



False Start
PLAY

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ONE

LAINE

I need a miracle.

And a pig. Or two.

Twenty-eight tons of sand, a bajillion coconuts, four smoking-hot life guards, one frozen shave-ice food truck, and two sixteen foot tall tiki gods... and only half the expected pigs. The Phi Iota Pi annual Spring Fling is only two hours away, and I believe in miracles. And pigs.

By pig, I mean actual pig as in Kālua pig, or Kālua pork, which is the headliner of the buffet tonight, or was the headliner. But a world-class event planner doesn't panic. She innovates.

I mean, who hasn't experienced a pig shortage before, right?

"Hey, Cass, it's Laine. No sign of Leilani?" I ask into my headset.

"Out front getting Kane and Kanaloa vertical and sweating off any trace of cuteness I may have once possessed. Wait. A catering van just pulled around the block, so you might want to check the garage," Cassidy replies with an uncharacteristic fluff of huff.

"Great. Thanks, Cass. And don't discount your cuteness. It's Captain Marvel level cuteness—totally unstoppable—and your costume is going to be epic. And if I haven't said it already, thanks for overseeing the tiki god installation."

"You've said it a million times."

"Then thanks for being my best friend. Your selfless acts will soon be rewarded with a frozen, fruity drink."

"You know my weak spot, Laine, but are you sure you're okay? You sound like a fortune cookie."

Am I that transparent? "Just a pesky pig predicament. Nothing I can't handle."

"You sure that's it?"

"Positive. Everything non-pig related is on track and going to plan."

"If you say so, Laine. Come check out the tiki gods when you get a chance, they're so cool you'll forget the word pig."

"Roger that. Good to have the God of Light and Life on our side tonight."

"And the God of the Sea. We can't offend Kanaloa, unless you want a typhoon. And honestly, Laine, I don't think I could've handled sewing up another one of these things. So glad you stopped at two tikis."

“Leaving the Gods of War and Fertility off the guest list wasn’t an easy decision. But seriously, Cass, I appreciate you giving me your whole day to help with setup...” I consider literally biting my tongue, but I can’t help myself. “You haven’t seen Penn, have you?”

Cassidy chuckles, “Penn Mitchell, helping with setup? Girl, you’d have an easier time pulling a broody hen off a nest. Unless you made some sort of blood sacrifice.”

Her voice is gentle. She knows how disappointed I was when Penn refused to help. Of course he said no—football above all else—but a little part of me was hoping he would show up anyway. I shake it off. “Yeah, looks like I left blood sacrifice off my check list.”

“If you want to make a sacrificial offering, we could give them Tessa...”

As always, Cassidy knows how to get me laughing. “We need to keep Tessa around. She makes us all look like nicer people.”

“We don’t just look nicer, Laine, we *are* all nicer. But good point. Tessa lives to party another day.”

“Thanks for reining in your bloodlust, Cass. Signing off—I’ve gotta go deal with our pig problem.” I dash through the house and do a little shimmy. The tiki facade looks amazing. I wheel around the back door and encounter another problem altogether...the dark demon herself. Tessa Bellacosa.

“Oh hey, Laine,” she purrs, looking over the decorations. “It’s looking good. I can’t believe how elaborate the décor is. Do you think you’ll be ready in time?”

Double-edged compliments are Tessa’s signature move. “Hey, Tess. Thanks, I sure hope so.” I air kiss each of her newly sculpted, buccal-fat-barren cheeks, in the Italian style. “Got to go find the caterer, see you later.”

“Laine, before you go, please tell me Penn’s coming. I could swear I saw him and Brandon heading toward the Sigma Chi House, and you know the Sigs pre-party hardy. It’d be a shame if he missed out on all our Phi Pi fun.”

My fingers clamp down on my pen like a dart. “Don’t worry about Penn, Tessa. He’ll be here.”

“Of course, Laine. It’s just that the girls are looking forward to seeing the football team. Wouldn’t want to start the party without our Wildcats.”

I suppress the urge to throttle her. “Wouldn’t want that. Can’t wait to see your costume. Gotta run.”

I wave my clipboard at her and move away before she can say anything else. I’ll give Tessa this—she does know how to dress for a party. Her

costume for our Phi Pi February Frosted Fantasy party could've been straight out of RuPaul's Drag Race—all fully feathered and glitzy glamour. But I don't have time to unpack Tessa's backhanded compliments. I've got a food crisis to handle.

Then again, maybe it isn't too late to sacrifice her to the tikis.

I high-tail it to the garage, where the caterers have staged their remote kitchen. Amid a flurry of activity and bowls of fruit salad, Leilani stands as the eye of the storm, pointing and directing, her mobile phone squeezed between her ear and shoulder.

I don't want to interrupt, but I need to know how we are going to feed half the Buckley University student body. I catch her eye and wait. She holds up a finger, asking for a minute, so I step out of the way and take a breath.

Across the pool, two lifeguards, both *Bay Watch* bronzed and toned, are in their own world. Completely at ease with each other, their laughter ringing out across the water as they splash and flirt. I can't help but watch their playful touches and lingering glances. They're so connected, so into one another. As I stare, a little cloud races across my heart. It pinches, like it's been zipped into jeans that are two sizes too small.

"Laine, I'm sorry about the pig fiasco." Leilani interrupts my reverie, looking miserable.

"Completely not your fault, Leilani, accidents happen. Is your team okay?"

"Just minor damage to the van but look at this. It's like a luau exploded all over Le Conte Avenue."

She hands me her phone. The photo is almost comical—the Polynesian Paradise Catering van's rear door hanging off its hinges like a loose tooth—the car that hit it plastered in pork and pineapple. I stifle a laugh, not wanting to upset her further. "I'm so sorry about your van, Leilani. Are you insured?"

"Fully," she nods.

"Then let's keep it simple. Could you sub in some Huli Huli chicken? Spam Musubi? We could even order Hawaiian pizzas if we need to. Whatever it takes to get everyone fed."

"Great minds do think alike," Leilani grins, leading me back into the garage. I steal one last glance at the lifeguards, now sitting quietly by the pool, still lost in one another. Back in the garage, chefs are busy preparing trays of Spam Musubi and feverishly cutting up racks of sticky pork ribs.

"I rerouted some of the dishes meant for an event tomorrow when I heard

about the van. We don't have Huli Huli chicken, but we do have plenty of pork ribs, and Musubi for days." Leilani beams with pride at her staff.

Impulsively, I give her a quick hug. "You're a miracle worker, Leilani. Thank you." She seems startled, briefly allowing the hug, then pulling back like she touched a hot pan. I think the hug flustered her more than losing the two roasted pigs.

"Thank you for being understanding. Not all clients are this flexible," she says, patting my shoulder.

I thank her for her proactive approach and make a mental note to tell Cassidy that someone actually called me flexible.

WITH THE FOOD PROBLEM SORTED, I revisit my checklist. The photographer has my curated shot list to document my growing and gorgeous portfolio of work—check.

The bars are well stocked, the door greeters have heaps of leis to welcome guests, and the DJ is already spinning soft Hawaiian music. The dance floor looks inviting, with hula dancers swaying rhythmically to the music, doing their beguiling hula moves—check, check, and check.

I light the final tiki torch as the sun dips into the Pacific, casting the Phi Iota Pi sorority house in a golden glow. This party could be the launchpad for my event planning career, and right now, everything feels rosy.

"Welcome to party paradise, Laine Summers. You've really outdone yourself this time," I whisper the words like a spell and a warm gust of evening air answers, wrapping me in an approving hug as I admire my handiwork. It's grass-skirted, pin-spotted perfection. I see Cassidy by the front door, head tilted back, snapping pics of our imposing tiki god statues.

"Cass, doesn't it look like a jungle sprouted up in the middle of campus overnight?" I exclaim, rushing over to her.

"Laine, you scared me," she squeaks, her surprise shifting quickly to delight. "But your timing's perfect—let's get some selfies with Kanaloa."

Wielding her phone like a pro, Cassidy snaps a slew of selfies from varying and sometimes ridiculous angles. The moment doesn't last long, as she suddenly turns, pointing her phone at a boisterous group of fraternity boys disembarking from a vintage Volkswagen Vanagon. They pile out like it's a clown car, but instead of wigs and red noses, they're adorned with hula skirts and coconut bras. "The Sigma Chis went all out. Those coconuts look

like they'd chafe," she chuckles.

"Hey, they're fully embracing the theme, and you know how much I love a good theme." Our fellow Greeks are a riot. They form an impromptu hula line, their movements hilariously out of sync. Their act ends as quickly as it started, and they file past us and into the party, leaving a trail of laughter in their wake.

Guests continue to flood in, and although I knew they would, it's still a relief. Next comes a group of surfer dudes decked out in board shorts and Ray-Bans. They surround Cassidy and me, and break into song.

They begin crooning the lyrics to "Kokomo" in perfect harmony, which is no surprise for Theta Alpha Phi—the theater Greeks never shy away from a chance to harmonize.

Cassidy responds with a joyful little shimmy, big pineapple leaves fluttering atop her head as she sways in a pineapple-printed tunic. She cheers and sings along"".

The group encircles Cass, continuing to sing the song sweetly to her.

"You guys should take this act on the road," Cassidy gushes, clearly enjoying the attention.

"If this whole college thing doesn't work out, we might just do that," one of the surfer dudes replies with a wink.

"Alright, guys. Thanks for the magnificent serenade, but we've got a party to run," I say, shooing them toward the bustling backyard. "Enjoy the party."

Cupping her hands around her mouth, Cassidy calls after them, "And try not to break too many hearts."

"Our hearts belong to you, Chiquitita," a surfer yells back, donning a lei before disappearing into the crowd.

The moment he's gone, Cass tugs on my arm. "We have to find out who that was. So cute. He could sing to me all night long."

I hesitate, glancing down the street one more time.

"Laine, he'll show up. You know he will. Let's track down my cute surfer before he vanishes."

"WOW, Laine, it looks as good inside as it does outside," Cassidy eyes gleam as she scans the room for her mystery crooner. "It's like I walked onto Waikiki Beach. I can't even feel the floor through the sand."

“Thanks, Cass. Need any landscaping supplies, you know who to call,” I quip.

“Hey, Cassidy, love your fronds. Hey, Laine, you nailed the beach theme,” Tessa drawls as she breezes up. She pauses and sips from a coconut full of punch and paper umbrellas.

Tessa never disappoints—classic tepid Tessa compliments and an outlandish costume, both of which make my eyes ache. She’s living out her Kylie Jenner mermaid costume fantasy. A sequined green tail trusses her legs tightly together like a Thanksgiving turkey, and two precariously placed seashells leave my mouth gaping wide and worried about imminent wardrobe washout.

Cassidy’s fingers grip my arm. “Tessa, how? How are those shells holding on? Those shells are a shoo-in for best supporting role. Those shells are shucking amazing.”

Tessa flashes Cassidy a pinched and pained look, before turning it on me.

“Hope the DJ livens things up tonight. I’m dying to dance. Bye.” She lifts her coconut, snaps a quick selfie with us, and saunters off.

“Did she just—?”

“Yup, she did,” I sigh, cutting Cassidy off. “Tessa, in all her Little Mermaid glory.”

Cassidy snorts, “She’s way more burlesque-show Ursula than angelic Ariel, but I guess every party needs a villain.”

“I just wish she could play nice for once,” I sigh, watching Tessa tip-toe-tiny-step through the crowd.

“Don’t let her get to you,” Cassidy says, giving me an affectionate squeeze. “This is your party, Laine. She’s just jealous. You have the perfect event, the perfect grades, the perfect boyfriend.”

“Thanks, Cass,” I manage a thin smile. People in colorful costumes conga past, laughing and dancing. I glance around, tallying my wins—pork problem solved, the house and yard transformed, the DJ spinning an awesome soundtrack. I’ve achieved peak party planner status, full bossiosity. And yet...

“Besides,” Cassidy chimes in, interrupting my introspection, “Everyone’s too busy partying by the poolside to notice Tessa’s attempts to hog the spotlight.”

“I hope so. It’s just event jitters. I’ll relax once we’re past the party’s halfway point.”

“Oh, Chiquitita...”

Cassidy’s surfing suitor has found her. He takes her hand, placing it over his heart like a true Romeo. “My little piñita, where have you been all of my life?”

“Waiting right here for you,” Cassidy demurs, blushing to the tip of her pineapple headpiece.

Her surfer flushes too, in a unexpected and endearing display of shyness. “Care to dance, my querida Cassidy?”

“Do the Beach Boys give off good vibrations?”

With that, Cassidy and her surfer friend join the throng on the dance floor, leaving me alone amidst the partygoers, clutching my clip board like a life preserver.

Then, like Captain America emerging victorious from the midst of a battle, cutting confidently through the crowd, he arrives.

TWO

LAINE

Penn's imposing figure parts the crowd, his purposeful stride bringing him closer and closer. He stands out effortlessly, towering over the crowd, broad shouldered and achingly handsome in red board shorts and a white tank top bearing the word "LIFEGUARD" in bold, red letters. His nose sports a stripe of white zinc oxide, a quirky touch he'd added himself. The whistle around his neck matches mine, tying our coordinated costumes together—cheesy, perhaps, but it's a detail I secretly enjoy, a proclamation of our coupledness.

"Hey, babe," he greets, gracing me with his devastatingly charming smile. "Incredible job with the party. Everyone's loving it."

With Penn by my side, I should be on cloud nine, but the second he speaks, I plummet down to thin, gray cloud three. He's saying all the right things, but the tone's just off. The words feel like a good-boyfriend script, lines from the playbook of Relationships 101.

"Thanks," I answer, my voice infused with an enthusiasm I'm struggling to feel. Fake it 'til you make it, right?

"Have you seen the crew, Lainy?" Penn asks, eyes already scanning the room for his football brethren.

No questions about my day, no celebratory hug. Not even a rundown of football practice. It irks me. But I simply point him toward the buffet where his Wildcats are gathered. He rewards me with a quick peck on the cheek before disappearing into the crowd, heading toward his friends. The whole exchange leaves me feeling deflated, like a balloon three days after the party.

I follow in his wake, bobbing and weaving around guests as if tethered to his wrist by a fragile ribbon. He stops so I stop, hidden behind his solid frame. I'm close enough to hear the back-slapping barrage of bro-hugs, catch snippets of his conversation with his teammates. They talk about the food, praise the party, and inevitably turn to—no surprise—football. Everyone congratulates Penn on becoming Buckley University's Athlete of the Year.

So it's official.

I'm dating *The One*. The campus star, the top jock destined to go pro—a first round NFL draft pick. Which is no surprise given Penn's exceptional GPA, selfless leadership, and unconditional devotion. Not to mention the innate talent he possesses. No, I'm not surprised in the slightest.

Except that he didn't share the news with me himself.

Penn's body stiffens. He ducks his head and deflects the avalanche of praise they're piling on him with a quiet, "Nope."

An unexpected show of modesty from the unswervingly confident Penn Mitchell? I lean in, the better to hear.

"If Hunter hadn't blown out his ankle, I wouldn't even be the starting QB right now," he admits, in subdued solemnity. "It's not my award to win, not my year. It feels like I'm stomping on any hope Hunter might have to make something of his career."

My heart squeezes in sympathy for Penn, but I can't help wondering why he hasn't shared any of this with me. Being named Athlete of the Year has been a bucket list item for Penn—he's talked about it since our first date. He should be celebrating, shouting his success from the rooftops, but instead he sounds dejected, like he's the understudy instead of the superstar.

My thoughts flicker to poor Hunter Williams. I've never met him, but it's hard not to feel sorry for the guy...he's been benched, sidelined, his career as a quarterback over before it even had a chance. Watching your dreams slip away must be so awful. But that's not on Penn.

"Dude, don't sell yourself short," a teammate I've never met chimes in, clapping Penn on the shoulder. "You've proven your worth. You're a freaking legend, Penn. You didn't just inherit the position or the award—you earned it. You've even made me look like the best receiver in college football. I owe you big time."

"Best receiver in college football? Not unless you get picked in the first round, Rivera," counters Penn's bestie, Brandon Bauer, his rumbling baritone commanding the group's full attention.

"Just wait, Beast. Just you wait. I'll get picked way before you. What team would draft a slower-than-erosion defensive player over someone who runs at warp speed?"

"You're warped in the head if you think you'll be picked before me, and doubly so if you think you'll go before Penn."

Caught off guard, I retreat a step as Brandon hauls Penn into a hearty back-slapping hug.

"Thanks, man," Penn replies, his voice full of emotion. "I just wish Hunter could be here tonight to join in, you know?"

"Hunter Williams," Rivera raises his beer in salute.

"To Hunter Williams. And to Pendleton Mitchell," Bauer corrects.

Bottles clink together, each chink of glass chipping away a little bit of my

heart. Who is this Penn Mitchell, really? We've been dating for almost six months, and yet it feels like I've barely dipped below the surface of who he truly is. Our shared moments seem as shallow as a margarita glass compared to his deep bond with his team. Is that all I can expect from this relationship?

I shake my head, trying to push those thoughts away. This is my big night. The most elaborate party I've ever planned. I'm in a room full of people, including my boyfriend, and I've never felt more alone. "Welcome to paradise, Laine Summers, be careful what you wish for."

"Hey, babe." Penn turns and pulls me in for a kiss. "You don't need to wish for anything. I'm right here."

My eyes pop—did I actually say that out loud? He wraps me up in his warm arms, nuzzles my neck. The guilt of it all makes me squirm, and I cover lamely. "A little distance please, Penn. That white zinc all over your nose is much cuter on you than it would be on me."

"Anything would be cute on you, Laine," he chuckles. He almost lets me go, but one strong arm stays wrapped around my waist.

Brandon the Beast Bauer circles around, and for once I'm grateful for the interruption. Brandon isn't quite as tall as Penn, but he's like one giant muscle—the Hulk to Penn's Captain America. He steps in close, so close that we're all touching, and I'm the uncomfortable, squishy middle of a man-sandwich.

"Hey, Party Girl, great event. You really outdid yourself tonight, Laine. Sorry to interrupt the public display of pair-bonded behavior, but I need to verbally smack some sense into your boyfriend. He's being an idiot."

I try to pull away to give them some privacy, but Penn holds me tight. "You can stay. I'll need a witness to corroborate that a pronouncement by the Great Brandon Bauer is completely, irrefutably horse shit."

Bauer arches an eyebrow, "First, I'm never wrong. Which means you should really listen closely and get this through your head, Penn, because this fall is going to be your last season as a Wildcat. And even more importantly, it'll be my last season. We're going to make it the most epic season of our college careers, because I didn't turn down my invite to the combine for a shitty final season. Agreed?"

Penn nods.

"Good," Brandon's tone shifts in a word, from big-headed conceit to genuine concern. "Listen, every game this season, you've glanced back at the bench after you blow a play. Every single play, from the most routine

incomplete pass to a full on interception, and who do you look for? You're looking for Hunter Williams. Every single time. Like you're apologizing to him for your mistakes. Like you're some undeserving usurper in the kingdom of college football. Like it should be you on that bench instead of him. And if it were him out there playing, that interception would've been a touchdown."

I feel the tension build in Penn's body with each sentence. The forearm wrapped around my side, rigid like a bent steel beam. I slowly angle my head so I can see his face. He stares blankly toward the ground, fixed and inaccessible.

Brandon waits for a response, and when he doesn't get one, he pushes on, "Hey, I get it. Maybe I'd feel the same in your position. Hunter's the real deal. Gunslinger quarterback, raw talent, fearless, and he's one of my best friends. But you're all those things too, Penn. You're so good it pisses me off. And you're not just a guy who can throw a ball. You're a natural born leader, a lightning-fast tactician who marshals the team like a field general. I want to hear you say that you've earned your spot as starting quarterback. You're the man. You earned the stupid award. You did. I want you to feel that. Okay?"

"Yeah, I just..." Penn's words trail off as he runs a hand through his hair, struggling to articulate his thoughts. "I don't know. Sometimes I feel like people see me as the guy who walked into the position. That I got lucky when Hunter Williams got injured."

"You sort of did, Penn. So what?" Brandon pitches his deep voice lower still. "You got an early opportunity, but you made the most of it. You led the team to a win in Pasadena. That's something you did, Penn. Not Hunter. It sucks that he got hurt, but that's part of the game. He'd tell you so himself, if you'd man up and actually call him."

"I called. I texted. I got nothing back, zero response." Penn pulls his phone from his pocket, and holds it up for Brandon to see. "Nada. Nothing."

"Really? He told me he was over it. Then again, the Athlete of the Year award was just announced yesterday. Maybe it hit him hard, salt in a wound." Brandon shrugs and tilts his head toward the pool. "If you still want to talk it out, he's right up there."

I follow Brandon's gaze to the tall, white lifeguard chair. An imposing figure lounges at the top, a muscled leg wrapped over the chair arm and a big straw beach hat hiding his face. But you can't miss the black velcro rehab boot wrapped around his lower leg as he swings it slowly back and forth. He

just sits above it all, not engaging with anyone, doesn't even have a drink in his hand. He's like a massive, shadowy piece of decor, more living tiki god than party-goer.

As much as I want to make sure everyone has fun tonight, this Hunter Williams is someone else's problem. I don't have the mental bandwidth to play the happy hostess. I need to focus on cueing the fire dancers for their performance and stop myself from saying something to Penn I'll regret later. From the sound of it, Hunter and Penn need to talk anyway, which gives me an easy exit.

Gently extricating myself from Penn's arm, I give him a little nudge in the ribs. "Hey, congratulations on the Athlete of the Year award. Brandon's right, Penn, you've earned every bit of it. You're the most dedicated person I know."

He gives me a small smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. They're full of guilt and dart from the lifeguard chair down to me. "Sorry I didn't tell you sooner, Laine. I should've called, but I knew you were busy setting up, and then one of the guys invited me to the Sig house for a congratulatory pre-party drink. You know how it is."

But I don't.

And that is exactly my dilemma. I don't know where I stand with Penn. Everything he says needles me, rubs me the wrong way like I'm a cat he's petting against the grain, leaving me puffed up and bristling. My placid exterior is slipping beneath my bubbling interior frustrations, and my tongue itches to challenge Penn to explain to me exactly how it is.

"Laine's a smart girl, Penn. She's right, you earned it. I'm going to tell you one last thing, and then I'll stop. That feeling of being a pretender isn't going to go away until you end this weird emo-mope-fest between you and Williams. So buck up and go talk to Hunter."

"Nah, I can't talk to him now, Bauer. Laine and I haven't seen each other all week. This is her night." Penn looks down at me, as if he's posing for the camera after a winning game, another page straight out of his good-boyfriend playbook.

"Go, Penn. It's fine. This is a big night for you too, and it sounds like you have some things to talk through with this Hunter Williams guy."

His eyes search my face, and then drift over my shoulder to where gloomy Hunter Williams sulks in his chair. "You sure?"

The truth is, I'm not sure about anything, but now is hardly the time to

address that. I hug my clipboard to my chest like a shield and slowly back away. “Like Brandon said, he’s always right. Really, I have to go wrangle some dancers anyway. We’ll catch up later.”

My friends swarm me, showering me with compliments and heart-warming hugs. But I can’t help keeping an eye on Penn as he makes his way to the lifeguard chair. He gathers his own hugs and high-fives, and the easy laughter that follows stands in stark contrast to our strained and stilted puppet-like interactions.

My life is a lie. Flashy, fake, and hollow as Mardi Gras beads—girlfriend of the quarterback, Phi Pi, popular, straight-A student. Yet here I am, feeling as substantial as a dandelion puff in the wind. Well puff you, Penn Mitchell. Puff you.

THREE

LAINE

The Samoan fire dancers burst onto the dance floor, knives ablaze and their bodies gyrating. Within seconds, the thunderous rhythm of drums subdues all party chatter, commanding everyone's attention. Mesmerized, my troubles recede. Cassidy bounces up with two piña coladas in tiki glasses.

"Perfect timing, Cass, but where's your new friend?"

"Taking a break with his Beach Boy buddies. He needed a rest before our next dance-off. And you," she hands me a drink, herding me to vacant beach chairs, "need this. You look like you just lost your favorite Tory Burch sandals. What's wrong?"

"Thought I was better at hiding it," I mumble.

"Maybe from others, but not from me. It's Penn, right?"

"Yeah...it's Penn," I admit, my throat suddenly too thick to talk. I stall by sipping my drink and toying with the tiny umbrella. Cassidy waits patiently.

"Penn and I, we're drifting apart. Or maybe we're walking different paths altogether. We barely spend time together, and when we do, there's no spark. He flipping forgot my birthday last month, Cass. And he didn't even tell me about the Athlete of the Year thing. I feel...sidelined."

"Laine, you deserve so much better," Cassidy's gaze softens with concern.

"I think so too. He treats me more like a trophy than a confidante, he never shares big stuff, like life goals or deep feelings. He just clams up. Our conversations are as dull as an empty dance floor."

"Typical jock behavior. If you dissected the average college guy's brain, you'd find footballs and queso dip instead of gray matter," Cassidy snorts.

"Right?" I sigh. "I've been trying to keep us interesting. I plan all our dates, put in all the effort. Penn canceled date night last Saturday, so he could review game film with his lumbering roommate, Brandon. So what did I do? I picked up groceries and made them both dinner. I feel taken for granted, like I'm a snack dispenser with benefits."

"Laine, you've been the soul of this relationship. You've celebrated his every victory with literal cake and sparklers. If Penn can't appreciate you, he doesn't deserve you."

Cassidy takes a long pull from her drink and continues, wielding the tiki glass like a saber. "Honestly, forgetting a birthday is total deal breaker. But

you seem so invested, Laine. I mean, we've talked about the big B, but are you sure? This is a big decision."

"It is. He's everything I thought I wanted. But I know I deserve more. If I don't act now, I might lose myself."

As the fire dancers' performance peaks, I feel resolute, more settled than I have in weeks. "It's time for change, time to find someone who values me as much as I value him."

"Bravo," Cassidy agrees, raising her tiki glass in a toast. "Here's to new beginnings, Laine."

"Thanks, Cass," I say, squeezing her hand gratefully.

I clink my glass with hers, a whirl of anxiety, excitement, and determination brewing within me. The fire dancers finish with a breathtaking flourish and a shout. Inside, I'm shouting too. This feels big. It feels enormous. My first step toward living my life for me.

THE POUNDING bass of the speakers vibrates through my chest as I scan the living room of the Phi Iota Pi house. Abandoned coconuts and plastic tiki glasses litter every surface, and a couple is entangled in a sloppy embrace on the sofa, oblivious to the dwindling crowd around them.

Just another successful party. Only this one is set to end with a twist—me breaking up with the guy everyone says is the perfect catch. My teeth clamp down so hard at the thought that I'm afraid I'll crack a molar. Am I really doing this?

I spot Penn by the pool, looking like a Norse god emerging from a sea battle. The tank top has vanished, but he still wears the matching whistle around his neck. Per usual, he's surrounded by football fanboys and cooing sexy-costumed coeds, including—shocker—Tessa.

Penn's eyes meet mine from beneath a disheveled shock of water-darkened hair. A slow, sexy, knee-weakening, and dimpled grin spreads across his face.

Curse him and his male perfection.

"He's ignored you all night," I whisper to myself like a protective mantra as I watch him extract himself from the group and saunter over, all confidence and charm. I brace myself as he pulls me into his arms.

"There's my girl."

His lips brush my cheek, leaving a trail of fire in their wake. I close my

eyes for a moment, breathing in his familiar clean scent, mixed with a little rum and coconut. He smells unbelievably good.

My resolution softens, and I let myself sink into his warmth. *Come on, Laine, you can do this...tear off the kinesiology tape and let loose.*

Penn's voice rumbles through my conflicted feelings. "I thought I might have to pretend like I'm drowning to get your attention. You've been so busy with the party tonight that we haven't talked about my big news."

Get my attention? Is he kidding? He just tore that tape right off. "Do you have a minute? We need to talk."

Penn frowns, confusion clouding his eyes. "Everything okay, babe?"

I square my shoulders and meet his gaze. "Not exactly."

Oh god, here we go.

Penn's brows knit together as he studies my face. I can see the gears turning in his head, trying to figure out what's wrong. He glances over his shoulder at his waiting horde before turning back to me.

"Sure, I'll catch up with them later. Do you want to talk about the banquet?" His voice drops as he leans in close. "If you want, you could come to my place after the party. Much more privacy there for talking...or other things. We haven't had a sleepover in ages."

His suggestive tone makes my cheeks flame hot. I stare down at my hands, twist my sorority ring around my finger. How do I say this without hurting him? I take his hand and lead him out front. Cool night air fills my lungs, and it's quiet and dark except the glowing torches and the uplit tiki gods. It steadies me.

"That wasn't what I had in mind..." I raise my eyes to his, tears pricking the corners. "Penn, I think we need to take a break."

"What?" His brows pull together, cross and confused. "A break? Laine, what are you talking about? Where is this coming from?"

My words come out with a heavy, heavy sigh. "Things haven't been great with us for a while. We've both been so busy, we hardly see each other. It feels like we're drifting apart."

"Is that it? I'm just distracted with spring training and the upcoming exhibition game. And then there's the big decision." Penn grabs my hands, his grip so firm that his stress channels into me. "Do I stay for my senior year and finish my degree, or do I go pro now? There's so much riding on my choice, it's almost overwhelming."

His grip eases up, and he runs a practice-calloused thumb back and forth

over my fingers. My heart twinges in response, twisting and tallying out the tense rhythm of his touch. I look up and see distress flash across his face. He looks like a lost boy, and it almost breaks me. But then, faster than a flash, his self-assured mask slides back into place, and I know I'm right. He's Wildcat Penn the QB, large and in charge. "After the scouting combine and the draft, it'll all be different. I promise. Laine, you're the best thing in my life."

"Am I though? Am I the best thing? Football will always be your first love, Penn. It's the first thing and last thing you think about every day, and I understand that sort of passion. I don't want to change you, but I need more than that. I don't need to always come first, but with you...I feel like I always come last."

Drawing in a shaky breath, I force the words I've held back for too long to the surface. "Penn, we've shared some amazing times together. You're an exceptional guy. We're just not the right fit."

Shock dawns in Penn's eyes. "You're breaking up with me."

His words pierce me like a spear through a fish. My mouth opens and closes, opens and closes. How do I make him understand that our dreams diverged in different directions? That we want different things? That I'm not who he wants me to be. That he can't give me what I need?

Disbelief carves his mouth into a deep, flat line as he rakes a hand through his hair. "I can't believe this. You're dumping me like I'm some tired social media trend."

"Penn, no, it's not like that," I plead, reaching for his hand.

"Then what is it like?" He pulls his hand back from my touch. "We were happy, weren't we? I thought you were happy. We make a great team, Laine. We're both going places and pushing for more. We fit together perfectly."

"I'm lonely, Penn." The confession bursts from me in a sob. "You're so absorbed in your football world, there's barely space for anything else. Including me."

"That's ridiculous." A flicker of uncertainty passes his eyes—a painful validation of what I already know—that he's unwilling to alter our equation. Nothing will ever change with Penn and me, never ever.

His hand sweeps over his face. "Laine, I...I didn't know."

"I know, Penn. That's the whole thing. I've been asking for more time, time together with just the two of us, and that's apparently not something you have to give. We are both really driven, but I still take the time to text or call

just to check in. Even if you tried to find time for me now, I'm graduating. If I land the job, I'll be moving, and not a little move across town, but to another country, across a whole ocean. How would that fit with your aspirations? Could you spare a week to visit me, a single weekend? Our life plans don't line up." I summon all my courage before delivering the final blow. "We need to face it—this isn't working."

"So what, we're just giving up, quitting? After everything?" Cynicism and anger seep into his voice. "You're just going to throw it all away, like that?"

Tears stream down my face. He looks so wounded that I feel my hardening heart shatter into shards. "I'm not throwing anything away. I'm accepting reality. We're moving in different directions and there isn't room for a course correction."

His body tenses, and he boxes me out by folding his arms, biceps flexing mad. "Accepting reality, huh? Here's my reality. Your timing stinks, Laine. I'm already grappling with the draft indecision, the awards banquet is four weeks away, and now I'm going to see you at rehearsals and pretend like everything's just peachy?"

"I'm sorry, Penn," my voice cracks. "But I believe this is for the best. I'm so sorry."

"Yeah. Me too," Penn murmurs, jamming his hands in his pockets.

Heavy silence wraps around us, every second stretching into a painful eternity. I literally bite my tongue to keep myself from taking it all back.

"So," Penn breaks the silence, his voice raspy. "This is where we part ways."

"Seems so," I answer. My voice wavers and I avert my gaze, hiding more tears.

Penn reaches out, tenderly cradling my cheek. "Hey. Don't."

This tiny gesture, the very intimacy I've yearned for, makes my knees quake. I tamp down that wave of want and need with a forced little laugh. It comes out all choked, and I shake my head, frustrated. "I'm sorry, Penn. I'm being ridiculous."

"You're not," he insists, thumb brushing gently over my cheekbone. "Anything but that. You're remarkable. And some man will be fortunate beyond his imagination to be forever yours."

"You too," I whisper. His words, his touch, bruising my heart. I cover his hand with mine, holding it in place for a few seconds more. "You're going to

make some really lucky girl ecstatically happy one day.”

“Maybe.” He gives melancholy smile. “But she won’t be you.”

“Penn...” Emotions choke me.

I stretch my fingers out, and our hands intertwine. And we linger, a thousand unspoken words passing between us.

As if compelled, I step into his embrace, wrap my arms around his solid waist. His arms secure me, hold me tight, and I breathe in the clean, male scent of him one last time.

When I gradually retreat, submitting to the inevitable, he lowers his head, brushes a soft kiss on my forehead, and murmurs, “Farewell, Laine Summers.”

I muster a watery smile. “Goodbye, Penn Mitchell.”

He turns and strides into the night, leaving me alone.

My chest squeezes and squeezes and squeezes with each pump of my unkindest organ. I possess the most hateful heart.

How did our perfect world crumble into ruins? Everyone said Penn and I were so perfect together. Now all that remains is the veiled vestige of our discontinued love story. I turn and trudge toward the Phi Iota Pi house. Grief and exhaustion beg for refuge in the form of my bed, and I’m suddenly desperate to hide away in my room.

But a slew of tasks awaits me—pay the DJ, ask the real lifeguards to close the pool, and above all, make sure any alcohol is carried off by our Lambda Gamma Pi brothers. Heaven forbid we fragile females have alcohol in our house without our big, nerdy fraternity brothers around to safeguard our sanctity. Wouldn’t want to shake the tree of the National Panhellenic Conference. And more importantly, extinguish the tiki torches so the house doesn’t burn to the ground.

A sob breaks from my throat, halting me mid-step. Forget the sorority house, I’ve torched my relationship. My once bright and predictable future feels as transient as morning mist. I thought Penn was my forever. Now I’m alone, adrift in an ocean of uncertainty.

FOUR

LAINE

“Fifteen-love,” Cassidy sings across the court.

My heart prickles, mirroring the heat in my exertion-flushed face. I spin the racket grip in my hands and then sprint to return her wicked serve. My normally lethal backhand, restricted by my aching rotator cuff, crashes into the net.

Cassidy breaks into a victory shimmy, teasing, “Shoulder holding up okay?”

“Doctor’s orders—light play only, and I’m a perfectly compliant patient. We can’t all be lethal serving machines like you,” I retort, trying to lighten the mood, my pulse echoing the thwack of our ball-racket exchange.

“Perfect patient? That’s a first,” she snickers, the ball smashing right to the baseline and sailing past the tip of my racket.

Cassidy’s grin broadens. “Game, set, match. You sure you’re ready for this, Laine?”

“I need something physically exhausting—it helps drown out the voice whispering that I just made a colossal mistake,” I admit.

“So...” Cassidy voice trails off, waiting for me to spill about the breakup.

“We’re over. For good,” I confirm, a lump growing in my throat. “He seemed surprised but didn’t even really try to talk me out of ending it. In the end, he just told me some guy would be lucky to catch me and walked away. It’s fine though. Really. My life with Penn would have been an eternal wait for him to throw a little attention my way.”

“You’re worth being someone’s whole world, Laine. Penn wasn’t that guy,” Cassidy consoles, pulling me into a hug that smells of sunblock, sweat, and sisterhood.

Cassidy checks her watch. “Shoot, I’ve got to scoot.”

“I can help with the dodgeball fundraiser,” I offer.

Cassidy dismisses me with a wave. “No, Laine. Have some fun this weekend, okay?”

“Mai tais and mani-pedis?” I ask, even though I know she won’t let me off the hook that easy.

She shakes her head. “Try a movie you’re dying to see, or a party you didn’t plan. Shamelessly flirt with some hot guy you’ve never met before. Kiss him right on the lips. Remember how fun single Laine can be?”

“I am not ready to meet someone new, much less kiss somebody I don’t know,” the words shoot out like Pop Rocks, fast and fizzy and all over the place, and I feel foolish.

“You will be,” Cassidy says confidently, giving my cheek a quick peck. “Call me later?”

I watch Cassidy vanish up the steps, leaving me alone on the court. Can I really be okay with being single again? I grip my racket, the texture grounding me as I consider Cassidy’s advice. Maybe it’s time to try being single Laine, just for one weekend. Do I even want to try when the guy everyone on campus wants or wants to be couldn’t make me a priority or bother to fight for us?

IT’S STILL EARLY, and the courts are mine alone. The rhythmic motion of moving my body helps drown out my messy thoughts. Maybe Cassidy is right. Distraction is the key to happiness—or at least an effective antidote for the sorrow in my heart and the restless energy thrumming under my skin.

My emotions are a toxic cocktail of hurt, anger, and regret, like a radioactive breakup smoothie. He doesn’t deserve me, never appreciated the energy I poured into supporting him, squeezed me into the fringes of his schedule. Then walked away without so much as a glance back.

Bouncing the ball against the hard court, I test the feel of taking a full serve. My muscles respond eagerly, liking the force of the returning ball. One, two, three, four...I count off numbers as the ball strikes the cement.

The unspoken fifth count comes out as “Suck it, Penn Mitchell!” as I smash the ball with all my might. My voice colors the air with cattiness, echoing off the backboard after the ball’s satisfying thud.

“Wasted love,” I hiss, all my frustration and anger pouring into the poor tennis ball. “Always prioritizing himself, never sharing his feelings, busy, busy, busy. Too busy to answer a text.”

The words ricochet off the neighboring court, much like the ball I just sent flying. My shoulder protests, but I ignore it. I’m not done yet.

“Always football, football, football,” I scoff, launching a series of furious shots. Every word spurred by months of pent-up resentment. “I thought Athletes of the Year were supposed to be outstanding communicators.”

I’m practically growling now.

“And now I’m expected to plan a banquet in his honor? Create the perfect

night for someone who doesn't give a flipping fig about me and never deserved me in the first place!"

The last ball crashes into the backboard and returns with such force, I just let it go long—no bounce, just raw, unfiltered heat.

A pained grunt pierces the morning quiet.

Startled, I whirl around to find a man lounging on a courtside bench. He's shirtless and scruffy, his face tipped to the sun. He's tossing a pink tennis ball up and down.

My pink tennis ball.

"Nice shot. Had some spice," a deep, male voice drawls, filled with amusement and slow like honey. "Almost as spicy as the sentiments you've been airing for the last...fifteen minutes, give or take."

The heat of my anger toward Penn disappears faster than morning fog, burned off by a surge of volcano-level mortification. As I step closer to Mr. Slow-talking Southern Drawl, it's hard not to stare. This guy is chiseled. Every-freaking-where. His jaw is adorned with stubble, the kind that looks like it's one shave away from a beard. My fingers itch with the temptation to feel it, to discover if it's as rough as it looks. Which is ridiculous considering moments ago, I was cursing all men. Deeply tanned skin stretches over muscle and bone, as beautifully defined as an anatomical drawing. Now though, his perfection is marred by a glowing red, tennis-ball-sized circle right on his ribcage. Ouch. No wonder he groaned.

"I'm really sorry about that welt. It looks painful," I mumble, "Can I have my ball back?"

"You know, when I was traveling in Scotland, I learned that saying 'can I' instead of 'may I' might earn you a stern look from the locals. They're pretty firm about their manners," he says with a teasing grin. "More particular than my own nana, and she wasn't afraid of using a bar of soap if you so much as thought about cussing around her."

I stare. He tosses my ball high into the air and catches it, winking at me. "Another thing that raised eyebrows was ordering a Scotch on the rocks. You'd think I had said something genuinely offensive, like called a kilt a skirt. You see, to them, Scotch is just whiskey. And putting ice in your whiskey is a betrayal of human decency. Oh, and don't spell whiskey with an E. No one does that there. Haven't figured that out yet, but after considering it, I do understand the whole 'call it whiskey' thing. It's not like we call bourbon an American."

My emotions spiral, a dog park gone wild. A Corgi-sized ball of embarrassment nips at the heels of a Labrador-load of anger, chased by a Rottweiler's worth of pure, unadulterated lust.

He's hot.

But he's also annoyingly verbose.

And incredibly rude.

His grin remains unapologetic as he leans back on the bench, continuing his monologue while I'm standing here seething. I cut him off, unleashing the angry Labrador. "The guy who just eavesdropped on an obviously personal conversation is giving me a grammar lecture? You have no manners whatsoever. No wonder they didn't like you in Scotland."

"I didn't say they didn't like me. I'm entirely too personable for that," he retorts, seemingly unfazed.

"Oh, I doubt that. I'm halfway to hating you, and we haven't even officially met."

He chuckles, and, perversely, I enjoy it, even if he's laughing at me.

"I didn't want to interrupt. Can't cork up those feelings or you'd be fit to burst."

"Then you should've left me to the uncorking." I fold my arms across my chest.

Unfazed, Southern Drawl pushes up and off the bench like a gymnast on the pommel horse in one slow, controlled, gratuitous display of ripped abs and ripped arms that lands him too close for comfort.

"Could do it again, if you'd like," he offers with an unashamed grin. "Bet it'd go viral on your many social media accounts."

"First, no thank you. Second, you're presuming I have *many* social media accounts."

"That was presumptuous of me, but you do have that influencer look about you."

I raise an eyebrow. "What sort of influencer?"

"You're not into heavy makeup. Could be you're a fashionista, since you're all matchy-matchy. But I'm betting you post aesthetic shots, like food and such."

"Is this where I'm supposed to be impressed? Because that was a lukewarm pickup line, at best. Everyone on the planet posts photos of *food and such*. Even my nana. Step up your game, champ."

He barks out a laugh, unrepentant. "Now that's not very nice. I was trying

to give you a compliment...telling you I find you easy on the eyes.”

“And you eavesdropping on my emotional outburst wasn’t exactly nice either. Did you sneak around reading your sister’s diary when you were a kid?”

“How else would a young man learn about the feminine psyche?”

He’s downright charming, radiating this laid-back and sexy southern vibe that is completely getting under my skin in the best and worst way possible. It’s unsettling. Down girl, down.

He scoots over, patting the bench beside him. “Sit with me for a spell. Let’s compare misbehavior. Come on, I don’t bite. I’ll even put my shirt back on so you won’t have to pretend you aren’t trying to peek at my tattoos.”

Heat fills my cheeks, but as he pulls his shirt over his head, I do sneak a look at those tattoos. Who wouldn’t? I catch a glimpse of a BU paw print but can’t make out the rest—he moves too fast. I remind myself I’m here for tennis, not for some swole sweet talker.

I close my eyes, which is kind of ridiculous, but this guy doesn’t need any encouragement.

“All better. You can open your eyes.”

The first thing I see is his shirt. And I know it’s time to call it a day. Injecting my voice with buckets of scoff and scorn, I read the scrawl aloud, “You Just Got Served by Jerry Levrier. Wouldn’t have pegged you for a Jerry.”

He cocks his head like he’s confused.

“It’s on your shirt.”

“Oh, right.” He holds the shirt out as if seeing it for the first time. “Jerry. At your service. But you have me at a disadvantage...”

“On so many levels, but let’s not get into it.”

“Again with the not nice. Did I do something that you don’t like?”

“Yes, you did. Or you do,” I sigh, not wanting to get into it with some Jerry I don’t even know. “Looking at you with your BU tattoo and your hours- in-the-gym-jacked body, my guess is football. You’ve got football written all over you. And in my experience, football players only have room in their hearts for the holy trinity of team, touchdowns, and trophies. Players, all of you.”

His face splits into mile-wide grin, like an origami cootie-catcher revealing a fortune full of sly self-satisfaction, “So you think I’m jacked, huh?”

“I think you’re the arrogant jock-type that I have sworn off for the rest of my days. Football team, tennis team, whatever team—you’re an athlete.”

“You’re right about football players, as puffed up and combustible as the Hindenberg. Egos aside, this is your lucky day, because I might be athletic, but I don’t play for any team.”

“Not on a team, huh? Listen, Jerry. You’re cute, you really are, and I’m sure lots of girls would love to sit around and watch you flex. But not this girl. I don’t do athletes.”

“Well now, Penn Mitchell might be a dickhead, but he is an athlete, so I’d say you do. Or at least you did. Do athletes that is.”

“And here I thought southern boys were supposed to be polite.” I shove my racket into my bag and stomp off in a noisy exit. So much for my shot at harmless flirtation. Infuriating, ill-mannered a-hole.

“Aw, Sugar. I’m sorry,” he calls after me from his bench. “I thought we had this whole sexy banter thing going on. Who’s gonna keep me company until my friend gets here?”

I flip him the bird over my shoulder.

His loud chuckle trails me to my car. I open the trunk and make the mistake of looking back over my shoulder. He’s moved closer, his big, inflated form fills the chain-link entrance to the courts. His eyes slant against the morning sun, turning his whole look from teasing and twinkly to hungry and hunting.

“You are a spirited creature. A fiery Venus emerging from the surf. Or maybe a Terminator busting out of a vat of molten metal. I just can’t decide, and I’d take ya either way—I think you’re simply glorious.”

He’s right about one thing. I am on the verge of Pompeii-level eruption. A wall of burning hot anger close to collapse, ready to spew molten lava everywhere. I toss my gear into the trunk and slide into the driver’s seat, pulse racing. A tap on my window makes me jump.

“Forgot something.” Southern Jerry peers in with stupid schoolboy grin, pressing my tennis ball into the glass.

I narrow my eyes at him and lower the window. Before my fingers can even brush the pink and yellow felt of the ball, he pulls it back like a child. Patience exhausted, I turn away. “Keep it.”

“Alright now, here you go. I’m just playing.”

He presses the ball into my outstretched hand, and with it, a slip of paper. I close my fingers around the ball, but instead of releasing, he cups his

fingers over mine. Our eyes lock as a silent spark hums where skin touches skin.

Finally he drops his hand.

“My number. In case you change your mind about exchanging tales of bad behavior.” With a wink, he saunters off.

I let the tennis ball roll into the seat beside me and stare at the paper in my hands. I’m a riot of emotions, chiefly annoyance. Crumpling the paper, I flick it off my hand and watch it bounce from the windshield onto the passenger seat.

I don’t need his number. I don’t need any man who thinks he can get under my skin so easily. I’m Laine Summers, damn it, sorority social chair and future event planner extraordinaire. No stupid Buckley athlete who collects women like baseball caps deserves even a second of my consideration.

But an unwelcome yet undeniable spark of curiosity flutters in my brain. And a little spark of something else entirely flutters quite a bit lower in my anatomy. The feel of his warm fingers wrapped around mine is living rent free in my mind.

FIVE

HUNTER

“Just one more glance. That’s all I ask.”

I backstep toward the courts, every bit of my being fixed on the scene playing out in a tiny convertible...waiting, hoping, watching. She sits in her car, keys in one hand, my number in the other. I shouldn’t be staring. It’s rude. And weird. And possibly stalker-like.

I’m doing all the things I shouldn’t. I *should* play it cool, give her space, let her come to me on her own terms...but I can’t help myself.

My fiery new friend traces her finger over the paper I slid into her hand. Her gaze flicks over my name and number. Then she squashes it into a small ball and flicks it with her finger, discarding it on the dash.

An involuntary groan echoes from my depths, shaking me from gut to heart. “Nice one, Williams. A real masterclass in subtlety.”

I double over, feeling like I took a hard tackle and air’s been knocked out of me. “Just breathe, dum-dum.”

Her engine roars in response, like its laughing at my misery. I squeeze my eyes shut against the inevitable—her driving out of my life. Instead, I hear the mashing crunch of gears, metal on metal. A sudden buck, and her car stalls.

She drives a stick. Interesting.

I wait for her to turn over the engine and leave me behind, as fast and furious as our introduction. But sweet silence fills the air. Her little Mini Cooper, my unexpected ally, forcing her to reconsider her abrupt departure.

As if on cue, she turns my way, her head tilted adorably as she peers over her shoulder. Her eyes widen and then narrow like a cat stalking through shadow and sunshine. She swivels so fast in her seat that her shiny ponytail fans out over her shoulder.

This time she nails the exit, ten out of ten. Gracefully, she turns over the engine, lowers the convertible top. To my utter delight, she maneuvers the car slowly and deliberately to face me. One neat turn of the wheel, and the driver’s door arcs inches in front of where I stand.

A spark of triumph glimmers in her eyes as she reaches out, the crumpled paper in the center of her palm, “You expect me to call you because you gave me a receipt from Kitten Mittens?”

A grin unfurls on my face. “Not just any receipt, sugar. Kitten Mittens

isn't some cutesy boutique. It's one of the finest craft beers by the Kushan Brewing Company in Bellingham, Washington. A testament to my exquisite taste, no more."

The flash of annoyance in her shining eyes drives me to add, "But I must say, stalling your car like that? Seems like I got under your skin a skosh, huh?"

Effortlessly, she slides the little car in gear, her parting words thrown over her shoulder, "Don't get used to me stalling, Jerry. The only thing getting stuck around here is your number in the trash."

With that, she flicks the crumpled receipt my way, her tires crunching gravel as she disappears. Her last words linger, a sobering reminder of my impetuous blundering. Twice she gave me an opening, and twice I blew it. "Couldn't stop pushing, could you, dum-dum."

Except, I'm not just some Jerry, and her? She is more than she knows.

THE TENNIS BALL arcs against the blue expanse above, a soothing preserve rhythm that eases the tension in my body that's been there since she peeled out of the parking lot.

"Nice toss, you tosser." Brandon's low voice interrupts my flow, and I pivot as he strolls up, the picture of slovenly self-satisfaction.

"Finally decided to grace us with your presence, Bauer?"

"You seriously need to get a life, man. Can't believe you waited this long, Williams. I'd have ditched me by now."

"And you really need to set an alarm, Bauer. Or maybe hook up with a gal who lets you sleep at night." I nod in his direction, and, pleased as punch to land an easy burn, offer, "Your shirt's on inside out."

"Sorry, dude." Brandon shrugs out of his shirt and rights it with an unabashed glow of princely pride. "Lost track of time."

"Don't you fret. I kept myself well-occupied." I bite back the urge to spill about Penn's probable ex. Brandon's no fool, and if I drop her into conversation, he'll know. And I want to keep my interest in her to myself. But I've got to get her name, and I need to know if Penn's really out of the picture. This will take craft and cunning, and subtlety's never been my strong suit.

"So, are we doing this or what?" I goad Brandon, diverting any questions about what kept me occupied while I waited for his late ass.

“I’m here to play,” he tosses up a ball and aims his serve straight at my chest. “The question is, what are the stakes?”

“Starting off with a body shot, huh? That’s low, even for you. But I’m game for a little competitive betting. Loser buys lunch after?”

“Too tame. Even for a side-lined old lady like you.”

“Alright then. How about this, loser wears the gaudiest possible tuxedo to the athletic banquet.”

“Nope, already made that wager with Penn, and I’m not turning up at the Excellence in Athletics twinning with my housemate. But I like where your head’s at, try again.”

“Well the simple shame of nudity’s out, as you love flaunting your big old birthday suit.”

“Body positivity, Hunter. It’s an indicator of confidence and mental health. Don’t shame me.”

“Alright. You lose, you get your body positively waxed.”

“That’s a little high stakes for a friendly game.”

“If you’re afraid of losing a—”

“Oh, I’m not losing.”

“Then what’s got you spooked, Bauer?”

“Waxing hurts, dickhead. A lot.”

“Them’s my stakes, take it or leave it.”

“Fine. If I lose, I’ll go get all silky smooth, you sadist. But when I win, and notice the word when in that sentence...you’re required to attend my party tonight. And you are required to stay at said party for a minimum of two hours. No excuses, Hunter.”

“Hard pass on that idea. That’s a no-go, and you know it. Got no interest in playing nice with Penn Mitchell and his posse.”

“Get over it already. One, Penn’s my housemate, and that’s not changing. Two, you wrecked your body pulling some ridiculous Ethan Hunt-style stunts. Life’s no Mission Impossible, and you’re not Tom Cruise. You’re a Buckley Wildcat. Three, and I’m not going to dive into all the gossipy details with you, but you might want to go a little easy on Penn. He’s going through some sort of personal purgatory. He’s tanking practice, throwing interceptions. Even let me sack him three times yesterday. Thrice,” he throws up three fingers.

“Finally, the golden boy ain’t so golden,” I crow. “Though it’s a pity about practice.”

“Reveling in Penn’s misfortune, Hunter? Come on, that’s not you.”

“Always ready to kick a man when he’s down.” I pantomime a bruising kick. “But you’re right. As much as I resent Mitchell taking my spot, which is a huge bucket of resentment, I wouldn’t wish harm on the team. Can you fix him?”

We exchange some easy groundstrokes, Brandon thoughtfully silent, until we finish game one. “I’m not sure. He won’t talk about it. Got himself royally dumped at the Phi Pi Spring Fling. He’s been floundering ever since.”

I snort, feigning indifference while my insides light up with all the excitement and brightness of a Christmas tree. “Brandon, Penn’s got himself a whole stable of girls, just prancing and preening for his attention. All vying to date the quarterback.”

“This girl’s no Penn Hen. Laine Summers is the real deal—beautiful, smart, genuine. That’s not exactly easy to replace. And Penn might look like he’s got it all, but we all have our own hamartia to overcome.”

He’s right. Laine Summers is the real deal. Bauer’s incoming shot sails right by, as I stand stock-still like I’m in a trance. I guess she’s throwing me off my game too. I scrunch up my face. “Hold up, Bauer? We all have our what?”

“Hamartia. You know, fatal flaw, Achilles heel?”

“You’re full of surprises, Brandon.”

“That’s my job, Williams. Enough with the coffee klatch. Game on.”

“Game on.”

BRANDON STROLLS TO THE NET, dragging a hand through his drenched hair. “How’d you pull off that miracle? I had you cornered in that second set, and you pulled some magic out of your ass and turned it around.”

I spin my racket fast around my finger, flick it out, and catch it on the descent. “Just lucky, I guess.”

“Lucky, my ass.” He jabs a finger at me. “I’m onto you, Williams. Next set, no mercy.”

“Mercy?” I bark out a laugh. “Is that what you call giving it your all and still losing your shirt? Face it, I’m just better.”

Brandon’s eyes narrow. “In your dreams, Hunter.”

The rest of the match is a joke. Once Bauer gets a whiff of defeat, he cranks it up to maximum effort. Given my aching ankle and wandering mind,

I'm lucky to have won a single set. Brandon's triumphant howl echoes across the complex, and I can't help but join in even though I'm the loser.

"I guess I'll see you at the party tonight. Dress to impress. The honeys will be in abundance."

"Here I was looking forward to seeing you waxed as smooth as a supermodel. And don't you worry about me, I always clean up good."

"If by cleaning up good you mean dressing like a middle-aged German tourist."

"Nothing wrong with sandals and socks, Brandon. It's all about the comfort. Tell me more about the abundance of these so-called honeys."

"Penn's little sister invited the cheer squad, that's where you'll find me. And I think Penn invited the whole Phi Iota Pi house. Of course, that was pre-breakup, and those girls stick together like glue. I figure they'll either show up in force to make a statement or boycott us. But since I let Tessa know that Penn's got other plans, I'm betting on the former."

"Mitchell's not coming? Why didn't you say so? If he's not there, count me in."

"I don't like easy bets. If I had told you Penn was a no-show, you wouldn't have any real skin in the game. I already knew I was going to wipe the floor with you today, so I had to give you a reason to fight for it. You know I prefer a good fight."

"Fair enough. So a house full of vivacious Phi Pis and cheerleaders...you reckon Penn's ex will be joining her sorority sisters?"

Bauer shoots me a look as keen as a hawk eyeing a field mouse. "Why do you care?"

"Well, I may have slipped her my number while I was waiting on you."

"What's wrong with you? Are you kicking off a personal Cold War between you and Penn? Lord help you, Hunter."

"Be cool, man. She tossed it right back."

Bauer shakes with laughter. "Do tell."

"Not much to it. She was here, hitting the felt right off some tennis balls. And cursing out Penn for his basic stupidity with each shot. It was great. She didn't miss a beat. Let's just say she intrigued me. Greatly."

"Let me get this straight. You're risking our team unity just to spite the guy who took your spot? Because I saw it happen. You were the idiot who went and injured himself. Penn had nothing to do with it."

"Well, when you put it like that, I sound mighty unkind, petty even. But

it's nothing like that, I swear. First of all, I'm hardly a part of the team these days. As much as I hate to say it, and you hate to hear it, you know I'm speaking the truth." I hold up my palm to head off any argument, and it kind of stings when he doesn't even try to deny it. To the Wildcats, I guess I'm just a dead man walking, so I move on with my argument like I'm trying to move on with my life.

"And second, Brandon, this girl's something else—all fine, fierce, and fiery. She shrugged off my full southern charm like water off a duck's back. She's magnificent. Full of life."

Bauer's confusion is near comical. "Laine Summers? She's a great girl, a sweetheart, but she's more pearls and plaid than fire and ferocity. And she's definitely not your usual taste in women."

"I got a type now?"

"Sure do."

"I'll play your game. What's my kind of female?"

"Your type is the backpack across Europe with two tees and a toothbrush. You're all wild at heart and spontaneous. Your girls run to Burning Man, while lovely Laine runs the Boston Marathon. She's precise. She's orderly. She's the rules and rigorous preparation type. Revenge against Penn aside, Laine Summers is not your brand of whiskey, Hunter.

"That I cannot deny. But this isn't a revenge play, and it seems to me that Mitchell didn't exactly suit her either—turns out he's not the world's best boyfriend. But none of it matters anyway, Brandon. It's really about her. It's not like she's going to throw herself at a wanderer with no direction and no prospects. Penn's the star quarterback, and I'm the scrubbed-out backup. Hell, I wouldn't choose me either. But if she's game, I won't say no."

"You're barking up the wrong tree, Hunter, that's all I'm saying. That, and don't screw up the team over a female."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"Good," he snaps. He stomps around, making a production of gathering his stuff to emphasize his displeasure, in case it wasn't obvious. Just when I think he isn't paying me any mind, he nods at my ankle as I try to massage it on the sly. "Hey, man, you alright?"

"Yeah, just a bit sore," I answer tersely. We've amply covered my love interest, but my swollen ankle isn't up for discussion.

"Listen, you're not washed out at twenty-one. But maybe it's time you took it easy on the athletics, Hunter. Get back to the rehab center."

“Lay off sports? You might as well tell me to cut off my arm,” I grumble, losing football aching more than any physical pain.

“Keep your arm, it’s your greatest asset,” Brandon smirks, flicking my cheek. “But that hideous excuse for a beard definitely needs to go. Or I’m going to start calling you, Patches.”

“Laugh it up,” I roll my eyes, already calculating how long I can go without shaving just to annoy him.

SIX

LAINE

The hot, bubbling water envelops me as I sink into the plunge pool, my tired muscles lengthening and stretching like a happy cat in a sun ray. I let my hands and arms float on the stream of bubbles, savoring the sensation of warmth and weightlessness.

“Too much tennis and not enough physical therapy makes Laine a surprisingly non-compliant patient,” Josh jokes, coming over to check on me. He makes a couple of notes in the tablet he’s holding.

“Ha.” I give it a beat. “Ha.” I’m being a little bratty, especially since Josh is singularly devoted to making his patients whole people, but today...is not the day to poke at me. I’m still dwelling on the whole encounter with Mr. Southern Charm...because I may have been brusque or even bad-mannered, bordering on abusive. But who does that? Lurks and listens in on what is obviously a private conversation? Even if the conversation was between me, myself, and I.

“Laine, numbers don’t lie. You’re worse than you were last week. What gives?”

The news makes me wince a little. Because he’s not wrong... “I’ve been *mostly* compliant. I may have strained my shoulder a little getting everything set up for our Spring Fling party.”

Josh just taps the iPad screen, “And?”

“And this morning I may have gone overboard smashing some tennis balls before our appointment, but I had some serious demons to vanquish.”

“Vanquish those demons, Laine. Just don’t push yourself too hard, too fast. As fun as it is hanging out with you, let’s get you out of PT.”

My answer wavers across the room on a sigh, “Okay.”

“Did you at least work it all out?” Josh gives me a smile so understanding my eyes well up in response.

“Work what out?”

“Whatever made you need to pulverize those poor tennis balls?”

“Oh, yeah. That. Kind of.” I can feel my eyebrows knit together as I think about it. Did I work it out or am I lying to myself? “Maybe. I’m not really sure.”

“Do you want to talk about it? I mean, I’m not that kind of therapist, but my wife says I’m a good listener.”

“Aw, you’re sweet, but I think that’d be too embarrassing.”

“Relationship stuff?”

“I broke up with someone.” It pops from my mouth before I can stop it. “He’s this great guy, but...I don’t know...maybe not great for me. But now I feel like a total jerk because I’ve heard he took it really hard, and I...well, I’ve been really edgy.”

“You’re definitely not a jerk, Laine. The best relationship can be tough to navigate, and ending one is painful. I mean, if you’re a nice person, which you are, you don’t want to cause another person pain. Sometimes the hardest thing is letting go so you can reach for that next level. It sounds like that’s what you had to do for you. And what I said about your shoulder goes for your heart too—don’t push yourself too hard, too fast. You’re going to get where you’re going. You’re a smart cookie.”

“Thanks, Josh. I’ve been bouncing between grief and relief, and it’s nice to hear that you think I’m not a total jerk. You know, the really weird thing is, I think I was more upset that some stupid, Grand-Slam-only-in-his-dreams tennis player overheard me venting on the court, and that got me more riled up than the actual break up did. He worked my every nerve. Anyway, thanks for saying I’m nice. I don’t feel nice.”

“You are definitely nice, Laine Summers. You know, I think you need to do something fun this weekend...something just for you, or something that gets you out of your head and out of your house. No sitting around in pajamas eating ice cream and watching Nicholas Sparks movies.”

“That’s the advice my best friend gave me too.” I feel my cheeks heat thinking about what Cassidy actually suggested, and I’m not about to share *that* with Josh. “But I have a paper I want to get a head start on and a project to complete for a job application, and I—”

“Laine, I bet you can study a little, work on your application project, and still get out of your house. Shake up your routine a little, say yes to one new thing. But definitely say no to heavy lifting. And no tennis until Dr. Nguyen gives you the go ahead. Promise?”

“I promise.”

“Okay, now that that’s settled, finish up here with about fifteen minutes in the hot pool, then at least a minute in the cold plunge. And be sure to leave some in the tank for our rehab workout. Next week we’re going full beast mode.”

“Bringing out the best in my body and brain, Josh. You’re a double-threat

therapist.” He waves away my praise, but I catch the pleased look in his eyes before he moves off to help his next patient.

Sinking deeper into the churning water, I close my eyes and relish the heat seeping into my aching body. For a crazy second, I wonder if this is what it feels like to be a fish. No worries about guys, no worries about grades. Just me and the water. Floating. Simply floating.

My oneness with the water lasts about ten seconds before my mind skips like a scratched LP. Why does everyone think I should go crazy and throw caution to the wind? Have a good time, go to a party, you’re only young once. It’s exactly the sort of sentiments I’d find in the notes my mom left for me for me before going out of town for a little holiday with her latest boyfriend. ‘Let loose and live a little this weekend, Laine.’ Age-inappropriate advice and twenty dollar bills—my mom’s favorite forms of parenting.

I cross my arms and lean my head back against the lip of the oversized hot tub. There’s nothing wrong with taking a little me time and getting my emotional ducks all lined up in a row again. Breakups were made for Ben and Jerry’s and bad movies. Cassidy and Josh have no idea what they’re missing.

My restless thoughts move on to my unanticipated tennis court connection. My behavior is sitting all wrong with me. Sure, Penn never called or texted, even though I sort of hoped he might. But that just proves I was right about him. He didn’t love me. And no way does that warrant my stupid little public pity party.

And that guy. Ugh.

The thought of my emotional outburst coupled with all that cutting banter makes me want to sink far below the surface into the muffled solitude of the underwater world. So I do. Like a fish. I definitely overreacted. Something about that guy got me sparking like a roman candle.

Enough. I push away the negative thoughts and float lazily on the surface. No one is around to hear, but I whisper anyway. “Focus, Laine. You’re the architect of your life...choose something new, something positive. Something that makes you feel like saying yes.”

I hear the glass doors slide open and the chill air of the hallway wafts over my exposed face and shoulders. I push back to the edge and sink back into the warm water.

Staccato click-clacks announce the arrival of Dr. Nguyen and her signature high-heeled feet. At first, I thought it was funny that an orthopedic specialist would wear such unforgiving shoes, but if I were as short as she is

working around all these hulking jocks all day, I'd wear the tallest shoes I could find too. Sure enough, her firm yet warm voice follows the echo of her footwear. "Josh...look who's back."

"Hey, man, great to see you," Josh replies. "It's been a while."

"Ain't that the truth. Like I told the doc here, I've been worn slap out trying to wrap my head around what's next for me, and I'm still not sure what I'm gonna do. But here I am anyway, trying to figure it out. With your help, of course."

My eyes snap open with the force of a handful of popcorn thrown into the core of a nuclear reactor, fast and hot.

It's him.

The Dinosaur Command Post in my brain screams run. Luckily, my internal Logical Lifeline threw that inner lizard a bone, and I manage to sit still. Very still. Because I shoved the flight response into a tight little box, my inner lizard is chafing against the stillness, spoiling for a fight. I squeeze my eyes shut tight and listen.

"Josh, since it's been a while since we've seen our friend, let's see where he's at—we just did some blood work and have his MRI scheduled, but let's start with the basics and pretend this is our first visit. Let's see how you're moving. Josh, will you take some notes for me?"

"Happy to, *doc*."

I hear Dr. Nguyen laugh, low and melodic. I've never heard her laugh before.

"Oh, not you too, Josh. Doc makes me feel like we're getting ready for a shootout at the O.K. Corral." More laughter, this time from all three of them.

Curiosity wins out, and I let my eyelids peek open. Through my lashes, I watch Dr. Nguyen beside a tall, tanned, and toned athlete. Of course he's not just an athlete. It's my early-bird tennis player, Rude Rudy McRudeface.

An icy finger draws an unexpected doodle down my spine, and I shimmy-shiver with a searing shot of shame. Of all people on campus, Jerry's the last person I want to see. Rehash my mortifying morning temper tantrum with Mr. Southern Charm? I'd rather drown in these four feet of frothy water.

I sink down, the bubbles and chlorine tickling my nose, praying he won't notice me. After what feels like eons of spying while Jerry steps, stands, stretches, and flexes, Dr. Nguyen gently guides Jerry down from a plyo box, her hand resting lightly on his back. My eyes fix on that hand. I stare, bemused. Our esteemed doctor isn't usually so touchy-feely with her patients.

She must really like this one.

“The swelling has gone down significantly since we saw you last fall, but I’m really concerned about the level of pain you’re experiencing,” Dr. Nguyen says to the guy in a gentle, almost affectionate tone. “We need to talk about scheduling that ankle surgery soon if you want to play this coming season.”

“I know you’re right, Doc,” he sighs. “I’ve just been putting it off, hoping to avoid the knife again, you know?”

Dr. Nguyen gives his arm a comforting squeeze. “I understand, but this is the best option we have. You’ll be as good as new before you know it.”

“But that’s the thing, isn’t it? No one knows if I’ll ever be as good as new.”

She shrugs her shoulders. “You’re right, I can’t make that promise. But I can tell you that you’re risking permanent damage if you don’t move forward with treatment. And I know you live to compete. I’d hate to see you sitting out your last year. I’ll be in touch when I get the results of your MRI. Josh, take good care of our favorite awful patient.”

With that, Dr. Nguyen exits, and Josh walks Jerry from the fit balls and floor mats to the hydrotherapy pool. Perilously close to where I stew in the hot plunge.

“Hey, Josh. How you been? How’s your little soccer star?”

“Making her dad proud. This weekend’s her championship tournament, but I don’t see how they can call it a tournament. There’s no bracket, and every team leaves with trophies and ribbons. It’s pretty cute, but basically chaos in motion. We call it amoeba ball, because there’s no scoring, no positions, no goalie, and the kids move as one giant organism, kicking and shouting around the soccer ball. Of course we parents keep score, and I’m happy to tell you, even at six years old, Olivia is a stone-cold striker.”

“Atta girl! I’d be proud too, and I’m sure little Olivia is the nucleus of that amoeba. Where’s the match?” Jerry slides in casually, like he follows kids’ soccer like a die-hard fan.

“They set up over at Cedar Rose Park. First teams start at ten.”

“I’ll get some of the guys together, and we’ll come cheer them on.”

“Seriously? That would be awesome. Normally it’s just parents, and half of them are more concerned with their coffee and conversation. Olivia would love to have an enthusiastic cheering section.”

“Consider it done.”

“My man,” Josh replies, giving Jerry a bro hug. “Thank you. We’re done for the day. We got all the numbers for Dr. Nguyen. You could do a cold soak to battle that inflammation, but we’ll wait to start official therapy until Dr. Nguyen writes the orders.”

They walk to the cold plunge, and Josh offers him a hand into the frigid water, but Jerry hops in without hesitation or help. He sucks in a breath that floats around Josh and comes to me in a loud hiss. “Now that’d wake up a hibernating grizzly.”

“How long do you want to take the pain?” Josh asks.

“I’m in it to win it, Josh. Give me the full three.”

Josh shakes his head and punches a pre-set timer. “I admire your unshrinking dedication.”

“With water this cold, I’d say there’s plenty of shrinking going on, Josh.”

Josh laughs like this is original as he makes notes on his ever-present tablet, while Charming Jerry literally chills in his pool, less than ten feet from me. I’m feeling a little dizzy and a little desperate. If I scoot any farther down, I’ll completely submerge myself, and my lungs prefer air to chlorinated water. And speaking of water, my emotional stewing is perilously close to actual physical stewing—one more minute in this hot tub, and I’ll be human Coq au Vin, Laine à la Bourguignonne.

No sooner does this thought lodge in my brain than Josh finishes his notes. He turns to leave, and I watch his eyes go wide. “Laine, what are you still doing in that water? It’s way past time to move to the cold pool. You’ve got to be dying in there.”

Maybe Jerry won’t recognize me with my sopping messy bun and matronly one piece bathing suit. Maybe he’ll close his eyes and—

“Hey, Serena Williams. You stalking me?”

SEVEN

HUNTER

I hurry out of the locker room, still damp from my rushed shower, hoping to catch Laine before she leaves. What are the chances I'd run into her twice in one day? It must be fate. As I round the corner, I spot her ponytail bouncing as she walks toward the exit. My pulse kicks into overdrive at the sight of her.

"Laine!" I call out, wincing as the sound bounces around the tiled room like I shouted into a damn bull horn. So much for playing it cool.

She stops short, shoulders tense. "Jerry," she calls back, her voice flatter than week old ginger ale.

I freeze, her words landing like a tackle from a three-hundred pound linebacker, cracking my confidence. Jerry?

Who's freaking Jerry? For a split second confusion sweeps over me, before I remember the fool tee shirt I had on this morning with my buddy's name scrawled across it. Heat rushes up my neck. Nice going, way to look like an idiot in front of her. I force out an awkward chuckle and try to play it off as I jog up beside her. If I want to win this girl over, I'll just have to rely on my charm. Can't let a bruised ego sideline me here.

"Hey, Laine." I turn on the old southern charm. "You can call me whatever you want if it means I get to keep talking to you. But listen, I wanted to apologize for eavesdropping on your conversation earlier. That was rude of me, and I'm really sorry. And it's possible I came on a little strong. You were just so magnificent as you rained down that hellfire hissy fit."

Her eyes widen in surprise, and for a moment, she doesn't say a thing. My pulse throbs in my ears as I wait for her answer.

"Wow, um... thanks, Jerry," she finally says, a smile splitting her pretty face. "I appreciate the apology. And to be truthful, I was trying to sneak out of here just now because I'm not proud of snapping at you this morning. Months of relationship frustration spilled out on that tennis court this morning, and I'm afraid I dumped it all over you. But apparently, you find that attractive."

"I'm not the type to back down from a challenge. I have to tell you that it is pretty refreshing to have a female just tell it like it is."

A little furrow pops between her brows before she answers, "Refreshing? Okay. Well, let me lay it all out then. I'm surprised you said you were sorry. I

don't mean to sound judgmental, but I had you pegged as just another puffed up athlete. All ego and no substance. But I'm a big girl. I can admit when I'm wrong too. You seem like a decent guy. I guess tennis players are more evolved than football players."

"What do you mean?" I ask, totally confused by that comment. "What's wrong with football players?"

"Let's just say my ex quarterback ruined football players for me. So I'm glad you're just a humble tennis guy, Jerry."

I rub my suddenly damp palms against my jeans. She thinks I'm some tennis-playing Jerry. I know I should come clean, but the truth stubbornly sticks in my throat. I force an awkward chuckle and lie through my teeth, "Right, us tennis guys are a thoughtful, sensitive bunch."

I'll tell her, I swear to myself. Just...not yet. I have to see where this goes first. I'll come clean eventually.

I flash her a dimpled grin and say, "So, about that apology dinner I owe you..."

"Forget about it. You don't owe me anything. Our mutually bad behavior cancels each other out."

"Come on, let me make it up to you. Let me take you out tonight. There's a casual kickback happening at my buddy's later. Nothing too wild, but they've tapped a keg, and it'll be a chance to ditch your usual Friday plans and try on someone new. You should come. You know, most women find me irresistibly charming."

"Is that so?" she says, her disbelief obvious.

"I mean, I've been told I'm irresistibly charming, at least when I'm not shoving my big feet in my mouth." Pulse racing faster than a thoroughbred at the Kentucky Derby, I hold her gaze as I await her reply.

She squeezes her eyes shut and sighs like she's gonna tell me to bless my little heart and piss right off. Then, like a thousand angels singing from heaven, she peers up at me through her lashes. The move makes my heart fumble.

"A party I didn't plan and shameless flirtation with some hot guy I've never met..." she says slowly. "Alright, Jerry. I'll go with you."

"Really?" I croak. I clear my throat, trying to retain some semblance of composure. This girl makes me feel like I'm a quivering little poodle jumping through terrifying, towering hoops of fire. "Yeah, uh, that's great, fantastic."

"Only because I was challenged to say yes to anything new and exciting

this weekend,” she explains, her tone playful yet cautious. “And I suppose this qualifies.”

“Absolutely it does. Ridiculously exciting. In fact...” I flash a crooked grin, “Why don’t we start right now? Since you’re a yes girl, and all. We can spend the whole day together, just you and me...see where the adventure leads us, sort of like a day of daring.”

Her eyes meet mine. She’s intrigued. This time, her response comes more quickly. “Alright, Jerry. Let’s do it.”

This Jerry thing is kind of annoying, but then again, this truce would be over in a heartbeat if she knew who I really was.

Laine puts her hand forward with the decisive formality of an office manager confirming the delivery date for a shipment of staplers, not the beginning of something special. That’s definitely not the tone I’m going for. Instead of a handshake, I take her hand in mine and bring it to my lips, like she’s my queen.

Her skin is soft as flower petals and kitten fur, and she smells incredible, warm and woodsy, like spring flowers in a secret, sunny forest grove. I let my lips linger against the back of her hand a half heartbeat too long.

“You smell absolutely amazing.”

“Hair products.”

She brushes off the compliment but leaves her hand in mine. “So what’s our first ridiculously exciting adventure?” she asks.

“How about a ferry ride across the bay, then we can eat our way across San Francisco. I’m hungrier than a tick on a teddy bear.”

“That’s a horrific phrase that I could happily go my whole life without ever hearing again. And I can’t believe I’m telling you this,” Laine’s cheeks glow a pretty pink, “but in the three years I’ve been at Buckley, I’ve never crossed the bay. I’ve never actually explored San Francisco.”

“Seriously? That’s shocking.” I squeeze her hand, tempted to pull her into my arms and kiss her breathless. Instead, I let her hand go before I do something that sends her running. “Well, we’re definitely fixing that today. We’re spending today being tourists in our own backyard.”

“Perfect. First stop, Golden Gate Park?” Laine grins.

I’m mentally listing off all the amazing sights I’ll share with her. “The park will be one of many stops, but first stop will definitely be at the Ferry Building for warm-from-the-oven empanadas. And you really have to try the famed banana pudding, nowhere near as delicious as my nana’s banana

pudding, but so sweet it'll remind you of puppies and picnics."

"You weren't kidding when you said eat our way through the city." She glances at me, eyes bright. "It sounds like the start of a perfect day."

"Well consider me your personal tour guide," I say with a wink. "Anything on your San Francisco bucket list?"

"I want to walk the Golden Gate Bridge and see the Conservatory of Flowers and Japanese Tea Garden," Laine says, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.

"Consider them checked off your list," I reply with a tempting smile. "The Conservatory is beautiful—very romantic strolling through all those tropical flowers. And the cherry blossoms in bloom around the Japanese Tea Garden are just begging to be your next Instagram backdrop."

I waggle my eyebrows at her. "The tea garden has some secluded nooks perfect for...whispering sweet nothings."

I hesitate, then add softly, "But in all seriousness, I want you to feel completely comfortable today. If at any point you want to cut our adventure short, just say the word. I may be an incorrigible flirt, but I promise I'm also a gentleman when it counts. Do you want to set up an SOS?"

She frowns. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, you just agreed to spend the day with the jackass from the tennis courts. Should you find me less than entertaining, your bestie can call with a fake emergency."

"You're giving me an easy out in case I'm bored to tears?"

I give her a roguish grin. "With the romantic gardens, secluded tea nooks, and the real danger of falling for my beguiling southern swagger...you likely won't want this day to ever end."

"That's a relief, Jerry. I wasted away waiting around for my ex, trying to get a minute of his time. Boring doesn't do it for me anymore. I've had enough boring to last a lifetime. You promised me a day of daring. I'm ready to be dazzled."

Low, slow, and husky, the pitch of Laine's sweet voice sends darts of want and need directly to my nether regions. I lean in close and match her low tones. "This morning when I saw you with all your glorious fierceness, fury, and fire...my entire being lit up with the most powerful longing. To know you. To measure up to a woman as exceptional as you. Asking you out is the most daring play I've ever made."

EIGHT

LAINE

The ferry's engine roars to life as we pull away from Buckley Marina, the salty breeze whipping through my hair. I tilt my head back to the sun, and there's no holding back a giddy grin as I stand beside Jerry, feeling more carefree than I have in forever.

"First stop, empanadas," he announces, eyes twinkling. "Second stop, banana pudding, followed up with cupcakes. We'll eat our way across the Embarcadero waterfront, all the way to the Golden Gate, for that bridge walk you requested."

"The way to my heart, food and adventure," I say through an enthralled smile. It's all I can manage, as I'm momentarily blinded by his dazzling, toothy smile as our eyes lock. What am I doing running off into the city with a guy I just met? This is so unlike me, the control-freak valedictorian—most likely to succeed and least likely to ever be the life of the party. Yet this guy throws a couple compliments my way and has me kicking caution to the curb. I can't remember ever feeling this...alive and free. I'm just not the giddy girl next door.

But this is exactly what Cassidy was talking about when she urged me reach inside and find my single Laine. I know because that's what she texted back when I shared my impromptu plans with her. My crazy, surrender to chaos plans.

She also texted that she was proud of me. And that she would call the police if I didn't get home or at least call before midnight. Cassidy also demands I send her a photo of Jerry so she can see what kind of scoundrel lured me away from my planned evening of moping. I discreetly sneak a pic of his handsome profile as we ride the ferry.

I smooth my windswept hair and try to collect myself as our ride bumps to a stop at the bustling Ferry Building. Jerry hands me down, then expertly weaves us through the bustling crowds at the Ferry Building, placing a steady hand at the small of my back. The warmth of his palm seeps through my shirt.

We arrive at El Porteño Empanadas, and I'm enveloped in the heavenly aroma of baked dough. My mouth waters as I take the first bite of the flaky empanada, the beef and olive filling melting on my tongue. I suppress a moan of delight. "Why did we only get one? These are ridiculously delicious. We

need another. Maybe two.”

I reach for my wallet, intent on more empanadas, but Jerry gently pulls me away. “We can absolutely come back for more, but right now, we have a date with some legendary treats that are gonna blow your mind.”

At Miette Patisserie, I’m overwhelmed by the displays piled high with the most beautiful confections I’ve ever seen. Jars filled with macarons, tables brimming with colorful sugar candies, shining mini chocolate dome cakes topped with sugar daisies, bright lemon tartlets, and rows of perfect little cupcakes decorated like works of art... It almost makes me want to cry.

I want them all. Literally.

“Trust me, the cupcakes are too good to miss,” Jerry chuckles at my indecision. “I’ll take the whole case so you can sample everything.”

“What’s your favorite?”

“Doesn’t matter much what my favorite it, this is your day. I’m just enjoying watching you having fun.”

After consulting with the nicest baker ever, I select a sinful-looking chocolate cupcake topped with a perfect swirl of glossy Italian meringue.

“You sharing? Or do I need to order my own?” Jerry asks.

“Sharing.”

“Excellent, we also have to get a bag of sour cherry cola bottles. Just for walking around snacks.”

His choice confirms that he is an enormous child, but I can’t help but admire his enthusiasm, and following his lead, I snag a box of macarons for walking around snacks myself.

WE TAKE our loot to go and walk down Pier Seven. It’s picturesque—all wooden planks and wrought iron with a cool breeze coming off the Bay. When we reach the end of the pier, I snap some selfies of us with the Transamerica Pyramid and the city in the background. It feels natural when he pulls me close, his arm wrapped securely around my waist. Like any couple would. So when he takes my hand and interlaces his fingers in mine, I leave it, my palm fitting perfectly in his.

It’s nice. It’s like coming home.

“I got some really big news while we were riding the ferry over here,” I blurt before I even know what I’m doing.

“You’d better share it, because you seem fit to explode it you don’t get it

out.” He gives my hand a playful squeeze.

“I made it to the final round of interviews for this really big internship I applied for at the beginning of the school year. You’re the first person I’ve told.”

“That’s fantastic, sugar, congratulations.” He flashes a smile my way. “Tell me more.”

“Well, I haven’t won it yet. It’s down to me and one other person out of thousands of applicants. I can hardly believe it,” I gush, pressing my free hand against my lips.

“You going to tell me what this really big internship is about?”

“I’d be working for the Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games. Planning the next Summer Olympics from almost the beginning.” The last word ends with a squeal that I just can’t hold back. “It would be just an amazing, career-defining experience, learning from the best, working side by side...And the pay is great too. It’s almost overwhelming to think about.”

“No shit? I mean, no kidding? That’s a mighty prestigious internship,” he whistles.

“It really is. But...” I feel my brow furrow. “It means moving to Paris next fall, before graduation. Leaving everyone I know behind. And I’d have to figure out finishing my degree remotely. And before that, I have to finish preparing for my final interview.”

Jerry sweeps aside my concerns with a wave and his easy-breezy confidence.

“They’d be crazy not to hire someone as talented as you,” he assures me. “And if you decide to pursue it, I’m sure Buckley will work with you on getting you graduated and what not. They’d be happy as a cat in cream to have a graduate working on the Olympics. And Paris? Well, Paris would be lucky to have you, even if just for a little while.”

His ready conviction fans the spark of daring I’ve felt all day with him. Jerry makes me feel like anything is possible.

“You’re right. I guess sometimes you just have to take a leap of faith, even if it’s mental one.” Squeezing his hand, I add playfully, “I’ll send you a postcard from the Eiffel Tower if I go.”

He squeezes back. “*When* you go, maybe I’ll hitch a ride in your suitcase. I’ve always wanted to play the clay courts at Roland-Garros.”

“You’re funny.”

“No, I’m serious. Who doesn’t want to hit some balls on that hallowed

ground?”

WE FIND a bench and sit in charged silence, the sounds of the bay filling the space between us. Our eyes lock, and I feel the pull of him, as strong as a riptide. The crashing waves and crying gulls fade away, and I am fully anchored in this moment with him. He leans closer. And closer. I match him, lean for lean, and let my eyes fall gently shut, waiting.

“Cupcake?” he asks.

I slit my eyes open. The now open box is between us in the palm of his hands. I breathe in noisily, “Cupcake.” Is he playing with me? I carefully lift it out of the container and hold it aloft. “Behold. Perfection.”

He reaches for it, and I warily pass it over, but I snatch it back as he lifts his hand to his gaping mouth.

“Seriously? Let me show you the proper way to eat a cupcake.”

“There is no proper way to eat a cupcake, except for the way that gets it into my mouth the fastest.”

“You’re a barbarian.”

I carefully tear the cake part in half, making a sandwich with the frosting in the middle. His eyebrows raise in surprise. I lift the cupcake slowly, taking small, sensual bites and exhaling exaggerated little moans of delight.

Jerry’s eyes darken as he watches me lick the last spot of frosting from my lower lip. I pass the half-eaten cupcake to him, and as my fingertips graze his large, outstretched hand, he fumbles slightly.

“Mmm. Distracted?”

“Mesmerized is more like it,” He responds as he takes huge bite, smushing a line of frosting from his lip to his cheek.

“You’ve got a little...” I say, reaching out to wipe it away with my thumb. My hand lingers, caressing the stubble along his jaw. I pull back shyly.

“Thanks,” he murmurs, his gaze never leaving mine. He slowly reaches with the cupcake like he’s going to feed me, which is the worst move ever. As I wind up to launch a verbal counteroffensive, he taps my nose with the icing. “You’ve got a little...”

He takes a victory laugh, deep and rumbling. My stomach responds with a hummingbird flutter of appreciation. He has a nice laugh, easy and natural, and infectious. People could pay him to sit in movie theaters at comedy

premiers just to get the audience going. That kind of laugh. He runs a finger over the tip of my nose, and pops it into his mouth, licking it clean. “Just divine.”

“Ha ha,” I lick the sugary delightfulness off my finger and snatch the remaining bite of cupcake from his lowered hand. “That was a dirty trick.”

“Dirty? That was a sweet trick. Just wait until you see how dirty my tricks can get.”

NINE

LAINE

A fat and fuzzy bumble bee buzzes around the cherry blossoms above us, and I'm grateful for the dappled shade giving us a break from the warm spring sun.

"You're gonna have to carry me home," Jerry traces a finger lazily down my arm.

"You're far too big for carrying, my friend. You're going to have to suck it up and get marching."

"Who knew such a pretty little thing would be such a harsh taskmaster? Give me another minute. Or an hour. I'm exhausted. First you make me walk across the bridge and back again, then you insist we rent that damn surrey bike. Woman, you might be the death of me."

I roll over on my side and blades of grass tickle my bare arm, "Jerry. Let's get clear on one thing. You were the one who rented the surrey bike. It's not my fault they weigh as much as armored cars. Besides, you said it was great exercise."

"Great exercise, sure," he snorts, "But I meant for you, then you let me do all the work, like I'm your personal pedicab driver."

"Mmm. You're hired. You're a champion driver. Personally, I found the ride totally relaxing."

"Because you did nothing."

"Because you did everything."

He reaches out and grabs me in a ferocious tickle. Strong fingers mercilessly wiggling across my sensitive ribs. I writhe beneath him, trying to shimmy free from his powerful arms, but he's everywhere and has me pinned like a butterfly. Between peals of laughter, I suck in air and manage to screech, "Stop!"

He stops immediately.

His face is inches from mine.

He holds his body suspended above me, muscles flexed and on full display. I swear the air between us is arcing with electricity like a Tesla coil in a science museum. I roll my lips between my teeth and release them, swallow hard.

"Say it," his voice pitched low. Just for me.

"Say what?"

“Say uncle. Tell me to stop, and I will.”

I turn my head slowly from side to side and wiggle my arms up between his until they’re free. Wrap them around his neck and pull him closer.

He shifts all his weight onto one arm, and with his free hand, walks his fingers slowly up my ribcage. One. Rib. At. A. Time.

Not tickling.

Torturing.

His eyes are half-lidded, full of warmth, dilated and dark with want.

For me.

“Say it. Say you want me to stop.”

“I can’t. Stopping is exactly what I don’t want.”

“What do you want, Laine?”

“I want this.”

I pull him down, hard.

Press my lips to his. Soft.

I taste him, skimming light kisses across his lip, his jaw, and his mouth again.

He tilts his head and inches his body lower. His eyes are closed, lips slightly parted. He holds himself stock-still, hovering millimeters above me, achingly apart.

I unlock my arms from his neck and let my greedy fingers run through thick hair, trace along the trapezius, trail across collar bone, track over his well-developed deltoids. I know them all, they’re just parts of the shoulder, the back. Tendons connecting muscles to bone. But I want to memorize them like a map, memorize all of him.

I squeeze my arms between his again and run my hands down his ribs, across his back, up his lats. His whole body is taught, hard. Hovering.

His squeezed-shut eyes open suddenly, catch me staring, mapping, memorizing. His soft lips gently curve into a smile. “That was more than I had hoped for and better than I imagined.”

“I’ve imagined more,” I whisper.

“Me too, Laine.”

“What do you want, Jerry?”

“This.”

He’s everywhere. His body presses down on mine and his hands move to my ribcage, holding me fast as his mouth takes mine, and he’s kissing me harder, deeper, tongues touching. Then brushes warm lips across my jaw and

down my neck, kissing, licking, tasting, devouring me. And I want him. My hands move to his jeans, slide between where his warm skin meets his waistband.

He ducks his shoulder and rolls us over. I'm on top and his big hands have captured mine, moved them slowly to his chest, stilling them, gently holding hungry fingers captive.

"You're definitely going to be the death of me." He inhales deeply, my body moving slowly up and down as he releases his breath in a long, controlled sigh. He skims a hand slowly down my back. "I'd like to pick up the thread of this singular and riveting interlude when we're in a slightly less well-traveled spot. Would you be amenable to that, Laine Summers?"

"I think you could persuade me, with proper incentive."

"Can I incentivize you with some sourdough bread and delicious cheese?"

Laughter wells up from deep inside, shaking me on top of him, shaking him below. "Food it is. There's no way you've got anything in that bag of tricks as motivating as that kiss, but you can try to tempt me."

Jerry raises up and slides me around before standing up and lifting me with him. He holds me in his arms, and I can't help but reach up and wrap my arms around his neck.

"I'm not sure I ever want you to put me down."

"As you wish." He treats me to those dazzling teeth and just stares into my eyes, lips inches from mine in the most deliciously tantalizing position.

"But I've got to get my pack with the food." He carries me over to the pack he stowed at the tree trunk, shifts me to his shoulder, and bends over.

I shriek. It just comes out. "Okay, you can put me down."

With his pack in one arm, he gently lowers me with the other, but keeps it tight around me.

"Show-off."

"What's the use of being so dang strong if I can't man-handle you every so often?"

"I didn't ask you to stop showing off." I stare into his fine eyes. "In fact, I think I might need you to show off more often if it means carrying me around like a damsel in distress."

He picks me up again, and his eyes tighten almost imperceptibly. But I saw it, pain.

"You might be a damsel, but in distress? No way. You're more like a

damsel of determination.”

“Determination? Really? Maybe you’re right. I am absolutely determined to figure you out.” I lean back in his arms and try to match his playful smile with one of my own. “I’m not sure what’s stronger—my curiosity about you or my attraction to you.”

The embarrassment of my boldness, the truth of my revelation, makes me bury my face in his chest. He squeezes me tight in return, and I feel him kiss my hair before he slides those sweet-talking lips so close that I could kiss them if I tilted my head.

“You kidding me, sugar? Clearly it’s the attraction. You just haven’t given it full rein. Yet. But don’t you worry, we’ve got all the time in the world for that. And I reckon it’ll be quite the ride.”

AS WE MUNCH on our makeshift picnic, I can’t help but think about what Dr. Nguyen said at the rehab center—that Jerry had skipped out on physical therapy and further treatment. The question has been circling in my brain all day, and there won’t be a better time to ask.

“Hey,” I begin hesitantly. “Can I ask you a question?”

“You can ask me anything.”

“You winced just a little when you picked me up, and I couldn’t help but overhear Dr. Nguyen talking to Josh at the rehab center, saying you skipped out on physical therapy. Are you okay? Because I feel like I’ve walked you into the ground today.”

Jerry’s easy going expression falters, and he looks away, his fingers absentmindedly picking at the crust of the sourdough bread. “You heard that, huh? I take it you heard her talking about surgery, then?”

I nod, not wanting to interrupt.

“Well, it won’t be the first surgery. Last year, in the middle of the season, I broke my ankle...surgery, healing, and two months of grueling rehab. But I was a machine...Talk about determination, nothing was going to stand between me and my goal of going pro. I was the first one in and the last one out every damn day at rehab center. And by winter break, Dr. Nguyen cleared me for playing.”

“That’s great.”

“Sure. It was great. But what did I do? I pushed. And pushed. Acted like I was invincible, like a damn fool. I just had to catch one last wave. And what

happens? I blow out the same ankle. Just destroyed it, like I poured gasoline all over my hard work and threw the match. I sat out the entire last season and lost my place on the team. I have never been more disappointed in myself.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Ah, you know. I did it to myself. The weird thing is, nothing matters more to me than sports. I’ve always been competitive—finish first place, number one, best in class.” He pauses and takes a long pull from his water bottle. “I don’t really know who I am if I’m not on a field or a court. This injury...it’s got me feeling lost, you know?”

I reach out to touch his arm, “You don’t have to talk about it if it’s too personal. I didn’t mean to pry.”

He shakes his head. “No, it’s actually great to get it out in the open. I haven’t really talked about it—not even with my brother or my best friend. Everyone knows me as the winner, and I don’t want them to see me as washed up or broken. Faulty.”

“Maybe it’s time to trust them,” I suggest gently. “To let other people in more.”

He takes a deep breath, nodding slowly. “Maybe so.”

“Maybe so?” I say, smiling. “I mean, you let me in just now. Don’t tell me you’re already having regrets?”

“Regretting you would be like turning away from a winning hand.”

“You’d better ante in then. I’m ready for our next adventure.”

Jerry grins and stands up, holding out his hand to help me up. “Come on, let’s find out.”

TEN

HUNTER

“You are gonna love this,” I tell Laine as we arrive at Pier Thirty-Nine. “It’s touristy, but trust me, it’s worth it.”

“What’s that stench?” She eyes me with a hint of suspicion, so I pull her to the railing where a raucous chorus of barks and grunts greets us. Her eyes light up as she spots the sea lions lounging on the docks below.

“Wow,” she breathes, leaning against the railing. “They’re incredible! There are so many of them, but they’re kind of stinky. Wait. Jerry, look at that guy, he’s huge. What’s he doing?”

The sea lion who caught Laine’s eye is ten times louder than the others, and he’s lifting his body up and flopping it down on his platform, stealing the limelight from his more laid-back companions. As Laine leans in closer for a better look, the show-off lets out a massive sneeze, sending a spray of sea lion snot-water in our direction.

“Yikes!” she yelps, dodging back just in time to avoid getting soaked. We both burst into laughter, sounding a lot like the sea lions.

“I think he might have done that on purpose, Laine. Look, he’s just the cut up of the pinniped world.” I point back to our sausage of a sea lion, who’s bouncing from one flipper to another, shaking them in the air like he’s doing jazz hands.

“Alright, he’s pretty funny when he’s not spraying me with disgust,” she admits, as she grabs my arm and wipes her face with the sleeve of my shirt. “Pinnipeds, huh? Aren’t you fancy. How do you know so much about San Francisco anyway? College student by day, sexy city tour guide by night?”

“Thanks, I was hoping you would use my shirt as a towel for your filthy face. And no, my sexy city tour guide schtick is for you alone. But to answer your question, my oldest sister bucked family tradition and went to school out here. My mama cried for days and days. To make her happy, my dad took as all west for every family vacation until my sister graduated.”

“Does she still live in California?”

“My sister? Nah. As soon as she graduated, she left for Maryland. Medical school. She’s the smart one in the family.”

“You’re pretty smart.”

“Me? Nope, I’m the good-looking one.” I give her a wink.

“And the modest one too?” she chuckles.

“Oh no, that’s my other sister. But enough about them. Let’s talk about me some more.”

“Mmm. You...” I watch as she rolls her lips as she pauses. They come back shiny and kissable, and I want nothing more than to seize that tempting mouth and never stop. But another part of me wants to hear what she’s thinking.

“You’re stalling.”

“I am stalling.”

“Okay, well, while you’re thinking, why don’t you put this on,” I reach an arm behind me and pull my sweatshirt out of my backpack. I hold it out. “It’s clean.”

She takes it from me and tilts her head. “Yeah, but why do I need it?”

“I don’t want you to get cold during the sunset cruise.”

“Sunset cruise? Jerry, you have spent a ton of money on me today. We can’t do a sunset cruise.”

“As your sexy city tour guide, we can’t *not* take a sunset cruise. It’s the only way to conclude a sexy city tour. Now try that on for size.”

She treats me to a bright smile and unfurls the rolled up hoodie, pulling it over her head. It’s like the world’s bulkiest mini dress on her. She turns in a circle. “Perfect fit. You sure I’m your only sexy tour customer? You’re so well-prepared.”

“First and only.” It comes out more seriously than I had meant it to, so I reach back into my backpack and fish out the other thing. “This is for you too.”

She takes the piece of paper and carefully unfolds it, revealing the photo tucked inside. “Oh my holy cuteness. Did you adopt a seal?”

“Well if you read the form, technically you adopted a seal. That’s Bilbo. He’s an elephant seal pup who got pretty banged up by a shark. Almost lost a flipper. You seem to gravitate to hard luck cases with limb issues, so I thought he seemed like a good match for you.”

I watch her as she reads through the certificate of adoption, lost in the dimples on either side of her sweet lips that I somehow missed all day long. “This is too touching. It appears that Bilbo took his surgery like a man-seal and after a month of tender loving care and much rehab, resumed his life as a healthy and vibrant member of the San Simeon elephant seal tribe. Such a brave seal pup. I bet all the girl seals try to swim beside Bilbo.”

She folds the photo carefully inside the paper, reaches up and tucks it

back into my pack. “You see how I did that?”

“You’re so subtle, I almost missed it, but were you suggesting that like Bilbo, I should put my flipper in the capable hands of the Marine Mammal Center?”

“Oh shoot, not so smart. I guess you are just the good-looking one.”

“Shot through the heart,” I clutch at my chest like I’m fatally wounded.

“And we both know who’s to blame. Just remember Bilbo, Jerry. Brave little Bilbo. And thank you, by the way. I will treasure his sweet little whiskered photo forever. And this hoodie. No take backs.”

“I wanted you to have a souvenir of our first date.”

“First date?”

“Fine, let’s consider this pre-date zero until I wine and dine you properly.” I give her a roguish grin. “But that kiss felt pretty date-worthy to me...”

I move closer and gently tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear, letting my fingers trail down her cheek. “I know I should’ve asked you out on a proper date. But when you mentioned saying yes to trying new things this weekend, I couldn’t resist seizing the opportunity to spend the day with you... getting a little lost together.”

She takes my hand and turns it in hers, kisses my palm softly before letting go. “You’re much sweeter than I would have guessed. I thought you were just another arrogant jock-type, but you have this whole wounded but still winning thing going on that is—”

“Whoa. Hold it there. I’m definitely that arrogant jock-type. It’s part of my DNA. I think you secretly like it. In fact, I don’t think you’d be standing in front of me now looking all bold and beautiful if I were some Yoda quoting, Dungeons and Dragons playing, poetry writing Jerry.”

“That’s not true,” she laughs. “I love Yoda.”

“Deceitful you are, yes. A desire for arrogant athletes, I sense in you.” I give her a gentle poke in the arm, and leave the Yoda voice behind. “You go for athletic bad boys just like me, admit it. If a sensitive, Star Wars quoting boy I was, stand before me now, you would not.”

No sooner are the words out of my mouth, than I realize I’m accusing her of being deceitful, when I’ve been hiding my real identity from her all day. The irony is not lost on me. I have to come clean.

“Laine, listen—”

The minute I speak, a woman in aviator shades and a black beanie cap

comes up and greets us. “Ahoy there. Ready to board? We set sail as soon as everyone’s settled in.”

We board the boat and claim a spot at the railing. Laine’s face lights up with delight at the sight of the sun dipping below the horizon, casting a warm glow over the water as the city lights up behind us.

She leans her head back against my chest, chin tilted up so I can see her lips. “This is so beautiful.”

Unable to resist, I lean in close. “Not as beautiful as you.”

Laine turns to face me, eyes sparkling with amusement and something more. Our laughter fades into the sounds of the waves and wind. Suddenly, I’m hyper-aware of her body just inches from mine. My heart pounds and I have to remind myself to take deeper breaths.

I step closer, backing her against the railing. Place my hands on either of her hips.

“Can I kiss you again?” she asks softly.

“I thought you’d never ask.”

She hesitates just a moment, eyes locked with mine. Slowly I lean in, lips meeting hers in a kiss both soft and searing. It deepens, leaving me dizzy. her hands find my shoulders, and I have to remind myself to breathe. Again.

I force myself to pull back. “I’m sorry if that was too much,” my voice comes out too fast and too thick. “You just ended things, and I’m pushing it, been pushing you all day.”

“No, it wasn’t too much. And if you’ve been pushing me, I’ve been pulling you.” Laine shakes her head, her eyes bright. “My heart broke up with Penn long before I had the courage to end the relationship. I never really loved him like I thought I did. And I’m not sorry for any of this. For the first time in forever, I feel like someone is seeing me...really seeing me.

“Not many people do,” Laine continues softly. “But you noticed things, like my favorite flower, and that I can’t stand sticky stuff on my fingers. Made me feel so valued, appreciated. Like I’m the only thing that matters.”

“Of course you matter,” I murmur, holding her close.

“On the surface, I know my life looks pretty good with the sorority and all the parties, and I have a lot of friends. But I’ve been searching for something real. Like what I feel here with you... honestly, I’ve felt so lonely. For months.”

I tenderly tuck a lock of windswept hair behind her ear, wanted to memorize everything about this moment. But the pit in my stomach only

grows heavier. Laine is so honest and open. Here she is telling me about being lonely, and how her heart moved on from Penn Mitchell long ago...and she has no idea of my connection to him.

No clue about the web of deceit underpinning this entire day. She's this amazing woman, and I'm feeling things I've never felt about anyone before. But I haven't been honest about who I really am.

I'm feeling like a filthy liar. But the thought of losing what we're building strangles the confession in my throat. I hold her tighter, like if I squeeze hard enough, I can keep her from disappearing in a frosty puff of disappointment and distaste.

ELEVEN

HUNTER

“Man, my luck might actually be changing.”

It falls straight from my mouth, a big old blurt. I hear a series of low snickers roll from the back of Laine’s throat, and immediately feel stupid.

Her eyes twinkle with mischief. “You didn’t mean to say that aloud, did you?”

“No ma’am. That was an internal thought that I couldn’t keep to myself, apparently. But...it’s true. You’re the luckiest thing that’s happened to me in forever and a day.”

“Okay. Be honest when you answer this. This morning, when you tried to palm your phone number off on me along with my tennis ball...what did you think would happen? Did you ever in a million years imagine that we would be walking past a park, holding hands? This evening? Together?” Laine asks, her eyes bright and full of bliss.

A minute goes by as I consider, taking it all in—the scent of freshly cut grass, the twinkle lights on trees lining the street, combined with the sound of her quiet laughter floating on the air makes me feel like we’re walking through a movie scene. I can’t help but smile at the thought. And at her.

“Truthfully?” I grin. “No. Not for a second. I had you pegged as particularly unimpressed with me. Especially at the rehab center, when you looked at me and bolted out of your hydrotherapy pool. But if I’m being honest here, I was shipping us. Hard. Just like I always hoped Hermione would go with Ron instead of Harry. And now? I feel like fate decided to throw us together twice in one day. Gotta be a reason for that, so I’m not taking even a second of the time I’ve gotten to spend with you for granted.”

“Me too,” Laine looks at me, her eyes sparkling. “It’s funny how life can change so quickly. You think the day, or life in general, is heading in one direction, and then it takes a quick turn. And I was so rude to you. You are so much sweeter and more considerate than I would have ever guessed, and I dismissed you as just another full of himself college athlete. I’m so sorry. I really misjudged you and didn’t even give you a chance this morning.”

She lowers her gaze, and all the sparkle is gone. She’s frowning deeply, like she’s guilty of a vast injustice. I know she’s kicking herself for judging me so harshly, and that’s the last thing I want her to feel. I stop and pull her into my arms, not in an embrace, but in a dance. I place my hand on the small

of her back and hold her close enough that I can feel the heat of her. Slowly we move about, tracing a circle on the sidewalk, as I hum an old jazz standard, “La Vie en rose,” in her ear.

“Jerry, I feel bad that I—”

“Hush. There’s no time for that.” I drown out her protest by humming a little louder as I lead her through a slow dance. She relaxes against me, and it feels so right that I start singing ever so quietly when I get around to the chorus.

Tilting her head back, Laine smiles up at me, and it hits me like a flash—I could live here forever. Freeze this moment in time, with her looking at me like that, all warm and soft in my arms...it could be enough. Forever.

My memory fails me, or maybe it’s that I can’t think with her this close. Or maybe it’s the realization that it will never be better than this, no one will be better than this. Ever. Her hair smells amazing and the feel of her is torturous. I’ve never wanted anyone or anything more in all my days. I press a kiss against her hair and spin us around in a full circle, resorting to humming the words I can’t remember.

“I’ve always loved that song, but now I think it might be my favorite,” she whispers against my chest before leaning her head back and looking into my eyes.

I watch the corners of her mouth pull back, and the dimples come out. She licks her lips, but before I kiss her, she pulls back completely. “You know what? Because I rudely tossed it back at you, I don’t even have your phone number.”

Slowly, reluctantly, I let her hand fall from mine. She needs a little space between us. She fishes her phone out of her bag, and as I watch her searching, I wonder, for not the first time, what I did to deserve to meet someone as sensational as Laine Summers.

“Ready.”

I take her left hand and tap eight times against the back of it.

“Very clever. But don’t you think you’re tempting fate by not just giving me your digits?” she asks with the tiniest hint of annoyance in her voice.

“Why, Miss Summers. I would not have pegged you as the superstitious type,” I tease and bring her hand to my lips.

“Not superstitious, just practical.” She pulls her hand away and raises an eyebrow so I hold up four fingers, followed by three.

“You’re tedious.”

“Okay, okay, here you go.” I tell her the rest of my number, and she does her thing. My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I pull it out, shooting her a suspicious glance. One new text, and it’s from Laine. No words. Just a whirl of a hundred little sparkling hearts. Followed by a second text with just a poop emoji. She’s quick.

As we walk along, the silence between us is comfortable, but my mind is anything but quiet. The closer we get to the party, to the house Brandon shares with Penn and his little sister, the bigger my sense of unease. I’ve got to come clean, tell her I’m not Jerry Levrier, and I don’t really play much tennis.

Because I’m Hunter Williams, through and through. And my football is my life.

What if she’s pissed? What if she’s not pissed but decides that she doesn’t want to date another football player? Or worse, what if she forgives me for unintentionally deceiving her, but then after we spend more time together, she decides that she’s just not that into me? Been there, done that. She’s got everything going for her—beauty, intelligence, ambition...and here I am, a has-been quarterback with an uncertain future.

“Hey, what’s on your mind?” Laine asks, her gaze shifting from whoever she’s been texting to me, concern etched on her face. “You’ve been awfully quiet.”

I start. How am I supposed to answer that? I opt to share one of my immediately lesser concerns with her, just not the one that involved raging indecision and the least attractive emotion in the world, raging insecurity. “I’ve been thinking that I need to amend my earlier declaration of luck. I’m lucky, except for the fact that Dr. Nguyen wants me to have another operation on my ankle. That’s pretty much the opposite of lucky.”

“Ouch,” Laine says sympathetically, her brow furrowing with concern. “That doesn’t sound fun at all.”

“It’s not,” I agree, trying to tamp down a sudden surge of bitterness. “I followed Dr. Nguyen’s advice the first time around, gave my all and then some to rehab. Now I’m back in the exact same place, except she’s saying this is my only option if I want to compete again. Ever since she brought it up, I’ve been wondering if it’s even worth it, this second surgery.”

“Hey,” Laine gives my hand a reassuring squeeze. “You should trust your doctor. Did you know she works with the San Francisco Sentinels during football season? She’s up there with the best in the business. Maybe you just

need to be a little more cautious this time while you recover?”

“Ha,” I snort, trying to lighten the situation. “Cautious? Me? That’s not really my nature.”

“Maybe not,” Laine concedes. “But we all have different approaches to life, right? You’re more of a leap-before-you-look kind of guy, while I tend to think things through before taking the plunge. You could try it on for size. You might like the feeling it gives you.”

“Is that your polite way of saying I’m reckless and you’re boring?” I tease, raising an eyebrow at her.

“Absolutely not,” Laine protests, her cheeks flushing pink. “I just prefer to live my life a little more...strategically, that’s all.”

“Oh okay,” I begin. “So you’re more like a chess player, carefully planning your moves ahead of time—which is great, by the way. You’ve got everything under control, and you know exactly where you want to go. Whereas I’m—”

“Whereas you,” Laine interjects playfully, “are more like a skydiver, jumping out of planes without a parachute and hoping for the best.”

“Exactly!” I exclaim, impressed by her ability to read my mind. “I’m all about living in the moment, chasing the thrill, and not worrying too much about what comes next. But I’m not gonna lie, it might get me into a spot of trouble every so often.”

“Like with your ankle?”

As if she willed it to be, I take a little misstep right after the words leave her mouth.

She’s not wrong. My ankle is throbbing. I’ve been ignoring it throughout the day, and now it’s telling me to sit my stubborn self down somewhere fast. She looks up at me, her eyes full of genuine concern, and I realize this is one of the many reasons why Laine has so quickly worked her way into my heart. She listens. She cares deeply.

“Like my ankle. Thanks, Laine.”

“Alright,” I concede. “I’ll listen to Dr. Nguyen. After all, what’s one more scar in the grand scheme of things, right?”

“Exactly, and you never know—maybe this time around, you’ll come back even stronger than before,” Laine cheers me on. “And I don’t think I’ve told you this yet, but I find scars to be incredibly sexy.”

“That’s good news, because I’ve got scars to spare.”

Even though she managed to make me smile, the truth is, I’m scared.

Scared of going under the knife again, scared of the recovery process, and scared that my future is pinned to the outcome. Feeling the weight of all these insecurities gnawing at me, I decide it's time to lighten the mood.

“But hey, it's not all bad news, right? I mean, it led me to finding you, right? That's an indisputably huge check in the win column. And if all else fails...I can always fall back on my winning personality,” I jest, wiggling my eyebrows playfully.

Laine laughs, her eyes crinkling at the corners as she responds with equal humor, “Oh, absolutely. You've got buckets of charm, charm for days!”

“Charm for days? I like that.” I wink, feeling a warmth spread through my chest at her lighthearted reassurance. The energy between us shifts as we continue walking, our conversation now peppered with laughter and teasing banter.

The feeling that my luck is finally starting to change for the better has run its course. We're one street from Brandon's party, and I'm thinking more about of the tangled mess I've made of today than the mess I've made of my body.

I'm thinking more about the fact that I have about two hundred steps to make the most important confession of my life.

TWELVE

LAINE

“I never thought—”

“Laine, I’ve—”

We speak at the exact same time.

“You go, Laine,” Jerry replies, ever the gentleman.

“I just wanted to say, that I never thought I’d see the day when I enjoyed being a tourist,” I confess as we walk to campus. “I’ve always thought that looking for those little authentic and out of the way places was the way to go. But running all around the city, ticking off every box for those splashy, big San Francisco sights...that was the most fun I’ve had in years.”

“See? Stepping out of that well-controlled comfort zone wasn’t so bad, was it?” Jerry nudges me playfully with his shoulder.

“Not at all. In fact, this might go down as the best date ever.” A well of emotion bubbles up unexpectedly. My words are completely true, but not quite the complete truth. I really like this guy. Like a lot. “Thanks for sharing all of that with me.”

“Believe me, the pleasure was all mine, sugar. I’m just glad you get to go back to your friend and tell her that you did exactly as ordered.” He laces his fingers through mine and lifts my hand to his lips, for what must be the twentieth time today.

I could get used to that treatment.

“Are you kidding? That’s the worst part of this entire day. Cassidy is going to milk this I told you so for months.

“Laine, there’s something I’ve been trying to tell you...” Jerry begins.

But as we turn the corner, if he’s still talking, I don’t hear a word. It’s easy to pick out our destination, even from a block away. One house glows as bright as a red carpet reception at a movie premier.

Music spills out from the swanky fold-back, floor-to-ceiling glass doors. Party people crowd the generous deck, drinks in hand, dancing, flirting, and getting their groove on. It’s an all-out bash—it’s the place everyone wants to be on warm, spring Friday night.

It’s where I used to want to be every night.

It’s Penn’s place.

I turn to Jerry, confused. He raises his hands slowly, palms down, like he’s some Cesar Milan, serene dog psychologist approaching a rabid rat

terrier. My warm and fuzzy feelings of five minutes ago have been replaced with a pricking pang of realization.

“You knew. You knew this was Penn’s house, his party.”

“Now hear me out, Laine—”

“Hear you out? Are you kidding me? After hearing me rant about Penn Mitchell, my awful ex-boyfriend this morning at the tennis courts, you decide to take me to a party at his house? His house? A house full of people who probably think I’m a horrible, awful person because I broke the heart of their favorite guy. What in the world were you thinking? This is the most f-ed up way to end what I thought was an incredibly romantic first date...maybe the most romantic day of my life. How incredibly inconsiderate, Jerry. “

His carefree smile disappears in an instant. “Laine, I’m sorry. I wanted to tell you, but I didn’t think it would be such a big deal. Penn’s not even here tonight.”

“Not a big deal? Then why didn’t you tell me?” Hurt and frustration rise in my voice, and I hate that all this emotion is boiling up and out of me. “Were you trying to keep it a secret or something?”

“Of course not,” he replies defensively. “We were just having such a great day, and I didn’t want it to end. I thought when you heard Penn wouldn’t be here, we could have a good time...without worrying about your ex.”

“Jerry, it’s not about Penn,” I snap. I swallow, struggling to find softer words. “It’s about being open with one another...it’s about honesty. You know how I feel about him, about the whole football scene, and you still brought me here without telling me. You could’ve given me the option to bow out gracefully.”

With a heavy sigh, Jerry closes the distance between us, his face full of regret. “You’re completely right. I should’ve told you and given you a choice. That was really thoughtless of me, and I’m so sorry, Laine. Let’s get out of here. Let’s just leave. We can go anywhere you want. Name the place.”

I look into Jerry’s eyes. They’re full of sincerity, suspiciously shiny, the picture of remorse. The heat of my anger evaporates like flash paper in a magician’s hands. Part of me wants to stay mad, is still reeling from walking around the corner and realizing this rude revelation. But the larger part of me, the one that relished every second of our day together, wants to forgive him and move on.

I close my eyes and focus on breathing...in with the good air, out with the

negative feelings. When I can trust my voice again, I open my eyes. “Alright. I accept your apology. But next time, no surprises. Okay?”

“Deal,” he agrees. His smile returns but looks as shaky as I feel. He extends his hand to me.

“Deal,” I echo, placing my hand in his. “Let’s see if we can salvage the rest of this night.”

Jerry steps close and takes both of my hands between his. “I’m so sorry, Laine. I wasn’t thinking. Let’s go someplace where we can talk. I have some things I need to tell you.”

I nod my head, wanting to get away from the too-familiar scene as quickly as can be.

The good-time sounds of laughter and music grow louder still, as the front door of the house opens. Pretty girls in sundresses and sequined skirts pile out, hanging on oversized, corn-fed football boys. Their squeals of excited, alcohol-infused enthusiasm fill the space between us and them. I turn away. The last thing I want is to run into anyone who knows me, who might think the worst of me for calling it off with Penn and then showing up at his house with some new guy.

“Hey, Lainey! Hey,” a familiar voice calls from the doorway. A voice that could cut through the din of the loudest party.

I turn and see Tessa, my most-trying sorority sister, standing beside none other than Brandon the Beast Bauer, Penn’s roommate and closest friend. Shite. Double shite.

I haven’t seen Brandon since the Phi Pi Spring Fling, the night Penn and I split. Irritation over being singled out chafes me, especially in front of Brandon, but before I can retreat with Jerry, Tessa click-clacks down the steps and throws her arms around me.

The hug is unexpected. It feels real, and oddly reliable. I hold on like she’s a lifeline and I’m treading water in tank of sharks.

“Laine, what are you doing out here? I’m so surprised to see you at Brandon’s little impromptu party. Good for you, girl. A Phi Pi sis can’t be denied.” Tessa steps back, throws me a smile and throws an elbow into Brandon’s ribs. “It’s good to see Laine out at your party, isn’t it Beastie?”

Brandon grunts at the assault to his mid-section and shoots her a toothsome look that says he’s going to eat her up like dinner and dessert. He turns to me and gives me a surprisingly graceful half-bow. “Laine, it’s a pleasure to see you again at the Pigskin Penthouse. We’re having a little

gathering in honor of the Crimson Cats' Spring Scrimmage. I'd love for you and your friend to join us, have a drink, and hang out."

I open my mouth to tell him thanks but maybe another time, when Brandon presses past me and raises his huge hand up for a bro-clasp.

"My man. You actually showed." Brandon, who rarely shows enthusiasm for anyone, greets Jerry like a long-lost brother, meeting his hand and clapping him on the back. "I honestly thought you'd welch out on our bet, Hunter. Really great to see you show up, man."

The air feels like it has thickened around me, as if I'm slowly drowning in a pool of honey.

Those six letters stick in my throat.

"Hunter?"

THIRTEEN

LAINE

Hunter?

Not Jerry?

My mind tries to piece together the puzzle in front of me, but my heart thuds through my spine, my ears, my head, muddling my thoughts.

Not Jerry. Hunter?

Not Jerry. Hunter.

Not Jerry.

Hunter.

The blood rushes so loud in my head, I can't hear Tessa talking beside me. Her lips pull back in what looks like a squeal as Brandon's arm wraps around her waist, and Jerry-Hunter leans too close to me. His face is distorted and etched like a Japanese Oni mask we saw in Golden Gate Park. All three of them have pixelated, as if I've zoomed in too close on a photo, and now they're just splotches of melding color and light.

I dig my nails into my palms to jolt myself back to reality, before I slide to the sidewalk in an embarrassing crumble. BU tattoo, broken ankle, football physique...I'm such an idiot. From morning to night and every minute in between, I've been hanging out with Hunter Williams.

Kissing Hunter Williams.

Former Wildcats quarterback, *that* Hunter Williams. The football player replaced by Penn, now replacing Penn. Sliding into my world like some sort of secret mid-season trade. The cold truth sits like a cannonball in my stomach—this perfect dream of a day has been nothing but an illusion.

“So, *Hunter*. Great to meet you.” My voice crackles full of raw bitch energy. “My name is still Laine. Still Laine Summers.”

“You don't know each other? My bad, I thought you came together.” Big Brandon Bauer steps between us, Tessa swinging like a gate around his arm. “Laine, meet Hunter Williams, South Carolina charmer and the best kind of guy. Hunter, Laine Summers, whip smart and definitely out of your league.”

“Brandon, stop teasing. Hunter's totally dreamy, don't you think, Laine?” Tessa leans heavily into Brandon as she playfully swats at him.

We ignore them both, eyes locked on one another. Hunter, not Jerry, takes my arm and turns us away from Brandon, from Tessa, from the sounds of happy party people having happy party times.

The fuzziness sharpens into too-crisp clarity when Jerry-Hunter touches my arm, re-igniting the embers from my earlier agitation. I'm red hot and royally pissed. I call back over my shoulder, "We've actually met, but this is the first time I've been properly introduced."

"Uh, yeah, about that...I've, um, I've been trying to find a way to tell you." He looks over his shoulder then back at me with concern.

I don't want his concern.

"Laine, are you okay?"

"Okay? Am I okay? You lied to me...about your name. Your actual name." My emotions are whipping into and frothy and explosive inferno, which I detest. But if anyone deserves to be showered in an explosion of molten emotion, it's him.

And maybe me, a little. I'm kicking myself so hard.

How could I have been so blind? Broad shoulders, scruffy beard, the tattoos, the ankle injury, that charming southern drawl—all big, crimson and gold clues leading to the identity of the former starting quarterback for the Buckley Wildcats. How did I not put it all together? And why in the world did I assume that his name was Jerry? Like it's a normal, everyday thing for a guy in his twenties to walk around with his name scrawled across the front of his ratty t-shirt. Like he's an overgrown and impetuous kindergartner who went wild with the box of markers.

But why didn't he correct me?

"Explain. You lied to me about your name, *Hunter*. Why in the world did you let me call you Jerry all day long? You let me call you Jerry after I *kissed* you. What else have you lied about?"

"Look...Laine, I—" Hunter starts, but I cut him off.

"Save it for the next girl you string along on some false flag romantic adventure," I snap, feeling the sting of his betrayal squeeze my chest like a shop class clamp. "I can't believe I trusted you."

I turn away from him, my chest tight, so tight I can't take a breath. I can feel my face flush and my eyes are welling up with tears, and I would sooner die than have him see me cry. I want to run away, leaving Jerry...Hunter...all of him far behind. I suck in a stuttering, embarrassing breath and shut my eyes hard against the tears. And start walking.

“Laine, wait!”

His fingers close softly around my wrist, his hand warm and gentle, and he pulls me slowly back. He runs his hands up my arms and back down again, slowly, slowly. I shut my eyes and count to ten, forward and backward, trying to calm my nerves.

“Yes?” I hear myself say to him, proud that my voice is strong and steady.

“I didn’t mean for it to happen like this, I swear. I just...I wanted to get to know you. For you to get to know me...to give me a chance.”

I pause, letting his words roll around in my disorganized head before turning to face him. I press my palms into my eyes to dry any incriminating traces as I contemplate. He has a point. “A chance? Would I have given you a chance if I had known who you were, if I knew you were a football player? I honestly don’t know. Maybe not, but maybe so. But now? I think it’s you who should’ve given me a chance, Hunter.”

“Look.” He runs a hand through his hair. “I wasn’t trying to deceive you or play games. I swear I wasn’t. When we first met, I was wearing that stupid shirt, and at the rehab center, I thought you called me Jerry to tease me. Like I called you Serena Williams. I thought it was funny, and I went along with it.”

“Okay, well that was this morning. You didn’t bother correcting me all day long. Explain,” I repeat, almost begging for an answer that makes sense of this mess. “More words. I need to hear more words.”

“When I realized that you actually thought my name was Jerry, I wanted to tell you. But you kept saying how you would never date another football player. Being Jerry gave me a chance to spend enough time with you to get you to see beyond this big bias and without all the baggage my name might bring. Honestly, it felt like a fresh start. You didn’t know who I was or anything about my past—you weren’t feeling sorry for me, or asking me questions about my game, or what it’s like to be the former star quarterback. And I liked that. A lot.”

“Aw, being the former star quarterback is such a burden.” My tone is awful even to my ears, but I can’t help myself as I cap my little jab by blinking my lashes fast as I tilt my head to the side.

He winces. “I’m not just about football, Laine. There’s so much more to me than that, and yeah, sometimes being the former star quarterback is fucking awful.”

“Wow. Okay, so you decided lying to me was the best way to avoid being judged? That’s so backward.” I shake my head, unable to comprehend his reasoning. “Wanting to be seen without preconceptions, sure, I get it. No one likes to be put in a neat little box, but you didn’t even give me a chance to see any part of what you might actually be going through right now, any part of the real you. And don’t try to tell me that football hasn’t been the biggest thing in your life, Hunter, because that would be just another lie.”

“Laine, I completely understand why you’re angry with me. But I need you to know that every minute we spent together, everything I said and did, was real. I wasn’t pretending to be someone else. I was just finally able to be myself.”

“But, Hunter, how am I supposed to know what was real and what was you just pretending? You can say that everything was real, but I’m having a really hard time feeling that from where I’m standing. From my view, it looks like you’re just another guy who does whatever suits him, regardless of how it effects the people around him. It’s ridiculous. Penn Mitchell was completely selfish about his time, never compromising to find a way to fit me and my life into his, but at least I knew who he was when we started going out. You didn’t even give me that. Today felt so amazing. You were so present, and you acted like I was your magnetic north, and you would always be drawn in my direction. Now I feel like a total idiot for following you around like some dumb puppy. I guess that’s what I get for tossing my better judgment out the window and leaping without taking a closer look—a double-dose of disappointment and disillusion. “

“I messed up, okay?” Hunter admits, dropping his hand from my arm. “I never meant for things to go this far. I wanted to come clean, I really did, but I didn’t know how to do it without either losing you or hurting you. Like I was stuck in a no-win scenario where you were going to condemn me either way.”

“Condemn you?” The pain of the last ten minutes spools out, and my voice hits a new octave. “I wouldn’t have condemned you based on your past, Hunter. But I’m definitely judging based on the present.”

“Please, Laine.” His voice hits me dead in the heart. “It doesn’t have to be like this. We can go somewhere, anywhere, and talk it out until we find our footing. Can’t you find it in your heart to forgive me? I will never, ever lie to you again.”

I look up, aware for the first time that we aren’t alone. Tessa stands

beside Brandon, both of them open-mouthed and taking in every word.

I look into Hunter's eyes, searching for any trace of deception. And as much as I want to hold onto my anger, a small part of me wants to believe him, to trust that he's telling the truth this time.

"Give me one good reason why I should," I challenge, my voice shaking.

"Because I'm falling for you, Laine. And I think you might be falling for me too."

FOURTEEN

HUNTER

Laine holds up a hand. “No. Oh no. No, no.”

Each no strikes like a blindside hit, leaving me winded and unbalanced. I stand silent, prone, and paralyzed, trapped by her piercing glare like a deer caught in blinding headlights. But if I understand anything, it’s that when a woman says no, she means no.

I recoil a little, wincing. Not from Laine.

But I think I just admitted that I’m falling for her. And there’s no way she’s falling for me. She’s staring, and I feel like I just missed something important and she’s expecting an answer. Except I have no answers, other than the lame-ass excuses I’ve already made for myself. She’s talking again, and I try to focus.

“A minute ago, I found myself standing outside Penn’s place, the last place in the world I want to be. A few seconds later, I found out that you aren’t you. And now you tell me that you’re falling...for me?”

I lift my hand only to have it pushed away.

“No. You don’t get to do that. You don’t get to just apologize in one breath and declare your feelings for me in the next. You barely know me. Or maybe more to the point, I don’t even know who you are.”

“Laine—”

“No. I can’t.”

She turns to the side, faces Tessa and Brandon, who stand there gaping like two meerkats watching a hawk circle, necks craned and eyes unblinking. “What are you two staring at? Go sing some karaoke or something. This is private.”

“Seriously, Bauer. Shove off,” I snap. He frowns at me, then carefully wheels his flavor of the day back toward the house.

“I’m here if you need me, Laine,” Tessa’s voice cuts as sharp as the withering side eye she throws as she passes me. “Jackass.”

“Sorry, Laine. I didn’t realize they were still there.” I move a little closer, but keep my hands jammed into my pockets. She clearly doesn’t want me to touch her. She looks so vulnerable that it stabs my insides. She sighs, and the knife comes down again and again, carving out a circle around my heart.

“I want love, Hunter. Real love. It’s not some fleeting infatuation you feel after a tilt-a-whirl date. Love is serious, it’s deep. I deserve genuine, honest

love, not some...misplaced impulsive passion. I've wasted so much time trying to prove that I'm worthy, trying to earn love from capricious, self-centered people. I've created a life of order, of plans and goals, to avoid the chaos I grew up in. You...you leap into situations, chase the next adrenaline high, with no thought about the consequences. But life...love...it isn't some Hallmark movie where the guy and the girl get together and save the family home, despite their lack of funds and their load of insurmountable differences. This is reality. And in my reality, love can't be built on a foundation of deceit."

"Laine. That's not the way it is. This is just a little misunderstanding. You're brewing up a tempest in a teapot. I can make this right."

"Just like that, Hunter?" She snaps her fingers. "You can make it right? Making it right is about apologizing in a thoughtful and meaning way, about taking your time and building trust. You don't get it, don't get me. I thought you were different, that you had room in there for someone else, but you're just another football player...another man-child wrapped up in himself, careless with the truth and careless with the feelings of others. Maybe for you this is a little thing, maybe this is something you do every day. But it isn't just a little misunderstanding for me. I don't just kiss every Jerry I stumble across. I have to go."

She turns. And she goes. And I just let her.

FIFTEEN

HUNTER

A swift kick to the couch cushions jolts me awake. Blinking against the morning light, I find Bauer's big face looming over me with a jack-o-lantern leer. I close my eyes, pushing him away with my mind.

"Nah. You're awake."

He stands surveying the room like an overgrown Jinn, broad biceps crossed over his broad chest, broad shoulders pulled back to emphasize how jacked he is. Like any of us need a reminder. We've all been on the receiving end of one of Bauer's scrimmage tackles. Despite staying up until the early hours with the rest of us, he's shower-fresh, bright-eyed, and bushy-tailed. A spotless white t-shirt looking two sizes too small creeps up his hulking arms, and while not quite scowling, the set of his jaw means business.

"Rise and shine, sleeping beauties," he bellows like a drill sergeant tormenting new recruits.

On the opposite side of the huge sectional, Seb Rivera emerges from under a throw blanket looking exactly like I feel, ridden rotten and rough, and groans, "How about you dial down the volume and dial up some painkillers, Beast?"

"How about I dialed up some coffee and breakfast burritos. Eat up." Brandon grabs a bag I hadn't noticed from the coffee table and tosses a hot, foil-wrapped burrito in my hands. Then he launches one fast at Rivera. Rivera makes the catch, and tucks in like he hasn't eaten in days.

Tyler Anderson pops up from the floor in front of the tv, disheveled, discombobulated, bleary-eyed. Bauer lobs a burrito at him. Unlike Seb, Anderson bobbles the catch, earning a disgusted glare for his fumble. "You're better than that rookie. Get your shit together and be the baller you're destined to be. Anyone else lingering and stinking up my house or just you three?"

"Just us," Seb answers around a huge bite of burrito.

"It's too early for working on the whole destiny mindset thing," Anderson grumbles quietly as he picks his bashed in burrito up from the floor.

Bauer shakes his head, "Mindset is everything, Anderson. Everything. Grab a coffee and beat it, rooks. Unless you plan to run intervals with Penn and me this morning?"

Anderson's head retracts on his neck as if the mere thought of running is

sickening. Because this morning, it is. I stand and stretch, pick up my goods, and make for the door. While just thinking about running intervals makes my head pound, the thought of starting my day off with Pendleton “Athlete of the Year” Mitchell makes me want to heave.

“Not you.” Brandon bores into me with slitty, shrewd eyes.

Rivera’s eyebrows shoot up and I watch as he and Anderson telegraph silent messages back and forth. Their mumbled words of thanks collide and mix as they grab their breakfast and shuffle out in a raggedy hurry. Before the door fully shuts, Bauer’s on me like a dog on a fox.

“Alright, Hunter. What the hell happened between you and Laine Summers? I’ve never seen Miss Calm and Collected lose her cool like that.”

I slowly sit back down on the couch. No use avoiding this conversation— not when Brandon’s boring into me with that laser stare, determined to cut to the core of it. Time for some hard truths. I take a long pull of coffee, scalding my tongue and not caring one whit, because I deserve the pain.

“You ready to talk about it,” Bauer interrupts me mid-self-recrimination, “or do you need a few more beers first so you can marinate in whatever shit-storm you brewed up yesterday?”

Scenes from yesterday come flooding back. Sunlight streaming through Laine’s hair as she hovers above me at the park. The unfiltered delight in her laughter as we watched the sea lions. Her face full of hurt.

I blew it. “I had my shot. Missed by a mile.”

“So I gathered. You want to elaborate a little?”

“Man, I panicked,” I admit, raking a hand through my messy hair. “I think I’ve been into her since I first saw her, I just didn’t recognize it. I know this is going to sound cliché, but she’s something else, something really, really special. She’s so bright, and everything seems brighter, more vibrant when I’m with her...like someone turned up the volume on the sun. But instead of being real with her, trusting her to give me a shot, I put on this stupid act. And you saw how that worked for me.”

Bauer, looking equal parts annoyed and empathetic, raises an eyebrow. “What do you mean, ‘this stupid act’? Was it your whole ludicrously confident vibe or your so nice you hurt my teeth thing? Because that’s just you, and as much as it pains me to admit, you’re one of the good ones. I’ll ever admit that ever again, so soak it up while I’m feeling sorry for your dumped-on-the-sidewalk ass.”

“It wasn’t like that. I mean, she liked me. Or at least I think she did

except that I literally pretended like I was someone else.”

“Wait, back up a minute. Pretending like you’re someone else? You’re Hunter Williams. You’re solicitous southern swagger. You’re prime quarterback beef, Williams. Any female with any sense of—”

“I lied to her, okay? All day long. Lied like a no-legged dog on a rug.”

I pick at the foil on the untouched burrito still in my hand. When Brandon still hasn’t replied, I look up. His mouth is open like he’s going to talk, but the rest of his face is clamped down in disbelief warring with disgust. His expression is stuck, like a diagram on micro expressions from my Psych 101 textbook. “Well, say something.”

“Why would you do a dumb-ass thing like that, Hunter?”

“That’s not exactly the support I was looking for, Brandon.”

“You want a participation trophy for best way to fuck up the start of a relationship?”

“No.”

“It’s hard to be supportive when I don’t understand exactly where things fell apart. Just tell me what’s really going on, and I’ll give you a serious answer.”

“Fine. When I saw her at the tennis courts, you know I was smitten. But she was going off on Penn, and going off on football players, like we’re all set on breaking hearts and being dickheads. So when she asked me if I was a football player, I told her I wasn’t on any team. And if that wasn’t enough, she thought my name was Jerry Levrier, and I didn’t correct her, because I figured if she’d heard the name Hunter ever, the whole house of cards would come down and she’d dump me before I had a chance.”

“So you let her call you Jerry all day long? That’s fucked up.”

“I know. It just snowballed, and then I was afraid...” The air filters out of my lungs on a sigh as long as the Mississippi. “I thought if she saw the real mess that’s me, she’d bolt. I...she—”

My throat closes down around the words, and every cell in my body goes warm and tight. I want to explain more about how she got my name wrong, how I tried to tell her...how I think there will never be another girl like Laine for me.

But I can’t speak.

Brandon leaves the room, comes back a minute later with a glass of ice water. “Here, drink this. And take these.”

I pop the ibuprofen in my mouth and drink the entire glass in one, grateful

pull.

Brandon shakes his head at me, like he did to Anderson earlier. “That’s where you really screwed up, Hunter. Summers isn’t a shallow pond, she’s an ocean. She can handle depth.”

“She’s plenty deep, I know. But a girl like Laine deserves better than my murky mess.”

The staccato quick-step of feet marching down the stairs heralds the arrival of star quarterback glory, all six foot four of him looking camera-ready despite the early hour. He eyes me with open hostility, and I can’t help but tense up.

“Morning, Mitchell,” Brandon offers. “Breakfast burrito?”

“How about you explain why you’re talking about Laine instead?”

He stares, hard. I meet him there. Without wavering.

“Chill,” Brandon casually inserts himself between us, breaking the tension. “I know you both might disagree, but we are literally on the same team. Penn, coffee and sit. Hunter, answer Penn.”

“We are, but you’re not the coach of that team Bauer, and this sorry excuse for a teammate abandoned us months ago. And if he’s messing with Laine to get back at me, I’ll fucking kill him.”

“Again. Sit. Coffee. Listen.”

“I’m not messing around with Laine to get back at you, you super-inflated, conceited bag of dicks. You’re half my problem.”

Brandon holds both hands out like he’s breaking up a fight that hasn’t started. Yet.

“Fuck. What is wrong with you idiots? Sit. Both of you. Now.” Bauer’s nostrils flair and he side checks me. I fall back on the sectional where I started off this craptastic morning.

“Penn?”

Penn picks up one of the two remaining paper cups and chooses a chair, farthest from me. “Speak, Hunter. I’m interested in hearing what you have to say. Because you’re right about one thing, Laine deserves the best. Not some bullshit lies.”

“You’ve been listening to our conversation? Nice. That’s real classy, Mitchell.” For the second time in as many days, the hypocrisy of my words hits me like a hammer. “Aw, shit, whatever. You’re right. She does.”

“You all want to catch me up? I don’t think I got the whole story,” Penn grimaces at either his tepid coffee or at the thought of me and Laine.

“That makes two of us,” Brandon leans his head on the back of the sofa and waits.

I shake my head, having zero desire to rehash anything I’ve already said, but at this point, I have nothing to lose. I’m laying it all on the line.

“You’re right. I messed up. Big time. And in more than one way. I’ll explain about Laine, but before I do, I have something to say.”

“That’s what we’re here for, brother,” Brandon answers, totally sincere. Penn shrugs and nods in agreement.

“I’m not exactly one to talk about my feelings, but the truth is, I’m kinda sick of myself. I’ve been pissed at you, Penn. I’m sick with envy every time I see you with a football in your hands. I’ve dodged you, blocked your messages, and as you said, turned my back on the team. Instead of facing potential failure head-on and going back for another surgery, and instead of taking responsibility for my reckless and fateful stupidity, I’ve wallowed in self-pity and blamed all my woes on you. There, I’ve said it.”

“Hunter, I’ve felt unworthy of the position since minute one, when you were first carted off the field. I didn’t want to slide into someone else’s spot. I wanted to earn it. I’ve felt like a fraud.”

“Fraud? You’re on track to surpass all my records, Penn. You’re no fraud...just freakishly good. Like some football throwing cyborg.”

He laughs, and I join him. It feels good.

Penn leans forward in his seat. “Hunter, if you’re not using Laine to get to me, what are you doing with her?”

Brandon and Penn sit waiting, immobile, and I’m frozen like someone hit the pause button. I open my mouth, close it. Stand up, pace. When I turn back around, they’re still staring.

“I know it was only one date, one day together...but I swear I’ve fallen headlong for her.”

Penn has the good manners to at least cover his amusement with a fake cough, but Brandon laughs at me outright. “Sorry, Hunter, I really am. But there’s nothing shocking about you rushing into anything. Not even love. It’s just baked into you. Go on, I promise to control myself.”

“Okay, so you’re in love with the girl who dumped me less than three weeks ago.” Penn holds up a finger. “And you’ve only hung out once. And you lied about your name and pretty much everything you told her? How is this love?”

“It sounds ridiculous when you say it like that. The truth is Laine sort of

unintentionally started it by thinking I was someone I wasn't, and then I was in the middle of pretending to be this someone before I was even aware it was happening. By that time, I was in so deep, I didn't know how to dig myself out of the pit of deception. But I plan on fixing it."

Penn looks me up and down, then sighs, "For what it's worth, Laine is one of the fairest people I know. If you genuinely apologize and show her the real you, maybe she'll give you another chance. But you'll have to work for it. She has standards, the highest of anyone I know. Because she herself sets that bar unbelievably high."

I meet his gaze, fired up. "I'll work for it. I'll do whatever it takes."

Brandon clears his throat, "Alright, alright, enough with the budding bromance heart-to-heart. Penn, we have intervals to run. And Hunter, you've got work to do."

The tension of the last hour breaks, and even Penn chuckles. We clean up and walk out into the still-crisp morning air. Brandon chucks me on the shoulder before taking off in a slow jog.

"Take care of her," Penn says solemnly, pointing at me as he jogs backward to catch up with Brandon, "or I'll break your other ankle."

Alone, I pull out my phone and start typing up a to-do list, a blueprint of my apology. Brandon's right—I have some serious work to do. And I know just where I'm going to start.

SIXTEEN

LAINE

Curled up on my bed, I pour my jumbled thoughts out to Cassidy, second-guessing my swift breakup with Hunter.

“Did he text you today?”

“No. Nothing at all today. Or yesterday. Or the day before.”

“Which is good. Right? It would be creepy if he were stalking you with relentless cyber sorries.”

“Yeah, it’s good. I mean, it’s really good. He did send a few texts that first day, apologizing for everything, but since then, he’s played it pretty cool.”

“If by pretty cool you mean sending you a dozen cupcakes from that fancy bakery and hanging a banner proclaiming he’s an idiot on the Sigma Chi House across the street, then I totally agree. Pretty cool.”

I look over at Cassidy, and she’s barely holding it in, eyes rolled to the ceiling. We burst out laughing.

“Okay, he hasn’t played it cool at all. He’s jumped through proverbial flaming hoops to communicate his regret, but I have appreciated that he hasn’t just blown up my phone with a million text messages.”

“I totally agree, Laine. That sort of thing is just annoying. But that banner must’ve cost a fortune, like a semester’s worth of textbooks.”

“I know.” I plant my face in my pillow and let out a huge groan.

“Hey, girl, he should be groveling a little. He didn’t just lie. He let you call him Jerry all day long. And then he took you to a party at your ex-boyfriend’s house. Who does that?”

“That was pretty dumb, huh? But honestly, Cass, I probably should have let him explain instead of lashing out,” I say with a sigh. “It’s just...the lying really hurt.”

Cassidy nods sympathetically as I confide my conflicted feelings, absently braiding strands of her hair.

“But underneath it all, I can’t deny that everything just felt so right when we were together. We were like negative and positive charges colliding. He was so attentive all day...he made it all about me. My preferences, my schedule, catering to my every want—from cupcake flavor to where we went next. He seemed so open and vulnerable when he told me about his fears about having another surgery. I don’t know, Cass. I just thought we were

starting something great, something really rare.”

“Maybe you did share something special, Laine. Maybe that’s why he’s pushing so hard for you to give him a second chance. I don’t know. But I would kill for a guy to send me a postcard from a place we visited on our first date. Not to mention those cupcakes. They were amazing.”

The vintage postcard is wedged under the slim frame of the mirror on our closet door. It’s The Japanese Tea Garden, iconic, and the colors in the photo sweetly old-fashioned. “You’re not wrong. With him, I do feel truly seen...valued,” I admit. “And he paid attention to the little details, he remembered everything about our day together. No guy has ever taken the time to notice so many little things about me...across the span of an entire relationship much less in a single day. But Hunter did, effortlessly.”

“Laine, it’s okay to second-guess your decision.”

“Do you think I was too hasty?” I ask with a twinge of regret. “Maybe I should give him a chance to explain.”

Before she can respond, a knock interrupts us. Tessa sweeps in, hidden behind an explosion of pale pink branches in a tall cylinder vase.

“These just arrived for you, Laine, and here’s your mail girls,” she declares, angling the arrangement to fit the bountiful cherry blossom branches through the door. She places it on our dresser, along with a few envelopes, and carefully shifts some of the branches to make the huge bunch fit. To say it dominates the room is an understatement. It’s like a small tree has sprouted between our beds. She hands me a tiny florist’s envelope, and pops onto the end of my bed. “Here’s the card. You totally have to tell me what he says.”

Tessa has been surprisingly supportive since my mortifyingly very public display with Hunter. Two days after the blowup, she forced me out of bed and told me to shower and dress upscale casual and bring a bathing suit. She took me to the Claremont for a spa day and the most amazing poolside lunch. It was decadent, luxurious, relaxing, and made me feel like a queen. When I thanked her, she shrugged it off, and simply said every woman deserves to feel like a queen and be treated like a queen.

The delicate blooms fill the room with their subtle almond fragrance that transports me back to my day with Hunter, walking hand in hand through the tea garden, making out in Lindley Meadow. Overcome, I blink back tears, and open the card.

“Wishing you the best. H.”

“That’s it?” Tessa’s voice is laden with disappointment.

“I think it’s perfect. He wants you to know he’s thinking of you, but no pressure.”

Tessa snorts her disagreement. “I expect so much more. Flowers and cupcakes are like the most unoriginal, empty-gesture apology ever. That’s sitcom level sentiment. Our girl deserves better.”

“Our girl deserves to be happy,” Cassidy sends Tessa a little passive jab. She’s been a little salty over Tessa’s sudden involvement in my life, and I can’t blame her. Tessa’s running a one-woman campaign against Hunter Williams, largely by blasting him on her socials. She started with our day at the Claremont, when Tessa posted a photo our server took of the two of us poolside, sunglasses and champagne flutes raised with the words,

‘When the trash takes itself out, there’s only one cure—pamper yourself like the queen you are! Shoutout to my girl for never settling. Here’s to standards higher than Everest and letting go of anyone beneath us. #NewdaynewLIFE’

“Cassidy, we all want that for Laine. PiPs forever right? We Phi Pis stick together, and if you get really publicly humiliated by a totally weak, lying loser, I’ll take you for a manuka honey massage too, k?”

“Aw, that’s literally such a sweet offer, and I agree that we need to stick together, but I’m not sure I understand how assassinating Hunter on Instagram is helping Laine,” Cassidy fires back.

“I’m not assassinating anyone.”

“How is posting, ‘Does anyone have recommendations for grooming services to tame shaggy liars? Asking for a friend... #WildCatLiarCat #IntegrityIsSexy’ not character assassination?”

“It’s not like I came out and said, ‘So sad that Hunter Williams suffers with type one liabetes.’ If Hunter recognizes himself in my posts, that’s completely on him.” Tessa picks up her phone, and starts typing, “Hang on a sec, that was a good one.”

“You can’t post that,” Cassidy goes wild with alarm.

“Chill, Cassidy. I’m just making a note in case I ever have a future need for a great liar burn.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath of cherry blossoms. They smell like spring and gentle sunshine, and simple serenity. It’s so transporting I almost feel like I’m in that park, lying on the grass beside Hunter, music drifting on the air.

Cassidy breaks the spell. “Okay, well, I think maybe we need to back off a little and give Laine room to make her own decision about Hunter without tanking him. What if they get back together again?”

“Well I think we should support Laine by not trying to influence her just because Hunter is paying her all this attention. And if they get back together, I will toast their future happiness.”

Tessa flashes a quick no-eye smile at Cassidy, which Cassidy meets with one of her own, maintaining a pro-level frenemy vibe. I know they mean well, but I don’t want this to grow into a battle of who’s the bestie. As they continue their back a forth, I tune them out, and focus on the song that seems to be floating in from the room next door. It’s a little sad, a lot soulful, and draws me in. Tessa and Cassidy’s impassioned points are drowning it out, and then I hear another voice, calling my name.

I run to the window and am stunned to see Hunter below. He smiles up at me, those perfect teeth shining in the pale evening light. He’s dressed in a ridiculously small tan trench coat over a Wildcats tee shirt and jeans. He gives a shy little wave, pulls out his phone, and it looks like he’s texting me.

I listen closely for a new text chime, but instead of that, I hear the first chords of that sorrowful song again. Hunter bends to pick something up beside him, the coat hampering his movements and looking like it might split at the seams. When he stands, he lifts his arms overhead, each hand holding a large bluetooth speaker. Self-consciousness pours off him in waves, as he stands with speakers raised, so much so that I’m tempted to go down and put him out of his misery. But then the singer comes in and Hunter’s awkwardness fades into nothing. I watch his lips move, and although it’s not his voice I’m hearing, he’s singing. To me.

He’s feeling every word, every line. I’m not catching all the words, and I’m not sure that I need to, because it’s all I can do to keep the catch in my throat from turning into an outright sob. And all I need to push me over is to see Hunter’s solemn expression and hear Chris Stapleton singing the refrain about being wrong.

I feel held in place, as if Hunter has his own field of gravity and I’m orbiting around him. Cassidy rushes up on my right, and Tessa follows on my left.

“He’s *serenading* you, Laine,” Cassidy squeals. “It’s like a movie, so romantic.”

“Okay, that’s pretty cute,” Tessa holds up her phone, recording.

I ignore them both.

The last notes of the song play, and Hunter slowly lowers his arms. He tucks a speaker in each pocket and struggles as he peels off the trench coat. His eyes meet mine again, pulling at my heart until I feel a real danger that flip-flopping organ might burst from my body and float down to wrap around his.

“I was wrong, Laine,” he calls to me, voice clear and certain, “So wrong.”

SEVENTEEN

HUNTER

I tap my fingers against the thick mug, my heart racing faster than a wild Mustang on the Outer Banks. The campus coffee shop buzzes with conversation, but all I can focus on is the empty seat across the table. Any second now, Laine will walk through that door, and my fate will be decided.

The door swings open...and it's just a happy couple holding hands in what feels like a deliberate display of mocking the unhappily unattached. Of course, I am attached, it's just a painfully single-sided attachment. I watch the couple negotiate their order, pointing at the pastry case. She leans into him, and he busses her cheek as they settle on a chocolate croissant. Their oblivious exhibition of little intimacies gets my dander up, and for just a minute, I let my jealousy ride hard and free. That could be me and Laine, if she'd just give me a chance.

I pick up my mobile for the millionth time and note that another minute has gone by. Sixty seconds late, sixty torturous seconds, each one needling me like an unrelenting yellow jacket. Maybe I need to lay off the caffeine. I push my cup aside, and suddenly she's there, her radiant smile warming every corner of my edgy soul. My breath catches, snagged on the hook of my own anxious excitement.

As she orders a coffee, I pull myself together. "Deep breaths, Williams." But as she walks to the table, I'm as solid as a bag of rice pudding. Pain shoots up my leg as I rise from my chair, but I ignore it and clamp down on the wince that wants to take over my face. God, how I'm dying to kiss her cheek, but my stupid ankle prevents me from taking so much as a step toward her.

"Hey, Hunter," she greets me softly, her voice pouring over my frayed nerves like a cup of tea with honey.

"Hi, Laine." I can't help but grin like an idiot as she sits down across from me.

"Um, I wanted to thank you for the flowers. And the cupcakes. And post card. But mostly for the serenade," she begins, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "I had to get rid of the cherry blossoms though. But I'll never forget being serenaded. It was...amazing."

My cheeks heat at her words. "Yeah? I was afraid maybe I'd gone too far. I was trying to find the right balance of giving you space and letting you

know how sorry I was. When I didn't hear from you, I was afraid I had messed up again. But I'm glad you're here now."

"No, it wasn't too much. And I'm sorry I didn't reach out sooner...I- I really liked it. I've never been serenaded before. I always thought it seemed hokey, but when it's done with real feeling, it's quite a touching tribute. All the Phi Pis think you're adorable. I'm also a huge Chris Stapleton fan now." The right side of her mouth curls up and up, creating a little dimple, and I swear my heart swells to twice its size.

"Really? Now that's cool." I try to sound nonchalant but fail miserably. So I try to push off some of my enthusiasm onto the music. "I can't get enough of his guitar. And that song in particular just cut to the heart of it, he lays out how I feel more clearly than I could ever say myself."

I watch her eyes scan the coffee shop and eventually land on the bulky gray boot hugging my ankle. Her pretty brow furrows in concern. "Hunter, are you okay? Did you hurt your ankle again?"

"Ah, that," I say, waving it off. "I finally had that surgery we were talking about. You know, for my injury? But, uh, you actually inspired me to finally suck it up and find out what the future holds for me."

"Wow, I'm so glad I could help. I know you have a whole lot riding on the outcome."

We fall into a comfortable silence, the kind that can only exist between two people who've shared something more meaningful than a mere date. Laine's eyes search mine, and I know without a doubt that she is worth every ounce of embarrassment and every pound of heavy-heartedness I've experienced. And I'll do everything in my power to keep her close, even if it means facing a thousand more surgeries or serenading her in front of a stadium full of her sorority sisters.

"Anyway," Laine says, shifting the energy, "how did it go? The surgery, I mean."

"Dr. Nguyen is really optimistic," I answer, feeling a little more confident as I talk about my progress. "She thinks that if everything goes well during rehab, I'll be able to start working out with the team in another month."

Laine's face lights up, eyes sparkling like stars in a clear night sky in the country. "Hunter, that's amazing. That's the best news I've heard in a long time."

Her genuine happiness for me sends a warm glow through my chest, and for a second, all I can manage is a huge grin back at her. "Thanks, Laine. It

means a lot coming from you.”

Silence descends over our table again, the air thick with my awkward feelings and unspoken words. I roll my lips between my teeth and take a deep breath in through my nose and summon up the courage to ask Laine out—to dinner, to lunch, heck, I’d go to the moon if that’s what she wants. But before I can get out a single word, she beats me to it.

“Hunter, I have some news too,” she says tentatively, playing with the edge of her coffee cup.

“Really? What’s going on?” I ask, genuinely curious.

“Well,” she hesitates, takes a deep breath. “I got the internship. In Paris.”

“Paris?” I echo. My stomach lurches, like I just took a punch in the gut, but I scramble to keep my composure.

“Yeah,” Laine continues, a nervous smile flashes across her face and disappears. “You were right about the university and my professors supporting me. They’re letting me finish out the semester remotely, with everything online, so I can take the position. They want me in Paris before next week, to sort out housing so I can be in on the site planning from day one. I...I leave in just a few days to start this exciting new chapter.”

“Wow,” I manage to choke out, the word grating like sandpaper against my throat. I want to be happy for her—truly, I do—but the thought of Laine being an ocean and a continent away makes it difficult to breathe.

“Congratulations, Laine,” I say, forcing the enthusiasm into my voice that I know she needs to hear. “You deserve this opportunity more than anyone I know.”

“Thank you, Hunter,” she whispers.

In that moment, I know that there’s nothing left but a bittersweet goodbye that’s seconds away. I take a deep breath, push down the tidal wave of emotions that’s about to drown me.

“Laine,” I reach out and gently take her hand, steeping my fingers with hers before entwining them. “You are extraordinary. This internship is just the first step in what I know will be an incredible journey for you.”

Her eyes shimmer, and that drowning feeling in my chest grows stronger.

“Thank you, Hunter,” she whispers, squeezing my hand.

“My only regret,” I confess, unable to hold back any longer, “is that if I hadn’t been such a fool, we could’ve spent these last few weeks learning each other...together, instead of apart.”

“And I should’ve heard you out that night,” she admits, her voice soft and

vulnerable. “I get why you got caught up in...everything. And our date? It was magical, Hunter. It meant more to me than you’ll ever know.”

Her words wash over me in a flood of warmth and sorrow.

Slowly, Laine stands up, her hand slipping from mine. “My only regret, Hunter, is that we didn’t meet sooner,” her voice is barely audible. “But I’m at least a little happier knowing we both get a fresh start.”

“Yeah. Me too,” I lie, keenly aware of the irony as I do it. I desperately want to stand and pull her into my arms one last time, but the pain in my leg, or maybe the pain in my heart, anchors me to my seat.

“Please don’t stand,” she urges, seeing me grimace. She places a warm hand on my shoulder and kisses the top of my head. “Take care of yourself, Hunter. I’ll never forget you.”

Once again, I find myself watching the only girl I’ve ever loved walk away. And I let her go.

“Laine,” I manage to choke out as she reaches the door. She looks back over her shoulder, sends me one last smile. “Safe travels.”

I watch her step out into the sunlight as the door to the coffee shop swings shut, leaving me feeling as empty as a beach before a tsunami. I stare at the empty chair across from me, and the feeling of Laine’s hand still tingles on my fingertips. I can’t help but clench them in a fist, as if they’re trying to hold onto her.

“Shit,” I mutter under my breath, sipping my lukewarm coffee. My insides begin to churn in an odd concoction of emotions. A cold undercurrent of loss seizes my heart, but an inexplicable sense of hope swirls against that swift current like little eddies in a stream.

“Did you need something?” The barista glances my way, her face full of kind concern.

“Nope. Just talking to my coffee.” I offer a weak smile.

“Let me know if you change your mind.” She bites her lip and returns to wiping down the counter, leaving me to my thoughts.

I take another sip, wincing as the bitter taste coats my tongue. My eyes drift to the window, watching the world pass by in a blur of color and motion—lives intersecting, diverging, and moving forward. That’s when it hits me: maybe our paths will cross again someday. It might be wishful thinking, but it’s enough to ignite a tiny flame of hope within me.

“Awesome and awful,” I say more quietly into my cup, the words bouncing back up at me. “Mostly a kick in the nuts awful. But who knows,

right?”

EIGHTEEN

HUNTER

Every muscle aches after a grueling morning practice, and the groan floats out with my breath as I sink into Brandon's bubbling hot tub, welcoming the pulsing jets as they push against the sore spots. The tension and pain begin to ease as the warmth seeps into me like an effervescent cocoon. I lean my head back, close my eyes, and let the steamy air kiss at my face. It's pretty much the closest anything has come to kissing my face for the last four months.

"Man, you look like hell," Brandon says, popping open two beers with a satisfying hiss. He passes me one, foam creeping over the edge. He puts his bottle down and hops into the steaming and streaming water. "And you're being awfully quiet for someone who's about to make a monumental, career-building comeback. Is that brain of yours rocking like a hurricane, or is it just stuck in southern slow-motion?"

I take a swig of beer, the cold liquid contrasting beautifully with the heat surrounding me. "The song is about him rocking her world. Like a hurricane. Which is worlds apart from rocking like a hurricane, although I like that concept too, truth be told."

"Don't hide behind semantics, Hunter."

"Don't mess up the lyrics to what is arguably the greatest song the Scorpion's ever recorded."

"I know you're spouting all this nonsense just to cover up the fact that your tiny southern brain is actually wrestling with something big, huh? You should be celebrating, but instead, you're sitting here all pensive and philosophizing like a lost Plato."

"Well, you're not wrong. I guess I just hoped to feel, oh I don't know. Different," I admit, watching the condensation bead and slip down the bottle. He's completely right, of course, but I'm not going to bare my soul here. I should be doing back flips over coach's comment about me maybe starting at quarterback again. I've put in the work, busted my ass all summer longer. I'm bigger, faster, and stronger, but despite all those gains, I feel more broken than ever.

Brandon raises his beer in salute, smirking. "Big of you to admit it. I imagine it's hard to get excited about anything when you've taken on the persona of Dark Thundercloud of Doom. Don't get me wrong, I think it's great. The whole offensive line is afraid you'll snap if they make the slightest

mistake. You're really keeping 'em on their toes. Yeah, you've been a total dick the last few months. But I get it. Love has fucked up stronger guys than you."

"Hey now," I protest, nearly choking on the mouthful of my drink I'd just taken. "Unless you're talking love of the game, I plead the fifth. I will not self-incriminate."

Brandon just gives me a knowing look and takes a sip of his beer. "Admit it, Hunter. You've been in one seriously dark mood since Party Girl left."

"Fine," I concede, slapping my hands against the bubbling water. "You're right. When Laine left, she sucked the light out of my soul, but that doesn't mean I'm going to admit that I love her. And if you're going to keep poking at me like this, I'm gonna need another drink."

"You know where to find them," Brandon waves a hand toward the built in fridge by the grill station.

I push up and out of the tub and pause on the edge to watch the steam pour off my skin into the night air. "Some host you are. But let me diverge from your lack of manners for a moment. Since you brought her up, I've been wondering why you call Laine *Party Girl*? She's so driven and studious, it doesn't exactly fit as a nickname."

Brandon snorts, shaking his head. "You're such a moron sometimes, Hunter. It's because she's an event planner, as in she plans parties. Party Girl. Not because she's some feral party animal."

He takes another sip of his beer before leveling a pointed stare at me. "And nice try, but don't think you can change the subject that easily."

The hot tub bubbles around us, and the second beer is hitting my bloodstream, but it does little to ease my nerves. "Okay. I just...I thought football was everything. Being the quarterback, it was like the be-all and end-all of my entire existence."

"Your whole life has been centered around the game," Brandon agrees, nodding.

"But now," I pause to gather my thoughts. "It's lost all meaning without her. I would trade it all to spend my days making Laine happy. I would. It's like something inside me shifted when she left, and I can't shake the feeling that I need her in my life."

My words hang heavy in the steamy air, and I brace myself for whatever goading response Brandon is about to deliver. But instead, he looks thoughtful, contemplative even, before clapping me on the shoulder.

“Man, love really has done a number on you,” he muses, taking another swig of beer. “But if that’s how you feel, then own it. Embrace it. And most importantly, freaking do something about it.”

“Like what?” I ask hotly, all the frustration of the past three months seeping into my voice.

“Like packing your bags and going after her,” Brandon’s eyes sparkle with self-satisfaction. “You’ve made dumber decisions for far worse reasons.”

As I consider his words, the possibility of reuniting with Laine fills my head like fireworks on the Fourth of July. It’s terrifying, exhilarating, and everything in between. And as I sit there, surrounded by the warmth of the water, I realize that it’s exactly what I want—no, need—to do.

But then, wavering fears creep in. What if she turns me away, refusing to even listen to what I have to say? The thought of being rejected by Laine after leaving everything behind, sends an icy shiver down my spine despite the warmth of the hot tub.

“Brandon?” I ask, my voice barely audible over the hum of the jets. “What if she doesn’t want me?”

“What if she does?”

“No, I mean it. What if she sends me packing the second she lays eyes on me?”

“Really, man? What if she’s been waiting for you all this time? You won’t know unless you give it a shot,” sighs Brandon.

I LET OUT a deep breath and nod, feeling the weighty truth of his words. “Okay, that settles it. I’m going to pack my bags, fly to Paris, and tell her how I truly feel. And I won’t hold anything back.”

With renewed vigor, I jump out of the hot tub, water cascading off my body in gleaming rivulets. Grabbing a towel, I pat myself dry while turning back to face Brandon. “Come on, man. You’ve gotta help me find the best flight.”

“Seriously?” He raises an eyebrow, clearly amused by my eagerness. “Alright, alright. Let’s get you to Paris, lover boy.”

As we head inside the house, my heart races with anticipation. The prospect of reuniting with Laine fills me with both hope and fear. It’s a gamble, sure, but isn’t that what love is about? Taking risks, putting yourself

out there, and fighting for what matters most?

My thoughts drift back to Laine, her laughter like music in my ears, her eyes sparkling with mischief and warmth. I picture the way she'd look at me when I made her laugh, or how she'd bite her lip when she was deep in thought. Every little detail about her feels etched into my soul.

"Please, universe," I silently plead as we hunch over the computer, searching for flights. "Let this be the right decision."

"Plead to the all-knowing powers of the universe all you want, Williams. But tell me you have a valid passport."

"P-shaw, Bauers. Every southern gentleman worth his salt comes prepared when international adventure calls."

"Driving from Charleston to Charlotte in a beater pickup truck doesn't count as international adventure, Hunter. You got a passport or what?"

NINETEEN

LAINE

It's Saturday, my day off, and I'm determined to savor every minute of it. The sun peeks through the clouds, casting a warm glow on the Parisian streets, and I inhale deeply, enjoying the scent of fresh pastries and brewing coffee that fills the air.

As I stroll leisurely down the cobbled street, I can't help but marvel at how far I've come in just four months. New apartment? Check. Bank account? Check. Loving my neighborhood? Double check. Life has definitely been good to me.

Birds chirp overhead as I watch shopkeepers sweep their stoops and arrange tables and baskets for the busy day ahead. Tourist season is in full swing, and even though it's not yet eight in the morning, the streets are already bustling with activity.

Approaching the little flower shop on the corner, I spot Madam Foret emerging from the store with a bucket brimming with flowers under each arm. Not wanting her to struggle, I hurry over and help her steady them in the holder on the sidewalk.

"Merci, Laine," she exclaims, smiling warmly. "So, have you found a nice French boy to settle down with yet?"

I laugh and shake my head. "No, Madam Foret, I haven't been swept off my feet just yet."

"Ah, c'est intelligent!" she chuckles, winking at me. "A bouquet takes time to arrange, non? Each flower chosen for a reason, each one needing space to bloom."

"Exactly," I grin, playing along. "And just like flowers, relationships need room to grow. Why settle for a dandelion when I could have a rose?"

We both burst into laughter, and Madam Foret picks a bright dahlia from one of the buckets. "Well, my dear, I hope this will do in the meantime."

"Thank you, Madam Foret," I reply, accepting the flower with a smile. I continue on my way, the dahlia's vibrant petals adding a touch of color to my day.

Entering my favorite café, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee and warm pastries envelops me. The barista, Juliette, greets me with a bright smile. "Bonjour, Laine. The usual?"

"Absolutely," I reply, fanning myself with a hand. "It's already so hot

today.”

“Oui, it is like an oven,” she agrees, expertly pouring steamed milk into a cup of espresso. The familiar pattern of a swan emerges in the foam, bringing a grin to my face. She hands over the beautifully crafted cappuccino along with a buttery brioche scented with cardamom.

“Merci, Juliette,” I say, heading toward a small table by the window. As I sit down, I admire the delicate foam art and take a blissful first sip. The rich blend of coffee and milk complete my leisurely morning.

My phone buzzes, and I see a new text from Cassidy.

Bonjour, how’s my favorite expat?

I chuckle as I type back, *Living the Gallic dream, Cass. About to tuck into freshly baked buttery brioche. How are you? Why aren’t you out on a Friday night doing things that would make me blush?*

What’s to say I’m not? she replies.

Hmm. You might be more fun, but you’re a terrible multi-tasker. So I know you’re home.

Just wanted to check in and see what’s new. Anything new?

Nothing but my delicious brioche. I send back, snapping a quick picture of my breakfast.

K. Send word when things get a little more interesting.

Rude, but K. Hugs!

Hugs back.

I SHAKE MY HEAD, amused. What a weirdo.

Taking a bite of the brioche, I close my eyes and savor the buttery, cardamom-infused flavor. This is living.

Suddenly, a familiar southern drawl fills my ears. “You know, when I was traveling in France, I learned that saying thank you, instead of merci might earn you a stern look from the locals. They’re pretty loose about their manners, or maybe their manners are just a little different from what we have going in South Carolina. It’s probably too soon to tell, but I do know that I’m about fifty-fifty on annoying folks versus making friends. So I’ve gotta tell you, I sure am pleased to finally see your beautiful, familiar face.”

I startle, nearly choking on my brioche, and spring up from my seat. “Hunter! You’re here!”

“I am.” His eyes beam a look filled with so much warmth and affection

that I can't speak. Before I can move, he wraps me in a hug so tight it lifts me off the ground. And holds me there. I bury my face in his neck, inhaling the comforting scent of him, and hold on tight, afraid that if I open my eyes, I'll find this was all a fever dream.

"How is it possible you're here?" I ask, stuck in a dreamy feeling of unreality.

"I may have badgered Cassidy for your new number. Remarkably she has a high-level of resistance to my many charms and refused to share anything with me. I wore her down with a ceaseless campaign of adorable text messages, and finally she hinted that I should try The Beans on Fire café, if I ever found myself in Paris."

"And here you are," I murmur, in low-level amazement.

"And here I am," he winks at me. "Starving. Andres claims the pancakes are a must-try."

"Breakfast first, huh?" I say, playfully narrowing my eyes at him.

As if on cue, Maria arrives at our table with Hunter's coffee. "Bonjour, Laine, Hunter," she says warmly, and I can't help but love how his name sounds with her French accent. "It is nice to see you in this part of Paris, Hunter. I see you've found Laine. I hope your visit is everything you desire."

"Wait, how do you know Maria?" I ask, puzzled. "And you just said Andres recommends the pancakes."

An adorable blush fills Hunter's cheeks to the tips of his ears as he confesses. "I've been in France for four days, visiting The Beans on Fire every morning to find you."

"But I've been here every day and never saw you," I say, still confused.

He looks sheepish. "I was at their other location in the Eleventh Arrondissement, not here in Montmartre."

I can't help it—I burst out laughing, and Hunter joins me. Maria slides his plate of pancakes in front of him, chuckling, "It's quite a sad tale of waiting, no?"

"You've been waiting for me, Hunter?"

"All my life," he answers, nodding softly.

After that monumental admission, I need a second for my brain to catch up to my now thumping heart. I turn and look out the café window, stealing a minute to settle myself. I'm not sure if he's serious or laying on the southern charm. We grow quiet, and I notice that Hunter, who said he was famished, hasn't picked up his fork. He's just... staring at me, smiling, silent. Not

eating. I squirm a little in my seat, wishing I could just read minds.

“Today’s my day off,” I offer up, hating the timid tone in my voice. “Do you have plans?”

“I did,” he answers, still smiling. My heart sinks, and I wonder what on earth he’s doing here. “But now that I found you, that box is checked. I’m going to have to come up with something new.”

I can feel the heat rising to my cheeks now, and my thoughts race. Is he serious? Can’t he just tell me what he wants? I try to keep my voice steady as I ask, “What did you have in mind?”

“Spending every available minute of every available hour with you.”

“No, seriously, what sights do you plan to see?”

“Laine,” Hunter shakes his head. “I’m not here for the Eiffel Tower.”

“What are you here for, Hunter?”

“I’m here for you.”

I swallow, and a warmth spreads through my chest. The fact that Hunter Williams tracked me down in a city of over twelve million people, just to spend time with me, makes me feel special in a way I’ve never experienced before. He’s here for me, and me alone.

He leans a little closer, and my heart leaps. “I want to spend some time with you, Laine. Get to know you better.”

“Hunter?” I pause, finding my voice again, “How fast do you think you can eat those pancakes?”

He grins at me, mischief sparkling in his eyes. Without breaking eye contact, he stuffs an entire pancake into his mouth, which makes me to burst into laughter, drawing eyes in the small café.

“Down, boy,” I tease, still giggling. “You might think the French are loose with their manners, but they generally use flatware and chew their food.” I demonstrate by taking a small, delicate bite of my toast, chewing slowly and maintaining my gaze on him. “Like this.”

Hunter swallows his pancake, takes a long sip of his coffee, and proceeds to stuff a second pancake into his already full mouth. I laugh again, shaking my head in disbelief. “Good thing those aren’t as large as the ones back in Buckley,” I say, stealing a bite of fruit from his plate, “or you wouldn’t be able to do that.”

“True,” he agrees, swallowing audibly before sipping more coffee. “These are conveniently bite-sized.”

“Only if your mouth is as big as your fist.”

“Are you saying I’ve got a big mouth, Laine Summers?”

His smile is so infectious I can barely contain myself. “I’m saying it, Hunter Williams.”

He chuckles, takes two bites of fruit, and then stands up, dropping his napkin beside his plate. “Done. Grab your flower, woman.”

I comply happily.

Hand in hand, we walk down the most picturesque street in Montmartre. The sun is shining brightly, casting a warm light on Hunter’s handsome face. The sidewalks are full now: tour groups gathering around guides, a well-dressed woman walking a little dog, an artist in front of his easel, sketching a caricature of what can only be an American family of four. Hunter scans the street taking it all in with obvious appreciation. I love his natural enthusiasm.

As we approach Madame Foret’s flower shop, my cheeks burn at the memory of our earlier conversation. She looks up from her flowers and stares at Hunter for so long that she doesn’t even notice me until we’re almost past her. “Ah, Laine,” she says with a grin. “It looks like you discovered a beautiful specimen for your bouquet, n’est-ce pas?”

“Madame Foret, you know I like my flowers big and showy,” I reply with a chuckle, feeling my face grow even hotter. “May I introduce you to my friend, Hunter?”

“Of course,” she replies, winking at us. “I am never too busy to meet an attractive young man.”

Hunter takes Madame Foret’s hand in his, bowing over it with the chivalry of an eighteenth-century courtier. “Enchanté, Madame,” he says, his bright smile lighting up his entire face. Madame Foret waves him off with a laugh. “Ooo la la, Laine, be careful with this one. He is trop charmant.”

“Thanks for the warning,” I say, waving as we continue on our way.

We stroll through the narrow Passage des Abbesses, where Hunter stops to consider the street art and vintage charm everywhere. As we exit the alley, he enthusiastically points out the architectural details that catch his eye, and I can’t help but be drawn in by his energy.

We arrive at my apartment building after walking just one more block. I punch in the entry code and glance over at Hunter, who looks surprised. “We’re here already?” he asks. “Pretty upscale for an intern.”

“Wait ‘til you see the view,” I reply with a grin. “I may have splurged.” We step into the elevator and start our ascent to the top floor.

Feeling the tension in the small space, I notice Hunter’s reflection staring

at me in the elevator door. I tug at a cord on his heavy pack, “Always carry so much gear on a Parisian walk?”

“For four days, I waited at the wrong café,” he explains. “Hoping it’d be you every time the door opened. Kept my bag in my hotel room. When I realized my mistake, I checked out and came straight here. This pack has all my stuff.”

“Isn’t that a bit presumptuous, showing up to a girl’s apartment with all your belongings?” I tease as we reach my floor. The doors slide open, and I lead Hunter down the hallway to my door, feeling equal parts excited and nervous.

The moment Hunter steps into my living room, I feel a hit of desire surge through me that I wasn’t prepared for. The weight of his pack hits the floor with a thud, and he turns slowly, taking in the space with an appreciative whistle. “Nice place.”

“Thanks,” I manage, though my voice comes out a bit breathless. I brush past him, trying to ignore the way my pulse races when our bodies touch. “Come take a look at the best part.”

I throw open the door to the balcony, the breeze blows against my face, a welcome cooling of the intensity building between us.

He follows me outside, standing so close behind me that I can feel the heat radiating off his body. His hand finds its way to my hip, firm and possessive, as he leans down to murmur in my ear. “It’s beautiful, but nowhere near as nice to look at as you.”

My stomach flips, and suddenly I’m back on that sunset cruise in San Francisco Bay, feeling the first stirrings of attraction. He’s so close. I duck under his arm, grabbing his hand from the railing, and playfully pull him back inside, desperate for some space to breathe.

But Hunter doesn’t give me that space. Instead, he pulls me in, his arms wrapping around me, trapping me against his solid chest. I tilt my head back, lick my lips. “Hunter—”

His mouth is on mine before I can say anything else, warm and generous, exploring, tasting. I feel myself sinking into him, losing myself in the kiss. But then, his arms loosen, and his hands slide slowly down my back, to my hips. He gently but firmly pushes me ever so slightly away from him.

Confused and disappointed, I search his face for answers.

He leans his forehead against mine, eyes shut tight, and takes a deep breath. He lets his hands drop from my body and steps back. I feel an

immediate stab of loss. My voice comes out raspy and pinched, “Hunter, what are you doing? You came a really long way and went through a lot of trouble to see me. Is there something you need to tell me?”

I cross my arms, hugging myself. He rakes his fingers through his hair, and finally opens his eyes. They’re filled with the sort of vulnerability I saw in the park when he told me how lost he felt, and it tugs at my heart.

“Look, Laine. I didn’t fly here to take you to bed and have a good time. I’m here to tell you that you are worth giving up everything I possess, that I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my entire life. But you can tell me to kiss off here and now, and I’ll be on the first flight back home, licking my wounds and trying to figure out how I’m ever going to get over you.”

He pauses, searching my face for any sign of my thoughts. His words hang in the air between us, heavy and hot. This is the moment I’ve been wanting and waiting for, and now that it’s here, I’m not sure how to react.

“But if you have even the slightest interest in seeing where this might lead between us, I’m all in, with everything I have. No let’s move in together and see how it feels, no one foot in and the other out. I don’t do anything halfway. If you give me a chance, I’m going to spend every day until I take my last dying breath proving to you how much I love you.”

TWENTY

LAINE

I stand in front of Hunter, my heart beating in time with the lighting-fast thoughts zinging around in my mind like subatomic particles, until they coalesce into one solid mass.

He loves me.

For a split second, I freeze. Then, like a bottle rocket, I launch myself into his arms. My hands snake around his neck, drawing him closer as I press my lips against his with the hunger of a street dog who hasn't eaten in days.

Hunter lifts me effortlessly, and I wrap my legs around his waist, squeezing him like a vice, as if to ensure that he'll never be able to escape me. Our tongues touch, greedy and demanding, each trying to consume the other. He takes steps forward, pins me against the wall, our bodies locked together like two puzzle pieces finally finding their match.

One of his hands is firmly planted under my ass, holding me up, while the other tugs at my shirt, yanking it free from my jeans. His fingers slide beneath the fabric, traveling up my side until they reach the curve of my breast. He explores, squeezes gently, and his thumb brushes over my nipple through the thin material of my bra. It sends searing bolts of heat to my center, and I moan.

"Take me to my bed," I whisper into his ear, my voice hoarse with need.

"I thought you'd never ask." Hunter obliges, carrying me down the short hallway. At one door, he hesitates, balancing me on his knee as he opens it and peeks inside. "Office," he chuckles, his eyes twinkling. "Sturdy enough looking desk..."

"Later," I growl into his ear, nipping at his earlobe with my teeth. "Bed first. Now."

With renewed urgency, he hoists me higher against his chest and practically sprints to the only remaining door. He swings it open, and in one fluid motion, deposits me onto my bed like a hunter claiming a prize. He stands above me, peels off his tee shirt, revealing the tattoos that weave across his muscular chest. "Laine, I want to see you, all of you. Let's get that shirt off you."

I slowly pull my shirt over my head as he stands watching. He slides beside me, trails kisses up my stomach, and his hands follow. He slips his fingers under the band of my bralette and pushes it up and off me. He stares,

his eyes eating me up. “Gorgeous. You’re just gorgeous, Laine.”

He pushes my legs apart with one strong thigh and kneels between them.

“Come here,” I say, reaching out to pull him down by his waistband. But he hovers just out of reach, his clever fingers working on the zipper of my jeans. With a swift, smooth motion, he slides them off me along with my underwear.

“God, you’re beautiful,” he murmurs, his voice thick with desire.

My body trembles as Hunter’s hands run up the length of my body, until his football-calloused fingers surround my breast, kneading, gently rolling the peaks of my nipple between his fingers. He trails his fingers down my abdomen until they reach the heated space between my legs. He slips a finger over my aroused slit, and then deeper until he slowly traces it back and forth across my clit. His touch is electric, teasing and exploring me with a dedication I’ve never experienced. It feels like he’s mapping me out, learning every inch of me.

“Laine,” he breathes against my neck, his voice husky and full of awe. “You feel amazing.”

“Then don’t stop,” I plead, raising my back to press myself closer to his touch. Instantly responding to my request, his finger deftly circles my clit, making me gasp and my body quiver as pleasure builds in me. He adds a second finger, squeezing my clit between them, stroking me rhythmically, his eyes locked onto mine, watching my reactions. I spread my legs wider, and he slips a finger inside of me, making me want more. Instead, he returns to my clit, and the intensity builds until I’m crying out, clutching at him as my orgasm rocks through me. I’m throbbing and wet and trembling.

But Hunter isn’t finished. He lowers himself between my legs, his lips hovering just above my sensitive, quivering flesh. My breath catches at the sight, my embarrassment mounting. “Hunter, you don’t have to—”

“Let me please you, Laine,” he interrupts softly, his eyes shining with determination. “I want this. I want you.”

Before I can protest, his mouth descends upon me, his tongue teasing and tantalizing me with an expertise that makes me moan as he licks and applies more pressure in just the right spot. As another climax rocks through me, I whisper raggedly, reaching for him. “Please, I need you inside me. Now.”

He reaches over the side of the bed, comes back with his jeans, and fishes a condom out of his wallet, rolling it on before I can offer. He slides a finger over my clit again, moving his finger faster and faster. He positions himself

carefully, rubs himself against my wetness, and then presses against my opening.

As he enters me, I realize he's much bigger than I realized. The pressure is intense, and he pulls out. "You okay, Laine?"

I nod rapidly; he pushes the tip in, and then pushes once more, filling me. My body locks around him, holding him in place. It takes a moment for me to adjust, but then I relax, and he's fully inside me. Our gazes lock, and I can see the want in his eyes, the desperate need to claim me fully.

"Take me. Take me, Hunter," I tell him, my voice full of confidence and desire. "However you want."

It's all the permission he needs. He moves within me, sometimes gentle and slow, then hard. He pins my hands above my head, and his mouth sucks and nips at my breasts. He moves in and out, faster and harder until our bodies are slick with sweat and he comes inside of me.

Finally, spent and breathless, I find myself lying atop Hunter's chest, moving up and down with each of his inhalations. "Why did we waste all that time? I could have had this for months."

He chuckles, the sound rumbling through his chest and into mine.

"Can I ask you something, Hunter?"

"Of course."

"Your ankle..." I slide down his body, tracing the fading scars around his ankle. I kiss across the marks, wishing my kisses could magic away any damage to his beautiful body. "How did it go?"

"Great. More than great. Doc cleared me for full use. I can run, jump, and fly with the best of them." He grins, but there's a hint of uncertainty in his expression.

"So...what does that mean?" I ask softly, pressing kisses to his shin, his knee, his thigh. His cock stirs beneath me, thickening as I move up his body.

"Mean?" he asks, clearly distracted.

"Your future with the team," I clarify, brushing my lips lightly across his tight abs. I avoid looking him in the eye as I summon the courage to ask, "It's your last year with the Wildcats, right? Will you be leaving me soon to be there for the start of the season?"

In a split second, Hunter reverses our positions, flipping me beneath him with surprising ease. He wraps an arm under my back and shifts me lower, so my head isn't left hanging over the edge of the bed.

"Laine, don't you get it?" he asks, his voice tinged with the smallest bit of

hurt.

He rolls off me and props himself up on an elbow. Ever so tenderly, he tucks my hair behind my ear and stares deeply into my eyes. “I’m not going anywhere. I quit.”

“What do you mean, you quit?” I ask, my heart fluttering like a hummingbird.

“Exactly that,” he says softly. “I thanked coach for the opportunity to start again, Brandon drove me to the airport, and now I’m here. With you.”

“You quit the team? For me?” My throat goes tight as I realize the enormity of what he’s saying. “You gave up all that you’ve worked for—for me?”

“I guess I did,” he admits, his gaze never leaving mine. “I realized that none of it matters if I’m not sharing this life...with you.”

Tears start, and I can’t stop them. They flow from my eyes, and I’m unable to contain the overwhelming emotions I’ve been feeling any longer. I pull Hunter back on top of me, holding my hands on either side of his face. “I love you, Hunter Williams.”

Our lips meet in a kiss full of gentle passion. It’s deliberate, warm, and intimate.

“And I,” he kisses my lips, “love,” he kisses my jaw, “you, Laine Summers,” he whispers in my ear, “always.”

With a tender touch, Hunter enters me once more. Slowly, deliciously filling me up. We make love this time—our bodies moving in sync, hearts beating as one.

Later, exhausted and satisfied, we fall asleep tangled together, the warmth of our bodies cocooning us. As I drift off to sleep, I can’t help but feel more loved than ever before. It really has been the most delicious day off.

TWENTY-ONE

LAINE

Hunter and I stroll arm in arm toward Sacré Coeur. We're creating a fantastical itinerary of all the places we will visit together while we're in Europe. Hunter paints a picture of whimsical picnics in Luxembourg Gardens, and I counter with stolen kisses at the top of the Eiffel Tower.

And one day," Hunter adds, a glint in his eye to rival the shimmering Seine, "we'll hop on a plane to Rome. Just because we can."

"Rome..." I repeat, my heart soaring at the possibilities. "We could toss coins into the Trevi Fountain, make wishes under the Italian sky."

"Exactly!" he grins, squeezing my hand. "And explore the Colosseum, share gelato in Piazza Navona..."

We continue listing off all the places we'd love to visit until we reach the majestic white façade of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Paris, the Sacré Coeur. Our breaths catch in unison at the beauty and scale of it.

"Ready?" Hunter asks, his voice all hushed reverence.

"Always," I reply with a smile, anticipating the enjoyment of discovering something new about the Basilica through Hunter's eager first-time eyes.

Together, we enter the cool, hushed interior of the Sacré Coeur. The atmosphere is a stark contrast to the bustling city outside, as if we've stepped into another world. Hunter's eyes are drawn to a side altar, where flickering candles cast a warm glow, inviting us closer. He fishes a few coins from his pocket and drops them into the donation box.

"Watch this," he whispers, lighting a candle with practiced ease. "I'm praying for our eternal happiness."

My heart does a little flip, and I feel power in his words inside this sacred space. This quiet promise, this shared connection. It's as if Hunter is grounding our fledgling relationship in something spiritual.

As we leave the basilica, I glance at Hunter, curiosity getting the better of me. "I didn't know you were Catholic."

"Oh, I'm not," he smiles softly, kissing the top of my head. "But I figure it never hurts to ask for a little help. Now, come on, Party Girl. We've got more dreams to plan."

The late afternoon sun casts a romantic glow over the charming streets of Montmartre as Hunter and I explore the neighborhood. The enticing scent of warm bread and rich cheese from the local shops makes me realize we

haven't eaten since breakfast.

Hunter's eyes sparkle with anticipation, a dimpled grin never leaving his face as he takes in the bakery display. "Come on," he urges, pulling me toward the small bakery with its irresistible aroma. Once inside, he wastes no time selecting a freshly baked baguette and a wedge of perfectly ripe cheese. With a conspiratorial wink, he breaks off a piece of the crusty bread and holds it out to me.

"Open," he orders, and I comply, feeling the warmth of the bread against my lips before taking a bite. The satisfying crunch and warm crumb send my stomach into overdrive and it rumbles. Hunter laughs and offers me a slice of cheese.

"Keep feeding me like this, and you'll never have a moment of peace. I'll always want more."

"That's the idea. I can't wait to cook breakfast for you every morning," he tells me, his voice playful, but his expression is completely sincere. I smile gleefully at the thought, knowing full well how spoiled I'll be with him in the kitchen.

"Really? The thought of having someone cook for me is so exciting." I raise my brows in enthusiasm. "What's your specialty?"

"Without a doubt, biscuits and gravy," he replies without missing a beat, his chest puffing up with pride.

"Gravy?" I ask, feigning innocence. "What's in that?"

He rolls his eyes dramatically, clutching at his heart as if struck by an arrow. "Oh, Sugar, your sorry culinary education is now in my capable hands. You need not fear, for I shall introduce you to the delicacy that is biscuits smothered in mouthwatering country gravy."

"Ah," I chuckle, elbowing him playfully in the ribs. "Well then, I shall return the favor by introducing you to the beauty that is overnight oats."

"Deal," he grins, sealing our pact with a quick kiss.

Back at my apartment, my excitement bubbles over as I lead Hunter to the fire escape. Climbing the metal steps, we emerge onto my rooftop sanctuary—a secret garden high above the city, adorned with twinkling fairy lights and vining, vibrant blooms. A panoramic view of Paris stretches out before us, bathed in the soft light of dusk.

"I always hoped I'd get to share this view with someone special," I confess, feeling a flush of belonging as I watch him take it in. My words must strike an emotional note in Hunter, as he wraps me in his arms and pulls me

close.

“Thank you for sharing it with me,” he murmurs into my hair, his breath warm against my ear. “I promise to cherish every moment I have with you—up here and anywhere else our journey takes us.”

As we stand there in one another’s arms, looking out over the City of Love, I can’t help but think that life has never been more beautiful than it is right now—with Hunter by my side.

The sky above us turns shades of crimson as the sun begins its descent, a color I often associate with the passionate, impulsive, and incredibly warm Hunter. We’re still on the rooftop, lounging on a blanket, and I’m sitting between Hunter’s legs, trading memories like precious treasures.

“Remember when we first met at the tennis court?” he asks, a sly grin on his face. “I knew there was something between us, but you wanted no part of it.”

I laugh, recalling the undeniable pull we felt toward each other. “How could I forget? We were both so full of ourselves, trying to out-clever each other with every word.”

Hunter chuckles and nods, his eyes sparkling with mischief. “You were so determined to deny me, and I was just as stubbornly insistent that you would fall for me. But that’s what made it so much fun, you know?”

His words send warmth flooding through me, and I can’t help but smile. “It really was the best banter of my life. Despite our constant need to one-up each other, deep down, I think we both knew we had found a worthy opponent—and an incredible friend.”

Suddenly, Hunter’s expression turns serious, and he looks away for a moment before meeting my gaze again. “You know, after you left San Francisco, I went back to all the spots we visited and just sat there thinking about you.” He hesitates, then adds softly, “I missed you so much, Laine.”

My heart swells at his confession, and I feel tears prickling at the corners of my eyes. “Hunter,” I whisper, feeling grateful and overwhelmed by love, “you make my heart beat with the flutter a million butterfly wings just looking at you.”

He smiles, a little shyly, and pulls me closer. As we stand there, wrapped in each other’s embrace, we turn our gaze toward the endless Parisian skyline. Its iconic landmarks stand like sentinels against the fading light, watching over us as we share this peaceful, private moment.

“Wherever we go,” Hunter murmurs, his breath warm against my ear,

“I’m already home when I’m with you. There’s no place I’d rather be.”

Hearing those words, I can’t help but smile through my welling tears. In that moment, I know that no matter where life takes us, the most important journey will be the one we take together. We’ve found our home in each other, and we’re diving in heart first.

EPILOGUE

LAINE

Balancing a bag of groceries in one arm, I fish around for my keys with my free hand, but they have been absorbed into the lightless pit that is the bottom of my laptop bag. I breath out heavily in a vain attempt to dislodge the sweaty strands of hair that are making it impossible to see and end this game of find-the-keys.

“Uncle,” I say to no one, just as my very old, very French neighbor opens her door, two apartments down. I give a little waive as I slide the heavy bag of food down my leg, so I can dig the keys out of the abyss they’re hiding in.

“Bon soir, Marguerite. Ca va?”

“Non, Laine, c’est terrible. L’ascenseur ne fonctionne pas. Encore.”

“Oh, yes. The elevator. I’m sorry you have to take the stairs. Hopefully they’ll fix it tomorrow. Can I get anything for you?” Although I will happily run any errands or shop for any groceries Marguerite may need, I’m really hoping she says no. I just want to catch my breath after walking up six flights of stairs in heels, heavily laden with files from work and a dozen little jars of Hunter’s favorite yogurt.

“Thank you, sweet girl, mais non. Your Hunter has already done my shopping for me. He was up and down those stairs all day. He is a nice boy, your Hunter.”

Marguerite smiles knowingly and disappears back into her apartment.

It took Marguerite four months to acknowledge my greetings when I first moved in here. Hunter was having afternoon wine and cheese parties with her after four days. He is a nice boy. A nice, charming, and hugely attractive boy, and the only one I hopelessly, utterly, and irreversibly love.

As I finally slide the key into the lock, I’m surprised to see a small envelope with my name on the outside, taped to the door. I must’ve missed in my floppy-haired frustration. The handwriting is unmistakably Hunter’s, and my heart flutters with anticipation. I open the envelope and read,

*Hey there, gorgeous. Really long day?
Let's leave the world behind, and get you relaxed right away.
Follow the scent for your private spa-stay.*

I LAUGH SOFTLY, charmed by his thoughtfulness and creativity, and hoping this means what I think it means.

“Hey, Hunter!” I call through the barely cracked door, “I have a bag of groceries out here...am I allowed into the kitchen first?”

“No, Laine Summers, you most certainly are not allowed into the kitchen.” He sprinkles a little extra drawl into his voice, knowing how much I love it when he lets loose with his South Carolina accent. “Leave those groceries for me to manage, and then take your sweet time, Sugar.”

I step through the door and am greeted by an obscene number of pillar candles resting in glass cylinders flickering and glowing against the wooden floors. Hunter’s playing some old jazz crooner, and everything together is creating an lush and impossibly romantic atmosphere. I can’t help but giggle at the magic of the moment. And in case his note wasn’t obvious enough, there’s a thin arrow of what looks like herbs and salt on the floor, pointing down the hall.

“Alright Mr. Williams,” I whisper to myself, taking a deep, stress-releasing breath and letting it all go. “I’ll gladly follow your lead.”

I make my way to the bathroom. The slightly ajar door gives me a peek of more candles inside, and when I step through, I’m enveloped in a heavenly aroma of eucalyptus and lavender. Hunter’s drawn me a hot bath, complete with scented bath salts, filling the little room with steam and soothing fragrance. A glass of rosé sits on the edge of the tub, beside a neatly folded, fluffy towel. I can’t stop smiling—Hunter really knows how to spoil me.

On top of the towel is another note from Hunter. I save it. Now is for relaxation and rejuvenation.

I carefully lower myself into the hot bath, feeling the scented bath salts immediately begin to work their magic on my tired muscles. The water is just the right temperature, soothing and relaxing after a long day of attending to all the little details for the opening ceremony. I can’t believe the project I’ve been working on for over a year is about to launch. Olympics. Just thinking the word gets me whirring again, so I breath in and out, and let it go for the rest of the night. With a sigh, I lean back against the tub, allowing the stress of the day to slowly dissipate.

After enjoying my decadent soak for an almost shameful amount of time, I feel like my worries have drifted away with the rising steam. Eager to see

what Hunter has planned for me next, I take a sip of wine and unfold the accompanying note.

*Enjoy the soak, my love, and sip this chilled wine.
Once you're wrapped in warmth and feeling divine,
venture to our room for something soft and fine.*

ALL THESE SWEET sentiment in Hunter's confident handwriting tug at my heart and make my eyes well—the only place I want to be is in his arms. I pull myself out of the tub, and wrap the fluffy towel around me. Taking my wine, I step out of the bathroom and follow the trail of candles down the hallway to our bedroom. I'm half expecting to find a naked Hunter in our bed, and I pad quietly to see if I can surprise him.

Giddy excitement bubbles up in me, like a kid on Christmas morning, when instead of Hunter, I'm greeted by a large shiny box wrapped in a big, hot pink bow. Eagerly, I untie the ribbon and lift the lid off the box, revealing a chic, silk lounge set from my favorite Paris boutique. I've been admiring it in their window for weeks.

"Wow," I breathe, running my fingers over the luxurious fabric. I shimmy into the bottoms, feeling like star, and sigh as the top slips over my head and onto my body like a whisper. I dig deeper into the box, and uncover a knit blue and bronze scarf of monstrous proportion hidden beneath the tissue paper. It has an old-fashioned compass rose stitched on one end.

"Ah, the finishing touch," I chuckle, wrapping it around my neck. "I feel like I've been sorted into Ravenclaw. PJs say supermodel, scarf says Pottermore."

Holding my glass of wine, I riffle through the tissue paper, searching for the next clue. I find another little enveloped taped to the underside of the box lid.

Now slip into this silky set—like you, all elegance and chic.

*But the scarf? It's a hint, not a fashion critique.
Hungry yet? There's a treat just for you in our wee kitchen nook,
an amuse bouche, a little bite from your favorite cook.*

I PRACTICALLY RUN to the kitchen, but no Hunter. I tiptoe around the pots on the stove, the aroma of beef and rosemary filling my senses. Unable to resist a preview, I swipe a finger through some mashed potatoes and bring it to my lips. Delicious and buttery, and tastes like home.

“Alright, Hunter,” I call out, addressing the empty room. “Where’s my treat? What’s next?”

“Laine did you look around?” Hunter’s voice floats to me through the open patio doors. I know exactly where this is leading.

“I tasted some amazing mashed potatoes. I’m about to sit down with the rest of that pot and a spoon, and do my worst,” I yell back, laughing.

“Don’t you dare, you savage,” he shouts down to me. “Just look under the upside-down bowl already.”

I lift the bowl, which I really should’ve discovered without his help, and reveal a tiny, deviled quail egg, topped with the tiniest slice of pickle. And another little envelope.

*This morsel, a preview of what's in store.
Now follow the candles out the patio door.
Atop the roof, with twinkling stars above,
Waits your next big surprise and your truest love.*

A PATH of candles leads me up the stairs to our rooftop patio, and I gasp at the sight before me. Fresh flowers adorn every inch of the space, their petals perfuming the night sky. Twinkling fairy lights form a canopy over our little bistro table, and Ella and Louis harmonize softly in the background. There sits Hunter, legs crossed with his foot slowly swinging along with the beat,

the picture of sophistication with a glass of red wine in his hand.

My hands fly to my mouth as I take in the scene, and try not to burst into tears. “Wow, Hunter. This...you...it’s amazing.”

Hunter stands, and one side of his mouth pulls up in a sweet and crooked smile, beckoning me with open arms. “Come here, Sugar. I can’t wait a second more.”

As soon as I’m in reach, he takes my hand and gently spins me around, making me giggle like a schoolgirl.

“Only you could make that scarf look that sexy,” he teases, his eyes sparkling with mischief.

“Ha. It’s all about confidence,” I retort, dramatically flinging the scarf over my shoulder. “That and the million dollar silk pajamas.”

“Those certainly don’t hurt.” He runs his hands up and down my silk-clad arms and pulls me in for a promising kiss. “But I think the girl beneath the pajamas is sexiest when she’s wearing nothing at all.”

“Thank you, Hunter,” I whisper against his lips, my voice cracking as my heart beats hard, so full it’s painful. “This is...it’s just perfect.”

“Anything for you, Laine,” he replies, sincerity shining in his eyes. Together, we dance to the charm of Louis Armstrong’s timeless trumpet, our bodies swaying in time with the slow music. And I think that this moment in time, on our rooftop patio, tucked away in Montmartre, is as close as can be to paradise found. I feel impossibly content and completely secure.

As the song comes to an end, Hunter leads me over to the table, and seats me like we’re at a three-star restaurant, unfurling my napkin with a theatrical flourish.

“Dinner time, Ms. Summers, I’m so hungry I could eat the north end of a south-bound goat.”

“Oh really? Well, I hope whatever you’ve cooked up is enough to satisfy your appetite.”

“Only one way to find out,” he says with a wink, lifting the lid off a heavy dutch oven. “How was work, Laine? You seemed a bit frazzled when you left this morning.”

“I guess it’s just the pressure of pulling all the little details together for the opening ceremony. Honestly though, now that I’m sitting here...today was...great, actually,” I admit, surprised to find that I truly mean it. “But maybe a little overwhelming, too.”

“Must be something in the air,” Hunter jokes. “That’s how my day went,

too.”

I look around the table, and the full extent of Hunter’s culinary efforts finally registers. All my favorite foods are in front of me—a simple salad, succulent short ribs resting on a bed of delicious mashed potatoes, and a heaping platter overflowing with passionfruit, vanilla, and chocolate macarons.

“Hunter,” I gush, “this is incredible. But what are you up to? It’s not my birthday, and we celebrated the one-year anniversary of our all-day date last month.”

A mischievous glint flickers in his eyes as he leans in conspiratorially. “Well, Laine, since you asked...the royal treatment is because you deserve it. But we might have a little something to celebrate here this evening. In fact you might say you’re wearing your new favorite colors.”

“Do tell, Mr. Williams.” I bat my eyes at him like a cartoon coquette.

A grin a mile wide spreads across Hunter’s face, lighting up his handsome features. He takes my hands in his, the warmth of his touch sending a shiver down my spine.

“Laine, word has it that next season, the NFL is announcing a new European League.”

“Really?” I ask, trying to digest this bombshell revelation.

He nods enthusiastically. “Really. They’re creating four new expansion teams, and one is going to be based here in France. Yesterday, I had a conversation with the coach, and this morning, the Marseilles Mariners officially invited me to their summer training camp. I’m one of only four quarterbacks on the roster. The position is mine to win or lose.”

My heart turns somersaults in my chest, and I’m so excited for him that words don’t feel like enough. “Hunter, that’s amazing! I’m so proud of you. What an unbelievable opportunity.”

“Thanks, Laine,” he says, his eyes twinkling with excitement and affection. “It means the world to me to have your support.”

“Well, you’ve always got it,” I assure him, my voice soft and sincere. A warm glow fills my chest at the thought of Hunter fulfilling his dreams.

“Laine, this is going to change how the summer goes for me. I can take the train and be home in just four and a half hours, but I’m going to be in Marseille five days a week. I really wanted to be here for you this summer, for every single competition and every party and press conference you’ve planned, but I just can’t let this opportunity to play pass me by. It might be

my one shot to play professional football. I've got to give it my all."

I give him a tremulous smile, my emotions threatening to bubble over. "Of course you do, and I want you to go after it with everything you've got. I understand, Hunter. And hey, if you aren't too exhausted by training camp, we can still attend some of the weekend events together. It's just the thought of spending so much time apart during such an important summer. I'm not going to be able to come see you at all during the week."

"Aw, Sugar," says Hunter, noticing my watery eyes. He stands and pulls me from my chair, and wraps me in his strong arms. "I know it's upsetting. I can't even think about how much I'm going to miss you."

My voice breaks as I continue, "Oh, Hunter. Ignore me. We'll make it work. I'm just overwhelmed, because...well, ever since you found me in that cafe, I've been feeling like you gave up your dreams to be with me. And now... now you have this incredible chance to play again. And maybe, maybe we can have it all. And that's just so incredible and huge, and..."

Unable to hold back any longer, I start sobbing into his chest.

Hunter holds me tight, gently rubbing my back as I let out the torrent of emotions from deep inside. "Laine, when I quit the Wildcats and packed my bags, I wasn't giving up my dreams. Football's great, don't get me wrong, and if someone will pay me to throw a ball for a living, I'll never work a day in my life. Or however that saying goes. But my dream is standing right in front of me. She's in my arms right this minute, and I will never give her up, not for fame, not for money, not for football. Living with you is a dream fulfilled. Everything else is just gravy."

I rub my tears across his shirt, and lean my head back so I can see his eyes. "You really mean that, Hunter."

He nods solemnly, tilts my chin up with one finger, and brushes his lips across mine.

"We're in this together, remember? Nothing is as important to me as being with you." His voice is gentle but firm.

I squeeze him with all my strength, nod against his chest, sniffing as I try to regain control of my emotions. "You're right, Hunter. We'll make this work, just like we always do."

"Exactly," he says, squeezing me back before releasing me from his embrace. Taking my hand, Hunter looks deep into my eyes, his own filled with tenderness. "I wish the timing was different, but I'm so excited about what the future holds for us."

“About your NFL life, you mean?” I tease, trying to lighten the mood.

He shakes his head, a playful smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “No, about making you an NFL wife.”

Before I can process what’s happening, Hunter kneels down on one knee and pulls a small velvet box from his pocket. My heart leaps into my throat as he opens it.

“Laine Summers, from the moment I met you, my world shifted. With you, I have learned what it means to feel passion, to forge a connection deeper and more vital than my heart has ever held. These past months with you have been the most vibrant, chaotic, and absolutely wonderful moments of my life. I want to live the rest of the days with you, explore the world with you, grow old with you. Please make me the happiest and luckiest of men, and tell me yes. Tell me that you want live out this dream with me, Laine. Tell me you’ll be mine. Marry me?”

“Yes, Hunter. A million times yes,” my voice falters, deep with emotion, “I want to live every moment of every day with you, I want to share this crazy life with you, and be your wife and have you as my husband. I want us to do it all...together.”

He slips the ring onto my finger and kisses me until the world around us fades away and there is nothing but him for me, and me for him.

“This is the most incredible, overwhelming, and beautiful day of my life,” I breathe, pulling back to admire the ring. “This is surreal.”

Hunter grins, his eyes twinkling. “Just wait until you see the plans I have for our wedding.”

“Our wedding? Our wedding.” I press my fingers to my lips. “We’re getting married. Hunter, we’re getting married!”

“We are Laine. It’s official. You said yes, and that technically makes you my fiancé.” He picks me up and swings me around. “What do you have to say to that, Laine Summers?”

I glance over at dinner Hunter went through so much trouble to prepare. “Do you think those will hold if we eat in another hour or so?”

“An hour?” he asks, raising an eyebrow. He walks to the table and places the lid back on the pot. “What exactly do you have in mind?”

“Well, Mr. Williams,” I say coyly, “I’d like to invite you to the inaugural session of Laine Summers’ training camp for future husbands.”

Hunter chuckles, wrapping an arm around my waist. “In that case, those short ribs can hold until breakfast tomorrow.”

We move over to the cozy lounge surrounded by candles and start discussing potential wedding dates in between kisses. Each time we suggest a date that won't work, our lips meet again, our hands exploring each other's bodies as we continue our search for the perfect day.

"Hunter, I'm beginning to think you're shooting down my suggestions just so you can prolong the kissing."

"Now why would you ever think that?" Hunter presses his lips to mine, but fails to hold back a laugh, "Okay, you might be right. What about April? Isn't there a song about April in Paris?"

"Yeah, no way. It rains almost every day. But..." I give Hunter a long look, "...what about April in Charleston?"

"Dogwoods and cherry blossoms aplenty, my wife to be. I believe you have a soft spot for cherry blossoms."

"That I do."

"Then I think we just scored a touchdown, Sugar."

"We could call all the parents, set a firm date..." I suggest half-heartedly.

"We could do. Your parents have a pretty good idea that a proposal was imminent."

"You called my parents for permission?" I melt into him that much more.

"It's what you do when you're raised in the southern states."

Hunter traces along my jaw, "But I'm thinking of other ways we could spend the next hour or so."

"You're thinking of scoring some extra points?"

"Extra points, you say?" Hunter's eyes sparkle with mischief as he takes my hand, pulling me to my feet.

"Absolutely," I reply, grinning like a lovesick fool. "I mean, that's what happens after you score, right. Tonight's been so perfect. Why not go for some extra points?"

"That's some inarguable logic," Hunter answers, his grip on my hand tightening slightly. "Let me just grab this bottle of wine."

As he reaches for the bottle, I snag the plate of macarons.

"Ready?" Hunter asks, his voice low and enticing.

"You really made this the most magical proposal ever, Hunter."

"Well, if you're only doing something once, there's no sense in holding back," he replies, his eyes never leaving mine. "Now, let's see how I go about earning those extra points."

"I think you have to get something right between the goal posts," I bite

my lower lip, feeling the heat rise in my cheeks at my own boldness.

“Extra points for sure,” he murmurs, taking my hand and pulling me close. “I love it when you talk dirty football to me, Sugar.”

WANT to read about Laine and Hunter’s first Christmas as an engaged couple?

[Join my newsletter list](#) to find out what happens when Laine and Hunter get stuck under the mistletoe...with another couple.

And maybe a greyhound.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dive into the exclusive world of Parker Finch. For sneak peeks, behind-the-scenes glimpses, and updates on the latest releases, visit www.authorparkerfinch.com. And for the unfiltered side of Parker—both steamy and silly—jump into her Tik-Tok: [@parkerfinchauthor](https://www.tiktok.com/@parkerfinchauthor).

Parker loves rom-coms and disaster movies, and she's still lamenting the end of *Friday Night Lights* after only five seasons. Perfectly chilled wine and cashmere anything are the way to her heart, but nothing beats a season that calls for a cozy scarf and books in front of the fire.

When she's not penning tales to make you swoon and snort-laugh, you'll spot Parker, coffee in hand, wandering the tree-lined streets of her hometown with her most devoted fan—her utterly sweet and unusually vocal greyhound. Their whispered conversations? Well, let's just say they're cooking up something special for her readers.

