dig into the mattress, my cock jerks until Victoria captures my balls in her hand, squeezing them to drain me out.

I collapse back on the bedspread. Jonathan settles on one side of me, and Victoria does the same on the other, until I'm held between them, my body slack, bones dissolved, lungs heaving, my chest filled with a strange, liquid warmth that's dangerously close to contentment.

"I think we broke him," Jonathan stage-whispers across me, and Victoria giggles.

I attempt to sit up, but Jonathan puts a hand on my shoulder. He kisses my cheek, his stubble scratching softly against mine. His hand is at my waist, and I really should move, but I can't, not when he leans over and breathes into my ear, "You both should stay tonight."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### *Jonathan*

THE WORDS SLIP out of me before I can stop them. *Stay*. What I want. What I can't stop thinking about—all of us together.

Across Mike, Victoria is looking at us, eyes gray in the ring light's glow. "Are you sure?" she asks.

Answers rise to the surface. That the bed is big enough for all of us. That we can make another video. That we don't have to do this for the camera. "Yes," I say, "if that's what you want."

She doesn't answer, but she tucks herself more securely at Mike's side, and maybe that's answer enough.

I'm still hard, distantly, vaguely. I should probably take care of that. Mike's eyes keep drifting shut, sinking into sleep like he's struggling against it, with Victoria not far behind.

I shift to get up and accidentally nudge his hip with my cock.

"Hey, c'mere." Mike rolls over onto me, boneless and heavy. He's bigger than anyone I've ever kissed. His face settles on my shoulder, his thigh solid between mine. My cock finds the hollow of his hip, and we move like that together, his mouth catching mine.

He looks up at me, eyes dark. "This good?"

*Good*. An understatement for how I don't want to stop kissing him. For how something inside me feels unlocked for the first time. "Yeah"—I kiss him again—"it's so good."

Somewhere, the camera is still filming. I don't care. I kiss his mouth, his cheek, the bridge of his nose. I thought it'd be different—that kissing Mike would be different than talking with him, or riding next to him on the bus, or any of the thousand ways we're close. But it isn't.

I come like that, all over us both, something that would be embarrassing

if he didn't kiss me through it, if he didn't mumble, "Go to sleep, baby," right after.

So I do, with Mike resting on my chest and Victoria close enough that I can rub the ends of her hair with my fingers.



WHEN I WAKE UP, IT'S FULL NIGHT OUTSIDE THROUGH MY WINDOW SHADE. Victoria and Mike are talking softly. Victoria must have showered: her hair is piled damply on her head and she's wearing a T-shirt of mine that hangs off her like a dress.

Mike has changed too. His hair is long enough that he can put it in a little ponytail that I want to tug on. He must have gone to his place because he's in a different pair of sweats, socks, and our team T-shirt from last year.

Which means they both came back here to be with me. Something in my chest does a cartwheel—a fucking backflip.

"Hey," I say, "did one of you turn off the camera?"

Victoria laughs. "Way ahead of you."

I need to get up—to get cleaned up, to eat. I don't regret falling asleep with them, but my skin is pretty itchy, and my stomach is letting me know I missed first and second dinner.

Mike ruffles my hair. "You want food?" he asks, like he can read my mind.

I nod. My face rubs against my pillowcase. It smells like both of them, like Victoria's laundry detergent and Mike's shampoo.

Mike lean over. He pauses, then drops a kiss on my cheek like he's not sure it's allowed.

"Wait until I don't have morning breath," I say. "Evening breath. Whatever." But I kiss him back, my mouth on the edge of his lips.

No one's recording us. No one will know about this, except the three of us. I kiss him again, then turn to Victoria, who leans down and drops the tiniest kiss at my temple.

I grope for my phone on my nightstand and open my delivery app, then hand it to her. "You both should pick what you want for dinner."

Mike makes an objecting noise. "I can get this."

"Yeah, but I'm gonna order half the menu." The skin at my hip tightens

even further. Scratching it will only make it worse. “Can you put in my order?” I say. “I gotta rinse off.”

“What do you want?” Mike asks.

I smile. “You know what I like.”

“Sure,” Mike says, easy, and I kiss him again, and again, enough to make him laugh.

Despite gravity pulling me back into bed—to them—I get up, then throw myself toward my tiny shower stall. The water is blazingly hot; my soap smells soapier. My arm only hits the wall a few times. I sing, loud, probably loud enough for Mike and Victoria to hear me—but I don’t care if everyone hears me right now.

When I come back to my room, Mike is making the bed. “Victoria’s editing video.” He pulls the sheets taut, smoothing them with the flat of his hand. He stretches the comforter on top of that, and something about it makes me want to slide up behind him, so I do, winding an arm around him.

I kiss the back of his neck, his collarbone through the fabric of his shirt, his ear. Objectively unsexy places, except for how the weight seems to drop from his shoulders.

“I was reading this thing online,” I say, and Mike’s eyebrows rise. “It said that any circuit design must contain at least one part which is obsolete, two parts which are unobtainable, and three parts which are still under development.”

A joke from an engineering website that I don’t really get, but that makes Mike laugh against me. That part I get.

The pictures on my dresser are still face down. I step back, reluctantly, then pick up the frame. Me and Mike and the team. Me and Mike, together. In a month, I’ll have to pack this up and take it with me.

Mike might be thinking the same thing, too, because he eases the picture frame from my fingers, setting it on the dresser. “Food’ll be here in a second,” he says.

I smile. “So we have a second?”

He kisses me again, longer. His stubble catches at my lips, and I add that to the growing list of things I didn’t know I’d like.

“You’re handling this well,” he says, when we pull apart, our foreheads resting together.

I tug him closer. “You expected me to freak out?”

“I expected...” He considers. “I don’t know what I expected.”



“I like you a lot.” But of course I like him. He’s my best friend. “I like Victoria too.”

“Yeah.” He smiles. “I know just how you feel.”

“Good,” I say, “because I have an idea.”



THE FOOD ARRIVES A FEW MINUTES LATER. I GET IT AT THE DOOR AND ASK the delivery driver for her CashApp so I can tip her directly. When I carry the food into my living room, Victoria is on the couch, face tense as she stares at her laptop.

“You gonna take a break to eat?” I ask.

“In just a second.” She turns her laptop so that the video’s displayed. “I was making clips. If you want, I can edit things out.”

“Do you usually?”

She turns her laptop back to her, then types something briefly. “There are a few things we didn’t put online.”

“Like outtakes?”

She laughs. “Those. And some things that aren’t for an audience, you know?”

*Like Mike hurting his knee.* What do I want to keep for myself? A question different from what I don’t want people to see out of fear or shame. “When Mike and I were kissing,” I say, “the camera angle on that is pretty bad, right?”

Victoria smiles. “Yeah.”

“Then we should probably edit that out.”

Another smile, a few keystrokes, like she’s removing a segment of the video. “There we go.” And she closes her laptop with a click.

Unloading the food takes a while—I hand her container after container. “I think Mike went a little overboard,” she says.

Mike emerges from my kitchen holding plates. “I just got the family special.”

And my heart shouldn’t do a *thing* at that, but it does.

My couch isn’t really large enough for all of us to eat on. I sit on my floor, cross-legged, and fill and empty my plate twice. Mike turns on my TV, and we half watch a show, talking over it.

It feels like a normal evening at home with Mike. It feels like a date, not a first or second date, but a twentieth one, the kind where you stop counting in numbers and start counting in weeks. *How long have we been together and I just haven't noticed?*

After we're done, I take the plates and various containers. Victoria comes in as I'm attempting to fit the leftovers back in my newly cleaned fridge.

"Can I help?" she asks.

"Here." I pick her up and put her on the counter. "I'm trying this thing where I clean up as I go."

She taps her bare heels against my cabinet doors, and she's so different here than she is in the clubhouse that I have to turn and kiss her. "So I'm supervising?" she asks when we pull apart.

"You're providing"—I search for the right term—"positive reinforcement."

I put a container away, then kiss her. I rinse the plates off, then kiss her. I wipe down my countertops, then kiss her. By the time I'm done, the kitchen is sparkling and Victoria is laughing with her legs around me. Her eyes are blue as flowers right now, the kind I want to buy for her.

"I want to ask you something," I say. "You and Mike."

"It sounds serious."

Yes. "C'mon." We go into the living room where Mike is sitting on the couch with a book out—a textbook he left here a week ago. He closes it when Victoria sits next to him.

Standing, I'm so much taller than they are. That sensation is back: that I'm too much for either of them. But still, I have to ask.

"Um," I say, like this is a clubhouse speech I haven't prepared for, "I wanted to know if you—if you both—would go out with me?" I stand there, my hands stuffed awkwardly in my pockets.

For a second, they both look at each other, like they're sharing a secret. Then Victoria says, "I think we're already doing that."

I turn to Mike. "I know that's not really your thing," I say. "So if you don't want to or you want to, uh, keep doing what you normally do —"

"You mean sleep with half our campus?" Victoria interrupts.

"It isn't half." Mike pauses like he's calculating in his head. "Like a third at most." But he's smiling.

"If you want to keep doing that," I continue, "you should do whatever makes you happy."

Mike waves me over to the couch, clearing the middle seat so I'm wedged between them. Victoria's thigh rests against mine. Mike's hand drapes across my knee. "You're right," he says. "This isn't—hasn't been—my thing. But I could be into it."

"Could be?" I tap his shoulder with mine.

"I'm probably not any good at it." An admission he all but whispers.

And I think of that first dinner together, of Mike fumbling around until he finally ate sushi with a fork. How the next time we went out, he pulled his chopsticks apart and dove in like someone who'd practiced until he got it right.

"We have about a month before the end of the season," I say. "You wanna give it a try?"

"Yeah," Mike says, "I really, really do."

I have to kiss him, to kiss Victoria, to watch as they lean over me and kiss each other, the sparkle in Victoria's eyes, the careful stroke of Mike's thumb at her cheekbone.

"We'll have to be careful," Mike says, when he draws back. "The team might notice something going on."

Victoria frowns. "I could just quit. I don't need the money anymore."

Mike's frown matches hers. He looks between us like he's deciding something. "I could quit too."

I shake my head, emphatic. "No one's quitting anything."

Mike turns to me, and he has that expression on, the one that says he knows more about the world than I do. "If people found out, it'd hurt your chances in the draft."

I smile. "So they won't find out. I want you there—both of you there." Another issue occurs to me. "After the semester's over, are you both actually gonna be around?"

Victoria's cheeks go faintly pink. "I'm staying with my stepbrother—my *ex*-stepbrother. But yeah, I should be here." *Family*. The stuff Mike knew about that I want to know about too, whenever Victoria feels she can tell me.

"I'll be here too," Mike says. "My lease goes to August."

"For team tryouts?" I ask. After the draft, there'll be a flurry of showcases around here, undrafted players auditioning for teams.

Mike looks down, his eyelashes a dark sweep on his cheeks. "For the draft. If you want me to be there."

My chest aches but in a good way. "Of course."

“Then I’ll be here.”

“Good,” I say, “that’s good.” And I kiss them both again, then nod to the TV. “You wanna watch something else?”

“Sure.” Mike hands me the remote. “You pick.”

Later, we pile into bed, Victoria on one side of me and Mike on the other. The bed’s big—it was a beast to get into this apartment and I’ll probably just leave it for the next tenant—but Mike settles close, trailing a hand on my stomach.

“Stop.” I laugh.

He withdraws his hand like he’s been burned. “Sorry.”

I take his palm in mine, returning it to my belly. “It’s fine. It just tickled.” I thread my fingers through his, and kiss Victoria right below her ear. It’s strange how some people just fit next to you the way the ridges of a key slide into the right lock.

So I fall asleep that way, watching the numbers on my alarm clock turn from one to another—every tick a second toward when we’ll have to be apart.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### *Victoria*

THE VIDEOS GO up the next morning. I sit on Jonathan's couch and answer DMs, and upload pictures I've promised, and post teaser content for future videos. The second word in sex work really did turn out to be *work*.

I brought extra clothes with me, the way I would for a sleepover the few times in high school when I stayed over at someone else's house. What staying at Tyler's—*James's*—will feel like: me and Elizabeth and too much house. She doesn't move in all the way until next week. Next week, I can worry about that.

Today, I'm only worried about if I blur Mike's tattoos well enough. Jonathan doesn't have any tattoos, but I pick a spot on his hip and blur that anyway, since having no tattoos can be just as identifying as having one.

Jonathan comes in while I'm painstakingly applying a filter, then drops down on the couch next to me with an *oof*. "Did you decide my ass is too hot for the internet?"

I tell him about my tattoo plan.

He frowns sweetly. "You decided I seemed like the *ass tattoo* type?"

"Hip tattoo," I correct. "If you did have one, where would you get it?"

He shrugs. "I'm Jewish, so some people get them, but I probably wouldn't. How about you?"

*How did I not know that?* I'm sure Mike knows. It's not fair to be jealous of them being friends, but they got three years of one another, and I only get a month.

Jonathan's still looking at me in question.

"I don't know if I want to spend my life with something I might regret." Put like that, I sound dull and overly cautious.

"I really like how much you think things through," he says. "You and

Mike both.”

“Where is Mike?” Because he was gone by the time I woke up.

“Don’t tell anyone”—Jonathan wrinkles his nose—“but Mike is a morning person.”

“I am too. All my classes are early.” I glance at my phone. “Is it okay if I come back for my bag?”

“Whatever you want to leave here is fine. I could clear out a drawer if you want.”

*I like you so much.* It might be silly to think that about someone I’m already dating, but Jonathan makes it hard not to. So I climb into his lap and kiss him.

He pulls back, his hair mussed. “It feels weird without Mike here.”

“Yeah.” Because it does. We should probably have set ground rules for who can be with whom and when and in what way. Old Victoria would have, and I giggle at that.

Jonathan brushes a piece of hair off my cheek. “What’s funny?”

“I was thinking about making a spreadsheet,” I say. “Of when we’re together and in what combination.”

His laugh is like a gentle earthquake. “I can see why you and Mike get along.”

“Let’s send him something.” I snuggle myself against Jonathan’s chest as he extends his phone, camera pointed toward us. We take a series of pictures—me leaning against him, him kissing my hair, the two of us kissing—and get an almost instant reply. *Have a good time for me*

Which feels like another rule for the napkin contract: *Tell each other everything.*

I tap Jonathan’s arm until he puts his phone down, and we make out—kissing and kissing and kissing—until I’m almost late for my first class.



WHEN I GET BACK TO MY APARTMENT LATER THAT DAY, XIOMARA IS SITTING at our kitchen table, eating cereal for dinner. “Oh, do you live here?” she teases.

“Sometimes,” I shoot back, and she laughs.

“You should probably know Kaleigh broke up with her boyfriend.”

Kaleigh, our other roommate, who I haven't seen in...a while. "Really? I kinda thought they were forever."

"Turns out he showed their sex tape to his friends." Xiomara crunches her cereal. "Now it's on that campus gossip Insta. What a fucking dirtbag."

"Wow."

"It's cool." Another cereal crunch. "If his car ends up keyed, I don't know anything about that."

I laugh. "I definitely didn't hear you say that."

"Good." And Xiomara mimes zipping her lips.



THURSDAY GOES SMOOTHLY ENOUGH, BUT FRIDAY IS HECTIC. I GET UP EARLY, run, text Elizabeth to tell her I'm working. Finals are coming up. I comb through my ochem textbook, pulling out practice problems.

*Consider the following combination reaction: nitrogen, oxygen, and water.* On their own, they're everyday things. Put together, you get ammonium nitrate, which has this tendency to explode.

*Is that what I'm doing?* I trust Mike and Jonathan. But Kaleigh probably trusted her asshole ex.

Is it any different if I'm putting the clips up myself—if I'm altering and filtering and blurring until we're different people? I do five more problems. At least that's chemistry I can predict.



LATER THAT DAY, I GO IN THE CLUBHOUSE. WHICHEVER CLUBHOUSE attendant has been coming hasn't kept up with laundry, because there's a ton of it hanging outside each stall. I dump my stuff in my drawer, grab my clipboard, then push the cart, about to make my usual rounds. A player comes in. Cooper. *Great.*

"Hi," I grit out.

No one else is here. I shouldn't be bothered. I'm in the clubhouse with players sometimes. Mostly I just pretend I'm furniture. I resist the urge to take out my phone. To call Mike or Jonathan—who's starting tonight and who doesn't need the distraction—and ask them to come in just to make

sure...just to make sure, really.

I push the cart, grab more laundry. My route takes me closer to where Cooper is sitting, his legs spread out on the bench. He's built like an infielder, somewhere between Mike and Jonathan in height, and narrower than them both, with a flop of red-blond hair.

He's dressed in normal ballplayer gear—shorts, exercise tights, a T-shirt—but when I get to his stall, he's loaded it up with several laundry rings, including what looks like his regular clothes. I wash players' street clothes sometimes, if players have to squeeze classes in between practices and games. Most are apologetic about it.

Never three full rings of non-athletic clothes. There are jeans. There are collared shirts. There are *boxers*.

"Hey, Equipment Girl," he says. "Looking good today."

I aim my gaze at the floor. His feet are where I need to push the cart. I could just pick up his laundry, but I want as little contact with it as possible, gloves or no gloves.

"Do you mind moving?" I say. "I need to get through."

"No reason to bark about it." But he doesn't move. "What's the matter? I heard you were *fun*." *Fun*. He drags out the word, like he knows. Like he's watched me online. Heat creeps up my neck, not the heat I get around Mike and Jonathan, but something closer to humiliation.

I push the cart forward. Half-loaded with laundry, it's heavy. I don't clip Cooper—much. He grabs his foot, howling in exaggerated pain. "You didn't need to be a bitch and break my toe."

I smile, a parody of a smile that's all in my mouth and none in my eyes. "Next time, move when I ask you to." I grab the laundry rings from his stall—one, two, three. "Don't worry, I'll put in extra bleach, just for you." And I roll off.

With my back to him, I can feel his stare on me. His shoes squeak as he gets up. I can't run. With the cart between the bench and stalls, I've boxed myself in. My only way to escape would be to lever myself over the bench and try to get past him that way. My heart hits my ribs. Sweat beads down my back.

Old Victoria would have waited meekly for him to move, would have accepted the paw of his hand as a toll to go about her work. New Victoria is a kind of a bitch. I decide I like her.

That doesn't help my current predicament. Fight or flight comes with



another option: freeze. Which is what I'm doing with hands tight around the cart's handles.

Until there's another voice, this one from across the locker room, drawled in a voice that makes my back go even stiffer. "Hey Vicky, thought I'd find you here."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### *Tyler*

WHOEVER THIS GUY IS, he needs to get the hell away from Victoria.

She's standing there, tense, like she's debating how to get away, a guy in workout clothes hovering behind her. He has a sort of punchable prep school face: I would know. I've been told I had one of those, too, mostly from guys who try to deck me. It doesn't always work out in their favor.

*Let's see if it works in his.*

I walk up to him and get close enough to tap his shoulder, mostly to make him turn toward me, a flick to his nostril like I'm beneath him. Except I'm half an inch taller than he is, wearing better clothes. I smile and don't bother to put any of it into my eyes.

"Tyler," Victoria says through clenched teeth, "what are you doing here?"

"We need to talk."

For whatever reason, that makes the guy crack up. "Don't let me keep you," he says to her, a statement practically coated in oil. "I know you have a busy social life."

*What the fuck does that mean?* "Well, you don't seem to be part of it, so let her past." I don't bother to phrase it as a request. Guys like this don't get that courtesy. Especially not when his eyes track Victoria as she slides by him, deliberately trying to put as much space between her body and his as possible.

"Not in here," Victoria says when she gets to me. Her hair's back into one of those braids. I want to tug on it, just to see what she'll do—glare at me, probably, but glaring Victoria is better than fearful Victoria.

I don't want to cede any ground to this asshole, but Victoria takes off toward a set of double doors labeled *Field*. After a second, I follow.

We end up outside, in a passage leading to the ballpark that's strewn with

sunflower seed shells and what looks like drying Gatorade spit. She snags a bristle-brush broom that's resting against one concrete wall. A hose is coiled next to it, hanging around a spigot.

She screws the hose onto the spigot and sprays down the floor, close enough to my feet that flecks of water fall across my Loro Piana loafers. I jump back.

Victoria grins. She takes the broom and begins pushing detritus toward the long, grated drain lining the other side of the tunnel.

"Who was that guy?" I ask.

"Cooper is one of the players." She gives the broom an especially vigorous stroke.

"Was he giving you a hard time?"

Her sweeping motion stutters. "Nothing I couldn't handle."

"Sure," I say, making it clear I don't believe her.

She gives the broom another flick. "What'd you come to talk about, Tyler?"

"Have you thought about my proposition?" I ask.

Another push. "I'm not interested."

"Hear me out."

That makes her put down the broom. She's wearing thick, practical sneakers, the kind I've seen nurses wear at the cardiac center. They clomp across the floor as she approaches me. Sweeping has left her with a faint glow, or possibly she's learned how to underpaint her blush.

"Be specific," she says. "You don't get to come to my job and do this. How'd you even know I was here?"

"Lizzy mentioned your little cleaning gig. What if I offered you a better job?"

Victoria gives me a long look. Her eyes harden. "I don't need—or want—your money."

"So they must be paying you pretty well," I say. *Or she has someone else to pay for her all of a sudden.* The thought ignites something in my gut that could not possibly be jealousy. I am not jealous of that slimeball in there. "I guess it's okay if Cooper breathes all over you so long as he tips extra."

She goes a glorious, angry red. "Fuck you."

"Hey, just wondering if you were in the family business. I'm sure being ambitious about your dating prospects isn't cheap. Or is that the side hustle implied with the job? One of these guys is bound to get a payday."

For a second, she looks like she's going to slap me. *Bring it.* I want the sting of her nails on my face. Instead, she calmly picks up the hose, points it at my shoes, and turns the water on.

I spring out of the way. "Vicky, what the hell?"

She cuts the water. "Tell me what you want, then get out of here."

"You ruin these shoes and I'll add that to your tab."

She smiles, and her teeth don't gleam, exactly, but there's a distinctly confident look that wasn't there a few weeks ago. "But you still walk out of here with wet feet."

Two can play that game. I clear my throat, enough that she pumps the nozzle of the hose, sending drips of water onto the concrete floor. "As I said, I took your previous response under advisement —"

"You mean I said *no*," she interrupts.

I grin. "So I'm here to up the offer. I need errands run this summer. Appointments. Meal plans. That kind of thing."

"I'm not going to be your personal assistant. Hire someone else."

"This wouldn't be for me." But I don't have time to elaborate. Noises come from up the tunnel. A group of players sweeps through the door, Cooper among them.

That's not who catches my attention. Because someone else is with them who I haven't seen since that day in March. A guy with black hair and almost-black eyes who I last saw when I kicked him out of my car and onto the literal curb. *Fuck.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### *Victoria*

MY FINGERS ARE HOLDING the nozzle of the hose, but just barely. All I want is someone—*anyone*—to treat me like a person today. Guess I don't get that. I settle for Tyler squirming at the loss of his probably limited-edition loafers. Who the hell wears loafers to a locker room?

Except he's not staring at me. His attention is turned up the tunnel to the players who've come in to run fielding drills and hit batting practice.

Jonathan isn't with the group, but Mike is. He's standing by the door, face as unreadable as if he was already wearing his catcher's mask. "Victoria." There's a slightly possessive growl to that, enough to make Tyler's stupidly well-groomed eyebrows shoot up. "I think Coach was looking for you."

*Probably because the laundry cart is sitting in the middle of the floor.* "Thanks," I say. "Tyler was just leaving."

Mike gives Tyler a hard look. Tyler's a little taller than he is, but Mike isn't exactly small. Right now, they both look like they want to hit each other in the face. *Great.*

"I can walk him out if you want," Mike says, like Tyler can't hear him.

Tyler's lip curls into a smile. "Sorry, I didn't get your name?"

Mike offers a hand, and they shake. "Mike Pappalardo. I'm a catcher." He squeezes Tyler's knuckles, enough that a normal person would wince.

Tyler's smile only widens. "Uh-huh," he says. "Tyler Navarro"—and I'm not sure when he started using James's last name—"Vicky's stepbrother."

"*Ex*-stepbrother," I clarify.

Mike gives an *uh-huh* of his own. "You need help finding the exit?"

"I'm sure I can manage," Tyler says.

Mike snorts and waits until Tyler leaves through the clubhouse doors.

Hopefully he keeps going into the parking lot and maybe into the ocean. “You good?” Mike asks me when he’s gone.

“Yeah.” Because they have a game in a few hours. Because I’m behind on my list of to-dos. Because I’ve had enough hyper-defensive pissing matches around me for today. “I’m good.”

“Are you sure?” he asks. And yeah, I wouldn’t believe me either.

“I think the guys are waiting on you.” A few players are lingering at the entrance to the field, possibly eavesdropping. Cooper is with them, staring back at us, something hardened in his glare.

“Right,” Mike says. “See you after the game—I mean, later.” Then takes off to order around the infielders.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

*Mike*

THE THING with baseball is that, if you play enough games, you're bound to lose a few. Jonathan pitches fine. Hell, Jonathan pitches great. The rest of the team...

In the fourth inning, Jonathan induces a ground ball. What should be an easy grab for Cooper at second base, but it rolls right past him into the shallow infield.

A mistake that doesn't matter that much—except Jonathan's shoulders go stiff.

I jog out to the mound. Around us, the stands are packed. Rumor has it there are a few front-office executives here. When I get to him, Jonathan's shoulders haven't relaxed. Maybe we should talk about pitch selection. I put a casual hand on his hip. "Any exciting plans for the weekend?" I ask.

That gets him to smile. "You know," he says, "the usual."

That calm lasts until the sixth inning. A ground ball up the middle that Cooper moves toward lethargically. He doesn't even do so much as a *my bad* as the ball rolls past him.

Jonathan takes a step like he's going to storm off the mound.

I shout *Time!* to the umpire, then jog out to where Jonathan's fuming. Our infield is watching us, mostly because they're nosy. Cooper is not my responsibility; Jonathan is, and scouts should see him in the best light possible.

"I know you have plans for tomorrow," I say—we both do, another game—"but we could go to the beach Sunday. Maybe see if our mutual friend wants to come with us."

Jonathan frowns slightly. "Our mutual friend?" After a second, realization dawns. His shoulders drop. "Sure."

“You good otherwise?”

He floats his hand up and down a few times—a gesture, *our* gesture, though I don’t remember it feeling like this before, this strange clench behind my sternum. So I do it back, then return to home plate, ready for the rest of the game.



WE DON’T WIN, BUT THAT’S NOT JONATHAN’S FAULT. OR MY FAULT, REALLY. I get three hits—hitting is easier now that I’ve made my peace with not being drafted—but the rest of our offense is kind of listless. My knee doesn’t hurt, so I’ll take it.

After the game, our manager catches me by the sleeve as I’m heading toward the dugout. “What’s up, Coach?” I ask.

“Tomorrow,” he says, “feels like we need to run more infield drills.”

More time with Cooper. *Terrific*. “Sure.”

“You’re a gamer, Pappalardo. That’s gonna take you places.”

But right now the only place I want it to take me is toward home.

Inside the clubhouse, Jonathan is at his stall, ice pack on his shoulder, his phone tipped to his ear. “Yeah,” he says, “game went okay.” He mouths *advisor* when I get over to him. His definitely-not-an-agent because he technically can’t have one of those until the draft.

I start to strip off my jersey. Somehow, in all of this, I’ve missed Victoria doing the laundry rounds.

She’s probably just putting stuff in the washers. I walk to the laundry room, undoing buttons as I go. When I get there, Victoria’s sitting on the counter, head tilted back, her hand on the bridge of her nose like she’s staving off a headache.

Her eyes fly open when I knock on the already-open door.

“You okay?” I ask.

“Sorry.” Her hair is slipping out of its braid. There’s a tiny smudge of mascara under one of her eyes. “Long day.”

I pluck my jersey. “I was just dropping this off.”

“Here, let me get your laundry ring,” she says.

“I got it.”

And she tilts her head back again.



I find my ring in the laundry pile, pull it off, and add my jersey to it. A mountain of laundry is sitting in the cart. “You want me to throw this stuff in?” I ask.

“I can do it.” Victoria starts to lever herself up. Even that looks tired.

“It’s fine. Stay there. Is there any trick to this—I don’t need to run the water ahead of time or anything?”

“If there’s anything really stained or ripped up, set it aside. Other than that, not really.”

“Got it.” I start grabbing laundry rings and tossing them into the washer. It’s about at my eye level, so must be above Victoria’s.

The clothes flap around as I go—most are heavier than I would expect. By themselves, it’s not exactly a workout, but after a game, with my arm tired from tossing balls to the mound, it’s not totally easy. Doing this day in, day out...Victoria is stronger than people gave her credit for—maybe than I gave her credit for.

“All done,” I say when I’m finished. “What buttons should I push?”

That at least gets her to smile. I go over to where she’s sitting, then drop a hand on her knee.

And get the stutter of her breath, the slight tensing of the muscle in her thigh. She wipes her hand over her forehead, then says, “Yeah, close the door, I guess.”

*What the fuck?* I pull my hand back. “Are you feeling okay?”

She blinks her eyes open. “I’m just tired.”

“Right.” Because that was obvious when I walked in. “You’re tired.”

“We can still...whatever.” She blows out a breath. “If you want.”

I step back. My cleats scrape loudly against the laundry room floor. We’ve only been dating for a few days, so I’m not sure when this turned into another task on her to-do list. “No thanks.”

That gets Victoria’s attention. Her eyebrows push together in a confused scrunch. “Sorry.”

I soften my tone. “What are you apologizing for?”

She swallows, visibly.

Maybe I should leave and come back in so we can restart whatever is going on. Or maybe I should find whoever made her feel this way and—I’ll figure that out when I get there. “Did something happen with Tyler?” I ask.

She shakes her head, less like she’s denying it and more like she’s used to it. “No. Yes. He came in while Cooper was—While I was moving the

laundry cart.”

My hand contracts into a fist. “While Cooper was doing what?”

Another head shake. “Mike, don’t do anything. Things turned out fine.” Victoria looks around. “I’m probably blowing things out of proportion. I’m sure he was just giving me a hard time.”

“You should be able to work without guys being creeps.” Though I’m standing here in my sweaty undershirt, having just put my hand on her knee. “Or without feeling like you have to go along with stuff.”

She smiles. “But I like you.”

Something about that reminds me of the first time she stayed over—how she pressed a tiny hesitant kiss to my cheek. “I want you to like me enough to say no,” I say.

“Okay,” she says, softly, “I will.”

For a second, neither of us does anything. I turn back to the washer. “What buttons do I push?”

“The middle one on the bottom twice, then the top left green one.”

“I was wondering,” I say, after I’ve pushed the buttons in combination. “Jonathan and I were gonna go to the beach on Sunday if you want to come.”

Victoria tilts her head to the side. “It’s okay if I say no?”

I nod.

“Then, yes,” she says, “I’ll come.”

I laugh. “Okay, good.” I glance around—I’m sure there’s more laundry to collect, and probably cleats to work on. A dozen things I don’t know about that she does invisibly so we don’t have to think about them. “How much more do you have to do tonight?” I ask.

“Not too much.”

“You want me to stick around until you’re done?”

She shakes her head. “No, I’ll be all right. If anyone gives me a problem, I’ll just ram them with the laundry cart”—she pauses for a full half a second, then adds—“again.” And giggles.

I want to kiss her, but I settle for going back down the hallway to where the team has cleared out, carrying her delighted laughter in my ears.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

*Tyler*

Me: Does ginger help with nausea?

Victoria: What?

Me: Does ginger help with nausea?

Victoria: Do you think I can't read?

Don't answer.

And yes, it helps.

Me: See that wasn't so hard.

Victoria: I am rolling my eyes

Me: This is exactly why I hired you

Victoria: Fuck off, Tyler.

Me: I don't know what's gotten into you

But it's great

Victoria: One of these days you're going to realize you're not entitled to everyone's time and attention.

Me: just yours



I PUT my phone down on the stack of papers I've been reading for the past hour. Not reading—attempting to make sense of. James's doctors keep sending him home with care instructions. Some are contradictory. Some just say *per conversation with patient*. Conversations that, when I ask him about them, he tells me not to worry about. Information I'm also not entitled to.

Noises come from up the hall. James in his bedroom, probably trying to lift or move more than he should. “I’ll be there in a second,” I yell.

I set the papers aside. My computer displays my inbox—emails, none of which I’ve gotten to. I guess I’m not entitled to free time either. *Or sleep.*

Another noise, this one a bang, like he’s dropped something. “I’m coming,” I say, and peel myself up to go see what he needs.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### *Victoria*

THERE'S a lot of good stuff about San Diego, but the beach is probably in the top one, two, and three. So on Sunday I'm ready—more than ready—when Jonathan and Mike text that they're outside my building.

I dash down the stairs with my beach bag sitting on my shoulder. Instead of finding them in the parking lot, Jonathan's standing by my front door, holding a bouquet wrapped in brown paper. "These are for you."

My heart does a *thing*, a rapid-fire thing, a strong beat against my chest. "What?" I ask quietly.

Jonathan smiles. "Mike picked them out. Well, we both picked them out. They reminded us of you."

I examine the flowers: they're blue and gray and a little wild-looking, not neat like a wedding bouquet. "Thank you. These are beautiful."

Jonathan's smile goes even softer. "Like I said, they reminded us of you."

"Do you mind waiting while I put these in water?" I ask.

"Of course we don't," he says, and that thing in my chest catches on *we*. "Let me take your bag."

I extract my phone and keys, then climb back up to my apartment, bouquet resting in my arms. Xiomara's at the kitchen table. She has her computer open, frowning over it while she shovels cereal in her mouth. She looks up when I come in.

"Those are nice," she says when I lay the flowers on the counter.

"Yes"—I begin trimming the stems at an angle so they can draw up water—"they really, really are."



I TAKE ABOUT TWENTY PICTURES OF THOSE FLOWERS—NOW SET IN A VASE that Kaleigh’s ex gave her—before I head back downstairs. Mike and Jonathan are in Jonathan’s SUV. Mike gets out when I approach and switches to the backseat.

“You don’t have to do that,” I say. “I need the least leg room.”

Mike shrugs, a grin playing around his mouth, and it’s been a full day since that conversation in the laundry room, but his *I want you to like me enough to say no* has been on my mind ever since. “This way, you can put your feet up,” he says.

Unsurprisingly, Jonathan’s SUV is tall. I climb in, adjust my seat, then kick my shoes off and rest my heels on the dashboard. My sundress, which isn’t that long, gets even shorter, inching up my thighs until my legs are on full display.

Jonathan reaches over the center console and carefully cups my kneecap in his palm. It’s sweet and it’s gentlemanly, until he brushes his thumb on my inner thigh, after which...it’s something else, easy and warm and a little sexy.

“Are we going to the beach or what?” I ask, mostly to make him laugh.

He squeezes my knee, then removes his hand. “Yes, boss,” he says. “Sorry, yes, *Victoria*.” And puts the truck in gear.



PREDICTABLY FOR A SUNDAY AFTERNOON IN EARLY JUNE, THE BEACH IS crowded. We set out a blanket with stuff they brought: a mini cooler with waters and juice, a reusable grocery bag heavy with snacks, and several cans of sunscreen.

Around us, a few people have textbooks out in nominal acknowledgment that finals start soon, but we’re far enough from campus that most people aren’t doing that. I brought a paperback from the county library that I pretend to read. Mostly, I watch Jonathan, who’s shirtless and coating himself with spray sunscreen, laughing as it drips down his torso.

“Want me to do your shoulders?” I offer.

“That’d be great.” He sits so that I’m in the shade of his broad back. I begin at his waistband and work upward, rubbing in sunscreen as I go, enjoying the shift of his muscles under his skin and the way he laughs when I hit a ticklish spot.

“Remember that day in the dugout when you had mud on your hands?” he says. “I wanted to kiss you.”

I glance around, but no one else on the beach can hear us, the wind off the water carrying everyone’s voices away. “I wanted to kiss you too.”

He laughs. “You want me to get your back?”

I’m pale enough that I applied sunscreen before I left my apartment and again in the parking lot as soon as we got out. I’m sporting my sundress over my swimsuit and a hat large enough that Jonathan brushes the brim several times.

“I could probably use some more,” I say.

He sits behind me and traces his hand across my shoulder. A second later, I feel a drip of sunscreen down my back, followed by the careful flat of his palm. He applies it in short bursts—and I’ve had his hands all over me the past few days, but this is different, sitting out here, with Mike watching us, eyes lit with something that a month ago I’d have thought was jealousy.

Jonathan slides my dress straps gently up my arms. “Papa, you want me to get you too?”

“Sure.” Mike strips off his shirt, pulling it up over his neck, and I don’t know why I find that motion hot—the casual efficiency of how he yanks his collar over his head—but I do.

Jonathan seats himself behind Mike, then sprays a patch of sunblock at Mike’s shoulder that he rubs in.

“Can you get my tattoo?” Mike asks.

“Sure.” Jonathan taps the three initials that make up the tattoo. “What was your uncle’s middle name?”

Mike snorts. “You know it was *Melvin*.”

“I know,” Jonathan says. “But maybe Victoria doesn’t.”

Mike glances back at him, eyebrows raised in question.

“You’re tense.” Jonathan sprays another dripping circle of sunblock on Mike’s shoulder blade. “You’re not supposed to be tense at the beach.”

“I’m not tense,” Mike says tensely.

“No lying at the beach either.”

A second later, Jonathan sends another long spray of sunscreen down Mike’s spine, cold and wet enough to make him yelp, before he begins to massage it in.

Mike makes a noise low in his throat. “You really want to do that here?”

Jonathan digs his thumb in an apparent muscle knot, drawing out a groan.

“I could do this later too.”

“You going for extra boyfriend points?” Mike says.

“I didn’t know there were points”—Jonathan presses his thumb in more, enough that Mike looks like he’s melting—“but yes, I want them.”

Mike cracks an eye open and turns to me. “Should we give those to him?”

I smile. “He could earn them a little more.”

Jonathan buries his grin in Mike’s shoulder. It’s no different from how players are with each other in the clubhouse, than how Mike and Jonathan were with one another before. *Before*. Before Jonathan asked if it would help if he was in the videos too. Before we all said *yes* to each other.

I have no idea what they look like to any of the beachgoers around us, but from across the blanket, they’re both smiling and at ease.

I don’t want to forget this. “Hey”—I hold my phone up—“group picture.”

We cluster together. Jonathan takes my phone, angling it upward. He has residual sunblock smeared on his cheek. Mike’s hair is escaping its topknot. My lipstick is smudged. Even in the glare of my phone screen, we look happy.

Jonathan takes pictures, a burst of them. “Let me see.” He thumbs his way to my camera roll, then looks up at me, eyes wide. “Um, I don’t know if you want me to see those.”

I laugh. “I’ve been selling them for five bucks a pop to subscribers. You can take a look.”

He scrolls through. “You should be charging way more.”

Mike crowds over him. He taps a picture on the screen. “Send me that one.”

And Jonathan does, then hands me back my phone. On it, a notification that Jonathan has sent a picture to our group chat—a photo we just took that’s not worth anything to anyone but us.

“Right.” Jonathan shifts back, then tugs on Mike’s topknot. “We’re at the beach. Time to *beach*.” He gets up and hurls himself down toward the ocean, his laugh trailing behind him.

“You going in?” I ask Mike.

“Someone should make sure the water doesn’t take him.” Mike draws himself up, brushing sand from the hair on his calves. “You good here?”

I tap my book. “Should be.”

The strap to my dress has drifted down my shoulder. Mike runs a finger under it, pulling it right. A touch that isn’t a kiss but feels like one, like a



signal between all of us that no one else gets to have. “Be back soon,” he says, and he jogs toward the shoreline, the ocean almost loud enough to cover Jonathan’s whoops of delight.



I READ. THEY SWIM. I PULL A BOTTLE OF JUICE FROM THE COOLER—something fancier than I’d get for myself, with dubious claims about prebiotics on the label. I’m halfway through the bottle when Jonathan returns, dripping with ocean water, droplets clinging to his chest.

He collapses on the blanket next to me, nudging my arm with his wet head, and he laughs when I giggle. “Whatcha reading?” he asks.

I show him the cover of my book. “It’s part of a series. Elizabeth—my sister—and I read them together.”

“That’s so nice. How old’s your sister?”

“Sixteen.” I try to think of ways to summarize Elizabeth. “She’s really smart. Like much smarter than I am.”

Jonathan *tsks* like he disagrees.

“She is,” I protest. “She does all sorts of stuff, but mostly robotics. That’s what she really likes.” And I haven’t checked with her or with Tyler to make sure that fancy-ass prep school has a robotics team—it must, it has everything else.

“Mike did robotics in high school,” Jonathan says. “I think he still does volunteering stuff or something for tournaments.”

I look around. “Where is Mike?”

“He went for a run. Sand is better for his knee.”

Sure enough, up the beach, Mike is just at the edge of the water, jogging at a slow but even clip.

“Does your sister want to be an engineer too?” Jonathan asks, and I don’t know why him asking about Elizabeth puts a warmth in my belly that has nothing to do with the sun, but it does.

“I think so,” I say. “That’s why I need the money—needed the money. For her to go to college.”

Jonathan nods. “She’s lucky to have you.”

“I probably should have come up with another way pay for her.”

“I don’t know,” Jonathan says. “Seems like we’re pretty good at it.” He

bumps my leg again. “I was thinking...Is it that different from when Mike and I play in games?”

I laugh. “What do you mean?”

“People pay to watch us too,” he says, as if it’s that simple.

Something in my back untwists, some sense that Jonathan would be kind but condescending. That he wouldn’t get it, but would pretend to, and that would somehow be worse. Different from this acceptance: that money was something that, if you needed it, there was no shame in earning.

“I made a graph with our subscriber numbers,” I say. “It’s pretty exponential.”

He laughs. “Definitely show that to Mike. You can be math nerds together.”

“What does that make you?”

“A math nerd appreciator.” Jonathan looks around, spots someone across the beach, then frowns. “A guy over there is recording us.”

I scan the beach. A few blankets away, someone is aiming his phone at us unashamedly. I inch away from Jonathan, not that that will help. “Don’t you get annoyed by that?” I ask.

“I have to get used to it, I guess. It was kind of flattering at first, but I don’t like that they don’t ask.” He shrugs. “I’m gonna take a nap. I don’t know how interesting watching me sleep will be.”

“You want me to sunscreen your back again?” I ask.

“You’re the best.” And he lies down, his face unworried against the beach blanket.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### *Jonathan*

I WAKE up to Mike gently shaking my shoulder.

Around us, people are beginning to pack up. “What time is it?” I mumble. “Dinner time-ish. First dinner.”

When I sit up, something slides off my back—a towel. Another is draped across my legs. Both end up in a heap, and I fold them into something resembling squares.

When I’m done, Mike picks up the towel and refolds it. “Victoria mentioned you had an audience.”

“Was that what the towels were for?” I ask.

“And so you don’t get sunburned.” Mike smiles, and I want to kiss the lower curve of his lip. I settle for resting my hand next to his. He has good hands—strong, with a dusting of hair on the back.

He must catch me staring, because he taps my index finger with his. “You still asleep?” he asks.

“Remember when you used to put those pink stickers on your nails?” Because before we got the current pitch communication system, he used stickers to help me see what pitches he was signaling for.

His forehead creases, an expression I’m familiar with—a *What are you talking about?* that never feels mean. “Yeah?”

I try to think of the right words. The stickers looked good on Mike the way Victoria’s nail polish looks good on her but also different. How Mike’s hands were always coated in ballpark dirt. How there was something about that that made me want to keep looking at him. “I liked those.”

Mike taps my finger again, like he gets what I’m saying.

“Where’d Victoria go?” I ask.

Mike smile becomes a smirk. “She’s getting changed.”

I should probably do that too. My skin is sticky—sand, ocean water, sunblock, sweat—and my hair is crunchy. Except I don't want to move, not as the beach is emptying of people. Not with Mike sitting next to me as the sun hangs on the horizon. Something I'll only get another few weeks of, tops.

"What're we doing for your graduation?" I ask.

This time, Mike's *What are you talking about?* face is a little more shuttered. "I'm walking, I guess. Hadn't really thought about it otherwise."

"Is your family coming out?"

Mike shrugs. "I don't think they can make it. It's not really a big deal."

*It is.* Because I know my parents are planning something major on draft day, even if doing that feels like bad luck. "You should fly them out here," I say. "Use the video money."

Mike swallows. "Yeah. We'll see."

A *no* in all but name. "I can still get you a present, right?"

"Sure"—then he frowns—"within reason."

"What's reason?" I ask, mostly to watch him laugh.



EVENTUALLY, MIKE AND I PACK UP THE BLANKET AND COOLERS AND HAUL IT all back to my SUV, then take the shortest showers humanly possible in the grody outdoor stalls and pull on dry, sand-free clothes.

I emerge from the bathroom complex to find Victoria there, wearing the same blue sundress, but with one of those lacy tube top bras underneath it. *Lovely* doesn't really sum it up.

"Where do you want to go to dinner?" I ask her.

"Someplace quiet," she says.

I smile. "Quiet sounds good."

We end up at a seafood place up the road, seated at a table on their back patio. Mike and I get beers—they card me and don't card him, which makes him laugh—and Victoria orders a mojito. A few other diners eat around us. After our drinks come, Mike does a broad sweep of the room like he's looking for paparazzi.

"It's fine," I say.

Mike gives me a skeptical look. "If you're sure."

For that, I brush my knee against his under the table, then wrap my arm

around Victoria's chair. "Which appetizers shouldn't we order?" I ask, because that's sometimes easier than picking the ones we are.

Mike laughs. "You're ridiculous. Also, you don't eat catfish, so we can't get the fritters."

"Right." I look down at my menu before I do something silly like tell him I'm going to miss him.

Next to me, Victoria is studying the menu between sips of her drink. The tiny electric candle on the table picks out glints in her hair. And I want to bottle this up, this feeling—what it's like to be with both of them.

Victoria shifts in her seat like she's rubbing her knees together. She smiles and casts a look over at Mike, who coughs politely, as if something else is going on. "We should toast," she says.

"What to?" I ask.

"To friends." She offers the rim of her glass and smiles when we clink our beer bottles against it. *Friends*. Before when we said it, it sounded like it meant something else—a euphemism. This time, it feels like it settles something. Like, no matter what, that's who we are to each other.



AT THE END OF DINNER, THE SERVER BRINGS OVER THE CHECK. I REACH FOR my wallet at the same time as Mike reaches for his, and as Victoria starts to dig through her purse. "I got this," I say.

Mike taps my hand with his card. "You don't have to."

I wave him off. "I'm sure it's easier if they don't have to split the bill."

"Jon, for real?"

I relent and toss my card in the tray as Mike does the same. Victoria does as well, and we both turn to her to object.

"Either we're all in this together or we're not," she says, as if this is about more than the bill. "Besides, there's more where that came from."

Mike laughs and leans over to kiss her hair, a date kind of kiss.

"I was thinking," I say, "since Mike's graduating, technically he won't be on the team anymore. So you could date each other. If you wanted." *After I leave*, I don't add, but it hangs there all the same.

They both look at me. Mike's mouth is open. A crease digs between Victoria's eyebrows. I've said something wrong. "I mean"—I shrug like it's

no big deal, like there isn't an ache expanding in my chest—"just a thought."

Victoria turns to Mike. "Is he breaking up with us?"

Mike laughs. "It really sounds like he is."

"If he knew about"—and she drops her voice purposefully—"do you think he'd be doing that?"

Mike looks at me, something sparking in his eyes. "You know, I really don't think he would." He flags down the server, hands her our three cards, apologizes for the hassle.

When she returns them, we all sign—and I dig a few bills out of my wallet because I've heard restaurants sometimes short people credit card tips.

Distantly, we have class tomorrow. Unlike me, Mike and Victoria actually care about studying. The responsible thing would be to go back to campus and call it a night. "You all want to go back to the beach?" I ask.



WE END UP AT A DIFFERENT BEACH, IN THE UNLIT CORNER AT THE EDGE OF A parking lot, the back of my SUV facing the water. There's an automated way to flatten the seats, but it's easier just to do the whole thing by hand. I fold down the second- and third-row benches until the back is one big space, then shake out the beach blanket until it's no longer leaking sand and lay it down.

"There, all set," I say, with the same sense of *ta-da* as when I showed Victoria my kitchen.

I offer a hand to Victoria, who crawls in through the open rear door. Mike goes in next, and I climb in last. It's kind of a tight fit—tight or snug, depending on your perspective. Either way, I'm close to them.

"We need..." Mike digs around in the cooler, removing ice packs with a *thunk*. At first, I think it's for his knee—until he comes back with the champagne Victoria brought over a few days ago.

"Good thinking, Papa," I say when he hands me a bottle.

I open it and take a sip, and pass it to Mike, who does the same. "Here." He holds the bottle a little above Victoria, who lets him splash some into her mouth. She laughs as the bubbles hit her tongue, and I have to lean over to kiss the taste from her lips.

She kisses back, mouth sugary, her hands stroking my shoulders. That ache—that feeling that all this is temporary, that I'll have to say goodbye as

soon as I have it—recedes. When I look up, Mike is watching us, eyes dark as the sky above us.

I reach up and kiss him too. His hair is still damp from his post-beach shower. “What’d you want to tell me?” I ask when I pull back.

He smiles. “You’ll see.” And kisses me again.

From there, it’s easy: we pass the bottle around, kiss occasionally, talk about whatever comes to mind. Victoria ends up shifting between us, from Mike’s lap to sitting between my legs, her back resting against my chest.

I tuck my face at her neck, and she smells like the beach, like her shampoo, like summer. When I whisper that to her, she laughs and widens her legs so I can trace my way up her thigh. I brush my fingers under her dress, expecting to find the fabric of her underwear. Instead, there’s only heat and skin, her pussy wet against my hand. “Were you like that all through dinner?” I ask.

“Mike told me to leave them off.” She shivers against me. “I kept thinking how easy it’d be for you to pull me on your lap.”

I shift her up until she can feel how I’m already hard. “Like this?” The rear door is still open, its awning casting us in shadow. Night has descended around us. With the car’s lights off, I don’t know how much anyone walking past could see. “Do you want to?” I whisper. It feels daring—*reckless*—to contemplate.

Victoria drags her dress up until she’s bare against me, until I’m left trying to work my belt and button and zipper all at once. I finally get them, sliding my pants and boxers down.

“Hold on,” she says. “Mike wants to watch.”

But Mike’s already watching, looking at us intently like he couldn’t look anywhere else. Now he moves over, undoing the tiny buttons on the front of Victoria’s dress until it splits open.

He traces a hand at her breast, lightly at the tip, thumb over her nipple, and she sighs against me. “You gonna do that while he fucks me?”

“I’m gonna do whatever you want me to,” Mike says. “Whatever either of you wants me to.” Like he’s promising more than just that. He shifts his gaze to me. “You want a condom?”

“What all did you put in the beach bag?” I ask. “And it’s up to Victoria.”

She rolls her hips against me again. “I want to feel you.”

So I line myself up and push inside her, letting her adjust. Mike works a hand up her dress, and she hums at that, cycling her hips. I kiss her neck, run

my hands up her sides, try not to thrust too hard as she tightens around me.

It's close, close in a different way than we've been before. No one's watching this but us. The only witnesses are the ocean, the distant city beyond it.

"How's that feel?" Mike asks.

Victoria rolls against me. "So full. He's getting me all wet inside."

Mike presses a kiss to the slope of her neck, his face very near mine. "You gonna send her to me full of your come?"

"Yeah," I gasp, and I'm close, right at the edge.

"Yeah..." He trails off like it's a question.

"You want me to call you *daddy* again?" I tease. The thought stirs something hot and needy within me.

He grabs my jaw and kisses me deep, possessive—enough to tip me over. I come, pumping into Victoria, wrapped up in both of them.

Victoria pulls off me. In an instant, she's on Mike's lap as he's palming her under her dress, as he's tugging down his pants and pulling his cock through the opening in his boxers until Victoria sinks down on him, as they move like that, together, frantic and beautiful and building toward something.

I have to kiss them, so I do: Victoria, then Mike, then somehow, the three of us together, a kiss like a fizz of champagne.

"I'm gonna—" Mike says a second later, then comes, eyes clenched shut, long enough that it must almost start to hurt, and he collapses against Victoria like he's catching his breath.

"Was that good?" she teases.

"So fucking good." He strokes a hand down her face. "Lie back."

She does, across the blanket, smiling up at him.

"You look..." He parts her legs.

"Like a mess?" She huffs a laugh.

"No"—he shakes his head—"like ours." And he presses his mouth to her pussy, licking, working his fingers, drinking her in until she comes apart in a series of soft cries.

After, we lie like that. Victoria between us, Mike's hand on her belly as I kiss her neck. Around us, the world is probably doing something, but I don't care what. I just want to be here with them.

"We should probably get cleaned up," Mike says, eventually.

Victoria sits up. Her dress is still unbuttoned to the waist. She starts to do up the buttons, until I wave her off. The cloth-covered button is impossibly



small against my fingers as I secure it in its little elastic loop. I do that and the next one and the next one, until it's done.

"I need to, uh..." She trails off like this part is dirty or embarrassing.

"There's a bathroom over there." Mike grabs something from the beach bag—a pack of wet wipes—then gets out of my car, his hand extended to help Victoria down. They walk quickly, laughing at something, and I use their absence to clean myself up and stash the tissues in a nearby trashcan.

When they return, Victoria climbs past me, digging something from the bag—snacks, she's so smart—that she hands to me. "Don't take it personally," she says, "but I'm gonna nap."

"We tire you out?" Mike asks, a grin playing at the edge of his mouth.

She laughs. "This weekend tired me out. But you helped."

He kisses her, and I don't think I'll ever get tired of watching that—how they fit together. How I get to see them in a way that no one else does.

Victoria kisses me too, a little peck like a bite of sugar. "Thank you," she whispers.

I kiss her back. "What for?"

She looks around the SUV, at the blanket, at where Mike is sitting, his hair still ruffled from our hands. "I didn't know it would be like this."

"Good?" I ask.

"Yeah," she says, "good." She yawns like she's going to fall asleep right here.

I dig in the stash of stuff I put between my folded-down seats and pull out one of my sweatshirts. "In case you get cold."

"You keep these in your car?" she asks. "Not just your jerseys?"

I laugh. "Busted."

She pulls it on. The sleeves drape adorably over her wrists. She yawns again.

Maybe we should go home, but I don't want to leave, don't want to break this spell we're all under. I sit next to where Mike is, crossing my legs.

Victoria curls herself against my thigh, her hair a soft fall across her face. I brush it back, watching the rise and fall of her breath as it evens, the way her face relaxes in sleep. When I look up, Mike's watching her too.

For a minute, we sit, listening to the waves.

"The first time I saw the ocean," Mike says, low, "it was when I transferred out here."

I don't say anything, just nudge my shoulder against his. He doesn't talk

much about his life before we met, but I collect it in scraps. That he has a big family, that he grew up in a small but comfortable house. That neither of his parents went to college—his mom manages a restaurant, and his dad is a custodian at a school. Being in Missouri, he had a hard time getting scouts to come see him play, even before his ACL tear.

That getting accepted to our school's engineering program—which is top twenty in the world—via transfer means that he's probably smarter than the rest of the team put together. Certainly smarter than I am, even if I manage to smile my way into my grades.

"I drove out here from St. Louis," he continues. "It took about three days—I didn't know if I was gonna make it. I coasted down half the mountains in neutral to save on gas. By the end of it, I was running on caffeine and not much else. When I got into the city, I just thought, *I have to see the ocean.*"

"So I pretty much sped straight through till I got here. I'd been to the beach before—lake beaches. But here was this enormous line of water. I must have sat at a picnic table for an hour, just watching it. And I got this feeling—it was a few months after my uncle died—like he was with me."

He glances over at me, as if I'm going to laugh or contradict him. "It's probably not like that for you," he says.

It isn't. I grew up with the ocean nearby. But I reach and twine our fingers together. Victoria was right: I didn't know it could be like this. "Before we got together, I thought about you a lot. Like, you'd make me food or say something before a game that would calm me down, and I just thought—I don't know what I thought. That feeling like that was just sort of normal, even if it didn't happen around other people. Except Victoria."

At her name, Victoria murmurs on my lap and nestles closer. I tighten my fingers around Mike's, enjoying the solidity of his grip and the soft weight of Victoria's breathing. "It's probably not the same," I say, "but that's what it's like—I look at you both and it's like I'm seeing the ocean for the first time."

Mike drops my hand. For a second, I worry I've said too much. Like he was trying to tell me something I didn't hear right. Until he traces my cheek with his palm. He blinks at me, long and slow, then presses his lips to mine, an easy kind of kiss if not for the way his hands feel like they're holding me together.

"I'm selfish," he whispers. "I don't want to share you."

I pull back, heart at my ribs. "With Victoria?"

"No, I didn't mean it like that. I want you. I want her. I want us to be

together.” He kisses me again. “People are gonna want things from you—we won’t even know how much until it happens. I guess I’m selfish because I want part of you for myself. For us.”

“You have it,” I say. “As much as you want from me, it’s yours. Both of yours.”

“I love you,” he says, quiet. Something we’ve said before, always with a *bro* at the end. Not like this.

I kiss him again. “I love you too.” And I want to shout it or fling myself into the ocean, but instead I laugh loud enough to wake Victoria.

“Everything okay?” she asks.

“Mike loves me,” I say, like I can’t contain it.

Victoria’s eyebrows pinch. “Oh,” she says, “good.”

I reach for her hands, still wrapped in the fabric of my sweatshirt. Her palms are small and dry and warm. They fit into mine.

“I love you too,” I say. “I mean, along with Mike. I mean, I love Mike and I love you.” Words spill out of me, like I can’t believe I ever held them in.

Victoria looks like she might laugh—not mean, but the *What are you talking about?* giggle people sometimes get. Then she shifts her hand until it slides against mine even more perfectly. “I love you too,” she says softly.

I kiss her just as gently. Until we part, and she casts a look up at Mike, where he’s still sitting, his expression unreadable in the darkness.

“We should get out,” I say.

Slowly, Mike nods, then offers Victoria a hand down as she descends. When I climb down, Mike is talking, his voice low. “...you don’t have to.”

Victoria frowns. “It’s okay if I don’t say it?”

He nods, face impassive like he doesn’t want to show how much it hurts.

She goes up on the tips of her toes to kiss him. “Too bad,” she says, “because I love you. And I think you love me.”

“Think?” he teases.

She shrugs playfully. “You’re the first people I’ve been in love with—how can I tell?”

Mike kisses her hair. “Jon spent half an hour looking for flowers the same color as your eyes.”

Her smile goes wider, and she’s lovely like this, glancing between us.

“Mike threw someone’s phone in the ocean for you,” I call.

“That was for *you*,” Victoria yells back.

Mike sweeps her up and kisses her deep, clutching her waist like he might stumble without her holding him up. “I love you,” he says, pulling back. “Fuck, I love you both so much.”

I have to wrap myself around them both, right there, to take them both in my arms and kiss Victoria’s upturned mouth and the side of Mike’s jaw, and every place I can reach that they offer to me, laughing into the wild night. I don’t care if anyone’s looking—if there’s a dozen photographers or just the moon. For a second the world is the three of us, and no one else, and all I can think about is holding on instead of letting go.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### *Victoria*

## ONE WEEK LATER

TODAY STARTS out bursting with possibility. I wake up, run in the morning cool with my music playing, the distance meaningless under my sneakers. Even my eight a.m. lab is all right: We have our last exam, a lab practicum that I speed through by muscle memory.

Maybe I should get my lab partner a gift card for making this so easy.

After lab, I go back to my apartment to catch a nap before I have to head to the clubhouse for cleat-and-laundry duty. Even that feels great, like I'm the flowers still blooming in my kitchen, a wild spray the vase can barely contain.

Until I check our OnlyFans DMs. Most are the usual—dick rating requests, asks for pictures, generalized thirst.

Except for one. A message from a new subscriber. I read it, and read it again, as if that will make a difference. But there the message is. One sentence. A question. *How do you like San Diego?*

I close my laptop, as if the message is just a hallucination. Like maybe I fell asleep in Jonathan's SUV a week ago and I'm still dreaming.

Reopening my computer doesn't help. Six words sit there, taunting me. *How do you like San Diego?*

I take a screenshot of it. I take several more screenshots then upload those to my hidden Dropbox.

Blocking whoever sent this means that they'll know I saw it and got spooked. Not blocking, and they could escalate. They might escalate anyway.

It could be Cooper. Or Kaleigh's dirtbag boyfriend. Or someone else—someone I don't know and that might even be worse, an invasion of privacy that sits on the back of my neck like a stare.

If they know it's me, they might have also put together who the stocky guy with glossy black hair is. And who the tall guy is with us. People Jonathan's size aren't exactly common. I have to tell Mike. And Jonathan...*Fuck*. I have no idea what major-league teams will think of someone who decided to have sex for money on the internet. Probably nothing good.

This is a disaster, a trainwreck, a godawful mess.

And I have to go to work.



WHEN I GET TO THE LOCKER ROOM, MIKE'S ALREADY THERE, A NOTEBOOK open on his lap. He's sketching something, a pencil flying over the page, smiling to himself.

His smile doesn't fade as he looks up and displays what he's sketching—an engineering diagram surrounded by neat annotations. For a second, I think of the careful grasp of his hand in mine as he helped me down from the car, not because he thought I was weak, but because he thought I was worth it.

I don't want to wreck his Monday.

But I have to.

I sit next to him on the bench and hold out my phone, displaying the screenshot. "Someone DMed me that this morning."

It takes a second for it to register. Mike's smile drops, his face going quickly dark. "Who the fuck—" he starts. He shakes his head like he can't find the words, like his anger is clogging his voice.

I put a hand on his shoulder. It's possible he's going to shrug it off—that he'll fling me aside in an effort to protect me.

"We need to be rational about this," I say.

"*Fuck* rational."

"They might have just seen me on the street."

"And sent you this as what—an opening line?" He enlarges the screenshot with his fingers, like he's looking for something else there, some clue to tone or intention. "This is a threat."

I sigh. I know. It's a threat—or at least, someone who wants a piece of me I don't want to give.

"We could delete the account," I say.

Mike's eyes narrow. "Is that what you want?"

*What I want and what I have to do are sometimes different. I thought you understood that.* "Not really," I admit. "We're at about \$30,000 anyway." Split two ways, it's what we set out to make all those weeks ago, sitting in that coffeeshop. When I didn't know Mike or Jonathan or myself, really.

Mike makes an objecting noise. "We were going until \$45,000—fifteen K each. And we're not there yet."

I try not to sigh again. Of course. Because there's no way to unruffle his ego—that Jonathan doesn't, and won't, need that money. That we're all in this together, but not quite in the same way. I take my phone back from Mike and set it face down on the bench. "If I say stop," I say, "then we stop. That was the agreement."

"And let this asshole win?"

*Win.* Like it's a competition. I don't want him to win. I want to be the Victoria who ran Cooper over with a laundry cart, who has enough money to tell Tyler to go fuck himself. "You're right, I don't want that either. But we don't know how much this guy knows about us."

Mike's face goes blank. He picks up his notebook. Taps a few times with his pencil. "If he knows who you are, he might know about Jon too."

Whatever good feelings I've been floating on for the week fade. If it comes down to it, I've always known who Mike will pick, and it isn't me.

"So we close the account and tell Jonathan," I say. What old Victoria, *safe* Victoria would say.

"Or we leave the account open and draw whoever it is out."

It's not a terrible idea. Still, the uncertainty puts nerves in my belly. What's the difference between taking a risk and being reckless? "If we do that, do you really want this to be the thing Jonathan's worried about?"

"I don't." Mike folds his arms in front of his chest. "We can't tell him."

I will not lose my temper at Mike. Not here, where it might attract attention. But I don't bother keeping the edge out of my voice. "We need to."

Mike shakes his head, adamant. "And what? Have him focused on this and not playing? There are scouts at every game—he can't be distracted."

But what it sounds like is, *You can't be a distraction.* "So we should just lie to him?" I ask.

“It’s not lying. It’s protection.”

“Except if someone figures out who he is.”

“You’re right,” Mike says. No, Mike *snaps*. “We should probably stay away from each other until it’s over.”

But what I hear is *it’s over*. “I need to do the laundry.” I’m already making a list: laundry, picking the dirt out of their cleats, all the things that have to be done so they can play. A list that, if I think of it hard enough, won’t feel like my heart is breaking open. “I guess I’ll see you later.”



MORE MESSAGES COME IN THAT WEEK, ONE WITH EVERY VIDEO I POST.

Message one: *You studying for your finals?* So he knows I’m a student.

The message makes me test the lock on our building door. On my apartment door. On my bedroom door. My distance must be obvious, because Jonathan texts me a picture of himself frowning at a textbook like it matters if he studies.

Jonathan: I miss you

Me: Sorry, finals have me panicking

But they really don’t. I’m as studied-up for my exams as I’m likely going to be. It’s fine. I’ll be a nurse. It pays well. It’s job security. It’s the thing I should want for myself.

Message two: *You ever go back to that beach?* That one makes me pack. I need to anyway, but I shove my clothes in boxes with a particular vigor to bring them to Mom’s.

I text Elizabeth.

Me: Are you at James’s yet?

Because whatever this is, I don’t want her swept up in it.

Elizabeth: I’m still at Mom’s. Come over.

Which could mean anything: that Elizabeth wants company packing, that this is a cry for help.

I ferry a few boxes down—our building has an elevator that moves at a



glacial pace—and load them into my car. It’s early evening and, for San Diego, the traffic isn’t that bad. When I pull up at Mom’s house, Elizabeth is sitting outside, swinging her legs over the edge of the deck, reading a book in the light of her phone, because the deck light is out and apparently Mom wasn’t up to replacing it.

I park in the driveway, then hop out. “Everything okay?”

Elizabeth looks up from where she’s reading. “Yeah.” Said in a way that means it’s not.

“Why are you studying out here?”

She holds up the book—the same one I was reading on the beach. “Not studying. We’re done with classes.”

“Lucky,” I tease. “You want to help me carry stuff in from the car?”

Elizabeth casts a look toward the house like she’d rather do anything but go in.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“Mom has a date.”

So Mom told Elizabeth to find something else to do while she has a date. I try to find some semblance of a smile. “Gotcha.”

Elizabeth does a one-shouldered shrug. “It’s fine. I’ll be out of here soon enough. Why’d you bring that stuff back here if you’re going to be at James’s house with me?”

*Because I wanted to come check on you. Because there’s a creep in my DMs and I needed to make sure you were all right. Because one of us shouldn’t have to worry, and it doesn’t get to be me.*

“Must have slipped my mind,” I say. “You know, the end of the year is pretty wild.”

Elizabeth gives me a look like she doesn’t fully believe me. “Uh-huh.”

“Actually, why don’t we take stuff over there now?” James has *stuff*, so someone should be there to answer the door.

Elizabeth smiles. “Sure. Tyler said he was gonna get me a VEX kit for the summer. Maybe it’s already there.”

“Do you need to get anything from inside before we go?” I ask.

Elizabeth holds up her phone and her book. “Nope, I have everything.”

So we climb down off the deck, back toward my car.

“Who’s been riding here?” Elizabeth asks as she gets in my passenger seat. She reaches under it and slides the seat forward.

“No one.” *Jonathan, because I gave him a ride a week ago, and he didn’t*

*even complain as he was comically folded into my car.* “I must have moved it to put boxes in.”

Elizabeth gives a skeptical *hmmm*. “You don’t have a secret boyfriend or something?”

I cough nervously and cover it by navigating my car out of the driveway and punching the directions to James’s house in my GPS. “What? No.”

“Okay.”

“Text Mom that you’re going to be at Tyler’s. At James’s, I mean.”

Elizabeth gives me a sulking teenaged look, then taps out a message on her phone. “Do you just not date?” she asks.

I don’t know why she’s bringing this up—we haven’t talked about it much. From what I can tell, her school does a decent job of sex ed and Elizabeth’s never shown much interest in anything other than getting good grades and running track and building robots. *Neither did you until about two months ago, and look where that got you.*

“I date,” I say. “I’m just not seeing anyone right now.” Which is sort of true. Mike and I have barely spoken since that talk in the clubhouse. I’ve been ducking Jonathan and pretending I’m not—a situation that’s way too complicated to bring into this car.

Elizabeth knocks her knees against my glove box like she’s thinking. “Would it be a problem if I dated someone?”

I’m half tempted to pull the car over. To go to whoever she’s dating’s house to tell him to back the hell off. “Who?” I ask.

Elizabeth stares out the window for a full minute before she says, “Someone from school.”

“Are you changing your mind about moving in with James and Tyler next year?” I try—and probably fail—not to sound too eager.

“It’s not that serious.” Though the slight twist to her mouth says otherwise.

And I summon all my big sister energy for this talk. “You know, I’m three-quarters of a nurse. If there’s anything you want to ask me about—even stuff you might think is gross or embarrassing—you know you can, right?”

Elizabeth laughs. “Tyler said the same thing. Well, he didn’t say the nurse part, but about the talking part.”

*I bet he did.* “That’s good.”

“Actually, he offered to hit anyone who hurt me with, like, a shovel.”

“Has Tyler ever held a shovel?”

“I’m sure he has. Don’t they use those for, like, building openings?” Elizabeth says, and I crack up. “I kind of miss having him as my older brother.” She says it quietly enough that I almost don’t hear it.

It’s enough to make my chest ache a little. That because of Mom, we got a year of instant family and a nice house. Elizabeth got an older brother who genuinely likes her despite his many—*many*—other faults. And then we had to give it all back.

“Well, you’re gonna get a lot of him this summer,” I say.

She perks up at that. “Yeah, the school has a robotics camp this summer—I was going to do that, then new student onboarding and they have these short-session summer classes...”

Her excitement carries us the rest of the way there.



WHEN WE PULL UP TO THE GATE AT TYLER’S HOUSE—YES, THERE’S A GATE—and buzz in, no one answers.

“Oh,” Elizabeth says, “Tyler gave me a code.” She reads it off to me and I punch it in. Slowly, the gate starts to open. It’s possible they’re not home. Maybe I can drop off these boxes and avoid Tyler altogether.

I ease my car up the driveway. The house is one of those hyper-modern ones with glass and decks and lots of open space, set high up with a view of the city. James bought it years ago when the housing market wasn’t what it is now—when he first made his money investing in some kind of ceramic parts manufacturers. Now, the only thing he manufactures is more money.

When we go to knock on the front door, Tyler answers before I can rap my knuckles against the door. He’s dressed casually for Tyler: expensive sweats with the kind of gold-toe socks you get in a value pack. There’s something disconcerting about that—Tyler, without the armor of overpriced shoes.

“What are you doing here?” he whispers. Behind him, the house is dark.

“Good to see you too, Tyler,” I say.

Usually that would get a derisive comment—at the very least, a sneer. Not the way he turns his gaze back over his shoulder. “James is resting.”

Not asleep. *Resting*. “Is he okay?” I ask. Because it’s barely nine p.m., and James has a businessman’s energy: in the year we lived with him, he

would wake up early to make his own bread.

“Try not to make too much noise,” Tyler says.

I shift the box I’m holding, the corner of which is starting to dig into my arm. “We can come back...”

But Tyler’s already walking back into the house. Inside, everything feels weird—the darkness, the muted television. Next to me, Elizabeth is walking toe-to-heel like her footsteps might otherwise echo. She shrugs, as if this is just Tyler being Tyler.

“You’re in this wing.” Tyler leads us down a hallway. He flicks a wall switch, flooding the hall with light, then opens the door to a room. The room is simple: a bed, a dresser, a desk, all similar to what I have in my dorm though probably cost five times as much.

“Lizzy’s room is next door,” Tyler says.

I almost snap a *Don’t call her that* at him before it registers. “Thanks.”

“Yeah, well...” In the light, circles darken the skin below his eyes.

I set the box I’m carrying on the floor. Elizabeth and I make another two trips. I’m on my way to the room—my room, I guess—to drop off the last box when voices emerge from a different hallway. Maybe I shouldn’t eavesdrop, but something is definitely going on.

Tyler’s standing in the doorway, talking in a low voice. “—I’ll bring that in a sec, Dad.” *Dad*. Technically, that’s what James is: Tyler’s former stepfather. It’s hard to reconcile that with the Tyler who stood in my mother’s kitchen and issued directives like threats. The one who showed up to the clubhouse and insinuated I was sleeping with players for their money.

I’ve stood here long enough that Tyler glances back, like I’m overhearing something I shouldn’t—like he doesn’t want me to know if James is too sick or tired to even say hi to us.

Tyler’s forehead creases. “Did you need something?” He asks me in the same tone he might use on an incompetent waiter.

I shake my head and walk away, in time to hear Tyler close the door with a soft click.

I drop the box off, then go down the hall to Elizabeth’s room. Kid-ish letters decorate the outside of her door, spelling out *L-I-Z-Z-Y* in rainbow colors. Inside, a bed and a dresser take up much of the room, along with wall storage with large bins for the robotics materials that Elizabeth otherwise just left scattered all over her room—her old room.

True to Tyler’s word, an unopened VEX kit sits on the floor. The rest of

the room is rainbow-themed, with a throw rug shaped like a rainbow and a multicolored stripe painted on one wall. Even without her stuff unpacked, this place clearly belongs to her.

She's already lounging on the bed, her shoes kicked off on the floor, texting someone rapidly and smiling at whatever replies come in.

"Hey," I whisper, then sit next to her, "what's going on with James?"

Elizabeth puts down her phone. She bites her lip like she's trying to hold back saying something she shouldn't. "I don't know, exactly."

"But you have some idea?"

She peers at the hallway, as if she's expecting to find Tyler listening at the door. "He's been having all these doctors' appointments. I don't know. Maybe you should ask Tyler."

And yeah, I need to know what Elizabeth and I are getting into this summer.

I check the hallway. No Tyler. Out in the living room, the TV is off; a plate scattered with crumbs sits on the coffee table. I shouldn't pick it up—this isn't my house, I don't have to clean it—but the tiredness in Tyler's eyes makes me grab the plate.

The kitchen is a level below the living room, down a set of exposed stairs—nothing in this house was designed for practicality. I'm rinsing the plate off when I hear someone behind me.

"Oh good, you found the dishwasher," Tyler says, like it was my responsibility to clean up after him. "That'll check one thing off on the list."

I put the plate in the dishwasher, then lean against the countertop. "Are you going to tell me what's going on with James?"

Tyler slips his hands in the pockets of his gray sweats. He leans casually against the doorframe. He'd be like his normal handsome, awful self if not for the faint lines of tension in his neck and jaw.

"If I'm going to live here," I prod, "I should know what's happening. Especially if it affects Elizabeth."

"Fine." He takes a deep inhale. "James is sick. Yes, it's serious."

"If you wanted me to help you with that, why didn't you just ask directly?"

"I did. A few times."

Right, direct. Or direct for Tyler. Meaning he didn't want to admit he needed help. But if he's in a sharing mood... "Why were you so adamant about having Elizabeth here?" I ask.

Tyler narrows his eyes. “Isn’t it obvious?”

Possibilities race through my mind, each less and less likely. “Tell me anyway.”

Tyler cranes his neck back, then lowers his voice. “James wanted her here because he had a health scare—a bad one—and he wanted to be with family.”

It takes a second to sink in. “So he wanted his stepdaughter to live with him?” I ask. Ex-stepdaughter, to be exact, but Tyler is also an ex-stepson who just called him *Dad*.

“She’s not his *step*-anything. Your mom and James go way back. I guess the marriage was an attempt at a reconciliation.”

I get dizzy for a second—actually, honestly dizzy. I always assumed that Elizabeth and I had different fathers: people out in the universe who’ve never given my mom a dime. *But if James is Elizabeth’s father...* “Does Elizabeth know?” I ask.

“For whatever reason, your mom didn’t want James involved. I know he sends money, but trusting Anne with that...well, it must really be love.” Tyler gives me a knowing smirk. “James gave her the tax money or whatever, in case you were wondering.”

*Fuck. Fuck.* Of course he did. Of course he did, and of course my mom didn’t bother to mention it. Of course Tyler is looking at me like I should have known this all along. Tears build inside me. My eyes prick. My chin gets that wobble. I’m not going to cry. “James isn’t my father, right?” I say, trying to keep my emotion out of my voice.

Tyler gives me a semi-horrified look. “No.”

“Is he your father?”

“No.” Said with an air of disappointment.

I shouldn’t have asked it that way. Tyler’s here. Insufferable, but here. Having manipulated Elizabeth and my presence, but here. “Does Elizabeth know about James paying off my mom’s taxes?” I ask.

“I said he gave her the money. I don’t know if her taxes actually got paid.” Tyler’s smile is back, the one that’s all teeth and arrogance, the kind that makes me want to clamp a hand over his mouth.

I don’t get the chance. “Victoria...?” A voice comes from up the hallway. Elizabeth, looking for me.

Tyler eases himself off the doorway with the kind of lazy grace that rich guys all seem to have. “Vicky’s in here,” he says.

“Really?” I snap.

“We’re gonna be together all summer.” He grins at that, bright, challenging—and maybe it’s just a trick of the light, but something in that smile wavers at the edges.



THE NEXT DAY, I’M SITTING ON MY DORM ROOM BED, ATTEMPTING TO STUDY for finals, when another OnlyFans message comes in.

*You should cover up that tattoo better. Someone might notice and figure out who you are.*

Of course he accompanies it with a wink emoji.

My heart starts racing. *Which tattoo?* I put down the textbook I’ve been staring at and pull up our videos. I spent hours editing these clips, applying filters to our faces and the books in the background and to both of Mike’s tattoos.

*Except.*

Except for the last video we made. By accident, I left in the briefest flash of Mike’s shoulder tattoo, the initials and two dates separated by a simple dash. Something personal that no one should turn against him.

Something personal...which means whoever is sending me these has seen Mike’s tattoo before. Someone we’ve met. Someone we *know*.

I have to text Mike. There’s no avoiding it, even if I’m still pissed off. If they know who Mike is, then it’s just a matter of time before they figure out Jonathan as well.

Me: Come over.

Mike: ???

Me: I got other messages. We need to talk.

Mike: be there ASAP

Eight minutes later, Mike texts that he’s outside my building. I jog down the stairs, then we walk quickly back up together. I had locked the apartment door behind me, but the knob turns easily, sending my heart up into my throat.

Mike puts a hand on my shoulder. “I’ll go first.”

A second later he comes back out. “I think it’s your roommate.”

Sure enough, when I go in, Xiomara’s at the kitchen table. She waves

semi-sarcastically in greeting. “Hey, Victoria, hey, boyfriend number whatever.”

For a second, I worry how he’ll react: if we’re not anything to each other but people going through a slow business breakup; the thought churns my stomach.

But Mike waves right back. “Which number roommate are you?”

Xiomara laughs. “One, obviously.”

“Where is Kaleigh?” I ask. Because I haven’t seen her in...I don’t know the last time I saw her.

“She moved out early,” Xiomara says. “She didn’t like feeling like everyone was staring at her.”

“Yeah”—I swallow my discomfort—“understandable.”

Xiomara turns her attention to Mike. “What kind of car do you drive?”

Mike blinks. “A 2012 Honda CR-V. Why?”

Xiomara hums. “No reason.”

“We’re gonna study,” I say. It feels like a euphemism. “And we should probably keep the door locked in case Kaleigh’s boyfriend comes looking for her.” I turn the door handle latch and then the deadbolt for good measure. As if that will help the feeling Kaleigh had: the same dread of being watched.

Mike and I go into my bedroom, which at this point is half bedroom, half boxes. “I’m moving out this weekend,” I say.

Mike eyes the field of half-packed stuff. “I could help, if you want.”

“I thought you wanted me to stay away from you.” I thrust my phone out at him. “You might after you see these.”

He sits in my desk chair, then looks through the screenshots, frowning.

“I should have blurred your tattoo better,” I say.

Mike shakes his head. “This guy shouldn’t be a fucking creep.”

“You think it’s someone on the team?” I ask.

“It could be. I don’t exactly have a list of people who’ve seen my tattoo.” Which narrows whoever this is to the baseball team. And the people Mike’s slept with—not an insignificant number. “Has he sent anything else?”

“Here.” I open up our OnlyFans account and navigate to the DMs, then hand my laptop to Mike.

Mike scrolls through them. “Have you been answering all of these yourself?”

“Yeah.” Because I’ve been doing that and a hundred other things necessary to keep the account running, a list of tasks like the one I keep at the



clubhouse.

“We could have helped,” he says.

Some—but not all—of my annoyance at him fades. “It’s fine. Turns out I’m pretty good at that stuff.”

Mike clicks on something else; his eyes go a little wide. “Is this a new message?”

He hands me my laptop. On it, a message that definitely wasn’t there before: a link to a Reddit post created by a burner account posted on a college baseball discussion thread. Two pictures, a single line of text.

Picture one: a still from our OnlyFans with Mike’s tattoo and our account name circled.

Picture two: a screengrab from a YouTube video—Mike, in a tank top. He’s half twisting out of his chair, exposing his shoulder. And his tattoo. Which is oh-so-helpfully circled.

The caption reads: *Looks like Mike Pappalardo (C, San Diego) has a second job.*

“What’s that from?” I ask just as Mike says, “*Fuck.*”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

*Mike*

FUCK. Fuck. Fuck. The word beats in time with my pulse. I check the post, then check it again like that will help. It doesn't.

"What's that picture from?" Victoria asks.

I study the screenshot more closely. "One of my old gaming videos. I should have taken that stupid YouTube channel down."

"How many people know about it?"

On my phone, I pull up my channel. Each video still only has a few thousand views. Nothing on the videos connect them to my real name—because I was worried that doing those might hurt me getting hired later. Something that would be funny, except for how my muscles all tighten. My whole body either wants to fight or collapse to Victoria's box-strewn bedroom floor. The chances of someone finding that video and finding our OnlyFans account—and recognizing me from my tattoo—are miniscule. Unless...

"A few guys on the team know about my YouTube channel," I say. "And people hang around Jonathan all the time. Someone might have overhead."

"So we're back to *this could be anyone?*"

"Let me see the messages again." I'm sitting in Victoria's desk chair—the bed felt too personal. I scroll through the messages when she hands me her laptop. I don't know what I'm looking for, exactly, only that there must be something that tells us about who sent these.

*How do you like San Diego?*

*You studying for your finals?*

*You ever go back to that beach?*

*You should cover up that tattoo better. Someone might notice and figure out who you are.*

Three questions. He wanted us to know he knew where we were. That we

were students. That we spent time...at the beach? But almost everyone does.

And the last message. Not *you should cover up his tattoos better*, but *you should cover up that tattoo better*.

I put the laptop down. Try not to panic—not at the messages, not at that Reddit post. I thought I had a plan: try to get signed with a team as an undrafted free agent, spend a few years in the minors or in indie ball. Now there’s no way teams won’t see this. They might not care, but then again, they might not want a player whose first search result is about how he does porn.

In twenty years, maybe I’ll be sitting in a bar, telling someone how I could have made it in the big leagues—if not for circumstances beyond my control.

Something in my brain clicks. The beach. My tattoo. That guy talking to Jonathan, whose phone I threw in the ocean. “I don’t think those messages were ever meant for you,” I say.

Victoria looks up, surprised. “What do you mean?”

“Remember that guy who was filming us that night on the beach?”

Slowly, she nods.

“Well, I think I might have pissed him off.” I scrub a hand over my face. “Maybe we should close the account.”

Victoria’s cheeks flush—not with embarrassment, but with clear anger. “Now you want to stop?”

She’s right. I insisted we keep it open. This is my fault. The guy might not have figured out who Victoria is yet, but it wouldn’t be hard to trace the distance between me and Jon.

*Jon.* I scan the comments on the Reddit post. So far no one’s put it together.

“We should at least take down the videos with Jon in them,” I say.

Slowly, Victoria nods. “Yeah. I don’t know if people already got screenshots.”

She isn’t wrong. We violated our own first rule: *be safe*. None of this was safe. So I need to take myself out of the equation. To put as much distance between me and Jonathan and Victoria as possible.

“I guess I only have one option,” I say. “I have to quit the team.”



I GO INTO THE CLUBHOUSE EARLY THE NEXT DAY. WE'RE PLAYING REGIONALS tomorrow, the first round of the college playoffs. Guys'll be in soon to prep. Our manager isn't here yet, so I sit in front of my stall. I should probably start packing. After this conversation, I'll just want to get my shit and get out.

My body feels like it's a hundred times heavier than it is, like I woke up to find my bones replaced with lead. Everything is moving too fast and too slow. That subreddit post got picked up on other social media sites. I shouldn't look at the comments, but I do.

*Who cares if he's a porn star?*

*I care ಠ\_ಠ*

*Imagine paying for it. I hear he'll fuck you for free.*

*Think he'll rock number 69 if he gets drafted?*

*Bro look at his stats. Good thing he's got a backup plan.*

*You mean other than riding Halperin's coattails?*

All stuff I've thought, but it's worse to see it written out. Jon probably hasn't seen it—he's an Insta photo dump-and-go kind of guy. Back when we first met, he read everything people said about him, some good, but mostly sports fans doing what they do best: talking shit. Until I told him to quit looking at it. And he smiled and gave me a *Thanks, Papa*, and actually stopped.

Meaning it's up to me to tell him. *People found out about the OF account*, I type and erase. No, he doesn't need that stress before the playoffs.

Me: Probably gonna sit out Regionals

Jonathan: Your knee hurt????

Me: something like that

He sends about a dozen frowny faces, a link to yet another article about treating anterior knee pain, about having additional surgeries to clean up whatever the first one didn't.

Me: don't worry about it

Jonathan: I will tho

And there's the three dots of typing and deleting and typing and deleting before another message appears:

Jonathan: ilu

If I felt heavy before, it's no match for right now. How I whispered that to

him a week ago. How he wrapped his arms around me and Victoria, like he could protect us. Well, I'm protecting him now.

A few minutes later, our manager arrives. His gaze settles over me as I'm sitting on the bench. "Pappalardo, you good?"

"Can I talk with you, Coach?"

It's hard to gauge a reaction from under the worn brim of his ballcap. The college baseball gossip mill is never-ending. He could already know why I'm here.

I drag myself toward his office. "Is this a door open or door closed conversation?" he asks.

I close the door and sit on the padded folding chair in front of his cluttered desk. I can't quite bring myself to look him in the eye. My knee doesn't throb, for once, and I almost wish it would—that I'd have some excuse beyond what I know I need to do.

"I know it's last minute," I say, "but I don't think I can play tomorrow."

Coach's eyebrows rise.

"Something's come up," I add. "You might have seen...I got involved in, uh, content creation online I probably shouldn't have, and it's come out. I don't want to be a distraction to the team."

He doesn't ask what I mean by *content creation*. He neatens a stack of papers, then clears his throat. "I was under the impression that you're graduating next week," he says.

"I am."

"I was also under the impression that you'd have family joining us for tomorrow's game."

My heart kicks up. "What?"

"Halperin mentioned it a few days ago—he wanted to make sure there were tickets available for them. I assumed you were aware."

I smile, tight, then tap out a message to Jonathan.

Me: Coach mentioned something about my family coming out here?

Jonathan: Surprise!!! Happy graduation!!!

Me: This is not within reason.

Jonathan: They get to see you play and get to see you walk

Sounds pretty reasonable

He includes a kissy face emoji, something that he might have done before we were...whatever this is. A throb develops in my forehead. Because of course Jonathan decided that bringing my family out here was *reasonable*. I'm not going to react. Not in the clubhouse or in front of Coach.

Whatever's building in my throat—that he did this, that I love that he did this, that loving him means that we need to stay the hell away from each other—begins to burn.

When I look up, Coach is studying me. “Seems like you're going through something, son,” he says.

*Son.* The go-to when guys really fuck up. “Yeah.”

Noises from the locker room come through the door—the familiar chatter that accompanies ballplayer gossip with the occasional *shh* like they all know I'm in here and don't want me to overhear.

“You ever feel like you made the wrong decisions for the right reasons?” I ask.

Coach considers for a second, then nods. He's not that old—midforties, maybe—but with the deep lines that accompany a lifetime spent working on ballfields. Another door that closed to me, or that I slammed shut for myself. No one is going to hire me as a coach.

“In my experience,” he says, “the wrong decisions made for the right reasons are better than the reverse.”

“I think I fucked things up pretty bad.”

He doesn't bother denying it. “So unfuck them.”

“I'm trying,” I manage. “I shouldn't play tomorrow.” Even if it'll disappoint my family. Even if it'll be my last game. I need to walk out of here and make sure I'm leaving everyone else intact.

“We don't have time to add someone else,” Coach says. “So if you change your mind, you have until game time.”

I nod slowly, then get up. When I open the door, the noise stops. I walk out, expecting...I don't know. Anything but a bunch of stares and elbow nudges. Until Gabe sticks two fingers in his mouth and whistles. “Way to go, Papa!”

The rest of the team dissolves into laughter and shouts, with two exceptions. Jonathan, who's looking around like it's slowly dawning on him what's going on. And Cooper, who's leaning against a stall, with an edge to his smile.

Eventually, the laughter fades. Guys look at me like I should be making a

speech. “I take it you all saw the stuff on Reddit,” I say.

Someone hollers an approval; someone else teasingly throws balled-up socks at my head.

The laughter fades into a single set of claps. Cooper, applauding, slow enough to be sarcasm. “Pretty impressive work, Pappalardo. My only question is how you convinced that little Equipment Slut to be in it.”

The room goes pin-drop silent except for the faint whoosh and thump of washers from up the hall. A squeak starts nearing. Victoria with the laundry cart. *No. Fuck. No.* I can take this, but she shouldn’t have to.

“Shut the fuck up,” I say, loud—loud enough that Victoria’s eyes widen as she rounds the corner with the cart.

Cooper does not shut the fuck up. He points to where Victoria is standing, shoulders statue-stiff. “The thing I can’t figure out,” he says, “is how you convinced her to go against clubhouse rules and fuck you on camera.”

Jonathan leaps up, pulling himself to his full height. In an instant, he has Cooper shoved against the nearest stall, Jonathan’s fist tight in his shirt, Cooper high enough off the ground that he shifts unsteadily on the balls of his feet.

“*Say that again,*” Jonathan growls.

“Say what again?” Cooper laughs. “That Pappalardo fucked her on camera or that she liked it?”

Jonathan shoves him harder, gripping Cooper with one hand and drawing back the other—his *pitching hand*—like he might hit him.

I can’t let him. He might break his hand. Word might get out *how* he broke his hand and teams might not want a guy who injures himself in a clubhouse scuffle. He can’t give up everything for us. For *me*.

I jump up and attempt to pull him off Cooper. But Jonathan’s big. Right now, he’s using every bit of his size and strength. “Jon, stop.”

That at least gets him to pause. He’s red-faced, angrier than I’ve ever seen him. “You didn’t tell me,” he says.

*I wanted to protect you.* But I can’t get the words out. “I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

And Cooper laughs.

My pulse accelerates. “I’ll get to you in a second,” I spit, then turn back to Jonathan. “I swear I was —”

Jonathan’s shaking his head. “I can’t believe you. This is so screwed up.”

Everyone’s watching us—the whole team. Who knows if someone’s

recording this? If they're broadcasting it to the entire world. Fuck. I fucked up so bad. "Jon, don't." *Don't tell them you were part of it. Don't let them think this is about anything other than two guys jealous over the same off-limits girl. Don't ruin your chances at the draft.*

Jonathan goes redder. "Stop saying my name like that."

Cooper laughs again. I don't think. I just go. It's easy to shove him against a locker, to rear back my hand—my throwing hand, not that I care about a broken finger right now. My knuckles connect with Cooper's jaw. It's mean and hard and satisfying for all of two seconds: Cooper's surprise, his cry of pain. Quick enough that I only catch a glimpse of Victoria fleeing the locker room, the final flash of her hair as she rushes up the hallway.

There's yelling. I can't tell where it's coming from, except some of it's me, a red haze of anger flickering at the edge of my vision. I punch Cooper again. "Don't fucking talk about her like that." *Or him. Or me.*

"Pappalardo, stop," someone calls. "You're gonna hurt him."

*Good.* I want him to fucking hurt. Until someone catches my arm. Gabe, who's pulling me back, like he might from an on-field fight.

Distantly, a few guys have tackled Jonathan—or are trying to. He shrugs them off like he's going to charge across the locker room.

Another pitcher gets between me and Cooper. That doesn't stop me. I swing again. "Right, that's enough," Gabe says, and I'm dragged off toward the showers. He tosses me in a stall. "Sit your ass down and stay there."

He turns on the shower—not even a full spray, just a drip of unheated water. I'm still running hot, but there's only so mad you can stay with water soaking through your shoes. The bathroom door slams shut. Sounds echo from the locker room—Jonathan's shouts followed by Coach's bellow.

"Everyone cut this shit out immediately!" Coach yells. And there's the sudden silence of two dozen ballplayers sitting down, contrite. "Pappalardo, get out here."

I take a deep breath and go, ignoring the squish of my sneakers and the stares of the players who, up until a few minutes ago, were my best friends in the world. Including Jonathan. He's gone from red to a panicked kind of pale, his cheeks white enough that I'm worried he might collapse.

We edited around us kissing—I was grateful for that, for the privacy of it—but that doesn't mean he's not on camera basically sucking my dick. What we left in, as if Victoria being between us made it somehow less queer.

Teams have passed on drafting players for less. I can practically see him



running through that: all his work, all his care not to get in any kind of trouble, washing away.

“Right,” Coach says, “let’s make this brief. Pappalardo, you’re benched. I don’t want to see you at the ballpark.”

What I came into the clubhouse to do. Still, it feels like a punch to the gut.

Cooper snickers at that until Coach adds, “Cooper, that goes for you too.”

“What the fuck—” Cooper begins.

“Do not mistake this for a negotiation,” Coach says. “You are never to refer to a clubhouse employee—or anyone else—like that in my presence.” And it would almost be satisfying if Coach didn’t inhale exasperatedly. “You both better hope there’s not some kind of investigation into the clubhouse working environment. What we will not have is a scandal.”

*A scandal.* Not that Cooper shouldn’t have harassed her or that Victoria might have gotten hurt in the process. “Is that really what you’re worried about?” I ask.

No one answers. Not Coach. Not Cooper. Not Jonathan, who’s sitting in a stone-faced silence on the clubhouse bench looking everywhere but at me. Well, I guess I know where I stand: He was always going to pick baseball over me—over *us*. I just didn’t think it would be this soon.

Victoria appears at the doorway, the strap of her purse digging into her arm. “You don’t have to worry about me—because I quit.” And she nods to Coach, sends one final wide-eyed glance around the room, then walks out with her shoulders high and proud.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

### *Victoria*

I MAKE it about five steps into the parking lot before my eyes blur with tears. I wipe them away. I just have to keep it together until I reach my car. I take a step, another, a series of them until I'm close enough to pop the locks, to unload my purse. To sit in the driver's seat with my face in my hands.

The team knows. Soon, news will get out to the rest of campus. I don't even want to know what will happen from there: if there's some rule against making OnlyFans videos in the dorms. If the school will be worried about a lawsuit and pressure me to quit or transfer. If this will somehow drift on the wind around the city until it finds Elizabeth.

A few other people are walking through the parking lot. I don't wait for anyone to come over, to tap on my window to ask me if I'm okay. I send Xiomara a text—*moving out ASAP*—and another to Savannah—*stuff with Mike and Jonathan just blew up*—then pull away as quickly as I can.

I don't have any more classes. My next final isn't until Monday afternoon. I go back to my apartment only long enough to pack a bag. I sweep my textbooks from my desk into a box. The candle Mike got me—the one that smells like laundry—rolls with them and I don't bother to pull it back out.

Next, I stuff my suitcase full of clothes. I grab a handful of underwear from my dresser, then root through until I find two full-coverage bras, the kind I only wear under the thinnest of T-shirts as an insulating layer.

I pull them out. Somehow, the bra Jonathan got me tangles with them, the straps of it like a net. I separate them and shove that bra back into the drawer. I don't need that for where I'm going.

Once I have my toiletries and makeup bags, I roll my bag out into our kitchen. The flowers are still sitting on our kitchen table. After this long,

they're wilted, petals and leaves falling in a loose scatter around the vase. I pull the bouquet out and chuck it into the trash, then rinse the vase. Things were nice while they were happening, I guess, but they were never meant to last.

I don't wait any longer. I haul my suitcase down the stairs and out to my car in a series of echoing thumps.

My phone buzzes in a concentrated burst of texts. I take it out only long enough to mute all incoming messages from Mike, and Jonathan, and in the group chat with both of them.

In the car, I pull up my GPS. The last two addresses I've visited appear: my mom's house and James's.

Mom won't care if I'm home. She might not even notice. And then I think of Elizabeth in that darkened house right up the hall from a man who she doesn't know is her father.

So I select a destination and put my car in gear. If I drive fast enough, I can pretend it's because I'm going toward something and not running away.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

### *Jonathan*

AFTER MIKE LEAVES THE CLUBHOUSE, a duffle bag slung on his shoulders, I get a text: *At the airport. Thank you again so much for this!!! Words can't express how much this means to us.* Followed by about a hundred heart emojis.

Mike's mom, letting me know they're about to take off.

I text Mike.

Me: we need to talk

No answer.

Me: it's important

No answer.

Me: Mike, your family is on their way.

No answer. I text him; I call him, but it goes to a full voicemail. I try him and Victoria together on our group chat. Nothing.

Somehow, we still have team practice. Or at least attempt to have practice. I'm set to start tomorrow—Regionals are playoff games. If we lose two, we're out of contention. Tomorrow could be my last start of the season and the last of my college career.

*Mike's supposed to be here.* Instead he left without even texting me an *I'm sorry* for having lied to me. Again.

I need to prepare. So I sit on the dugout bench, watching clips of the team we're playing in Regionals on an iPad. I play the video. The pitcher throws. The batter swings. I study it. Or try to. The pitcher is throwing...something. The batter is doing...something. I should be considering...something.

I hit pause and restart the video. Turn on the bench, a question forming in my mouth.

But there's no one next to me.

My pulse beats in my temple. Not just a pulse—a throb. Mike's family will be here soon. Mike isn't playing and we can't tell them why. And I'm playing without him. We've played apart before—during his ACL recovery and during rest days and just because that's how baseball works sometimes.

Not this *absence*. Not the hunch in his shoulders when Coach told him not to come to the ballpark. Not this silence that's only been going for a few hours but feels like it's forever.

I watch the video again for places that, if I throw just right, the batter won't be able to make contact with the ball. Most days, it's easy to see. *Most days, Mike is here.* I watch three times, then set the iPad aside. Because the only thing I can see is Mike and Victoria walking out like they might never return.



COACH SENDS ME HOME EARLY FROM PRACTICE. THAT'S PROBABLY FOR THE best. When I get to my apartment, I don't go in. The light's on under Mike's door. I have a key.

And I'm still pissed off at him—at both of them—for not telling me something was going on. I unlock his apartment and open the door carefully, unsure what I'm going to find.

But there's Mike, sitting with a bag of ice on his left hand.

When he looks at me, his eyes are red. A few dishes linger on the table. The contents of his baseball duffel are half strewn on the floor.

Normally, I'd see what he needed—another ice pack, to nap. To not worry. Now I stand in the doorway. “Your parents’ flight arrives soon.” *Surprise.*

Mike squeezes his eyes shut like the news physically pains him. “Thank you for bringing them out here.” He puts the ice pack on the bare surface of the table, not bothering with a coaster, then starts gathering stuff from the table—plates, an empty drink bottle, stuff he doesn't normally leave lying around. “Were you not gonna tell me they were coming?” he asks.

“Were you not gonna tell me people found out about the videos?” I

counter. I'm calmer than I was in the clubhouse, but that doesn't mean I'm calm. Something in Mike's expression—guilt, not like he lied to me, but that he's upset he got caught—stirs my anger again.

"Someone was sending Victoria weird DMs," he says, like that explains everything.

He heads toward the kitchen. I follow, carrying anything that looks out of place: a glass, a tin of mixed nuts, a crumpled napkin.

Mike begins shoving dishes into his dishwasher. I tear a few paper towels from the roll and grab his cleaning spray from under the sink.

"I can get that," he says.

I spray the counter like I'm proving a point, then begin wiping. "How did people find out if it was just DMs?"

"Whoever it was posted on Reddit when we didn't respond. I think it was that guy from the beach party—the one who was filming us. Things kind of spiraled from there."

Which sounds like it didn't all happen today. "How long has this been going on?" I ask.

"She got the first DM Monday morning."

"It's *Friday*. You've been lying to me for five days." My hand is flexing of its own accord, curling into a fist around the wad of paper towels. "Five days. Five fucking days."

Mike starts to scrub a hand over his face then winces, like his knuckles smart. "We didn't want anyone to connect you to the videos."

"So you let me get blindsided." Wiping done, I toss the paper towels into the trashcan, then turn to him. "That wasn't your decision to make."

"Yeah." Not *I'm sorry*. Not *I know I fucked up*. Not anything. Just *yeah*.

"Stop it." It comes out more forcefully than I mean it to, but fuck it. Fuck all of this.

Mike holds his hands up in his own defense, then winces again. "Jon, listen —"

But I'm done listening. Done being *reasonable*. I push him against the counter and poke my finger against the solid plane of his chest. "You should have told me."

"Victoria wanted to. I talked her out of it. We were trying to protect you."

*Victoria*. Who's somewhere after she fled the clubhouse, her purse heavy on her shoulder. I want to call her, text her, hold her, and shield her from this. With Mike...he should know better. *Protect*. Like I couldn't handle the

consequences. “You should trust me to make my own decisions.”

Mike shakes his head. “It’s not like that.”

I poke him again. “Not like you don’t trust me to decide for myself?”

“Would it have made a difference?” he says quietly.

Yes. But of course. I didn’t speak up in the clubhouse when he gave me the chance. Fuck. “I still deserved to know. Stop treating me like I’m too naïve to understand anything.”

Mike’s looking down like he’s embarrassed to meet my eyes. “I want you to be naïve,” he says quietly. “One of us should get to be. I love that about you. How you see the best in everyone. I just don’t want you to lose that.”

I can’t help it—I grab his shirt the way I did with Cooper’s earlier. Except this time, I pull Mike to me, thread my hand through his hair, and crush his lips to mine. It’s hot and angry and desperate, and I kiss him again and again.

I turn, out of habit, Victoria’s name on my lips. But no, we’re in Mike’s kitchen, alone. That doesn’t stop me from kissing him again, from shoving my tongue in his mouth, or the way he sucks it like an apology.

“Jon…” His voice is a growl in his throat. “What do you want?” Like he’ll just give me whatever it is.

*To redo this week. To go back how we were. To be able to trust you again.*

But I don’t get a chance to say any of that—not when my phone buzzes with a set of texts. I pull it from my pocket. “Your parents landed. They’re gonna drop their stuff at their hotel then head over here.”

“Where are they staying?”

“Nearby. Here.” I pull up the details and hand Mike my phone.

Mike looks, forehead wrinkled. “You did all this in the last week?”

“Yeah, I should’ve thought of it earlier.”

“I love that you thought of it at all.”

*Love.* A word he’s used twice. The air smells like cleaning spray. That doesn’t stop me from cupping his cheek. His jaw fits just right in the curve of my palm. His eyes soften. I kiss him, slow, my hand up the back of his neck, his hips against mine. He tightens his arms around me. How many times has he hugged me at the end of a game? How many times has he held me together when I’ve felt like I’m coming apart?

He pulls away from me, only slightly, eyelashes dark on his cheek. Our foreheads rest together.

“What are you gonna tell your family about the game tomorrow?” I ask.

His shoulders go stiff. "I'll just say my knee hurts."

"If I told Coach I needed you there, he might change his mind."

"Don't," Mike says. "You'll be fine on your own."

One of us has to keep it together, and it probably should be the guy who didn't just get kicked off the team. "Yeah." I try to ignore the tightness in my throat. "I'll be okay. I should probably leave before your family gets here."

Mike frowns at that. "I'm sure they'll want to see you to say thanks."

"They don't know we're together, right?" I ask. *Are we still together?* I don't add.

"No," Mike says, "they don't."

"I don't know if we'll be good at pretending to be friends."

His frown deepens. "You don't have to stay. I understand if you're still pissed at me. I would be too."

"I'm still pretty mad"—I run my hand under his jaw, tilting up his mouth—"but that's not really what I meant." And kiss him again until we have to let go.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

*Mike*

I'M ON THE COUCH, an ice pack on my knee, when my family texts that they're downstairs.

I start to get up. Jonathan pushes my shoulder. "I'll get them," he says.

I sink back down.

Jonathan studies me for a second, then leans over and brushes my hair away from my face. Tension still lines his mouth. I want to kiss it away, but I don't have the right. Not with him, and not with Victoria. I fucked up. I have to wear it.

He kisses me, not on my lips but on my forehead, a little brush of a kiss that could almost be between friends. Less than I want but more than I deserve. His phone buzzes again. "They're impatient to see you."

So he hustles out, and I have the time it takes him to get down the stairs, then into an elevator with my family to enjoy that kiss.

I know what I have to do, but that doesn't make it any easier. I take out my phone and send a text to our group chat.

Me: we should all take a break

Is it cowardly to do with Jonathan downstairs and Victoria...somewhere? Yes. But step one to fixing this is taking myself out of the equation. I'm relieved when neither of them answers immediately.

After a few minutes, voices come from up the hall. I count down the seconds before they return, a three-two-one for the end of our relationship. When Jonathan's on the other side of the door, we're still together. But he turns the knob and opens the door.

My family pours in—my parents, along with Nick, my youngest brother, who's eleven. My other two brothers are back in St. Louis, finishing their

school years and staying with my aunt.

I pull myself up. Take a breath, then stagger forward like my knee smarts. This charade will only work if we commit.

“Mike, Jonathan told us you’re supposed to be sitting down.” My mother, who is already reaching for the ice pack and putting their luggage in the corner and pulling tissues out of her purse because she’s crying, seemingly all at once.

She hugs me. My dad lays a concerned hand on my shoulder. My brother launches himself at me. He punches me hard in the arm in greeting, a little brother kind of punch that hurts less than getting hit with a baseball. I laugh and scrub my knuckles over his hair.

“Mike, stop it!” he yells, delighted.

“Nicholas Pappalardo, can’t you see that he’s hurt!” my mom shouts.

I’m not going to cry. I’m not. But I blink rapidly. There’s a lump in my throat.

Jonathan made this happen. Made the airplane tickets and the hotel stay and their rental car happen. It must have been expensive. Fuck, it must have been really expensive.

*You could have...* I could have. Except my parents would ask where the money came from, and I can’t tell them.

When I look over, Jonathan is staring at his phone. When he looks up, he puts on the same face he wears to greet fans—a pretended kind of enthusiasm that looks real unless you know him. “I should let you get caught up.”

My mother turns to him and grabs both of his hands. She’s all of five feet tall, and he has to bend practically in half as she pulls him into a hug. “Thank you.” When she releases Jonathan, there are slight damp patches on his shirt.

“I’m so glad it all worked out,” Jonathan says. “Sorry I can’t stay longer—I need to go do some prep for tomorrow’s game.” He grimaces apologetically.

My mom gives a watery nod. “Of course. It’s too bad Mike won’t get to play.”

“You’re still planning to go, right?” I ask. Because I can’t imagine Coach would have an issue with my family being there, but I’m also not going to ask in case he does.

“Jonathan offered to give us a tour of the clubhouse,” my father says.

“Oh.” My heart sinks, because that should be me, leading them around and showing them where I spent the last three years. “Of course.”

My mom zeros in on my swollen knuckles. “Is your hand okay?”

I examine my fingers like I’m surprised to find my knuckles bruised. “Got hit with a ball earlier.”

“Uh-huh.” Said like she would when I did something growing up that got me grounded. “And why is that girl you’re dating not here taking care of you?”

My heart sinks. I’ve mentioned Victoria, a few times. Casually. Across the room, Jonathan’s giving me a *What the hell?* expression. Upset that I told my parents about Victoria. That I didn’t tell them about *him*. About *us*. Except it’s not like there’s an *us* anymore. Also my fault.

My mother is still looking at me. “Victoria’s working this weekend,” I say. Then I go for the Italian-mom kryptonite. “The last time my knee hurt like this she brought over food. Besides, I can’t do a whole lot other than stay off it until Monday.” The way I figure it, a weekend spent on knee rest will blend into a week spent studying for finals and showing them San Diego, and then I’ll have graduated.

“If you’re sure...,” my mom says.

I sink back on my couch. “We should let Jonathan get home.”

“Thank you again for all this,” my mother says when Jonathan is almost to the door, “Mike is so lucky to have a friend like you.”

I adjust the ice pack. It’s cold enough to hurt a little. Maybe that will hide whatever my face is doing: a wince or something worse. *Friends*. That’s what we are now. Just friends.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

### *Victoria*

WHEN I GET to the house—after I punch in the gate code and park under one of the overhangs that functions as a carport—I find James in the living room watching a financial show on TV.

He's wearing a polo shirt and khakis, his already-tanned skin deepened by a career half spent on the golf course. His black hair is neatly combed, though there's more gray at his temples than the last time I saw him. The only sign something's up is the still-shiny scar visible in the open vee of his shirt collar. He smiles when he sees me. "Good afternoon, Victoria."

"How're you feeling today?" I ask. A nurse's question. Will I even get to be one now that my secret is out?

James's smiles flickers at the edge—the same way Tyler's did the last time I was here. "Just fine," he says. "Enjoying the afternoon. How about yourself?"

So we're not going to talk about whatever it is. "I'm doing well," I say. "About to start finals. I hope you don't mind, but I thought it might be quieter to study here."

"Of course." He gestures to the house around us. "I want to make sure you and Elizabeth feel welcomed over the summer—I'm so excited that everything worked out with her for next year."

*You mean Tyler basically steamrolled us into this.* But no, I can't say that. Not with James being sick. Not with Elizabeth getting a better shot than my mom could give her—than I could give her. "Yeah, it'll be great to spend time with everyone." *Except Tyler.*

I reshoulder my bag.

James gives me a polite nod. "Don't let me keep you. I appreciate how diligent both you and Elizabeth are in studying. Tyler never seemed to, but

then, business thinking sometimes requires a less academic approach.”

Less academic...meaning Tyler knows how to play dirty. “Is he around?” I ask casually. Or I hope it’s casually.

“He should be—Tyler’s working too hard, but you didn’t hear that from me. In fact”—James lowers his voice—“if you could make sure he has a little fun this summer, I’d appreciate it. As a personal favor.”

My mind stutters on the word *fun*. What Cooper said. *I heard you were fun*. What Savannah told me I should have more of. Look where that got me.

I smile my politest smile, my *guest in someone else’s house* smile. “Thank you again.” And roll my suitcase down the hall, trying not to let my eyes spill over with sudden tears.



SEVERAL HOURS LATER, THE FRONT DOOR SLAMS OPEN, A THUMP THAT permeates through what’s now my room. I’m midway through making the bed. My clothes are put away, my toiletries stored in the bathroom up the hall. My textbooks are on the desk—*my* desk. Except this room isn’t really mine. I didn’t bring any pictures. Nothing decorates the walls. The only décor is that candle, and I haven’t even lit it. The last thing I want to smell is *laundry*.

Noise echoes through the house, at last settling on the patio below my bedroom window: Elizabeth and someone I don’t recognize, an Asian girl with short pink hair. They have a robot with them and are zipping it around.

If I can’t be a good student or a good clubhouse employee or even a good friend, at least I can be a good older sister. I head down to the patio, and they’re so caught in conversation that they don’t see me at first.

“Hi!” I say, overly chipper. “I’m Victoria—Elizabeth’s sister.”

They both swing to look at me, Elizabeth’s eyes widening in surprise. “This is my—” she begins, then cuts herself off. “This is Lin, my friend from robotics.”

I nod to Lin. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Lin bites her lip like she’s nervous, maybe from being around an adult.

I point to the robot, which is size of a banker’s box, with metal struts like a beefed-up erector set. “What’s this one do?”

Elizabeth gets that look—the *I’m so glad you asked* expression that

sometimes precedes lengthy robotics explanations. “If I show you, I have to show Tyler.” She pulls out her phone and sends a quick text. “He got us the kit.”

*Tyler.* Who I don’t particularly want to see but can’t avoid, particularly because I’m at his house.

A minute later, he comes out on the patio. “Lizzy, you summoned me?” Apparently, he’s ditched the obnoxious workwear for sweats. A pair of gray joggers sits low on his hips, revealing a strip of muscle between the waistband and the hem of his probably three-hundred-dollar white T-shirt. He has less product in his hair than usual. Blond waves fall casually over his forehead.

I’m not staring. Tyler looks like he always does, like the most obnoxious version of handsome, and it’s being frazzled that makes me notice it more than I normally would. Looking away would be admitting I’ve been staring, so I sharpen my gaze.

He smiles at me—are his teeth somehow whiter? “Vicky...” He drags out the syllables in my nickname. “Didn’t know you graced us with your presence.”

Elizabeth is looking between us. “Hey, Ty, check out this robot.” She thrusts her thumb against the controls, sending the robot speeding down the length of the patio. “Now for the arm.” She activates the crane arm, which telescopes upward, grabbing a robotic handful of air.

“You did all this in the past few days?” I ask. “That’s pretty impressive.”

“What, like it’s hard?” Elizabeth tosses her hair semi-sarcastically.

“It is pretty impressive,” Tyler says, and I search for any hint of sarcasm—and find none. It’s as if he has a switch that toggles between *self-absorbed jerk* and *caring older brother*. And that *self-absorbed* label feels...thin, given what he’s doing for James. Maybe it’s a trick. I sidle up to where Elizabeth is showing him the robot’s controls. Just in case.

When I get there, Elizabeth is handing him the controller. He takes it, then maneuvers the robot easily as it zips around the patio.

“I didn’t know you were into this stuff,” I say.

“Tyler did robotics in high school,” Elizabeth blurts. She puts her hand over her mouth as if she divulged something personal.

Tyler isn’t looking at me; his gaze is fixed on the robot as he guides it through an especially tight turn, fingers quick on the controls. Is he embarrassed that someone might think he’s *smart*, not *business guy* smart but

*does stuff with his hands smart?*

“I guess the secret is out,” he says. “I do in fact do robotics.”

“Do?” I ask.

“I may have contributed to coaching Lizzy’s team,” he says airily.

Elizabeth snorts disbelievingly. “He basically ran the whole program!”

Which sounds dangerously close to Tyler doing something nice. No, beyond nice: *selfless*. I’m struck with a hundred questions. Why Tyler offered to do that. Why he took pains to hide that he was involved—if not directly, then by omission. “How’d that start?” I ask.

“Elizabeth’s team was at a tournament where I was volunteering,” Tyler says. “It seemed like they could use some help.”

Something in that tickles a memory—Jonathan on the beach, talking about Mike with a similar sort of pride. “You volunteer at tournaments?”

Tyler shrugs, like he’s embarrassed by all of this. Like it’s embarrassing that I might think positively of him. “Sure,” he says.

“So does...” *Mike*. “One of my friends,” I finish.

Tyler smirks. “Which friend?”

I glare at him. “Mike.”

“Catcher Mike?” he says, mock innocently.

“Yes, that’s the one. He’s an engineer. Or will be.”

“Didn’t know they let ballplayers think.”

I square my shoulders. “There’s a lot you don’t know.”

He smiles at that, the insufferable Tyler grin I’m used to now tinged with something else—a teasing sort of amusement like we’re both in on the joke. “I’m sure that’s true.”

My stomach drops. *Who told him? Does everyone know?* I step back, shield my phone with my hand, and finally unmute my texts.

Xiomara: did you mean to throw out those flowers

Jonathan: Mike, your family is on their way

Mike: we should all take a break

I send a thumbs up to Xiomara and another to Mike. There, it’s done. *We’re done*. I won’t cry. It’s my fault for not blurring his tattoo and his for hiding those DMs from Jonathan. And Jonathan’s for not understanding why we had to. Everyone’s fault and no one’s fault, and I will not cry. Not in front of Elizabeth, who might worry, or Tyler, who might...I don’t know what he’d do. Sympathize? That’d be even worse.

There's one more text.

Savannah: it's on Insta

She drops a link to our school's off-brand version of Deuxmoi. I suck in a breath, then click their story.

First story: People amped for tomorrow's baseball game. An arrow encouraging the reader to keep tapping.

Second story: The roster from the game. A circle around the catcher position. *Where's Mike Pappalardo?*

Third story, a text post that begins: *I probably shouldn't be saying this but...* They make it sound like a clubhouse brawl versus it being a two-punch scuffle.

Fourth story: Screenshots of that Reddit post. Looks like Mike Pappalardo (C, San Diego) has a second job.

My OnlyFans account handle is on full display along with a few screenshots—blurry enough that Jonathan isn't recognizable, but the filters I was using to conceal Mike's and my faces only do so much if you know who you're looking for.

Tears prick my eyes. My breath goes short in my lungs. *I don't deserve this. None of us do.*

I could have closed the account, but I didn't. Not when I first suggested it. Not after word got out. Some part of me burns with humiliation. Another, more stubborn part wants to tilt its chin up to the world, and say, *So what? So what if we had sex on camera? So what if I liked it? So what if I liked the freedom it brought—both the sex and the money?*

Except now Mike's been kicked off the team, and Jonathan's pissed at us, and we're all broken up.

I wipe my eyes a few times, then give up. I'm going to cry. I wave vaguely to Elizabeth and Lin, who are watching their robot...and to Tyler, who is watching me.

"I need to run inside for something." My voice sounds thin.

I make it as far as the hallway leading out to the patio before I collapse against the wall. *Fuck, this hurts. Fuck, I don't know how to fix this.*

I hit FaceTime and try to push down the swell of acid in my stomach.

Savannah answers. "How're you holding up?"

"I'm not." I clench my eyes shut, trying not to cry again. I take a long deep breath. "That OnlyFans account Mike had...I was the one on it with



him.”

Savannah’s eyes go wide in realization. “I heard there was some threesome stuff on it. Was that you and them?”

There’s no use in denying it. “Yeah.”

She presses her lips together, like she’s trying not to say something. It takes me a second to realize she’s trying not to laugh—not meanly, but in obvious delight. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I know, it’s terrible, but you really are an overachiever.”

“What?” I ask, bewildered.

“You know, I date a scumbag, you go out with the guy who’s slept with half of campus.”

“A third,” I say, remembering Mike’s amusement at that. How easy everything felt with the three of us and how hard it’s been since. “And he’s not a scumbag.”

Savannah laughs, then keeps going. “Most people have a few wild nights—you make an OnlyFans account with two of the hottest people I’ve ever seen in person.”

A giggle rises within me, slightly hysterical. “Yeah.”

“And now you’re getting an A+++ in catastrophic breakups,” she adds.

I sigh. “I feel like I blew everything up.”

“Good,” Savannah says.

“Good?”

“Look, I know you don’t believe me, but I want you to have some fun, okay?”

“This doesn’t feel like a lot of fun right now.”

“Yeah, this part sucks.” She waves a hand like she’s clearing something away. One of her rings—a new one with a large yellow stone—flashes on camera. “But the rest of it—that was pretty good, right?”

I think back to the beach, the three of us together in the back of Jonathan’s SUV. “It really was.”

“Then you’re gonna be okay.”

That part feels less certain. “I’m not sure if I’ll be around much this summer. I’m at Tyler’s—I mean, James’s. My ex-stepdad’s.”

“You and Tyler getting along?”

*Yes. No. I don’t know.* “He’s not annoying me as much as he normally does.”

“You mean pulling your pigtails to get your attention?”

“What’s that mean?”

“Nothing”—Savannah presses her lips together—“absolutely nothing. After finals, we’re getting brunch, right?”

“Maybe some place not on campus?”

“I’ll hold you to that.” She smiles. “And I’m going to want details—*lots* of details.”

After we hang up, I take another minute to gather myself, then head out on the patio. Out here everything seems normal. Or normal-ish as it gets around Tyler.

He gives me a look like he’s going to comment on how red my eyes are or how my mascara is probably dripping down my face. Instead he turns to Elizabeth. “Pizza for dinner?”

She nods, emphatic, while toggling something on the robot’s controls.

“Lin, how about you?” he asks. “We’ll get some with vegan cheese—James needs that too.”

“If it’s okay with Lizzy,” Lin says.

For some reason, Elizabeth flushes at that. She might get her hair and complexion from James—now that I know she does, it’s hard not to see it—but she blushes like Mom and me. “It’s definitely okay,” she says.

“Let me go call my parents.” Lin ducks off to the side of the patio, her phone raised to her ear.

After Lin walks off, Elizabeth taps her shoulder against Tyler’s. “Thanks, bro.”

He taps her back. “No problem, li’l sis.”

That shouldn’t make me jealous, but I can’t help it: I fled here to escape campus and now I’m confronted with this strange at-home version of Tyler, who cares about robots and vegan cheese. About James and Elizabeth and being a family, even if he and I aren’t technically part of that.

Who turns to me and says, “You staying for dinner?” Like he’s mentally increasing the order.

“Yeah. I should be around most of the time, once my finals are over.”

“What happened to your little laundry job?”

My back goes stiff. “Didn’t work out.”

“Great. I just so happen to have a position available.” He draws out the word *position* like he’s deliberately getting under my skin. That’s enough to refocus me. Tyler is an asshole—a fundamental truth. No part of what he’s doing is charming. I am not—*won’t be*—charmed.

I could also say *no*. I still have some money in the bank. Even if I have lost two jobs in the last twenty-four hours: no more clubhouse, no more OnlyFans. *And probably no more Jonathan and Mike*. I feel strange—anchorless, directionless like I haven't in a long time. "Fine."

Tyler smiles, a grin like a shark's. "So glad to have you on board." And he walks away, leaving me to wonder exactly what I've gotten myself into.



## TYLER

On Saturday morning, I wake up to my phone buzzing. At first, I think it's James texting me from the other room, something he only does when he's truly in crisis, despite me telling him to ask when he needs something.

This isn't from James; it's from a robotics friend. *Isn't this the guy who was doing safety checks at the March tournament?*

Safety check guy. Meaning Mike. Catcher Mike. *Victoria's Mike*. I thumb open the link in the text—it goes to a campus gossip Instagram. I open the story and click through. There's a baseball game today. So what? Mike's not playing today. *So what?*

Until I hit the third story. The one about the clubhouse fight. And the fourth one. Mike...who plays baseball and volunteers at robotics tournaments to make sure nothing catches on fire...and fucks on camera.

Helpfully, they left his OnlyFans handle exposed. I look it up and scroll through the teaser content. So Mike doesn't just fuck on camera, he fucks someone in particular on camera. Someone blonde, whose face has the telltale shimmer of a filter. It's probably just coincidence. We're in San Diego. There's no shortage of fuckable blond women.

Suspicion hums under my skin. If it is her, I want—*need*—to see for myself.

Before I can stop myself, I hit *subscribe* and select the premium tier. Slowly, each video unlocks. I hit the first thumbnail: the two of them in what must be a dorm apartment, sprawled across a bed, kissing.

It can't be. It must be someone who just looks like her. My brain won't process it. *Good girl* Victoria on camera. Unashamed.

She looks...

Fuck.

*Get your hands off her*, something within me roars. But of course, he's touching her all over, palming her breasts, stroking his fingers into her panties. She bucks against his hand, her chin tilted back in obvious pleasure.

Maybe she's just acting. This is porn, after all.

But no, Victoria's terrible at covering her emotions, at least when you know her, which I do. She's enjoying herself. He's doing this to her—for her.

I should stop watching. It feels wrong, a good kind of wrong like pressing a bruise. *You're not supposed to look at her like that*. Something James told me over and over when they first moved in with us, and never seems to take. I pick another video. He has her against a door, fucking into her with a desperation I know. Because I've felt it around her.

My cock is already hard against my belly. It has a curve to it I hate, a bend that's asymmetrical to one side. *Not like his*. She likes his from the way she's writhing on him, pressing her nails in his shoulder, begging him to go deeper.

*Laughing* at something he says. It's the laughter that gets me.

I spit on my hand and start stroking myself with tight, angry movements. Even with spit, it's still a little dry—a hurt I chase after. I imagine her here with me. Sitting by me. Touching my cock with that smug, bossy way she has. *Perfect*.

I stroke myself faster and watch on-screen as Mike kisses her pussy deep and slow and soaked with his come.

Fuck, I'd do that for her. I'd do that for both of them. I should have done it when I had the chance.

When Mike was with me. When we met at that tournament and spent the day flirting, and he came back here to hook up. Except James was in the house, resting under doctor's orders. So we hooked up in my car. Or sort of hooked up. He blew me. I may have asked him to leave after that. Nicely. Well, succinctly.

And now...Now he's fucking the girl I can't have. Revenge—if you can call it that—like they shoved me in a corner and told me to watch.

*I would*.

My cock doesn't object. Not to that video. Not to the next one that's mostly Victoria and Mike and a glimpse of someone else, someone big whose face is completely blurred, but there's no way to ignore the reverence with

which he's touching her. Like she's special. Like I would touch her if I weren't so...me.

I shut my eyes, pushing out everything other than the image of Victoria here, body over mine, a curl to her lip as she looks me over, like she knows I don't deserve her. *I've had better.* And before I can stop, I come all over myself in hot, shameful pulses.

I'm left the way I always am—on my own. I wipe my hand against a T-shirt sitting on the nightstand. It cost two hundred dollars, and I don't even like the graphic on the front.

My head is clearer. Questions flood in: If other people know it's Victoria in the videos. If she knows she's been doxed and she's hurt or angry or both. She was crying when she came back to the patio yesterday. She must.

A possessiveness curls low in my belly. I didn't want Mike to touch her until I saw he could do it right. But whoever put her name out there.... *I'll hurt anyone who did this to her.*

So who found their OnlyFans channel to begin with?

I could find out—it just takes money and a questionable sense of ethics. Fortunately, I have both. I grab my phone and tap out an email.

*You don't deserve her.*

But maybe, just maybe, I could.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

### *Victoria*

I TRY to have as normal a Saturday as possible, given the circumstances. There's a home gym on the first floor, a level below the kitchen. I don't love running inside—the whole point is to move through the world versus studying your progress on a digital display—but I don't know the neighborhood that well.

So I set myself up on a treadmill in front of the big picture window overlooking the hills studded with green palm trees. From up here, it's easy to forget about anything but the beat of my shoes, the song playing in my ears.

I should make a new playlist.

I should figure out what I'm going to do about any of this—about Jonathan and Mike. About how it feels like the world is staring at me.

I run faster.

Fast enough that I don't hear Tyler come in. "Morning, Vicky," he says from just beyond my elbow.

"Fuck!" I nearly jump out of my skin.

He laughs. He's dressed to work out—in shorts and one of those sweat-wicking T-shirts that clings to the panes of his abs.

To my dismay, he gets on the treadmill next to mine and falls into an easy, loping jog. The room is relatively large for a home gym, but the two treadmills are set only a few feet apart. It's hard not to notice Tyler—the beat of his running shoes against the belt and the way the morning sun picks out the blonder parts of his hair. After a few minutes, the roots start to darken with sweat, and he pulls the hem of his shirt up to wipe his face.

I will not look at him. But he's right at the edge of my peripheral vision. And great, now he's peeling off his shirt.

Compared to Jonathan and Mike, Tyler's lean. *Are you eating enough?* It's a complicated feeling, how some part of me cares if he's doing all right. Especially when I can't seem to stop looking at the sweat beading on his chest.

He glances over. "You okay?"

I force my gaze out the big window. "Just admiring the ocean."

"Uh-huh." I wouldn't believe me either.

I swallow. My mouth is suddenly dry. *Stop being thirsty.* Especially because he has that same smirk he did when we were driving Elizabeth's robot around the patio. Like this is a joke we're both in on. I'm not going to let him get to me. I tap the button on the treadmill to increase my pace.

Next to me, he does the same. "So, about stuff for James..."

"You want to talk about this now?"

"Just making sure you're a good fit for the role."

"Really, Tyler—you want to interview me, considering you badgered me into this?"

"You mean," he says, "I persuaded you using well-honed negotiation skills?"

"More like by being a pain in the ass."

Tyler laughs. "New Vicky really is something."

*New Vicky.* Like he knows there's something going on with me. "Just tell me what you want me to do," I say.

"James has new health requirements. He needs a better meal plan, and for someone to talk to his doctors to make sure he's recovering properly."

None of which should be that hard. Why is Tyler so adamant I'm the only person to do this? "You could just hire a home health aide."

"I looked into it. James said that made him feel old."

Meaning Tyler did all this to...what? Spare James the indignity of acknowledging that he's aging? Something nice, or Tyler's version of it. "Fine," I say, "but I'm getting paid."

Tyler laughs. "Sure. Name your price."

I stop the treadmill and use the pretext of wiping down my neck with a towel to consider what else he has to offer—money, connections, the literal mansion I'm standing in. Nothing I want—or things I want, but not from Tyler. "Ten thousand dollars." Why not go big if he's going to say no?

Now Tyler punches the button to stop the treadmill and jumps off. I expect him to balk—to argue. Instead, he sticks out a hand like we're sealing

a business transaction. I study it for a second before I shake it—surprised at the gesture and at the calluses lining his palm like he might actually work for a living.

Except when I try to pull back, he doesn't let go. His mouth ends up close to my ear. "You sure that's all you want?"

*What I want.* His breath is hot on my neck, and he's still shining with sweat. I should not want anything other than him to leave me alone. Certainly not this feeling like he caught me looking at him—like he doesn't mind. A feeling that's a thousand times better than remembering how the rest of my life has exploded.

So I stare up at him, defiant. "Don't overestimate the size of your... wallet." Then walk off, carrying the heat of his stare between my shoulder blades.



## *Chapter Thirty-Four*

MIKE TO JONATHAN

you fucking did it!!  
seven scoreless innings!!!  
you're gonna get paiiiiiiiid at the draft  
I knew you'd be fine

...

~~without me~~

on your own

## JONATHAN TO MIKE

thanks

...

~~I wish you'd been there with me~~

~~I wish it was how it's been~~

~~the two of us together~~

~~I don't know what I'm gonna do when we're apart~~

~~it~~

bro

## VICTORIA TO JONATHAN AND MIKE

Sorry that I missed

...

~~Being with you both~~

~~All of us together~~

~~How things used to be~~

your game.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

### *Victoria*

THE WEEKEND GOES BY. Monday, I drive to campus, spend an easy hour taking a final and a more difficult one packing my stuff up. Xiomara isn't around, which is just as well. I don't know what I'd say to her.

My next final isn't for a few hours. I kill time at that café where Mike and I had our first meeting. Maybe it's silly to avoid being on campus, but I need whatever protective layer I can put between myself and this whole mess, so I drink a latte and bury myself in a stack of flash cards.

My phone is on the café table, face down. I tell myself I'm not disappointed that Mike and Jonathan haven't called. It's only been a few days. We're on a break. *Or broken up and not acknowledging it at all.*

No, I can't think about that. So I shuffle through my flashcards on reasons for patient noncompliance in health settings. *Lack of health literacy. Lack of social support. Lack of trust.* A phrase that beats in my head. *Lack of trust. Lack of trust.*

Because that's what we have right now: Mike didn't trust Jonathan and look where that got us. I didn't trust myself—to speak up the first time Cooper said something awful. To insist that we tell Jonathan the truth. To stick around when stuff got hard.

A while later, a murmur ripples through the café—*fuck*, are people going to be weird about me, even here?

Except, when I look up, Jonathan has just come through the door, a backpack slung on his shoulder like he's here to study.

Even with a crowd of people in front of him, he's hard to miss—he fills the doorway, then the area in front of the cash register. For a minute, I consider slinking down in my chair to avoid him seeing me. But there's silly and there's cowardly, so I wave.

His eyes widen for a second, then he comes over.

“Funny coincidence,” I say. Easier than asking something dangerous like *How’re you holding up? Or So, we’re broken up, right?*

“I figured I should try this place since we never made it here together.”

Motion from a corner of the café gets my attention—a woman with her phone up like she’s taking a series of selfies. But the camera’s aimed right at Jonathan. Something that used to make me feel famous and a little sexy whenever it happened when we were together. Now it just makes me feel watched. I lower my voice. “A woman over there is taking pictures.”

“Yeah”—Jonathan pulls out the chair he was holding and sits, back defiantly stiff—“so what?” From anyone else, it’d be slightly irritated. *This is Jonathan, pissed off.* Not at the woman in the corner, but at me. “How’ve you been?” he asks.

“Um, fine?”

He frowns at that. “Really? I’ve been a mess.”

I laugh, then lower my voice. “No, not fine. I’m a mess too.”

Jonathan indicates my now-emptied coffee cup. “I could get you another latte.”

Like buying me something is going to fix any of this. “I’m good. If you see Mike...tell him I’m sorry.”

“Tell him yourself at graduation.” Jonathan digs into his bag and pulls out a wrinkled envelope, then slides it to me. Inside, there’s a ticket to commencement.

“You’re not going?”

“We have a game. Super-Regionals.” He frowns at that, as if it’s bad news that the team qualified for the next round of the playoffs.

“I thought you’d still be mad at him.”

“I am. But that doesn’t stop me from loving someone.” Jonathan looks at me a little pointedly.

“I’m sorry we didn’t tell you. I should have.”

He nods. “Thank you.”

“But”—I slide the ticket back toward him—“I’m not sure I should go to graduation. People might...well, you know. Word’s gotten around.”

Jonathan drums his fingers on the table. “I thought you liked him enough not to care what people say.”

Guilt slides down my neck like a slick of sunscreen. “I could say the same thing to you,” I shoot back. “Because I didn’t hear you jumping to his

defense in the clubhouse.”

Jonathan stands and pulls himself to his full height, looming over me. His mouth is pressed into a serious line. “I know how I feel about him—about both of you. And I’m not afraid to let other people know too.”

And he walks out before I can ask him what that means.



TUESDAY, I TAKE MY ONLY FINAL OF THE DAY—EIGHT A.M. FINALS SHOULD actually be illegal—then load up my car with stuff from my apartment to drive it back to Mom’s.

When I get there, her car’s parked in the driveway. The front door to the house is unlocked. I open it slowly, not knowing what to expect: chaos, a sink full of dirty dishes, a party in full swing.

No dishes are piled in the sink, but a stack of paper plates sits on the counter.

“Mom,” I call, to see if she’s here, a *Mom* that goes slightly teenaged at the end.

Nothing. That doesn’t mean much.

I make a few trips from my car, hauling stuff into Elizabeth’s and my old room. It’s bare—Elizabeth stripped her stuff off the walls. The absent photo frames have left square gaps in the dust on her dresser. I drop my boxes in a semi-neat pile when I catch a faint strain of music from the other room.

My mom’s bedroom door is shut. When I knock, I get a quiet, “Come in.”

She’s in bed, sitting up this time, wearing an old T-shirt she cut the collar out of. Her hair is piled up like she just got out of the shower. Next to her, there are a few stubbed-out joints on an ashtray, like Tuesday mornings are for getting high and listening to Sharon Jones.

She waves a hand to me in easy greeting. I grit my teeth. *Were you just waiting for us to move out?* “Hi,” I say.

“Hey Victoria.” Her throat sounds scratchy with smoke. She pats the bed next to her.

Despite myself, I go over there, the way I would when I was a kid. I sit next to her, ignoring the smell of weed but not the music.

“When you were little, you used to dance around to this,” she says. “I’d put it on, and you’d just go absolutely wild. It was the only way I could tire

you out.”

We listen like that for a while. Music has that funny way of taking you back to a particular place and time, like when I was six years old and my mom was the best person in the universe. “I loved this song,” I say.

She pats my arm. “I always thought you’d be a musician. Or end up doing something in the industry.”

As if musicians just happened and didn’t need instruments and youth orchestras and all the other stuff that went with it. “Yeah, maybe,” I say.

I get up and walk semi-aimlessly around the room. Most of the stuff is still on her dresser from the last time I was over here, all the same perfume bottles and half-used cosmetics. Only now there’s something else. A check, written from James to my mom, dated from more than a month ago. “What’s this?” I pick it up and show it to her.

“I’ve been meaning to take that to the bank,” she says, as if having a check for five thousand dollars is an inconvenience.

I hold out my hand. “Give me your phone.”

She does, and I type in her passcode—Elizabeth’s birthday—then go to the app store to download a banking app. I have to update the phone’s operating system. It takes a few minutes, but my mom doesn’t seem to mind. Mostly, she’s just swaying softly to music coming from the old iPod plugged into a speaker. Once that’s updated, I download the banking app, set my mom’s username and password, then log in. Finally, I’m able to deposit the check.

“There,” I say, “now you have it.”

“Thank you. You were always so much better at this stuff.” A compliment that doesn’t sound like one. *Victoria, queen of worries.*

I transfer another five thousand dollars from my account to hers until it totals ten, then look around. “Where’s your checkbook?” I ask.

She frowns. “Why?”

“We’re gonna pay off the IRS.”

That at least gets a reaction—her face crumples, like she’s trying to stave off tears, before she composes herself. “It’s over there.”

Which it is, by a pile of envelopes that looks like they’re from the government. I grab one from the top of the pile and thumb it open. Inside, another letter in neat bureaucratic font, along with a form to include with payments. I fill it out with my mom’s info, but they need her driver’s license number for some reason.

Her purse is on the dresser. I pull her wallet out and extract her license from between wads of receipts. I jot down the number, but my eyes drift to her date of birth.

*Wait, that's not...* There's her birthday: February thirteenth. She likes to joke that the world gets her chocolate a day late. I hold up the license. "Did they print the wrong year on this?" I ask.

My mom frowns. "No?"

I do the math. Then do it again. If that year is right, my mom is thirty-eight. *Sixteen years older than I am.* Meaning she had me when she was Elizabeth's age.

Things fall into place slowly, then all at once. My mom's bewilderment at all those parts of adulthood that other parents just seemed to get. Her declaration that Elizabeth was old enough to make up her own mind.

Tyler's horror when I asked if James was my father—because he's at least a decade and a half older than my mom. He would have been in his midthirties when she was in high school.

I must have known. How could I have not known? I rack my brain, trying to remember the last time I saw my mom's birthdate written anywhere. Where would I have? She took bills and hid them, or simply piled things up because she didn't know what else to do.

Tears start, the kind that seem to be rising up from my lungs. Tears, and questions: What would she have done if she didn't have me? What could she have done if I wasn't here? My chin wavers. My throat tightens. I take in a ragged gasp.

Across the room, my mom is frowning at me. "Victoria, what's the matter?"

"Nothing." Because I'm not ready for this conversation, especially since she's sitting there like she doesn't have a care except for the next song. "I'm taking this to the mailbox," I say.

Her voice trails me as I'm walking out. "Are you coming back?"

*Would you even miss me?* I shake my head and go to drop the letter into its box, money for a debt I don't owe but am paying anyway.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

### *Victoria*

SATURDAY COMES; I wake up in the now-familiar half dark of James's house. Graduation starts early: doors open at eight a.m. I have the ticket Jonathan left at the café, a dress I ironed, and no clue about what I'll say to Mike. If he'll even want to see me.

I'm still not sure if I should go, but I get ready anyway—I shower, do my hair and my makeup, and slip on my dress. It's possible it's been a while since I last wore it because it's somehow shorter than it used to be.

Even though I'm ready, I can't force myself to actually leave the room. This place is more lived-in than it was a week ago—a library paperback and an empty water glass sit on the nightstand, but the only décor is still the candle Mike got me. I pick it up and roll its frosted glass holder between my palms. It does smell like laundry, like the best version of laundry, not industrial detergent and jock sweat, but clean sheets. I turn it over. Something's stuck to the bottom of it—a price tag? No, a sticker with a note.

V—

*I'm from St. Louis.*

—M

*Why would he...?* But I remember. What I said in the laundry room—that I didn't know where he was from—before I asked him to kiss me. That's what he was thinking of: not me pushing a cart, but the two of us, together, kissing for no one to see but ourselves.

I put the candle down. I need to get moving. Graduation starts soon and I don't want to miss it.





GETTING SETTLED AT COMMENCEMENT TAKES AN HOUR BETWEEN THE DRIVE, parking, and waiting in line at the arena. Security searches my purse while I listen for various whispers from the crowd around me. None come. Maybe the news has blown over.

I find seats high up in one section. From up here, it's hard to make out the graduates. There's no way Mike will be able to see me. I could come, clap for him, and leave, and no one would know the difference. But I take a picture and send it to the group chat with him and Jonathan with a little graduation cap emoji. *Congrats!!! Thanks for the ticket J*

Mike responds almost instantly. *Where are you sitting?*

I send him my section and seat number.

*Are there seats near you?* he asks.

*A few. Place is filling up.*

A few minutes later, three people walk into my section, peering around like they're looking for someone. One, a middle-aged white woman with dark hair, comes up to me. "Are you a friend of Mike's?"

This must be his family. I extend a hand to shake hers and her husband's, and wave to the kid next to them who looks like a younger version of Mike. "I'm Victoria," I say.

"It's so lovely to meet you," his mom says. They take the three empty seats next to mine, and I sit back down, attempting to extend the fabric of my dress further down my thighs.

"It's chilly in here," I say as a cover, though the place feels warm and airless with so many people crammed in it.

His mom laughs. "You should try the Midwest sometime." She lowers her voice and whispers to me conspiratorially. "Don't worry about that dress, sweetie—if I looked like you, I'd wear that too."

Something that makes me blush, slightly. "Um, thank you."

"Mike might have mentioned you a few times," she adds with a wink.

My blush deepens even more, obvious in the dim arena lighting. "Only good things, I hope."

She laughs, again. "He never tells us when he has a girlfriend, so you must really be special."

*Girlfriend.* My heart rate picks up. Mike liked me enough to tell his family about me and didn't tell them we broke up. Whatever else happened, if that's who I need to be for a couple hours, I can do that. "I'm sorry I haven't been around much this week," I say. "I've been taking care of a sick

family member.”

His mom smiles at that. “Mike tells me you’re going to be a nurse.”

“That’s the current plan, anyway.” I do another quick scan of the arena as if daring the world to contradict me, then put on my best smile—my *three-point-nine GPA, does the work on the group project, happy to help in any way I can* smile. “So how’re you liking San Diego?”



COMMENCEMENT STARTS SOON AFTER THAT. THE GRADUATES WALK IN. Various people make various speeches. Then they call graduates by school and department. Name after name gets read; person after person walks across the stage. That’ll be me in a year, walking toward a career I don’t know if I want.

Mike’s family is relatively quiet—his mom occasionally murmurs if there’s an unusual name or if someone decorated their mortarboard elaborately. His brother takes out a handheld game that looks like it’s a few years old and plays something on mute.

Eventually, they get to engineering: the biomechanical engineers, the computer engineers, then finally, the electrical engineers. I zoom my phone camera in as much as possible, even if, from this high up, everyone looks like a dot.

They get through the early letters, and then are onto the Ps. “Oh, Mike’ll be soon,” his mom says. Sure enough, a few people later, there he is, walking across the stage as they announce *Michael Pappalardo*. There’s vague cheering from the rows of graduates below: Mike’s other friends, possibly? But the sound has a slightly jeering edge to it.

I turn to Mike’s mom to offer my congratulations and find her crying, dabbing ineffectually at her eyes with the edge of her sleeve.

“Here.” I dig in my purse and pull out a tissue from the travel pack, then hand her one. I pull out one for myself too and run it under my eyes.

His mom catches me crying and turns, pulling me into a *mom* hug, her arms comfortingly around me. “He’s lucky to have someone like you,” she says.

*I’m sorry I couldn’t have been better for him.* A thought I bury in another few dabs of Kleenex.

Thirty more minutes of ceremony goes by, and then it's over. The packed arena seems to stand up all at once, everyone texting each other congratulations.

*Can you help my parents find...* Mike includes their agreed-upon meeting spot for after the ceremony.

*Sure*, I say.

The seats around us drain of people. We follow the line out of the arena and spend a minute on the sidewalk blinking at each other in the sunlight while graduates swarm around us.

"Mike!" his mom calls.

He comes over, still in his graduation regalia, grinning like he can't stop. Some of my guilt evaporates into the late morning sun. Especially when he hugs his parents and his brother, then turns to me. I wonder if it will be more or less awkward if we hug.

Neither matters when he picks me up, easy, and swings me around. "Thank you," he breathes in my ear. "I'm sorry. I fucked up—I really fucked up. You and Jon both deserve better."

That anger is back, that creeping sense of shame that sat on my shoulders as I fled the clubhouse. That Mike let his pride get in the way of caution and that I let him. "Well," I say, "we want you. So *be* better."

It takes a moment for my words to sink in. "I'll try. I promise." Then he hugs me tighter. For a second, it's just him and me and the world melts away.

I'm not going to cry again. I'm *not*. But I do. Happy tears feel different anyway. When I pull back, Mike is holding out tissues the same way he did with Jonathan that day in the locker room. Not offering them, exactly, but making sure I know they're there. I take one and blot my face with it.

We crowd together, snap a few pictures, then gamely pose while his parents insist on about a million shots. I send a handful to the group chat, and I was worried about sunburn or my eyes looking red, but mostly we both look happy, clustered together, Mike's arm around me.

"We should say hi to Jon." Mike clicks FaceTime, and it rings enough that I wonder if Jonathan's screening our calls.

But no, he picks up. "I'm on the bus."

Mike's face falls. "We don't have to talk." Like he's worried about the team overhearing.

Jonathan shakes his head. "I'm putting in my headphones." Which he does, then frowns until the audio switches. "Hi, congrats, did they give you a

piece of paper that says you're really smart?"

Mike laughs. "They mail diplomas in a few weeks."

"Well, you're really smart even without the paper—you both are."

Something about it makes my heart squeeze in my chest. How easy things are when it's just the three of us. How *good* this all feels. No matter what happened—or will happen—between me and him and Jonathan, Mike has something he worked for, something that no one can take.

Until someone whistles.

My spine goes stiff. A tic jumps in Mike's jaw.

"It's probably not at us," I whisper.

Until whoever it is shouts, "Didn't think they gave degrees in *that*." Loud enough to be audible on FaceTime.

Jonathan winces. "Do you need to go?"

The words are barely out of his mouth when Mike ends the call. "I'm going to tell them to cut that shit out." He balls his hand into a fist, seemingly involuntarily.

"Don't," I spit. What we don't need is another clubhouse incident. We can't punch our way out of this. What I need to be is gone. What I needed to do was not come here in the first place or have pretended that everything was okay when it wasn't.

Mike's mom is looking at us in question, a frown forming at the edge of her mouth.

I take out my phone and pretend to check it for something. "Sorry," I say. "I need to run—family stuff." I turn to his parents. "It was really great meeting you."

Around us, various whispers have started. People start elbowing one another. My face is burning, my eyes hot with unspilled tears. I have no idea what Mike's parents think of me—of us. But I can't be here.

"Congrats again," I say and settle for a little half wave, then take off at a rapid clip to where I parked my car.



THAT FEELING DOESN'T FADE ON MY DRIVE BACK TO JAMES'S. IT DOESN'T fade as I park my car or march up to the house, my heels loud against the driveway. I fling open the front door, praying that no one's around.

Of course, Tyler is in the living room staring at his laptop. He closes it when he sees me. When he *stares* at me. I have no idea what I look like. My hair is windblown, my cheeks flushed hot.

“Where were you?” he asks.

“Commencement.”

“Did you graduate?” he asks, like it wouldn’t be a big deal if I was. Like I wouldn’t be the first in my family to do so. I guess I wouldn’t be if we count James, who is sort of family, or Tyler, who definitely isn’t.

“A friend did,” I say.

“Was it Catcher Mike?”

“As a matter of fact, yes.”

Tyler smiles like I’m admitting something more than what I said. “So how was it?”

“What?”

“Commencement, Vicky, keep up.”

I scowl at him. “Shitty.”

His eyebrows rise like I’ve managed to shock him. He pulls a tissue from the box on the coffee table, then holds it out as if he’s waiting for me to take it. “You have mascara on your face.”

So he knows I’ve been crying. This is Tyler’s version of sympathy. “Don’t,” I begin. A wrinkle of confusion forms between his eyebrows. “Don’t be nice to me right now.” *Don’t pity me. Don’t treat me like I’m going to fall apart, or I just might.*

“I shouldn’t be nice to you,” he says skeptically. “So how do you want me to be?”

*Normal. Mean.* “Be yourself.”

Slowly, he nods, then puts on a sharp Tyler-ish grin like he’s pulling on a mask. “Sorry commencement sucked,” he says, like he’s not sorry in the slightest. “That outfit does look good on you though. Did that dress get shorter?”

So it’s going to be like that. It only takes three steps to cross the living room—one, two, then I station myself in front of him. “Say that again,” I spit.

“But is it an outfit?” he continues. “Or a free preview?”

He knows about the videos. Fuck, why shouldn’t he? Everyone else does. It should hurt—him treating me like all those assholes at graduation. It should hurt, but it doesn’t, not when he’s looking at me like he can’t tell if he took it too far.

“Sorry,” he begins.

I shake my head. Anger is better than despair. It pulses through me, hot and clarifying. My heart’s beating double-time; my skin feels like it’s on too tight. I need something—*anything*—to vent this out of me.

I raise my hand to—I don’t know what. Shove him away. Pull him close.

He catches my wrist, thumb and forefinger around the bones in a hard circle, then brings my hand to his cheek and taps my fingers there like an imitation of a slap. “Only do that if you really mean it.” He gives me another look, a sweep up from my hem.

I yank my arm free. Buttoning the cardigan I’m wearing would be admitting defeat, so I don’t. I’m flushed, hot. Have I never noticed how he looks at me—with open, unambiguous *want*? The same way I’m looking at him—have been looking at him. “Do you think you own me just because you’ve seen me naked?”

“Maybe,” he says, dragging the word out.

“See, Tyler, that’s not how any of this works. I’m not some pair of expensive loafers. I’m the one who decides who sees me and how.”

“Should I get my wallet?”

“Do you ever shut up?” Even if I want him to keep talking. Even if I want him to make me angry. Even if I just want him, period, and to drink in the heady power of him wanting me right back.

Tyler slides another look over me, one I can feel across my skin. “So,” he says, “give me something better to do with my mouth.”

I glance down. He’s in sweats, his cock a heavy outline against the fabric. I want to feel it, to feel something other than this out-of-control madness. *Slut*, something whispers at me. Well, so what? I want to fuck Tyler. Tyler obviously wants to fuck me. Why shouldn’t I? *This is a terrible idea*. That’s a problem for a different Victoria, for responsible Victoria who did everything everyone else wanted and never took anything for herself. If everyone thinks I’m a slut, then I’m going to be the slut valedictorian. The slut MVP.

“Fine,” I snap. “Not here.”

Tyler laughs, loud, mean. He tugs me close until his mouth is right at my ear. “What is it you think I’m offering?” he breathes.

I reach my hand between us, palming the outline of his cock through his sweats, relishing in his gasp.

I smile. “I bet other people have told you it’s big,” I say, and wait for the insult to register.

“For that—” Tyler’s hand is hard at my wrist, his other arm forcing me even closer. “For that, I’m gonna get my ten thousand dollars’ worth.”

“Yeah, well, talk is cheap.” For a second, I think he’s going to kiss me. He doesn’t. Just drags me down the hallway by the wrist.

We bypass my bedroom, Elizabeth’s bedroom, end up in the bathroom at the end of the hall. He locks the door with a click, then spins me around until I’m facing the large vanity mirror above the sink. My dress slips down—the edge of my bra peeks above the neckline. My face is as red as it feels.

“I heard a rumor”—Tyler’s lips brush the back of my neck—“that you like being watched.” He bends me forward until I’m practically on my elbows, then grasps my chin, pointing me at the mirror. “So make sure you’re paying attention.”

I gasp and shove my ass back against him to hear him grunt. At this angle, the hem of my dress barely covers my panties. It gets even shorter when he slides his hand up my thigh.

He doesn’t ask if I’m sure. I’m not sure. *Sure* was for Old Victoria who knew exactly where she was going in life. *Unsure* is for the person bent over in the mirror who doesn’t want to feel anything but good right now. Still, he waits like he’s asking a question.

I push myself back against him. “If you don’t fuck me, I’ll find someone who will.”

He laughs. “Now we’re getting somewhere.” He shoves my underwear down until it’s suspended between my knees, then slides two fingers against my pussy.

“Oh, you’re ready for it,” he says, then smacks me lightly, a little thump that makes me pulse. He pushes down his sweats and fumbles around in one of the bathroom drawers until he pulls out a condom, ripping it open, making quick work of sliding it on.

But he doesn’t press into me. Instead, he just guides his cock until the tip of it rubs against my cunt. It’s too much and not enough, and I send a glare backward.

“Afraid you won’t be enough?” I ask.

That gets me what I want—he pushes into me hard.

Maybe it’s the angle or just how the day has gone, but my elbow hits the counter, sending a wave of pain up my arm. I cry out, biting my lip. Tears prick at my eyes, not from the contact, exactly, but a deeper sort of embarrassment. “I’m good,” I lie.

“Here,” he whispers, low, like he doesn’t want our other selves—the daring ones who provoked each other into this—to catch on. He grabs a washcloth from a basket, then slips it under my arm to pad it against the stone countertop. “Better?”

It is. I nod.

He points my face at the mirror again. “Now don’t look away.” He fucks into me, and I cry again, an exaggerated moan that lengthens into a real one. His hips snap against mine, fingers digging into my thigh, and he’s going fast enough that I don’t have time to think between thrusts.

Anger builds behind my eyes—not at him exactly, but not *not* at him. I thrust back, get Tyler’s laugh. “What’s funny?” I ask.

“I watched your little videos,” he says. “What would your friends think about this?”

“Why—are you jealous?”

Tyler shakes his head. “You have it all wrong—just seems like there were some missed opportunities.”

I crane my head back to look at him. “Do not give me business advice while you’re inside me, Tyler.”

“When else would you listen to me?” He thrusts again. At this angle, he’s not quite where I want him to be.

“That was almost good,” I say.

“Almost?” He tightens his hand on my thigh like he’s making a point.

“Harder,” I gasp, expecting an argument.

He fucks me harder, hard enough to shift me across the surface of the counter. He smacks me once, on the ass, firm enough that it might leave marks. “Whose pussy is this?” he asks.

I roll my eyes in the mirror. “Definitely not yours.”

And by now Tyler’s red-faced, disheveled, like he’s about at his limit. “Not his either,” he pants. “Not either of theirs.”

“You’re right”—I clench around him—“it’s *mine*.”

His hips stutter, like he’s coming from that alone, and he grunts long and low, and pulls out of me, then strips off the condom and finishes himself with a few strokes. Most of his come hits the back of my legs, leaving a wet mess.

“Clean that up,” I say, because I want to see what he does.

I expect to be thrown a washcloth, to be ordered into the shower. To be dismissed.

He drops to his knees behind me, then trails a single warm breath over my



pussy, but moves no further.

“You lost?” I ask.

He spreads me apart with his thumbs. “Watch yourself.”

It takes a second to realize he’s talking about my reflection in the mirror. I arch my back, and widen my legs, and lean more heavily on the counter. My tits are almost out, the tops of them visible in the mirror. My lips are bitten, my hair in disarray. I look *fucked*.

Tyler wasn’t wrong: I do want to watch.

“Use your fingers,” I say. I get the barest tip of one. Not enough, and he knows it. I squeeze my legs shut, forcing him away, then turn around so my back is to the mirror with Tyler kneeling in front of me. “I told you to do something.”

He smirks at me. “I guess I didn’t hear you.”

“You want this pussy?” I point to the space on the bath mat at my feet. “Come get your ten thousand dollars’ worth.”

Tyler inches forward. I slide my hand in his hair. He shivers. I clench a fistful of it and put him right where I want him, on my bare, dripping pussy, moving him exactly where I want. It feels incredible—the position of it, the power of it, the way he looks up at me like he’s grateful.

Too soon, my orgasm rises within me. I wrap my thighs around him until he has no place to go but to drink me in. “Don’t fucking move,” I order, then come like I’m like being shoved over a sudden cliff into a bright burst of nothingness.

After, we slump apart. I flop sideways against the counter.

It’s barely noon. In a few minutes, I’ll need to strip off and go about the rest of my day. My finals are over, but I need to make a few more trips to my on-campus apartment to pack up my stuff. Fuck, I don’t want to do any of that.

I just want to lie here, my cheek against the cool bathroom counter, and let my orgasm tire me out. *How would you explain this to your April self? You fucked Tyler and it was...good.* Maybe better than good. I won’t laugh—I won’t—but a giggle rises from my throat.

That gets a look from Tyler. His mouth is shiny, his neck damp. Slowly, he eases himself off the floor, pulling his sweats up. There’s a wet patch on the front, like he couldn’t even wait that long to fuck me.

I slide off the counter. I need to pee and shower and probably burn this scrap of a dress. I make it about as far as sitting on the closed toilet, watching

as Tyler moves around the vanity.

He splashes his face and neck with water. Opens his mouth as if to say something, but then runs a nail between two of his teeth like he's dislodging a hair.

Then he gives me a grin—a full-on Tyler grin. “Better?” he asks.

What am I supposed to say to that? *Thank you for being mean like I asked. Thank you for treating me like I won't break.* My head feels clear, my body achy but strong. Fuck those people who decided there was something weak about doing this for money. Fuck those people who tried to make me small. “I do feel better. Thank you.”

“Happy to be of service, your majesty.” He does a mocking little bow, but he's smiling.

I can't help it, I'm smiling too.

“Anyway,” he continues, “bathroom's all yours if you want it...Victoria.” And he opens the door and walks up the hallway, whistling like he just got away with something.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

### *Tyler*

JAMES KNOCKS on my bathroom door when I'm in the shower. I duck my head out from the stall. The clock says I was supposed to bring him lunch about fifteen minutes ago. Which is right about when I was walking out of that bathroom, elated.

For the first few steps.

*Your majesty*, I called her, after I fell to my knees.

Followed by a familiar rush: that I did something I shouldn't have, something selfish.

*You're not supposed to look at her like that.* Or touch her like that. Or fuck her like that. Or want her like that.

Especially when she looked at me with those blue eyes. Whoever made her cry is going to fucking pay.

But James is still waiting on me. "I'll go heat something up," I call.

"Really, don't trouble yourself," he calls back. Even through the wooden door, his voice is strained.

"I'm going." I finish my shower and dress quickly: joggers, a T-shirt, socks. An outfit I've been wearing iterations of for weeks. It's fine. It's not like there's anyone here I care about seeing me in particular clothes.

When I open the door to my room, James is leaning against the doorjamb. He's wearing a polo and khakis, the latter of which bears a crease from the laundry service. Sweat dampens his temples.

"What did the physical therapist say about your fatigue levels?" I ask.

He shrugs. "To be expected. Really, you don't have to worry about me."

As if he didn't have open-heart surgery six weeks ago. "You should be resting," I say. "Food'll be done in a second." I wait until he goes back to his bedroom, then head toward the kitchen.

Or try to, but Victoria's at the end of the hallway, blocking my path. Her hair is in a damp bun. She's in lounge pants and a tank top, face bare of makeup, different from her in that dress. She still has that flare to her cheeks like she might order me to my knees. Like she *did*, and I went eagerly. And would again.

"What do you need?" she asks. She's all business now, like she didn't bend over a sink less than an hour ago and tell me my cock was almost adequate. Technically, she works for me, even if I'm paying her with James's money. She isn't the first coworker I've fucked, but she's the only one I wasn't also trying to screw over.

Now she's looking at me as if she's daring me to mention what just happened.

"James's meals are downstairs in the fridge," I say.

She nods. "Anything else?"

"You gonna fetch me something too?"

She raises a single eyebrow at me. "That is why I was offering." Her tone is ice cold, or would be, if not for the slight upturn of her lips.

Lips I wanted to kiss less than an hour ago, a craving I can't ignore.

James appears at the doorway to his bedroom. He's still holding himself up like it takes effort.

Victoria glances at me in question. "Should he be walking around?" she mouths.

I shake my head. It's nice, somehow, conspiring together.

She smiles, wide and helpful, like a flight attendant assisting a difficult passenger. "James, I was just going to grab some lunch. Happy to bring you and Tyler something."

"Thank you," James says. "And thank you for pitching in this summer—I know Tyler truly appreciates it." He smiles and looks to me to corroborate.

I can't help it. I smirk.

Even with her new attitude, some things haven't changed. A blush licks up her cheeks. "Let me grab the food."

James clears his throat. "Tyler, why don't you see if she needs any help?" Asked like he might have when I first moved in with him when I was seven and had the manners of a seven-year-old.

"That's okay," she says, already heading toward the kitchen, "I can get it."

"No," James says firmly, "part of being a family is we all help one

another.”

*Family.* Right. What Victoria and I technically are, through two layers of separation. It’s not like James hasn’t always been clear: I’m supposed to treat Victoria as a sister. *Who I just fucked in the guest bathroom.* I swallow around my guilt and start to follow Victoria when James clears his throat. “Thank you for everything you’ve done, too, Tyler,” he says. “It’s been especially wonderful having Elizabeth around.”

Elizabeth. His actual daughter. If he has a choice, of course it’ll be her. And Victoria, if she makes Elizabeth happy. If he finds out that Victoria and I slept together, he’ll be gentle about it as he asks me to leave. But no, he can’t find out. And it can’t happen again.

“Sure,” I say, “no problem.” Then hustle out to where Victoria is already downstairs.

When I get to the kitchen, she’s in the process of pulling grain bowls out of the fridge. She loosens the top on the container, then puts it into the microwave.

We lean against opposite wings of the counter waiting for it to heat. With anyone else, I’d be kicking them out of the house—politely but firmly—and into a rideshare. With her...I can’t have her, and I don’t want her gone.

“So,” Victoria says, “we should talk about a few things.”

My eyebrows shoot up.

That blush is back, almost to her neck. “I meant about James,” she says.

“Uh-huh.”

“For real.” She crosses her arms against her chest. I focus on the floor in front of her bare feet and not the press of her breasts against the fabric of her shirt or the shine of her hair in the kitchen lighting. “Just so we’re clear,” she says, “the ten thousand dollars is for me taking care of James.”

“Right.”

“Take out your phone and text me that that’s what the money is for.”

“Bossy.” I get the rise of her eyebrows, the irritated tap of her foot. But I take out my phone and type accordingly.

Me: I promise to pay you 10,000 plus room and board for a summer of taking care of James

*James.* Who is not my father. Not even really my stepfather. Just a guy who my mother handed custody to when it turned out he wouldn’t say no. Who has made it clear who his real family is. Tightness forms in my throat—

no, that's weakness. I swallow around it and hope Victoria doesn't notice.

I send the text. Victoria reads it off her phone and nods and sends back a thumbs up. "Now write that I don't have to fuck you to get my money," she says.

The casual way she says *fuck* shouldn't do anything for me. But I move across the kitchen until I'm right at her, until she tilts her chin up at me.

I can't help myself—I lean in, face against her cheek, mouth at her ear. "I promise I'll only fuck you for free."

Her eyes go hot. "Good to know."

For a second, I wonder if we're going again right here. If I'm going to bruise my shins on the hard kitchen tile. If I'll get to kiss her as she screams her way toward pleasure, then have to pack my bags and get out. It's not like James needs me anymore. He'll be fine with her here. *Who wouldn't be?*

I creep my hand down her stomach and dip my fingers into her waistband—if I'm going to make a bad decision, I can at least enjoy it. "Just say the word."

She catches my hand in hers, her fingers a firm circle at my wrist. "We need to talk about..." She drags it out, playfully sultry. "...scheduling."

I step back. I can take a hint. I know when I'm being dismissed—I've done it enough to other people. Good. That makes it easier. She doesn't want me now that she got whatever she's dealing with out of her system.

I pluck the folder of James's documents from where I left it on the kitchen table last night, trying to make sense of the doctors' latest instructions. "Here."

Victoria thumbs through the file. "We should go through these together."

That's not what I want to do with her, but it's better than her not talking to me at all. "Upstairs?"

"Sure." And she grabs the various containers for James's lunch.

We end up in the living room at opposite ends of the couch, her legs extended on the cushions so her feet almost—but don't—touch my sweatpantsed thigh, while she sorts through James's documents and arranges them into piles.

I'm answering work emails. It's hard to give a shit about any of this with James being sick. It's hard to give a shit about any of this, period. But I got a business degree, so I should do business, even if business is mostly posturing at other guys with the same haircut as me for eight to ten hours a day.

*Per my previous email...*, I tap out, then drag my hand down my face in

irritation.

Another email comes in. This one's not about work. *Thank you for submitting your application. We received many qualified applicants, but unfortunately, we're unable to support all programs at this time...*

Another rejection. They've been rolling in for the better part of a month. Grants I helped write for Lizzy's robotics team, all of which have been met with universal *nos*. It's fine. She'll be at a better school. I shouldn't be worried about her former teammates or what they'll do next year. I drag my hand down my face again.

When I look up, Victoria's watching me. "Stuff with James has been going on since March?" she asks.

"Yeah."

"Who else has been helping you out?"

"Some of us are fine on our own." Even if I can't quite force my shoulders to relax.

"There's a lot here." She pages through the pile. "Medical documents, medication information, suggested diet and exercise regimens—that's a lot for anyone."

"If you're not up to it..." *I'm not sure what I'll do.*

She shakes her head. "I like this part of healthcare."

"The paperwork?"

She laughs. "No, I guess I thought being a nurse would mean working at a hospital or a doctor's office or whatever and not getting to take care of people so directly." Her cheeks glow with a faint blush, like admitting she's a good person—a better person than I am—is somehow immodest. "Here." She slides her laptop over to me. On it is what looks like a neat, color-coded schedule in really tiny font.

I squint as if that will make the text bigger. "Hold on." I rummage in the end table drawer for my spare set of glasses, then pull out the case. These aren't my favorite pair—they're thin-framed and the lenses could use a polish. "Didn't have time to put in my contacts."

Victoria looks like she's biting her tongue in amusement.

"What?" I ask.

"You look..." She waves an explanatory hand. "Kind of nerdy."

"Because of the glasses?"

She shakes her head. "Glasses. Your hair is kind of—" She shakes her own hair to demonstrate, ruffling it; it falls in soft waves around her face.

“You apparently do *robotics*.”

*You have a type*, I don’t say. Because obviously I’m not her type—and I hope Mike isn’t anymore. But I can’t help needling her, just a little. “Seems like there’s a lot of that going around.”

Twin splotches of color form on her cheeks. “You know, for a guy you only met for five minutes, you sure don’t seem to like Mike that much.”

I smile. “What makes you think I haven’t met him before?”

She blinks once, then several times in rapid succession like she’s sorting through various possibilities. “He never mentioned it.”

*Maybe he doesn’t remember*. But no, he tried to break my bones with that handshake. I don’t bother keeping the smile off my face. “I’m sure it just slipped his mind.”

“Is that how you know Mike—robotics?”

Yes. No. “We met at a tournament.”

She waits for me to volunteer more information. When I don’t, she says, “You don’t seem like you’d get along anyway.”

He and I got along for six entire hours, until I fucked it up. I don’t say that either. “Why not?”

“He doesn’t exactly like guys like you.”

“Rich ones?” I ask.

For some reason, that makes her laugh again. “No, he’s fine with prep school guys. Or at least some of them anyway. More he doesn’t get along with, uh...” She trails off like she doesn’t want to say *assholes*. “Certain personality types.”

What she thinks of me as. Why shouldn’t she? I haven’t exactly given her a reason not to. Mostly because I am one. I have a bunch of emails on my phone that say as much, even if they’re in coded business speak.

With my glasses on, I can make out the details of the color-coded schedule she devised. James’s medications and appointments and exercise and nutrition and rest are all accounted for. Put this way, everything looks simple. *Easy*. Like something I could have done weeks ago if only I knew how. I read the schedule a few times, looking for anything missing—trying to think of anything James mentioned offhandedly that turned out to be important.

Victoria’s still watching me read through it, like she cares about my approval. Like she’s waiting for me to find fault in it or to make some remark like how she’s good at spreadsheets *and* spreading her legs. “Thanks,” I say



finally. “This is really good.”

“You sure?” A wrinkle develops between her eyebrows.

I get the absurd urge to kiss her there. I can’t. I want to. I can’t because I want to. “Better than what I would have done.”

She laughs. “That’s what you’re paying me for.”

She doesn’t say *that and nothing else*, but I hear it anyway.

Various dishes are spread across the coffee table. So I start to gather plates and glasses—the housekeeper comes three times a week, but there are four people living here now—to bring them to the kitchen.

“I can get those,” Victoria says.

“You don’t have to.”

“I know. So let me help.” And she smiles when I hand her half an armful of dirty plates like it’s some kind of gift.

*Kiss me*, I don’t say. “Thanks for getting those.”

“Sure,” she says, “not a big deal.”

*It is*. “After you.” And I watch the neat swish of her hair as we each carry a manageable number of dishes down to the kitchen.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

### *Victoria*

SUNDAY IS move-out day from my apartment. I get there early and try to be as quiet as possible when I'm opening the door, even if my keys rattle. Most of the place is bare—Kaleigh left, I'm mostly gone, Xiomara's stuff is sitting in boxes.

She comes out of her room, still in her pajamas, her dark brown hair in disarray. "Good, you're alive."

Guilt washes over me. "Sorry," I say, "there's been some stuff happening."

She nods, then yawns, stretching her arms up. "People are assholes."

I laugh. "They really are." I do another scan of the room. "I was gonna get most of my stuff outta here so they can do the inspection." And I can finally kiss this year goodbye.

"Sure." She goes over to the kitchen counter where the coffee maker is still sitting. "You want some?"

I lift my thick plastic cup, which is holding a mango smoothie I put together this morning. "I'm good."

Xiomara shrugs, then turns on the coffee maker. "You want that vase?" She points to the other thing sitting on the kitchen counter—the glass vase where I put flowers what felt like ages ago, even if it was only a couple weeks.

"It's Kaleigh's," I say.

"Kaleigh said that anything left is community property. I think she might be transferring."

"Fuck."

"Yeah, her boyfriend is a tremendous tool bag. I tried to get her to talk to a lawyer about a revenge porn case, but I think she wanted it to be over." The

coffee maker beeps, and Xiomara pours herself a cup, dosing it with the dregs of an oat milk container, which she tosses into the trash. “You could think about that.”

I shake my head. “I put those videos out there. And there’s a chance that it would draw more attention to...uh, people involved.” *Jonathan*, I don’t say, but Xiomara smiles knowingly.

“There’s always the more direct approach,” she says.

“Mike did punch someone in the face.”

Xiomara howls at that. “Sounds like whoever it is had it coming.” She picks up the vase. “You should take this. Before all this stuff went down, it seemed like you were having a good time.”

I accept the vase. It’s cheap, the glass a little uneven, heavy-bottomed in a way that will keep it from tipping. It’s just a vase. But the flowers that went in it... Well, they made me happy at the time. “Thanks, yeah, I think I will.”



I PACK UP A CARLOAD AND FERRY IT TO MY MOM’S HOUSE. HER CAR IS IN THE driveway. I don’t really feel up to seeing her, but I guess I will. I carry boxes into the house along with a question: Was she ever going to tell me that she had me while she was in high school?

She’s at the kitchen table when I come in. The place looks cleaner. The counters have been wiped down—streaks of cleaner are still lingering on them—and there are vacuum marks on the floor. She’s dressed, showered, and with makeup on.

“Do you have a date?” I blurt.

“Good morning to you too,” she says. “This place needed a scrub.”

“I could have helped.”

She shrugs like it isn’t a big deal. “Elizabeth might be coming to visit in the next few days.” *Visit*. As if she didn’t live here as of a month ago. I swallow my reaction—my mom is trying, and I shouldn’t be a jerk about it.

“I was going to drop these off in our room,” I say.

“I’ll help you unload the car.”

We empty my car in a few trips. My mom holds open the front door and helps me set out the boxes I’m carrying on the carpeted floor of Elizabeth’s and my old room. “Thanks,” I say when we’re done. “I’m going back to

campus for the last few things.”

“You want company?”

I blink, trying to rein in my surprise. “Um.” I do a quick calculation about if I’ll need my passenger seat for space and decide I don’t care. “Sure.”

We drive to campus. My mom sits in my passenger seat, her large round sunglasses reflecting the morning light. She looks younger here, drumming her hands over her thighs to the music playing through my car stereo. “Who is this?” she asks.

I check the playlist. “This band out of LA. I follow them on TikTok.”

“You always did have an ear for it,” she says.

“Helps that you always had the radio on when I was growing up.”

“It was cheap childcare. You’d spin around or ask me about the instruments or the way the chorus sounded.” The song changes over, and she nods along to its opening notes. “I’m sorry I never sent you to music camp. I didn’t know they existed until someone at your middle school mentioned one.” Her voice goes slightly thin at the end—like she’s apologizing for more than that.

“It’s all right,” I say.

She shrugs. “It’s not.” But lets the subject go.

We arrive on campus to a flurry of activity: other people hauling their move-out stuff in enormous, wheeled bins with university branding on the sides. I grab one, and we wait for the elevator, then take a slow ride up.

“My apartment is probably a mess,” I say.

“Victoria, I know what moving looks like.”

Because that’s something we did every so often before Elizabeth was born—I remember her singing the *clean up* song as I helped toss things in various boxes. I hum it now. She sings along like I’m five and it’s the two of us against the world.

Then the elevator doors slide open. And there’s Cooper with his own cart. “Equipment Girl! I didn’t know we were neighbors.”

*Fuck.*

“Cooper,” I say, through gritted teeth, “this is my mother.”

“Your mom? You look like sisters.” Cooper smiles, oily. “Nice to meet you. Big fan of your daughter’s work.”

“I used to work at the baseball clubhouse,” I clarify. My throat is sawdust; my hands clench involuntarily around the lip of the bin. “We need to get by.” I push the cart forward enough that it taps against Cooper’s.

He jumps back like I rammed him. *I wish*. Eventually, he moves just enough out of the way that we can eke by. How did I not know we were neighbors? Have I just been lucky enough all these times to avoid him in the hallway?

“Have you lived here all year?” I ask, trying for politeness and ending up somewhere else.

“Nope, I’m moving in for the summer term.”

“Too bad.” I jostle my cart again. “I’m just moving out.”

“Yeah, too bad we missed each other. I hear the walls are pretty thin.”

*Go to hell*. “How’s the jaw?” I ask. “I know that kind of injury can smart.”

“Oh, that’s not what I would be worrying about.” He gives us another one of those smiles, the kind that seems to leave a slime trail.

I want to punch him again, or run over him with my cart, but I settle for saying, “We have to finish packing up.”

He turns to my mom. “It was great to meet you. Your daughter really made an impact on our team this year.”

And we go into my apartment to the sound of his echoing laughter.

The door is barely shut when my mom looks at me. I brace myself for questions, for her demanding an explanation. *See, to pay off your tax debts, I started a channel where I had sex with two men on camera and word about it got out.*

“What a fucking douchebag,” she says.

I startle out a laugh. “Yeah, he’s a douchebag.”

“I don’t know what that was about. Whatever it is, you don’t have to tell me.”

“Thanks.” The word sits heavy in my chest. I turn to the task at hand. In the hour or so I’ve been gone, Xiomara has mostly cleared out. The apartment has that strewn-about look unlived-in spaces get, those gaps that should be filled in with the details of someone’s life.

I try not to think about it as we pack. *Here’s the couch that Savannah and I ate sushi on. Here’s the table that held those blue and gray flowers. Here’s the bed where I had sex for the first time. A “loss” I sold to paying customers that never felt like one.*

After half an hour, all my stuff is packed, and we put one final load in the cart. Before we head out, I pause. “Let me get the RA.”

The inspection is quick—we’re apparently the cleanest apartment on the

floor. I hand my mom the smoothie I've only managed to drink half of in this entire process, then push the cart to the elevator.

Months of moving the clubhouse laundry cart makes me a pro at turning corners as we navigate our way outside, down the accessibility ramp, and out toward where my car is parked...right next to where Cooper is standing on the asphalt.

And he's opening his mouth to say something when my mom interrupts him. "Is that yours?" She points to a bright red open-top Jeep.

He glances behind himself. "Yeah?"

"Okay." She pries off the lid of my now-warm smoothie, then, in one swift motion, chucks it at his car. Smoothie splatters all over the paint and the windshield. Some even makes it over into the leather front seats. "Stay the hell away from my daughter."

Cooper gives a cry of complaint.

She cuts him off. "Victoria is a nice girl —"

He sneers at that. "Yeah, for a —"

Until she claps, sharp enough her palms must sting. "But I am not that nice. You come near her again, and we're going to have a problem. Are we clear?"

For a second, he looks like he's going to argue—instead, he turns and hollers for a nearby campus security guard.

A middle-aged Latino man with a neatly trimmed mustache strolls over, inspecting the scene with Cooper's car. He squints for a minute, then turns to my mother. "Anne, is that you?"

She immediately puts on a smile. "Hector! Oh my goodness, it's been a minute. I didn't know you were working here now. How are you?"

"Great—the pay is lousy, but you know how it is."

My mom nods at that. "I imagine some of the students can be difficult," she says, all sympathy. She curls a hand around my arm. "This is my daughter, Victoria. She's a rising senior here."

Hector smiles and seems to ignore Cooper, who is making gagging noises and typing on his phone.

"Remind me," Hector says, "is this the daughter who's going to be a nurse or the one who builds robots?"

Something in my chest, a thing I didn't even know was shaking, suddenly calms. *She's proud of us.*

"Victoria is going to be a nurse," my mom says, "or whatever she wants

to be.”

Cooper snorts. “If you’re done, this...person just threw a smoothie at my car. And threatened me.”

My mom straightens up to her full height. “I believe this young man and I are having a misunderstanding. We were pushing our cart and my hand must have slipped. You know”—she waggles her fingers—“so embarrassing.”

Cooper’s face blotches with anger. “You’re going to pay to have this cleaned.”

“Sure.” My mom takes out her phone. “I mean, if you can’t afford it, I’m happy to help out.”

He goes even pinker. “I’ll be fine.”

She turns to the Jeep, face drawn in concern. “You should probably get that to the car wash then. I think the acid could degrade the paint.”

And he sputters as he yanks a towel out of the trunk of his car, swiping through the mess on his windshield, then toweling off his seat.

Once he drives off, my mom turns to Hector. “Sorry about that. If he puts in a complaint against you, let me know.”

Hector waves a hand. “These entitled kids are something else.” He turns to me. “You getting your degree?”

I nod. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Keep at it.” A crash comes from across the parking lot—a student who’s managed to overturn their cart trying to push it down the stairs. “Anne,” Hector says, “it was great to run into you as always. Don’t be a stranger.” Then he goes off to resolve the next crisis.

My mom and I push the cart to my car, neither of us saying anything as we unload it.

“I should tell you—” I begin but stop when my mom shushes me.

“Wait until we’re in the car,” she says.

Finally, we’re done. I close the lid of the trunk, then get into the driver’s seat as my mom loads herself into the passenger side. She cranes her neck to inspect what’s in the back. “Will any of this stuff melt if it’s in the car for a little while?”

“Nope.”

“Great, let’s go get tacos.”

I drive to a beachside café. We get enough to feed us twice over and sit at the picnic tables in the parking lot, watching the ocean.

“So,” she says, “you don’t have to tell me what any of that was about, but

I want to make sure you're okay."

"I'm fine." I eat a bite of taco, not caring that I dribble bits of it on the table. "I'm better than fine. I thought you were going to slap Cooper."

She shakes her head. "Slapping is so unambiguous. A guy like that would sue."

I laugh loud. "Good to know." Even though she told me I didn't have to say anything, I find that I want to. I attempt the simplest version of everything from the past few months. "So what happened was that I dated a couple of players on the baseball team."

Her eyes go wide. "Was that guy one of them?"

"Absolutely not." My face is going red—I can feel it. "I was kinda dating them both at the same time. They, uh, knew about each other. And were cool with it." *And were dating each other. And we were all in love. And maybe still are.*

Of all possible reactions, she gives me a slight, knowing shrug. "Sounds like it was none of his business."

"There's more," I say. "I needed some money and one of the guys I was dating did too. We put some stuff—um, some adult content—online. It made money—a lot of money. But people found out. And it's been a mess ever since."

And I'm not ashamed of anything I've done, but I can't quite bring myself to look her in the eye either. The tabletop is safe. I lose myself staring at the fingerprint-like swirls of the imitation wood grain.

My mom puts down her taco, wipes her hands on a napkin, then cups my cheek with her palm. "One thing I know about this world," she says, "is that people will try to make you ashamed of your decisions. They tried that with me when I had you." And it's as close to her acknowledging everything as I'm likely to get. Still, tears start to form in the corners of my eyes.

"Here's the thing," she continues, "so long as you're not doing things that hurt other people, I could never be ashamed of you. And fuck that guy for even trying to make me." She looks at me for a long minute, my face reflected in the lenses of her sunglasses. "Why did you need that money?" she asks quietly. "Was it because of me?"

My voice gets caught in my throat, but I nod. "At first. But I didn't mind the work. No, I'm lying—I like it. It made me feel like people saw me, even if it was one version of me."

"Oh, Victoria." She wraps her arms around me in a hug. "I'm sorry I



made you feel like you had to do that. I know I need to be better at things—at everything. Stuff builds up and I don't know how to cope with it. But that's no excuse."

She eases back but doesn't let me go. "After you left on Tuesday, I sat there for a long while. I always told myself I did the best I could. You never went hungry, even if it was because they fed you at school. You always had a roof over your head. When you have a kid that young, you're still learning how to be an adult yourself.

"But it wasn't fair for me to ask you to be one as well, not from as young as you were. And now, I want Elizabeth to want to live with me, at least some of the time. But I know that's something I need to earn."

We pull away from each other. Distantly, people are on the beach, swimming and running and laughing, the ocean pushing sand back and forth along the shore. "James is Elizabeth's father, right?" I ask.

My mom nods. "He wanted to pay child support. But he was married when I got pregnant with her, and I didn't want to break up his marriage. Not when he had a new stepson who adored him."

*Tyler.* "So you didn't let James pay for anything?"

"He sent money—for Elizabeth and for you. I didn't want it. Or I did—I needed it but didn't want it to look like I was using him for his money. James can be a difficult man to love. He wants everyone to be happy and doesn't want to deal with the messy parts."

I think of him, and the scar up his chest, and his permanent smile. "Yeah. He had heart surgery. I'm helping Tyler take care of him this summer."

My mother scrubs a hand over her face. "Of course he did. He's going to work himself into an early grave." Said with an exasperated affection. "I'm glad he has you and Tyler to look after him."

"Tyler's paying me," I say.

"Good. You should get paid for that. And you should keep that money and do whatever you want with it. I'm going to give you back what you put toward taxes—I don't have it all today, but I will." She grabs a napkin, then pulls a pen from her purse. *I, Anne, owe my daughter, Victoria, \$5000. And I will pay her back before she graduates college a year from now.* She signs it and dates it and slides it and the pen toward me. "You sign too."

I sign. The ink feathers on the napkin and feathers more when a few tears hit it. "Thank you."

“I won’t suddenly be perfect. But I can be better. You deserve better.”

I hug her again, harder this time, and lean my face against her the way I did when I was little. “You really don’t mind my, uh, other job?” I ask.

“I meant what I said earlier.” She shifts until we’re sitting shoulder to shoulder, both facing the ocean. “You should be whatever you want to be—you should get to go wherever life takes you.”

So we sit and watch the water, and for once, the only place I want to be is here.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

### *Jonathan*

EVEN BEFORE THE final out registers in the opposing catcher's glove, it's obvious we've lost. Our team has been down since the seventh inning, with no sign of a comeback. So we're about to lose our second game in two days. Super-Regionals are best-of-three series. We clearly aren't the best of three.

Finally, the umpires declare the game over. The dugout is...I scan down our bench. Some guys are still lingering at the railing. Some are sitting with towels on their heads.

I turn—*Mike?* But he's not here.

All we have is a long bus ride back.



THREE HOURS LATER, WE TROOP OFF THE BUS. "HEY, MAYBE NEXT YEAR," Coach says, then gives various guys a paternal punch in the arm.

A few guys yawn. A few more take out their keys and try to remember where they left their cars in the parking lot. One—our first baseman—grumbles. "If we had the whole team, we might have won."

An *if* that's been beating in my head since the last out. We lost. Our season is over. *And you didn't even get to see Mike walk at graduation.*

I get my duffle bag from the pile. A few guys slap me with hugs and wish me the best of luck with the draft. But the *best of luck* would have been Cooper keeping his mouth shut and Mike being in the tournament and us getting to play together one last time.

I drive back to our apartment building and climb the stairs. It's late; no

light shines from under Mike's door.

I shouldn't use my key and go in there in case Mike's already asleep. But I do. I open the door quietly. If he's already in bed, I might—*crawl in there with him*—just go home.

Instead, Mike's on the couch with a blanket pulled over him, the light of his living room lamp dimmed low. He rouses when the door shuts behind me. "How'd it go?" he asks.

"Not great. We lost."

He nods. His hair has come loose from its ponytail. He runs a hand through it, taming it back. He looks sleepy—cozy under his blanket with pillow creases still on his face. It's been almost a week since we've seen each other between finals and his family visiting and baseball and graduation. I want to kiss him. I shouldn't kiss him. I put my duffle down beside the door.

He shifts over when I sit beside him on the couch, closer than we would have sat weeks ago when we were friends.

We're not supposed to be anything more than that. No one can see us here. It's just buddies if I tip my head onto his shoulder.

"Jon," he says softly.

"I'll be all right."

"That means you're not all right now." He brings his hand up to the back of my neck, rubbing through the short hairs there.

"I'm nervous about the draft," I say. *Because you're here now and you won't be soon, and we just lost and it sucks.*

Mike nods. His hair brushes my cheek. "I'm nervous too. But you're gonna be amazing."

"I don't feel so amazing," I say.

"Yeah, what'd you do—only pitched six shutout innings and set the team up to win?"

"We didn't win." I know I'm pouting about it, but it's still fresh. "Wait, you watched?"

Mike laughs, his scrape of a laugh that vibrates my arm. "Of course I watched. I'm gonna be your biggest fan. The second you get a jersey with your name on it, I'm gonna want one—Victoria will too."

Another memory: that night at the beach. How everything felt beautiful and easy—like the three of us would be together forever.

Mike knocks his shoulder into mine like he can tell I'm drifting away. "Victoria pretended to be my girlfriend at commencement."

“Yeah—how was that?”

Mike pulls a face. “Good, until people started being assholes. I had to lie to my parents and say it was all an inside joke.”

I turn to him. “People were saying that stuff about you and Victoria in front of your family?”

He nods.

My hands are forming into involuntary fists. “Which people, exactly?”

I expect Mike to shush me or laugh or knock my shoulder with his again and tell me it’s not a big deal. Not the swift slide of his hand at the back of my neck, the pressure of his lips on mine in a long, thorough kiss.

We pull back, just far enough that I want to kiss him again. “We’re not supposed to”—I press my lips to his—“I thought we broke up.”

He smiles and runs his fingers across the base of my neck again. “Can we break up tomorrow?” he asks.

*Tomorrow.* A few hours and a lifetime away. “Yeah, we can break up tomorrow.”

So he threads his fingers in mine, then tows me toward his bedroom. When we get there, he doesn’t let go of my hand. “You want to shower? It might make you feel better.”

“I don’t want to stop touching you.” I tighten my hand in his. “That’s what’d make me feel better.”

Mike smiles. “Who said we had to stop?”

I kiss him. Our mouths slide together, slick. Heat pools in my belly, melting away some of the jagged feeling of our season being over. On instinct, I reach for Victoria. But of course, she’s not here.

Mike catches me. “I miss her too.” Then he tugs me toward the bathroom.

His shower is identical to the one I have next door—a glass-sided stall with not a lot of room to turn around in. We bump into each other and laugh. “How do you fit into this normally?” Mike asks.

“I kind of don’t.”

“Then why’d you get this place?”

“You were here,” I say. “I can put up with a small shower.” And I don’t add *but not being without you*, but he must hear it anyway.

He closes the distance between us until his chest brushes against mine, his cock dragging at my hip. His wet hair falls into his face. He looks good like this—hair dark from water, skin browned from a summer tan, warmth in his eyes.

“I wanted to kiss you,” I say.

A faintly amused line digs its way between Mike’s eyebrows. “But you don’t now?”

“No, I mean, before. Maybe for years. Since we met.”

He laughs. “We met in a clubhouse bathroom.”

“We’re in a bathroom now,” I say, then kiss him, slow. His lips drag over mine. His hands grip my waist. We fit together the way Victoria and I fit together, the way the two of them fit together, like pieces in search of one another.

I don’t know how much time goes by—the water stays hot. Mike’s hair sticks to his cheeks. When he pulls back, I make a noise of objection.

“Here”—he picks up his bottle of body wash—“before you get pruny.”

I scrub myself all over with a washcloth. “This work?” I ask, teasing.

I get the slow cut of Mike’s grin. “Depends on what you want it to work for,” he says.

And *fuck*, whatever he’s offering, I want that. “Let me rinse off.” I angle myself as best I can until all the soap has sluiced off me. Some of the heaviness I’ve felt since the game goes with it.

When I turn back, Mike is looking at me from under his eyelashes, which are even darker with water. “You gonna let me take care of you?” His voice is low; he runs a hand up my side. Suddenly it’s very foolish to be in a place where we have to be upright at all.

“Let’s go,” I breathe, and he laughs.

We make it back to his bedroom—I dry myself in record time and he does the same. I don’t bother with clothes. Clothes are optional. *Fuck* clothes, and when I say that out loud, Mike laughs.

“You look so good, baby,” he says, and my heart flips at that. “Everyone’s gonna want to watch you from now on.”

“But you get to.”

That makes him kiss me. We drop onto his bed. It’s too small with us both sprawled out. It’s too big without Victoria here. I want a hundred things all at once, and to not think and to make him kiss me the way he already is, with the hard roll of his hips against mine.

He reaches between us, grasping my cock. “Fill my mouth up with this.”

My heart—hell, my entire body—stutters. I shift back until I’m sitting propped against a few pillows. Mike slowly descends. He kisses my neck, my chest, pausing at a nipple.

“There’s so much of you,” he says, like he wants to taste every part. He keeps kissing me, at places I didn’t even know I want to be kissed: my wrist, the rim of my belly button, the crease of my thigh.

A groan starts somewhere around my ankles and works its way upward. My cock is dripping, a line of pre-come that he gathers in the loose circle of his fist, spreading it with a squeeze of his fingers. “God,” he says, “if I had a cock like yours, I’d be unbearable about it.”

I laugh, startled. “I hope I’m not.”

“We could have spent the past three years doing this.” He captures the head between his lips and slides down. Looks up at me with teasing eyes as his knuckles rub my hole, firmer, and it’s always a surprise how good that feels.

I want more. I want more, and I want to have spent the past three years doing this and I want to not leave, and I want to bring him—them both—with me.

Soon, I’m close. I put a cautionary hand on his shoulder. “Hey, I’m gonna come.”

He pulls off, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth, grinning. “Don’t be selfish, baby, give me all of you.”

So I tighten my grip in his hair and try.



THE NEXT MORNING WHEN I WAKE UP, MIKE’S HALFWAY OUT OF BED. HE smiles when he sees me. “You hungry?” he asks.

My stomach rumbles, answering for me.

“I’ll bring you something.” He doesn’t kiss me, but maybe that’s morning breath.

By the time Mike makes it back with food, I’m awake enough to have put my clothes back on, to have rinsed my mouth out with a capful of his mouthwash.

Still, when he hands me a mug of coffee and a plate with breakfast sandwich on it, there’s something different in the set of his shoulders. “When’s your lease up?” he asks.

Not the question I was anticipating. “I have to be out midweek.”

“After that you’ll be doing draft stuff, right?”

I nod—even if *draft stuff* mostly consists of refreshing various baseball rumor pages, despite my parents and advisor and Mike saying I shouldn't. "There's prep work, I guess."

Mike sits on the bed next to me and grabs one of the two sandwiches he brought, wrapped up in a paper towel. We're not touching—he's sitting the same distance from me that he might have *before*. If we hadn't woken up naked in his bed together, we might just be buddies.

"I'm gonna end my lease," he says, "and move back to St. Louis."

*So I am getting broken up with today.* I take a bite of sandwich and try to swallow it. It's the kosher sausage kind that's covered in a film of fake orange cheese. Mike doesn't even like these sandwiches, but he keeps them in his freezer for me. I refuse to be upset about a sandwich.

I don't want him to go. But it wouldn't be fair to wind myself around him, to insist that he stays here for me. "I'll miss you," I say.

He puts down his sandwich. "We're all still gonna be friends."

"Right, friends," I agree. Friends who woke up together, friends who're in love with the same girl. Friends who need to be half a country apart to stay away from each other. *Friends*. My least favorite word.

We eat in silence for a few minutes before I remember my duffle bag. I get up and I grab something from it, then come back to Mike's room, handing him an envelope but not sitting on the bed.

"What's this?" Mike asks.

"Open it."

He does, thumb skimming the envelope flap. He reads the front, then turns to show it to me like I didn't pick it out. The text reads, *The optimist says: "The glass is half full." The pessimist says: "The glass is half empty." The engineer says: "The glass is twice as big as it needs to be."*

"Where do you even find these jokes?" he asks, laughing. He reads the interior of the card. I watch him and try not to shift around nervously. Maybe I should have just written *Congrats* instead of what I actually wrote: how much this year meant to me. How much getting to be with him and Victoria kept me going.

After a second, Mike looks up. His emotions don't usually play out over his face, but this time they do. There's a softness in his expression that makes me want to step between his knees and kiss him.

I stay put.

"I should have gotten you something," he says. "For the season or the



draft.”

*Stay here.* “You didn’t have to.”

“I want to know everything that’s happening. All the draft stuff. All the stuff that sucks or is great. You’ll tell me, right?”

I nod. I will. Talking to Mike has never been the problem. “I should probably start packing.”

“Yeah,” Mike says, “I guess I should too.”



WHEN I’M BACK AT MY APARTMENT, I GRAB A STACK OF BOXES I GOT LAST week and spend a while setting them up. Keeping everything clean makes packing easier, but it’s still time-intensive work. I load books into boxes, throw my clothes into suitcases. Sweep pictures off my dresser into a plastic bin, including the one with Mike at the College World Series and the selfie we all took at the beach, the three of us laughing together.

It’s strange to think that I won’t be back here next year. I’m not sure where I’ll be: Pittsburgh, Washington, maybe St. Louis, even if it’s likely I’ll spend a few years in the minor leagues. I won’t know what kinds of clothes to pack or what restaurants to order from. If any of the catchers on my new team have hair I want to run my fingers through or beds I want to sleep in. If whatever city I end up in will have women who are funny and kind and smart with eyes like the ocean, who make me want to put the whole world at their feet.

I take out my phone.

Me: I got broken up with today

It kind of sucks

The recipient types and erases and types and erases before responding.

Mike: yeah I know just how you feel

## CHAPTER FORTY

*Mike*

THE FIRST TIME I drove from St. Louis to San Diego, I wondered if I would make it. If my car could handle the descent from the mountains. If I'd have enough money for gas. If the same grief I felt at my uncle dying would follow me to San Diego.

If the ocean would be as beautiful as people said it was. (Yes.)

If the engineering department would give me the kind of education I wanted. (Also yes.)

If I'd be lonely in San Diego the way I sometimes was in St. Louis. (No.)

Because Jonathan smiled up at me from a bathroom floor, then went out and pitched like that was what he was put on earth to do.

Because Victoria pinned that flier up and didn't throw me out on my ear when I showed up at that café the next morning.

This time, I start out early to beat the traffic. It's about seven hours to Sedona—that's all I'm doing today, especially with a full trunk and a full mind. Victoria sent me a playlist as a parting gift. It's several hours long, arranged purposefully like it's telling a story. I don't know what's going to happen when I reach St. Louis. Maybe I'll send them both a *thank you* then figure out what to do with the rest of my life. For now, I just drive.



THREE DAYS LATER, I PULL UP TO MY PARENTS' HOUSE. THEY'RE NOT HOME—the driveway is empty—and I spend a while unloading my car. I shower off the road funk, then head around the corner to the restaurant my mom manages.

The place looks like it always has: an old-school spaghetti joint with pictures of ballplayers and other celebrities all over the walls. First among them, Yogi Berra, who was born here about a century ago—the reason I wanted to be a catcher at all.

My mom spots me. “Mike!” Soon enough, I’m being dragged into the kitchen. “This is my son, he’s an engineer!” she’s saying breathlessly to the kitchen staff. Most of them nod in my direction. A few who I know come and clap me on the shoulder in congratulations.

“Right now, I think I’m the pot washer,” I say. Because that used to be my task as soon as I was big enough to heft cooking vessels and trays in and out of the sink.

“Most important person in the kitchen,” my mom clucks. “But you just got in. You don’t have to do that.”

“Does it need to get done?” That’s not a real question—pot washing always needs to get done. I secure my hair back, grab an apron from a stack of them, then push my sleeves up. “I’m good for an hour or two,” I say, as if it’s a compromise.

She smiles. “It’s like you never left.”

Something about that stings like soap in a cut. So I grab the first pan and get to it.



FOR THE NEXT FIVE DAYS I WASH POTS, HANG OUT WITH MY FAMILY AND friends around St. Louis, and trade texts with Jonathan and Victoria in our group chat.

Jonathan sends a picture of a ballfield I don’t recognize, one nice enough to be a pro ballpark.

Me: where’s that

Jonathan: my high school

Victoria sends a picture of her view as she’s drinking her morning coffee, overlooking the dry expanse of the city.

Jonathan: where’s that

Victoria: New job has some perks.

I could send a picture—of my old bedroom? Of the pot-wash station where I’ve spent my evenings? Of the various job searches I’m doing?

On my sixth day back in St. Louis, I go into the restaurant. My mom shakes her head at me like I’ve done something wrong.

“Here.” She digs out a folded set of papers.

I unfold them. Three tickets to a baseball game.

“You’re taking Nick and Adam,” she says, “and then you’re going to go somewhere that’s not this restaurant.” She gives me a searching look. “Did something happen with Victoria?”

I shrug vaguely. “We broke up. It was easier than dealing with the distance, I guess.” *Between here and California, between the big leagues and everywhere else.*

My mom tsks—for a second, I worry she’s going to imply something disparaging about Victoria. “Love doesn’t care about distance,” she says.

“Yeah.”

My mom tilts her chin up at me. “And my stubborn-ass son who decided he wanted to be a baseball player *and* an engineer used to not let himself get intimidated by things.” She gestures to the tickets. “Go shake off whatever this is. Maybe things’ll look different at the ballpark.”



AN HOUR LATER, WE LOAD UP THE CAR—ADAM, WHO’S FOURTEEN, SITS IN the front. He moves his seat all the way back as Nick howls an objection. “I need the leg room,” Adam insists.

“You don’t!” Nick yells.

“You really don’t,” I say.

Adam moves his seat back even more. “I’m almost as tall as you.”

“Right”—I clip my seatbelt in and check my mirrors and ignore Adam and Nick, who’re now flipping each other off—“so you really don’t need the leg room.”

Adam mutters under his breath and moves his seat fractionally forward. “Fine. Just drive.”

“Nick, seatbelt,” I call.

Nick sticks his thumb under his shoulder strap to prove he’s wearing it, then goes back to flipping Adam off.

That's as close to a victory as I'm going to get. We drive downtown. After we park, we fall into the crowd, carried along in the red sea of jerseys into the stadium, then up to the bleachers.

"Here"—I dig out two twenties and hand them to Adam—"get whatever."

Adam smiles.

"*Not beer.*"

On the field, they go through the usual stuff: the anthem, the colors, the ceremonial pitch. Stuff I used to fidget at, impatient for the game to begin, but now feels closer to a ritual. *I wonder if the players think this is boring.* Even if I spent most of the anthems in college standing close enough to Jonathan that the sleeves of our jerseys brushed. He never thought it was boring. I snap a picture of the ballpark and send it to the group chat.

Jonathan: where's that?

Me: I got roped into babysitting

Victoria: You mean someone other than pitchers?

Nick and Adam return, holding hot dogs—two of which Nick hands to me—and yelling about something. "You gonna sit for the game?" I ask.

"Maybe." Adam rolls his eyes and takes out his phone, then texts while eating.

Nick sits next to me. He eats his hot dog in approximately three bites, then wipes his hand on his shirt. "Who do you think is going first in the draft?" he says.

*Maybe Jonathan.* "Not sure."

"Uh-huh." Nick puts his feet up on the seat in front of him. "Has there ever been someone who didn't have to go to the minor leagues—like they got drafted and went right to the majors?"

"A few players have. It doesn't happen that much anymore."

"Uh-huh," Nick says. "Are there..." He continues like that, a stream of questions that carries us into the first inning. St. Louis is playing Cincinnati. Neither team is particularly good but they're about equally bad, and sometimes that makes for a better game.

Two outs into the third inning, Nick points to the scoreboard, where the display briefly shows that the last pitch thrown was a curveball. "How do they know what type of pitch that was?"

"There's a radar system. It also uses cameras."

"Uh-huh." Nick kicks his feet against the seat. "Who builds those?"

“Engineers, probably.

“You can be a baseball *engineer*?” he asks, incredulous, and I would laugh, except I’m going through the same realization.

“Yeah, I guess you can.” And at the inning break, I pull my phone from my pocket and begin to search.

## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

### *Jonathan*

MY FIRST THOUGHT on draft day is, *I'm not gonna puke.*

My second thought is, *I might.*

A few waves of nausea pass. This feels like my birthday and cliff diving and a parade all at once. It's early, but it's two hours later in St. Louis. Mike said to FaceTime him "whenever"—and this is probably my most *whenever* day to date. I hit the button. It rings. He's been working late, so maybe he's still asleep.

He answers a second later. "It's, like, six in the morning."

"It's eight there."

He rolls over and switches on a lamp. The bed he's in looks different from the one he's FaceTimed me from. *Maybe he's sleeping with someone else.* Jealousy I don't have any right to have, but feel a pang of anyway.

"You okay?" he asks.

"Draft day." I try to sum everything up. "Is it possible I swallowed one of those bombs that only sprays confetti?"

"One of those what?"

"You know," I say, "like in cartoons."

"When you get drafted today," he says, "everyone else is going to be thinking about your pitching. I'm going to be thinking about this conversation."

"So you'll be thinking about me?" I tease.

"Yes." An unequivocal yes.

We've only been apart for a few weeks, but his hair has gotten longer, slipping from its ponytail. I like the shape of his nose, the soft line of his mouth. No, not *like*. How long did I love him and not notice?

As excited as I am for today, a part of me asks *what if*. What if I was

brave when it mattered? What if he and Victoria and I were all here together? No matter what I choose, it's always like I'm missing out on something.

"Thanks," I say, belatedly. "Sorry for waking you up."

"Well, I'm up now. Let me make some coffee and you can tell me about what you're doing today."

He gets up, leaving the phone pointed at the blank white of the ceiling. Distantly, I can hear a coffee maker gurgle, like it's in the same room as him.

He gets back, holding a cardboard cup that's steaming slightly. He raises it to the phone as if in a toast. "To draft day." He takes a sip, wincing at the taste, like he didn't get to dictate how his coffee was made.

"Why is your room different?" I blurt.

Mike doesn't really blush, but he goes a color adjacent to blushing. "I'm at a hotel."

I wait for an explanation—maybe he's visiting a friend. Maybe he really did sleep with someone and couldn't bring them back to his parents' house. Maybe...I don't know. The fact that he's not answering is strange.

"So what's on the agenda?" he asks, as if he's changing the subject deliberately.

"We're having a party—I think my parents invited all my cousins. The League made sure we had access to a Zoom setup so they can put us on TV when—if—I get drafted."

"That sounds like a pretty full day," he says.

"Is it weird that I want it happen and kind of wish it was over and kind of wish I was just going back to school for another year?"

Mike smiles. "It's not weird."

"This feels like before a game," I say, and he raises an eyebrow at that. "You know, I'm falling apart about everything."

"You're not falling apart."

"Because you're talking me through it."

"Feel what you feel." Mike shifts the phone and does that motion with his hand, that up-down, up-down that reminds me to stay steady.

I do it back. My stomach settles. "So that's my day. What're you up to?"

This time, Mike's shrug is a little forced. "Oh, you know, nothing too exciting."





THE PARTY DOESN'T START UNTIL THE AFTERNOON. I GET UP. I GO RUNNING. I do some light throwing in my backyard with a high school friend. I don't read various rumors spinning around social media about who's going to go first, second, or third overall. Or I don't read them that much.

The caterers arrive. I spend a while moving around tables and carrying things for my parents.

"Here"—my dad hands me a bag of ice—"take this outside."

"I just brought it in."

He gives me a look. Right, this is them keeping me busy. I carry the ice outside.

Various people start to arrive. A few drop cards on the drinks table like this is a birthday or my bar mitzvah. Most people just clap me on the arm and ask me where I hope I'll end up.

*Somewhere close to Mike and Victoria.* "Really, as long as I get drafted, I'm good with it."

And I'm about to go settle into the living room to count the minutes until it's four p.m.—the draft starts at seven, East Coast time—when my mom says, "I think people from your college team are here."

My heart hits my ribs. *Could it be...?*

But when I get to the front hall, there's Coach with his wife.

"Hey, Coach." I hug him. I'm happy to see him. Really. "Thank you for making the trip."

"Congratulations, son. You've earned today—hope you're enjoying it."

"I haven't been drafted yet."

"You will be." He shifts what he's holding—a gift bag with the neck of a bottle of wine sticking out of it. "Anyone else from the team here?"

"Yeah, I put a thing in the group chat. A couple guys are around."

He doesn't ask me if one of those guys is Mike and I don't answer. I can't be angry at Coach for kicking Mike off the team. But I don't have to be happy about it either.

Voices rise from the other room. My mom comes into the hallway, walking with a sense of urgency. "Jonathan, the League wants to confirm our Zoom setup."

"I'll be there in a sec," I say.

She gives me a *get moving* look.

I wait in the hallway, like Mike and Victoria will arrive any second. But of course they aren't going to be here. Today's the day they can least be here

—school gossip has mostly died down, but who knows what'll happen if they're on TV with me. Even if today's the day I want them here the most.

So I throw myself into the living room where the crowd is gathering, and smile for the League's cameras while they do a tech check, and try not to let my disappointment show through.



THE DRAFT BEGINS RIGHT AT FOUR. I SIT ON THE COUCH AND STOP MYSELF from jiggling my legs. On TV, the League commissioner comes out on a stage to a rain of boos. He gives a brief speech about...something. My brain is doing a *shush-woosh* thing. My heart might actually be audible to the surrounding room. *What if I don't get drafted?* But no, for the last three weeks, the consensus is that I'll go somewhere in the top five. I feel like I'm standing at the edge of a cliff about to jump. *Or freefall.*

I can't say any of that. My mom is next to me, a wad of Kleenex in her fist. My dad is on my other side, sitting nervously. Across the room, my sister is chatting with some of my cousins. I'm surrounded by my friends and family and teammates and loved ones. *Except.*

I discreetly pull out my phone and fire off a text to our group chat. *Wish me luck.* Then put it in airplane mode in case I'm inundated. Teams have the house number and my advisor's number if they need to get in touch.

The commissioner turns it over to Pittsburgh, the first team. They come to the podium and announce their selection. *Not me.*

The feed cuts to someone else's living room: to a guy I've played against before, who's no less deserving, who's hugging his family and talking about how this is a dream come true.

Then the second team—Washington—makes their selection. *Not me.*

The pattern repeats itself. Pick three: Oakland. Pick four: Detroit.

Pick five: St. Louis. Guess that's where I'm going. I take a breath in. They have a handful of really good prospects. I could do worse than playing for a smaller-market team. *And you'll be near...* My heart accelerates against my chest. Then they call a name. And it isn't mine.

A murmur goes through the room, a sense of failure unfurling. I shift around. My mom clutches my hand, squeezing hard.

I'm not entitled to anything. Not a draft spot. Not a signing bonus. Not to

have the people I'm in love with here right now. But I want those things, and I've worked for them, and the disappointment burns in the back of my throat.

The next team up comes to the podium. *The Anaheim Halos select Santa Monica native Jonathan Halperin as the sixth overall pick.*

The room erupts around me. Distantly on TV, they're saying stuff about me: how we won the College World Series last year. How I pitched a complete game. I don't hear the rest. I'm crying—joy, relief, something else—into my parents' shoulders. I wipe my face. Sixth overall. To a team that does not suck—who had a strange off-year last year but is currently leading their division. Who are right down the street. Well, an hour away because of traffic, but still.

*Fuck. I fucking did it. We fucking did it.*

“Jonathan”—my father claps me on the shoulder—“the League is calling.”

We accept the Zoom invite. I try to say words. “I'm just grateful for everyone who's gotten me here. It's been kind of a group project, you know?” And the people around me laugh. I thank my parents, my coaches, my various advisors. Then swallow. Now or never. “And my team and everyone in the clubhouse in San Diego. There's no way I could have done this without either of them—” I pause like it's a slip. “I mean, without any of them.”

It's more than I should say and far less than I want to. Wherever they are, I hope Mike and Victoria heard me.

Soon enough, the League disconnects the call and the draft moves onto the next person. I'm buzzing like I'm drunk on champagne. People hug me and congratulate me and ask me if I'm relieved it's Anaheim.

“So fucking relieved,” I say, and my mom elbows me and my dad laughs.

I take my phone off airplane mode. Texts pour in. My Instagram is unusable. Victoria filled the group chat with a dozen gifs of balloons. I send more back.

Victoria: Congrats!!!!!!!!!!!! How's it feel?

Me: incredible

Really incredible

No response from Mike. Maybe he's working. Maybe it just slipped his mind—but no, he knows it's draft day. Maybe he's mad that I called him out like that, if only tangentially. I should apologize, except I'm not sorry, and

I'm contemplating how to send a non-apology to him when a text comes in.

Mike: I'm here

Me: what?

Mike: Jon, come outside

I walk slowly toward my front door, then accelerate until I'm outside on the front steps. Someone's standing on the path between the steps and the curb. Not someone. *Mike*. Wearing an actual collared shirt and holding something.

"Hey," he says, like he didn't just show up unexpectedly.

So I hug him and pick him up a little and get the vibration of his laughter. "You came," I say.

"Yeah, I was in the area. I didn't want to tell you in case I chickened out."

I ease back, but don't entirely let go. "In the area?"

"There's this pitching lab that I'm visiting. I got in a few days ago."

*A few days*. Right, the hotel this morning and how cagey he was being about it. "A pitching lab? Do they work with position players too?"

He shakes his head.

"You're not thinking of becoming a pitcher?" I ask, though it's not a totally out-there idea. Catchers have strong throwing arms. Mike has strong arms. *Because you just felt them*.

"Nah, only one pitcher between us." He hugs me again. "Sixth overall!"

"Sixth!" I repeat, laughing, because the world feels lighter than it did twenty minutes ago.

He tightens his hug. "I'm so fucking proud of you, bro."

It's the kind of hug that's unmistakable in how long it goes on. Maybe someone's taking pictures. It's not like the neighbors don't know who I am, though a lot of them are still inside eating catering and talking about when I accidentally threw baseballs through their windows growing up.

Finally, we release one another. Mike's shirt collar has gotten ruffled. His hair is longer than I've ever seen it, brushing his chin. It turns out that being in my parents' front yard does nothing to prevent me from wanting him. I settle for leaning in and breathing, "I want to kiss you," into his ear.

I get a flash of heat in his eyes. "Not here," he whispers, like he knows I might.

I step back. Being a foot away from him makes it easier to think.

Mike's still holding whatever it is—a paper bag like you get at a gift

shop. He hands it to me. Inside, there's a plastic board about the size of a postcard, studded with LEDs, with a knob on one side.

I dial it. The LEDs light, forming a miniature baseball scoreboard. "Did you make this?" I ask.

Mike shrugs like it isn't a big deal. "TSA had a fit with bringing it in my carry-on." He clicks the switch and the board begins to cycle through various innings with scores displayed. "I programmed in your wins."

Sure enough, the dates displayed on one part of the board change, rotating through various games. My complete game shutout this year, our College World Series wins, a few others. "This must have taken forever."

Another shrug. "I had a lot of free time at home." He smiles. "I can always add more games."

"When I saw you in that hotel room, I wondered if..." I begin. "I mean, if you slept with other people, it'd be fine. We were broken up. Are broken up."

He glances around, then rises slightly to brush his lips by my cheek. "I'm here now."

"You are." Something occurs to me. "Where is it—the lab you were visiting, I mean?"

"It's in Irvine," he says.

"Irvine? That's, like, an hour away."

"Yeah"—Mike swallows visibly—"I know."

"And you're what, rehabbing your knee there?"

"Not exactly." He takes a long breath in. "I wouldn't be playing. This would be for a job. They partner with a university to do pitching analysis. I'd be developing sensors, maybe doing some programming and testing things out with players. A lot of the athletes they work with have disabilities or are recovering from injuries." He smiles as he's talking, his excitement slipping through.

"That sounds like the coolest shit in the world," I say.

His smile goes even brighter. "Yeah, after I emailed them, they invited me out here to see if it's a good fit or whatever. It's been a pretty great couple of days—they haven't made an official offer, but I think they will."

"So you're going to be here?" I say, slowly. "And I'm going to be here?"

He smiles. "You're gonna be in the minors and away a lot."

"Eventually I won't." Now that I'm imagining it, I can't stop. Us getting an apartment, this time together—with Victoria, if she wants to. What the

next few years might look like, the next decade. My mind races with possibilities, all good. I can't wait.

"Hey," I ask, "you wanna come inside?"

Mike frowns a little. "People are probably taking pictures in there."

"What do you mean?"

"People could make the connection between us, and between us and Victoria. I don't want today to be about anyone but you."

I want to argue. That he's the reason I'm being drafted. Those wins on that little scoreboard belong to him too—and I already told the whole world how much I love them both, even if they're the only ones who could hear it. "If you want, my room's upstairs." Another possibility occurs to me. "Or we could..."

Mike raises his eyebrows.

"We could get out of here."

Mike smiles knowingly. "We could."

"You have some place in mind?"

"Well," he says, "I did bring Victoria a present. And it's not that long a drive to San Diego."



WHEN I GET BACK IN THE HOUSE, MY DAD IS IN THE FRONT HALL. "WAS THAT Mike?" he asks.

I can't help smiling. "Yeah."

"He's not coming in?"

I scramble for an excuse. "Crowds aren't his thing right now."

My dad cranes his neck toward where the party is still going. "It is pretty crowded in here."

"Listen, would it be okay if I took off for the night? I think we wanted to go down to San Diego to see some, uh, people from my team. My old team." A distinction that's still fresh, like a ballcap with an unbent brim. "But if you all need help..."

"Go enjoy yourself," my dad says. "Also, if you don't get out of here, people are never going to leave, and your mother could use a break."

I laugh, and hug him, and take the stairs two at a time to my room, then fill a duffel with clothes, my toothbrush, and a few other toiletries. Including

a bottle I bought a few days ago.

After I'm packed, my mom stops me on the way out. "Your father says you're running off somewhere."

I laugh. "San Diego. I should be back tomorrow."

"Does that have to do with how Mike's sitting out in his car?" she asks.

A question that sounds like there's something else contained in it, but I'm not sure what. I try for the simplest version. "Stuff got kind of complicated between us right at the end of the season."

She gives me a searching look. Whatever she finds makes her stand up on her tiptoes. I lean down, because I've been a foot taller than her since eighth grade, and accept her hand on my cheek. "But he came to see you?"

I nod. The miniature scoreboard is sitting on the hallway table. I grab it and show it off, toggling through various games. "He made this for me. It's the games we won together."

"That's a very thoughtful present," she says.

I try to keep my shrug casual and mostly can't. "That's kind of how he is."

"You'll be back by tomorrow from your trip?"

"You're making this sound more organized than it is."

"It's your draft day," she says. "You should be with the people who're important to you."

"I have been. But, yeah, it'll be good to see him."

"You know"—she tilts her head like she's deciding what to say—"if there's anything you ever want to tell us, we'd be happy to listen."

Something she's said to me before, usually when a teacher called home about my being in trouble. Now she says it with a different tone.

"Um, okay."

She nods. "Be sure to tell people goodbye before you leave."

A half hour later, I'm folding myself into the passenger seat of Mike's rental car when I get a call. The car is a sedan, newer than his Honda, with that rental car smell. I move the seat back as far as it will go. My head brushes the roof. Positioned this way, it takes a second to pull my phone from my pocket. *Anaheim GM* displays on screen—the number my advisor sent me a few minutes ago.

So this is really real. I answer my phone. Over it, a man with a deep voice on what sounds like speaker phone. "Hello, is this Jonathan Halperin?"

For whatever reason, my heart starts going again. "Yes, sir, it is."

“Son, it’s good to talk with you. We’re excited to have you as part of the Anaheim baseball organization.”

“I’m excited to be part of it.” *Excited*. An understatement for how I feel like I’ve been shoved off a ledge, only to float in midair.

“Good,” he says. “There are details to work out. We’ll send over our offer in a day or so. Take some time to look it over.”

*Offer*. A signing bonus. My draft slot says it’ll be more than five million dollars, a number that feels unimaginable, especially as I’m sitting stuffed in a compact sedan. “Of course, sir.”

Something in my tone makes him chuckle. “Glad to hear it.” There’s a noise like he’s moving around his office. “I have a few other calls to make. But Halperin, if there’s anything you need to communicate with us in the coming days—anything at all—you have my number.”

“Yes, of course,” I say to the GM. “Thank you again.”

And we say our goodbyes.

After, we sit for a second. My knees are still almost jammed against the dashboard. “Yeah,” I say, “I don’t know if this is gonna work.”

Mike shoots me a shocked look.

“The car.” I shift around as if emphasizing how little space there is. “Mike, I meant the car.”

He pauses for a second, then laughs. “You want to take yours?”

We unload from his car and are about to load into mine when he says, “I can drive it if you’re tired.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty beat.” I climb into the passenger side and he gets in the drivers’ seat, fussing with the mirrors and the seat and the steering.

“If you want to sleep,” he says, “go ahead.”

I shake my head. “The adrenaline has worn off, I guess. But...” *I want to talk to you*. Something I would have swallowed around or played off as a joke months ago. “You did fly all this way to see me.”

“I came to see a pitching lab,” he protests.

“You came to see a pitching lab in the same city as where I live *on my draft day*.”

He smiles like I’ve caught him, like he’s glad to be caught. “Were your parents pissed about you taking off?”

“Nah, I think they’re happy for it to be over—this is the *wait* part of the hurry-up-and-wait.”

Mike’s smile widens. “So nothing to do now other than enjoy it.”



“Yeah, I mean, I’m sure I should be doing stuff or reading up on the team or...” But I trail off when Mike shakes his head.

“*Enjoy it,*” he says, in that tone that always tugs something low in my belly.

I laugh. “All right, Papa. Drive the car.”



THE MILES FLY BY, EVEN IN THE CRAWL OF LA TRAFFIC. MIKE GETS US TO the 5 and we begin the drive south. “Tell me about the pitching lab,” I say.

Mike laughs. “Not until you tell me about the draft.”

We talk for a while, an easy back and forth. It’s still early evening, the light fading, not enough to cast Mike in shadow, but enough to make his eyes shine. *I’m really going to miss this,* I think, almost as a reflex, and smile when I realize I don’t have to.

Eventually, we near San Diego. “Where does Victoria live?” I ask.

“I think she’s staying with some family. Can you text her?”

I drop the question in the group chat.

Me: what’s your address?

Victoria: Why?

Me: maybe I want to send you something

No answer appears. “She might not want us showing up,” I say to Mike.

“Yeah.” Said like the thought has already occurred to him. “If she doesn’t, I figure we’ll need to grab a hotel room anyway.” He’s been steering one-handed on the straight shot of the highway, his other arm on the center console. Now, he edges his fingers toward mine.

Every second we get closer to San Diego is one second closer to when we can be together, me and him and...maybe not just us.

A text from Victoria comes through a few minutes later, this one with an address.

“Turns out she likes us after all,” I say. “You want me to put this in your GPS?” I point to Mike’s phone, which is mounted on the dash.

“Yeah, go ahead.”

So I put it into the app he’s using. “Huh, that’s weird.”

Mike turns to me. “What’s weird?”

“The address was already in your GPS under past searches.”

“Huh,” Mike says, slowly, “that is weird.”

Soon enough, we’re in the city. Whatever neighborhood I expect for us to go to, it’s not one up in the hills with a clear view of the ocean. “I thought Victoria was from East San Diego.”

“Yeah”—Mike’s hands tighten on the wheel—“I thought so too.”

“Is something else bothering you?”

Mike shakes his head. “I’ll be fine.” Which means he’s not fine now.

The GPS guides us toward a house up in the hills that looks like a set of randomly stacked blocks. There’s a gate around it, along with an intercom box demanding a code.

Mike rolls down the driver’s side window, then presses the intercom button.

“We could just call her,” I say just as someone answers the intercom in a buzz of static.

“We’re here to see Victoria,” Mike says.

There’s a pause from whoever’s on the other side of the intercom, then a vaguely snotty, “She’s busy right now.”

“Tell her it’s Mike and Jonathan,” I call.

The person on the intercom laughs. “Hmmm...”

Mike’s gripping the wheel like he’s trying to strangle it. “Tyler, just let us in.”

“Thought you’d never ask,” Tyler says.

A second later, the gate buzzes open. Mike pulls the car up the driveway. We stop by the door, Mike putting the car in park but not getting out.

“So,” I ask, “who’s Tyler?”

“Victoria’s stepbrother. Or I guess former stepbrother.”

Which doesn’t exactly clarify things. “How do you know him?”

Mike pinches the bridge of his nose. “He was at the clubhouse one day.”

“That’s all?” I ask. “Because it kind of sounded like you knew him.”

“We met before then. I just didn’t know who he was. We didn’t exactly part on good terms.”

Which could mean anything from an argument to a bar fight. “We could go somewhere else,” I offer.

“Victoria’s inside.” Mike opens the door, then slides out. “I want to see her.”

A voice comes from the front door, a lean blond guy who must be Tyler.

“What makes you so sure she wants to see you?”

## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

### *Victoria*

I'M SLICING up strawberries in the kitchen, listening to music with Tyler milling around, when the text comes in.

Jonathan: what's your address?

My hand nearly slips on the knife. My heart rate kicks up—a strange beat in what has been weeks of calm. Because James is doing better than he was: with his diet plan settled and his physical therapy helping, most of what I do is check up on him and remind him to take his meds and do his PT exercises.

Tyler slides up next to me but stays a breath's distance away. Our only contact is the brush of his sleeved arm against my bare one. I hide my phone in my pocket.

But Tyler's not looking at the screen. No, he's hovering his fingers over the pile of newly sliced strawberries like he wants to snatch a few. Hovering... but not taking any. Gamely, I tap his fingers. "These are for James," I say.

"I paid for them," Tyler grouches, and I tap him again.

It's nothing. We touch all the time—when we're hanging out on the couch or when Tyler's teaching Elizabeth and Lin something about robotics, and he wants me to hold a part in place. The only thing it's taught me is that Tyler looks good in glasses, with a smear of grease across his cheek.

It's normal for two people living together to occasionally brush hands—normal, except the slide of his finger against mine just happens to send heat low in my belly. *It was a one-time thing. It is officially and totally out of my system.*

Now Jonathan's asking where I live—and that heat is accompanied by guilt.

Me: Why?

Jonathan: maybe I want to send you something

That's even worse: Jonathan being Jonathan and I've been unfaithful. Kind of. We're broken up.

I slide to a different part of the counter, then send Savannah a frantic text.

Me: Is it cheating if I might have slept with someone while I was on a break with other people?

Savannah: do you have a third boyfriend????

I glance to where Tyler is eating another strawberry. A single drip of strawberry juice falls on his pristine white T-shirt. He looks down at it, frowns, then snags another strawberry from the box, shooting me a grin like I might chastise him. Like he wants me to. I swallow.

Me: He is definitely not my boyfriend.

Savannah: aw, you're in your slut era. If you told the other ones about it, would they think it was cheating?

Me: I probably shouldn't tell them.

Savannah: well there's your answer

Hypothetically do you think they'd all get along?

Considering Mike and Tyler's glare-off the last time they saw each other—and how Tyler's mentioned Mike no fewer than five times since that day in the bathroom—probably not.

Me: Hypothetically, they'd try to fight each other.

Savannah: that can be fun too

Me: ha ha

Savannah: who's joking

Jonathan's text is still sitting on my screen. I could do a *sorry, didn't see that*, but I don't want to lie. Not on his draft day. I send the address. Maybe Jonathan's doing post-draft gifts for people. I wouldn't say no to more flowers. *Or lingerie.*

I finish chopping strawberries and load them into a container for James, then prep the rest of his food. By this time of night, he's pretty tired—the fatigue part of his recovery seems to be the worst—and he's been eating in

either his bedroom or the living room to save himself from having to climb the stairs after dinner.

“I can get half of those,” Tyler says, then heads upstairs with a stack of covered glass Tupperware while I gather the rest of James’s cutlery, napkin, and drink.

By the time I get upstairs, Tyler’s in the living room, phone tucked in his neck. Over it, I can hear the tinny crackle that comes from the gate intercom when it routes to his phone. “She’s busy right now,” Tyler says to whoever’s calling, followed by a *hmmm* that’s Tyler for *fuck off*.

The person he’s talking to’s volume increases.

“Thought you’d never ask,” Tyler says with that characteristic Tyler sneer—the one he doesn’t use much when he’s sock-footed around the house. Whoever it is, he must not like them very much. *He used to use that tone with you*. So he must not like them...or the opposite.

I don’t wait to find out. I deliver James the stuff for his meal and sit in the armchair next to his bed while he eats. After he’s had a chance to try everything—“This is all delicious, Victoria,” he says, which is what he says every night—we begin our daily catalog of his symptoms.

“How’re you feeling?” I ask.

“Fine, fine.” He smiles around a bite of tasteless quinoa.

I wait. If I give him long enough, sometimes “fine” turns into the truth. Not tonight, apparently. “How about your fatigue?” A pause. So not fine. How not fine? “You know,” I press gently, “they’re going to ask about it at your other appointments. You don’t want me to look like I don’t know, right?”

That does the trick. “I’m a little tired,” he says.

*So you’re exhausted*. Not surprising, since they just leveled up his walking program. I move to the next question. “How’s the—” But I don’t get to finish when I hear a commotion from the other room. “Excuse me for a second.”

When I get into the living room, there’s Tyler standing in the hallway to the front door. Tyler and...

“Victoria,” Tyler says, “I was just telling them you were indisposed.” He manages to make *indisposed* sound filthy.

Behind him, Mike’s standing in the doorway, clearly fuming. Beyond that, Jonathan isn’t as angry, but he’s not smiling. So, Jonathan’s version of furious.

Unbidden, Savannah's *that can be fun too* pops in my head. The reality feels distinctly messier.

They came to see me. On Jonathan's draft day. *They came to see me.* My heart does a *thing*. There's love, and there's a willingness to spend an hour driving south on the 5. I knew I'd see them again at some point—even if it was only watching Jonathan playing baseball on TV. I could point at the screen and say that we were *friends* once, way back when.

Nothing like having them here, in James's house. With Tyler seething at them like they're infringing on his territory.

"Tyler, let them in." I put as much command as I can into my voice.

Tyler smirks, then steps aside, admitting Mike and Jonathan to the living room.

We all look at each other for a minute. It's been about a month since I've seen Jonathan and several weeks since Mike's graduation. They both look out of place in James's house amid the modernist furniture: Mike, too practical, and Jonathan, just too large.

"Hey," Jonathan says finally, "so I got drafted today."

That breaks some—but not all—of the tension. I go over and hug him, up on the balls of my feet. He surrounds me for a minute; then, with only a brief hesitation, picks me right up.

"Congratulations," I whisper.

Jonathan hugs me tighter. It has the effect of brushing his lips past my cheek. Did I somehow forget this—how just being around him puts a glow in my chest?

Finally, he sets me down. When my feet are back on the hardwood, Tyler is looking at me, his eyes narrowed, as if something just clicked. "So nice of them to come all the way to see you," he says.

Mike snorts. Right, he and Tyler know each other. Somehow. They're certainly glaring daggers at each other as if they do.

"Okay." This time, I don't have to try to put authority in my voice. "I need to finish up with something in the other room. Tyler, go get a few bottles of champagne."

Tyler raises an eyebrow. "What's the champagne for?"

"We're celebrating." I tap my foot as if impatient.

"Who else is invited?" Tyler asks, because he's obviously trying to be a dick about it.

"Who said you were?" Mike shoots back.

“It’s my champagne,” Tyler says. “And my house.”

“Technically”—a voice comes from the doorway—“it’s my champagne and my house.” *James*. He’s walking slowly, like the fatigue has attached weights to his limbs. He straightens when he sees Mike and Jonathan.

*Please sit down*. I don’t want to humiliate him, so I resort to manners. “Mike, Jonathan, this is James, Tyler’s father.” Not the truth but close enough to it. “James, these are two members of the baseball team I used to work for. Jonathan”—I point to him—“was drafted today.”

“Congratulations,” James says. “We’ll have to break out the good stuff.” *We*, as if he’s going to celebrate along with us.

My apprehension must show.

James smiles. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to crash your party.” He stands a little straighter. “In fact, I’m leaving you all the house for the night.”

A second later, the intercom system buzzes. Someone else at the gate. Tyler goes over and jabs a thumb at the speaker button. “Who is it?”

“Tyler, please let me in,” comes the answer. Everything in my body tenses.

Tyler smiles, slow, knowing. “Anne,” he says, “how lovely to hear from you.”

A minute later, I go outside to greet my mother as she rolls up in her car. It looks freshly washed. Her hair is up, her makeup done, but when she gets out, she’s dressed casually.

She hugs me in greeting and presses a kiss to my cheek. “I’m here to get James. Can I come inside?”

I manage a gulp. “Some of my friends from the baseball team are here.”

“Friends or *friends*?”

“*Mom*,” I hiss, and she laughs. “Jonathan got drafted into the big leagues—we’re going to celebrate.”

“That sounds like a good time.” She eyes the front entrance. Distantly, voices are coming from the living room through the propped-open door. “I think James is having a hard time being cooped up in here. I promise to return him in one piece. Tomorrow.”

So, a date. And none of my business. “That sounds like a good time,” I say.

She laughs. “Do I get to meet your friends?”

I should be embarrassed. *Mom, here are the guys I banged on camera for money*, I imagine myself saying. But I straighten my shoulders. “Sure.”



We walk in. James is sitting on the couch, with Jonathan in one of the armchairs. Mike and Tyler are gone, and I expect to hear shouting or possibly crashes indicating a fight. Jonathan gets up when we come in, and my mom's eyes widen slightly at his size.

He offers a hand in greeting. "Jonathan Halperin," he says, with the faint but present assumption that she should know who he is. "It's lovely to meet you, ma'am."

My mom smiles at that—I can practically hear her thinking *What a nice boy*. "Anne." She waits a beat before adding, "I'm Victoria's mother."

Now Jonathan's eyes widen. He looks between us, as if searching for the resemblance. *Please don't say that we look like sisters*. "Wow," he says, "I should've seen that. Whoops." Said with an earnestness I missed—how he so easily makes other people feel at ease.

I breathe a little easier.

Of course that's when Mike and Tyler return, both carrying bottles. Tyler's hair is ruffled. Mike's expression is the same one he used to get midgame, clench-jawed frustration that threatens to tip over into anger. *Did Tyler tell him that we...?*

"Hey!" Jonathan takes a bottle from Mike. "This is Victoria's mom!" Not exactly the most subtle way to tell them to cut this shit out, but Mike's expression immediately brightens.

He sets the other bottle on the table—on a coaster, even if the table is glass, so all it would get is wet—then offers my mom a hand. "Michael Pappalardo. It's nice to meet you."

"Victoria"—my mom turns to me—"your friends are very polite."

Mike huffs a laugh at that, one of his low ones I can almost feel. I missed that sound, and Jonathan's eagerness to please, and even Tyler's sneer. I'm just not sure how any of it fits together. If we really are going to hang out and I'll just not mention that I've slept with all of them.

*Just be cool, Victoria*. Right. Cool, what I absolutely am. My hands go clammy. I'm silently wishing that my mom and James would clear out of here when Elizabeth walks in with Lin trailing behind her. Almost trailing. They're holding hands. A number of things click into place.

I smile, then glance at Tyler, who is also smiling. *He knew*. Of course he knew. The rainbow paint and rug. The threat to clock anyone who hurt Elizabeth with a shovel.

Lin and Elizabeth drop hands when they see us, like they've just been

caught. I start to reassure them, but my mom gets there first. She motions to Lin and smiles. “Who’s this?”

Elizabeth squares her shoulders. “This is Lin”—she takes an edifying breath—“my girlfriend.” She turns to Lin. “Lin, this is my mom.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs....” Lin trails off, like she’s not sure if she should say *Brown* or *Navarro*.

“Anne is fine,” my mom says. “And it’s nice to meet you too.”

Elizabeth deflates, less like she was disappointed and more like she’s relieved. “I was wondering if I could go over to Lin’s house tonight.” Elizabeth scans the room like she’s not sure which adult she’s addressing. “And if I could get a ride.”

*Please don’t object, I pray. Please all just go have your evening... somewhere other than here.*

Fortunately, James laughs. “Anne, you think we could manage a slight detour?”

“You know,” my mom says, “I think we could. There’s something we want to talk to Elizabeth about anyway.”

“Thanks!” Elizabeth says, and she tugs Lin toward the entrance.

A small overnight bag is sitting next to James’s place on the couch. My mom snags it, then offers her arm as if she wants an escort. James threads his elbow through hers, and they walk toward the front door, my mom slowing her steps to match his pace.

Leaving me with Jonathan. And Mike. And Tyler. To figure out where we all go from here.

Various bottles of champagne are still sitting on the coffee table. Champagne won’t fix this uncertainty, but it can’t hurt either. We’re supposed to be celebrating. Celebrating will be easier if I can’t see the door to the bathroom where Tyler and I fucked.

So I snag a bottle. “The back deck is this way.” I take off, not bothering to see if they’re following.

Sure enough, footsteps echo behind me, accompanied by a feeling up the back of my neck like I’m being watched. Or not watched. *Looked at.* I put some sway in my hips and get a noise like the three of them clearing their throats all at once.

This is gonna be some party.

Outside, San Diego is laid out before us, houses glittering in the hills. A breeze stirs the leaves in neighboring trees. The back deck is U-shaped,

surrounded on each side by wings of the house—it turns out privacy is one of those things rich people can afford.

I place my champagne bottle on a table, then light a few of the lamps. My phone goes into the little outdoor speaker, set to a playlist that matches the weather. *Romantic*. I shush that part of my brain.

After I'm done setting up, I seize my bottle of champagne. "We have some celebrating to do." My voice trips a little on *celebrating* as if it could mean something else.

They each grab their own bottles, stripping off the foil, then the caps. Even Tyler does it, albeit with an eye roll.

Jonathan pauses with his hand on the cork. "What are we toasting to?"

"You, obviously." Mike raises his bottle in salute.

Jonathan shakes his head. "It shouldn't be just me." He scans us all, then points a bottle at Mike. "To your new job."

"New job?" I ask Mike.

"Not officially. But I'm probably going to work at a pitching lab in Irvine."

Which would mean that he's not close...but not that far. "You didn't know Jonathan was going to end up out here until today."

Mike smiles. "Jon's not the only person out here I want to see. If you'll let me." A statement with a question embedded in it. *After all this, do I want to see them?* Old Victoria might rush to reassure him. New me says to let him twist, if only for a minute.

The silence goes tense, enough that Jonathan points his bottle at Tyler. "What do you have going on this summer?" He asks it like he's attempting to be polite. To *include* Tyler even if they've just met.

Tyler smiles, sharp, like he's about to say that we fucked in front of a basket of seashell-shaped soaps in a guest bathroom. *Don't say it. Please don't say it.* "Just getting to hang out with Vicky," he says.

Next to me, Mike's nostrils flare like they're going to pick back up on whatever fight they were having. But Tyler doesn't add anything else. Not a hint. Not an insinuation. *If they find out, it won't be because he tells them.* Something in my stomach settles—that same something that made Tyler listen when I asked him not to be nice to me.

Jonathan turns to me. "What about you, *Victoria?*" He says my name like he's making a point.

A few weeks ago, I might have said *being done with the semester*. Or

*surviving the year*. Now, the night feels wide open—the entire summer. Maybe beyond that, with the two of them up in LA. I smile. “To knowing what I want.” I lift my bottle.

“Before we toast...” Mike digs something from his pocket. “Here.” He shoots Tyler a look like he’s intruding then hands me a shiny cardboard jewelry box.

“Can I open this in public?” I tease.

Mike just nods.

Inside the box sits a pendant made of wire flowers—a miniature version of the bouquet from that day on the beach. *He brought me flowers that won’t wilt or fade*. “This is beautiful.” I examine the necklace more closely. Three tiny sets of letters are shaped into the wire. *VB, MP, JH*. Our initials. “Did you have this made?”

Mike shakes his head. “Turns out building circuits and making jewelry are pretty similar.”

Meaning he made this for me. For *us*. “Thank you.” My voice comes out a grateful whisper. I swallow, throat dry. “We were supposed to toast.”

Mike grins at that. I missed that grin and the way his eyes rake over me as he starts to work the cork from his bottle.

Something in my belly tightens. It’s not like we all could... No, that would be scandalous. We couldn’t...right? The three of them are all watching me like they’re waiting for my permission. We could have a quiet evening—a tasteful celebration, befitting a fancy-ass house up in the hills. Tomorrow, I could send Mike and Jonathan back up to Santa Monica what they came down as: good friends and former business partners.

I could do that.

But something in me wants to set spark to whatever this is—to take this heat I’m feeling and fan it a flame.

“Are we drinking or what?” I ask.

So we pop our bottles. Champagne flows onto my fingers. I lick it off. This is the good stuff—not sweet, not bitter. I don’t know how bubbles can taste expensive, but they do. I take a pull from my bottle and giggle at its fizz.

I wander over to where Jonathan’s sitting on the low outdoor couch. “What’s yours taste like?” he asks.

I tilt my bottle in offering. “You want a sip?”

He shakes his head, then slides his arms around my waist and pulls me back onto the couch. Not quite onto his lap but not far off either. “I’d rather

taste it from you. Unless...You tell me what you want,” he says. And *me* sounds a lot like *us*.

I take another sip of champagne, wrapping my lips around the mouth of the bottle like a suggestion. “I can think of a few things.”

Jonathan runs his hand up my side. When I laugh, he pulls me closer. “Tell me,” he breathes, like I could ask him for anything.

And so I lean in and fake-whisper loud enough for the other two to hear me. “You want to play Never Have I Ever?”

## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

### *Jonathan*

VICTORIA'S HAIR brushes my ear as she whispers. She's on my lap—she's almost on my lap. Now that we're all together, there's nothing I wouldn't say yes to in order to get her all the way there.

*Except.*

A lot of secrets are floating around the group. Maybe that's her intention. I don't know Tyler at all—if Mike doesn't like him, I don't either. Even if Mike's dislike is tinged with something else. Whatever it is, that doesn't mean I can trust Tyler. But it's a party game. We're having a party.

"Sure," I say, "you go first."

She smiles. "Never have I ever...been drafted to play professional baseball."

I laugh and drink and check to see how Mike takes that—if he frowns or if his shoulders stiffen at being excluded.

He's sprawled on a wicker armchair, holding a bottle of champagne, and he gives me a full-on grin. "I'm so proud of you, bro."

From my lap, Victoria makes a pleased noise. Maybe something a little beyond pleased. I tighten my hands at her waist, and she wriggles again. I want to kiss her. I don't know what kind of party this is...or what kind of ex-stepbrother Tyler is.

"Is it okay if I kiss you?" I whisper, low.

Victoria nods. Her hair brushes my mouth. I missed her. Missed this. Missed the way Mike's watching us and isn't pretending that he's not.

But Tyler's watching us too.

"Tyler won't have a problem with it?" I ask.

"No," Victoria says. "Or at least not in the way you're thinking."

*What way is that?* But I kiss her. A light kiss to her neck. Another when

she sighs into it. “I guess it’s my turn,” I say. “Never have I ever built a robot.”

Mike laughs and drinks. To my surprise, Tyler does too. “I’ll go,” Mike says. “Never have I ever gone to prep school.”

I drink and Tyler drinks. I aim my bottle at him. “Your turn.”

“Never have I ever...” His smile goes sharp. “Made a sex tape for OnlyFans.”

Before I can drink, Mike’s out of his chair and across the patio, finger pressed against Tyler’s chest. “What we’re not gonna do is *that*.”

“Mike,” Victoria calls, “it’s okay. He’s known for a while. About me. About you and me.”

“Fine.” Tyler lifts his bottle. “Never have I ever used putting out an electrical fire as a pretext to flirt with someone.”

Mike’s glare doesn’t exactly soften. “Really?” Then drinks while Tyler laughs.

Next to me, Victoria is studying them, expression curious. She catches me looking. “You know what that’s about?”

I shake my head. “I guess they know each other somehow.” Even if I’m beginning to realize what that *somehow* is: that they know each other from *before*. It’s fine. My fingers curl tighter around the neck of my bottle.

Victoria must feel me tense up. “Mike, go next.”

Mike aims a glare at Tyler. “Never have I ever had my team come in *fourth* at a San Diego County robotics tournament.”

“Fuck off,” Tyler says, but there’s no heat to it. He drinks, then turns to Victoria and me. “Never have I ever had sex in a baseball clubhouse.”

None of us drink.

“Really?” Tyler says. “Feels like a wasted opportunity.”

Something about that makes Victoria dissolve into laughter. “Never have I ever slept with someone of the same gender as me.”

Mike drinks. Tyler *also* drinks. I lift my bottle up—it’s a confession. Still, I take a small sip. Maybe I shouldn’t have. But Tyler doesn’t exactly seem surprised.

Victoria clears her throat, then motions for Mike to come over. He does, bending down, letting her whisper something in his ear. When she’s done, he smiles a little stiffly, then nods. “Yeah, that’s fine.”

“Are you rigging Never Have I Ever, Vicky?” Tyler shouts.

“She doesn’t like being called Vicky,” I shout back.

“Yeah”—Tyler laughs—“I know.”

I wrap a possessive arm around Victoria. “If he’s giving you a hard time...”

“Slapping him will only encourage him.” Victoria picks up her bottle. “Never have I hooked up with someone I met at a robotics tournament.”

Mike drinks. Not surprising. Tyler drinks. Slightly more surprising. Victoria crows in triumph. “I knew it. I knew that’s why you were being weird that day at the clubhouse.”

“Wait”—I glance between Mike and Tyler—“with each other?”

Mike nods, aggrieved. Tyler laughs.

“It could have been separate,” I add.

“What do you think is happening at robotics tournaments?” Mike asks.

“Robot stuff. Apparently not.” And I have no right to feel jealous. None whatsoever. This feeling building under my skin isn’t jealousy—or, fine, it is. Not of Tyler, exactly, but that he and Mike hooked up, and Mike and I spent the past three years working up the courage to do anything.

I lift my bottle. Grind my teeth together. “Never have I ever hooked up with Tyler.” I can’t quite keep the spite out of my voice.

Mike glares at me then drinks.

After a second, Victoria brings her bottle to her mouth. And takes a tiny but definite sip.

*Fuck.*



## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

*Mike*

I'm out of my chair, my hand gripping Tyler's shirt front before I can stop myself. "Start talking," I say.

"Careful," he says, "if you hit me, this fabric's a bitch to get stains out of." Like the laundry would be worse than the bloody nose. "What exactly do you want to know?"

*When...why?* And the worry my brain keeps repeating: *if he treated her the way he treated me.*

"Mike," Victoria shouts from behind me, "let him go."

"Yeah, Mike"—Tyler smooths a hand down his chest, sending a deliberate palm across my knuckles—"you heard her. Let me go."

I tighten my grip on the fabric. I can't stop thinking about it in full technicolor: Tyler's hands sliding up her legs. Touching that place on her belly I don't know why I'm obsessed with, only that I am. If he was gentle like she wanted or rough like she sometimes needs. If he *hurt* her during or after.

"Mike," Victoria says more firmly, "this wasn't your decision to make."

She's right. Her choices are hers. Her body is hers. If I tell her what to do with it, I'm no better than Cooper or any of those other creeps.

I release Tyler, then grab my champagne bottle off the coffee table. "Never have I ever regretted sleeping with anyone here."

Jonathan's bottle is firmly on the table. Victoria also doesn't drink. *Good.*

Tyler's bottle is at his lips. "Define regret," he says.

"I don't know, Tyler. Be *specific.*"

He takes a sip of champagne. "In hindsight, certain things about that day in March were a problem."

*That day in March.* Meaning when he and I hooked up. Something about

it stokes my temper. “Which part, exactly? When we drove back here? Or when you told me to wipe my mouth and catch an Uber?”

Jonathan makes an outraged noise. Victoria’s eyebrows are practically to her hair.

Tyler’s eyes go hard. It’s possible I’ve embarrassed him. Given the circumstances, I don’t really care. *And if he did the same thing to Victoria...*

But no, she’s sitting there, her forehead scrunched in confusion. “When in March?”

“Two days after...you know.” Tyler does go red at that, not the pleased red Victoria gets, but something closer to humiliation. He hoists his champagne. “Never have I ever been a good boyfriend—or anything else.” It feels almost like an apology. “You all should drink,” he adds.

None of us do.

It’s never humid in San Diego, but the air feels momentarily heavier. So Tyler knows about me and Victoria and Jonathan. So Tyler might actually regret the way he treated me. So Tyler and Victoria slept together.

I should be jealous. Jealous that when we broke up, Tyler swooped in. But no, I can’t be mad that I told Victoria to go after what she wanted—something she doesn’t regret—and she did just that.

She’s looking at me like I might explode again. This won’t be another clubhouse scene where she leaves in tears. I want her to have the things she wants, even if those things are... *Tyler*.

The music playing changes to something else, a low growl of a song that carries up into the night sky. Victoria puts her champagne on the table with a thunk. “Never have I ever danced to this particular song on this particular deck with these particular friends.”

*Friends*. Said pointedly as if she’s reminding us. *We are* friends. Friends...and more than that? That’s up to her. So if Victoria wants to dance, I’m happy to let her take the lead.

Jonathan gets there first, rising, offering her his hand. They look no different together than they did all those months ago on the beach. Beautiful, like the world was made for them. Now I know it’s because they work to make it for themselves.

Victoria spins slowly, then motions for me to come over. I slide up to them, registering them in flashes as we dance—the wrap of Jonathan’s hand around mine, the shine of Victoria’s hair. *Friends*. I pull them both closer. If we were alone out here, maybe we would close the distance the rest of the

way.

But we're not alone. Tyler's still sitting off to the side, lounging with a certain sarcasm, like he wouldn't join us if we asked.

Victoria doesn't give him the option. "Tyler"—she points to a spot on the deck floor as if ordering him—"come here."

I wait for his laugh. Instead, he pulls himself up and offers his hand to her.

Which leaves me and Jonathan dancing together just as the song turns slow. Jon tucks an arm around my back and eases his palm against mine. Our hips slot together. This feels close, a different kind of close than hooking up. Close like when I was soldering together the parts of that scoreboard, trying to put how I feel about him into its wires and joins.

He cups my mouth, and I nearly object—Tyler and Victoria are *right there*. We're outside. If someone took a picture of us, there'd be no mistaking what was happening. But when Jonathan leans in and kisses me, I kiss him back. "Never have I ever," I breathe, "not wanted to kiss you. Since the second I met you."

He laughs at that, a bubble of laughter like champagne. "Never have I ever not wanted you right back."

Nearby, Tyler and Victoria are also dancing, Victoria's eyes shut, her arms stretched up like she's grabbing handfuls of night sky. The last time we saw one another, she looked haunted by the prospect that people could know about us. Now...now she looks free.

Carefully, Tyler slides a hand around her waist, touching her like it's a privilege.

The anger that's been barking at me recedes, leaving something different in its wake. I watch them. *Just checking to make sure he's being respectful*. And definitely not because he's looking at her with an expression I know, because I'm making it too: amazement. Admiration. *Good*.

She must feel us studying her, because she opens her eyes, smiles like she's getting away with something. She winds her arms at Tyler's neck, and he leans into her, whispering in her ear. She laughs and taps her hand against his chest.

Not like she regrets sleeping with him. Like maybe she wants to again. I shouldn't like that at all, but fuck *shouldn't*. I watch them and don't pretend I'm not.

The song turns over, fast enough that we all end up in the same patch of

flooring. “Here”—Jonathan picks up the deck table and moves it like it’s no heavier than a playing card—“we’ll have more space.”

So we dance and drink and laugh. Victoria drifts over and I catch her at her waist, the familiar curve of her side that fits my hand.

“I missed you,” I shout over the music.

She smiles. “I missed you too.”

“Pretty fucked up how things ended.”

“Who says they have to end?” And she twirls away.

Sometime later, a song comes on, a hit from last summer. “Oh, I know this one,” Jonathan yells. “It goes like…” And proceeds to sing exactly the wrong words.

“You’re ridiculous,” I shout to him.

He kisses me again, playful, then Victoria right after, easy kisses we trade back and forth like nothing’s changed. Except Tyler’s here, watching us. Just for that, I kiss them both again and get his assessing stare. When I nod to him, he doesn’t look away. *Good.*

Jonathan interrupts, drunk, possibly, but mostly excited. “You have to sing with me,” he says. “All of you.”

So we sing, our voices pouring out into the night around us, echoing off the surrounding hills like we’re infinite.

## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

### *Tyler*

I NEED to get away from this party. We're all a little drunk, a lot happy.

I should go to bed. Pretend I won't be listening for the sound of their laughter, for whatever might follow. I know where this is going. And I'm not invited.

My feet won't move. Not as Mike climbs up on a chair, holding his bottle up like he's toasting the world. Not as he wobbles, only for Jonathan to swoop in and catch him, and they kiss briefly, easily, before they pull apart.

I could have had that. *If I weren't so...me.* If I didn't bring Mike home after that tournament, two days after James got a test back saying he had a heart condition—that it was serious. That they were going try all available options, but that surgery was the most likely. Not an excuse, really. Just a thing I carry around I don't know how to let go of.

Victoria drifts between them. Mike pulls her tight to him, runs his hand up the hem of her dress, exposing the curve of her thigh. I'm not jealous. Jealousy would mean I cared what any of them thought about me.

*They don't think of you like that.* Especially not Victoria.

Yeah, I should go inside.

I'm about to slink back into the house when she approaches me. Her cheeks are flushed from dancing, from the champagne and happiness. I want to kiss her—have wanted to kiss her ever since that day in the bathroom. Since well before that. And now we're apparently going to be family again.

"Are you leaving?" she asks.

"Why—would you miss me?" I try for sarcasm and fail.

"I just might." She sways into me, close enough that she falls against my chest.

Her hair is a soft tumble. I can't help it. I stroke a few of its strands.

“Do you like my hair?” she asks, teasing.

*Yes. Because it’s part of you.* “It’s fine.”

“Do you think Mike’s hair is also *fine*?”

“I didn’t notice.” Even if I did. Even if I like it.

She laughs. “Did you really kick him out on the curb?”

My back goes defensively stiff. “There’s a driveway. And James was inside resting.”

Still, it’s an admission. *Yes, I really am this much of an asshole.* I expect Victoria to shove me away—why wouldn’t she? Everyone else has or will, eventually.

“You were working full-time in March?” she asks.

“Some of our jobs are important,” I lie.

“What do you actually do for...,” she begins and shakes her head. “Were you also coaching Elizabeth’s robotics team?”

I snort. “If you can call it a team. They barely have funding. I had to apply for grants.”

Victoria’s frown intensifies. “James was sick while all this was going on?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s a difficult patient,” Victoria says.

“If you say so.”

“And,” she continues, “you’re a good son.”

I don’t let my heart beat at my ribs. I don’t let myself feel anything, except for this instant when something surges in my chest. “I’m really not.”

“Most people wouldn’t have done all this to help him.”

“I lived here already.”

Something about that makes Victoria smile. “James likes having you around.”

“He’s just too nice to ask me to leave.” I try to play it off like it doesn’t bother me: that I’m only his son by default.

Victoria pats my cheek, and I shouldn’t find her touch as comforting as I do. “It’s been almost twenty years,” she says. “No one’s that fucking nice. Still...” Here it comes—that I’m an asshole. That I’m never going to be anything but an asshole—not good enough for anyone, so I pretend to be too good for everyone. “Still, you should do something for yourself.”

I look up at her, surprised. *Good girl Victoria telling me to be selfish.* “What does that mean?”

She pats my cheek again, then moves closer, her breath warm and teasing in my ear. “James told me to make sure you have fun this summer. But if you’d rather us have fun without you”—she casts a look over at Mike and Jonathan, who are kissing—“I’m sure I can find something else to do.”

“Fun?” I ask, like I don’t know what she means. Like that day in the bathroom didn’t make me crave her even more.

Her grin goes wicked. “You said I just needed to say the word and you’d fuck me again. So this is me. Saying the word.”

I pull her close, fast enough she gives a surprised little *oh*. “Don’t say things you don’t mean.”

Her smile transforms from wicked to feral. She pulls away from me and picks her champagne up from the table, then clears her throat, loud enough to get Jonathan and Mike’s attention. Then says for us and the whole city to hear, “Never have I ever had a foursome.”

## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

### *Victoria*

FOR A SECOND, none of them says anything. Maybe I've overshot this. Maybe this was just a party where we all get tipsy and everyone goes to sleep in their own bed. Maybe I shouldn't be playing with fire again, but ever since that day in April, I can't help it. No matter how much it might burn, it makes the world brighter.

"Are you sure?" Mike casts a skeptical look around at the deck. "Out here?"

I laugh. "Your issue is location?"

He shrugs, a smile at the edge of his lips. "From experience, four people is a lot to coordinate." My eyes go incredulously wide. "No, I know from baseball," he says. "From playing *baseball*. This would be a first."

Over on the couch, Jonathan is cracking up, laughing so hard he's pressing his face into Mike's shoulder. When he pulls back, they look at each other for a minute in silent conversation, then Jonathan kisses him, slowly, a kiss like its own answer. "If Mike's in," he says, "I'm in."

Which leaves Tyler. Maybe he'll tell us all to have fun—or Tyler's version that's designed to cut everyone down—and go in for the night. *Can you believe what my slutty ex-stepsister-turned-roommate did?*

He's leaning away from me, attempting nonchalance, like he wants to show us exactly how much he doesn't care about being invited along.

"You coming?" I ask him.

He taps his chin as if in contemplation. "Hmm, still deciding."

I could just let him walk away. But I want him. And I want him to ask for it. To beg for it, possibly. To *work* for it.

A possibility occurs to me: something wild and dangerous and against every rule I've set for myself to shelter myself from the worst of people's



judgment. I moved into this house to regroup. To hide.

Well, I'm sick of hiding.

I turn to Tyler and put on my primmest demeanor. "You know, we don't have much room for spoiled rich boys."

That gets his attention. Gone is his nonchalance. He raises a skeptical eyebrow. "What's that mean?"

What'd he call this when he was pressuring me into working for him? A negotiation. "If you want to fuck"—I run my hand up my thigh, playing with the hem of my dress, dragging it up, up, up before dropping it—"you can put in the work."

His eyebrow goes up even further. But his face lights with interest.

"You've never made a sex tape." I let that sink in. "But do you want to?"

I wait for his *no*. For Mike and Jonathan to tell me the hundred ways this is a bad idea. For them to intercede to save me from myself.

"Is that what you want?" Tyler asks.

I tilt my chin up determinedly. "Yes."

"All of us?" he adds like he's not sure.

A question. *The* question. What I want for myself, for us all together, now and beyond. "Yes." A *yes* I'll carry with me no matter how much the world says *no*.

Tyler studies me for a long stomach-dropping second. Slowly, he smiles then sweeps his arm toward the house. "Lead the way."



TYLER'S ROOM IS ACROSS FROM JAMES'S. WHATEVER I WAS IMAGINING—something pretentious and overdecorated, or sleezy with black sheets—it's just a bedroom. A king-sized bed occupies most of the space, the extended kind that Jonathan has too.

I peruse the rest of the room: the stuff on the dresser, the meticulously organized closets, the occasional framed souvenir and trophy.

"So," Tyler drawls from behind me, "is this acceptable?"

I don't rise to the bait. "You talk a lot."

Tyler scoffs. "So you keep saying."

I tap a finger against my cheek with the same faked skepticism he used outside. "Maybe we scrap this whole thing. Maybe I just sit on your face and

get my fill.”

“Yeah,” Tyler says, sarcastically, “I’d hate that.” He lifts up a camera tripod. “Tell me where to put it.”

I walk over to where he’s standing, holding the collapsed tripod. I send my palm down the front of his pants. He’s already semi-hard. “Hmmm, I thought it’d be bigger.”

He huffs.

“I meant the tripod.” I dimple innocently, then flip the latches on the tripod’s telescoping poles, extending it. “We’re using my phone.”

It takes a second to get everything set up—the tripod, the camera, the lighting. Before we got in here, I changed into a skirt that I haven’t had the guts to wear before now. And...other purchases that I logged as business expenses.

Somewhere in the house, Mike and Jonathan are getting ready. Distantly, there’s water running. They’re going to show up *whenever*. Anticipation thrums through my veins. Of them coming in and catching us. Of them joining in.

There’s only one more thing I need. I pull the napkin from my bag with my and Mike’s and Jonathan’s signatures, then hand it to Tyler. “Here are the ground rules.”

He reads it briefly, eyes moving over our promises to one another. “Be safe?” he asks.

I flush. “Mostly, do you want to use condoms?”

At that, he pulls his phone from his pocket and hands it to me. On screen, test results from a week ago, a list of negatives.

“You just happen to have these?” I say.

“In case...” He shrugs, looking at a patch of floor. “I didn’t want you to worry after last time.”

My heart does a *thing*. My whole body does a *thing*. By now I shouldn’t be surprised by him being thoughtful, even if he currently looks like he doesn’t want me to point that out.

So I drop to my knees in front of the tripod. With the phone already mounted in its clip-on holder, it takes some doing to text him my test results. While I’m down here, I do one final check of the camera. “We’re all set.”

“You know,” Tyler says, “this is the most well-organized orgy I’ve ever been to.”

I laugh then take his hand as I rise. “Would you expect anything else?”

“From you? Absolutely not.” He goes a little quieter. “I appreciate everything you’ve done this summer.”

“How much?” I say.

“How much what?”

“How much do you appreciate what I’ve done?”

His cockiness returns. He laughs, the kind of laugh that once could sever all my self-confidence but now just makes me want to unzip my skirt. “Ten thousand dollars’ worth,” he says.

“See, Tyler, that’s where you’re wrong. I’m not worth ten thousand dollars.” I climb back on the bed, into the waiting view of the camera. “I’m worth so much more. Now show me.”

## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

### *Tyler*

I GROAN as my knees hit the carpet. Victoria is in a T-shirt and a skirt, if you can call it that. The fabric stops halfway down her thighs, the space between her legs an enticing shadow. I grasp my cock through my pants just to take off the edge.

“Stop,” she orders.

I don’t stop.

She grips my hair in her hand, yanking. “Stop. And take your shirt off.”

I do, casting it away. If the cost of what I look like is protein powder and kettlebell crunches, it’s worth it for the way her eyes go hot.

“Why couldn’t you be ugly?” she asks.

I laugh. “Why couldn’t you be awful?”

She rolls her eyes. Usually, it’s how she tells me to go away. “Come here.” She pulls me forward until I’m braced over her. “I bet you can’t hold a pushup that long.”

I know what she’s doing and it’s working. “I can go longer than you think.”

She smiles at that, wicked, and I can’t look anywhere but her. Looking at her is like a first sip of water—once I start drinking, I won’t be able to stop. I could hold this position for longer, but I don’t want to wait. I shake my arms purposefully like my muscles are going to collapse.

She nudges my biceps with her knee. “Desperate.”

I shake my head. “Eager.”

“Eager to please?” she asks.

My mouth goes dry. I nod.

“Good.” She leans back, stripping off her shirt to reveal the black lace of a bra. “So please me.”

I want to kiss her, but I stroke my hands up her legs instead, high enough to feel the warmth of her pussy. The skirt is nothing. Nothing and too much. I want her naked. I want to fuck her in any way she'll let me. I pull the zipper of her skirt down; each release of its metal teeth speeds my pulse faster.

She slips her skirt down her legs and kicks it off, leaving her in just her underwear: a set of black lace panties embroidered with little dots.

Or what should just be her underwear.

Over the top of those lie a set of leather buckles and straps: a harness for a strap-on, the mouth of its O-ring sitting empty. *For now.*

“You’re staring,” she says.

I am staring—at the thin black leather straps pressing into her hips. At the challenge of that empty O-ring sitting against her pubic bone. At how she looks confident, lounging at me like she doesn’t care if I stay or go.

Except for the smile playing at the edge of her mouth.

I stroke my fingers up her thighs and slide my thumbs under those straps. My fingertips catch on hidden pads of Velcro securing the whole thing in place.

“Were you wearing that all night?” I ask.

“I put it on when I was getting ready earlier.”

“Were you thinking about me?” I mean it to be teasing, but it’s not: I want her to have been thinking about me. I want her to think about me the way I think about her.

“I was,” she says. “I thought about what you might look like on your knees —”

I interrupt. “You know what I look like.”

She continues as if she didn’t hear me. “I thought about what you might look like on your knees, begging me to fuck you.” She shifts around, widening her legs, the harness catching and tugging slightly on her underwear, and fuck, it’s the crotchless kind, the sides of which part to reveal her bare pink pussy.

My mouth is empty, so I kiss her at her pussy, slow, like a kiss I want to press to her mouth. This might be all I get—all I deserve.

She settles a hand in my hair, then sighs and opens her legs. Says, “Use your tongue.”

I lick her and get the gratifying clamp of her thighs against my ears. Soon, she’s wet, and I slide a finger into her and then another, stroking her inner walls until her voice goes breathy.

“That’s it,” she says, and I shouldn’t preen at that.

I must be obvious, because she sits up, yanking me back. “You think you’re doing a good job?” she asks.

I shake my head. *Not even close.*

Her laugh that fills the room. “So get to it.”

Whatever restraint or hesitation or dignity was holding me back vanishes. I sprawl her on the bed, arms above her, breasts spilling out of that bra, legs open, then fuck her with my mouth—with my teeth and tongue, with every trick I can think of and some ones that come on instinct.

Distantly, she’s laughing, not that affected sneer she’s been using, but in actual delight, like I’m doing what she wanted all along. My fingers stroke her clit, frantic, tracing patterns, and God, she’s wet, she’s soaking, she’s going to flood my mouth until I’m drowning in it, until I can never taste anything else.

“Stop.” She taps my head for good measure.

I pause, my face resting on the soft rise of her thigh. I’ve been humping the bed—I don’t realize it until I stop—right on the edge from nothing more than the taste and the heat and the smell of her, her pleasure as it drips down my chin.

“Go in my bag,” she says. “There’s a gray drawstring pouch. Bring that to me.”

For a second, I don’t move.

“Fine,” she says, “I’ll just tell Mike and Jonathan I’m ready and then they can come fuck me.” Her smile goes sharp. “You won’t get to watch.”

In an instant, I’m crossing the room, my cock a weight between my legs, and I don’t know what would happen if Mike and Jonathan walked in right now—if I’d fall to my knees for them the way I had for her. I return to the bed with the pouch. It’s holding something—something I hope is what I think it is.

She accepts the bag, then pulls out a strap-on with a thick shaft. It’s nail-polish pink and delicate-looking, even if it’s...large. My mouth was already wet. Now it floods.

“You look like you want something,” she says.

*You.* I manage a nod.

Victoria shrugs, like I’m being silly, then undoes the Velcro of the harness and pushes the shaft of the strap-on through the ring. “This part”—she indicates a bulb at one end of the strap-on—“you’re gonna put inside

me.”

I take the strap-on, careful to angle it just so, easing the bulb into her. Her eyes flutter shut. Her cheeks go impossibly pinker. Her breasts test the limits of her bra.

“Can I kiss you?” I ask. The question slips out. Fuck. That’s embarrassing—a different kind of embarrassing from how I was humping the bed.

She opens her eyes just as the strap-on fully seats inside her. “Do up the buckles first.”

My fingers stumble on the clasps. I try to kiss her, my mouth against her thigh, but she catches me by my hair, forcing me to look up.

“Sure,” she says, easy. “You can kiss me.” And then points downward. “After you get this nice and wet.”

Before, I was desperate. Now, I’m practically shaking. I take the firm silicone head of the strap-on between my lips and suck. The toy is thick, filling my mouth. My lips stretch around it. Spit rolls down my chin. There’s a vibrate function—it’s centered in the part that’s inside her, but faint vibrations rattle against my teeth. I rub myself against the bed, just to take the edge off.

Her hand returns to my hair, moving me up and down on the shaft. “That’s it,” she says, “that’s so good.”

Every muscle in my body is winding toward coming, even if she’s barely put a hand on me. I whine in my throat and work the other end of the toy inside her as much as I can from this angle.

“Fuck,” she says, a clear syllable low in her throat. She’s playing with her nipples, cycling her hips like I’m just another accessory to her getting off. I want her to—I want her to come all over me, to tell me I made that happen.

I pull back. A trail of spit connects my mouth and that shaft. “Will you kiss me now?” My throat is rough.

“Not yet.”

I return to it until she starts shivering all over in fine little tremors. Sweat beads at my hairline and between her breasts. The camera is distant. The rest of the house might not exist. Nothing matters other than the hard grasp of her fingers in my hair and the way she’s fucking my mouth.

And that’s when the door to the bedroom creaks open behind me.

## CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

*Mike*

WHEN JONATHAN and I get to the bedroom, Tyler is on his knees.

Victoria is lying back, legs spread, a hand threaded in his hair. She works her nipple with the other. She's in dark lingerie. There's something else at her hips that I can't make out from this angle.

She pauses when she sees us. "Tyler was just getting me ready."

He pulls off her, the artful muscles of his chest and stomach heaving with effort.

"Fuck," Jonathan whispers where he's stopped behind me. "Fuck, that's really hot."

It takes a second for me to register what's happening, my mind clouded with arousal and slight disbelief. Victoria's wearing a strap-on, its pink shaft sticking up from a harness. Even in the dim bedroom lighting, it gleams. A universe away from the shy girl who brought me into her bedroom months ago. Who gasped against me, her blue eyes wide, as I pressed into her for the first time. Who's now surveying the room like we're hers to command.

She casts down the barest flick of a glance. "Tyler, wipe your mouth."

His lips are red, his mouth a sticky mess. He brings his palm up to his face—then thinks better of it and licks his lips.

"Hey," I call to him, "come here."

He does, slow, limbs syrupy. We kissed before, briefly, on that day back in March, the perfunctory sort of kissing before he started not-so-subtly pressing the back of my neck to get me to blow him.

Now I grip the back of his neck and draw me to him. "You treating our girl good?"

He snorts. "*Yours*, you mean."

I slap him, not hard, just the tap of my fingers at his cheek. He groans.



“He likes that,” Victoria offers.

“Is that true?” I ask.

For a second, I think Tyler’s going to tell me to fuck off. Slowly, he nods.

I slap him again. This time, color comes up in his cheek. He’s obviously hard in his sweats—from the look of the damp patch on the front of them, he has been for a while. “Take your cock out,” I order.

He lifts an eyebrow. “Why?”

I don’t answer. I push my thumb into his mouth, and he sucks it, grudgingly. “Oh, you do that now?” I pull my thumb from his mouth and smear it across his cheek. “Take your cock out.”

He pushes down his sweats. He didn’t bother with boxers. His cock is hard, sitting on a landscaped patch of dark blond hair. It curves gently to one side, and I wonder if that bothers him, given the neat lines of his abs and the precise way his bedroom is arranged.

I let him stand there for a minute, clearly shifting between proud and humiliated. “Now what?” he asks, impatient.

“Now you’re gonna fuck Victoria.”

He snorts. “You just gonna sit there and watch?”

“We’re not the selfish ones, Tyler.” I tilt his chin up with my hand. “You’re going to fuck Victoria. But so are we.”

From the bed, Victoria makes a low, approving noise.

“How’s that sound, baby girl?” I call. “You want all three of us filling you up?”

She lounges back, her blond hair glowing against the dark comforter, and grasps the strap-on, giving it a slow stroke. “You know, I thought you’d never ask.”

## CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

### *Jonathan*

IS THERE a limit to how many impossibly wonderful things can happen to you in a day? I got drafted. Mike showed up. Now Victoria is in the center of Tyler's bed asking for all three of us. *At once.*

I can't stop looking at her in that see-through black bra, those panties that I could slide my fingers into. That harness with a pinkish toy sitting in it.

Mike and Tyler are busy with...whatever it is they're busy with. I go to her; I have to. "You look incredible."

"Lovely?" she teases.

"Yes, lovely." Not like a princess, like a queen, like she could push me around with no more than a fingertip.

Victoria pulls me closer, and I shift her until she's on my lap and grip the strap-on, stroking it. "This thing's pretty impressive," I say.

She laughs. "You would know."

I work the toy again, and she moans. "Next time, will you use this on me?" I ask.

She bites her lip, her cheeks going pinker. "You'd want that?"

I kiss her, at her mouth, and her neck, and on the delicate bump of her collarbone. "I want you in any way you'll give me."

"Next time..." And it feels like a promise. "I'll wear this just for you." And she shivers at that, then starts to thumb open the tabs holding the harness in place. "I need to take this off."

"I've got it." I shift down the bed. The harness's straps are impossibly small under my fingers. When I undo the last buckle, she pulls the toy out of herself, then tugs the harness down. There are faint marks on her belly and hips from where its straps dug in. I kiss them, one by one.

"Today's supposed to be about you," she says. "It's your celebration."

“You don’t think this is celebrating?” I kiss a path up from her stomach—on her belly, between her breasts, at the place on her neck that makes her gasp. “But if you want,” I whisper, “there is something else you could do for me.”



WE START OUT EASY: TYLER ON HIS BACK, VICTORIA STRADDLING HIM, ME sitting on the bed next to them, just watching. She eases herself onto his cock, clenching until he shuts his eyes and makes a noise like he might come just from that.

“Go easy on him,” Mike says.

She laughs. “I won’t.”

Mike’s standing behind her. He bends her forward, hands possessive at her hips. He strokes her ass, then dips his fingers to rub against her hole. “You ever have anyone do this?”

She shivers. “You’d be my first.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll make it good for you.”

“I don’t worry”—she angles her head back to kiss him—“not when I’m with you.”

He smiles at her, soft. “Did you bring lube?”

“I think there’s some in my bag.” She pauses, then sighs. “I might have left it upstairs.”

I clear my throat. “Um.”

They both look at me. I dig into the pocket of my sweats, withdrawing the bottle of lube that I packed with the kind of formless hope that something good might happen.

Mike laughs, not meanly, then kisses me. “You trying to tell me something?”

Yes. So I hand him the bottle, fascinated as he dispenses some onto his fingers, rubbing them together to warm it. With his other hand, he traces down Victoria’s back to where she’s still moving on Tyler’s cock in short thrusts.

“He nice and deep?” Mike asks. “I know how much you like it like that.”

Victoria laughs. “I do, so quit stalling.”

He doesn’t wait. He adds more lube, fingering her ass open until she’s

rocking between his hand and Tyler's cock.

I watch, entranced, trying to save details that won't show up on video: How Tyler's cock is slightly crooked. How spots of pink color Victoria's cheeks. How she has a tiny constellation of freckles under one shoulder blade that Mike kisses.

How this feels like a celebration. Because I can't imagine a better party than the four of us upstairs dancing and shouting with joy. Or here now, like this is the only place in the world.

"You just gonna watch?" Mike asks me.

I shake my head. I slide over to where Victoria is bent in half. I cup her cheek, stroke her hair. "You're so beautiful like this," I say.

She smiles up at me. "You too."

From there it's easy to draw her face into my lap, to wrap my fist around the base of my cock and let her suck the first few inches. It's messy and uncoordinated and perfect, her hair soft under my palm, her eyes shut in seeming bliss.

"That's so good, baby," I hear Mike say. "You keeping him warm and wet?"

She shrugs, like she's trying to wind him up.

It works. Mike growls, then grasps her hair and works her mouth on my cock. She smiles around me. Too soon, I'm aching from it. I pull her off, gently.

"That good?" she asks, eyes sparking.

"So good."

"But it could be better?" She glances at me, then turns to Mike. "I think he wants to ask you something."

Mike raises a curious eyebrow. I draw him to me and kiss him, deep. My heart feels like it's too large for my chest. How I want her and him and both of them, to come immediately and for this to never stop.

"When you're done fucking her"—I pull back from Mike, resting our foreheads together, and summon my courage—"I want you to fuck me too."

## CHAPTER FIFTY

### *Victoria*

I DON'T HAVE to look at Mike to hear his reaction: a sharp intake of breath. A *yeah* said low, like any louder might disturb the atmosphere in the room. *Yeah*, he'll fuck me and then fuck Jonathan.

Jonathan, who was filling my mouth the way Tyler is my cunt. I'm full but not full enough.

I tense around Tyler, drawing out a groan.

"This good?" Tyler's voice is hoarse.

I glance at my fingernails, examining them as if bored. "It'll do for now." But I'm smiling. "You just gonna let me do all the work?"

Tyler cracks an eye open. "Thought that's what you like—being bossy?"

He's right. I do. *Bossy* doesn't seem like such a terrible thing to be called. Not bossy. *Powerful*. I laugh. "Turns out I do."

"So what do you want?"

*What I want*. I want to come, a want that's been building since we got in his room. Since I hung that flier up months ago—for even longer before that. Or would. If Mike and Jonathan weren't still kissing, caught up in each other. I give a polite, teasing cough.

Mike looks over at me, smug. "You need something?"

"You know, if it's not too much trouble," I say, "I thought you might fuck my ass."

He sends a palm down my hip, casually possessive. His eyes are warm in the half dark. It could just be from being turned on, but it's different somehow, or I've just gotten better at seeing it. He's *happy*, a sort of bone-deep contentment he didn't have before. "Sure," he breathes, "I'd love to."

My heart trips on *love*. Months ago, the best I could imagine about this situation was a mutually beneficial business relationship with someone happy

to fuck my body and split the money. Instead, I got this—him. All three of them. And myself.

I reposition myself on Tyler's cock, letting Mike bend me forward. It's sexy, sure—Tyler's literally inside me and Jonathan was and Mike's about to be—but it's hard to think of it *only* as sex with the tickle of Mike's mouth as he kisses my shoulder blade again.

As he whispers in my ear. "That first time we were together, I was afraid it'd hurt."

"That you'd hurt me?" I ask.

"No." He kisses my back. "That it'd hurt being with you without being *with* you."

"We're together," I say. "No matter what—we'll be together."

His hands go momentarily tighter at my hips. He eases his way inside me, slowly, painstakingly, every inch of his cock a drag. The slow stretch as my body adjusts—deep and full and *loved*, pleasure amplifying pleasure.

I motion for Jonathan, who's watching us, his lower lip pinked up from kissing, his eyes hot. "How's that feel?" he asks, curious.

"Fuck, it's so good," I say. "But it could be better."

Jonathan gets up on his knees, his cock level with my mouth. I don't know how this looks on camera. If I look desperate or awkward or like any of the names people called me after they found out about our videos. I don't care, not when I suck Jonathan's cock into my mouth, when I clench around Tyler. Not when Mike gasps behind me, and swears low, and we all move together, climbing toward something I can't quite reach.

Time stretches. Tyler plunges deeper inside me; Mike grasps a fistful of my hair. Jonathan strokes my face, a tender drag of his thumb. That warm feeling expands, something impossible to contain.

This can't last, but I want it to. I want this to last into tomorrow and the day after that. The four of us, together, in whatever way we can. A realization like a hot, bright center in my brain. That we *could*. That this is something we're making for ourselves.

I moan around Jonathan's cock. Mike eases a hand on my back. "That's it, baby. Let the whole world hear you."

I don't wait. I don't hold off any longer. I start to come, a throb, a wave, a crest I'm carried on. I come and come, enough to soak my pussy, to drip down my legs. Tears form at the corners of my eyes. My hair sticks to my cheeks. I'm breathing like I'm running, like I'm flying, like I'm shouting

down everything that's ever held me back.

I release Jonathan's cock, careless of the smear it leaves on my cheek. Mike pulls out a second later. I collapse on Tyler. His cock slides out of me, leaving a wet trail on my thigh.

I brace myself for his sneer, his derision.

"Can I kiss you?" he asks, low, and I tilt my face up. His mouth presses against mine, lips barely parting. Not chaste, but not aggressive, either. A long, slow kiss like he's committing it to memory. He wraps his arms around me and strokes my arms through the aftershocks shaking my body. We lie like that, my cheek on Tyler's chest, his breath steady. He kisses my face and my hair a few times, each one a surprise.

His cock is still hard; it nudges my hip. I glance down. "I could..." Even if I'm entirely boneless.

We manage to roll over, Tyler above me. He kisses me again before he slides back inside. My pussy throbs. I hiss, more from surprise than from hurt. Tyler stops.

"It's okay." I try to sum everything up—how I'm empty and full all at once, how the curve of his cock is hitting some place inside that lights me up. "You feel different from how they do."

Tyler frowns like it's a criticism.

"Good different," I add. "Your cock isn't as terrible as the rest of you."

"Not terrible?" He moves again, this time more deliberately. "That was almost a compliment."

"Especially since I like the rest of you."

Tyler looks at me, something soft in his eyes, then draws me to him and kisses me, kisses that blend into one another. For a moment, everything is warm and slow and perfect: the roll of Tyler's back and the bump of his hipbones and the way he's gazing down at me as if we're seeing each other for the first time. He traces a hand down my face. When I turn and kiss his palm, he shuts his eyes as if overwhelmed.

Soon, he's thrusting harder, rhythm going erratic, and I didn't think I could come again, but it's like I never stopped, an orgasm that traces through me like radiating white light.

I clutch him to me, riding it out, wanting more. "*Fuck me.*"

"I'm trying." He kisses me hard. "Say it again."

"Fuck me," I order, sinking my nails into his back. "I want everything. Give it all to me."

He presses his face into my shoulder, then comes in hot pulses, filling me up. Holding me like I'm worth being held.

After a few panting seconds, he rolls off. We lie like that. A laugh, sudden and joyful, works its way up my throat.

Next to me, he's laughing too—not that *Tyler* laugh, but something sweet. “Whatever you want, Victoria, it's yours—I'm yours.” Then he seals that promise with a kiss.



## CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

*Mike*

FOR A FULL THIRTY seconds after I pull out, I watch Victoria come apart. Her face glows; her body goes taut before she collapses forward. She looks like she did when she was dancing upstairs, free and laughing...against Tyler.

I should be jealous. He is, objectively, kind of an asshole. Except he's holding her to him and petting her hair. Kissing her like it's a privilege.

From over her shoulder, I can make out his expression: like he doesn't quite know how he got her but isn't going to let her go. I know that look. I've made it enough. A look I thought was finite—that only one of us would get her and it wouldn't be me.

Something in me relaxes. *I love her. I love Jonathan. She loves us. I could...tolerate Tyler.* But even that's a lie. I like him, despite himself.

I'm still wearing a condom—it makes cleanup easier. I dispose of it in the en suite bathroom and wash up. Stare at myself in the mirror for a second. My hair is loose. I gather it back into a knot. *You're in the middle of an orgy.* As if I've fallen through a rabbit hole into a whole new universe.

When I get back into the bedroom, Jonathan's watching Victoria and Tyler contemplatively, his forehead a little pinched. Maybe he's regretting asking me to fuck him and is determining the best way to gently turn me down.

But he smiles when I sit next to him. There isn't much space on the bed, so he draws me to him, loosening my hair and running his fingers through it. "Your hair's gotten so long," he says.

"Do you mind?"

"I liked that about you from day one. I remember thinking *I wonder what his hair feels like.*"

“That is a very straight thought,” I tease.

Jonathan laughs. “Good thing you were here. Otherwise, I don’t know what I’d do. Will you still...,” he begins, then trails off. “I still want to, if you still want to.”

“You haven’t fucked a man before, right?”

“You’re already the first —”

He stops when I shake my head. I think of Victoria in the clubhouse weeks ago, reluctant to remove my hand from her thigh. “Doing one thing doesn’t mean you have to do everything,” I say.

Jonathan kisses me, brief and fond. “What I was trying to say is that you’re already the first person I fell in love with.”

*Oh.* I glance over at Victoria, at where she and Tyler are moving slowly, caught up in each other. “Are you sure?” I ask.

Jonathan smiles again. “I didn’t say you were the *last* person I fell in love with.”

I kiss him, deep, declarative. “Yeah, I know just how you feel.”

Somehow, we’re still in too many clothes. We shed them all. The bed isn’t infinitely large, so I tug a blanket down and lay it on the floor. Jonathan joins me. “Sorry,” I say. “We could go somewhere else.”

He laughs. “Didn’t you used to spend all game on your knees in the dirt?”

I expect that to sting—that playing was something I *used* to do. It doesn’t, not with how Jonathan’s eyes shine with amusement. “Yeah,” I say.

“Then I’ll survive the floor.” He nods toward Victoria and Tyler. “Is it weird that I want them nearby?”

“No.” I try to put it into words: how we’re together, all of us, like the world slotted correctly in place. “It’s not weird.”

There’s just enough space for Jonathan to lie down, for me to drape myself on top of him, our bodies working as we kiss. Jonathan wraps a hand around my cock, stroking it lightly. The lube and condoms are over there. I should get them. I can’t seem to move.

Until he whispers, “Please,” his voice hot in my ear.

“Please what, baby?”

“I want you inside me,” he says. “I want to feel you all over.”

I don’t ask again. I get the bottle and condom. The lube is chilly, and I warm it with my fingers. Jonathan’s legs fall open as I kneel over him; he wrinkles his nose a little when I touch his hole with my lubed-up fingers, less like he’s objecting and more like he’s curious.

“Tell me what feels good,” I say.

He nods, and I press in with tips of my middle and index fingers, adding more lube as I go, working him open.

He gasps a few times; his back arches. Pleasure flicks across his face. Fuck, he’s beautiful. His cock is hard, dripping with pre-come and residual wetness from Victoria’s mouth. I suck him, no intention behind it other than making him moan.

He puts his hand in my hair, tugging gently. “I wanted you to do that from day one,” he says. “Probably should’ve been a hint, huh?”

I pull off his cock. “Jon,” I say, fake serious, “don’t make me laugh while I’m blowing you.”

He pulls me to him. “Get the condom then.”

I grab the condom, rip it open, and roll it on. Add more lube and stroke myself to distribute it. Jonathan adds his hand over mine but stops when I shake my head. “I’m close,” I say, apologizing.

“Good,” he says. “Me too.”

“Here.” I bunch the blanket under his hips and angle him so I can press inside. He’s warm and tight and wet from the lube, and I hold myself as still as I can as his eyes close and his teeth go tight on his lip.

“We can stop,” I say. “This isn’t for everyone.”

“Mike,” he says, exasperatedly fond, “I’m trying not to come.”

“Oh.”

“You’re ridiculous.” He kisses my cheek. “You can move now.”

I do, as slow as I can manage. He tilts his hips up, answering me with the full strength of his body. Sometimes I forget how much power he has—his thighs, his hips, in the way I’d drive across the country just to see him.

He gets a hand between us, jerking himself in time to my thrusts. Sweat builds in little beads on his forehead. He starts breathing my name as if he can’t help it. A minute later, his eyes screw shut. “I’m gonna come.”

“You’re doing so good, baby,” I say. “I want to feel you let go.”

“*Fuck.*” He pants around the word, then comes in a burst against his own hand, his hips stuttering, until I follow him over the edge. Until we’re floating together, his arms around me like they’re where I belong.

After, we lie for a minute. He rubs a circle on my side with his fingers. He’s quiet and I can’t tell if he’s overwhelmed or disappointed or just wrung out the way I am, like I’m drifting softly back to earth. “Was that okay?” I ask finally.

He kisses my hairline, then my temple. “It was really good.”

“So it could have been better?” I joke.

“It could be.”

My stomach drops, until he rolls his eyes good-naturedly, then sits up. “Hey, Victoria.”

She and Tyler are dozing together, holding each other the way Jonathan and I were a second ago. One of her eyebrows lifts in question. “Yes?”

“Do you have space on the bed?”

She smiles. “We can make room.”

They do, shifting over. It’s a tight fit. No, it’s a ridiculous fit—this bed is the size of the one Jonathan normally sleeps in alone. But it’s better this way. With all of us. With Jon at the edge and me next to him, and Victoria still on Tyler’s chest, even if she moves so that she’s draped on my arm.

“How was it?” she asks Jonathan.

Jonathan smiles and kisses her hair. “Mike’s pretty good in bed. Not sure if you knew.”

She giggles. Even Tyler’s smirk is amused. “So you enjoyed it?” she asks.

“I’m gonna leave a review,” Jonathan says. “Five out of five stars.”

I scrub a hand over my face. “Please don’t.”

“Too bad.” Jonathan snuggles closer. “I want to tell everyone about this.”

*Everyone.* The camera’s still recording, pointed at the bed. “You mean our friends?”

“Sure.” He shrugs easily and I think that’ll be the end of it until he pulls us to him and adds, “I’m talking to the Halos soon. I should probably let them know.”

## CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

### *Jonathan*

THE NEXT DAY, I wake up with Mike pressed against me. It takes a second to realize where we are: in a guest room at Victoria's ex-stepfather's mansion.

Victoria isn't sleeping in here—four of us in a guest bed is untenable—but she and I are going running this morning.

Or I would if I could slip out without waking Mike. He's asleep against my chest, the familiar muscles of his shoulders traced by early light. I want to get up—my body complains if I don't run—but I don't want to move, either, like all of this is a spell I don't want to break.

I ease Mike back toward the pillow when he murmurs.

I kiss his forehead. "Going for a run."

"Be careful," he says, as if there are dangers beyond stubbing a toe.

"You gonna get up?" Because it's not like him to sleep in.

He turns his face toward the pillow. "Someone woke me up early yesterday."

"You sure it's not because I wore you out?"

That gets him to open an eye. "You're not sore, are you?"

"I'm fine." I kiss him again. "I'm better than fine—did I mention I got drafted yesterday *and* a friend flew out to see me *and* we had two pretty great parties *and* also I was in a foursome? Or an orgy? Is there a minimum number for an orgy?"

Mike laughs and closes his eyes. "Go run."

"I scoped out the shower in this place. Definitely big enough for two people. Maybe more if we're careful."

"Go run," he says, "so you can wake me up when you get back."

And I practically whistle as I pull on my sneakers.

Victoria meets me in the living room wearing a sports bra and running tights. Her hair is back in its neat braid. Her face is scrubbed of makeup, but there's a bruise on her neck the approximate shape of someone's mouth, possibly mine.

She hugs me good morning and presses a kiss against my cheek. "There's a gym downstairs if you want."

"Nah, it's a pretty nice day out."

She smiles. "Because those are such a scarcity here." But she leads me out through the front door and down the steep descent of the driveway and out the gate.

Even for San Diego, it really is a nice day, the sun rising in the morning sky, the air cool and unhumid. We run, Victoria in quick, even steps, me loping behind her.

"You run like a track star," I say.

She laughs and picks up her pace. "You run like a pitcher."

"Ouch!" I call, feigning offense.

Victoria leads me around the neighborhood, up and down the hills by houses that make my parents' home look modest. We don't talk beyond pointing out various landmarks, and I lose myself in watching the sway of her hips and her braid, her smile as she cuts a path through the morning sunlight.

We descend for a while—running downhill strengthens stabilizing muscles and, also, it's fun—until we get to the bottom of a long slope. Victoria pauses, stretching, taking in the day around us.

"Are you really going to tell the Halos about you and Mike?" she asks, like she's been thinking about it.

I shake my head. "I mean, yes, but about all of us. Unless you don't want me to."

"Oh." An *oh* like she didn't expect to be included.

*Screw that.* I'm sweaty, she's sweaty. I kiss her anyway.

When we draw back, she frowns. "I don't know how the Halos will take all of this."

She's right. I know it won't be easy. The team probably won't understand. The public *definitely* won't understand. "I want people to know how great you both are," I say.

That gets her smile, but it fades just as quickly. "I wasn't gonna stop making videos."

I blink in surprise. "You mean the ones you took yesterday?"

She shakes her head. “Um, the camera angles were bad. The video wasn’t usable.”

“Wasn’t your phone pointing right at us?” I ask, confused.

“Jon...” she says, like she’s waiting for me to realize something. Oh. Right. That’s what I claimed about that first time with me and Mike. “I’m not ashamed,” she adds. “Certain things are just personal.”

And yeah, I get what she’s saying—how even though I signed up for a career where people watch me, I want to keep some stuff for myself. I lean down and kiss her. “So we have to make more videos?” I say, drawing back.

She shoves at my shoulder playfully. “No, but I might by myself. The money is good. I like doing it.” She shrugs. “Unless you don’t want me to.”

“It’s not my decision,” I say. “You should do what makes you happy.”

She rises on her toes to kiss my cheek. “You ready to run home?”

I gaze up the long rise of the hill we just came down. “Race you.”



WE RACE. OR WE TRY TO RACE—I’M TALLER BUT SHE’S A LOT FASTER, HER body more accustomed to hill running. We climb up, up, up, and I’m not winded, but I mete out my energy so that I don’t *get* winded. Which means she’s about half a block ahead of me when she lets out a sharp yelp and sinks to the pavement.

I rush up to meet her. “Are you okay?”

From the way she’s holding her ankle, she clearly isn’t. Her face is drawn with pain. She presses her lips together like she’s trying not to cry.

“I’ll get a car,” I say. Even if there’s not much curb or sidewalk and most of the houses are behind gates. I don’t want to leave her sitting in the street.

“Let me try to walk.” She gets up and almost immediately staggers.

“Here”—I put an arm under her—“lean on me.”

It’s slow going uphill, harder than running. We pause frequently. I’m flushed by the time we make it up a third of the way and hot soon after, enough that I strip off my shirt and wipe my face.

I’m about to offer Victoria my arm again when someone calls my name. I turn. A man I don’t know is approaching. “Are you Jonathan Halperin?” he asks, but he must know because he already has a Sharpie out.

“I am.” I glance to Victoria. “This isn’t a great time...”

The man frowns. I can practically hear a social media post write itself: *Jonathan Halperin, only a day in pro baseball and he's already an entitled prick.* “Just wondering if you would sign something”—he aims the Sharpie at me—“if it’s not a problem.”

Arguing will only drag this out. “Sure.” I take the Sharpie and dutifully sign the napkin the guy shoves my way.

“Can I get a picture too?” he asks.

“My friend needs to get home,” I say, and he looks at Victoria as if he hadn’t realized she was there. “She hurt her ankle.”

“Uh-huh,” the guy says, like he doesn’t believe me. “Picture won’t take long.”

So I duck and try to look like I’m smiling.

By the time we’re done, Victoria’s practically listing, her face damp with sweat. She stumbles forward when she tries to put weight on her foot.

“All right,” I say, “new plan.” It’s only a few hundred more feet back to the house. I scoop her up, carrying her with one arm tucked under her knees and the other supporting her back. She leans against my chest. “Here.” I give her my T-shirt, which is less sweaty than I am. “Use this as a pillow.”

“I can walk.”

I kiss her hair. “No, you can’t. And besides, you’re saving me from punching that guy in the jaw.”

“You wouldn’t.”

She’s right, I wouldn’t. “You’re saving me from thinking about punching him in the jaw.”

Victoria’s laugh ends in a slight hiss. Her ankle is beginning to purple and swell. So I climb the steep grade back to the house, not thinking about anything but getting her there safely.



WE’RE BOTH DRENCHED IN SWEAT BY THE TIME WE MAKE IT TO THE LIVING room. I deposit Victoria gently on the sofa.

The contact of her ankle against the cushions makes her whimper. “There’s an ice pack down in the kitchen in the freezer on the left-hand side. Get that, and a dishcloth from the drawer next to the stove.”

I glance around. The kitchen is...where? Great, I’m totally useless.



A voice comes from behind me—Tyler, standing in one of the doorways. “I’ll get it. You stay with her.”

He must take the stairs two at a time, because he’s back a minute later, holding an ice pack and towel.

“We need to elevate my foot,” she says.

Tyler grabs two throw pillows and stacks them, letting Victoria transport her leg onto the pile, then drapes the dish towel on her ankle and follows it with the ice pack.

Victoria squeezes her eyes shut in obvious pain. “I have some ibuprofen in the cabinet in the bathroom—*that* bathroom.”

Tyler laughs, for some reason. He gets those, a bottle of water, and a tube of crackers. “In case you haven’t eaten anything,” he says. “Painkillers bother James’s stomach.”

She gives him a slightly watery smile.

“Do you need to go to urgent care?” he asks, like he might scoop her up and drive her there himself.

She shakes her head. “Let’s see once the swelling goes down. It might just be a bad twist.”

“Don’t say you’re fine if you’re not,” Tyler counters.

“Hey.” Victoria reaches for his hand, threading their fingers together. “I’m not. I just shocked myself.” She nods toward me. “Jonathan carried me up a hill.”

Tyler scowls, but it’s a comical scowl. “How chivalrous.”

“You’d have done the same thing,” I say.

“Yeah, I would.” He sits next to her on the couch. “Your hair is sweaty. Truly gross.” But he’s stroking his hand down her face. Whatever lingering distrust of him I had—for hurting Mike’s feelings, for just kind of being a douche—fades. If he cares about her like this, the rest will work itself out.

I go wash up in the luxuriously normal-sized shower. When I get out, Mike’s not in bed. Instead, I find him on the back deck, drinking a mug of coffee and studying his phone pensively.

“Hey”—I kiss his hair in greeting—“Victoria hurt her ankle while we were running.”

“Yeah.” Mike’s voice is gravel. “I know.” He hands me his phone.

On it, an Insta post. It takes a second to realize what I’m looking at. There’s our picture—me, shirtless, Victoria resting against my chest, my face equal parts concern and strain. The caption: *Halos prospect...a knight in*

*shining armor?* It's gone moderately viral, and the *likes* count only increases each time I refresh it.

"That's not so bad," I say.

"Read the comments, Jon."

*OMG!!!!* Followed by heart eyes emojis. A few people propose marriage. A few spambots propose I slide in their DMs. That can't be what Mike is worried about.

*Isn't that the girl who used to work in the clubhouse? You think they were ~involved~ before?* That's worse but nothing truly bad. It's not like Victoria still works there. It's not like it's a conflict of interest now.

*You mean the one with the XXX channel?* And that is bad. No way to spin it. Not when people are dropping her OnlyFans handle in the comments.

*Wonder where Pappalardo is. Since he and Halperin are...close if you know what I mean.* And that's really, really bad. The Halos are going to see this. My advisor—now my agent—is going to see this. My parents might see this. I woke up wanting to tell the world about both of them, but not like this.

"Fuck," I say.

"Yeah," Mike agrees. "*Fuck.*"

"Does Victoria know?"

Mike shakes his head. "I haven't told her. Last I saw, Tyler was calling a doctor to see if one would come to the house."

"He really likes her."

Mike nods, tightly. "He does. We do too. I know you wanted to talk to the team. You should tell them this is a big misunderstanding. That you carried a *friend* up a hill to her *boyfriend*, who's taking care of her."

My shoulders go stiff. "I don't want to lie to people."

"You ever think Victoria wants you to lie?"

I think back to Victoria casually stretching in the sunlight, telling me she's going to keep making videos. "Is it that Victoria wants me to lie," I say, "or is that *you* want me to?"

I don't wait for his answer. I go inside the house, back to the living room, where Victoria is sitting up on the couch. She looks less ashen than she did, but when she sees me, her face pinches with concern. I must look...I don't know. *Determined.*

"Are you okay?" she asks.

I thrust my phone at her. "Someone got a picture of me carrying you. It

went viral.”

She takes the phone, then scrolls through the comments. “This isn’t good.”

“So people keep saying.”

Footsteps approach—Mike, who comes in and stands a little apart like he’s trying to separate himself from the situation.

“I’m gonna call the Halos,” I say.

Mike’s frown deepens. “What are you going to tell them?”

“The truth—that this is none of their business.”

“Jon, even you can’t be that naive.”

I bristle. “*Mike*,” I say in the same tone, “I am in love with you.” I turn to Victoria. “With both of you. Stop trying to make me say I’m not.”

“They could rescind their offer to sign you.” Mike ticks off on his fingers. “They could put out a statement about you being a bad organizational fit. You might not get to play. This could be it for you.”

“You really don’t have to do that,” Victoria adds.

“Yeah.” I give them both a steady look. “I know.”

Confusion wrinkles Mike’s forehead. “You’d walk away from everything?”

“I’d be walking *toward* something,” I say. “If they don’t want to sign me, then I’ll play overseas for a year or go back to school. Let it be known that *they* weren’t a good fit for *me*.”

Mike closes the distance between us and grips my arms, fingers strong against my elbows. “I don’t want you to do that. I want you to get everything you want.”

“Here’s the thing,” I say, “I already have.” I kiss him, his mouth tentative, his hand on the back of my neck like he’s holding on. And I don’t care if the entire world is watching through the big picture window, because all I want to do is kiss them both.

I pull away, then lean down to kiss Victoria. Her lips part gently under mine. She kisses the way I always imagined it before we were together—in a way that would make me carry her up a mountain if she wanted me to.

After we kiss, she scooches so I can sit next to her on the couch, then rests her face against my chest. “Mike’s right,” she murmurs. “You are ridiculous.”

“I love you both too.”

“You’re doing this for real?” she asks.

“Yeah. I mean, I can throw a hundred miles an hour and they can’t. They kinda need me more than I need them. I guess we’ll see how it works out.”

Mike stares at me, searching, then he gets that look that he puts on right before a game, that assurance that it’s all gonna work out okay. “Well,” he says, “here goes nothing.”

## CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

### *Victoria*

JONATHAN GATHERS us in the living room. James isn't home yet, but a text sits on my phone from my mother, reassuring me they're on their way. My ankle throbs. My head throbs.

Jonathan's been fiddling with his phone for a solid ten minutes, organizing everyone who has to be on a call. Meanwhile, the news has only gotten louder—that picture is now fully viral.

I refresh various social media feeds. Most of the world is in love with him. *Most*. But a handful are quick to point out who I am. Screenshots from our campus gossip Insta are in every reply. *Halperin got caught with an OnlyFans model the day after the draft* seems to be the prevailing headline with *Halperin maybe fucked his teammate* as an undercurrent.

“Okay.” Jonathan has that same wide-eyed, nervous look he gets before games. “I think everyone's here.”

“Who's everyone?” I whisper.

Jonathan cups his hand over the phone. “My agent. The Halos' general manager. And, uh, my dad.”

“Your *dad* is here?” My insides seize.

“He'll understand.” He frowns. “I hope he'll understand.” He takes his hand off his phone. “I wanted to clear up something that happened today.”

A deep voice emanates from the phone speaker. “Son, we appreciate you taking the initiative to reach out.”

Jonathan mouths *That's the GM*. He takes a deep inhale. “It's important to me that I play for a team where I can be who I am. That's what I wanted to talk with you about. If that means I'm a bad organizational fit, then I want to say I'm grateful for the opportunity to have been a Halo, no matter for how short a time.”

“Jonathan”—another voice, his agent—“let’s not get ahead of ourselves. What actually happened?”

“I’m visiting a friend in San Diego. When we were running, she hurt her ankle, so I carried her home.”

Silence follows that declaration with the implication of...*and?*

“I met that friend when she worked in our clubhouse in college. We were together—are together—but it started when she still worked for the team.”

The silence after that goes a little longer. “I appreciate you wanting to dispel any sense of impropriety,” the GM says, “but this is possibly making mountains out of molehills.”

“Well...” Jonathan drags out the word. “Victoria has a second job. Making OnlyFans content. That’s, uh, an adult content site.”

The GM doesn’t say anything, but there’s a sense that he’s pinching the bridge of his nose. “Yes, I’m familiar.”

“There’s more.” Jonathan swallows and looks at Mike and me. “She’s not the only person I’m dating.”

Now the silence is definitely longer.

“I’m in a relationship. It’s kind of complicated. But Victoria and I are together, and we’re together with another person—he was on the team too in college—and she has a different boyfriend, I guess, and —”

The GM clears his throat. “This sounds like quite a situation.”

“I nearly made a diagram,” Jonathan agrees.

From over the phone, there’s a giggle, like someone can’t contain their laugh.

“Is everyone over the age of eighteen?” the GM asks.

Jonathan looks momentarily horrified. “Yes, sir.”

“And,” the GM continues, “everyone involved is doing so with their full consent?”

“Of course.”

“And these videos, you’re not in any of them, right?”

Jonathan tenses. “Um.”

A long silence follows. Another voice—Jonathan’s father—swears.

“So step one,” the GM says, “is that we’ll ask you to remove those—we can’t always quash any screenshots, but California law frowns on distributing those without the involved parties’ consent.”

Jonathan’s eyebrows shoot up. “What?”

“Son,” the GM says, “do you think you’re the first player involved in,

let's call this, a complex but *personal* relationship?"

"Oh."

"Or the first one to be involved in *adult content creation*?"

Behind me, Tyler is pressing his lips together like he's going to laugh. I take a gulp of air. I won't laugh. I won't.

The GM's business tone returns. "We appreciate you bringing this to our attention. We want our players to feel that they can be transparent with us."

"Did you miss the part where I also have a boyfriend?" Jonathan asks.

"No," the GM says with a paternal sort of despair, "I did not miss that. Is your boyfriend still a teammate?"

Jonathan shakes his head, then remembers he's on speakerphone. "No, sir."

"So the plan is this: We'll promote this as your being chivalrous—to a *friend*—and make no further comments on the matter. Ninety percent of people will see you as a hero, and the rest will blow over quickly."

"But she's my girlfriend."

Mike nudges him with an elbow. "Take the win."

Jonathan frowns. Tension runs through his mouth and jaw. His shoulders creep toward his ears. "Hold on one sec."

He mutes his phone. "I don't want this to just blow over. I'm not ashamed. I'm sick of everyone trying to make you both ashamed." He taps something on his phone then holds up his screen, displaying an Instagram draft with the photo we took at the beach.

"Remember that day?" he asks, but it's mostly rhetorical. "Everything felt like it just fell into place." He types out a caption and shows it to us. "I won't put this up if you don't want me to."

"Jon"—Mike's staring at him with equal parts frustration and admiration—"once this is out there, you can't take it back. It's going to be *the* story about you. People won't let you forget this, no matter what else you do."

"You mean like they did to you?" Jonathan asks. He reaches for Mike and kisses his temple, then reaches for me and presses a kiss to my cheek. "You both want to protect me. I get that. But what's protection and what's hiding?"

Mike nods. "If you're sure."

"About you?" Jonathan says. "Always." He turns to me. "This is your decision too."

I examine the photo. In it, we're happy, even if that happiness took on a different shape than any of us expected. "If you didn't post this, would you

feel like it was hanging over your head?”

Jonathan takes a contemplative breath. “I don’t want to go into my career afraid someone will tell the truth about us. I don’t want to be afraid, period.” He picks up his phone and writes something else, adding to the caption. He displays it for me and for Mike, thumb hovering over the *post* button.

Mike closes his hand over Jonathan’s, and I do the same. It should be silly—an *all hands in* like they used to do before college games—but it isn’t. Only someone’s missing.

“Tyler...,” I say. It’s not quite a question.

Tyler turns to Jonathan. “This is for her?”

Jonathan smiles. “It’s for all of us.”

“All right.” Tyler says it grudgingly, but he clasps his hand over mine, tapping Jonathan’s thumb against the button. A little confirmation pops up. It’s out there.

Jonathan takes his phone and unmutes it. “I know your advice is to let this blow over, but I wanted to clarify the situation publicly.”

This time, there’s the silence of other people muting their phones. I check my Instagram. Jonathan didn’t tag me or Mike or the Halos, but I like the post anyway.

A minute later, the GM’s voice comes back. “If that’s your decision, then give us a few days to consider our offer.”

Sweat starts to bead up my back. *They’re saying no. Jonathan comes out and they’re saying no.* All of this is real, like we were at the edge of a cliff, and now we’re in freefall.

“I understand.” Jonathan looks definite, the way he does when he’s playing, when the world is his to command. “Let me know what you decide.”

The call ends. Jonathan eases back onto the couch. An unquantifiable noise makes its way up his throat. For a second, I worry he might cry, but he isn’t. He’s laughing. “Fuck,” he says, like he can’t believe he just did that.

“Fuck,” Mike agrees. They fall against each other, and Jonathan wraps an arm around me. Tyler can’t quite fit on the couch, but he comes over, grabbing a throw pillow, seating himself on the floor. I stroke my hand through his hair.

“Do you have any other marketable skills?” Tyler asks, after a while.

Jonathan laughs. “I can reach stuff on high shelves.” His phone is on the table. He doesn’t have notifications silenced, so it buzzes and buzzes. “I think everyone’s probably mad at me.”



“We’re not.” I kiss his cheek.

He shrugs easily, like all of this can slide right off him. “Then that’s good enough for me.”



@JHALPY18

*Yesterday was one of the best days of my life. I’ve been dreaming of playing professional baseball ever since I was old enough to hold a ball. Getting drafted sixth to a team where I grew up is a dream come true. But it’s not the only dream I’ve achieved this year. That’s the thing about dreams... sometimes they surprise you.*

*It’s said that the pitcher’s mound can be the loneliest place in the world. It’s just you, sixty feet from everyone. But it’s also what you carry into the game: your preparation, your competitiveness, all the people who’ve helped you get there. Some of that’s my family. Some of that’s my teammates, coaches, and friends. And some of that is the people I’m in love with.*

*Turns out, love is kind of funny. It makes certain things clear. How those of us who get the bright lights aren’t always the ones doing the hardest work. Mike and Victoria asked me if I wanted people to know about our situation, but the truth is, I want to tell everyone about them all the time. Maybe that’s what love is: seeing the best in other people even when they don’t see it in themselves.*

*I’m not asking you to understand or even accept that. I’ve understood for a long time that what I want from baseball means that I have to give up some of my privacy. But there are choices we make that we make for ourselves and no one else. And this is my choice. If I choose, I choose them and whatever dream we build together, even if that looks different from other people’s dreams. It’s my dream—it’s our dream—and I wouldn’t want it any other way.*

## CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

### *Tyler*

SO EVERYONE KNOWS about Mike and Victoria and Jonathan. *And not you.* Even if I'm the one who tapped the actual post button. I'm not letting it bother me. Really. But Mike and Jonathan get up after the call and I can't seem to move from the floor.

Everyone's going to know about them. They'll be famous. People will hate them. *People will love them.* I should be jealous. Every logical thing says to be jealous. Mostly, I just take out my phone and search for a better security system for the house. If people want to bother Victoria, they'll have to go through a reinforced gate...and me.

"Would you mind swapping this ice pack out?" Victoria says it like she's asking for the second time.

"Sure." I get up from the couch. "You need anything else?"

She nods and threads her fingers in the fabric of my shirt, tugging me down. She kisses me long enough that I rest my knees against the couch cushion so she doesn't have to crane her neck.

"You trying to keep me from being left out?" I ask. It doesn't come out as sarcastic as I want it to.

Victoria's eyes shine with amusement. "Maybe I just like you."

I kiss her again. Her mouth tastes like bottled water and saltine crackers. I can't get enough of her. I pull back. "I can bring you some breakfast"—another kiss—"or some coffee"—another kiss—"or —"

I don't finish that sentence. Not when someone behind me clears their throat. I turn. I don't know how long James has been there for, but there's no way he didn't see us.

He gives me an uninterpretable smile. "Good morning, Tyler." He nods to Victoria's leg, which is still propped up. "Is everything all right?"

*So we're not talking about him having just walked in on us.* "She hurt her ankle running," I say.

James nods. "Well, it looks like she's well taken care of." From anyone else, that might be a cheap shot. From him, it comes out as mild as a comment on the weather.

My pulse starts throbbing in my temple. "I can bring you some coffee," I say, then wince. What I'd been offering Victoria when he walked in.

"Why don't I accompany you to the kitchen?" James offers.

*So we are going to talk about it.* My pulse doesn't settle as I trudge down the stairs, as I punch commands into the coffee maker and wait until it begins to hiss and gurgle. James follows me—at this point in his recovery, he's doing most things normally, albeit with bouts of fatigue. Still, I watch for signs of dizziness, but he looks hale. Chipper, even.

"You should know," he says, after I've handed him a cup of coffee with a heavy glug of oat milk in it and fixed one for myself, "things between Anne and myself are becoming serious."

I'm not surprised but try to pretend to be. That way I can act surprised when he suggests I move out. "Really?"

"We had a long discussion with Elizabeth last night. She's aware of my desire for us all to be a family again. I should also let you know I revised my will to reflect that."

*His will.* Right. Of course. So I'm not just being kicked out. I assumed he wasn't leaving me his money—that it's going to his daughter. But it's one thing to know and another to hear. "I understand. I'll start looking for apartments later today."

James frowns. "I think we're having a miscommunication."

My pulse ticks up impossibly higher. "No miscommunication—you want Lizzy here and Lizzy wants Victoria here. You told me..." *Not to fall in love with her...* "You made it clear that I was to treat Victoria a certain way. I didn't. I don't see any sense in prolonging this."

Now his forehead really does wrinkle. He sets down his coffee cup. "Are you paying her for her work this summer?"

I nod—I've sent her a thousand dollars each week that she's been here. Maybe I should just send her a lump sum for the rest.

"Does what I saw upstairs affect any part of her work?" he asks.

"No."

"Then I'm not sure what the issue is."

“You told me...” My voice is locked somewhere in my throat, but I pull it out. “When we moved in together, for the first time. That I was supposed to respect her.”

“I didn’t see any disrespect.”

And I want to grind my teeth together in frustration, but I settle for saying, “You said she was off-limits.”

James smiles. “Yes, when you were sixteen and very clearly taken with her and expressed that in ways that weren’t always healthy.”

*I’m still taken with her.* “And now...?”

“Now you’re no longer sixteen.” He gives me another smile. “And you’ve grown up well—you both have.”

“I thought...” Because it doesn’t matter what I thought. I shake my head to clear it. “If you’re redoing your will, well, I know where I stand.”

“What I was trying to say”—James’s tone approaches exasperation—“is that I put some money in trust for Elizabeth. The same way I did for you.”

I blink. I live here. James paid for my college. I have access to his accounts to pay for any household expenses and the things he needs. Not... the rest of his money. “I didn’t realize.”

“I should’ve mentioned it sooner, but my recovery has been more difficult than I expected. You’ve done such an admirable job with everything this year, son.”

*Son.* He’s called me that, occasionally, but not with this seriousness. “You don’t have to pay me.” *I would’ve done it for free. I did do it for free.*

That makes James smile. “The money is yours because I want you to have it. Because we’re a family—and if I haven’t made that clear to you, then that’s my own doing, and I apologize.”

Something in my chest is pressing against my ribs—like my lungs got smaller or my heart suddenly expanded. *Is this a heart attack?* But no, I looked up those symptoms when James was first diagnosed, just in case. Heart attacks usually don’t feel...good. “Thank you,” I manage.

“You really have grown up well,” he says. “You take good care of your sister—Elizabeth told us about everything you did for her team. You’re responsible. You’re thorough. You’re kind.”

*Kind.* A word that doesn’t fit. I’m not kind. Everyone is quick to tell me how much of an asshole I am. Except Lizzy, but she’s a kid and doesn’t know better. And James, I guess. *And Victoria.* But that’s not who I am. My skepticism must show.

James smiles. “Kindness doesn’t always look the same. Sometimes it’s about remembering why you’re doing the things you’re doing—whose interests you’re serving and how.”

And I’m hit with a memory from when I was nine or ten: tagging along with him to meetings and watching him casually dismantle his competitors. How he would take me for soft serve after and explain all the parts of business in ways I could understand. How, even with my mom off wherever, in those moments, I felt less like the lonely kid I was.

“Thanks, Dad,” I say, my voice hoarse in my throat. But for the first time, calling him that doesn’t feel like something I’m trying on to see whether it fits.

My phone buzzes. I pull it from my pocket and scan the email preview. “Are you all set here?” I ask.

James looks over from where he’s leaning on the counter, contentedly drinking coffee like he doesn’t have a care in the world. Maybe he doesn’t.

“Yes, thank you for checking. I’m all set.” He takes another sip of coffee. “Where are you off to?”

I thumb open the email and skim it until I find an address. “Just gonna show someone the kindness they deserve.”

James laughs at that and shakes his head. “Whatever it is, be sensible.”

“Don’t worry.” I smile, feeling surer than I have in days, possibly years. “I won’t forget who I’m doing this for.”



THE ADDRESS IS TO AN UNASSUMING HOUSE ABOUT THIRTY MINUTES FROM James’s: a one-story place with a gravel and succulent yard. The only thing to distinguish it from its neighbors is the lapis blue front door. It looks freshly painted. That’ll make this better.

Victoria’s sitting in the back of the car, her leg propped on one of the seats. The swelling has gone down significantly. Still, I’m careful as I park the car, leaving the engine to idle.

I hop out, then grab the stuff sitting in the passenger seat. “This will only take a second,” I say.

Victoria smiles warily. “You haven’t said why we’re here.”

I hand her one of the two things I’m holding: a printed-out letter. She

reads it, eyes moving rapidly over the page. Then reads it again. “This is a cease and desist letter,” she says.

I nod. “This is the guy who’s been bothering you—the one who made that Reddit post. He and I are going to have a conversation.”

She nods to the roll of gaffer’s tape I’m holding. “What’s that for?”

I smile at that, bright. “So that he ceases. And desists.”

Victoria’s eyes go wide. “Tyler —”

“I’m not going to hurt him—not physically.” I take the letter back. “Be back in a second. You probably want to keep the engine running, just in case.”

The lights are on as I approach the house. I should probably be nervous. I don’t know this guy, but every action about him has been soft—the way he creeped on Victoria and doxed Mike, the way he hid behind layers of anonymity online. Guys like that don’t love confrontation. Which is too bad. Because I love confrontation.

When I get to the front door, I pull off a length of tape. It’s silly to have a favorite kind of tape, but this one’s mine. We use it in robotics to fix basically anything. Now I’m going to use it to fix this situation. The front door is wood—the tape adhesive won’t strip the paint off this. Probably.

I tear the first length of tape and hang the letter from the door. Strip one fixes it right below the peephole. Strip two anchors the bottom of the letter. I add strips on each side, then more diagonally at the corners for good measure. There’s no way this is going anywhere without some serious effort.

I don’t bother being quiet, not as I peel off tape, not as I thump my hand across the door to affix it.

I must get someone’s attention, because a second later, there’s frantic pounding from inside the house. The door opens and I step back in case anyone comes out swinging.

The guy standing there is a nondescript bro: damp hair, backwards hat, outraged expression. “What the fuck are you doing?” he asks.

“Hi, Joe,” I say, “you’ve been giving my friend a hard time. You’re going to stop.”

He eyes the roll of thick black tape in my hand and goes a little pale. “Who?”

“How much of an asshole are you that you have to ask *who*? Don’t answer that. Here’s the thing—maybe you flushed out of high school baseball or maybe you’re just the kind of guy who wants to feel important. I don’t

really care. What cannot happen is you harassing Victoria—or anyone else.”

“You can’t just threaten me,” he says.

“Read the letter.”

He reaches for the letter, then registers exactly how much tape I used and lets out a whine of frustration. But he reads it. Then reads it again. “Revenge porn? What the fuck do you mean?”

“Doxing people isn’t nice behavior, Joe.”

He snorts. “She’s a fucking OnlyFans model—she’s giving it up to anyone with five bucks.”

“The premium tier is thirty.” I give him my brightest, worst smile. “Or can you not afford that?”

“Why are you even doing this?” he asks. “It’s not like she loves you.”

I glance back to the car and wave to Victoria, then turn back to Joe and clench my hand into a fist. “Are you sure that’s the tactic you want to take?”

Joe’s mouth clicks shut.

“Good. Now that we understand each other. You are going to close your OnlyFans account. You are going to stay out of sex workers’ DMs. If I so much as catch a whiff that you’re back at this, I will ruin you in every way that matters. Do we understand one another?”

He makes a gagging noise I take as agreement.

“Great, consider yourself served.” And I walk away, leaving Joe to sputter at my back.

Back in the car, Victoria has her hand clamped over her mouth. I should climb in the driver’s seat and get us out of here before Joe has a chance to regroup. Fuck that. I open the rear door.

“You could have mailed the letter to him,” Victoria says. But her smile is practically burning with delight.

I shrug. “Felt like he needed to hear it in person.”

“He might call the cops. Say you threatened him.”

I put on my best businessman voice. “I was simply ensuring he got notice of my letter.”

She laughs, big and open. “All right, you’ve convinced me.”

“Is he still watching us?”

She peers over my shoulder. “Yeah, he’s got his phone out. Probably filming.”

“He really doesn’t learn, does he?” I ask.

Victoria shakes her head, a swish of her blond hair.

“Looks like he needs to experience some consequences,” I say.

She laughs again. “Looks like.”

“But first”—and I pull Victoria to me gently, relishing in the feel of her against me, the fire in her gray-blue eyes, the way her lips part in anticipation of mine—“let’s give him something worth watching.”



## CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

### *Jonathan*

## ONE WEEK LATER

“JON,” my mother calls, “someone from the Halos is on the house phone.”

I get up from my bed—I’ve spent much of the past week here, staring at the phone, wishing it would ring. It has, to a certain extent: Every baseball reporter in the world has tried to get a story out of me. I direct them to my agent, who directs them to my Instagram post. I said what I said.

Mike’s not here: He flew back to St. Louis four days ago to pack his stuff so he can drive back out here for his new job—so we can all be together. The thought still sets my heart against my ribs.

The last time I saw him was when I dropped him off at the airport with his phone pressed to his ear, his side of the conversation a series of *yeahs*.

Victoria’s still in San Diego for the summer, but she promises to come up when she can. She didn’t provide many details, but James is sick or recovering, and she and Tyler are sharing the responsibilities for that. She sent me a text this morning, a picture shot from the back deck of James’s house, San Diego sprawling before her. *Sometimes the world is simple.*

Even as I pick up the phone, it doesn’t quite feel that way. “Hello, this is Jonathan Halperin.”

Over the phone, the GM laughs. He probably wouldn’t call me with bad news, right? Bad news is an email.

Still, I can’t help my nerves. I stand up a little straighter, imagining Mike and Victoria with me. Sometimes love is that feeling you get when people aren’t in the room but they’re there anyway. No matter what happens, I’ll be

all right.

“I’m calling to formally invite you to our Complex League team in Arizona,” the GM says. “And to be a part of the Anaheim Halos organization.”

The Complex League: the lowest level of the minor leagues, where newly drafted, newly signed players usually begin their professional careers. “Sir?” I ask.

“You mentioned being an organizational fit. Let’s give that a shot. I’ll send final numbers to your agent today, but I feel we should be able to reach a mutually agreed contract fairly easily.”

My heart starts pounding again. *This is good, this is good, this is good.* “What made you change your mind?”

The GM huffs. “I’ve been in this game a long time. One of the things we look for is being a competitor. Our scouting said you had some mental skills issues we’d like resolved. But you’re a stubborn-minded asshole, Halperin.”

“Um, thank you. I think?”

He laughs. “You gotta be a stubborn-minded asshole to make it in this game. Can you get yourself to Phoenix by Wednesday?”

I check the calendar hanging on my wall, the one where I’ve been X-ing over the days until the signing deadline. Right now, it’s Monday at ten in the morning. “I can be there today.”

“Good. We’ll see you then.” Then adds, “You certainly have people willing to go to bat for you. That’s good too. You’re gonna need ’em.” And hangs up.

I let everything sink in for about five seconds. “Mom,” I yell because she’s probably hovering in the hallway, “the Halos want me to go to Arizona.”

Sure enough, she comes in, a dry cleaner bag slung over one shoulder.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Your suit. For when you sign your contract.”

“You didn’t know that it was a sure thing.”

She stands on her toes and kisses my cheek. “Never doubted it for a second. Now”—she approaches my closet and flings open the doors—“let’s get you to Phoenix.”



LATER THAT AFTERNOON, I PULL INTO THE HALOS' TRAINING COMPLEX. I spent the drive out making calls—my agent, my coaches from high school and college—but when I tried to reach Mike and Victoria, they didn't pick up.

I get out and grab my game bag. The parking lot asphalt is gooey from the midsummer heat; some of it sticks to my shoes. It's objectively gross and kind of perfect—each step a reminder how I worked to be here.

Inside, the training complex looks like a cross between a gym and an office building. A receptionist sits at the front desk, tapping things out on her laptop.

"Hi," I say, "sorry to drop by unannounced."

She frowns for exactly one second, then holds her hand up as if blocking the upper part of my head with her hand. "Halperin?" she confirms.

"Yep, that's me. What's with the—" I make the same gesture she is.

"Ballplayers are easier to recognize if you imagine them wearing a hat."

I laugh. "Gotcha."

She slides an envelope toward me. "We have a room set up for you." She points out where the team housing is located on a map. "Your locker is downstairs. Guys should be around if you want to go get the lay of the land."

"They know I'm coming?" I ask. Because in all this, I didn't fully chew on explaining my whole romantic situation to new teammates.

She smirks at that. "Oh, they are *very* aware."

*What's that mean?* But I thank her and follow the signs downstairs.

Inside the locker room, there's no question which locker is mine. Like most clubhouses, lockers are open wooden stalls, each with an area to hang clothes and various equipment, along with a small metal safe for valuables.

My stall already has my name on a placard above it and team-issued pieces of my uniform displayed on hangers. And someone's decorated it with rainbow tape.

A lot of rainbow tape.

Tape lines its sides and decorates the wooden shelf. Someone even wound tape around the closet pole—it bridges the stall like a rainbow fucking candy cane.

My heart rate shoots up. *Is this hazing? Did I just drive across the desert for a prank?* I'm still carrying my bag with my cleats and glove. I need to unload it. I need to not let my new teammates know this bothers me. So I flip through the stuff already in my stall—pants, belts, undershirts, and

compression sleeves. A single jersey with an *18* printed across the back.

Above me, the safe is unlocked, its door the slightest bit ajar. So I open it. And trigger something...

Because I'm hit with a burst.

*Glitter.*

Glitter—in my face, my hair, down my chest. “What the hell?” I ask, just as a bunch of guys pop out from seemingly nowhere.

“Surprise!” they yell.

I sputter around a mouthful of glitter.

“Welcome to the team, man,” one of them shouts. “We're so fucking glad you're here.”

And *oh*—this isn't hazing. It's the opposite. Guys come up to me, hugging me, heedless of the fact I look like a human disco ball, introducing themselves in rapid succession, a few outfielders, a few other pitchers.

A catcher who introduces himself as Perez gives me a thumping hug like we're old friends. He holds up his left hand—he's wearing a wedding ring, one of those rubber ones that athletes wear during games. “I'm spoken for, so don't go falling in love with me, okay?”

“I'll do my best not to,” I say, and he laughs big at that. “You guys really don't mind the whole...” I try to sum up *Mike* and *Victoria* and occasionally *Tyler* situation.

“Nah man,” Perez assures me. “You balled *out* in college. You do that for us, and we don't give a shit that you're banging two porn stars.”

“Hey, Mike is an *engineer*.”

For whatever reason, that sends Perez into peals of laughter, along with the rest of the guys. My pulse slows. My shoulders relax. They want me here. Whatever happens off the field, they have my back.

I wipe my face, which does nothing to fix the amount of glitter on it. “You know this shit's never gonna wash off, right?”

Perez claps me on the shoulder. “We're counting on it.”

There isn't much in the way of formal practice today, but guys are milling around. I mill with them—Perez and Jackson, one of the outfielders, give me a tour of the whole facility: the various batting cages and bullpens and training rooms. The weight room, which is enormous, with treadmills and other cardio equipment lining its perimeter. “Any place to run outside?” I ask.

“It's fucking Arizona, man,” Perez says. “It's too hot to do anything

outside.”

Jackson nods to Perez, who’s built like a catcher—square, with most of his weight in his legs. “What’re you asking him about running advice, anyway?”

Something in that makes me miss Mike acutely. He’s still not answering his phone. All my messages are marked *delivered* but not *read*.

Victoria’s are the same.

*Where are they?*

I can’t let that weigh on me. I’m here to prove that I was worth signing. “Any chance you’re up for some catch?”

Perez smiles. “Thought you’d never ask, bro.”



THE NEXT DAY, WE HAVE A GAME AGAINST ANOTHER COMPLEX LEAGUE TEAM. The whole clubhouse is boisterous, even if I catch my name being shouted in occasional loud whispers.

Their coach—I guess my coach now—calls me into his office. He looks like most of my other baseball coaches: a white guy with a deep tan and premature wrinkles, either from spending his professional life in the sun or, more likely, talking with ballplayers. He greets me and gestures to one of the folding chairs in front of his desk.

I sit. It’s low enough that my knees stick up.

“We’d like to have you throw out of the bullpen today,” he says.

Not surprising—a way to have me ease in with an inning or two versus the longer commitment of a full start. “No problem.”

“Good, good.” Coach nods at his clipboard. “We always check in with guys before their first game. How many more tickets do you want for your family block?”

*More?* I scan that for insult or insinuation. If any is there, I can’t tell. “I thought tickets were free.”

He smiles and sets down the clipboard. “They are—we just want a headcount for when we think there might be a space issue.”

*A space issue? In the Arizona Complex League?* Most games are just watched by team personnel and scouts and maybe a handful of true diehards. I try not to let my surprise show in case he thinks that’s insubordination. “A

few should do it. My parents are flying out tomorrow.” *Still no Mike. Still no Victoria.*

“Is that addition to the folks already here?” he says.

“Uh,” I say, “what folks?”

Coach smiles at me. “Son, when was the last time you checked the news?”

“Maybe last night? I got rid of most of the apps from my phone.” *Mostly so I didn’t fight people in my Instagram comments.*

“You might want to take a look at this.” He slides me an iPad. On it, a video that’s been posted to the Halos’ Instagram; Mike’s face sits frozen in the thumbnail. He’s wearing dress clothes—his suit that makes him look like a hot waiter. His hair is tied back neatly. I press play.

“The first time I met Jon,” he says, “I wasn’t sure what to expect. Big-name players can be kind of unapproachable. But I made a silly joke and he laughed. That’s the best thing about him—a lot of guys seem like they’re nice, but it’s for show. Jon really is *that* nice.”

The video cuts to a few of our old teammates, talking about the College World Series, about games I pitched, about what I was like in practices. Then to Victoria. “I worked in the clubhouse. Jonathan was always incredibly kind. His locker was always a mess”—she lowers her voice conspiratorially—“but don’t tell him I said that.”

On it goes from there: coaches, my parents, a few people I played with in high school. A shot from the Zoom recording of me getting drafted. Another highlight reel of games. A few other candid—team celebrations, parties where I look more or less sober and...*that photo*. The one from my Instagram post slipped in among the others, the picture Mike and Victoria and me at the beach. Like I’m just a normal guy. Like this is any other highlight package that the team would share on social media.

I’m not going to cry. But I swallow around the sudden feeling like I might. “Did the team do this?” I ask.

“Your friends reached out and suggested it. They wanted to make sure we had the full picture of you.” Coach takes the iPad back. “Once they put a call out, we were amazed at the responses. I like to say that loyalty begets loyalty. If you have this many people in your corner, we should probably be there too.”

I can’t say anything in response—I’m too overwhelmed, the same flying feeling of draft day amplified about ten thousand times. It must show.

“Pregame jitters?” Coach asks.

I shake my head. “Just can’t wait to get started.”

Coach smiles. “Then I suggest you get yourself out to the field. We’ve got some baseball to play.”

## CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

### *Victoria*

FROM WHERE WE'RE SITTING, the field looks enormous. I know it's the same dimensions as the one Jonathan played on in college, but there's something larger about it. Maybe it's the Halos logos everywhere. Maybe it's the sign I'm holding or how my heart won't stop tapping against my ribs.

Or how crowded the stands around me are.

Both baselines are lined with seats. Beyond the outfield, there's a set of berms where people are picnicking. Almost every available seat is filled. It's mid-July. It's hot as blazes.

I poke Mike with my elbow. "Were you expecting this many people?"

Mike's eyes are wide as he takes in the scene. "Absolutely not."

"Why do you think they're here?" I ask, even if I know why. Jonathan's going to pitch. They're here to see him.

On the other side of me, Tyler's frowning at his work phone, answering emails and looking like he'd rather be doing anything else. So I check in with Savannah, who's pinch-hitting for the day on James duty.

Me: How's James?

Savannah: You know him, hasn't stopped complaining lol

Me: ha ha

Savannah: He's fine. Too bad I can't stick around longer

Me: Remind me where you're going.

Savannah: Vegas, shhh. But don't worry. And don't let Tyler worry either

Next to me, Tyler has finally put down his phone in favor of baking in the Arizona sun. He's wearing designer shorts and a shirt that looks ironed



despite the heat, his face covered in several coatings of sunblock. There's a white smudge on his cheek. I rub it with my thumb and get his playful scowl, so I kiss him in just the same place.

I wipe my mouth. "You taste like sunscreen."

"Who could have predicted that?" Tyler says. He shifts and aims a hand up at the sky like he's attempting to block the sun. "Any idea when he's going to pitch?"

I shake my head and adjust my sign. "Guess we'll just have to be patient."

A half hour later, my patience and my sunscreen are wearing off. I reapply the latter, spraying it on my arms. I watch it drip for a second, remembering that day in the dugout with Jonathan, before I rub it in.

I distract myself playing with my necklace, running my fingers over the fourth set of initials Mike put in the wire: *TN*, sitting next to the others, linking us all together.

I'm not the only one who's impatient. Around us, the crowd shifts restlessly. A few people have rolled-up posterboard signs. There's a sense of anticipation tipping into boredom. It's possible Jonathan won't pitch.

Mike nudges me, then points to the bullpen along one side of the field. It's hard to make out what's happening, but there's someone up and throwing in it. I squint. The digital scoreboard to announce who's coming in to pitch stays an infuriating blank.

Still, noise ripples through the crowd. My heart starts going hard. I pick up my sign and try to flatten the cardboard.

The in-game announcer comes on. *Now pitching for the Arizona Complex League Halos... Making his professional debut... Number Eighteen, Jonathan Halperin.*

A bright shock goes through me—he's doing this, and we get to see him do this. I hold open my sign and yell, a noise that gets lost in a sea of screaming from the ballpark.

"Mike"—I look around—"what's going on?"

A row ahead of us, two people are holding up a sign with a rainbow and a baseball. Around us, other people have the same signs, like they printed them specifically for this game.

A few people have out bags of stuff they're passing around. They throw us some—rainbow wristbands, rainbow rubber bracelets. Rainbow folding fans, and I snag one and snap it open, working it to dispel some of the

Arizona heat and the feeling like I might faint in surprise.

I tap one of the people in front of us on the shoulder. They turn around, register who I am, and do a full-on delighted shriek. “Oh my goodness, it’s her,” they yell, then register Mike and Tyler with me. “It’s them!”

“Hi,” I say, slightly at a loss. “Could you tell me what’s happening?”

“We saw his post and the team video and we thought he could use some support.”

“Oh, that’s...” I try to come up with the right words. “Incredibly amazing.”

They smile, creasing the little rainbow flag they’ve painted on their cheek. “Queer baseball people are pretty good at organizing when we want to. This game can make it hard to be fans. When there’s something to celebrate, we’re gonna fucking celebrate.”

A lump forms in my throat. We spent so long worrying about the people who would hate him that we forgot about everyone else—the ones who were waiting to see someone like them take the field.

“Thank you,” I manage and dab at my eyes. “Really, thank you.”

They smile even bigger at that. “Can I hug you?” When I nod, they hug me; their rainbow face paint smears on my cheek. “Welcome to the family.”

And my vision is so blurred with happy tears that I almost—*almost*—miss Jonathan jogging to the mound.

For the next minute, every eye in the stadium is on him. His uniform is different from what he wore in college, but he still runs with those same long strides. When he gets to the mound, he does a broad sweep of the field, taking it all in—the signs, the screaming.

A video starts playing on the scoreboard, and the crowd goes even louder when Mike’s face appears on screen talking about the first time he met Jonathan.

I lean over and whisper to Tyler. “That video was a good idea. Thank you.” I lower my voice even more. “You want me to tell Mike you suggested it?”

Tyler shakes his head. “Please don’t.”

“Yeah,” I say, “wouldn’t want anyone to know that you’re nice.” And kiss his cheek again.

Out on the mound, Jonathan looks...sparkly? Maybe that’s sweat. Whatever it is, he begins his warmup pitches, and he must be amped up because they come out of his hand as crisp as any pitch I’ve ever seen him

throw.

“Hey”—I lean into Mike, whispering in his ear—“he looks great.”

“Yeah,” Mike says, “he really, really does.”

“You think everyone else is going to love him?”

Despite the heat, Mike threads his fingers through mine. “I know they will,” he says. “But we loved him first.” And he tightens his palm against mine as Jonathan winds up. As the crowd holds its collective breath to see what comes next.

# Epilogue

VICTORIA

## ONE YEAR LATER

ON THE DAY of my mother's second wedding to James, I'm woken to the noise of someone honking outside from the driveway. I fumble for my phone.

Mike: we're outside

Jonathan: hiiii surprise

Tyler: we don't have time for this

Me: Why are you texting from the other side of the bed, Tyler?

Jonathan: ooooh busted

Mike: send pics

I turn to Tyler, who has a wicked case of bedhead, especially now that his hair has grown out from *very serious businessman* to *full-time robotics teacher* in length. "Really?" I ask.

"Not all of us can just blow off our responsibilities."

I roll my eyes and playfully thwack him with a pillow. "Yeah, you know me. *So irresponsible.*" I sit up and stretch. "Everything's taken care of."

Because he spent the previous afternoon directing the caterers to set up in the backyard while I confirmed with the florists and decorators.

If I squint outside my window, I see three enormous cards displayed on easels. One congratulating Elizabeth on her high school graduation. The next,

congratulating me on my graduation from nursing school. A third, reading *James and Anne...Third Time's The Charm*. A joke my mom wanted printed. Their first wedding was a big affair. This one will be at the courthouse, with our friends descending on the house later to cheer us on.

But first, we're all going to the beach. If I can convince Tyler to get out of bed. He sleeps here some nights and in his own room others. Some nights, Mike drives down from Irvine or I drive up when Jonathan's not on the road with his team.

Initially, we tried to make schedules, as if this kind of thing could be doled out equally. Now we just talk to each other and go by what feels good.

"Are you seriously not going to come?" I wiggle around until I can drape myself over Tyler. Pressing my chest into his back is probably cheating, but I don't really care.

He cranes his neck back and looks down my thin sleep shirt. "Do you think you can persuade me with those?" he asks.

I drag myself against him again to make a point.

Finally, he breaks. "Well, you can, and I'm going."

We dress quickly—I packed beach bags last night, so mostly we have to wash up and jump in our clothes.

We're almost to the door when Tyler doubles back for something. "Go ahead without me if you don't want to wait," he says. Tyler for *Please don't leave me behind*.

When I get outside, Mike and Jonathan are sitting in Mike's car—he bought a new one, finally, after his old one passed two hundred thousand miles. Or not sitting. Making out. They pull apart, but only barely.

"It's, like, nine in the morning," I say when I climb in the backseat.

Mike huffs. "The team was on a road trip."

I laugh. "You *live* together."

And they go right back to kissing.

A minute later, Tyler slides in the car.

"Now that we're here"—Jonathan hands me a small bouquet of flowers that was sitting on the front dashboard, a spray of blue and gray flowers—"Victoria, you look lovely."

Tyler makes a disagreeing noise—maybe at the compliment, maybe that he didn't say it first.

"Sorry, Tyler," Jonathan says, "you look lovely too. Did your hair get blonder?"

“Are we going?” Tyler asks.

And Jonathan laughs and puts the car in gear and drives.



THIS TIME OF MORNING, THERE AREN'T THAT MANY PEOPLE AT THE BEACH. We lay out a blanket. Jonathan holds up a canister of sunblock and sprays it on my arms, gently rubbing it in. Mike pulls his hair back. Tyler grumbles at the sand like it's a personal insult.

“I want to swim,” Jonathan says, just as Mike says, “I'm going running.”

“I'll come with you,” Tyler says.

“I don't run that great.” Mike points to his knee. They did another surgery to clean up his ACL reconstruction, and his recovery has been steady but slow.

Tyler glances around like he's worried someone will see him, then kisses Mike on the cheek. “I don't mind.”

“That's new,” I stage whisper to Jonathan.

“They're just gonna”—Jonathan makes a teasing *blah blah blah* hand motion—“about engineering stuff the whole time.” And then kisses my cheek right back.

“Are you keeping track of how many times each of you does that?” I ask.

Jonathan laughs. “I am—the score goes to infinity and I'm winning.” He kisses me again. “Are you coming in the water?”

I hold up my book, the next in the series that Elizabeth and my mom are reading together. We have a “book club” at my mom's house that turns into a sleepover half the time, the three of us on our living room floor. “I'm gonna read. Meet you all back here in a while?”

So they swim and run and talk. I read for a while, my mind drifting. I could study. My nursing exam is in a few weeks, but I'm acing every practice exam I take. I'm still not sure if I want to be a nurse, but it'll be nice to have the option.

Not that I need another job right now. My OnlyFans channel is doing well. It's solo content mostly, though the videos that do best are just me telling stories about my *three boyfriends* life.

After a while, I stick a placeholder in my book, then put in my headphones. A song comes on I haven't heard before. For a while, my world

is the rhythm of the water against the sand and the pleasure of hearing something for the first time—how each note carries a surprise.

Eventually, Mike and Tyler drift back, and Jonathan makes his way up the beach. We work together to unload the food: a thermos of iced coffee, breakfast sandwiches, fruit. A six-pack of champagne. We each pluck a bottle from the pack and strip the foil and caps off, but don't open them.

"We should toast." I cycle through possible options—*friendship, family, new beginnings*. None quite fits. I offer the neck of my bottle. Mike clinks his against it, then Jonathan, then Tyler.

"So," Jonathan says, after we've all drunk, "there's something we wanted to give you." He digs into the beach bag and pulls out a box about the size of a small shoebox that's wrapped in plain brown paper.

"Should I be opening this at the beach?" I laugh.

"It's not that kind of present—but if you want that kind of present..." Jonathan offers.

Mike nudges him with his shoulder. "Let her open this one first."

I slide my fingers under the tape and carefully unwrap the gift, seam by seam. Inside sits a wooden picture frame with something suspended in the glass. *The napkin*. Except I still have my version of it, so this must be Mike's. The ink has feathered in the past year; the napkin folded, like he carried it around with him.

"This was Mike's idea," Jonathan says. "I know we can't get legally whatever-ed —"

"Whatever-ed?" I ask.

Jonathan turns to Mike. "Help me out."

"Jon's trying to say *married*," Mike says, and the word catches me at my throat. "If that's what you want."

I swallow. "Are you sure?"

"Read the napkin," Tyler says.

I pick up the frame, angling it to deflect glare. On it, our declaration to one another: *Be safe, split the money fifty-fifty, tell no one else about this without the other's approval*. Below that signatures I knew were there: mine, Mike's, and Jonathan's...and Tyler's, who must have signed at some point. Along with a word: *Always*.

"We want this," Mike says, "for as long as you want this."

"I can say no?" I ask, but my smile is already at the edge of my mouth.

Mike laughs. "Sure."

“I want to be with you, with all of you, for as long as you want to be with me.” I kiss him, then Jonathan, then Tyler. “Only one thing.”

“What’s that?” Jonathan asks gamely.

“What it says here.” I lift up the napkin in its glass case. “You all make me feel safe. And equal. But that’s not all. You make me feel daring. Like I could do anything I wanted—be anyone I wanted. And I want everyone to know it.”

Mike smiles. “You want to shout it from the rooftops, baby?”

I laugh. “Maybe I’ll go door-to-door like Tyler.”

“Hey,” Tyler says, “That was *one* door.”

A door. A set of letters sent by a lawyer. A firm that zapped those screenshots off the internet. A promise that Tyler made, then kept over and over. That they all kept, to protect me. To love me. The way I want to protect and love them.

I laugh, impossibly happy, then lift my champagne. “To dreams and the people who live them with us—to how *good* things can be when we let them.”

So we raise our bottles and toast the bright morning sun as it rises in the sky—and kiss each other for the whole world to see.

THE END



I HOPE YOU HAD AS MUCH FUN READING ABOUT VICTORIA, MIKE, JONATHAN, and Tyler as I had writing about them! Want even more? See what they’re up to two years later with this free [bonus story](#).



# *Acknowledgments*

Big, huge, tremendous thank yous:

To Jo, for telling me I should do this and encouraging me every step of the way, even when I wanted to quit.

To Ruby, for her relentless positivity and sweat emojis.

To Sarah, for her kind (and extensive!!!) feedback that made this a much better book and me a better writer.

To Katie for finding every typo and formatting error and for shouting this from the rafters at every step.

To Britt for answering all my questions about college baseball and for always having a fun baseball thing to share.

Big shoutouts to Studio Plum Editorial for the fast and thorough copyedit (and kind words) and to Kelsey Bowman for the cover design. Kelsey also designed the merch and the interior art, and damn, does this book look so much better because of it. Big ups to Shannon at RR Booktours for her promoting prowess.

To all of you: this lil book wouldn't be where it is without your edits, support, and unhinged (complimentary) enthusiasm.

And big thank you to you, the reader, for coming on this journey with me.

## *About the Author*

Aimee Rivkin is a writer living on the East Coast. She writes steamy, angsty *why choose* romances including EXPANDED ROSTER, her debut in the genre. She can be found drinking coffee, herding cats, and hollering at sports on TV.

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