

FLIP THE SCRIPTS

TAKING
THE SHOT
SERIES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MJ FIELDS



FLIP **SHOT**

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About Flip Shot

Theo

Returning from Texas after **summer break**, which I spent working, and training, I expected a **temperature change**. Hell, I welcomed the chill, but I didn't expect to be **completely frozen out** by the only chick at **Lincoln University** who I thought about almost as much as **I do hockey**.

When I saw *Riley Park* for the first time, the **universe shifted**. Which sounds completely lame, but I take issues with liars; therefore, I refuse to be one.

I, Theo Rivera, **was enchanted** by her.

Was? Yeah. Because now... *now I'm just pissed*.

Riley

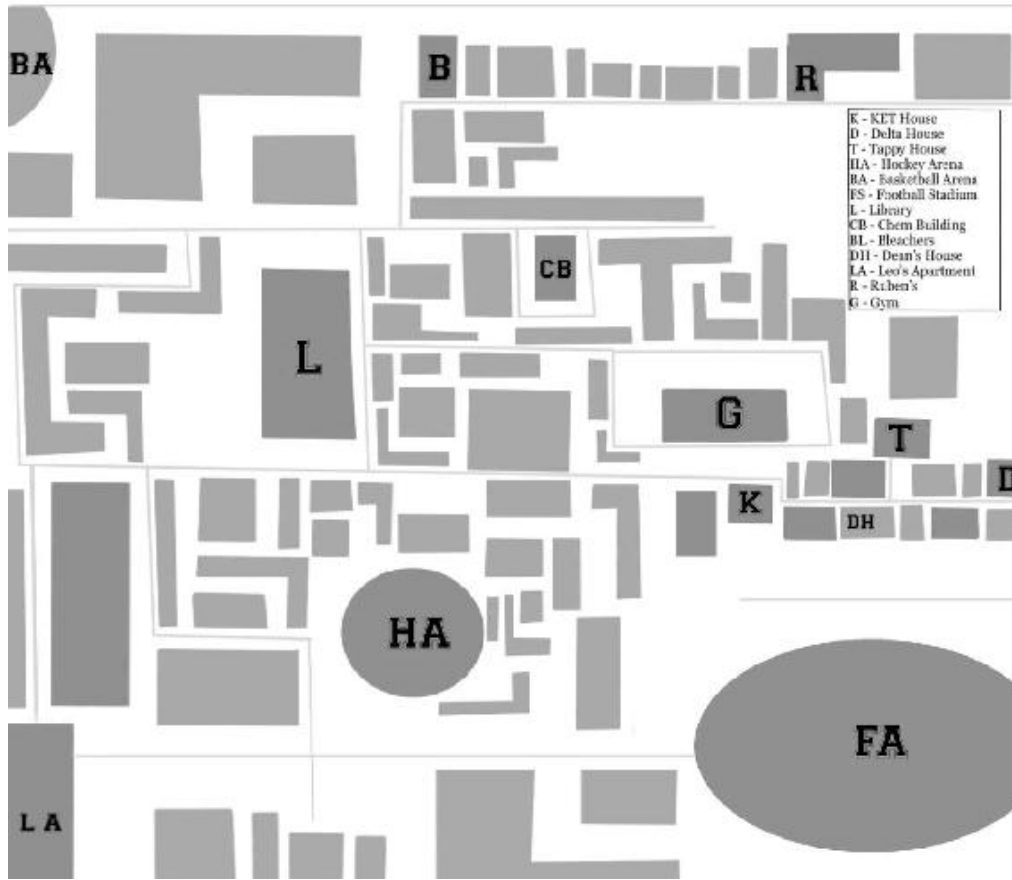
Theo Rivera is **six-foot-four** to my five-foot-two. The **first boy** who made my heart do *The Biles II—a triple double on the floor for those unfamiliar*. And just like every time I attempt to stick that landing... let's just leave it at that.

Moving on...

My **hockey era has come to an end**, much earlier than I foolishly hoped it would. But I'm not a **naïve freshman** anymore with stars in her eyes over a **cough** **HAF puck boy** **cough**. Nope, I have written it down, a promise to Simone, and **manifested it**; therefore, it's official.

I, Riley Park, am now a *football fan*.

LINCOLN UNIVERSITY



Flip Shot Play List

Enchanted- Taylors Swift

Hey Look Ma, I Made It- Panic! At The Disco

Thinking 'Bout Love - Wild Rivers

All You Had To Do Was Stay - Taylor Swift

Hey Stephan - Taylor Swift

RILEY



Chapter 1

Riley
KET Work Week

Saturday, August 17th

STANDING ON THE PORCH, I wave goodbye to my parents with one hand and dab beneath my eyes with the other to put on an emotional effect for them. I do this until the Volvo disappears around the corner. Then I break out into my happy dance and sashay my ass inside to get to work decorating what is now our home for the year!

My sorority big, Ellie; my bestie, Leah; and her sorority big, Grace, along with Cody, will be staying at Casa Costello. We had a sixth roommate, Nalani. She was supposed to transfer to Lincoln from Hayward with her boyfriend, Koa, who's a kick-ass hockey player, but for some reason, she's not. I haven't gotten all the details about why this happened, but I'm sure I will.

Did I mention my parents have no idea that Cody Warren is living here? No, of course I didn't tell them. I just don't want to deal with the questions, or worse—Mom meddling and trying to make him a possible love interest in the story she's crafted about my life that she has going on in her head. They weren't on board at first because it doesn't fall under

student housing. I had to convince them it was a wise financial move, but in a way that they thought it was their idea.

They know rent is three hundred dollars less a month than they were paying for the dorms and even more of a savings than if I moved into KET, our sorority house. They know I'm ecstatic to have my own room, that I'll be sharing a house with my favorite people, and that they are no longer required to purchase a meal plan. They still insisted on me keeping the lowest cost one, because I'm more a takeout girl than a chef. *I swear I'm going to learn how to cook, though.* It was never about not wanting to learn. I mean, who doesn't love food? It was more about my schedule that was always so packed that I just didn't have time.

Mom and Dad are both anesthesiologists and practically live at the hospital, so they didn't have the time, either. Both my brother and I are expected to follow in their footsteps and become doctors of ... something.

My parents insisted on seeing a lease and, well, there was none. It was an agreement between friends. But they are all about legalities and contracts, so Dean's ... whatever Drew Daniels is to him—his best friend? Occasional lover? Who knows? All I know is Drew and Cody Warren were his rocks when his grandfather Costello died, and Dean was 'burdened with his family's billions. They hardly left his side.

Others weren't so kind. Hell, some had zero empathy.

One night, Dean threw one of his epic parties, and I heard whisperings of how "lucky" he was to have that kind of money while he was still grieving and stop being a bitch about his first world problems. It was some asshat frat bro, and it was like a switch flipped inside of me. I went off on him in an epic way.

Apparently, Dean heard about it, and I became his "little sister." I understand it is a burden to be someone everyone else expects you to be. Those expectations we carry are hefty. Clearly, that asshole didn't understand that. He didn't understand that Dean's whole path changed in the middle of his senior semester; his life is no longer his own. He can't play

hockey, chill with friends and watch movies, or throw parties without worrying that once he signed the dotted line that all that “burden” is in his massive hands, he could 1) let his family down along with all they employ and now count on him, and 2) open himself up to ... “Opportunistic hoes and frat bros who want to suck off big daddy Dean’s dick. Little bitches like you are now the enemy. So enjoy your top-shelf freebie while you can, bottom sucker.”

That’s the night, he offered Casa Costello to us. Dean didn’t want a dime. He simply stated, “Pay the utilities and occasionally throw a party when the Bears play. Take care of her; she’s given me the best memories of my life.”

We were adamantly against it because we’re not “hoes or frat bros.” When my parents insisted on a contract, emotional support Drew “drew” up a lease agreement that she adjusted to a sample agreement she found on the internet, had her father’s lawyer look at it, and made sure it was beneficial to all parties.

Dean graduated and bought The Brooklyn Bears, an NHL team, so he could continue being part of a sport he not only loves and was so good at that he was named the goalie of the year. Leo Stone, Evan Smith, and Bass Giulietti—all Dean’s best friends—are now signed with his team, with eight-year contracts. Emotional spend, for sure, but you do what you have to do, and Daddy Dean was doing what he had to in order to keep his “family together,”

And my parents have a fit when my Amazon cart is over a hundred bucks.

The house is amazing. The outside is white and gives off all the historical New England feels that every house on Athens Lane gives. The best way to describe it is that it’s grand. I must admit it never seemed so grand at parties I attended, but that was probably because the house was always packed with students celebrating a Lions win, especially last semester when both the men and women’s hockey teams won their national championship games.

You’re greeted by the brick front porch with pillars and a balcony over it. Mom was astonished by the entrance and the

grand staircase that is open all the way up to the second story. The fireplace in the living room is stunning, but I never noticed that one—there are two. If memory serves me right, there was always a bar set up in front of it. There's also a theatre room and the downstairs suite that Dean rarely slept in ... because he rarely slept alone and chose to leave that room for family if and when they visited “unsullied.” He locked those two rooms off during parties. After his grandfather passed, he and Drew, and sometimes Cody, would hang out in there for hours watching 90's rom-coms, but mostly Adam Sandler movies.

The room Dean normally slept in when he had his usual “guest or two” was upstairs to the left of the stairs, and it faces east. He said he preferred to watch the sunrise over sunset. He's not alone; I prefer them, as well.

Ellie took his room, and I have the one right beside her. Grace and Leah are across the hall, facing west. Between each of our rooms, we have a shared bathroom, which will make it so much easier to get ready in the mornings. The two rooms on the opposite side of the stairway also face west. The front balcony is between them, and there's a full bath on the east side, closest to Cody's rooms.

The flooring throughout the house was just refinished and, apparently, the original wood flooring, except the bathrooms, are subway tile. The walls are all a light tan, and now that Dean's “artwork,” a collection of hockey memorabilia and trophies he's won through the years, is gone, they may seem bare. But the massive L-shaped couches, huge screen televisions, two fireplaces—now fully exposed—and a bar area beyond the stairway draw the eye.

The kitchen is insane. Mom, who is never at a loss for words, just stood there with her mouth agape until she finally said, “Spectacular.”

She's correct. It's all professional grade and “supersized.” Honestly, until we began moving in, I didn't realize how massive the kitchen island was. It looks so much bigger when it's not littered with red Solo cups.

I picture us having sit-down meals, playing board games, cooking! I want to host themed parties and possibly trade the red cups for maybe wine or rocks glasses—plastic, of course, because these floors are too pretty to get scratched up.

My family home is amazing, but this place is next level, and now standing in the center of it, I want to know *her* history. I want to know how it is that Dean Costello owns this massive home at 673 Athens Lane when every other house is either owned by a sorority or fraternity.

I sigh. “Someday.”

After attaching the “*Welcome Home Lions*” banner I ordered from Etsy—the Lions are wearing little Brooklyn Bears pins—to one of the fireplace mantels and a Brooklyn Bears Banner—the bears are wearing little Lincoln Lions pins—to the other, I look at the clock and realize I only have a little over an hour before my roomies are supposed to arrive. Well, the girls, anyway. Cody isn’t one to really chime in on the Costello Casa group text so I have no idea when he’ll arrive.



MY BRAND new *to me* blue RAV 4 is filled with balloons—forty, to be exact—twenty in Lions colors, and twenty in red and black for the Bears—as I pull out of One Buck Chucks, a knock-off of Dollar Store owned by a man named ... you guessed it—Chuck. With a vehicle full of balloons, I smile my happy ass all the way to Pie Zones to pick up the pizzas, wings, and the subs I ordered. *I’ll learn to cook another day.* Then I hit Lou’s Liquor Store. Using my fake ID, I grab a few bottles of cheap champagne and of course my favorite—peach White Claws.

Arms full of alc, I manage to open the door but lose one black balloon. Even that doesn’t get me down today. *What the hell is it about balloons that bring me so much joy?* I think as I slide into my new home, batting away balloons with a smile on my face so big it actually hurts.

Sophomore year is going to be epic!



GRACE IS the first to arrive, and Leah pulls in right behind her. Is it odd their parents aren't with them? No, it's perfectly normal, which is something my parents are not. My Dad, Jimin, is fairly quiet, but Mom, Nabi, is like a mix between a tiger mom, a helicopter parent, and the "cool mom" from *Mean Girls*. All so confusing at times, but it works.

"Yay! You're here!" I yell as I rush out onto the porch and stall for a moment to take them in. It feels like it's been years and not just a few months.

Grace's dark auburn hair is pulled up in a messy bun, and Leah's blonde hair is in pigtail braids. Both are in shorts and a tank top.

"I've missed you bitches so much!"

"Love the new ride!" Leah squeals as she slides out of her car. "But the balloons?"

"She didn't want you to pass by the place." Grace stretches.

Leah giggles. "I've been here dozens of times."

"Not sober," Grace jokes.

"Not a lie." I laugh as I make my way to them.

"Hey," Leah huffs, "you're one to talk."

"Last semester was—"

"A shit show?" Grace pulls us both into a hug.

"Yeah, a little bit."

A horn sounds off from down the street, and we break our embrace and glance that way.

I cup my hands over my eyes, shielding them from the blinding sun, and see a white Jeep. "Is Leo helping Ellie move in?"

“Maybe?” Grace asks as we all stand there and watch as Ellie pulls in, driving Leo’s Jeep.

“Should we be expecting the cops?” Grace jokes as Ellie kills the engine and slides out.

“He’s such an asshole,” she grumbles. “Says my car isn’t safe and made me take his.”

“Oh my God, you should totally break up with him,” Grace deadpans.

Rolling her eyes, Ellie opens her arms. “Bring it in, bitches.”



AFTER UNLOADING THEIR VEHICLES, we all hit the kitchen where we do in fact sit around the island to eat as we catch up.

Leah sits back, rubs her hand over her tummy, and groans before doing a recap. “So, Riley scooped ice cream all summer and did flips, Ellie and Leo probably got married and didn’t tell anyone, and Grace and Tyler are probably planning a massive wedding that will put the Royals to shame.”

Ellie throws a wadded-up napkin at her. “I’m getting my PhD first. I want that diploma to read ‘*Eleanor Rhodes*’ since that’s the last name that brought me to this point.”

“And Tyler and I are”—Grace holds out her hand and tips it from side to side—“rough summer.”

“Wait. What?” Ellie gasps.

“Nope.” Grace nods to Leah. “Your turn, you spent the summer ...?”

She shrugs. “Working at my dad’s firm and catching up on sleep. Very boring.”

“No hooking up with the ex?” I ask, knowing she probably did.

She looks down.

“Oh my God, he’s an ex for a reason,” I scold.

“He hasn’t got a brain in his head or any ambition at all, but knows how to get me off, so don’t judge.”

“Oh, I’m totally judging,” I joke, sort of.

“And how about you? Did you hook up with your ex?” she accuses.

“No, ma’am, I did not.” I say proudly.

“That’s because a certain hocky hottie is all up in your DMs.” She grins.

I shake my head. “Again, no, ma’am.”

“What? Why?” Ellie asks.

“Wasn’t going anywhere, and the initial tummy flips disappeared.”

“But we love Theo,” Grace and Ellie say at the same time.

“Go for it.” I shrug. “I’ve always been more a football fan, anyway.”

“You crushing on our roommate already?” Leah whispers like he’ll hear it, and he’s not even here.

“Nope, I’ve been roster stalking.” I pull out my phone, hit up Lincoln’s website, and set it on the island so they can see it. “I’m going to start with the newbie wide receiver and work my way to the tight end. Then, when I get sick of football, I’ll go check out the lacrosse guys. Sophomore year is going to be the official start of my sexual revolution.”

“Fuck yes, I’m in.” Leah grins.

Ellie holds up her drink, “Looks like we’ll be—”

Grace cuts Ellie off. “Living vicariously through them.”



LYING in my bed for the first time, I swear it’s more comfortable than my bed at home.

I wasn't lying when I told them I was moving on from my little crush on Theo Rivera. I have, and I hope he doesn't make it awkward for me by asking me why I stopped replying to his DMs. I mean, it's lame to think everyone meets their "one" in college, but it was hard not to get wrapped up in it last year with Ellie and Leo, Kameron and Evan, and then Drew's twin, Dylan and Bass. It was silly to expect Theo, who is going into his junior year, wasn't going to bang half the campus like all the other players did.

I'm not pissed at him anymore than I am at Drew Daniels, who he obviously hooked up with a few times when I thought he was into me. Then the flips stopped, like just ... disappeared. And God, how I loved the flips he caused. It was like being on the bars while my feet were firmly planted. I will find them again like that, and again, and again.

We're young, wild, and free, some more than others. Sophomore Riley is going to embrace being all that, *and then some*.

I mean, I'm not looking to get coupled up as a sophomore in college when I have med school from here. They say you have to kiss a few frogs to find your prince, right? I'm not just going to kiss a few. I'm going to kiss as many as it takes and keep on kissing them until I find one with those grippy feet, *a tree frog*, one who will surely stick.

I reach over and grab my journal from my nightstand drawer, take off my silky pink sleep mask, pushing it back so it sits on the top of my head, before I pick a hot pink gel pen from my case. I lean back and plant my knees on my pale pink comforter, set the journal against my knees, and I begin.

Dear Simone,

I'm finally here, all moved in and reunited with my sisters. Seeing them again was amazing as I knew

it would be, no awkward moments.
Cody's still not here.

When last I wrote, I was stressing about the topic of TR coming up and, well, it happened, and all those scenarios that taunted me were far worse in my head than IRL.

So, Simone, I'm here to let you know I am over the hockey boy, and from now on, I, Riley Park, am stepping off the ice and moving onto greener pastures or, in this case field, officially becoming a die-hard Lincoln Lions football fan.

Ending on 2 highs and a low.

H- My girls!

L- TR was brought up.

H- MY. GIRLS!

they deserve two mentions

X,

R

I PLACE the cap on the pen and roll over to place the journal back in the drawer and the pen back in the case.

As I fluff my pillow before lying down and getting comfy again, I hear the water running in the shower and know Ellie is now off the phone with Leo and getting ready for bed. I pull the mask down to cover my eyes.

Just as my eyes start to get heavy, there's a knock on the door.

I sit up and push my mask back up to the top of my head. "You don't have to knock."

"You okay?" Ellie asks.

"Of course I'm okay. Why?"

She walks over and sits on the end of my bed. "The Riley I know and love doesn't stop talking until her eyes are closed."

She's right; I have always been one to talk and, at times, blabber, often going off on some seriously messed-up tangents because I hate silence. But I didn't notice I had stopped talking tonight.

"I should warn you since we share a wall, sometimes I don't even stop then. So, if you wake up, hearing me going on about fifty-one flavors to choose from, or some TikTok I saw, just ignore me."

She looks at me with a thoughtful smile. "Okay then. But Riley, if you want to talk about anything, anything at all, it stays between you and me, okay?"

And Leo, I think.

"Leo knows what is said between sisters stays between them. He'd never press."

"Oh my God, I didn't mean to say that outloud." I groan into my hands.

She laughs. "You didn't. I just knew you were thinking it."

"Double OMG. Now I've admitted it."

She leans in and gives me a hug. "Sleep well, Riley Park." And then she's gone.

I am one hundred percent a believer in not holding grudges, and I don't. But I'm glad that the Theo situation has been addressed, because now, the three of them won't purposely leave us alone like they did way too many times last year, so he'd make a move. It's now more than clear that this thing was more them wanting there to be an us, than he and I.

Obviously.



Chapter 2

Theo
Flight

Saturday, August 17th

THOROUGHLY ANNOYED, I grab my phone from my pocket and hit *accept*.

“Delayed?” my brother, Grant, asks just as the departure screen at Atlanta International Airport changes.

“Fucking delayed again,” I hiss. “Four hours. This is bull ___”

“Theodore Osias Rivera,” my mother gasps.

Shit, I think but instead say, “Sorry, Mami.”

“Don’t you *Mami* me just to get out of a very well-disserved tongue lashing.”

Double shit.

“Grant should get one first for putting me on speaker, and then provoking me when he knows I’m angry.” Then I turn it up. “Four more hours of purgatory, a place between home, where I want to be, and college, where I have to be.” I sniff for good measure, although it’s no shit—I could possibly cry right now.

Grant chuckles. “All I did was—”

I hear a *smack* and Grant gasp, and I know for a fact she smacked him in the back of the head.

“Be nice to Theo; he’s homesick already, leaving behind more than you could imagine and probably starving to death.”

My mother seems to think that because she caught me in bed with my high school “sweetheart,” Candace, that she and I are once again trying to make things between us work. Nothing could be further from the truth. The girl has issues, and I am not about that life, not anymore.

I walk to the nearest bench, pull out a package of disinfectant wipes, take one out of the package, and wipe it down.

“How does it feel to be Mom’s favorite?” Grant whispers.

Fanning the seat with my ticket, I answer, “We’re all her favorite when we head back to school. You will be next week.”

“Fair enough,” he states.

“I’m gonna hang up and try to get my ticket changed.”

“Looking into that for you now,” he says.

I sit down and run a hand through my hair. “Should have driven home.”

“That thing wouldn’t have made it.” He chuckles.

“That thing,” I huff, “served our family and now me and will for years to come.”

“I seriously have no idea what your emotional attachment to that old Chevy Tahoe is, but maybe you should talk to someone about that.”

The fact he doesn’t get it blows my mind. I was six when my parents bought their first new vehicle. It was a huge deal to a family like ours and so many others in the world. Grant’s less than two years older than me, but older just the same. I have no clue how he missed the pride they felt with that purchase. Hell, it served our family for years before I saved all the money I could, working my ass off summers and anytime I

could after school and when I wasn't at a team practice for whatever sport I was playing, or at the rink, even during the off season, and bought it so it didn't go to a stranger. That money went for the down payment on the next family vehicle, which means all of us kind of have part of it still. *Yeah, okay, I clearly have issues.*

"You find anything?" I ask, watching the stressed faces of every other traveler no doubt in the same situation I'm in.

He sighs. "Not yet. I'll keep trying."

"Great," I mumble, watching the departure times continue to change for half the damn flights out of the ATL.

When I see a little brown-haired girl toss herself on the floor, throwing a tantrum, and her parents looking as if they want to pull their hair out, I realize that we may be in the same predicament, but their situation is a hell of a lot different. That's when my 'tude changes. With an attitude of gratitude, I let Grant know, "I appreciate you doing this, but I'll take it from here."

"Make sure you keep us informed, or Mom will be—"

"I know, and I will."

After scrolling through the airline website, I eventually accept that I'm stuck here another four hours.

I keep a death grip on that attitude for gratitude the whole damn four hours. When it's announced that the plane heading for Logan International has arrived, I allow myself to release that grip and literally feel the tension roll out of my shoulders. When my boarding group is called, I think I smile for the first time today without having to force it. Even when that same little tantrum thrower, whose name I've learned is Chloe, and her parents, who are trying to keep her in line, are going to be in my section, I'm all still good, unlike some of my fellow passengers who seem to be put off by it.

Two and a half hours to Lincoln, I remind myself.

Two and a half hours to Lincoln, I repeat as I get a tiny elbow to the back and the father of Chloe apologizes profusely.

“She’s fine,” I assure him then smile at her. “Been a long day, huh?”

She sticks her tongue out at me and glares, and her Mom, who is pregnant, looks to be ready to cry, but manages an, “I am so sorry.”

I shake my head. “Like I said, it’s been a very long day for all of us. Don’t worry about me.”

I then turn and watch an older gentleman struggle with getting his luggage in the overhead compartment, and I struggle with whether or not I should offer help. He’s traveling with his wife, and I don’t want to make him look or feel like a chump.

When I get another elbow, or maybe a foot this time to the back, I decide screw it and ask the gentleman, “Can I help you with that?”

When he doesn’t answer me, his wife taps his shoulder. He looks at her, and she points to me.

He turns and scowls at me then looks back at her and yells, “He can wait!”

Two and a half hours to Lincoln, I remind myself once again.

She yells back, “He’s offering to help.”

“What?” he yells.

“Turn on your ears!” She points to his ear.

“Goddammit, Loretta. This thing is heavy,” he snarls and messes with his ear as he turns to me. “What do you need?”

“Was going to offer to give that bag a lift, sir.”

He looks me over, eyes honing in on my shirt. “Would appreciate that.”

I lean over and grab the bag. He’s not wrong. “It’s heavier than it looks.”

“All the porn,” he mumbles, and I swear my face immediately catches fire.

“Samuel!” his wife gasps.

“You call them books. I call it porn.” He looks at me, shaking his head. “Spent two days surrounded by a bunch of horny women at a book signing. They call it romance; I call it ___”

When I see his wife palm her face, I quickly cut him off as I lug the bag up over our heads, “Whatever makes them happy, right?”

“Would have appreciated the extra help when we were in our twenties, but I’m seventy years old now and can hardly keep up with her.”

“Sam!” she gasps.

He waves his hand dismissively toward her and points to the logo on my shirt. “You play basketball?”

At six-four, my weight fluctuating between one eighty-five to one hundred and ninety-eight pounds at my heaviest, I look thinner. Hell, I am thinner than most of the ice hockey players at Lincoln. I’ve always eaten like a horse, at times to the point that putting another forkful of food in my mouth would cause me to vomit, and yet I’ve never hit two hundred. This summer, though, I broke through that ceiling. I’m two-ten, and I owe it all to fried spring rolls and dumplings from the new restaurant in town that my sisters, McKinley and Reagan, are working at. The restaurant? Sizzling Seoul on the Range. The food? Addicting.

“No, sir, I play hockey.”

“Good school. Good team?” he asks as his wife moves into her seat.

I nod as he follows her in. “Good school, great team last season. Hoping for an even better one this season.”

“Good luck, kid,” he calls to me as I start toward my row.

As soon as my ass hits my seat, I pull my portable charger out of my backpack then bend to shove the bag under my seat and see shoes pointing at me. I look up from the ground to see who I’ll be sitting with.

“I am so sorry,” pregnant mother to Chloe whispers as she points to the two vacant seats inside.

I stand, step out into the aisle, and notice the father sitting across the aisle. “Would you like to switch seats?”

He looks down and shakes his head as his wife answers for him, “Nervous flyer.”

Fuck me, I think but do it anyway. “Would you like to switch seats so that you can be next to your husband?”

She looks me up and down. “He’s just six feet, and he hates—”

“Hate’s bad, Mommy.” Chloe pushes past her, climbs onto the middle seat, and steps over to the window seat.

“Right,” she acknowledges as she sits in the center and finishes, “You can’t stretch out and relax sitting on the inside seat. Plus, Miss Thing would have a meltdown if she didn’t have the window seat, but thank you.”

“No problem.” I sit down and put my AirPods back in my ears. I can’t help but look over at Chloe’s dad, who’s having a hell of a time keeping his eyes open. It’s obvious he took something to knock him out.

Two and a half hours to Lincoln.

By the time we’re in the air, Chloe’s dad is passed the hell out, and drooling on himself as Chloe’s screaming because her ears hurt. The mom is now one hundred percent in tears.

“Can she have gum?” I ask. “Might help her ears.”

“She can have a shot of vodka if it’ll help quiet her down.”

I’d laugh at that, but in this situation, I don’t think she’s joking, and straight up, only a tiny bit of judgment if she’s in fact being serious.

The gum’s a game changer.

As soon as it’s announced we can feel free to move about, Chloe’s mom, Christine, tells me she needs to use the bathroom, and her husband, Joel, is passed the hell out. I do

what I should and offer to take over reading the thickest princess picture book I've ever seen.

Sitting in the center seat, knees to my chest, Chloe's head on my shoulder, I read for what must be twenty minutes. I wonder if someone should check on Christine, but her husband's sawing wood, and it's quiet. More importantly, Chloe's head is bobbing. When Christine returns, it's more than obvious by her puffy red eyes that she had a "good cry"—that's what the females in my family call it. So, when I close the book to switch seats, and Chloe starts in again, wanting me to keep reading, while stuck in the middle seat of a plane, I give up, give in, and read on.



IT'S eleven p.m. when I walk out of Logan International and message my brother to let him know I landed as I wait for the Uber.

It isn't until I'm three-quarters of the way back to Lincoln University when I'm hit in the gut with the realization that the past eighteen hours of airport bullshit, I haven't been tripping over the fact that I'm going to see Riley within the next day or two. How the hell am I going to deal with that?

I don't think I've ever looked at someone and just felt ... hell, I don't know how to even explain how I felt exactly because it was like everything all at once. It's so messed up that even thinking it makes me sound like an idiot, but it is what it is.

Seeing Riley the first time was like watching fireflies dance in the night or standing on top of a waterfall it took hours to climb to and feeling the mist on your face. It was being eighteen and seeing snow for the first time.

Hearing her whimsical laugh that night, and seeing her brilliant smile, her brown eyes absolutely sparkling, it was like fantasy and reality blended and made the experience enchanting. And yes, I hate admitting that to myself, but it was in fact enchanting to meet her. Pretty sure I just lost my man

card *and* my balls all at the same time for admitting that, even if only to myself.

I stayed there, in the enchanted land of Riley Park for months, not wanting to fuck things up by getting too close, but never wanting to be too far away either.

We followed each other on social media, got to the point we were sending simple DM's. *Good mornings, have a good day, good game. How was your competition? Goodnight sleep well.* Just shit like that, but it was building into something. I knew it, and I know she did, too.

Around the time Dean's grandfather passed, we stopped messaging as much, and then all at once I'd sent four messages without so much as a heart emoji or even a thumbs-up.

The last one I sent was a "*we good?*" To that, she gave a thumbs-up.

That was it.

I have no idea why, and I have mind-fucked it enough that I should be way over it, yet knowing I'm going to see her fucks with my head.

My Tahoe's parked at Dean's old place where Riley, Ellie, Grace, Leah, and Cody will all live this year, so it's not even something I can avoid for long.

"Kid?" The uber driver asks, and I open my eyes.

I glance to his reflection in the rearview. "Sorry, what was that?"

"This the right place?"

I look out the window as he approaches the parking lot of the apartment complex Leo, Evan, and Bass lived. Hell, all the top players are housed here. It's the newest athlete housing complex at Lincoln.

I smile because this was always the goal. "Yeah, this is it."

"You play basketball for Lincoln?" He asks, turning in.

His words scratch across all that pride I'm feeling, like a needle scratching across a record. "No."

"You're tall, so I fig'erd," he says instead of *figured*, "livin' here, you must play basketball."

"I play hockey."

"Seriously?" he asks, surprised, which is annoying as hell.

"Yeah," I answer.

"Oh, wow."

This grates on my nerves because even though it doesn't come up a lot, it comes up. Today alone, even after I've packed on weight, it's come up twice.

He pulls to a stop in front of the building.

"I play center, and now that Leo Stone's playing for the Bears, you'll see me on the ice. Number thirteen, Rivera."

"Should be playing basketball," he mumbles as I open the door and step out.

I force myself to thank him for the ride instead of telling him to eat shit then shut the door a little more aggressively than I normally would. But in my defense, I'm shutting the door on the whole day.

I pull out my phone and see the time is eleven fifty p.m. Sixteen hours of doing nothing but sitting on my ass and waiting has me more exhausted than I'd be if I just played an entire game.

I tap the screen, hoping the WIFI still picks up because the service from the airport to here was weak as hell and maneuver my way to my email to see if the apartment information has been updated and the doors newly installed keypad codes have been sent.

When the email opens, I'm not going to say I'm not a little disappointed that we didn't get the same floor as Leo, Evan, and Bass's old place, but we're in the same building and one floor above their apartment.

“Floor four,” I say then smile. “Apartment 4013. Lucky number thirteen.”

I hear a loud whistle and look around.

“Up here, Rivera.”

I look up and see Dash Sterling, or Sterling Dash—I have no clue which is his first name, and which is his last. All I know is that he was Hayward U’s center, and when they closed the ice hockey program down, he and Koa Olu Kelekolio, aka The Cock, were recruited to play here at Lincoln. They’re my roommates, and they weren’t supposed to be in until tomorrow night. Jason Taylor’s our fourth.

Dash calls down, “Koa just texted you the code.”

I shoot him a thumbs-up as I hit the keypad, and then make my way up to apartment 4013.

When I walk in, I see all three of them standing around the island.

“Welcome back, man.” JT, Jason Taylor, walks over and gives me a bro hug. “The hell happened? You were supposed to be here hours ago.”

I let my backpack slide off my shoulder and drop my duffle onto the ground. Then I bend down to unlace my sneakers. “It’s a new day now, thank God.”

“Um, Rivera.” JT coughs out a laugh. “You have a huge wad of gum in your hair.”

You have got to be fucking kidding me.



Chapter 3

Theo
You Good

Sunday, August 18th

“YOU GOOD, MAN?” Koa asks as we walk into the arena for the gear grab, a short meeting, and to get our schedules.

“Feel like I’m hungover, and I didn’t have an ounce of alcohol.”

Dash chuckles. “Hurricane—what was her name again?”

“Chloe,” I grumble as I run my hand up the back of my now buzzed head.

“Looks bad-ass, Rivera,” JT assures me. “Still got all those sexy locks on the top.”

I lift my chin. “Yeah, thanks for that. Would have been nice to know you were good with the clippers two years ago when I started here and had no idea where to go.”

He chuckles. “You’ll probably know a hell of a lot more about all of us now that you don’t have Stone, Smith, Giuilietti, and Costello to cart around.”

“Team hazing?” Dash cringes.

“Hell no. Stone loved him from day one and took him under his wing.” JT laughs. “Not sure he even spoke to me

until last semester, and I played with them a year longer than Rivera.”

“He took interest because I was signed with the same team he was,” I explain.

“Flyers, right?” Dash asks.

I nod as I open the door to the locker room.

“But he went to the Bears because Costello bought them?” Koa asks.

“Better contract, too, right?” JT asks.

I smile. “Dream team right there.”

“Yeah, well, we’re gonna win the frozen four two years in a row, and you’ll do it again the year after, Rivera. The ultimate hat trick.” JT nods.

As the teams staff hands out gear, I introduce Koa and Dash to the rest of the team, knowing Dash is going to ask a million questions about each of them when we leave, and not just because he’s a talker, but because I had at least that many when I came in as a freshman, and they’re juniors.

“Heads-up,” JT whispers when Coach walks in the locker room. “Coach comes off as an asshole, but he’s really not that bad.”

“We have a lot of new faces here today, but that doesn’t mean a damn thing. My expectations are no different for this team today as it was before we took the ice in Vegas and won the Frozen Four championship last spring. I couldn’t be prouder of what we achieved together. I’m seeing a lot of you still riding on that pride right now. That shit ends today. Your heads need to come out of the clouds, and your skates need to be planted on the ice. You’re no longer that team.” Coach sputters then looks around.

“I’ve had some accusations brought against me. Been questioned about hours required for practice. As you know, it’s a max of twenty hours a week and at least one full day off. We’ve stayed within those perimeters but have and still will

have open skate and keep the fitness center open to you should you chose to utilize that.”

“Any idea who would have done it?” Dash whispers.

“Montgomery,” JT and I both answer.

“We’ll fill you in back at our place,” I assure him.

Last year’s women’s coach was a massive piece of shit and treated his team like dirt. Don’t get me wrong; Kosta gives us shit, but this guy, he wiggged the fuck out. Shit all over the Daniels girls and the entire women’s team. Even shit on his assistant coach—a woman—as well as Dean Costello and Coach. All are big no-nos. The Daniels twins’ father is a highly respected and retired NHL superstar. Dean Costello’s family built this state-of-the-art arena and training facility here at Lincoln. And Coach ... well, he’s Coach. Montgomery is not just an asshole; he’s bat-shit crazy, and you don’t fuck with crazy. Dean Litty witnessed the whole thing, and even though he’s known to be a dick, he really had no choice but to fire Montgomery’s ass.

“You know what went down. Montgomery got fired, and our Coach Tallman took his job after they shut down our program at Hayward,” Dash reminds Koa.

“Shit, that’s right.”

Coach continues, “One last thing, men, half of you look like you spent your summer at an all-you-can-eat buffet. Let’s start eating like athletes, or you’ll be meeting the nutritionist for weekly weigh-ins.”

“Did he just fat shame us?” Dash laughs.

I roll my eyes, “That’s nothing.”



I’M ABOUT to get into the back seat of JT’s SUV when I hear someone calling my name. I turn and see Kameron Kosta heading toward us, covering her head with her coat as the rain starts coming down harder.

“You heading over to casa, Costello?”

Shit.

“Need a ride over?” JT calls to her before I have a chance to get my mind straight and answer.

I move so she can climb in. “Get in, you’re getting drenched.”

“Cody dropped me off, and I thought we’d be longer. I don’t want him to have to stop unpacking, so if you don’t mind.” She slides over and crumples up her soaked jacket, placing it at her feet.

“Theo’s gotta get his ride, anyway. Not a problem at all.” JT assures her.

After I shut the door, I ask, “How’s Evan?”

“Wait—I thought her boyfriend’s name was Cody?” Dash asks.

She and I both laugh at the same time. Then she explains, “The love of my life is Evan Smith. My ex-boyfriend and best friend is Cody Warren.”

“Shit, that’s got to be—”

“Believe it or not, it works,” she politely cuts him off, no doubt sick of being questioned about the whole situation.

I know what he’s thinking, because every one of us has wondered how the hell Evan’s so chill about it, but he is. And Cody, who’s a pretty cool guy, is, too. I’ve spent a lot of time around them, and it’s impossible not to see the difference in the way each of them look at her and how she looks at them.

“Evan pretends like he’s not having the time of his life, but I know he is.” She smiles. “I mean, I’m sure playing his first NHL game will top guy time, but they don’t have to start training camp for a couple more weeks, so he and Leo are helping Bass and Dylan move into their place, Drew to hers, and then crashing with Dean at the Hamptons house.”

“That’s fucking sick,” JT says as he pulls out of the parking lot.

“It is.”

“How are you gonna handle a year apart from your guy?” Dash asks.

“It’s not the military; it’s hockey. We’ll make time to see one another. Then, when I graduate”—she holds out her ring finger—“we get married—”

“And have babies,” JT adds.

“Evan wants them immediately, but I want to focus on starting my own career.”

“Which is?” Dash asks.

“I’m torn between having a little coffee shop and bakery, or a photography studio. I have time to figure it out.”

Dash asks a ton of questions and not just about the team. I guess he likes to be informed. Me? I still haven’t asked Koa why his girlfriend didn’t transfer here like they’d planned.



AS SOON AS we turn the corner, I see a yard full of girls with tables set up.

“Oh my God, they’re making their banners already?” Kameron sighs. “I feel like I’m ten years behind.”

“Banners?” Dash asks.

“Sorority details. They’re getting ready for the new class of recruits to come in. Ellie, Grace, Leah, and Riley all live here and are KET girls.”

“Any of them single?” Dash asks.

I catch Koa glance back from the passenger seat at him.

Dash laughs. “You know I like a cuddle buddy.”

Koa rolls his eyes as he turns back to face the front.

“Leah and”—she pauses, and I catch her looking out of the corner of her eye at me, as if she’s expecting me to claim

Riley. I don't—"Riley, last I heard. But Evan and I spent the summer traveling, so I'm a little out of the loop."

"You in KET?" he asks.

"Delta." She smiles proudly.

"She's the president," I dive into the conversation to distract myself from gawking out the window because I don't wanna see Riley Park. For fuck's sake, Kameron even thought she and I had something going on and she wasn't around us as much as the others. Riley must have missed the memo. So now, now I'm kind of pissed.

"Well, I didn't realize I was in the presence of greatness." Dash mock bows.

"Well, you do now," Kameron jokes.

When JT pulls up at the end of the driveway, I sit there like an idiot, looking at Kameron, because I don't know if I can pull off the fact that I'm no longer just a little confused and butt hurt. I'm pissed, and no one here at Lincoln has seen that side of me. I prefer it that way.

"That's a paid parking area," Ellie points a paint brush at the vehicle.

"Oh yeah?" JT lifts his chin. "How much you charging?"

"We're college kids," an all-too-familiar and disturbingly voice chides. "We barter. One sign painted gives you half an hour parking, a bottle of water, and a hot dog."

"Well, damn." JT kills the engine. "Count us in."

Motherfucker.

When I open the door, I see that the driveway is also packed, and of course my Tahoe is blocked in the garage.

"Looks like you're stuck here for a while." Kameron winks. "Now let me out. I need to squeeze my girls."

Sliding out, I put on my sunglasses then wave my hand in front of me as I smile at her excitement. "Go."

Squealing, she runs toward Ellie, who's also squealing, and out of the corner of my eye, I see Riley Park.

Her long, thick, jet dark hair is twisted up, exposing her elegant, thin neck. She's wearing overall shorts with a tank top, so her shoulders are exposed. Riley Park's shoulders are muscular, defined, as are her arms and legs. Her ass, a solid bubble. She's strong and solid, *and fuck me*, she's sexy as hell. There's something different about her, though. It's the way she stands ... taller, though that's not true. I'm sure she's still five-foot-one and one hundred and two pounds, and I'm sure of this because I looked at the women's gymnastics team roster online once—okay, a dozen times—over the summer. And I hate to admit it, but I watched dozens of videos of her competitions, read just as many articles about her, mostly from her senior year in high school.

My brother busted me on more than one occasion—we still share a room, so it couldn't be avoided. He was sure I was watching porn under my covers, and I had to prove him wrong. He teased me relentlessly, so bad in fact that I wished I'd just let him think I was yanking it to porn and not watching videos of the girl who ghosted me.

Riley carries herself differently now. She's no longer trying to find where she fits in. She has that sophomore confidence.

“Mind showing me the bathroom?” Koa asks.

Thank God, I think. “Don't mind at all. This way.”

We make our way through the lawn full of KET sorority girls, and I make damn sure to keep my eyes focused forward on the porch, ignoring the whispers as we pass.

“Rivera's looking fine this year.”

“That's The Cock. Heard he has a girlfriend.”

“Rivera's still single, and damn, he's looking good with that short hair.”

“He'd look good bald.”

“Place looks bigger than it did in the pictures the girls were sending”—Koa pauses and swallows hard as he looks around —“to Nalani.”

“Yeah, a hundred or so less people in here changes the look of the place, for sure.”

He looks at me, and I assume he’s waiting for me to ask about Nalani. I realize maybe I’m a dick for not doing so already, so I do. “So Nalani—”

He quirks a brow. “Nope, we’re not going there.”

“Sorry, man.” I point. “The bathroom is through the living room to the left in the back.”

He takes a few brisk steps, stops, and turns back. “Don’t be sorry, Rivera. Life is good.”

“Sure is,” I say with the same less-than-enthusiastic tone he used.

He shakes his head as he forces a chuckle then walks toward the bathroom.

“Theo Rivera,” comes from behind me, and I turn to see Riley’s best friend walking in.

Leah is tall, all legs, boobs, and blonde hair. She’s gorgeous and straight up everyone’s type, but not mine.

“How are you, Leah?”

“Good, real good.” She looks me up and down, and not in a way girls normally check me out. I’m being judged. Not sure how to feel about that, but ... whatever. “So, how was your summer?”

The way she’s asking is not in a way that requires an answer. She’s being ... bitchy.

“How are you gonna walk right by me without saying hello?” Ellie hurries toward me and gives me a hug.

“Just showing the new guy the bathroom. How are you? How was your summer?” I ask as we step back from one another.

“Busy, but good.”

“Leo get settled in Brooklyn?”

“Leo and Evan got Dylan and Bass moved in yesterday. Now they’re in the Hamptons.” She rolls her eyes.

I chuckle. “Roughing it?”

“Totally.” She smiles as she looks me over then gasps. “Where did all the waves go?”

I run my hand up the back of my shaved head. “Still got them on top.”

“Bro, you have to tell her about Hurricane Chloe.” JT laughs as he walks in.

“I’d rather just forget that whole thing.”

“Oh no, you have to spill.” Leah’s smile is all fake.

JT laughs as he nods to the bar. “Not setup yet?”

“We just moved in.” Ellie shakes her head. “Besides, we’re working here, not partying.”

Ellie squeezes my elbow then walks with JT, toward the kitchen, leaving me with Leah.

“So, who’s this Chloe? A hairdresser?”

Koa walks out just in time. “Think I could get a glass of water?”

“Yeah, man, this way.” I nod toward the kitchen then look back at Leah. “Nice seeing you again.”

“It’s always nice seeing me,” she calls after me.

A few steps toward the kitchen, and Koa whispers, “She’s ... exactly Dash’s type.”

I suck in a breath through my teeth. “Ouch.”

He adds a quiet, “Yeah. Gonna have to block that pass.”

When we walk into the kitchen, JT is sitting at the island, drinking a bottle of water.

“You earn that yet?” Koa asks.

“About to.” He chuckles.

“Mind if I grab a glass of water?” he asks Ellie.

“Bottles are in the fridge,” she says as she washes paint from her hands.

“How about a glass, and I’ll wash it when I’m done?” he asks.

“Environmentally conscious?” Grace asks, entering the kitchen.

Koa shrugs. “Every little bit helps, right?”

“Sure does.” Her boyfriend holds out his hand. “I’m Tyler, and if you’re at all interested in Greek life, you should know TAPPY’s philanthropy is environmental protection.”

“They’re all ice hockey, Ty; they don’t have time.” Grace shakes her head.

Leah chimes in, “Female athletes make the time, huh, Riley?”

My back straightens at her name, and I glance out of the corner of my eye in the direction of her voice as she asks, “Do what?”

“Koa’s into the environment, and Tyler mentioned TAPPY.” Leah rolls her eyes. “Male athletes never rush frats. Multitasking, not their strong suits.”

I’ve had just about enough of her shit. “Multitasking doesn’t ever have a positive outcome.”

“He’s going to mansplain multitasking to us,” Leah grumbles.

“No, just spit the facts. Multitasking may save time, but when you’re going in two directions at once, you reduce efficiency and quality. Task switching is more effective. It’s all about time management.”

And that’s when Tyler asks me if I would consider joining.

“I know my schedule, and there’s no way I can effectively perform on the ice, get the grades I need, and do whatever you

have to do to join a frat.”

“What if there was a way that you didn’t have to go through the recruitment process? Or hell, really do much but wear the letters and attend a few social engagements on nights you don’t have games and early practice?” he asks.

I laugh, knowing that’s not possible. “I’d probably say sign me up.”

“Shit,” Koa grumbles.

“Perfect.” Tyler claps his hands together and rubs them, a small smile tugging at his lips, making him look a little bit like a cartoon villain.

“Looks like TAPPY’s going up in rank.” Ellie laughs.

I give Koa a look like, *what the hell?*

“C.O.B.” Leah snorts.

He scrubs a hand over his face and whispers.

“C.O.B?”

From behind me comes an annoyed laugh, and then Riley says, “Continuous Open Recruitment.”

I turn and look at her, eyes narrowed.

“You’ll make a perfect frat boy.”

What the fuck?

“Sororities C.O.B. We dirty rush.” Tyler chuckles.

Again, what the fuck?

RILEY



Chapter 4

Riley

Alone

Sunday Evening, August 18th

ALONE FOR THE first time in hours, I stare at a blank screen that may as well have Theo Rivera plastered on it.

He looks the same, but with the new haircut and added weight, he looks ... rougher. Yet, still no tummy flips, we're not counting the ones in my *princess parts*. Ones that neither Mr. History nor the Ex-periment caused when one was knuckle deep.

Why, why, why didn't you just jump him? Oh, that's right, because he pretended to be a gentleman. Fuck you very much, Rivera. His jersey number, unlucky 13 should have been enough of a sign, but no, I was an idiot ... again.

"I'm fucking exhausted." Leah flops down on the couch beside me, freshly showered and paint-free.

Laughing to myself, I nod. "Haven't heard of an artist getting so emersed in their work since ..." I pause to come up with something, but the words evade me.

"Picasso," Cody offers as he walks into the theatre room with two huge buckets of popcorn and hands us one.

“Thank you. You’re now my favorite roommate,” I say, taking the bucket and handing him the remote. “You pick.”

Leah reaches in, pulls out a handful, picks a piece up, and pops it in her mouth. “She’s trying to butter you up.”

“And why’s that?” Cody sits down on the couch across from us and hits the power button.

“She’s a *huge* football fan,” Leah mocks me.

“Thought I was in a hockey house,” he states.

“She’s switched rosters.”

“Seriously, not even two days, and I want to duct tape your mouth shut,” I huff.

She completely ignores me. “So, you have to hook her up.”

“Not sure how good a wingman I’ll be since I’m just starting my first season here.” He yawns. “I don’t even know who’s a good guy or a—”

“Not looking to be wifed up. Just looking for some fun.”

He cocks his head to the side and does a slow blink.

“What?” I ask defensively.

He shakes his head. “Nothing.”

“Bullshit, Warren, spill it.”

“Just heard you were someone who required”—he pauses a moment—“wooing.”

“Wooing?” I snort.

Cody’s looking a bit uncomfortable which, after spending time with him today, is unlike the man whose confidence is so strong that it’s he seems to have a forcefield around him. He’s attractive. Very, very attractive. *So attractive.*

I wonder if maybe he and Kami parted ways because he’s packing a pinkie winker, but then he has such big dick energy that it’s surely not possible. I mean, Evan’s hot as hell, but so is Cody, and he and Kami have history. I guess science wins in this instance, because Kami and Evan, they clearly have

chemistry, and unlike some people, that hasn't seemed to dwindle.

"Courting," Cody amends.

"Wow." Leah shakes her head then smiles. "Now do me. What do I require?"

"A shot and an ass grab," I state.

"Works for me." She grabs another handful of popcorn.

Cody nods to the TV. "You all texted shows to binge. What shall we start with?"

"You read them?" I laugh. "You never even sent one text message in our Daddy Dean's House group chat.

He nods once. "Every couple days, I unmuted it and caught up."

"You muted us?" Leah gasps.

"Makes more sense to read a few days' worth. Questions such as: what group Halloween costumes are we doing for Bleachers? tend to be answered and don't require my input."

"Perfect. So, you know that we're doing superheroes and villains. Ellie is going as slutty Wonder Woman, Grace is slutty Poison Ivy, Riley's slutty Cat Woman, I'm slutty Harley Quinn, and we want you to be the joker."

"Not a slutty Joker?" he asks, tapping *Pretty Little Liars* into the search.

"No, but a pimp style Joker would be bad-ass." Ellie says as she and Grace walk in.

"I'm pretty sure I have an away game."

"Nope, it's home against Princeton. We'll wait for you." Grace grins. "We're going to every game we can of yours, to show support for our roomie."

"You truly don't have to," he sighs out.

"Oh, but we want to, don't we, Riley?" Leah giggles.



MONDAY AUGUST 19TH

Day one

EXHAUSTED, I flop down on my bed. “One down, four to go,” I yawn out.

I look up when there’s a knock on the door and Ellie asks, “So, what did you think?”

Sorority polish week at Lincoln is a week before classes start. I was so excited to be part of it that I will not admit it’s so much different than I expected. I mean, how could a week packed with themes and include dress-up and being surrounded by a bunch of your sister not be fun?

Toady was “*there’s no place like home-towns,*” and we all dressed up like the founding founders. Since most of the girls are from Massachusetts, there were several Samuel Adams, John Adams, John Hancocks, and Paul Reveres, *but no one Paul Revere-d like me.*

I push myself up and yawn again. “What’s tomorrow again?”

She sits on my bed and, with a slight roll of her eyes, answers, “There’s no way you, the girl who galloped into KET on a broomstick horse, doesn’t know exactly what every polish week theme is.”

“Totally nailed it.” I grin.

“Slayed,” she agrees. “Tomorrow is ‘*welcome to the jungle.*’”

“Right.” I nod and can’t help but giggle.

She looks at me suspiciously, which is warranted. “What are you plann—”

“Never you mind.” I pull my knees to my chest and attempt to conjure some chill. “Tell me the rest.”

“Wednesday is ‘*KET is the perfect fit.*’ We’re all wearing jeans. Thursday is ‘*Roundin’ up the best MC.*’”

“Cowboy attire, and MC is member class.” I rub my hands together, excited for the fits I have planned.

She rolls her eyes slightly at my renewed excitement. “Friday is—”

“‘*Keeping up with the KET’s.*’” I clap my hands. “I’m going to Kendall Kardashian the hell out of Friday.”

“Khloé is the superior Kardashian.”

“*Pfft,*” I huff ... and yawn again.

She slides off the bed. “We ride at nine.”

“We rode today. Tomorrow, we rock.”

Shaking her head, she smiles. “Goodnight, Riley.”

“Night, Ellie. Tell Leo I said hey.” I roll over and set my phone on my docking station. “And I’ll be listening to music, so I don’t have to hear you two have phone sex *again* toni—”

“Oh my God, shut up.” She makes to slam my door, but at the end, she closes it gently.

Lying back on the bed, I stare at the ceiling and smile, knowing tomorrow is going to be so much better than today.



DAY TWO

After stripping out of my leopard print pants, I look in the mirror, throw up devil horns, and stick out my tongue as I begin to play the air guitar. I look hot, especially with the top hat. I should have learned guitar instead of caving to the pressure to play the violin, which I had to beg my parents to quit when gymnastics became more than a full-time job that I happen to love.

“Your brother manages piano while playing baseball and getting straight A’s in college.”

My brother Owen is two years older than me and is the quintessential golden child. It bothered me when I was younger, but I now realize I'm more a platinum girl, anyway.

The next day, I got a B in one of the many AP classes and threw a fit, cried, did it up big just so they'd let me lighten the load. That night, I was allowed to pack away my violin as long as I promised to ask my teacher to allow me to do extra credit to make up for the B.

So, although I missed out on playing the actual guitar, I rock the air guitar. That is one thing I promise myself to learn ... when school is over.

After a quick shower and setting my alarm to give me plenty of time to get ready for tomorrow's festivities, I pull my journal from nightstand drawer to update Simone.

Dear Simone,

When last I wrote, I was excited about my sophomore year and all the new experiences it promised to bring. Things I wanted to share with you, as I have so many things since that day that everything changed.

That day, Coach told me I was "no Simone Biles." As you know, that was a heart pain I so eloquently likened to falling spread eagle on a balance beam and suffering a battered princess part. But as with most physical injuries, after the initial shock and bruising wore off, I

decided she was right. I was not
and never would be Simone Biles.
I'm Riley Park.

After accepting this, the emotional
healing began.

Thankfully, ~~I'm at a place where~~
~~I'm getting to know her, that sounds~~
~~crazy, because I know her is me, so~~
I'm getting to know and like who I
am becoming. I'm living with the
reality ~~I'm not you... also sounds~~
~~crazy...~~ I'm not just a gymnast.
I'm a daughter, a friend, a sister, a
student rocking a four-point-0, without
making it about being the top in my
class. I'm finally letting go of the
ingrained competitiveness and belief
that if I'm not the best, I'm not
good enough.

I digress.

The college experience has been a
dream ... mostly.

It's only mostly, because this
week has not met my expectations. As
much as I love dressing up and
hanging out with most of my sisters,

the singing and constant raging on recruitment week is already becoming a bit redundant, and a bit is a nice way of putting it.

Three more days of singing at the top of our lungs makes little to no logical sense, as I'm pretty sure we all have the silly songs memorized.

So, Simone, even though you didn't get the college experience, I am sure that your days at the gym were more exciting than this has been.

I am sure that recruitment week will be more fun than it was last year, since I will not be trying my best to make everyone like me.

Instead, I'll be helping find the girls who are the best fit for K&T. Bid day will be epic, and then ... I get to have my very own little!

Ending on 2 highs and a low.

H- My fit was epic.

L- My throat hurts.

H- Sophomore year is here!

Later.

X,

Riley

DAY FOUR

Dear Simone,

Through the years, I have shared with you that I basically had to beg my parents for braces when I could have probably eked by without them for a couple more years, but because my friends had them, I thought it was cool. And of course that they would make me look less like an eight-year-old boy. After I got them, I hated them. They were so uncomfortable they hurt, and don't get me started on the headaches after tightening appointments. If I could have removed them myself, which I tried, I would have.

I've shared with you that I only wore a bra because everyone else did, even though my brother, Owen, had bigger tits than I did. Then, when

the titty fairy graced me with itty bitty titties, I was also graced with the most sensitive nipples ever created. They harden at even the gentlest breeze and were visible to anyone within a ten-mile radius. I hated them, too. Thanks to lined bras, boob tape, and those inserts that look a hell of a lot like chicken cutlets, I learned to deal.

My period would surely not disappoint me, for I would finally be all woman. Wrong! That was the biggest disappointment to date. Cramps and the inability to wear white—even after Memorial Day—during that time of the month, and the snickers and looks from everyone—even from my fellow female classmates—when I had to buy tampons or pads was something I never expected. I thought I'd been through all the tribulations a woman must face ... until I set my sights on wearing heels for prom.

What kind of sadistic motherfucker invented those torture devices? Don't you worry, Simone; you don't have to answer. I googled it. Men. Men

invented the high heel. It's unclear as to who exactly, but studies point to Egyptian butchers who wanted to keep their feet clean of animal blood. The other possibilities? Persian men for riding attire, or European aristocrats to make them taller. Regardless, as you know, I hate heels after literally falling during my senior year promenade and taking three people down with me. I took so much shit for being clumsy-me, a fucking ranked gymnast-by those snatches at school. The rumor quickly spread that I had a crush on the head cheerleader, Molly Muldoon's, date. I mean, I did, but that had nothing to do with the fall that caused her to get a bloody nose that stained the white dress that looked more wedding than prom-desperate much?-when she was crowned. The crush had more to do with John Stevenson's constant Snap messages telling me how hot I was. I mean, I am, but whatever. When I have to wear them now, it's platform wedges, and I make sure the dress doesn't touch the ground.

Here I am again, Simone,
digressing when all I really want to
say is this week has been ... almost
nothing like I expected. It's been
exhausting, and aside from the
dressing up and being with my girls,
underwhelming AF.

Ending on 2 highs and a low.

H- I lived, learned, and I've
been polished.

L- My voice is nearly gone.

H- Just one more day!

Later.

X,

Riley



Chapter 5

Theo Bar Stools

Friday, August 23rd

“YOU’RE BOTH NUTS,” JT says, sitting back in his bar stool and taking a sip of his pint. “This side of the bar’s where all the action happens.”

“Koa likes that side better.” Dash winks. “Makes some badass drinks, too.”

If memory serves right, last season, we played Hayward, and he and his then girlfriend, Nalani—straight up, I have no clue if they’re still together or not—stayed here so we could give him the Lincoln experience and hope he’d play for us this year. The owners son, Joey, heard us, and that’s how this whole idea of us working behind the bar at Bleachers after home games for an hour or so was birthed.

He basically said his dad, Joey Sr., would bust one if he could get one of us hockey players behind the bar and said he’d probably throw in free food and drinks for the semester anytime we stopped in. I jumped on it. Koa said he was down to do an hour or so, if Nalani had a dedicated bar stool and could eat a meal, too.

We decided to stop in and have a drink and a meal just to see if it was brought up. Joey lit up when we walked in, and now he's disappeared through the door behind the bar to put in our order and chat with his old man.

"You ever tend bar?" JT asks me.

I nod. "Did a couple nights at our local bar this summer to get my feet wet."

"It's not rocket science." Koa lifts his beer to his lips and takes a drink, damn near finishes it on one gulp, too. As he sets the near empty glass down, he's pulling a face. "Why the hell people drink this shit is beyond me."

"Not a beer guy," Dash explains.

"Would not have been offended if you'd passed on the pitcher." I chuckle.

"Good to know." He nods.

Joey Sr. walks out from the back and looks at Koa then me. "Can't offer you a big endorsement deal—we don't have that kind of money—but the tips should be at least gas money and the free food and drinks whenever you stop in with or without a date are a decent perk, I suppose."

"More than fair." I smile.

"Perfect." He smiles back then lifts his chin to JT and Dash. "You two, as well, if you want."

JT shakes his head. "Thanks, Joe, but you're better off with me over here."

"I'll think about it," Dash tells him.

Smiling, he taps the bar twice. "The wife made some lobster rolls and clam chowder; you boys wanna try it out?"



SATURDAY, August 24th

Lying on the couch, I am waiting for the email Coach promised today after a last-minute team meeting, to inform us that Lincolns men and women's ice hockey teams are announcing a conference change. I'm not sure how I feel about not having the chance to slap the shit out of Yale, Harvard, and the rest of the ECAC on the regular, but now that we have a Frozen Four win, we need to prove ourselves and go against the best of the best, and those teams are in the hockey east conference.

"How you feeling about the change?" JT sits across the room on the sectional.

"Indifferent. You?" I swipe out of my Lincoln email account and onto IG.

"We've played them all, anyway. Just sucks that we may not be up against Killer and Motherfucker unless we get to face them out of conference."

"What are your thoughts on these players Coach brought from Skidmore and Johnson and Wales?"

"We lost a lot of great players, so we need them." My scrolling finger stops on a KET wrap-up reel from they're "polish week." I think that's what they call it, but I'm not seeing any work going on.

Each day is themed which, looking at the banners and having helped paint some, I should have known this. But I was too busy ducking daggers Leah was throwing my way and trying not to act like I'm pissed at Riley.

I stall on a picture with her dressed in a leopard print leotard, thigh high boots, and a top hat. If that wasn't enough to give me a semi, the shot of her in cut off jean shorts and knotted flannel, that's exposing her midriff, even her belly button, that's now pierced is a turn on too.

"Fucking ridiculous."

I hear a chuckle and look to my left, seeing Koa is standing behind the couch and definitely saw that I had zoomed in on her piercing.

"So ..." he starts.

Sitting up, I tell him the same thing he told me, “Nope, not going there.”

“We’ve got mail,” Dash announces as he walks into the room shirtless ... and he’s pierced too.

I glance up and catch him smirking.

He pops his pecs. “You like?”

“I mean, to each their own.”

“Koa’s cocks pierced,” he says, flopping back on the couch.

My hand instinctually covers my junk as I cringe.

“Hurts for a minute.” Koa shrugs. “Worth it.”

“Your girl like it?” JT asks, looking at his phone.

Both Dash and I look at each other then at Koa.

JT looks up. “What? We’re roomies; we should be able to talk about shit like that.”

“Every chick who’s seen it is first shocked, then curious, and once they’ve ridden it, they get it,” he answers, as well as avoids.

“Get what?” JT prods.

“That it’s not just an accessory. It’s an enhancement.”

“Yeah?” he asks.

“Yeah ... I’m good with us jumping off Koa’s pierced dick and talking about this schedule.” I hold up my phone. “Every game is a Friday, Saturday, or Sunday except like four.”

“Fuck, man, we’re traveling all the way to”—Dash pauses —“South Bend, Indiana?”

“Holy shit.” JT chuckles.

“What?” I ask, still waiting for the schedule to fully load.

“ESPN and Puck Net are going to be broadcasting at all but like three games.” JT jumps up, laughing. “That’s fucked up, in a good way.”

“More eyes on us, that’s for sure.” Dash nods as he continues looking between his screen and JT pacing.

“Real good,” I agree. “None of you are signed yet, so that’s huge.”

“Don’t rub it in, Rivera,” Koa feigns annoyance.

“Gotta toss your helmets in the draft.”

“Koa will get drafted, for sure,” Dash states and looks at JT. “No offense. I just haven’t seen you on the ice yet.”

“Had a bad-ass first line, didn’t get much of a chance to prove my worth.” He shrugs. “Hoping I’ll be there this season.”

“And when he was given play time, he spent more time in the penalty box than on the actual ice,” I add.

My messenger goes off, and I glance back down at the screen.

ELLIE:

7 PM. It’s game night. Bring your boys.

ME:

Tonight?

ELLIE:

Don’t pretend like you have plans. Plus, we’d love if a couple of Cody’s teammates showed up ... like your roommate from last year?

“Shit,” I mumble.

“Sup?” Koa asks.

I hold up my phone. “We’re invited to ‘game night’ at the Costello house.”

JT lifts his chin. “Nothing else to do but drink a few beers and maybe play *C.O.D. Modern Warfare*.”

I reply to Ellie.

ME:

I'll see what I can do.

ELLIE:

Can't ask for anything more.

I shoot last year's roommate a text.

ME:

Heading to Athens Lane for game night. Would be cool if you grabbed a couple of your teammates to chill with Warren outside of practice.

HART:

I'll see what I can do.

"You bring a system?" Dash asks JT excitedly.

"Hell yes, I did." JT gives him a high-five.

"You play, man?" Koa asks me.

"Never," I answer, setting my phone down and running a hand through my hair, trying not to get too much in my head about tonight. It is what it is, right?

Dash laughs. "Shit, Koa, you might not lose every game now."

"Fuck you, nerd." Koa stands up and stretches. "I'm going to take a nap if we're going out. Been a minute since I've been to a party."

"It's game night, not a party," I remind him.

"Right." He chuckles.

AS WE PASS by Uncle Ronnie's, it feels a bit weird not to have Costello asking me to stop and hit the drive-thru like he has for two years now, and it kind of sucks to not be able to laugh about it with anyone. I know it'll get better. I mean, it is better. I'm living in an actual apartment and not in freshman and sophomore athlete housing anymore, with a different roommate who plays a different sport each year.

Freshman year, it was TK Timms, a soccer player who was one of the best in the country, and he flunked out at the end of freshman fall semester. I feel bad for the guy, but not too bad since he had no qualms about throwing a sock on the door handle, and at least a handful of times, his hookups caused me to fall asleep on a couch in the lounge. The second half of freshman year, I had a double all to myself.

Sophomore year, I laid down the law immediately, and Hudson Hart, wide receiver for the Lions football team, didn't bring anyone back to our room.



WALKING INTO THE HOUSE, both JT and Dash pause to check themselves out in the entry mirror, trying to be inconspicuous about it.

“Let's go, pretty boys,” I grumble quietly, as to not embarrass them, even though they deserve it.

“My hair look okay, Rivera?” Koa smirks.

“Looks sexy as hell.” I wink.

“You made it!” Kameron greets us, hugging me then Koa.

“You start without us?” I laugh, seeing that she's a bit less composed than Kameron Kostas usually is.

“We're no longer a red cup and beer house; we're sipping girls now.” Her smile is blinding. “Your friend, Hart, is here with Oz and”—she cocks her head to the side in thought—“another big guy who plays defensive line, but I can't remember his name.” She waves a hand through the air then turns, and we follow her toward the kitchen. “Doesn't matter.

Just wanted to thank you from the bottom of my heart for getting some of the team here. Cody hasn't met many outside of practice, and they have their first game on Monday night. You think you guys could come?"

"Rivera"—Hart walks over—"thanks for the call."

We do the half hug thing. "No problem, man."

Kameron puts her hands on her hips. "I think this is the year hockey and football support each other. What do you think?"

I glance at Ellie who mouths, "*She's had a couple.*"

I look back at Kameron. "I mean, yeah, of course."

"Perfect." She claps then looks at Koa. "You know, you should be playing footb—"

"Where's the love, Kami?" I ask, holding a hand over my heart.

One of Harts friends—Oz, I think—lifts his glass. "Fuck love, right, little Riles?"

Riles?

"Hell, *like* isn't even necessary when it comes to getting sweaty and ..." Riley clinks her glass to his.

Getting sweaty? I'm not a betting guy, but if I was, I'd bet she wasn't talking about anything appropriate for a girl like Riley, in a room full of testosterone-driven assholes. And yeah, I know that's the pot calling the kettle black, but I do not give a flying fuck.

"Riles, you gotta like the person you're—"

"Playing Jenga with?" Ellie cuts Oz off.

He smirks at Riley. She smirks back. I wanna bitch-slap him.

"Is it my turn again?" Leah asks, reaching over the island to grab a wooden block.

Grace bats it away. "We have new players now."

“I’m gonna need a drink or two before I start playing games.” JT chuckles.

“I was just about to say the same thing.” Dash follows him over to where Ellie’s lining up glasses.

“Fuck it, I’ll give it a go.” Koa rubs his hands together.

Grace shakes her head. “Your fingers are bigger than the game pieces.”

“You’re Catholic, right, Rivera?” Dash asks.

“Yeah?” I answer, wondering what that has to do with Jenga.

“Got any kids?” he asks.

“Hell no,” I answer, a bit offended.

He chuckles. “Then you go. Your pullout games gotta be strong.”

“Oh my God.” Ellie laughs and elbows Dash. “I think we need to keep this one.”

“Dash.” I shake my head.

“Yeah, man?” he says, still laughing at his own joke as he looks back at me.

I flip him off, and the room erupts in laughter.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see that includes Riley Park.

Watching Riley and Oz blatantly flirt and throw sexual innuendos around like confetti at a kids party is fucking brutal. Hell, I’d rather take on Yale’s biggest players alone than have to go through that shit again.



THREE GRUELING HOURS LATER, I drop off Hart, Oz, and Skinner three buildings down then head to ours.

“You good, man?” Koa asks as I park.

I was good three fucking hours ago, and yeah, maybe I should have called it a night two hours and twenty minutes ago, but there's no way in fuck I was leaving Oz and Riley alone.

“Why wouldn't I be?” I ask as I open the console and grab a reusable bag while still trying to hold back the venom in my tone as I get out. So yeah, fuck you, Leah. Men can multitask.

“Tonight was a blast, man.” Dash slides out of the back seat and begins to shut the door.

“Decent night,” I force out as I walk around the back, open the hatch, and grab the mini vac.

“What the hell are you doing?” JT asks in a slur.

I don't answer.

“Get him upstairs,” Koa tells Dash.

“Why Grace gotta be hooked up with that frat boy?” I hear JT complain as they walk away.

“Love is love is love, brother.” Dash chuckles as he guides JT to the lobby door.

I close the back hatch and walk around to open the back driver's side door and see Koa standing, arms crossed, looking at me from the back passenger door.

“What's up, Rivera?” he asks.

“Gonna go with nope, we're not going there.”

He stretches his neck from side to side. “Nalani's grandmother came back from a 'girls' trip' out East and was sick for months, in and out of the hospital. Nalani decided she wasn't going to transfer to Lincoln and stayed back in Maui.”

“Her grandmother okay?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “No, she passed away.”

“Fuck, man, I'm sorry.”

“Much appreciation. She was an amazing woman.” He exhales a long, deep breath. “Even after that, Nalani decided to stay back and go to college closer to her folks, which makes

sense after a loss like that—you wanna be closer to your people.”

“Of course,” I agree, but also feel the pangs of what that implies.

“I love the girl, but”—he pauses—“I’m not accepting of her hanging out with her ex, even within a group.”

“I get that.”

“She doesn’t.”

“Bro, I’m sorry.”

“I’m not heartless, but ...” He clears his throat. “Now you.”

“Thought Riley and I had something going; felt it necessary to take it slow based on the read I was getting and the fact our schedules were both tight—neither of us barely had time to breathe let alone date. Before the semester ended, she stopped responding to messages. After she left me on read enough times, I decided I was one text away from looking like a chump, so I stopped.”

“You get she was peacocking tonight, right?”

I shake my head then look around for any garbage they might have discarded.

“It was painfully obvious. Gonna guess I wasn’t the only one who noticed. Pretty sure that’s why Oz left had no problem leaving after getting verbally stroked all night. But Rivera, also gonna guess that’s only because you were there.”

“She’s a grown-ass woman, she—”

“Then step to her like that. Don’t just sit back and let someone take something that you want.”

“Not sure I do anymore.”

He coughs out a “*Bullshit*” as I shove the bag in my pocket and turn on the hand vac. “You don’t have to stay out here, man. I’m good.”

He doesn’t leave.

RILEY



Chapter 6

Riley

Wake Up

Sunday, August 25th

“LEAH, only one person in this house has long blonde hair. I am not digging your fucking hair out of the shower drain!” I hear Grace shout from down the hall.

Fuck me. I get *one* day before training starts to sleep past five, and Grace and Leah can’t keep their mouths shut past eight.

“Kameron showered here last night after she threw up! She’s blonde!”

“If you bitches don’t shut the fuck up right now ...” Ellie trails off.

I try to go back to sleep so I can ward off this headache, but instead, I stare at my phone and watch time tick by as they continue to bicker. When I finally can’t stand it, I roll out of bed and stomp my ass down the hall to the stairs and down them.

“Morning, Riley,” Cody shouts—I think—as I walk into the kitchen.

Matching his far too chipper tone, I reply, “Fuck off, Cody.”

He smirks. “That is *not* the attitude to start the day with, Park.” He slides me a cup of steaming hot ... something from the Nespresso machine, and I glance up at his smiling face.

“How are you not hungover?”

“Sippin’ is sippin’.” He lifts his cup to his lips and takes a drink.

“I’ll keep that in mind for next time.” As soon as the words leave my lips, my stomach turns.

“You good?” He chuckles.

“Uh-huh,” I admit.

“Go curl up with Kami, and I’ll bring you both some toast and pain relievers.”

“Gonna shower first,” I mumble as I set the cup down.

“She’ll still be in there. She’s watching a *Say Yes to the Dress* Marathon.”

“Team meeting today,” I grumble.

“Ouch.”

“Yep.”



UPSTAIRS, I turn on the shower, sticking my hand under the water until it’s scorching hot before stepping in.

Scrubbing the soreness out of my muscles from yesterday’s run with Cody doesn’t lessen the nausea that I know is part bourbon and part nerves. One p.m. feels a little like a death sentence at this point.

I worked hard over the summer, but I’m sure everyone else worked harder. I spent three hours a day, five days a week, in the gym, but I know that Bria and Hailey and the four new girls I let shadow me during their official visits probably trained more.

I didn't really talk to anyone but Ellie, Leah, and Grace all summer, anyway. I have my friends from my gym and my coworkers at the ice cream shop, so I let myself slip into irrelevance in the gymnastic group chat. Happy birthday messages and Instagram comments were enough to remind everyone I was alive.

I love gymnastics, and knowing that I have two years left before that part is all over is more difficult than I thought it would be. More so now, after listening to the football guys talk about the combine and the hockey boys talking about who's already signed to pro teams. Through my time with Simone, and choices I've made about moving on to med school, I have come to terms with it all, but ...

I'm snapped out of mind-fucking my future as the water goes freezing.

"Leah!" I shout as I scramble out from under the glacial spray, mentally cursing myself as water splashes all over the newly finished floor.

I hear a faint, "Sorry!" from across the hall, but I know she's laughing.

Bitch.

I quickly dry off as I walk out of the bathroom, into my room, and grab the black tennis dress I bought with my designated "fun money" mid-July. Leah keeps telling me I need to stop wearing Lincoln sweatpants and hoodies all the time, but I really don't have room in my dresser after two years of bi-annual "merch Christmases." This is the best she's getting. I'll wear it to class tomorrow. Today, it's Lincoln sweatpants and a tee.

After dressing and squeezing the water out of my hair, I grab my pajamas off the bathroom floor, toss them in the laundry basket, and then flop on the bed and grab my phone from the charger.

I begin mindless scrolling through LU's gymnastics IG and checking out my competition—I mean, my team. When I find myself being a judgmental bitch, I consider writing to Simone,

but instead, I switch to the men's hockey IG and see new pictures have been posted, and Theo Rivera is in almost every single one of them.

Fuck my life.



"RILEY."

I startle at hearing my name and sit up, looking around for my phone.

"Don't you have to go do flips and shit?"

"Flips and shit?" Ellie laughs from her room.

"Flips and shit," Leah reaffirms.

"Both of you can suck it," I groan as I push myself off the bed and catch the missing phone before it falls to the floor and I crack my screen ... again.

"I slept for three freaking hours?" I gasp as I hurry to my desk/makeup station and brush my still soaked hair.

"You're welcome," Leah says as she walks out.

"Thanks," I grumble.

I settle on doing my makeup rather than my hair, knowing damn well I don't have time to do both.

After I've added just a *little* too much highlighter to the tip of my nose I call it good, then I hurry downstairs to try to find something to eat, because now my stomach hurts for another reason. I'm starving.

"You in a better mood?" Cody asks, looking up from his tablet.

"No," I answer as I toss my second-to-last cinnamon raisin bagel into the toaster.



"Hi, RYE!" Bria beams as I walk into the film room. She's first person here, last to leave. *Always*.

"Hey," I answer, dropping my bag on the floor and sitting in the blue, theater-style seat next to hers. "How was your summer?"

"Really good! Busy, but good."

"How's Taya?"

"She's good ..." She trails off. "I always feel like shit when we train together, but—"

"Not your fault," I remind her.

"I know. It's just like ... sad now. I don't know why she's still training, anyway. She knows she's done."

"It's all she's ever done," I remind her.

"I just don't get it." She shakes her head.

Taya landed wrong during her floor routine at a competition in February and dislocated her knee, tearing five ligaments in the process. She went home for a few weeks, and when she came back, she was like a zombie rising from the dead. She didn't talk. Didn't come to practice or team meetings or even film. There was a rumor that the coaches had kicked her off, but we all knew it wasn't true. She was still using crutches when we left for the summer.

Medical disqualification is worse than death, but better than getting kicked off. We all knew she wouldn't be cleared for a year, and as a junior, there's no shot she'll be allowed to compete.

"I do," I answer as the room fills.

And I really do, because of Ellie and what happened to her,

"Welcome back, ladies." Coach Tina claps her hands, and the room goes silent. "Big season this year. I'm expecting a lot out of each and every one of you."

I take careful note of how she eyes the freshman. She did the same thing to all of us before we rode the bench our

freshman year. We deserved it, but the way that look can get your hopes up for a full year seems unintentionally cruel.

“Practices start weights tomorrow and the staff will start your assessments to determine your pairings. You’ll all have your full semesters schedule in your emails immediately after that, your pairings will be emailed out after a full week.”

“Never one to waste words or time, that one.” I whisper.

Bria kicks my foot in the least subtle way possible as Coach continues discussing pairings.

We’ve always been paired just about everywhere other than skills. Our strengths are complete opposites, which should be a good thing, but Coach thinks that putting us together “enables us” to continue letting the other excel on opposite events.

She’s not wrong.

Bria scores first in vault and beam; I’ve got floor and bars. That’s just how it is. How it has been since we found out we were both going to Lincoln and started DM’ing before freshman year.

“How’s beam been?” she whispers as the coaches debate amongst themselves.

“I don’t think it’s our year.” I can’t help but laugh.

Bria and I opt to stay together to wait for the email, so we make our way to the athlete’s dining hall.

“Who do you think our six will be?” Bria asks after we grab our cafeteria chicken taco salad and fountain soda.

“Us,” I say then take a drink as I shrug.

“You think any of the freshman will make the cut?” she asks, stabbing her salad a little too aggressively, and I nearly spew soda from my nose and begin choking. “Arms up. Arms up!” She laughs.

“Jesus, Riles, you need to stick with the bourbon. That shit will kill you,” comes from behind me.

Bria twirls around, and her jaw drops as I quickly grab a napkin and wipe under my nose. As soon as I finish, Oz Hunt, Lincoln's defensive end, sits beside me.

"Hey." I awkwardly laugh as he leans forward, resting his elbows on the table. "Bria, this is Oz. Oz, Bria."

"Hey, girl." He smiles at her, and she squeaks out a "Hey" in return.

He turns to me and asks, "How are you feeling today?"

"Did you know that sipping actually mean sipping, even in college?" I joke.

He laughs, and he laughs in a loud, from the belly kind of way. "I do. And no shit, Riles, I was having a hard time keeping up with you."

Hudson Hart sits beside him, and Cody beside Hart.

"What is happening here?" Bria whispers, and I have to bite back a laugh because it is highly unusual that three seriously hot college boys would sit with us, and it feels even more like an alternate universe because they're football players ... who actually play and aren't riding the bench to improve the team's GPA.

"Bria, this is Cody Warren. He's—"

"I'm aware," she again whispers so only I can hear.

I continue so it's less awkward, "My roommate. And—"

"Are you kidding me?" she gasps, and not in a whisper this time.

My face catches fire due to secondhand embarrassment for my friend. "No, I'm—"

"First that hockey guy, Theo Rivera, shows up to one of our competitions last year to watch you, and now—"

"Oh, shiiit." Oz laughs.

I shake my head, "It was nothing. It was—"

"Bullshit," Hudson Hart cuts me off.

"Nuh-uh!" I huff. Yep, I nuh-uh'ed Hudson fucking Hart.

“Ever meet someone so polite you know they’re overdoing it because they secretly want to shank you?” Oz chuckles, and before I can reply, he says, “No? Me, neither ... until last night. Riles, babe, what are you dragging me into?”

“I’m a football girlie now,” I lamely defend myself.

“Now”—he looks at Hart and sighs. “She said now.”

Hart nods. “Yeah, man, she did.”

Both massive men look at Cody. “You were just named captain of our team; you’re supposed to have our backs.”

“It’s roommates before bros,” I defend Cody.

“You hearing this?” he asks Bria, who turns paler than normal. I’m afraid she’s going to pass out. “You better watch your back with Riles here.”

“It wasn’t even a thing with Theo. He’s—”

“Prove it. Show up to my game tomorrow,” Oz dares, which should drop him in points because either he’s been hit too many times in the head, or he didn’t pay enough attention last night when I said I was going. But he’s hot, so I decide to let it pass this once. “Bring Bria, too, would ya?”

Before I have a chance to reply, my text alert goes off, and so does Bria’s.

We both grab our phones and immediately.

“Monday through Thursday, six until eight until December? Holy shit, it’s like we’re on vacation all over again.”

“Sweet,” Bria says in her normal voice now, because like everyone else on the team, she eats, sleeps, and breathes gymnastics, so she’s basically forgotten all about the guys.

Another text comes through, and Bria says, “And four days, two hours of alternating weights or yoga for an hour and tapes.”

“Silver lining: we’re going to be so bendy,” I joke.

“Now you’re speaking my language.” Oz wags his brows, and just like that, Bria is on fire again.

In her defense, freshman year I reacted that way too, until Ellie exposed me to the Ice hockey team. I’ve adapted.

“How are you only required sixteen hours a week and getting two full days off?” Hart asks.

“Three days off,” I correct with a smile.

“That’s bullshit,” he grumbles.

“They don’t start their regular season until January,” Cody interjects.

“Well, shit. Then you’ll be able to make all of our games.” Oz winks.

“Depends on how you play this season. I’m not freezing my ass off to watch you all lose.”

“So, are you saying if we win—”

“When we win,” Cody cuts him off.

“Right, of course.” He winks at me. “When we win tomorrow, you’re going to come to all of our—”

“Let’s not get to ahead of ourselves.”

“One game at a time then.”

“Sounds much better.” I nod.

“Incentive this for me. When we win, you agree to go out with me Thursday night.”

“Not gonna work, recruitment starts Wednesday and doesn’t end until Sunday.” I totally hide how excited I am to be part of this, but I am so freaking stoked.

“They don’t let you eat?” He laughs.

“Guessing we eat there.”



Chapter 7

Theo
First Day

Monday, August 26th

“DOUBLE MAJOR?” I ask Koa ... again.

“He doesn’t just have great hair, he has brains, too,” Dash jokes.

Koa shrugs. “History is what interests me the most, and literature the least.”

“Why pick something you don’t like?” JT asks.

“I like a challenge,” he answers and looks at me. “You a finance guy like these two?”

“Psych,” I answer, knowing I’m gonna get shit for it, I always do.

“Okay.” He nods. “And what made you choose that when you’re going pro?”

“Average is four and a half years for a hockey career. I plan to go into sports psychology after that. Can’t imagine not being part of a team in some way.”

“So, you’re going to go back to college when you retire?”

I nod.

“Very cool.”

“Fuck that, four and done.” JT shakes his head as he pulls up and parks behind the arena. *Another perk of playing hockey—free parking.* “Invest smart, and you’ll never have to work again.”

“I’d be bored out of my mind,” I say, opening the door and sliding out into the parking lot it seems like we just left, because we did an hour and thirty minutes ago after finishing an “optional” workout.

“Don’t take off, man.” Dash waves us over. “First day of school pic, or my mom will have my ass.”

“Your mom hot?” JT asks.

“Yeah. Why?” Dash asks, completely clueless.

“She can have my ass.” JT wags his brows.

“Bro, she would break you.”



WHEN I WALK into the lecture hall, my eyes immediately fall on Riley. Not sure why I’m shocked she’s taking this class when she’s on a pre-med track, we all need to meet our electives.

Also shocking is that she’s wearing a dress and her hair and makeup are done. This confusion is warranted. Anytime I ran into her on campus last year, she was in hoodies, sweats, or leggings, and her hair was knotted on top of her head, looking every bit the athlete in Lincoln U apparel that she is. She never wore makeup either, and yeah, it looks good on her—she’s fucking beautiful—but she’s one of those girls who doesn’t need a bit of it. However, I learned from my sister that, “It’s not all about you boys. Sometimes we girls just like to feel pretty for ourselves.” To which, I responded, “Then can you take your feel pretty shit to your bedroom, so I don’t have to spend twenty minutes looking for my razor or toothbrush?”

I'm not sure how Mom heard it from across the house, but she did, and I got an ass-chewing. And yeah, a lesson was learned.

My hackles rise when I see Oz sitting beside her.

Fuck it. This wondering what the hell happened every time I see her isn't good for my head. And yeah, that's gonna fuck with my on-ice game, so I head over, hell-bent on sitting in the empty seat on the other side of her, when another girl—one of her teammates, I think—sits there.

You have got to be fucking kidding me. I shake it off as I set my sights on the seat beside that.

Instead of asking Oz to move his legs to scoot by, I head to the row behind them and plan to do a step-over.

Directly behind Riley, a blonde stops me. "There's a free seat right here, Rivera."

Freshman year I would have pounced on tall blonde and buxom. Hell, early sophomore year me would have, too. But until I get ahold of this Riley Park situation, I'm no good to any of the females looking for just a good time.

I start to pass her, and she laughs. "Am I that unforgettable?"

Fuck, I think as another girl occupies the seat I was heading to.

Well, I guess this is where I'm landing.

I pull out the earbud I wear so that I can ignore people without seeming to be rude as I smile and point to the seat next to ... shit, I have no clue what her name is. "Seat free?"

She smiles and speaks as she signs, "If you turned down the volume, you may be able to hear what's going on around you."

"Gina." I laugh when I realize who it is I was avoiding.

She signs as she speaks, "New Year, new me." She points to my hair. "You, too, I see."

I set my bag and book down and sign, “*You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.*”

She signs back, “*Try me.*”

I do the best I can to sign as I speak. “It involves a flight from hell, a two-year-old named Chloe, her pregnant mother, a father who drugs himself to fly, gum, a good Samaritan act that ended with me and a shit haircut.”

She laughs.

“You look good, G, and you sound amazing.”

She pushes back her hair. “New ears, too.”

I lean in and give her a huge hug. “That’s great.”

“Good morning and welcome back to Lincoln University. I’m Dr. Isabel Sinclair, and this is History 403. If you’re in the wrong lecture hall, make your escape now, because we’re here for two hours, and those doors should be considered locked.”

A few students leave, and she waits before saying, “Wow.”

The room collectively chuckles.

She steps up to the podium. “As an upper-level class, it should not be necessary to explain that this is a university and not high school. My job security is not based on your test grades. What knowledge I share with you, and yes, often times learn from my students, should be used to empower us all. I find it best to give you my expectations from day one so that you have time to drop the class if you aren’t willing to commit to learning. My PA will even give you a list of classes that won’t be as taxing, that still fulfill your requirements, after the class if you ask.” She looks around, and her eyes fall on me. “You’re an athlete.”

I nod. “I am.”

“Humor me?” she asks, and I nod. “Can you name ten Unites States presidents.”

“I can.” I try not to smirk.

“All right Mr. ...?”

“Rivera, Theo Rivera. George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jacksons, Martin Van Buren, William Henry Harrison, and John Taylor are the first ten. Hurst was only president for thirty-two days, so I’ll add James Polk for good measure.”

She arches a brow as if I’m challenging her, which is probably bad on my part, but if I know anything, I know my presidents.

“How many presidential elections have brought the American’s a new president?”

“Trick question, Dr. Sinclair, as we’ve had forty-six presidencies, but only forty-five men have served in that office.”

She nods. “Can you name who that was?”

“Grover Cleveland was number twenty-two and twenty-four.”

“Impressive.”

“Not really,” I admit with a chuckle.

“Explain.”

“I’m the second in a family of six. My older brother’s name is Grant, I’m Theodore, my sisters are Quincy, Kennedy, McKinley, and Regan.”

“Your parents are history buffs.”

“My parents are proud immigrants who wanted to make sure they passed the civics portion of the naturalization test. They also have made sure that all their children know the answers.”

“Were you all born in the US?”

“We were.”

She walks around the podium and looks around the lecture hall. “Now, let’s be honest, with a show of hands, how many of you knew ten presidents by first and last name.” She assesses the room. “Less than half of you. Those of you with

your hands up, raise your other hand if you are between first and third generation Americans.”

I glance around and all but two of us have both arms raised. Riley Parks and me.

“Keep your hand raised if your parents immigrated.”

Both our hands still stay up.

“Thank you.” She walks back to the podium. After a moment, she looks around. “I have a great feeling about this section and look forward to us learning together.”

She continues looking around. “As you should know, the class title is Civil Rights Movement and Presidencies. I will be assigning you into groups, and each week, two groups will present the research they’ve found on their assigned president and what they accomplished for the Civil Rights Movement.”

She looks around again. “In addition, you’ll have readings that you will be required to take notes, on actual paper, with a pen, and it will be checked. That will be a large portion of your grade, so please make sure you do the reading and take your own notes so that you can best answer the written, in-class quizzes. All the required reading is in the syllabus that’s online, but there’s also packets printed on paper. And yes, I know that those who are concerned with the environment may scoff at this, but let’s pick our battles here. To make up for use of paper, pick up a reusable water bottle, take a travel mug to get your coffee in the morning instead of getting one of those disposable cups that litter the campus, use less disposable makeup wipes, cancel your magazine subscription and choose an online option, walk instead of driving or taking the bus everywhere, turn off your electronics—all of them—at night, and have meatless meals once a week. Do whatever you need, but don’t make a fuss out of my requirements because you will lose the argument. And if that isn’t something you can live with, bring me your drop form, and I will sign it.”

No one says a word.

“I would normally put you in your groups on day one, but I’ll do that when we meet again on Wednesday. With that

being said, I have nothing else planned for today, so you are all excused, except for Mr. Rivera, Miss Park, and Miss Lovell.”

Once the lecture hall has emptied, we all make our way down to where Dr. Sinclair is now standing off the stage.

“Have a seat.” She smiles as she pulls herself up and sits on the edge of the stage.

I sit between Riley and Gina.

“I know you’re an athlete,” she says to Riley, “and that you have a four-point-O. I now also know that you’re a first generation American.”

“I’m not sure how to respond to that?” Riley shakes her head.

Sinclair shakes her head, too. “I’m just thinking out loud here, so bear with me.”

“Sure,” Riley agrees.

“And you”—she points to me—“Basketball?”

“No, ice hockey.” I say, trying not to sound annoyed.

“You sign,” she states.

“Not that great, but yes. I took ASL freshman year as my language elective and met Gina. I helped her as much as I could with Spanish, and she helped me with ASL. Took it again last year.”

Gina cuts in and signs as she speaks, “It’s typical for families to make up their own signs. Theo’s sister?” She looks at me.

I nod. “Quincy.”

Gina continues, “She has partial hearing loss, and it’s diminishing. He’s much better at it than he leads you to believe but was never properly trained, and it’s difficult to unlearn what you’ve already taught yourself. Quincy’s learning now in college?”

I nod again and almost laugh at the fact she's talking so much. Gina was so self-conscious about her voice when I met her.

She elbows me, obviously reading nonverbal clues that I didn't realize I was putting off.

"So, Theo wanted to learn the proper way, as well."

"That's wonderful." Dr. Sinclair states.

Riley looks up at me, "I'm sorry about your sister."

"I appreciate it. She's alive, so it's a blessing." I shrug.

She then smiles and lifts a hand to Gina.

Dr. Sinclair is nodding as we all look back to her, no doubt all still wondering why we were held back.

"Right, I'm sure you're all wondering why I held you back."

None of us answer because it's obvious.

"Gina, I wasn't aware I had a student with a disability, and I wanted to make sure you are comfortable asking for accommodations if you need them."

"I'm good," Gina signs and speaks. "I'll bug this guy if I need anything. If he doesn't have an answer, I'll email."

"Gina has new ears." I smile at her because I know how exciting this is for her. Those things are not cheap or readily available, and her new aids are so small, covered by her hair.

She signs, but doesn't say, "*I think you're more excited than I am.*"

I laugh. "Totally."

I can't wait until I can afford to get Quincy all the newest as devices as they come out, and there's no jumping through hoops from insurance companies and getting excited that life is about to change, only to get denied.

"Riley's taken classes with my husband, and I know she signs, as well."

I look over at her. "Yeah?"

She signs ‘a little.’

“I just wanted to pull you three aside and let you know why I’ve made this decision, and so, when you do get your assigned group, there are no surprises.”

“Could you tell us which president we’ll have?” Riley asks.

“Then you wouldn’t have any surprises left at all.”



WALKING out of the lecture hall, Gina asks, “So, which one do you think we’ll get?”

“Not Theodore Roosevelt.” I chuckle.

“Because of your name?”

“No, because he lost his hearing in his left ear. It would be too obvious,” Riley answers.

“If she’s on the disability train, the other obvious president would be, Franklin. He was in a wheelchair,” Gina adds.

“Or the immigrant’s track. Jackson, Buchanan, Arthur Wilson, Hoover, Obama, and Trump are all children of first-generation immigrants,” I add seriously just to keep the conversation going.

I look over and see Riley staring at her screen, probably getting a text from Oz.

She holds up her phone. “His dad’s not first gen, doesn’t count.”

“He the only one you looked up?” I laugh.

“Yes, actually.” She smiles, and fuck, that smile is just as stunning as it always was.

I hear a squeal and look over to see Gina’s boyfriend has come up behind her and wrapped his arms around her.

“Taking this one for breakfast,” Tanner says. “You two wanna join?”

I look at Riley, hoping she says yes, but her brows knit together. “Already ate, but thanks.” She then signs, “*See you later.*”

I shake Tanner’s hand. “You two enjoy.”

I turn to see her walking away.

“Riley,” I call after her then see Oz walking toward her, holding a cup of coffee out to her. “The fuck.”

She turns back and looks at me, and I hold up my hand, palm in front of my face, and make the “beautiful” sign.

She scowls and gives me ... the finger.

Then ... then she looks shocked.

Same, Riley, same.



“THANKS FOR PICKING US UP,” Kameron says as she and two other girls, whose names I’ve forgotten, slide in. “Winnie and Natalie, Theo. Theo, Winnie and Natalie.” She shakes out the umbrella before sliding it into some sort of sleeve.

“Not a problem,” I say and look back. “Hello, ladies.”

“Where are your roommates? We’re supposed to be supporting both football and hoc—”

“They’re meeting us there, saving seats,” I say, pulling out of Delta’s parking lot. “Definitely supporting Cody.”

“And the rest of the football team,” she adds.

Except Oz.

RILEY



Chapter 8

Riley Football

Monday, August 26th

“HALF OF KET SHOWED UP.” I look behind us and around the stadium full of umbrellas amongst the sea of blue and yellow.

We have the first three rows just to the right of our home bench. Apparently, Evan, Dean, Bass, and Leo bought season tickets for football, as well as men and women’s hockey. When they aren’t here, we get to use them instead of sitting in the student section.

Koa, Dash, and JT are sitting behind us, but not Theo. I hate that this disappoints me, but not as much as I hate that I was totally scoping out the stadium for him and now want to kick my own ass.

“It’s the Cody effect,” Ellie states.

“We football fans need a win. Last year was brutal.” Leah sighs exaggeratedly. We made one football game last year, on homecoming. One.

“There isn’t room for both of us on this bandwagon.” I lightly elbow her.

“Girl, there’s plenty of room if you just shove a cheek.”
She nudges me.

“Why are we sober?” Leah asks.

“Because it’s a Monday night,” Ellie reminds her.

“Margarita Monday,” I suggest *again*.

She rolls her eyes.

“Hey.” I poke her. “You didn’t waste sophomore year on sobriety so put the brakes on your judgment, Judgy McJudgerson.”

Grace leans forward and looks around Ellie. “She traded hangovers for morning wood.”

“Best decision I ever made.” Ellie laughs.

“Hey KET girlies, Delta has arrived!” Kameron announces as she makes her way to their seats

“Took you long enough, man,” I hear JT say from behind me, and even before I hear his voice, I know Theo’s here.

“Traffic’s insane.”

“We live a stone’s throw away.” Dash laughs.

“Delta’s across campus, and it’s raining,” he explains.

“All I’m saying is you should have parked at our place and walked over.”

“We made it before kickoff; it’s all good.” Theo states sounding less than enthusiastic.

Ten minutes into the game, it’s zero to zero, it’s pouring, and I’m so fucking confused by this game.

“Why didn’t we bring umbrellas?” Leah yells over the crowd.

“Because we’re idiots,” I admit.

To the left of us, Kameron has a huge stadium umbrella. She and her friends, and Ellie and Grace, are all squished under it.

Shit, shit, shit.

“Lean back,” I hear Theo say and ignore him because he’s surely not talking to me. “Riley and Leah, lean back.”

I look back, and he holds up the bottom of some sort of rain poncho.

“Both of you can fit.”

“Do we like him enough to at least use him for protection?” Leah asks.

“Is that even a question?” I ask, leaning back awkwardly.

When I feel something against my back, I realize quickly it’s his knee, and I look over and see the other is against Leah’s back. Our eyes meet, and we both glance behind us where his long, thick legs are spread wide, and yeah, he’s packing.

“You wanna bite it, don’t you?” Leah asks, and we both start laughing.

“Lean back if you want,” he says over the rain, so we do.

This should be awkward and uncomfortable, it should piss me off that I’m just sitting here, leaning against Theo Rivera’s leg, but it’s not. We’ve brushed knees before. This is no different, right?



THERE’S LESS than a minute until the end of the half, and there’s still no score, the rain hasn’t let up at all, and the stadium starts to empty out.

“Are we really staying?” Leah asks.

“You really wanna miss this?” I ask and use the hand not holding up the corner of the poncho shelter to point to the muddy mess of the field and then, something ... good happens. “Oh, he’s ... Cody’s—”

I jump to my feet, clapping and cheering as Cody runs the ball toward the end zone. When he makes a touchdown,

everyone is on their feet, cheering. Well, except the cheerleaders.

“Get up!” I yell down to them. “Seriously! Get up!”

One of them flips me off.

I gasp, and then give her two as I yell, “Your sport is cheer, so freaking cheer!”

“You really should put them away,” comes from behind me, and I look back.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Might as well face the mortification of flipping him off earlier and make it mine. “I can’t control them. It’s instinctual.”

“So, I shouldn’t be offended about earlier?” His lips twist in a smirk, the one he used to give me from across the room at every party we ended up at the same time, and then it disappears, but not quick enough that I didn’t feel warmth beginning to build in my tummy.

“You should totally be offended,” Leah answers for me, not even knowing I flipped him off. I purposely didn’t tell her because I’m embarrassed by my action. I would have never done that last year... not sober anyway. “But not until after the game. I kind of like the shelter.”

Needing a break from ... this, all of this, I ask Leah, “Bathroom?”

She digs in her pocket. “No, but grab me a water?”

“Sure,” I push away her wadded up cash, as I slide past her and hurry toward the stairs.

Turning the corner, I see Taya leaning against the wall, arms crossed, looking around. The closer I get to her, the better I see she looks confused.

“Hey Taya.”

She looks at me, or rather right through me. Her eyes that were always like sunshine are ... blank.

I place my hand on her wrist and give it a gentle squeeze.
“You okay?”

She blinks a few times and gives a slight shake of her head. “Riley,” she sighs out.

“Are you okay?” I repeat, knowing she’s not, but truly get the feeling she doesn’t know it.

“I’m tired.”

“Been a long day.” I lean against the wall beside her.

“Not really,” she murmurs.

I’m not sure what to say to that, so I say nothing. But I don’t feel right walking away, even though I have to pee so badly I can’t stand it.

She turns and looks at me, eyes still void of emotion. “I was officially released from the team today.”

“I’m sorry, Taya.”

She turns her head and looks straight ahead. “You don’t understand.”

“You’re right; I couldn’t possibly. I’m still sorry. It sucks.”

She just looks at me.

“Taya, I’m seriously going to piss my pants, but I want to stay with you, so come with me?”

Her brows knit, and she shakes her head. “Why?”

Taking her hand, I pull her behind me. “Because, if some shit thing happens to me, and I end up not being able to do this for the next two years, I am one hundred percent going to want someone to talk to who may understand.”

And I have a plan.

After I pee and while I’m washing my hands, I look in the mirror and see her again standing there with her arms crossed, leaning against the wall.

“Who’d you come with?”

“Myself. My dad insisted.”

“Perfect, you’re sitting with us.”

“I’m not—”

“We need to get some waters first. You good to help me carry?” I cut her off before she finds a way to back out of this.

“I guess?”

“Thanks, Taya. You’re the best.”



WHEN WE WALK OUT of the bathroom, Theo is standing there, hands in his pockets, hat backward, drops of water glistening on his skin as they slide down from under his hat, licking the edge of his square jaw and cascading over his Adam’s apple that I want to lick. His wet, long-sleeved Lincoln hockey shirt is clinging to his finely sculpted shoulders and ridges of his insanely defined deltoid muscles.

Arm porn? Oh, hell yes. His shirt, like a second skin, clinging so tight I can see the subtle bulge of his veins beneath the navy-blue material. Each bicep has to be carved from stone, and I want to touch them just to be sure they aren’t.

His chest? He has more cleavage than me. The separation between his pectoral muscles, a valley that, if not for his shirt molded around them, the water would freely flow between them and continue down the ridges and valleys of his abs, a mountain range. His waistline narrows, emphasizing the sculpted obliques that taper down to his waistband.

I, Riley Park, suddenly love the rain.

“Riley, can I have a second?”

My eyes snap up to meet his as Taya whispers, “Holy shit.”

I shake my head, trying to give myself a second to unscramble my brain that is seriously on the fritz right now.

Taya walks away. “I’ll grab the waters.”

I call after her, “I need, like, a lot.”

She points toward the long line. “Give the man his minute.”

I turn back and look at him, catching him eyeing my boobs. My naughty nipples are for sure pointing at him.

“It’s cold.”

He bites the corner of his lower lip as he reaches around behind him and produces a couple packets and holds them out to me.

“Disposable ponchos.”

I take them. “Thanks.”

He scrubs a hand over his face. “Look, whatever happened that caused you to slam the brakes on what we had going on ...” He pauses like I’m going to spell it out for him. Not gonna happen. I’m not going to look like a bitter bitch when he’s playing cool cat. He shakes his head slightly. “We have a lot of the same friends, we’re grouped up in a class, we should—”

“Hit the reset.” I give him a thumbs-up, and he smirks again. What the fuck is wrong with me? “We’re chill.” *Oh my God, shut up, Riley.*

“I was *chill* for months last year, and that led to a rift I don’t understand. I’m looking for us to explore whatever this is between us.”

“*This?*” I huff, but it comes out as a squeak.

He cocks his head and looks down at me. “There’s a definite attraction. You just eye-fucked me so hard I’m surprised I’m only partially mast right now.”

My jaw literally drops and, unfortunately, so do my eyes, landing right on his crotch.

He chuckles. “And like you said the other night, you don’t even have to like someone to—”

“Oh, wow, so you’re saying ...” I clear my throat, because I feel a squeak coming on.

“No need to read between the lines. I want your little hands on my body, doing all the things your eyes were doing

just a minute ago. I want my mouth on parts of you, not just to taste you, but to hear what noises I can make come out of your hot little mouth.”

“Oh shit,” I hear and turn around, expecting someone heard all the ... filthy things he just said. My insides are doing flips and shit, but it’s Taya, and an armful of water bottles that are now rolling all over the concrete ground.

“I got them.” Theo chuckles. “Go watch the game. It’s starting up again.”

I don’t even argue. I simply take Taya’s hand and almost run to our seats.



AFTER OPENING the pouch and sliding it over my head, I hand Taya the other because, apparently, Leah has the one Theo was wearing.

“Ellie, Taya. Taya, Ellie.” I motion for her to sit where I was and plop myself on Leah’s lap.

“Where’s my water?” she groans out as if I’m crushing her.

“Pass ’em down,” Theo says, handing Leah a bottle of water, and we begin passing them down.

“There’s a free seat up here,” Koa says, patting the one beside him.

“Who left?” I ask, not moving.

“No one.” Koa pats the seat again. “It’s free.”

It would be super obvious if I declined, so I get up and walk around Leah, who snagged the aisle seat, to take the one behind her, but Koa slides over and leans back.

“Long legs. Need to be able to stretch.”

I watch Theo smirk as he hands out more disposable ponchos as I begrudgingly move past Koa and sit between him and Theo.

“Is there a vending machine around here that spits these out, or do you just carry them around with you?”

“When the forecast is rain, I come prepared.”

“For the whole stadium?” I joke.

He leans down, unzips his back pack, and ruffles through it. “Shit.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing at all. Just looks like you and I are gonna have to share.”

“How?” I laugh.

He points to the neck and asks, “May I?”

“Uh, sure?” I answer, not knowing what I’m agreeing to.

He stretches the plastic and rips it.

And that is how Theo and I share a disposable poncho.



Chapter 9

Theo
Anaconda

Wednesday August 28th

I SHUT my locker and look around, seeing all eyes on me.

“What?” I ask.

“You made captain as a junior, and you’re still miserable,” JT states.

He’s not wrong; I am fucking miserable.

After Monday night’s game, a win in which I was pretty sure after the shit that went down underneath the poncho, I’d be celebrating the hell out of—for different reasons than the football team, of course—I loaded the Tahoe with Kameron, Winnie, and Natalie, added Ellie, Grace, Riley, Leah, and Taya, taking them all to Dean’s old place where they had some sort of dinner planned for a few of the football players. Those few? Cody, of course, Hart, and Black, who were there the other night, but also Hudson, Oz, and Grimes, who I all but delivered to them.

Riley offered to sit in the back, and I basically felt like a shitbag because I all but held her hostage back there until after the girls were all heading in.

When I open the back she's lying on her back, holding her phone up, smiling from ear to ear at the screen ... texting.

She sits up. "I thought maybe you'd all forgotten about me back here."

"I promise I didn't forget you, but the thought of you taking off before we can finish what we started under the plastic in the rain makes me crazy."

She swallows hard then slides her legs over the edge. "As appealing as the offer is, I promised Oz a date when they won the game. Doesn't feel right to just get sweaty with you, knowing I have a date coming up with him, after recruitment"—she looks at her phone—"next Thursday night."

"Your hand was on my thigh minutes ago, and you're in the back of my ride, making plans for a date with Oz, who I legit delivered to your door."

Her face turns red. "You put my hand on your thigh."

"You could have taken it away instead of skating it up and down my thigh," I counter.

She crosses her arms and squares her shoulders. "I was warming my hand."

"There's something here, and you know it. Go on your date, but if you're fucking with Oz, you're not fucking with me." I start to step away so she can get out, but then I think better of it. Instead, I take her face in my hands and tip it back so she's looking up at me. "You and I both know this is supposed to happen."

Her lips begin to quiver as I bring mine down to them. I don't kiss her, though; I brush mine across hers before stepping back.

"You want more"—I take her phone from her and send myself a text before handing it back—"you can text me first, because I was left on read for months."

"Earth to Rivera." JT snaps his fingers in front of me.

I glance up at him. "Yeah?"

“Breakfast before class with us, or are you gonna stand here in a towel all day?”

I pull my tee-shirt out of my locker and pull it over my head. “I could eat.”



WHEN WE WALK into the cafeteria, Riley is sitting with one of her friends. Bria, I think.

“Where you going?” JT asks as I beeline it to her table before it gets filled up again with Oz and even more of the football team, like yesterday.

“Grab me an egg white omelet with spinach?” I ask.

“I got you.” Koa nods to the table. “Save us a seat.”

As I approach, I hear Bria whisper, “It’s happening again.”

To that, Riley looks up from her French toast as I drop my backpack on an empty chair.

“How was practice?” I ask as I take the seat beside Riley.

“Fine,” she says, looking past me.

“Oh shit. These seats taken?” I ask with mock concern.

She narrows her eyes at me then whispers, “What are you doing?”

“Eating breakfast before you and I walk to class together,” I answer, leaning back in my seat and locking my fingers behind my neck.

“Not sure you realize this, but you don’t have any food in front of you,” Bria points out.

I cock my head to the side and catch Riley doing a full sweep of my body. When our eyes meet, her face immediately reddens. Straight up was expecting her to say something sarcastic to follow up on Bria’s observation, but I have to say I love the direction she took it. *I need to get her off.*

“You have room for four more?” comes from behind me and I look back to see Oz, Cody, Skinner, and Hart.

“Saving three for my roommates, but whatever’s left is all you, boo-boo.”

I feel a tiny foot rail against mine and bite back a laugh.

“Thinking we can squeeze in here. If it gets tight, I have a lap.” Oz sits down beside Bria, leans forward, and winks at Riley. “Morning, Riles.”

“I think I’m gonna head over to Switzerland,” Hart grumbles as he walks away.

“Think I’ll join him,” Cody says.

“Oh, hell no, roomie, you get back here,” Riley insists.

Sighing loudly, he heads back over and sits, leaving a seat between him and Oz.

JT sets a tray onto the table and he, Dash, and Koa take a seat. “Thanks, Taylor.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Oz points his fork with a sausage link stuck to the end of it toward my plate.

“Breakfast number two.” I shrug.

He chuckles. “What was number one? A protein shake?”

Fucker.

“Oh shit, my bad. Must be how you stay so lean.” He bites his sausage. “Should probably follow a plan myself.”

“It’s all good.” I cut into my omelet and look at Riley. “Good win the other night. We had a great time, didn’t we, Riley?”

“Must’ve sucked having to rough it. You’re all used to being inside, under a roof, and out of the elements, huh?”

“Yeah, it’s pretty cozy even on the ice, a nice, even twenty-four to twenty-nine degrees.” I chuckle and get another kick.

“Christ, I keep stepping in it, don’t I?” Oz laughs.

“We both play a sixty-minute game. Granted, yours takes you guys like three hours.” I laugh to myself. “With all those whistles the refs blow when someone gets tackled or—what’s that one call?—roughing?”

Oz looks at Cody. “Fucking brutal in here.”

Cody shakes his head. “Oh no, that’s a gift. Evan Smith would have laid it on much thicker.”

Oz looks back at me. “I mean, you all do have to play a pretty physically intense game on those cute little skates.”

Koa laughs.

“No disrespect, man.” Oz smirks at Koa.

“None taken. I used to play football. Had an injury my last game, and my football scholarship taken back.”

“What school?” Cody asks.

“Texas—”

“Steers?” Cody interrupts.

“You turn one down there?” Koa asks Cody.

“Left them to play here.” Cody shrugs.

Riley sits back in her seat and crosses her arms. “Koa, just so no dicks get whipped out to see whose is bigger, which—”

“No disrespect to you, Oz, but hockey men carry big sticks. And Rivera, he’s keeping the majority of his bulk hidden. He’s got an anaconda in his—”

“Bro.” I shake my head. “Let’s not go there.”

I look at Riley, who’s nibbling on her lower lip.

“Don’t they call you *The Cock*?” Bria asks just above a whisper.

Koa nods. “I’m above average size, but my dick’s got nothing to do with the name. K.O.K. are my initials.”

“Oh,” she says, looking down, face in flames.

“But seriously, which game is more physical?” Oz asks.

“That’s like comparing apples to oranges. You’re a defensive end; your game is all about throwing down. Cody’s QB. You and he aren’t playing the same game, even though you’re on the same field.”

Cody lifts his chin to Oz. “You made mine a hell of a lot easier Monday night, man.”

“Hell yes, I did.”

“What position are you all?” Oz asks.

I lean over and whisper, “If I whip it out, will he stop?”

She elbows me, and I chuckle.

“Just got our lines and positions today.” JT smiles. “I’m D. The enforcer, the fighter.”

Dash leans in. “Left wing, playmaker. I focus on getting the puck and look for who’s best set up to and get it to the goal.”

Koa shrugs. “Right wing, power forward.”

JT pipes in, “Rivera’s the center, the star of the show. He’s the sniper—fast as hell and can score before anyone knows he was even there.”

Oz chuckles. “He’s that fast, no one’s gonna even remember how big his stick is.”

To that, Riley stands up, laughing, and grabs her tray. “And ... we’re done here. Let’s go, Bria.”

Oz and I look at each other, and as fucked up as this has all been, I shake my head and tell him, “I ain’t even mad, Oz.”

He scoops up some fried potatoes “Nothing wrong with a little healthy competition.”

“Both of you need to keep in mind that Riley’s my roommate. Hurt her, you’ll answer to me.” Cody lifts his fork and points it at each of us.



"I CALLED THAT WRONG, but it makes sense," I say as I read over the email telling us we've been assigned Lyndon B. Johnson.

"How so?" Gina asks.

"He signed the Immigration and Nationality Act."

"Who knew Theo Rivera was such a nerd?" Riley says and signs.

She laughs. "What else do you know about him?"

"He signed in at Liberty Island."

"How the hell do you know that?" Riley asks.

"Dad always wanted to take us there, and travel wasn't really an option. Too expensive to travel with six kids, and Texas to New York is one hell of a road trip."

"When you go pro, you can fly them all there," Riley says, looking at her tablet. Then she looks up at me. "You better not be one of those rich guys who forgets where he came from."

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"Right?" she damn-near demands.

"Yeah." I nod.

"That doesn't sound too convincing." She laughs.

"Dad ..." I shake my head. "That was once the plan. He passed away."

"Oh my God, I'm sorry. I didn't ..." She shakes her head. "I'm ... Should we ask to change presidents? I think she would understand if—"

"No, of course not. We're good." I cut her off.

"I can have the whole thing done in like three days, and you don't—"

"Riley, seriously, it's fine."

"Okay."

"I'm serious. I'm good."

When she looks like she may cry, I force a laugh.

“You’ve got an exciting week ahead of you—enjoy it. Group starts Monday.”



LYING IN BED, I smile as I look through the pictures. Not gonna lie, I may be more excited about recruitment week than the sorority girls on campus. Why? Because they’re busy as fuck, and there’s no way in hell between that and gymnastics does Riley have time to be playing grab ass with Oz, who happens to have an away game in Illinois. They leave Friday morning and don’t get back until late Sunday afternoon. A whole weekend to ... do fuck not because I left it in her damn hands, and I have no excuse to see her, because we don’t have class together again until Monday.

I’m a fucking idiot.

My phone alert goes off, and I see a picture of my parents on the screen with a FaceTime request. I curl up to seated position and answer, “Hey, Mami.”

“Theodore, your hair? It’s ...” She can’t even hide the fact she doesn’t approve. “Cut.”

“How do you say it looks like hell without actually saying it looks like hell?” I laugh.

I stop laughing when I see Quincy walk by, shoulders slumped.

“What’s up with Quincy?” I ask.

“Aside from the fact she’s not enjoying her college experience, she had a checkup today and ...” Mom shakes her head.

Fuck. “How bad?”

“We knew it was progressing,” Mom says.

“Get her over here?”

“She may not—”

“Please.”

For the next fifteen minutes, I do my best to get her to a good place. I tell her about Gina and how she got new ears over the summer, and that her speech has even gotten better. I remind her of my promise to get into the NHL and make sure she has the best of the best as long as she busts her butt at community college, which she hates. She says it’s like high school but worse because people didn’t know her before the accident. She was popular as hell, even after the accident. Hell, maybe even more so.

I ask her how track is going, and that’s when an invisible weight seems to lift a bit.

“Are you still meeting with—”

“Yes, but this one is no better than the last.” Quincy hates going to counseling. She makes no bones about that and cuts me off every damn time I bring it up.

“You’re going to find one that is.”

“How do you know? You’ve never been.”

“Maybe not, but I believe in it, or I wouldn’t be going to school for psych.”

I get a smile, a quick one, but a smile, nonetheless.

“We got this, Q.”

She nods and signs, “*We got this, T.*”

RILEY



Chapter 10

Riley
Recruitment

Saturday August 31st

Dear Simone,

My first week of classes, sophomore year, was officially in the books on Thursday. Why Thursday? One perk of being a college athlete is we get to make our schedules a week before it opens up to the rest of the students. Is that fair to the others? Probably not. But this way, we miss far less classes, and I made sure I had Fridays off for competitions, and for Thursday nights.

Recruitment started Wednesday with philanthropy, moved on to sisterhood, pref. Tomorrow at one is bid day where all the recruits find out which house they will be joining. I'm emotionally exhausted, my voice is all but gone, and I am going to say a prayer tonight that my rush crush from day one shows up at K&T. If not, I may die. Like, seriously, I love her, and I need her to be my little.

Speaking of crushes, before classes even began, I began developing a new crush. Yes, developing on OZ, who plays football, Simone! For Lincoln. But ... hockey boy is back and, once again, making my tummy do flips. And that's not all. I must decide if I can keep it casual with hockey boy, who I've learned so much more about than I ever knew, or if I want to leave the past in the past and see if OZ can do the same.

Lincoln Football beat Southern Illinois tonight. They're 2-0!

Ending on 3 highs and a low.

H- I got a girl crush!

H- MY IG pics are *chef's
kiss*

L- I have 2 boy crushes

H- Tomorrow is BIRD DAY!

X,

Riley



SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 1ST

“LET’S ROLL!” I call up the stairs to the girls.

“It’s a five-minute walk,” Leah calls back.

“But a twenty-minute drive when we stop and get coffee!”

“We have a machine.”

“It’s a Starbies kind of day,” I explain.

Walking down the stairs, in her jean shorts and KET tee that was designed to commemorate this day, she pulls the final rollers out of her hair and reminds me, “New England loves Dunkin.”

I smile big and bright as I hold up my phone, showing her the text from Grace and Ellie, making their requests, as they have been at KET to help with final details. “Like I said, it’s a Starbies kind of day.”



ARMED WITH CAFFEINE and full of excitement, we walk into KET house. Everyone looks so good in their shorts, KET tees, hair all done, and of course everyone has accessorized their fits, making them all their own.

Grace and Ellie spot and make a beeline to us.

“Look at you pretties!” Grace exclaims as she holds her phone up, and Leah and I pose as best we can as we’re double-fisted.

They take their coffees, and we all exchange one-armed hugs, because we’re protecting our caffeine as if our lives depends on it. It basically does—we’re all dead on our feet.

“Did she make it?” I whisper to Ellie.

She doesn’t have to answer me. I can see it in her eyes.

My sweet but strong rush crush, Aaria, is in!



MONDAY SEPTEMBER 2ND

Dragging ass into class, my hair drenched from my post-workout shower, I’m dressed in sweats and a hoodie when I all but run into Oz.

“Riles, what the hell happened to you?” The way he’s looking at me is with true concern.

This causes me to snort-laugh which, to that, his face ... Oh sweet Jesus, Oz’s stunning face contorts into a look of horror, and that makes me laugh even harder.

I finally manage to respond with, “Rough weekend.”

“Jesus, I guess so.” He chuckles.

I see him look past me and turn to see what he’s looking at.

Theo.

“He have a problem with his mug?” He chuckles as we walk toward our lecture seats.

“He’s signing,” I say, trying not to smile at Theo.

“Thought he was already signed with a pro team.”

“ASL, American Sign Language,” I explain.

“Oh yeah. What’d he say?”

Beautiful, I think as I sit, but instead, I say, “I’m not sure.”



SITTING IN THE THEATRE ROOM, working on the group project while Gina and Theo are also working on their sections, is driving me nuts. Theo is a freaking grammar whore and doesn’t even give you a second to realize your own mistake before he’s all up in your business and fixing it.

“*Asswhole*,” I type and laugh at myself when he immediately fixes my purposely misspelled word.

Laughing at myself, my fingers go to town, tapping out, “*They’re is know way you thunk I’s beeing realize wit asswhole, Riviera. Hop off my assssssssssssss and let me fix my own shiz.*”

When I see him frantically fixing it, I laugh.

I look up as Cody walks in, fresh from a shower, wearing sweats and a long-sleeved shirt that clings to his body as he looks at the big blank screen, no doubt wondering what my crazy ass is laughing at.

“You good if I watch a movie?”

“Yeah, of course. Which Sandler movie will it be?”

He smirks as he sets his ginormous water bottle down and grabs the remote. “Thinking *Waterboy*.”

“Sweet. Football, my favorite.” I grin.

He stretches out on the couch across from me and chuckles.

I chuck an almond at him.

“Why the assault?” He pops it in his mouth.

I throw another. “Why you laughing at me?”

“I know you wanna be a football ‘girlie,’ and no one appreciates that more than I, but I’m not sure you’re out of your hockey ‘era’ yet.”

I air quote his fine but annoying ass right back. “Well ‘I think you’re wrong. ‘I’ve’ been to a ‘football game’ and froze my ass of ‘in the rain,’ cheering you all on. Your ‘stupid cheerleaders’ didn’t even get off their asses.”

He sighs. “I find you adorable, and because of that, and the fact we’re living together for a year, I’ll keep my opinion to myself.”

“Smart man.” I wink at him.

When I look back at the screen, I see Theo’s name as he types in the document.

Not gonna lie, today’s been a good day for the ego. Cody Warren just said I was adorable, Theo Rivera told me I was beautiful, and Oz well, hell, I guess you win some, you lose some.



THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 5TH

Walking from Brandley where my last class of the week—bio genetics lab—is held, my phone starts playing the 007 ringtone, specifically the part where the trumpets are at their most aggressive. I reach in and pull it out of my pocket to see it’s a FaceTime request and hit *accept*.

“Hey, Mom.”

“Happy end of week two!”

“Dang, Mom.” I cringe.

“How many times have I told you, don’t take my call until you take those things out of your ears?”

“I have these things in my ears all the time. Can you just not—”

“Feel excitement? Joy? Happiness? Pride in the fact that my only daughter is brilliant?”

I roll my eyes. “Yes, please, be miserable and start shunning me.”

We both start laughing at that.

“How exciting was last weekend with your girls?”

“A little less exciting as it was when I told you all about it Sunday night, since it’s now been a few days.”

Now she rolls her eyes at me. “I have ten minutes between surgeries, and I chose to spend them with you, and this is what I get?”

I nearly jump out of my slides when Theo pops out of nowhere and is at my side. “Skip breakfast this morning to avoid me?”

Yes. “No.” I force a laugh as I hit *end call* and shove the phone in my pocket.

“No? Not because tonight’s the big date, and you were thinking seeing me today would make it impossible to—”

I slap my hand over his mouth when I hear Mom ask, “Who is that, and what date?”

Theo’s brows are nearly at his hairline as I pull the earbuds out of my ears.

“*Shh* ... it’s my mom.”

As I pull my hand away, I hear Mom again, but now from my pocket and clearly the earbuds disconnected, so yep, Theo hears her, too.

“Riley, who is that young man? Are you okay?”

Before I have a chance to tell him she’s a master manipulator and knows I’m okay, he says, “My name is Theo

Rivera, Mrs. Park. Riley is perfectly safe.”

I draw my finger across my throat and glare at him, to which he laughs.

I pull my phone from my pocket and hold it facing up, just below my chin so she knows I am far from enthusiastic about this ... ambush.

“Hold the phone up so I’m not looking up your nose, Riley.”

I glare down at her. “My arms are sore.”

The phone is snatched from my hands. “Let me help you out.” Theo steps in front of me and holds the phone up.

“You’re both ridiculous,” I grumble.

“How come I can’t see your friend?” Mom asks, leaning closer to the screen as if that’ll make him more visible.

“Because he’s not in the frame,” I answer, feeling my chest and neck begin to burn.

“Theo Rivera, move into the frame so I can see you.”

I throw my hands up. “Oh my God, Mom, really? Don’t you have someone to knock out?”

Keeping the phone aimed at me, like the weapon it has become, Theo moves around me until he’s standing behind me, holding the phone out, catching us both in the frame.

“So, it’s not Mrs. Park; it’s Doctor. Park.” Theo smiles.

She does some sort of sitting kind of shimmy

Out of the corner of my mouth, I mumble, “Well, you’ve hit her emotional G-spot, player.”

“You can call me Nabi.” Her smile is so big all I can do is laugh ... and then, so does Mom.

Fortunately, she is on a timeline, and after asking Theo his major and finding out he plays hockey, she says, “I hope to see you again, Theo.”

His reply? “I’d love that.” Then he hands me back my phone, smiling as he jogs backward. “Gonna be late for

weights.”

Before he turns around, he signs, “*beautiful*,” and me? You know what I do.

I flip him off.



Chapter 11

Theo

Break Up

When I walk into our place, I overhear Koa say, “This is fucked up on so many fronts, Nalani.”

Shit, shit, shit.

“No, you’re not hearing me. I’m good with keeping my dick in my pants, because as far as I’m concerned, it’s no good to me without you. We can get through the next three months, and when you’re back in Hayward—” He stops.

I decide not to get something to eat because I feel like a dick overhearing his private conversation when he doesn’t even know I’m here.

“Fine, whatever. Stay there, but stay the hell away from him.”

I clear my throat as I walk into the living room, toward my bedroom so he knows he’s not alone.

“Babe, we made promises. I can keep mine. Can ...” Pause. “Why the hell does it feel like you’re trying to get me to end this? If that’s what you want, say it. Just fucking—”

I pop my earbuds in, flop on my bed, hit Spotify, and press *shuffle* to drown out the sound of a heart being battered.

Four songs in, and Koa opens my door. I pull out my earbud and sit up.

“Dash is on a date, JT’s probably fucking some bunny, and I need to go do something, man.”

“Then let’s go.”



In the vehicle, I ask, “You wanna talk?”

“Nope.”

“Just know if you do—”

“Appreciate it.” He looks out the window as I pull out of the parking lot.

A few seconds later, he asks, “You mind if I get fucked up?”

“Not even a little bit.”

“I won’t fuck up your ride. Not a puker.”

“Costello puked in it at the end of last semester, and he wasn’t my roommate. He and I are still good. If it happens, I’ll deal.”

“Won’t happen.”

Thank God.

“Gonna ask, you a fun drunk or an angry one?”

“A quiet one.”

RILEY



Chapter 12

Riley
Bleachers

Still...

Thursday September 5th

AM I enjoying the first real date I've been on since before the prom catastrophe? I sure am. Oz Hunt is fun, ruggedly handsome, and pulled out all the stops, including picking me up at the house and insisting on paying for an Uber since he doesn't have a vehicle on campus instead of me driving, with flowers in hand.

When he asked if I wanted to head to Bleachers for a drink after dinner, I of course said, "Let's do it." We were having fun, and I didn't want the date to end.

One of the reasons I wanted to stay in the "wonderful land of Oz" and all that it would surely promise is now standing on the raised stage, drunk, doing ... something that resembles karaoke, and he's doing it rather badly, with Koa.

I glance at Oz, and he's holding back a laugh. "I'll play dirty on the field for a win, but you won't catch me talking shit about someone to make myself look better behind their back." He then laughs. "Because most of the time, the fools do that all by themselves."

Then, well, Theo starts to sing slash speak into the mic. *“I got a blue and yellow Lincoln bag and a humongous binder. I’m trying my best not to look like I should play in the minors.”*

Koa leans in and takes over. *“I went out for the hockey team to prove that I’m the man.”*

Theo starts in again. *“Guess I shouldn’t tell them I love Duran Duran. This is me at Lincoln U, baby.”*

And Koa again. *“This is me at Lincoln.”*

Theo takes the mic and now ... now I recognize the song.

He points to someone in the crowd and holds his hand over his heart as he sings the first line... ish.

“If I had Costello’s dollars.”

Koa echoes him, *“If I had Costello’s dollars.”*

“Well, I’d buy you all a shot.”

Again, Koa echoes him and points in the same direction. *“You should buy us all a shot.”*

“And if I had Costello’s dollars.”

“If I had Costello’s dollars.”

“I’d buy you a chaser for your shot.”

“Maybe a nice lager or two.”

I push up on my toes then jump up to see who they’re singing to, and I see ... “Dean!”

I look over my shoulder at Oz, and he laughs. “Go, Riles. I’ll still be here, waiting if you want me.”

Shaking my head, I say, “Oz, I—”

He kisses the top of my head. “Go.”

“I—”

“You need to figure that out.” Then he firmly states, “Go.”

So, I do.

Holding my arms straight out, fingertips touching, I snowplow my way through the crowd to where I saw Dean

and run smack into Ellie and see Leo, Evan, Kameron, Dean, and Drew Daniels.

“Hey! How was your date?” Ellie asks.

“It was really good. He’s—”

“Little sis!” Dean reaches through the crowd and pulls me into a hug. “You went on a date with a football player? Isn’t that against the house rules?”

“Cody’s a football player, so I figured ...” I shrug.

“Cody shouldn’t be dating; he should be focusing on the game,” Dean jokes.

“How come no one told me you were coming into town?” I ask.

“We didn’t know,” Kameron gushes as Evan wraps his arm around her from behind.

“*If I had Costello’s dollars,*” comes through the speakers louder this time, and I look back at the stage. “*Well, I’d do amazing things to your monkey.*”

“The fuck, Rivera?” Koa laughs instead of echoing him.

Theo points to me. “*Cielo, I wanna love on your monkey.*”

Koa shakes his head but doesn’t miss a beat. “*If I had Costello’s dollars?*”

“*I’d buy your love!*”

“That was the”—Drew laughs—“oddest but sweetest serenade I have ever heard in my life. How are you gonna say no to a man who just told two hundred people he wants to *love on your monkey?*”

I feel my face catch fire. “Maybe it’s your monkey he was serenading?”

I see how Dean looks at her, brow arched. “Am I missing something?”

She huffs, “Really?” then looks back at me. “Rivera only has eyes for your monkey. Everyone knows that.”

The song ends, and Dean yells out, “Joey, shots and a Sam Adams for the house.”

“I should go find Oz. I’ll see you guys at home?”

“You need a ride?” Ellie asks.

“Hoping she’d drive us,” comes from behind me, and I look over my shoulder.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen Theo drunk. No, strike that. I have definitely never, not once, seen him anything but in control and, until recently, he was a comfortable kind of cool. Not cool as in an emoji with sunglasses, but ... reserved.

I won’t lie and say that sophomore Riley isn’t aggravatedly turned on by this version of Theo. The Theo at the game Monday night who drenches my insides with gasoline and threw a match on it. The Theo from the cafeteria who, in a kind of fucked-up version of a verbal 90’s music video dance-off, made it known he was interested in me. And yes, the Theo who just sang on stage about ... wanting to *love on my monkey*. Why was that hot? Shouldn’t that make me uncomfortable? I know if Oz had done something like that, I’d have gotten the ick immediately. But not with Theo Rivera. No, it’s a complete turn on ... even though I still believe something went down with him and Drew, which is messed up because I’m kind of catching on that she and Dean are together, which is also confusing as hell.

“What do you say, Cielo? Would you drive me and Koa home?”

“I didn’t drive here.”

He shakes his head. “But you’re here, right here. I’m asking you to go home with me, not him. Take me home. Stay with me. Drive my vehicle.”

“Rivera say what?” Evan Smith nearly chokes on his drink.

“Riley, babe, that’s the equivalent to him tattooing your name across his forehead.” Leo Stone shakes his head. “He doesn’t let anyone drive his ride.”

Dean wraps his arm around me and pulls me into a side hug. “Don’t even ask to drive his ride. I offered him a grand once to let me drive the hoe, and he looked at me like I asked if I could have a go at his mother.”

“The fuck is wrong with you?” Theo whirls around ... and nearly falls.

Evan wraps an arm around Theo. “Costello, you’re late to the game *again*. She didn’t. He asked her to drive it home.”

“No shit?” Dean asks me.

I shrug because, *What’s the big deal?*

“That’s even deeper than him telling all of Bleachers that he wants to love on your monkey.”

I see Theo glare over my head and look back to see Oz and two of his teammates, Skinner and Grimes, I think.

“See, now I’m gonna have to kick his ass.”

“What?” I gasp.

“Yeah, it’s gonna be ugly because he’s a big dude, but I know damn well I can take him.” He looks from him to me. “It’s gotta be done.”

“No, no, it doesn’t.” I stand in front of him as he steps forward.

“I don’t write the rules, Riley, but I—”

“Fine, I’ll drive you and Koa home, but we leave now, and I’m not staying with you.”

“I mean, that’s the obvious thing to say, but you will.” His eyes narrow over my head again. “Say it to my face, you fried potato eating mother—”

“Back door?” Evan asks Leo.

“Sounds like a plan.” Leo glances at Ellie. “Find Cock.”

She snorts.

“Babe, you know what I mean.”

As they usher Theo, whose head turns so he doesn't have to break his glare at Oz, Ellie links her arm through mine. "Let's go Cock hunting."

"I'll cock hunt with you." Kameron winks at me as she links arms with Ellie. "You go say goodnight to your date, yeah?"

"How?" I ask, feeling even worse about the situation than I did before.

"No one who's seen you and Rivera in the same room hasn't noticed the fucked up but kind of beautiful mating ritual you two have been doing for close to a year." Kameron nods toward the bar. "If he's oblivious, then he's not paying close enough attention, and that speaks volumes."

The fact he's not oblivious makes me feel even more like shit.

He's surrounded by a crowd of people when I begin to walk toward him. He's smiling and talking animatedly, having fun.

"He's good." Skinner nods toward the door. "There's a dozen chicks waiting to fill his time."

"Bro, you're a dick."

"Rather be a dick than a puck bunny."

Apparently, my finger isn't the only thing that flies instinctively. My hand cracks across his cheek, and then I pull it against my chest.

"Fuck!"

"You got a fucking problem, Skinner?" The voice. I know it. It's Koa.

I turn, press my hands on his chest, and tell him, "Theo needs you outside."

His answer is a growl as he continues to glare at Skinner.

"Now!" I scream.

To this, he glances down and narrows his eyes.

“I’m not going to be the reason Bleachers gets destroyed by a Cock and an asshole. Let’s go.”

“You won the Cock hunt!” Ellie says, standing on one side of me, and Kameron sidles up on my other side. “Let’s roll.”

I try to give Koa a shove, but he doesn’t budge.

“There a problem?” Oz asks, his chest pressing against my back.

“Wondering the same fucking thing. *Our* Riley”—Koa’s lip curls up as he looks at Skinner—“slapped Skinner, so I’m wondering what the fuck he did to deserve it.”

“You do something to Riles?” he asks Skinner.

“Told her I’d tell you she was leaving,” he lies so obviously.

Oz stretches his arms out wide. “See, man? No issues.”

“Koa, don’t do this shit to Joey. There’s never been a fight here,” I plead, but not just for Joey, but because I’m angry, and yes, a little hurt.

“For Joey,” he concedes then points to Skinner. “You watch your ass.”



“NOT SURE THE Tahoe’s ever been this packed.” Dean laughs from the back as I pull out of Uncle Ronnie’s. “You doing good, little sis?”

“If I am going to cart your drunk asses around in this thing again, I’d appreciate a heads-up,” I joke ... kind of.

“You look hot as fuck in my ride. I’m gonna buy you a booster seat, Cielo,” Theo slurs.

“That’s fucking perfect.” Ellie laughs.

“The hell is Cielo?” Leo asks.

“Heaven or sky,” Koa mumbles.

At the stoplight, I flex my hands, stretch my neck, and possibly breathe for the first time since getting into the driver's seat.

"Which will you be, Riley? Something so beautiful, so untouchable that all I can do is gaze up at you, or will you be a place that I'll never want to leave?"

All the tension returns, and I'm white-knuckling the steering wheel again.

"We totally called it!" I see Ellie, who's on Leo's lap, high-five him.

"We totally did." He chuckles.

Theo groans as he leans back and runs his hands through the thick mess of curls on the top of his head. "Leaving me on read again."

The light changes, and I hit the gas, with a little—okay, a lot—too much gusto, so much so that I squeal the tires and everyone in the back gets jumbled around.

"The fuck!" Evan laughs.

"Sorry. I'm so sorry." I laugh as Kameron, Ellie, and Drew right themselves.

"Riley," Koa groans. "I used to like you. Fuck it, still do, but your driving sucks."

When I pull into the driveway, the doors open, and they start piling out.

"Koa and Theo, you should crash here," Dean says.

"Need my bed," Koa replies. "Never getting out of that thing again."

"Hhm ... home," Theo mumbles, and I'm suddenly not as nervous.

"I'll be back," I tell Ellie.

"Nuh-uh, nope, no," Theo grumbles and reaches over, his big paw wrapping around my upper thigh.

The tummy is again doing flips, and the heat has returned.

Ellie squeezes my shoulder. “Text.”

“Will do.” I nod to Leo. “Have fun with Leo.”

She whispers, “Have fun with Theo.”



IN THE FIVE minutes it takes to drive to their apartment, being there's hardly any traffic on campus tonight, Koa and Theo both pass out. Waking them isn't easy, but it's much easier than getting them out of the vehicle and inside the apartment. Thankfully, JT is walking in as I'm trying to load them into the elevator to the fourth floor.

I swear that's all either of them dare say—to the fourth floor.

As soon as we're in their apartment, Theo stumbles to what I assume is the bathroom, and Koa starts mumbling about needing a charger to call his ex.

“I don't think that's a good idea, big guy,” Dash saunters out of what I assume is his bedroom, shirtless and in sweats.

“Don't get paid to think,” Koa stumbles down the hall and into a room.

“Not a good idea,” Dash whispers to me and JT. “You two gotta stop him.”

“Us?” JT whisper-hisses at him. “He's your best friend.”

“You two standing here, trying to figure out whose balls are big enough to deal with Koa is going to give him ample time to make a call he's going to regret,” I say as I walk toward the room. “Apparently, mine are bigger than both of yours.”

As he's ruffling through his drawers, I hear what I am sure is Theo hurling in the bathroom.

Koa looks from the dresser and sees me standing there. “Rivera?”

“Yeah.”

“*Unofficial* practice is gonna hurt. My bad.” He starts throwing clothes out of the drawer and onto the floor.

“Whatcha looking for?” I ask.

“Charger.”

“How about you have a seat, and I’ll find it?” I say, having no intention of doing so, but hoping he’ll fall for it and pass back out.

“Put too much on you already,” he says. “Should’ve killed Skinner.”

“Trust me; he got what he deserved. And you in this state”—I motion up and down the length of him—“I’m sure I’ll need you to back me up at some point this year.”

“Mmhmm.”

I point to the bed. “I’ll find your charger.”

“Preciate it.”

He stumbles over as he tosses off his shirt, and all I see is back muscles and arms decorated in ink. Then he pops the button on his jeans and shoves them down. Thankfully, he has on boxers or I would be getting eye full of *The Cock’s* cock, and I have no desire to be disappointed. In my head, it’s a majestic member, so being proved wrong would suck. And hell no will I admit that to anyone. Not even Leah, who has a seriously twisted obsession with penises. One that’s apparently rubbed off on me a little bit.

After tossing back the covers, he slides into the massive bed.

“Find it yet?” he asks, fighting to keep his eyes open.

“Still looking.”

He slurs, “Extra, closet, suitcases.”

Picking up the clothes, folding them and putting them back in the dresser, I look back. “Gotcha, I’ll check there next. Where’s your phone?”

“Pants,” is all he says.

Once the clothes are put away, I check to see that Koa is passed out and pick up his ginormous jeans, reach into his pocket, and pull out his phone.

“Oh shit.”

I look to the door and see Theo, with a white towel wrapped around his lower body. He’s ... stunning, and so much more cut than I imagined.

While I’m taking him in, he asks, “What is Koa doing in my bed?”

My eyes snap up to meet his that are slightly bloodshot, but still, his brown eyes with specks of golds that remind me of autumn are beautiful. And once again, he’s caught me checking him out.

“I didn’t know it was your room, and clearly, neither did he.” I look around and take it in differently, now knowing it’s his. His room is spotless. “You have the cleanest room I’ve ever seen.”

“Yeah,” he says, walking over to his dresser and opening a drawer. Then he pauses. “Did he—”

“Yeah, he was looking for his charger in there. His phone is dead, and he wanted to call Nalani, which is why I followed him. Pretty sure that wouldn’t be a good idea.”

“Good call.” He pulls a pair of ball shorts from the drawer and slips them on under the towel. He then turns and looks at me. “Dress is stunning, but I’ll grab you a sweatshirt to sleep in. It’ll be more comfortable.”

“Um, Theo, I’m not sleeping here.” I nod toward the bed. “Not only because it would be a bit crowded, but ...” I shrug.

“Watch a movie?” he asks.

“You should sleep. You have ‘unofficial’ practice tomorrow. And pretty sure you were just throwing up in there.”

He cringes. “Hoping you didn’t hear that.”

“Kinda hard not to.” I shrug. “I’ve hugged the toilet a time or two.”

He cringes again. “Why not throw up in the sink?”

“What?” I laugh.

He switches lanes so fast my head spins with one word. “Hungry?”

I shake my head.

“That’s right.” He looks down then back up at me. “How was your date?”

“It was,” I shake my head because could that question from him be any more awkward? No, no it couldn’t. “Good?”

“Good.” He nods toward the door. “Come get a drink with me?”

Good? So strange.

“Yeah.” I hold up Koa’s phone. “I promised I’d find him a charger.”

He walks over, opens a drawer, and pulls out an ... intricately wrapped bundle of cords. He looks back at me and holds out his hand. “Need to see which cord his phone uses.”

Biting back a smile, I walk over and hand it to him.

“What?” he asks.

“You’re very ... organized.”

“Seven kids in your—” He stops and shakes his head then whispers, “Six. Six kids in the family, and you tend to keep your things in order, or they’ll go missing.” He peels apart the Velcro closure of the band around the cords, finds the correct one, and plugs it in.

“Maybe keep it turned off just in case it rings and wakes him, and he inevitably calls Nalani and regrets it.”

“Good call.”



Chapter 13

Theo
Like Ass

Friday, September 6th

FEELING like ass but better than I deserve, I open the fridge. “What would you like to drink?” I look back as she digs into her little crossbody purse.

“Honestly, I’m all good.”

Damn right, she’s good. That little black skater skirt with the off-the-shoulder shirt that exposes her bellybutton ring with Chuck Taylors is insanely sexy.

“I’m grabbing a ginger ale and I have Dr. Pepper?” I grab one from the six pack I bought, having decided I would, in fact, start drinking soda, pop, Coke, or whatever they call it here once in a while. Having never been a drinker of anything other than water or drinks with added electrolytes, a ginger ale when sick, or the occasional Coke on the rare times we went out as a family, I chose what Riley drank at Dean’s at the end of last semester.

“Diet,” she corrects me, which leads me to believe she’s planning on staying.

Perfect.

I inspect the can and am happy I was a hell of a lot sober when I bought this, unlike now, as I feel buzzed and in the beginning stages of a hangover.

I turn around, see her looking at her phone, pop her tab, and hand it to her.

She takes the drink. “Thanks. Any chance you have another charger?”

“Yeah.”

Returning to the living room, I hand her a hoodie. “Again, you look stunning, but you’ll be more comfortable.” I hold my other hand out for her phone to get it set up.

“Just until my phone charges, and then I’m getting a ride.”

“Understood.”

After getting her phone charging and mine set up so the alarm goes off, I head over and sit beside her, leaving a respectable amount of space between us, and see she’s quickly putting on the hoodie. It swallows her up as I knew it would, but fuck if I don’t love the fact that I know my numbers are across her back.

I lean forward to grab the remote and my drink to see the ginger ale has been replaced with Powerade.

I glance at her, and she holds out her hand. “Drink that and take these.”

“You worried about how I’m gonna feel in the morning?”

She shrugs. “One of us has to.”

After shooting back the Motrin and drinking half the blue drink down, I turn to her. “I don’t get drunk.”

“Lies.”

“Fine. I *normally* don’t drink. I very, very rarely get drunk. Tonight was just—”

“Koa and Nalani broke up, and you two knuckleheads—neither of which drink often—decided tonight was the night to nosedive off the wagon.”

“Perfect summary.”

She taps the side of her head. “Contrary to what one of my group project partners thinks, I’m really pretty smart.”

“I know you’re intelligent.” *And beautiful. So fucking beautiful.*

She quirks a brow. “But my grammar drives you insane.”

“Just trying to be helpful.” I stretch my arm out on the back of the couch and take one of the waves of her hair between my fingers. I have to stifle a groan at how silky it feels. “Tell me about your date.”

She rolls her eyes. “You don’t want to know—”

“I do. Give me two good things and one that sucked.”

The surprise in her eyes is adorable.

“Why two and one?” she asks.

“Two good helps soften the suck.”

She shakes her head and sucks her bow-shaped lips into a line.

“It’s how the Riveras got through a shit time. Every night at dinner, we went around the table. High, low, high when Mom was home. Two ups and a suck when she was at work and Grant or I were leading the charge.”

“Your dad’s death?” she asks quietly.

I hold up two fingers. “My brother, Ford, died in the same accident and the suck? Quincy’s hearing loss.”

“I’m so sorry. Can I ask”—she pauses—“when?”

I run my hand over my face. “Summer before I started. Hardest thing I ever did was leave them, but Mom insisted. Quincy was wrecked, and we needed to ...” I stop and force a laugh. “No one needs to know that shit.”

“Your people care about you. If you need to talk to—”

“What I need is a rewind button. First time alone-ish with you, and I trauma dump. That’s not how I saw this going down. Come on; give me two ups and a suck.”

She holds up a thumb. “Got to get dressed up and do my hair.” Her smile falls into a frown.

“You sure that’s an up?” I chuckle.

She nods and holds up her other thumb. “Tried a new restaurant I never would have.”

Again, by her expression, I’m not sure that’s something she liked or something that sucked, but also ... fuck, I’m tired.

“Give me your suck.”

“I’ve DM’d this guy all week, and he’s left me on delivered.”

“Oz pulled that shit on you, and you still went on a date with him?”

She curls her legs up behind her, covers her knees with the bottom of the hoodie, and shakes her head. “You know I’m talking about you.”

“I’m calling bullshit.” I shove my hand in my pocket and realize my phone’s on the island with hers, charging. “Why would you DM me when you have my number?”

“Deleted it because, you know. Just because.”

“How the hell did I miss those?” I ask myself, but then it hits me. “Been logged into my other account all week.”

“Other account? Do you have a finsta?” She laughs.

“No, I have a personal account with family on it. Pictures I don’t wanna lose or share with the random people. Puck bunnies don’t need to see my sisters, or Mom, or—”

“I hate that term—puck bunny.”

“My apologies. I guess it’s more that I don’t need to be on an emotional level with people who aren’t going to be in my life in two years. When I go pro, I want to blend and not be the poor immigrant kid who got his chance to take a shot because his dad and brother died due to some idiot who needed to send a tweet while going eighty on I-10.”

“You’re signed.”

“That doesn’t matter to people who want to sell a story.”

“So, when you graduate, all us little people are but a memory.” She laughs, but it’s forced.

I take a moment to look over the only girl I’ve dreamed about for years, and even though I don’t want to set myself up for heartbreak, I tell her straight up, “There’s a few of you that I hope don’t fade away.”

I watch as she swallows hard and turn my upper body to face her fully.

“Riley, I don’t know what happened, why you stopped—”

“Give me two ups and a suck,” she interrupts me.

Groaning, I lean back and look up at the ceiling. “Gonna start with suck. Sucked knowing you were going on a date, and it was with him and not me.”

“You sure it didn’t suck worse throwing up, lightweight?” she jokes.

Head still resting on the back of the couch, I turn and look at her. “If I hadn’t, I’d have been facedown and passed out, not sitting here with you, which leads me to”—I lift up my thumb—“you not going home with Oz.” I lift it again. “I have Riley fucking Park at my place, wearing my hoodie, on my couch, and *Cielo*, I’m gonna need you to kiss me to prove I’m not dreaming.”

“You think that old line’s gonna work?” she asks, but I can almost see the quickening in her breaths and know it has.

I take my hand that’s resting behind her on the couch, cup the back of her head, and lean in. “You tell me.”

“Yeah.”

Her hot, sweet breath on my lips has me dizzy. The smell of her skin—light musk and lavender—has my heartbeat increasing. And the way we kiss . . . it’s gentle, soft, dizzily slow, a seduction of brushing lips and gentle tugging, slow swipes of the tongue, hers and then mine.

I'm pulling her closer, not realizing it until I have her straddling my lap, mouths tracing angles of one another's faces, lips pressing softly against necks. It's nothing like I have imagined, and everything a kiss should be.

"Fucking ruining me, Cielo," I groan as she sucks on my neck like I did hers, making her way back to my mouth.

I run my nose down the side of her neck, and her head falls back.

"Your neck is so incredibly sexy." I use my tongue to trace from the nape to her jawline, opening my mouth slightly to kiss lightly across her cheek to her lips.

Panting softly, she rests her forehead against mine, and we look into each other's eyes, a million questions lingering between us, but neither of us says a thing.

I take her hand, hoping to give her an answer. "I want you to feel what you do to me."

"Okay." She inhales deeply and holds her breath.

I hold her hand tightly against my chest. "Do you feel that?"

She lets out bubble of a giggle, and I lean back and shake my head, realizing she wasn't expecting her hand to land on my heart. "You're a naughty little thing, Riley Park."

She leans back and crosses her arms, amusement dancing in her eyes as she pretends to be annoyed. "Me? I seem to recall your words at the—"

She stops when a loud *thump* comes from behind her.

"Busted," a female groans and then, "Jesus, are you two going to screw or what?"

Riley's back goes straight, and she huffs, "Hooker say what?"

When she whirls around sideways, I'm given a clear view of Leah, who is walking from Dash's room.

Riley scoots off my lap, leaving me exposed. I quickly grab the blanket draped over the end of the couch to cover my

hard-on.

Leah holds up her phone. “Because you weren’t answering, Grace found my location and messaged me to see if you were here, then called me to make sure you got home okay. Something about puck bunnies, cocks, assholes, and hoes.”

“What?” Riley laughs.

“Bitch, I have no idea, but I was trying to give you two time to finish. I’ve already cancelled three rides and another one is on its way, so it looks like we’re calling it a night unless you’re staying over.”

“No, of course not,” Riley snarls then turns and looks at me. “So—”

“I’m taking you out tonight.”

“Um, no, you aren’t, lover boy. She’s got Cody’s game and then a party at the house. If either one of you checked your messages, you’d know that. I can hold Kevin off for one, maybe two minutes, but that’s it, so hurry it up.”

Dick still hard, I stand as Leah leaves the apartment. “This is happening.”

“Mmhm.” She rolls her eyes. “Are you going to the game?”

“Do you want me there?”

She lifts a shoulder, and I take her hand and walk her to the island, where I grab her phone then head to the door.

“You want me there, I’m there.”

“I mean, Cody would appreciate it.”

“Not being a dick when I say this, but I don’t care if Cody wants me at his game. I want to know if Riley does.”

She nods once.

“Good.” I open the door, still holding her hand, and walk us out. “Then tomorrow night, at the party, I’m not gonna be able to just hang back and wait for you to come to me, not

after that kiss.” I walk us toward the elevator and hit the down arrow button. When it opens, I walk us in.

“You don’t have to ride with me. I know—”

“I can’t believe I’m letting you leave after that kiss.” I lean against the wall, looking up at the ceiling.

When she says nothing, I look down at her. She’s staring at our linked fingers.

“Tell me you’ll give us a shot.”

“Can I think about it?”

“Do you really have to? I mean, was I alone in feeling like that kiss just wrote the first chapter of our second chance?”

The elevator opens, and I hear Leah yell from the lobby door, “Come on. Kevin can’t wait all night.”

Riley pushes up on her toes and kisses my cheek. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Rivera.” Then she all but runs to the car, with my name and number across her back.

Fuck. Me.

Friday September 6th

I woke up this morning feeling good, great, way better than I deserved, but as Coach blows the whistle, it feels like it’s coming from inside my head.

“Bring it in, you bunch of clowns!”

All huddled around him, he looks at us, shaking his head. “We’re one week and five days from our first game, a week out until mandated practices begin, and you look like a bunch of circus animals out there.” His eyes meet mine. “A bunch of monkeys holding your little monkey sticks, dragging your monkey asses all over my ice.”

What the hell is this shit? is all I can think.

His eyes leave mine as he continues, “If this was official practice and on my time, you’d be skating lines until you punks puked out whatever shit you got into last night that caused you to skate like baby baboons. Now go! Get out of my

face.” He throws his arms in the air as he walks away. “I’m taking the day tomorrow to try to unsee what you fools have shown me today. You should all do the same.”

Something draws my eyes above Coach to the bleachers, and that’s where I see Evan Smith laughing his ass off, holding a fake mic as he fake sings, and then ... the bastard drops the mic. Kameron? She’s covering her face, and her whole body is trembling in what I know is laughter.

I make a mental note to contact Dylan Daniels, who is not only the first female head coach in the NHL, but Smith’s coach, and ask her to make sure she’s riding his ass hard.

“Bro.” JT catches up to me as we skate toward the locker rooms. “Video from Bleachers went viral.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I snarl.



STEPPING OUT OF THE SHOWER, I notice a dozen or so of my teammates snickering as I pass.

“Know your place, little bitches,” I sneer.

“Goddamn, Rivera,” booms through the locker room.

Fucking Smith.

“This whole skating thing doesn’t work out, you should drop a demo.”

“How about I drop you on the floor?” I snap as I grab my sweats and pull them on.

“Bro, it was an epic move, and that’s coming from the guy who showed up at his coach’s house, trying to win the girl while wrecked. And you owe me.”

“*I owe you?*” I ask, pulling my long-sleeved tee over my head.

“Yeah, if it wasn’t for your video, Kami wouldn’t have gotten a call at six a.m. because he saw her in said video, and she and I wouldn’t be here to soften the blow.”

“Soften the blow?”

“Yeah.” He smiles then shrugs. “Well, Kami softened the blow. Reminded him that our team rocked last year when the three of us were coupled up, so he shouldn’t give you too much shit.”

I look left and see Koa glaring at his screen before taking his phone and hurling it into his locker.

“Shit,” Smith whispers. “That’s not good.”

“See you later?” I lift my chin to Smith, and he lifts his to Koa in understanding.

I grip the back of Koa’s shirt. “Let’s jet.”

RILEY



Chapter 14

Riley

Why oh why

Friday September 6th

WHEN WE GET HOME, I refuse to talk about Theo with Leah. Thankfully, that isn't a fight, and yes, I know it's because that would open up the door to her telling me what the hell is up with her and Dash, and she's not ready to go there any more than I am. And as luck would have it, the rest of the house seems to be behind closed doors, which is perfect because I need some time to process everything that just went down while it's fresh in my memory.

Inside my room, I take off everything I'm wearing except my undies, slide Theo's giant hoodie back over my head, pee, and then contemplate brushing my teeth but decided against it since I am still unwilling to part with his taste and the feel of his lips still on mine as I wash my hands. I then launch myself on my bed, hook my phone up, and hit shuffle on my music so Ellie and Leo can get freaky and I don't have to hear it. I grab my pink journal and my hot pink gel pen and prepare to word-vomit all that I am feeling for Simone.

Dear Simone,

I suited up and took to the field tonight, only to find myself once again slipping on the ice. Spoiler alert: I stuck the landing. It was on the softest, most delicious lips I have ever tasted.

Let me rewind ... I adored OZ, like truly, and even got over the fact that he was shook this past Monday when I looked like ... well me untouched.

I accepted it was because he'd never seen me without makeup and my hair done. Not really his fault. I get it. I see peoples IGs and think, "Who the fuck is that?" all the time, so I let it slide.

The date was nice. He picked me up in an Uber, with flowers. It was sweet that he insisted on the Uber even though I have a perfectly good vehicle we could have taken, but in retrospect, that worked out well. More on that later.

During dinner, at a steak house, we laughed and had a great time. He complimented me dozens of times on how hot I looked tonight. The first few times, I didn't catch on to the emphasis on tonight, but again, looking back, I am sure there was one.

He asked if I was good with stopping at Bleachers, and of course I was. I love that place! And also, no good date ends two hours in, and I was hell-bent on it being a good date.

But that's where I hit the ice. By this, I mean, Theo Rivera was there, and he was singing some silly made-up lyrics to the Bare Naked Ladies song, "If I Had A Million Dollars," and, well, Dean was there, and so were the guys and the girls, and Oz told me to go hang out with them. Insisted, actually. Now I'm a feminist, Simone, and not about a possessive man, but one who all but pushes you into the arms of another is for sure not into you. But one who sees you and sings the really horrible

lyrics about wanting to love on your "monkey" in a packed bar, and then pleads with you to come home with him ... even though he may have just wanted you to drive his beast of a vehicle because he got drunk, that kind of guy apparently is more appealing to me than the former. Is that wrong on a million levels? Fuck yes, but it's my life, Simone, and I'm all about living it.

Plus ... well, he confided in me, albeit drunk, but not too drunk since he must have lost some of the alcohol content when he vomited—sounds so much worse than it is. I think, anyway. Back to it. He has depth, and he brought me into it. And Simone, he kissed me, and my lips are still tingling. Did I mention he signs? And that he signed "beautiful" to me on the day OZ looked at me like WTF? Well, he does and he did. And Simone, sexy is nice, but beautiful is ... well, it's beautiful.

Okay, Okay, I just reread this, and it's a mess, but it's really not.

Before I fall asleep, I have to write down just a few more things that I never, ever, ever want to forget.

Cielo means sky or heaven. He called me that and said, "Which will you be, something beautiful, untouchable that all I can do is gaze up you, or a place that I'll never want to leave?" That's not verbatim, but gahhhh!

Theo and his family do a thing called two ups and a suck.
SOMONE, WE DO THAT, TOO!

Ending on two highs and a low, and then going to fall asleep with tingly lips and stomach flips. ← that rhymes.

H- One door shut but a much better one opened.

L- Got called a puck bunny, WACH OZ sided with his boy about. Strike 3.

H- Best. Kiss. Ever.

X,

R



“OH MY GOD,” I groan as Mom’s ringtone sprouts off.

I push myself up, swipe my sleeve across my lower lip because, apparently, I passed out facedown on my iPad. Rubbing my eyes as I pull my phone off the base, I hit *accept*.

“Mom, it’s early,” I groan.

“Your adorable friend with the bald head has gone viral.”

“What?” I rub my eyes again.

“Hold your phone up so I can see you.”

Annoyed, I hold the phone up. “Why are you FaceTiming me so early?”

“What? No practice today?” she asks.

I inwardly cringe since I have yet to tell her we’re not practicing Fridays until we get closer to competition season, fearing she’ll somehow guilt me into coming home on weekends. “No.”

“What are you wearing?” She scrutinizes me. “I bought you all of those cute pajamas, and you’re wearing that?”

“I’m going to hang up and go back to sleep,” I warn.

My door flies open, and Leah leaps on my bed, causing me and my phone to launch into the air. And before I have time to even think, she squeals, “Your hockey boy’s gone viral!”

“Who is that? Let me see.”

Leah slaps her own hand over her mouth, and her eyes are so wide they nearly pop out of her head.

I scramble to grab my phone, planning to hang up on her and pretend there’s bad wi-fi when Grace runs into my room, her phone facing me and Theo’s voice coming through the speaker, singing that damn song. “Fucking viral, baby!”

“That’s what I was telling her!”

Grace freezes and looks around.

“Down here,” my mom’s voice comes from ... somewhere.

Grace bends down at the end of my bed to pick up the phone and doesn’t see me shaking my head *no* like a crazy person.

“Hey, you must be Riley’s mom.”

“You’re Grace,” my mom tells her, *like she doesn’t know who she is*. “The fiery redhead in nearly all the KET pictures on the Gram.”

“I apologize for my language, Mrs. Park, but our friend, Theo, went viral and—”

“No need to apologize,” my mom, who would have threatened to wash my mouth out with soap, tells Grace, who is unaware that she’s now one of Mom’s best friends. “I was calling to tell her the same thing. I met Theo just the other day, in fact.”

Before Leah or Grace say something ... stupid, I hop up and snatch the phone. “When he, like you both just did, ambushed a call.”

“Oh, I don’t mind,” Mom says. “I like meeting your friends.”

“Are you coming for parents’ weekend?” Grace asks.

I look at the screen and into the judgmental face of Nabi, whose brow is arched. “I’m not sure. Riley hasn’t mentioned it.”

I walk over to the door so I can get these two bitches out of my room, and when I push it open the rest of the way, I see Dean’s reflection. He’s standing right behind me.

“Oh, hello, Dean. How are you, dear?”

Fuck my life.

“Mrs. Park, it’s lovely to meet you.”

“I’m so sorry about your grandfather. He was a lovely man.”

“He certainly was.”

“Such a kind heart.” She sighs. “And brilliant business mind.”

“Did you ever have the pleasure of meeting him?” Dean asks.

“As a matter of fact—”

“She’s probably seen him in interviews,” I cut her off before she sounds like a weirdo.

“He was actually a member of the hospital board, with your father,” she corrects me. “His donations funded the new research wing.”

“We’re obviously still trying to sort through all of Grandfather’s passion projects. By all means, please get my number from Riley if there’s anything I can do for you.”

When Ellie and Leo walk in, I hand Dean, who’s still talking to my mom, my phone. I then walk over to my window, lift it open, open the screen, and stand on the windowsill. I hold two fingers up behind me at all of them before holding out my arm and falling forward.

“Riley, don’t!”

Dammit.

A couple minutes later, I’m sitting on the balcony, holding a tissue against my bloody nose, and Theo is beside me, holding my damn phone out.

“How you can be so graceful on the mat and bars, yet simply walking is a problem? Did you tell your young friend about prom?”

“No, Mom,” I growl. “Nor did I tell him about the time I bled through white pants—”

“Riley!” she gasps. “Not in mixed company.”

“Mom, I love you. I’m good. I need a shower and some breakfast and to go back to bed until Monday. We’ll talk then, okay?”

“Of course.” She shifts her eyes to Theo. “I am so glad you have all that hair on top of your head. You should let it grow out. Those waves are just gorgeous.”

“Stop flirting with my friend, Mom,” I sigh.

She ignores me. “It was nice seeing you again. Riley, please stay safe.”

I narrow my eyes at her, and what does she do? She smiles, and it’s the smile that no matter my mood, or how annoyed I am, always makes me smile back at her.

“Nice seeing you, as well.” Theo smiles then ends the call.

He sets the phone down between us, leans against the house, and exhales. “You sure you’re okay?”

I pull the wad of tissues away from my nose and turn to face him. “Has it stopped?”

Sighing, he pushes himself up and holds out his hand. “Definitely slowed down. Let’s get you inside so you can lay down and tip your head back.”

I take his hand, and he pulls me up.

When I face the window to climb back in, he tugs on my hand. “You know there’s a door right here that happens to be a lot less dangerous.”

“I know where the stupid door is. I was being dramatic, and then you—”

“I am so fucking sorry. Everyone was in your room and—”

“When my nose isn’t throbbing, I’m going to laugh so hard about that.”

He smiles as he pushes the door open. “You have a twisted sense of humor. Might have to ask you to help me see the actual humor in that stupid fucking video.”

“With all that happened, I haven’t even seen it,” I admit.

“Promise me you won’t watch the damn thing?” he asks, walking into my room.

“Absolutely.” I wait for him to show signs of relief before I finish with a, “Not. I am totally watching it; are you kidding me? It went viral.”

Shaking his head, he points to the bed, “Go lie down, and I’ll get you some clean tissues.”

“Bathroom’s right there.” I nod to the door as I push down the covers, which I apparently slept on last night instead of under, then slide in, trying to be careful not to bleed on my bedding, because that would be the kiss of death to this pink cloud of comfy.

He walks back into the room with a washcloth in one hand and his other hand full of tissues.

Theo Rivera is in my room. My. Room. And I’m a shitshow, which is arguably his fault. I mean, kinda, sort of.

He looks down before taking the step that would put him within reach and lets out a sigh.

I glance down at the floor and inwardly die.

“You found my other account.”

“In my defense, by the time I was sixteen, I had honed skills that the FBI and CIA wish they had.”

He sets the iPad on my bed, sits down, a soft smile on his lips as he takes away the tissues, and then ... then Theo Rivera gently cleans the blood from under my nose.

“I’m surprised that none of my sisters have called me and busted my balls about that damn video.”

“Did the person who posted tag your college account or the other Theo account?”

He chuckles silently. “I would have called it a finsta, but you corrected me last night.”

He pulls the damp cloth away and looks over my face. “All better, but ...” He balls up the washcloth and shoots it like a

basketball into the clothes basket. Then he lies on his back, scooping up my iPad before lying back down.

“Your sisters are stunning. All long and lean like you, with your mom’s good boobs.”

To that, he shakes his head. “I mean, I don’t really wanna think about their boobs, but I’m sure my mom would appreciate that.”

“Probably not from you, though, right?”

“Probably not.” He chuckles in agreement.

I roll to my side and face him. “The Theo on this page looks like a lot of trouble.”

“You think?”

“Oh yeah, he has the same light in his eyes as Theo at the football game had when he was—”

“Let’s not do third person. It’s freaking me out.” He smiles at a photo.

“Feels a little detached and safer.” I lean in and see that he’s looking at a family photo. I count nine and know there are now seven.

I’m about to ask him about his brother when he sets the iPad on his chest. “You have zero problem saying what you’re thinking, so tell me something, Riley Park: what the hell happened last spring?”

Fuck.

“I wanna try this”—he motions between us—“but unless I know what I did to drive a wedge, then there isn’t anything I can do to ease your pretty little mind or fix my shit. If it’s time, I can promise to give you more. If it’s—”

Fuck it.

“If I tell you, you have to promise to tell me the truth, and you have to promise not to—”

“I’m not telling anyone shit, Ri. Let’s have it.”

“Can you not look at me? Maybe just—”

He rolls to his side, moves closer, and rests his hand on my hip. My. Hip. “Nope.”

I close my eyes. “It sounds petty, and it is, because we aren’t like a thing, or married, or ...” I cringe at the fact I just said married. “I’d really like to moonwalk that back, but you know what I mean.”

“You mean I took too much time showing interest and not making a move?”

I pop my eyes open. “Exactly.”

He smiles. “Keep going.”

“You left parties where I was more than once with ...” I suck my lips in and shake my head.

He shakes his head, too. “Swear it on the moon, from the day we met, I haven’t been with anyone. Longest drought of my life, believe it. Finsta Theo was trouble. Gave zero fucks about anything but hockey and family.”

“The girl in some of those photos—”

“She was a good girl who deserved better than an asshole boyfriend for all four years of high school.”

“Ouch.” I cringe.

“I’m not him anymore. Or, at least, being on this side of”—he shakes his head—“loss. Fucking loss sucks. But I wanna be on the side of it that I allow the sun to shine, for real, and not just fake my way through it. So, you gotta tell me, Ri, what did I do to fuck it up?”

“Okay, I love her and, like I said, we weren’t anything, and I swear I don’t hold anger or blame and—”

“Ri, who? Because I swear—”

“Drew.” I smash my eyes shut. “And I’d fuck her if I were a guy because—”

“Open your eyes,” he says with far too much humor in his voice to be ignored. When I do, he shakes his head. “The first time I pulled her out of here was because I was asked to. For obvious reasons, there was that fight, and she had a broken

ankle. I don't drink so, fuck, I don't know, I think it was Bass who asked me to take her home. I did. I slept at her place, on the couch. Nothing happened. I swear—”

“Drew, what the hell are you doing?” Dean's voice comes from the hall.

“Seriously, Costello, you suck.”

“Something you and I have in common.” He chuckles.

“Drew, are you really outside of the door, spying on us?” Theo yells out to her.

“She is.” Dean chuckles. “We've all been waiting for this to happen. It's about damn time.”

We hear her squeal, and then Dean walks in with her over his shoulder.

“Put me down, Costello, or I swear I'll lob off your dick, and then you'll have nothing to play with.”

He sets her on her feet, and she turns to face us, clearing her throat and straightening her shoulders. “I'm happy to hear that you love me and that you'd fuck me if you were a guy.”

I palm my face a bit too hard and wince.

She sits down on the bed beside me. “Cause I love you, too. The night Theo took me home from here, I could have totally gone down on you, and you would have loved me even more.”

Dean chuckles, “Just saying, I don't hate what I'm hearing right now.”

“The fuck?” Theo growls at him.

Drew rolls her eyes at Dean and looks back at me. “That time in my life, I was a hundred percent sure I was a lesbian. Theo was actually the first person, aside from Dean and Dylan, who knew that.”

“I'm so confused,” I admit.

“She's not gay; she's bi. She likes dick and—”

“Dick more as of late,” she cuts him off. Then she holds up her hand. “I, Drew Daniels, do solemnly swear that Theo Rivera and I have never so much as kissed.”

To that, I frown.

“Out with it,” she insists.

“I saw you two in the backyard after the guys won the Frozen Four. Maybe you were drunk and don’t remember or —”

She holds up a finger to stop me, pulls her phone out of her pocket, and begins tapping away.

“Was probably me,” Dean says.

“You were inside.” I know this because Theo and Drew were close then, and when I ran back inside, I looked for him. I saw Dean, Bass, Evan, and Leo. Theo was nowhere to be found. “Anyway, I don’t want this to be a thing, which is why I never brought it up. I adore you and—”

“What’s up?” Cody asks, walking into my room now.

“Remember that night out back, the Frozen Four party—”

“What the fuck, Drew?” He shakes his head.

“No one’s going to say anything. I just need you to clear up something.”

He crosses his arms and shakes his head. “That shit wasn’t to be spoken about. I don’t need hurt feelings.”

“You two?” Dean points between Drew and Cody.

Through his teeth he says, “Were very fucked up and—”

“We good?” Drew cuts him off.

I nod.

“No, for real, because you two need to stop dancing around the fire and dive headfirst into it.” She gets off the bed. “And also, please don’t tell anyone about that, because Cody’s clearly embarrassed about it.”

“That’s not—”

“Go. Shoo.” Drew waves him and Dean toward the door.
“Let them get to it.”

As soon as they leave, Theo shrugs. “Won’t lie and say I wasn’t outside that night. It was a rough one, fucked with my head that Dad didn’t get to see us win, but it wasn’t me kissing on Drew. And I’d seal that promise with a kiss, but you need to lie back down. You’re starting to drip again.”

I flop back. “Can we start this day over?”

“Wouldn’t hate lying here and chilling until four when Koa gets out of class.” He hands me a wad of tissues.

“How’s he doing?” I ask as I hold the tissues to my nose and tip my head back.

“Fucked up, for sure.”

“Theo?”

“Yeah?” he asks, lying down beside me.

“Your dad was there. He saw you win.”

“I’d take comfort in that, but then I’d wonder if he sees every move I make, like that performance last night.” He chuckles.

“Not gonna lie, after the initial shock, it was kinda hot.”

“Yeah?” He rolls to his side and smiles at me.

“Totally.” I smile back. “You have to let me watch it.”

“Can’t stop you; you’ve got skills remember?”

Then Theo Rivera gives me my very first forehead kiss, and yes, that kind of kiss is worth all the hype.



Chapter 15

Theo Going Down

Friday, September 6th

RILEY DISAPPEARED into the bathroom for a good ten minutes. When she came out, she was no longer in my hoodie but wrapped in a pink bathrobe. For a few beats of my damn heart, I was thinking she was bare for me.

She wasn't.

Aside from the blood-dotted tissue under her nose, she was wearing a sweet pair of baby blue sleep shorts and a matching tank, her thick hair knotted up on the sides.

For nearly a year, I've loved what she does with makeup. She's seriously talented, like my sister, Kennedy, but fresh-faced Riley Park ... fuck, it does something to me. Nothing hotter than how she looks now, or right after her practices.

I hold back her comforter as she climbs in. "Not gonna lie and say I've never watched porn—I have. Just not my thing. But if I was watching this on the screen, I'd never leave my bedroom."

"Blood kink? Maybe you should talk to someone about that."

“Not my thing.”

“What is?”

“I’m pretty sure you’re my thing. Pretty sure I knew that when I first saw you.”

She turns her head and looks at me. “Can I be your thing after I fall asleep, reset the day, and wake without a banged-up beak?”

“Yeah, yeah, you can.” We look at each other, just stare into one another’s eyes for a few quiet moments. “Tell me what your thing is.”

“Hoping it’s you,” she whispers.

“Hoping, huh?”

“Mhmm. But I will warn you, my high school boyfriend could never get me there, so you’ll have your work cut out for you.”

“Never been afraid of work, but anything that happens with you and I isn’t going to be work; it’s going to be nothing but pleasure.” I press my lips to her forehead, because when I did it before, she let out this sweet and hot little mewl, and fuck, I want to hear her do it again.

She doesn’t disappoint.

My lips stay on her head as I feel her hand fist my shirt.

I push myself up and nod down. “I wouldn’t mind getting more closely acquainted with your belly button piecing.”

“Yeah?” she asks.

“I think it’s safe. Far enough from your nose that it shouldn’t be an issue.”

“I mean, yeah, that makes sense.”

“Just wanna see if maybe that’s going to become a kink I was unaware of.”

She nods as she rolls onto her back and pulls her little tank up, and I notice how hard her nipples are. So fucking hot.

She takes my hand and runs it down her tight belly. “Be my guest.”

Using my finger, I circle it. “Pretty sure I’m gonna want my mouth right here a lot.”

“Just pretty sure?” She swallows hard.

“Be okay if I get a closer look?”

“Uh-huh.”

I curl up into a seated position and spread my hand over her entire belly. “Your skin is soft, so perfect.” When she doesn’t reply, I glance up and see holding her breath, “Breathe, *Cielo*.”

She exhales through her mouth slowly as I move lower down the bed.

“Can’t wait to kiss those sexy lips of yours again, but I fucked that up, didn’t I?”

“Wasn’t your fault,” she says, voice shaking.

“Our kisses last night ... fuck, Riley. I’ve kissed a few girls but never felt one so deep. Wasn’t just dick deep; I felt it in my soul. Really need to put my lips on your skin, Riley. You good with that?”

“Is that even a real question?” she whispers.

“Gotta ask.”

“Yes, and yes, and then yes.”

I move down and lean over her. She squirms when my hair touches her before my lips do.

I inhale her scent and groan, “You’re going to be an addiction.”

I lick around her belly ring and gently tug at the little pink jewel with my teeth as I tighten my grip on her hip to keep her from catapulting off the bed.

“Gonna need to breathe. Can’t have you passing out and wake up not believing me when I tell you how easy it was for the right guy to make you come so hard you saw stars.”

I slide my fingers under the loose fabric of her shorts and find her bare. “Killing me, Riley. Bare, hot”—I slide a finger up her slit, and she bucks beneath my touch—“wet, and responsive as fuck.”

I slide them deeper, parting her lips, and taking care not to touch her clit. “I don’t want you going off until I’m licking your pussy.”

“Jesus, Theo,” she whimpers as I push my finger halfway inside her tight pussy and curl it up, finding her G-spot in seconds.

“Fuck,” she cries softly.

“Fuck yeah or”—I curl it up again, this time pressing harder—“fuck no?”

“Yes, fuck yes,” she whimpers.

Feeling like my dick may bust through my pants in hot pursuit for Riley’s cunt, I maneuver myself over her so I can grind against her mattress to get some sort of relief ... or not. Either way, I want between her legs, and the fact her tank is loose, and she’s not wearing panties, I don’t have to waste time taking them off.

“I’ve changed my mind.” I kneel between her legs and continue fingering her tight, little pussy as I dip my hand into my pants and stroke my cock. “I’m gonna let you come this way because you deserve something good today. After that, I’m going to devour your tight as hell pussy because I need to taste you. Then I’m gonna make you come again, because I can.”

Her back arches as her knees clench around my wrist, and her hot walls smash around my finger as she throws her arm across her mouth and cries out her orgasm into it.

“You come so pretty,” I say right before I lean down and circle her clit with my tongue, still fingering her.

“OhmygodRivera,” she whimpers. “Oh. My. God.”

Once I’ve worked her through her first, I pull my finger out and use two in a V to spread her open. “Fuck, your pussy

is perfection.” I bow down and lick around her opening. “You taste like summer air. Delicious.”

She grips the sheets and arches again. “This”—*pant*—“is”—*pant*—“insane.”

I lick up her center then shove my tongue inside her, tasting her as deeply as I can get as she bucks against my face. Pulling my tongue out, I then suck her hot lips between mine.

Lapping at her, I run a hand up her body, cup one of her perfect little tits in my hand, and roll her nipple that is hard as glass between my fingers. She comes again, this time louder and fisting my hair.

“Theo!” she cries as I continue licking between her trembling slick thighs. “So, so, so ... good.”

I cover her with my mouth and use my tongue to flick her sexy little nub. Heat, wet, musk seeps from her body as her thighs shake and tighten around my head, her whimpers muffled by her arm again over her face.

She tastes so fucking good, her scent intoxicating, and I don’t want to stop, even after her thighs are no longer shaking and she’s panting.

“Cant”—*pant*—“move.” *Pant.*

I pull my mouth away from her and push up off of her, moving to throw her blanket back over her and lie beside her.

I pull her into my arms, heart hammering, cock hard as stone, but I don’t give a fuck.

“That was—”

“Fucking delicious,” I finish for her.

“Owe you big, Rivera.”

“I’m just happy your nose isn’t bleeding anymore.”

Her heavy eyes close. “Give me ten, and I’ll—”

“*Shh.*” I press a kiss to her head. “Rest.”

Within a few minutes, she’s out, and I’ve been lying in bed with her curled up and zonked out beside me. Exhausted, I’ve

been dosing off myself for a good thirty minutes.

When my pocket vibrates, I reach in, pull my phone out, and hit the screen.

DASH:

Requesting a house meeting before Koa is done with classes. You two up for it?

JT:

Be there in ten.

Fuck.

ME:

Give me twenty.



IT TAKES great strength and several reminders to myself that, even though this is where I want to be—with Riley—a teammate and friend needs me, and she needs to rest. She's out cold, and I'm able to slide out of her bed and leave her sleeping peacefully.

The entire way back to the apartment, I have a bouquet of flowers riding shotgun—the first I ever bought for a girl who wasn't related to or for a formal where flowers were required. Flowers for a girl that I plan on taking to lunch and asking her to officially be my girlfriend, because straight up, I am not emotionally equipped to handle the thought of her kissing someone else the way she kisses me or spend any bit of free time she could spare with anyone other than me. And that's how I was feeling before I tasted her and saw how she comes.

I truly want to believe it's not possible that that kind of kiss or connection could be shared between two people other than us. I've never experienced a single kiss like ours or felt such a need to make someone come, my own dick be damned.

I even light a candle for that prayer to be answered, and I haven't lit a candle in years.

As I hit the *lock* on the Tahoe, I'm reminded of the fact I was able to walk both in and out of her house unseen and unheard. That needs to be addressed, and it will be. I don't like the idea of Riley being unsafe or unprotected.

When I walk into the apartment, Dash and JT are on the couch, game controllers in hand.

"Grab a controller and let's chat before Koa gets in."

"Wasn't lying when I said I've never played." To me, *games are a time suck*.

"Contrary to popular belief, you can teach an old dog new tricks, man." JT chuckles.

I flop down on the couch opposite them, without grabbing a controller. "I was under the impression we needed to talk about Koa."

"Also, contrary to popular belief, men can do two things at once." Dash adds, "Fuck, man, you killed me."

Growing frustrated, I open my phone app to the TV controller and power the damn thing off. "I didn't come back here to watch you two play games."

"Chill, Rivera." JT laughs. "You don't always have to be in the library or at the gym."

"I was with Riley," I correct his assumption, even though that's exactly where I'd normally be ... until Riley. "So, let's do this, because I was planning on being here when he got out of class, drag him to the game tonight, and then to the party at 673 Athens Lane to keep him busy."

"Like that idea, but what if he says fuck that and wants to stay back?" Dash, who knows him better than any of us, asks.

"Guess we come up with a schedule of who's doing what and when so we can make sure he's always got one of us around to chill with or—"

"Get fucked up with and sing karaoke?" JT chuckles.

I nod. “Whatever it takes. He’s hurting, and we’re who he has here at Lincoln.”

“He wants to stay back from the game, I’m down,” Dash offers. “And the party, I’m skipping that, too.”

JT smirks. “Gotta ask if it has something to do with a hot blonde who—”

“Chick is crazy and, typically, I work well with crazy, but she hit a level well above batshit, and I’m not cool with that.” Dash’s eyes widen.

“Hoping you didn’t lead her on then,” I give a slight warning because even though Leah can be a bitch, she’s Riley’s friend.

“Rivera, I can promise you I did no such thing.” The fact he looks serious and a little frightened at her mention leads me to believe he’s giving it to me straight.

I stand up. “I’m gonna run to the store and grab a wall calendar. We can all add our shit on there before he gets back and play it off like it’s something we talked about before the breakup.”



AN HOUR AND A HALF LATER, I get a text from an unknown number as I’m cutting up vegetables to roast.

I pick up the phone and open the text. It’s a meme that says:

Grammar

The difference between

knowing your shit, and knowing you’re shit.

Smiling, I hit her back.

ME:

So what’s the verdict, Riley Park?

HER:

How do you know it's Riley Park?

ME:

I only give my number out to girls whose kisses make me wonder if I ever really kissed and pussies are my new addiction.

I set the phone down and continue cutting the vegetables as I watch the dots jump around the screen for a bit and stop. I finally get a text

Her:

And here I was trying to be tricky and cute.

I wipe my hands on the towel and pick up my phone.

Me:

You don't have to try to be cute. Even with a bloody nose, you're beautiful. Feeling any better? Rested at least?

HER:

Much better, thank you very much.

ME:

Do you need a ride to the game tonight?

HER:

Nope. All set. Are you all coming over after?

ME:

Not sure who else is coming, but I'll be there.

HER:

Cool.

Cool?

HER:

See you then.

I mind-fuck what that all means until I can't. There's no way she could fake an orgasm with me, let alone three consecutively, and the last being wet and hot as fuck.

When Koa walks in, my heads clear and I'm pulling steaks off the electric grill.

"Perfect timing." I nod to the barstool. "Hope you're hungry."

His eyes hone in on the calendar hanging on the wall by the fridge. Then he looks back at me. "Nope."

"Nope?"

"I'll eat with you and appreciate the gesture, but I'm a grown ass man and don't need a watch party. Gonna eat, shower, and go to sleep. Not because I'm fucking fragile, but because I'm dragging ass."

"No game then?"

He groans as he sits down. "Said I'd go."

I slide a plate loaded up with a steak, roasted vegetables, and rice. "If you're not feeling it—"

"I'm good."

"The party after?" I ask.

"Did I agree to do that?" he asks, picking up his fork and knife.

"Not sure. I just found out about it."

"Nah then."

Dash walks out of his room. "Headed to the Union. Anyone wanna go?"

"No game?" Koa asks.

"Not this one." Dash shakes his head.

“You need to learn to read chicks before you stick your dick in them.”

Dash glances at me then back at Koa. “That’s a story for another time.”

My phone goes off, and I smile as I grab it. Unfortunately, it’s not Riley.

LEO:

Got four seats free for the game. Bring your boys.

JT’s lounging on the couch with a remote control in his hand.

“Leo has seats free; you in?”

He turns and looks back at me. “You both going?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool, I’m down.”

ME:

Just three this time.

HIM:

See you soon.

“Rolling in five,” I tell JT.



WALKING down the stadium stairs toward Leo’s seats, I see Riley wearing a Lincoln football jersey, and my steps damn near falter.

“You good, man?” Koa asks.

“Yeah.”

When we hit the end of the row, my jaw tightens.

“She’s not wearing his number, Rivera.”

I look back at him.

“And she’s damn sure not wearing Skinners. Gonna have to go with Warren is on the back of that jersey.”

“Skinner?”

“You missed Park slapping him across the face at Bleachers last night.”

“She what?”

“I’d have handled it, but she insisted she did, and she followed it up with a guilt trip. She said there’s never been a fight at Bleachers and told me to walk away for Joey.”

A loud whistle pulls our attention down the row. Did I expect to see two fingers leaving Riley’s mouth as she waves for us to come down? Hell no, but I kind of like that.

“She’s into you, Rivera. Enjoy the ride, man.”

We make our way to the seats, and Leo gives me a side hug. “Plant your ass wherever you see a spot. Between us, we’ve got four rows, six wide.”

“Thanks, Stone.”

He lifts his chin toward Riley. “Heard you thought Riley was calling it quits, and you’re the cause of her busting her nose.”

“Yeah, it was an interesting morning, to say the least.” I laugh.

Leo shakes Koa’s hand. “This hockey thing doesn’t work out, man, you two should take last night’s act on the road. Fucking genius lyrics, my men.”

Koa nods. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

As fun as it is catching up, all I can think about is what the fuck Skinner did to Riley and how I’m gonna make him pay. I think about that the entire first half, because apparently, we’re at a middle school dance, and the boys are all hanging in one area, while the girls are in another.

As messed-up as that is, and as much as I want answers to this shit with Skinner, I'm an athlete, the girl I'm tripping on is right here, and the game ... it's fucking intense.

At halftime, I wait until Riley heads to the bathroom or to get a drink, so I can meet up with her, but when she does, it's with her girls.

"Stop pouting, man. She smiled at you." Stone shakes his head. "If anyone should be pouting, it should be me. My girls down there, too, and I won't be seeing her on campus next week. I'll be busting my ass and getting reamed by a coach who has to make a name for herself."

"That'll be ..." I pause and can't come up with anything, so I go with the reality of the situation. "You guys are so fucked, but you're fucked with a fat bank account, playing a game you love for a paycheck."

"You and this guy will be pro before you know it." Leo lifts his chin to Koa. "You throwing in for the draft this year?"

"Not sure what I wanna do yet." He shrugs.

"One hundred and ten percent sure Costello busts a nut if you sign with the Bears."

"Definitely," I agree.

Koa takes a swig from his water bottle and looks out at the field.

During halftime, a young-looking, middle-aged couple asks if the seats directly behind us are free, offered to pay us for them. I grab Leo's attention, and he tells them to sit and enjoy.

As the game is about to restart, the man asks Koa and I why the hell we aren't out there instead of sitting in the stands.

Overhearing this, Evan Smith leans back. "Football's a cute sport. We came to cheer on a friend."

"Cute?" He forces out a laugh.

"Lucas." His woman shakes her head.

“Baby, they called football cute. Puppies are cute, kittens, too. Football isn’t cute.”

“Ignore him. He’s a hockey guy,” Kameron cuts in.

The blonde woman sticks out her hand to Kameron and they shake. “Hockey’s no joke. I never played at this level or on skates, but I did play field hockey in high school and still have scars to prove it. I’m Tessa Links. This guy”—she throws her thumb over her shoulder—“is my husband, Lucas.”

“Lucas Links,” Koa whispers.

“Who?” I ask.

“Played in the NFL. Rumors are flying that he and a couple other investors are buying the—”

“New York Knights,” the man, Lucas finishes for Koa.

“Oh Jesus.” His wife rolls her eyes.

“Baby, he said my name; what was I supposed to do?” He winks at her.

I catch whispers going down the row, and then I see Drew pop up from her seat and start heading our way.

When she makes it to us, she asks what I knew she would, “Who’s the owner of the Knights?”

“Rumor has it, we are.” Lucas chuckles. “But that information has not been released.”

Drew holds out her hand to his wife. “I’m Drew Daniels.”

She shakes it. “Tessa Links.”

It’s clear Drew’s had a few drinks, so I try to intervene. “Drew, maybe now’s not a good time.”

“It’s the best time.” She digs into her pocket and pulls out a card. “I’m new, but a damn good sports agent, nonetheless. I’ve already signed these three to the Brooklyn Bears.”

“Yeah?” Lucas asks.

She nods. “Women get fucked in sports. That’s why I started the Daniels Agency. But I also represent men.”

“Hey, potty mouth, the games going to be starting,” Dean calls to her.

“That guy, he owns them, and yes, we all went to school together, but I’m not just going to sign hockey players. I’m going to sign that one out there, number 12, Cody fucking Warren, because he’s an amazing quarterback.” She leans in and whispers, but pretty damn loudly, “But after college, because the NCAA has silly rules.”

Tessa looks highly amused as she takes her card. “Between you and I, he’s the reason we’re here.”

Dean climbs over seats and plops down in the empty seat beside Lucas. “Drew’s been drinking, but she’s legit already killing it. She and her sister crushed every woman’s ice hockey record here at Lincoln in their first of four years. Won the championship last spring, too. She’s not just a pretty face; she’s an athlete, and she’s now attending Fairhaven University’s law school in Connecticut.”

“My daughter, Ava, went to law school.” Lucas smiles at Drew. “Not a walk in the park.”

Drew nods to Dean. “He owns the Brooklyn Bears.”

“Pretty sure you mentioned that.” Dean chuckles.

“They came to watch Cody,” she tells Dean.

“Then maybe we should let them do that and talk shop after the game. Might give you time to sober up a bit.”

“I have your card.” Tessa smiles. “We’ll chat.”

Once Dean gets Drew back to their seats, Lucas leans forward. “Why did Warren leave the number one team in Texas for a team that hasn’t won a championship game... ever?”

There is no way I’m telling this guy it was to be closer to his ex-girlfriend, who’s now dating the hockey player that basically just told him that football was for pussies. What I do manage to pull out of my ass is, “He likes a challenge.”

“Good enough then.” He laughs.

The game? Well, let's just say Warren keeps the Lions alive. With five seconds left in the game, the score is 23-24 Charlotte, and by the grace of God, Warren throws a sixty-yard Hail Mary to Hart, and the Lions eke out a win.

I lean back and shout over the crowd to Lucas Links. "Hart didn't have a chance in hell of showing his talent the first two years he was here. The team needed a quarterback who could get the ball to him."

"Speaking my language, kid." He smiles.

"Don't discount Hart—he bleeds for this game."

"Anyone else I should be looking at?"

I hear Koa chuckle, and I exhale a long breath. "Not on good terms with the only other one I think is worth a shit, but from what I saw a couple weeks ago, and what I've heard, Oz Hunt is a damn good defensive end."

"Hey," I hear from behind me and look over my shoulder, seeing Riley smiling. "Wanna give me a ride?"

"You know I do." I reach back and take her hand as I turn back to Lucas. "Good luck, and congratulations on the unofficial acquisition."

"Got a question for you two." He smirks, and I lift my chin. "Who's your football team?"

I gently pull Riley around so she's not hidden behind me and ask her, "Who's your favorite NFL team?"

She shrugs. "I've lived in Massachusetts my entire life, so I'm supposed to say the Patriots."

Both Lucas and Tessa cringe.

I chuckle as I answer, "Born and raised in Texas."

"Cowboys? Mine, too." Tessa laughs.

"Killing me, T Ross." He sighs exaggeratedly. "You can't say shit like that anymore. You're supposed to be working on not even so much as thinking like that."

She gives him a dramatic eye roll.

“Maybe I should clarify, I was born and raised in Houston, Texas.”

They both laugh.

“I’m not planning on moving back anytime soon. I’ll support whoever Warren and Hart end up with.”

“Good to know.”

Tessa looks at Riley. “Born in raised in Central New York and reside there. I still love the Cowboys.”

“But ...?” her husband says.

“Buuuut,” she concedes, “the New York Knights are my favorite.”

Riley looks at them both. “Who’s your favorite NHL team?”

“Whoever your man plays for after college.” Lucas winks.

“Good answer.” Riley smiles.

“If you’re ever in the Blue Valley area, look us up.” Lucas gives me a card.

I put it in my pocket.

RILEY



Chapter 16

Riley
Longest Day Ever

Friday, September 6th

OVERHEARING what Theo said about Oz to Lucas—or as Leah dubbed the older gentleman, a “DILF”—speaks volumes as to who he is and makes him even more attractive, and I didn’t think that was even possible. I knew he was a good guy, but I let the little green—and clearly night-vision-impaired—monster lead me to believe otherwise.

My tummy flips have fully returned, and stronger than ever, and so has the heat that the mere sight of him “inspires” inside of me, especially since parts of him have been inside of me and given my princess parts what I now know are actual orgasms. Theo Rivera, hot as hell hockey god, gave me, Riley Park, my first O, and then some more, yes, I wrote all about it to Simone.

Walking down the stairs, his arm is behind him, and his hand’s pressed against my back, keeping me tight against him. When we get to the bottom of the stairs, he maneuvers me in front of him.

“Don’t wanna lose you.”

When his large hands grip my hips, and his massive body presses against my back, I feel protected, cherished, and consumed, but in a good way, like a really good way. None of those things—protected, cherished, and consumed—were ever on any of my many lists of what I wanted in a man, but now ... now all three are in the top ten.

Once out of the crowd, he steps to my side, takes my hand, and looks down at me. “Gotta be straight with you, Riley, we’ve got a couple problems that we need to deal with stat.”

My mind immediately goes to my bedroom and what I could have possibly done wrong. “Wow, okay?”

“First, you need to let me know what Skinner said to you that caused you to feel like you needed to defend yourself.”

“Seriously?” I laugh. He doesn’t.

He squeezes my hand. “Your enemies are my enemies.”

“It wasn’t a big deal. I handled it.”

“That’s gonna be a problem for me.”

“So, it’s literally a *you* problem,” I joke.

His steps quicken, but he doesn’t reply.

After silence has ensued long enough to make this moment the kind of awkward that grates on my nerves, I purposely slow down, forcing him to do the same.

“Where are Koa and JT?”

“Meeting you and I—*us*—at the vehicle.”

I pull my hand from his, even though the way he just said that was so ... sweet and cross my arms.

His head cocks to the side in question.

“What Skinner did was put himself between me and Oz at Bleachers when I was trying to let him know I was leaving because I didn’t want to be rude. He told me that Oz had dozens of women in waiting to fill his time.” I point to myself. “I was in my feels about it and told him he was a dick. He responded like any dude bro would and, like, my flying

fingers, my whole hand, took flight. It fucking hurt, which I'm woman enough to admit I deserved that sting. This doesn't need to be a war between the hockey and football bros, especially since one of my roomies is a football bro, and my"—I gesture toward him, because I have no idea else to do—"is a hockey bro."

"If I were your boyfriend, and you were my"—he gestures to me the same way I did him, his autumn eyes twinkling—"that's something I'd need to know."

"If you were my boyfriend, you'd understand how shitty it would be for me if my boyfriend went after my roommate's teammate."

"Understood. But you need to understand, I'm gonna need you to tell me what caused the whole hand to launch, and I'm gonna need to know it immediately after I ask you a question that I should have asked you months ago."

I bite the inside of my cheek to stop this seriously ridiculous grin I feel coming on that may be overtaking my entire face.

"All right, let's get the hell out of here." He holds out his hand, and I take it.



JT AND KOA are standing by Theo's vehicle when we get there, and I suddenly remember what's waiting at home.

"No need to go home and eat; we're going to feed you tonight before we kick your asses at Jenga or maybe Scrabble, or—"

"Rivera's flying sol—"

I widen my eyes and shake my head.

Instead of finishing "solo," Koa turns the "o" into "Okay."

"Not real good at board games and shit, but if you have a gaming system, I'm down." JT opens the back passenger door, and I move to climb in.

Koa steps in front of me. “You’re in the front.”

“Got it. I’m in the front.” I walk around the back of the Tahoe, and when I round it, I see Theo standing beside the open door with flowers in his hand. “What is this?”

“Flowers that have been in my vehicle since I came over, in hopes to grab you and take you out.”

“Thank you.” I hold the daisies, gerbera daisies, carnations, roses, and all in various shades of pink, to my nose and inhale.

Theo shakes his head. “Can’t smell them, can you?”

I climb in. “Maybe tomorrow.”

“You sick?” JT asks.

“I gave her a bloody nose earlier today,” Theo jokes.

“In lieu of flowers,” I add.

Koa leans forward and gets all up in my face. “You wanna give that a little more depth?”

Theo climbs in the driver’s seat and looks him over. “You good?”

“Need the story behind you giving Riley a bloody nose.”

I snort-laugh, and the way Theo looks at me and starts to laugh is like the sweetest.

“It’s a really long story, so Riley, sum it up.”

I give him the condensed version—well, sort of—all the way back to the house.

As we all pile out of the Tahoe, I’m holding the flowers, feeling now is actually the right time to tell Theo about the slap.

“I called him a dick, he then called me a puck bunny. That’s when I slapped him.”

“He called you what?” Theo hisses through clenched teeth.

I place a hand on my hip and point my beautiful bouquet of flowers at him. “You don’t get to be pissed, because I’m

not.” I bring the flowers back to me. “I know who I am. I earned that by calling him when he was pissed and I was toying with his boy’s emotions.”

Koa and JT both start laughing, and Theo glares at them.

“You puck boys shouldn’t judge the girls you call bunnies, the ones you stick your dicks in. It takes two, you know, and women have needs just like you all do.” I look him up and down, lift my nose in the air, and then march my ass toward the front steps, feeling quite proud of myself.

As I take the second step up the stairs, I feel hands grip my hips, stopping me and keeping me right there as JT and Koa make their way past us and into the house.

He turns me around, and I am high enough up that we’re eye-to-eye.

“You can’t weaponize my signs of affection against me.”

“Huh?” I ask, and my heart starts beating faster as he moves closer while licking his incredibly sexy and, might I add, skillful lips.

“You pointed the flowers at me. I got them for you as a sign of affectio—”

“Right. I get it,” cutting him off, I nod.

“Then we agree?”

“We”—I shake my head—“do not.”

His jaw drops, and his eyes narrow.

“I’ll use whatever I need to win a fight or prove my point. Don’t take it personally. We short girls need all the leverage we can get.”

“Jesus, you’re adorable.”

“I am, aren’t I?” I grin.

“Doesn’t mean you’ll get your way all the time.”

I lift a shoulder. “Mostly, it does.”

He takes my face in his hands. “If I’m going to ask that question I want to ask you, you gotta go easy on me. I was a

shit boyfriend in the past, and I can't fuck things up, not with you."

"Because I'm adora—"

He quiets me with a kiss, one not as gentle as our first, but ... so good.

His tongue slices through my lips, parting them. He licks inside my mouth, devouring me and groaning softly as he does it. He tastes like mint, fresh air, and ...

"You're less than a hundred steps to your bedroom—take it there."

Fucking Leah.

He pulls back, sucking on my tongue, and then pressing his lips to mine. Against them, he whispers, "Be my girl?" Then he steps back and looks at me while I nod like a fucking bobble head on the front of a mountain bike on rough terrain.

"I just hope you know that, even though I'm kind of a small package, I'm sometimes"—I shake my head—"most of the time, a lot to handle."

Lips twitching up in amusement, he says, "I'm here for it."

"I made food. It may suck because I never had time to learn how to cook, but inspiration hit when I woke and Mom called and talked me through." I'm blabbering because I'm anxious, like seriously anxious. I clear my throat. "I made food."

"I love that you made food. Can't wait to cook with you sometime."

Looking down at my hands still fisted in his shirt, I should probably be embarrassed out how hard I'm holding on to him and start to let go.

He holds his hands over them. "I'm gonna need my mouth on yours a lot tonight."

I don't even know what to say.

Theo holding my hand, we walk into the house and head toward the kitchen when Leo calls his name.

“Go. We can’t be that couple who doesn’t leave each other’s sides.”

“Why?” he asks.

“Why indeed,” I consider out loud, and Theos silently chuckles. “Go chill with your guys, and I’m going to warm up the food.”



I’M NOT sure how normal relationships between mothers and daughters work, but I am almost positive that my relationship with mine has some sort of glitch in it, or I’m either chipped, or there was a cord that was never snipped when I was born. One that is invisible, untouchable, and unbreakable no matter how many miles it is stretched. But not three minutes after I woke up after my reset nap and allowed myself to bask in the aftermath of what just went down with Theo—what went down? Theo—my mom’s ringtone sounded off, and when I answered, she looked me over suspiciously.

“It’s not Dean Costello. It’s Theo Rivera, isn’t it?”

Ten minutes later, I was in my vehicle and on my way to the store to buy ingredients to make something to add to the buffet that Kameron and Evan planned for the after game festivities.

I was a little concerned that fried spring rolls and dumplings were a stretch for me to start with on the beginning of my culinary journey.

Mom didn’t just text me a list. No, she also went to the grocery store to buy the ingredients “we” would be using as we made them together, on FaceTime.

Is that insane? Yes, yes, it is, but it’s not the first time Mom has taught me how to do something this way. Nope. No, it’s not. Because she has always worked like eighty hours a week, she’s talked me through the period meltdown on the phone in the middle school bathroom.

By the time all the ingredients for the fillings of each were cooked and mixed together, Leo, Ellie, Evan, Kameron, and Leah had joined “us” and helped with the wrapping and frying.

Cooking for the first time in the kitchen far surpassed my expectations. We created something cool together. Something that we learned from my mom ... who also admitted that buying the wraps was cheating and promised we’d make them from scratch over Christmas break. She got a little uncharacteristically emotional telling me she hadn’t made them since she was a kid with her *halmeoni*—grandmother in Korean.

“Hey,” I say, walking into the kitchen where Kameron and Evan are fussing over the crockpots. Two filled with pulled pork, and two with shredded barbecue chicken, both of which I helped make the sauce for the chicken and the rubs for the pork.

“Oven’s preheating to warm up the appetizers. You wanna grab the trays from the fridge?” Evan asks.

“We can—”

“No way. She’s done this from start; let her finish,” Evan cuts Kami off.

As I’m carrying the last cookie sheet from the fridge to the oven, Theo walks in and stops dead in his tracks. “Is that—”

“You bolted too soon, Rivera. You could have had a lesson from Riley’s mom on how to make fried dumplings and spring rolls,” Evan says, walking between us with a bag of rolls for the sandwiches.

“You made these?” he asks.

“I mean, we all did,” I say, setting the tray on top of the stove and moving to open the oven, but Theo beats me to it.

“They look amazing.”



WHEN KAMI GETS a text from Cody saying they're going to be late and to go ahead and eat, we do.

Tonight is the first time we all sit around the giant dining room table.

When Theo sits beside me, I notice his plate is missing one of the hot meat sandwiches and is filled with dumplings and spring rolls.

"Although flattering, you're missing out." I point my fork at the shredded chicken.

"I couldn't break into the two hundred club no matter how much I ate. Would get to the point I'd eat so much just to meet that goal, I'd get sick. It's been like that for years. This summer, my sisters worked at this place in town and brought dumplings and spring rolls home after their shifts. Loved them, so I started ordering like four nights a week and eat the hell out of them. I broke two hundred and kept on going. You're going to have to teach me how to make these. I could eat a half a dozen of each every day."

When I realize I don't have the actual recipe, another realization hits. "She didn't give me the recipe, because she wanted me to have to depend on her to do this."

"Your mom's awesome," Evan says before taking a bite of a spring roll.

"She is," I agree. "She really is."



Chapter 17

Still The Longest Day Ever

Theo

Saturday September 7th

DEAN, Drew, Cody, Hart, and Oz show up, and Riley doesn't put space between us. She actually leans in even closer. That may be why when congratulations are given, I don't feel one bit jealous when she high-fives the guys, including Oz.

When I knock knuckles with them all, Oz pulls me into a bro hug and whispers, "Appreciate the endorsement, man."

"Come again?" I ask, a little fucking confused.

He looks at Riley then me and chuckles. "I know you didn't endorse me to Riles, but you did throw my name in at the stadium today, and I appreciate that."

"He's a good guy," Riley says.

Hart walks up to me, gripping the back of my neck and pulling my head closer to his. "Fucking love you, Rivera."

"What's not to love?" I joke. "Was given an opportunity to shine a light and took it."

"Who wants to play Jenga?" Riley cheers.

“You,” Leah grumbles. “You want to play Jenga, and no one here will say no.”

Riley grins at her. “Then let’s do this.”

Cody walks from Koa to me, pointing. “You.”

I point back at him. “You.”

Then he pulls me into a hug. “Seriously appreciate the endorsement.”

I step back and shake my head. “You didn’t need one. They came to watch you, and you didn’t disappoint.”

“Fuck man, I want this so bad.”

“Keep earning it, and you’ll always have it.”

“Damn right, I will.”

“Hey,” Riley says, throwing her arms around him. “You killed it out there.”

“Rough ride, but we got it done.”

Dean lifts his chin, beckoning me, and I walk over to join him, Leo, and Evan, who head to the couch.

I sit down next to Dean. “How’s the team looking this year?”

“We haven’t really had a practice yet, but I’m feeling confident. You all know just as much about Koa’s game as I do.”

“He’s pouting,” Evan whispers ... loudly to Leo.

“The hell I am.” I laugh. “Just shooting facts.”

“You pissed I didn’t pull you out of here?” Dean asks before taking a drink.

The words I just said to Cody, the words my dad used more than congratulations after a win—*keep earning it, and you’ll always have it*—make me smile as I shake my head. “Not at all. You don’t know me as a player. The four of you were untouchable, so we didn’t really get a shot to prove how good we are here. But this year is all about taking shots. I’m

good where I'm at. I earned my place when I was signed before I even came here; I'll earn whatever comes my way."

"Little double penetration tossed into that." Dean nods toward Riley. "How's that going?"

"She's perfect."

"She's a lot." Leo chuckles.

"She's perfect." I smile as she throws her hands in the air when the tower falls as Hart spews obscenities.

"You two serious?" Dean asks.

I turn and stare at him, saying nothing, because that's a dumb as fuck question.

"Understood." He nods. "So, this year goes as I know it will, and you light up the ice, if say, I could get you out of your current contract and pull you right to Brooklyn, with a fair contract, would you be able to leave that behind?" He nods to Riley.

Now I say nothing because shit just got real.

"Something to think about, yeah?" Leo asks.

"Keep in mind, lines change in pro much more than they do here. You'd be on the ice." Dean taps my knee and stands up. "I need a drink."

Leo's laugh draws my attention to him. "He wants you, Rivera. Koa, too."

"Full ride." I shake my head.

"Every kid who gets an athletic scholarship has it beat into their heads that they're lucky and should finish college because they'll never get a chance for a free education again of the go pro, but that's bullshit. You finish one season in the NHL, you can afford to get your doctorate." Evan leans in and whispers, "Don't drink the Kool-Aid, man. Brooklyn's going to win a cup within three years, and you need to be with us."

"Something to think about," I answer, leaning back against the couch cushion.

“It’s less than a four-hour drive from Boston to Brooklyn.” Leo winks.

“Any other Lions standing out?” Evan asks.

“My roommate, JT, left D, our enforcer. He’s got the mouth for it. Can’t wait to see how he is in a game.”

Evan laughs. “Kids got balls. He didn’t give a damn who you were during a scrimmage; he’d talk shit about your momma.”

“Sounds like him,” I agree. “Dash is our left wing. You guys have played him.”

“Played up to Koa’s strengths.” Evan nods. “Goalie?”

“Kid named Hank Marshall, and our right D is Asher Benjamin. Neither seem to give a shit who everyone else is. Dash, though, he’s captain material.”

“But he didn’t get captain.” Evan shrugs. “Gotta believe Coach knows what he’s doing.”

“Never doubted it.”

Leo leans forward, beer in his hand. “You’re smiling.”

“Not gonna lie, I’m excited to get out there.”



BY TWELVE THIRTY in the morning, I’m physically exhausted, mentally drained from mind-fucking the bomb that just landed on my lap, and I’m ready to tap out, but I also love watching Riley kick everyone’s ass, including mine, at Jenga. I don’t want to be the asshole boyfriend to interrupt, but in five hours, I need to be alert, even though Coach gave us the day off.

When all the blocks fall, and she throws her arms in the air victoriously, I give her a few moments to gloat before I grab her hand and pull her aside.

“Gonna have to say goodnight.”

She looks down at her watch and gasps. “You have to be up in like—”

“It’s cool. Not a real practice; open skate. But after this morning, I need to show up.”

She nibbles on her lower lip, and I have an urge to do the same damn thing.

“Gonna need your lips before I leave.”

I move us from the kitchen, through the house, and into the bathroom. After securing the door behind me, I turn and see her fixing her hair in the mirror. Before she turns around, I wrap my arms around her and pull her back tight against me.

Sliding my hand up her stomach and over her chest, I grip her chin lightly and position her face so I have access to her lips. “About lost it seeing you in this jersey tonight and realized, as juvenile as I always thought it was to want your girl wearing your numbers, I get it now. And fuck, Cielo, I’m gonna need to make sure you only ever wear mine.”

She licks her lips, and I bring mine down on them. When she starts to turn, I stall her as I pop the button on her jeans and slowly push my hand down the front of them.

Her lips quiver against mine before they wrap around my tongue and she begins sucking.

A groan leaves my throat as I feel how hot she is, and wet, so fucking wet, as I push a finger inside her and slowly finger her.

Breaking our kiss, she groans as her head falls just below my shoulder.

I watch her reflection in the mirror. “Fuck, you’re stunning. Look at yourself, Cielo. Look at how fucking gorgeous you are.”

“You ...” Her voice quivers as I rub my thumb around her clit. “So good.”

Her mouth falls open, and her chest begins to rise and fall harder and faster. With my other hand, I push up her shirt then

her bra, cup her tit, and start rolling her nipple between my thumb and finger.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.” She inhales and makes the sexiest little yelp as her pussy contracts around my finger and she begins grinding against it.

“That’s so hot. Ride it out, Riley. Take what you want. It’s all for you.”

“You ...” she cries softly as she comes.

I pull my hand out of her pants, release her tit, then straighten her bra cup and shirt before using both hands to button her jeans back up.

Eyes still closed, head still resting on me, a small smile begins to form on her pretty lips. “I owe you big.”

“I’m making you dinner tomorrow night, and you can bring dessert.”

“What should I bring?”

“Your pussy works. Can’t wait to taste you again.”

She opens her eyes. “I have to bring something.”

“A toothbrush?”

She turns and looks up at me. “You asking me to have a sleepover?”

I lift her chin and kiss her soft lips. “Mmhmm.”

Walking out, I kiss the top of her head. “Have fun.”

Smiling softly, she nods. “Sleep well.”

“See you tomorrow,” I say, walking backward toward the theatre room to get JT and Koa. When I turn around, I see Hart and Oz standing by the door.

“You two need a ride?”

“Would love one,” Hart answers.

“Rivera,” Dean calls to me and waves me over to the couch.

“You two wanna let Koa and JT know we’re leaving?” I ask, and Hart nods.

I walk over and Dean looks past me. “You two?” He doesn’t say what he’s asking, but it doesn’t matter. I know what the question mark implies.

“Not sure that’s a conversation you and I need to have.”

“I’m sure you don’t, but I’m going to tell you, proceed easy. She’s all but told us she was very, very inexperienced, and I’m not sure of the extent. And no, I didn’t ask but felt I should share, more for her. She’s a good girl. Calls her ...” He shakes his head as if what he’s going to say is shocking, and I’m not sure I wanna hear it. “Calls it her princess parts. Says it’s pristine.”

“And how the fuck do you know this?”

“Girl talk that was shared with me by a friend whose name I won’t share, who was looking for advice on how to tell you.” He shrugs.

“Drew.”

He nods. “Yep.”

Well, fuck.



I HAVE a gift that comes in handy when I’m on the ice. I can shut the world off completely and totally. It’s me and the game, and that’s it. That is the only place I can do that. So, this morning, I ran my own drills, and the four other people who showed up, also knowing there wouldn’t be a coach there whose ass needed kissing, they ran them, too.

After practice, JT and Dash invited Hank Marshall and Asher Benjamin over to play COD. It’s a good call, first line bonding time. Well, if Koa gets out of bed, it will be. And I’d honestly like him to converse with as a distraction from my thoughts.

I'm currently tripping over how to deal with Riley's ... issue. I mean, it's not an *issue*. Seriously, good for her, and lucky me, but fuuuck. I swore I'd never punch another V card, but here I've already unknowingly shuffled the deck, so to speak. I've licked it, fingered it, and now I'm addicted, so what's a man to do?

Standing at the stove, stress-grilling up the leftover steaks I sliced up and scrambling eggs with leftover veggies and cheese, while the four of them play ... a round? Is it a fucking round? I have no idea. I just know that it will never be my thing. My thing is hockey, and it's also Riley ... who's a virgin.

"Need some help?"

I look back at Koa, who's walking toward the sink with his empty gallon jug of water that he totes around.

"After you fill up, grab six plates?"

He glances into the living room. "Full first line?"

"Yeah, we all showed up, and they invited them to play that game."

"Better than us."

"Accurate." I laugh.

"Avocado toast?" he asks.

"Sounds good."



AFTER A FEW MINUTES, they all walk into the kitchen, and I nod toward the island. "Food's up."

"Well, shit," Hank Marshall says.

"Looks good," Asher compliments. "Appreciate it."

Koa walks back out of his room, now with his hair pulled back and in a knot. "How was the ice?"

"Messy," JT says, spearing a piece of meat.

“You all make me feel like I’m slacking. Probably going to hit the gym later if anyone wants to join.” Koa takes a plate.

“I’m in,” Dash says.

“We should go at around five so Theo can wine and dine his girl without us here.” JT winks.

“Not kicking anyone out to share a meal with my girl. Just chilling.”

“She got any hot friends?” Hank asks.

“She’s in a sorority; she has a few hundred hot friends.” JT laughs.

“Tread easy. They’re not all sane,” Dash tells them.

“Crazy’s hot in bed.” Hank laughs.

“Batshit isn’t,” Dash states.

RILEY



Chapter 18

Dinner
Riley

Saturday September 7th

I WOKE to a text from Theo at nine in the morning.

HIM:

You've been on my mind a lot today, and its only 9 a.m.

ME:

You're correct use of a lot is seriously hot.

HIM:

I do not get how people can fuck that up. No one writes abunch or alittle, unless they're idiots.

ME:

I mean, right? But also, hyphenated, non-hyphenated.

HIM:

Irony.

I send him a meme.

*The past, the present, and the future walk into a bar.
It was tense.*

HIM:

Allergies?

Okay? I think as I text back.

ME:

None. You?

HIM:

None.

He sends another.

HIM:

Five work for you?

ME:

Yep. See you then.

HIM:

Perfect.



I SMILE when I see Theo standing at the entrance door to his apartment building, holding it open as I walk toward him,

carrying a box of chocolate chip cookies that Kameron, who loves to cook, helped me make. I try to ignore the tummy flips, and the fact that I can literally feel my heart rate increase and work on suppressing the grin I feel creeping up.

“You didn’t have to bring anything,” he says as I get closer. He looks so good. So, so, so very good.

“One of my personal goals this semester is to learn to cook and now bake.”

“Love that you have personal goals. Any others that maybe I can help you out with?” he asks, reaching for the box, brushing his fingers across the back of my hand before taking it.

“You ticked a box or two yesterday,” I admit as he kisses my cheek and takes my hand.

“The exes with zero skills?”

“Yep.” I laugh as we walk into the open elevator. “And do you have any you need help with?”

“Yeah, teach me how to make those dumplings and spring rolls.”

“Noted.”

The door shuts, and we’re alone, in a confined space, not much smaller than the bathroom last night.

“How many exes?” he asks.

Taken aback, I shake my head. “One ex-boyfriend and one that I call an ex, but really, he was just an ‘ex’-periment. You?”

“Fuck.” He shakes his head. “One girlfriend and many mistakes.”

“Why mistakes?” I ask as the door slides open onto the fourth floor.

His reply as he steps out backward, keeping eye contact, is avoidance at its greatest. “Why an experiment?”

“*Hmm.*” I scrunch up my nose. “*Touché.*”

Smiling, he shakes his head and finally turns around and pushes open his door. When I step in, I am immediately hit with the smell of sauce.

“Smells delicious.”

His eyes rake over me in such a way I swear I feel it like it was his fingers, *like in the bathroom*. My nipples immediately harden, and he notices. *Of course he notices*.

But then, his phone rings and his whole, heated, sexy demeanor changes, and I swear I see almost panic in his eyes as he looks between me and his phone.

I walk to him, take the box, and nod to the phone, laughing. “Answer it.”

He mumbles, “Fuck,” and grabs his phone, moves to take a seat, and sets it on a stand. “Hey, Quincy,” he speaks and signs.

“I don’t want to go there anymore. I hate it.”

Her voice is clearer than I expected. Then again, she was able to speak until the accident.

“Slow down. Are we talking work or—”

She laughs angrily. “I’d rather be a waitress my whole life than go to that stupid college. I get sick of people looking at me and acting like—”

“Two years, and then you can transfer to anywhere you want to—”

“No. No way in hell,” she responds. “My life isn’t going to be determined by your success. I just want to live my life, and no one will let me.”

Then a woman’s voice cuts in, “No one is stopping you from living your life, Quincy Rivera.”

“You are,” Quincy spits back.

“Because I am not pleased that you have permanently marked your beautiful body with a—”

“I’m eighteen—let me live my shitty life, or—”

“Okay, let’s take a step back and—”

“We made a plan, and we’re sticking to that plan,” The woman, who I am ninety-nine percent sure is his mother, cuts him off.

His shoulders slump, and I pull a plan out of my ass.

Walking to the door, I knock on it. He looks up as I open it and looks confused.

“Is someone at your door, Theo?” the woman asks, and I nod.

“Yes?” he says, looking at me more confused now.

She calmly instructs, “Answer it.”

Again, I nod vigorously.

“I’ll—”

I cut off what I’m sure will be a “call you back” by knocking loudly again to get his attention and wave for him to hurry.

“Go,” they both say.

He walks over and fake-opens the door, and I say, “Go away to college, they say. It’ll be life changing, they lie.” I huff. “I can’t believe this is how we spend a Saturday night—finishing a class project.”

He smirks.

“Introduce us to your friend,” comes from the phone.

“I apologize in advance,” he mumbles.

“I heard that.” The woman laughs.

He motions for me to sit, and I do so, smiling at two women.

“Hey, I’m Riley. You must be Theo’s sisters.”

His mother smiles. “That’s very sweet, Riley. I’m Rosa and—”

“I’m Quincy.”

“*Ooo*, I’ve been told I look like June. We just need an Annie and Leo and—”

“A rocket.” Quincy smiles.

“Yes. And we actually do have a Leo.”

“You two wanna catch the rest of us up?” Theo asks.

“*Little Einsteins*,” we say at the same time and both start laughing.

Theo plants his hands on either side of me and leans into the screen. “Speaking of Einsteins, any of your classes giving you a hard time?”

“Hard time?” Quincy signs and says as she glares at him. I see the moment she realizes she’s signed, and then she looks at me. “I’m deaf.”

I sign, “*I’m five-foot-two and a libra.*”

Shaking her head, she smiles and looks at Theo, and that, that is when I see wheels turning in a different direction. “Are you two a couple?”

“We are,” Theo answers then kisses the top of my head.

“Oh, my God.” His mother puts her hand over her chest.

“Dang, Mom.” He laughs.

She shakes her head. “I’ve never even seen you show affection to the girl you dated for—”

“Oh my God, Rosa.” Quincy palms her face. “Candace was a psycho.”

“She was a lovely girl,” Rosa scolds her.

Theo mumbles, “What the fuck?” under his breath.

And to avoid the awkward, I interject, “Well, Candace had good taste. This one’s a catch.”

“How long has this been going on?” Rosa asks at the same time Quincy asks, “Wait—are you the gymnast in all those videos he watched this summer?”

“All right, I think Riley and I need to crack open the books.”

I take the phone before he can and laugh. “We’re not done here.”

He steps back and puts his hands in the air. “Well, I’m starving, so I’m going to eat. You hungry?”

“Sure am.” I smile at him before looking back at the screen. “So, tell me about yourselves.”

“Mom’s a social worker. She’s working on her master’s degree so she can get paid the right amount for the job she’s already doing. Dad was a linesman.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

They both make the sign of the cross.

“What do your parents do?” Rosa asks.

“They’re both anesthesiologists,” I answer. “My brother and I are both on the same track. Quincy, what degree are you working toward?”

She shrugs. “Just taking four of my basic courses that are prerequisites.”

“Tell her about track,” Theo calls as he pulls a pan of lasagna out of the oven.

“What about it?” Quincy huffs. “The team sucks, and the coach is a tool.”

“It’s time for me to go grab Kennedy and McKinley from work. You’ve got Regan here.” Rosa gives Quincy a quick kiss then looks at the screen. “It was nice to have met you, Riley.”

“You, too.” I pick up the phone and move to Theo. “Say goodbye to your mom.”

He leans in and makes an adorable kissy face. “Love you, Mami, drive careful.”

She throws him a kiss. “Love you, hijo.”

“I should let you go.” Quincy sighs.

“We’re good, right?” I ask Theo, and he nods.

“So, all coaches suck a little.”

“Mine doesn’t,” Theo says.

“Oh please, Kameron and Evan are constantly laughing about the crap he says to you players.”

“The stuff he says is always either funny or very accurate. Can’t hate on that.”

I roll my eyes, sign he’s crazy, and then we both laugh.

“Feeling outnumbered in my own place.”

“At least you have your own place. I’m stuck here for two years.”

“As soon as I graduate, Q, I swear on everything we love that the weight of the world is going to lift off those shoulders of yours.”

She shakes her head. “That weight shouldn’t be on your shoulders. I want to take care of myself, and I know I can. I’m going to apply to some schools and see if I get any offers. I know it was hard for you to leave because of the accident, but I swear it won’t be for me.”

“I get that, but you don’t even know what you wanna do yet.”

“Actually, I do.”

“Then let’s hear it.”

Quincy smiles. “I want to be a dentist, so I can make big bucks off of my brother and his teammates who lose teeth.”

I snort-laugh, and Theo chuckles.

“Then let’s figure it out and—”

“I have. I’m applying to Fairhaven.” She shrugs.

“Our friend Drew attends law school there.”

Theo nods. “She does.”

“And they have a track team.”

“Thought you hated track.”

“I hate running on a team that isn’t going to do shit,” she clarifies.

“Can’t blame you there.”

Theo rubs his chin in thought. “Stick to HCC for a year, take all the lower-level courses you can get out of the way. Crush some records for your team, like you did your freshman and sophomore year so you have something to show the D1 schools, and apply to more than just Fairhaven.”

“I want to be in the Northeast. I wanna see the seasons change.”

“Apply here,” I suggest, and her eyes immediately move to Theo.

“I agree with Riley. Apply here.”

“I’ll help with your applications, and if you make a list of what you want—”

“D1, four seasons, that’s it,” she quickly answers. “I want to stop feeling like I’m stuck.”

After we end the call, he’s quiet as he plates the lasagna and pulls a salad out of the fridge.

“I’m sorry if I overstepped. I—”

“Not upset with you at all. Just thinking.”

“About?” I ask as he pulls out a seat for me.

“Dean said something last night that could change things for my family, but I’m not sure I’m ready yet.”

When I don’t say anything, he sits down across from me, cocks his head to the side, and narrows his eyes.

“Okay, fine, Drew may have mentioned it but swore me to secrecy and—”

He points a fork at me. “We need to make a pact that you and I keep secrets from everyone but each other.”

“Okay, but what if it’s like Leah telling me something she did and asked me not to tell anyone.”

“If it’s not about me, us, or would in *any* way effect you negatively, I don’t need to know. If you need to talk about something that’s weighing on you, I’ll hold your secrets just like I do my own.”

I cross my arms. “Like you are.”

He lifts a shoulder. “I suppose.”

“Okay, so why didn’t you tell Dean to do whatever he needs to get you to Brooklyn?”

“Because I have junior and senior years left here.”

“Is finishing your degree a higher priority than playing in the NHL?”

He looks down at his plate.

“Hey,” I speak softly, because I sometimes can come off overbearing, and I don’t want this to be one of those times.

He glances up, and my tummy does a damn flip. Instead of tripping on the fact he has better lashes than I do, I focus on the task.

“I want to be that person who you trust with your secrets and dreams. The person you talk through things with. Whatever you do, I will one hundred percent support you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I smile.

“I have two years to show the world how good I am on the ice and master my skills. Cutting that time in half would suck if I ended up just fading into the background in Brooklyn. But doing that would afford me the opportunity to take care of my family in a way that would make my father proud. Not just him, but me.”

I simply nod because he looks like he wants to say more, and I am aware not everyone considers silence as awkward as I do.

“And I have two years to show you that I’m worth the trouble dating a guy who’s going to basically live on the road for his entire career.”

I bite down on my lower lip to stop the smile that threatens to take away from the gravity of this conversation, but seriously? Seriously!

“I really hope you aren’t misunderstanding my intention with us. I hope you understand I was never just trying to simply find a girl to attach myself to until college is done and then move on. I was the worst kind of boyfriend in high school, and when I realized it, I promised myself I’d remember some asshole like me could pull shit like that on one of my sisters.”

“It’s part of our journey. We’re growing up.”

Sighing, he leans back and links his fingers behind his neck. “Then I met Ellie, and I swear I’d have been on her team if Leo fucked up. Through her, I met this hot little chick with the kind of confidence that puts an asshole in his place.” He leans forward and rests his elbows on the table. “At Bleachers, you were fierce, and I knew right then that Ellie’s little wouldn’t ever put up with a fuck boy.”

I nod. “Got that right. But that was part of my journey. The ex-periment.”

“I want more on that.” His jaw muscles tighten.

“You first.”

He rolls his eyes. “Fine. The next day, Leo and I went to KET, and you looked hot as hell, had confidence, and I found out you were an athlete, which led me to believe you understood our lives were different and that maybe, just maybe, the girl I beat off to the night before could not only handle me, but put my ass in check when needed.”

I can’t help but smile.

“Then Leah kind of led me to believe you were interested.”

“She’s a horrible best friend, who I love dearly.”

“That night, at Bleachers, the night I met you, and—”

“Beat off to my image?”

Laughing, he nods. “Yeah. That day, I went for a hike and felt like I wasn’t alone. The leaves were changing, but they all seemed to be red, my dad and brother’s favorite color. I swear I could smell them, like they were right there with me. It was the first time I felt like I deserved to be at peace because they were. I felt like he was giving me a gift when I saw you and it was his birthday.”

I slide off my stool and walk around to give him a hug.

“Christ,” he says, moving sideways and placing me between his legs to pull me in closer. After a few minutes, he leans back. “Gotta give this meal the minute it deserves, and then I’m gonna want more of that.”

When I move to go back to my seat, he stops me by pulling me back by my belt loop as he stands. “Sit here.”

“Okay.” I climb up into his seat as he reaches across the island and grabs my plate.

Once he’s seated, facing me, he scoops up a forkful of lasagna and holds it out to me.

Seriously, this guy ...

“The ex?”

I hold my hand up to shield my mouth as I chew. “It tastes so good. Don’t ruin it for me.”

He smiles just a little and takes a bite from the same fork, off the same plate, and that is so ... hot and intimate and *Theo*.

“Steven’s parents and mine were close, and he and I ‘dated’ from eighth grade until right after senior prom.” I laugh. “He was someone to go to dances with, an occasional movie, the prom. I think the idea of having a boyfriend was like ticking a box. I literally didn’t have time with my schedule. Kissing him was”—I pause—“unenjoyable. Being felt up or fingered by him made me feel like I was maybe just not a sexual person. When I touched him, he came immediately, so yeah.” I groan and continue, “Full truth?”

“Nothing but.” He feeds me another bite.

Chewing, I nod and finally swallow. “But I was a sexual person, because I did get turned on by ...” I pause before I admit, “snaps from the John Stevenson—”

“Wait.” Theo laughs. “One was John Stevenson, and the other’s name was Steven?”

I snort out a laugh. “Steven Johnson.”

“Shut the hell up. No way.”

“Way,” I admit as he feeds me another bite.

“Continue.”

“John Stevenson, the star baseball player, had a girlfriend but zero issue sending me messages, telling me how hot I was and how hot I made him feel, with pictures. I shouldn’t have engaged, but I did.”

As he feeds me another bite, he spills some tea of his own. “Never felt it was wrong to get a blow job from other chicks, because I knew Candace wouldn’t find out.”

I cringe. “But she did.”

He laughs. “Yeah, but not from any of the girls. From me.”

“You told her?” I gasp.

“Sure did. But it wasn’t until after I found out she fucked my ‘best friend’ a week after my brother and father’s funeral.”

“That’s brutal.”

“I was pissed.” He shrugs.

“Not on your end. On hers.”

“I was more pissed at him. Still more pissed at him.”

“Pretty sure I’d feel the same. No revenge taken?”

“Odd question.” He chuckles.

“Not really,” I say quietly as I feel my face heat up.

“Spill it,” he insists as he takes another bite.

So I do. I tell him about prom, and how I will not ever wear heels again, and that I bloodied Molly’s nose, and oh

yeah, she was John Stevenson's girlfriend, but it was totally on accident. "She decided to make me pay for what I did to her, and when she was digging to find out who I was, she found our mutual friends on social media included her boyfriend. She made him snap me." I feel sick to my stomach and shake my head. "Plans were made to meet up, and even though it was clear through conversations I was actually having with her that we'd never met up before, she didn't stop there. So, I met up with—her and not him—and she had a friend recording her calling me a whore and so many other disgusting things that would have gone viral if it was shared."

"If?"

"Yep, because when she attacked me, I kicked her five-foot-ten ass all over the baseball field. Then I took the phone from her friend, who was also a mutual, and threatened to do the same to her. She gave me the phone, and I deleted it from her camera roll, and the cloud, and took it with me, telling her she could have it the next day at school, just because I wanted to make sure it was actually gone."

"That's badass."

"It was instinct. All I kept thinking about was those documentaries about mean girls who kill other girls and how pissed my mom would be if I died." I laugh.

All humor leaves his face. "You can't do that shit ever again, and we need to work on your impulse control."

"What?" I laugh.

"You're five-foot-two and like a hundred pounds, Riley Park. You took on a D1 football player the other night, and—"

"In a bar full of people."

He shakes his head. "No."

"No?"

"No. You don't fight your own fights anymore. You come to me."

I roll my eyes.

“Never wanted to spank an ass more in my life than I do right now.”

Even though he’s saying it out of frustration, it’s kind of hot.

“Never thought I’d want my ass spanked before now, either.”

He runs his hand up and down his face, and then he looks me over, jaw ticking, nostrils flaring, and everything inside me blazes.

“Favorite color?” Before I can answer, he does for me. “Pink.”

I nod. “Yours?”

“Red.”

“Which is technically a very hot pink. Sort of.”

He nods. “One could say that.”

“One just did.”

“Favorite day of the week, Riley Park?”

I laugh. “Sunday.”

“Same. Favorite food?”

“I have two—tacos and pizza.”

He chuckles. “Fried spring rolls and dumplings, and real tacos, not that Taco Bell shit.”

I throw out movie at the same time as he asks, “Sexual position?”

Silence.

Awkward silence.

Awkward silence that I do not want to fill, but I must.

“I’m hoping you and I can figure that out.”



Chapter 19

Theo

Oh, the possibilities

Saturday, September 7th

I TAKE her hand and lift it, dragging my lips across the back of her hand as I quietly ask, “Cielo, am I going to be your first?”

In barely a whisper, she answers, “God, I hope so.”

I stand up and take both of her hands, leading her toward the couch.

When we pass the hall that leads to my bedroom, her lips turn downward slightly.

“Have a seat?”

“In no way do I want to sit here and explain why I’m twenty years old and a virgin.”

“I don’t need an explanation; I just need to explain to you what I expect.”

She looks at me oddly.

“My ex was a virgin.”

She wraps her arms around herself as her brows knit together. “I mean, so were you at one point.”

I suck in my lips so I don't laugh, and she rolls her eyes.

“As I was saying, my ex was a virgin, and so was I. It didn't mean shit to me. I wanted to get off inside of something other than a mouth. And when I did, I was sure I was in love with her. Told her I was. I know damn well I wasn't in love with her, or I wouldn't have cheated on her. Just like you weren't in love with your ex.”

“Never said I was,” she says, glancing at the door.

“You thinking of leaving?”

“Maybe.”

“Okay, all right.” I'm getting pissed, and I need to tone that shit down. “If that's what you want, I'm not going to stop you. But before you leave, you should know I'm not a boy anymore, and I do know what I want. I want you. I want to fuck you so good that when someone asks you what your favorite position is, your response isn't doggy, or missionary, or wheelbarrow, or leapfrog. It's not the spread eagle or the reverse cowgirl. It's Theo fucking Rivera.” I grab her hips, pull her toward me, and then down on my lap. “Because I've no doubt what I'm feeling here. I haven't even been inside you, and I know I'm going to want to live and die in there. This little detour to the couch was for me, Riley, because I'm a man, and I know what I want, and it's not just to be your first. I'm fucking sure I wanna be your last. And after we do this, I'm gonna want to be your everything, because you will become mine.”

Heart trying to hammer out of my chest, I wait for her to say something—hell, anything—because that's what Riley does—she talks *a lot*. When she slides off my lap and starts toward the door, I can't fucking breathe.

When she looks over her shoulder, and I see her eyes are nearly black and a little fucking teary, my heart stops.

When she pulls her shirt over her head and drops it on the ground before turning down the hall, I turn into the fucking flash.

The man I was a year ago wasn't half the man I am now, standing before the woman I know without a doubt was a gift to me. I'm nervous and finding it hard to breathe normally as my heart is pounding damn near out of my chest because I know what this feeling is. It's one I've never truly felt for anyone I've been with, ever, and it's one I saw growing up every damn day. She's not my first, but she makes me wish she was.

I allow her to pull my shirt off. Then I grab her hip and the back of her head, letting my hand trace a path my lips follow, down her neck and her shoulder. My hands continue around to her back, where I unclasp her pink, lacy bra as I begin trailing kisses down her sexy, slender neck, the swells of her perfect little tits, and take her tan, already taut nipple in my mouth while pushing the straps of her bra off so there is nothing between me and her tits.

One hand on my hip, her grip tightens, while the other rubs my erection through my jeans, causing me to bite down reflexively on her. She whimpers, and that sound spurs me to lick across her chest to give the other the attention it, too, deserves.

I hook my thumbs beneath the waistband of her leggings then drag them down, kissing down her toned yet soft belly. My cock pulses in premature anticipation of what it's going to feel like sliding between her hot, wet lips, and for a second, I start tripping over the fact I may come too soon.

That, though, evaporates as I kneel before her, run my nose across matching pink lace panties, and realize they're a perfect match. I wonder if I've missed that about her. Does Riley Park wear matching sets every day?

Her scent, a mix of musky jasmine and need, catches a hold of me, and I'm now running my nose across her lace-covered pussy, inhaling. Unable to restrain the need to taste her, I tug her panties down with my teeth, exposing bare flesh that wasn't bare and look up.

“Step out.”

She does, and quickly.

“Condom?”

“Pill,” she says before swallowing hard.

“Matching panties and bra, bare pussy, and the pill. I was right; you are a gift. I’m only going to ask this once: are you ready for this?” My hands on her ankles, I slowly run them up her smooth, soft skin.

She nods.

“Good.”

I stand, sliding my hand between her thighs then dipping a finger between her hot lips as I unbutton and unzip my jeans, shoving them down one-handed. I push another finger inside her as I step out of them, and she inhales a quivering breath that nearly makes my damn knees weak. I curve my fingers, slowly thrusting them in and out, making sure to hit that spot, wanting her to be soaked for what’s to come as I kiss her and guide her back until her body hits the bed. When I pull my mouth and fingers away, she opens her eyes.

“Sit.”

As she sits, she takes my cock in her hand and begins to stroke it. Feels so good, too fucking good, and when she licks across my tip, I grind my teeth, trying to fight back the urge to thrust inside of her mouth.

“Not yet, Cielo. I need to make you all mine first.”

“Oh. My. God,” she whispers.

I kneel in front of her. “Spread your legs. Show me that pretty pink pussy.”

She does so without reservations.

I lean in, inhaling her scent as I run my thumb up her seam. Beautiful porcelain skin, pink on the inside.

“You smell so fucking good. Too fucking good. I’m gonna want to be down here all night.”

I run my tongue up her spread pussy, and her knees clench. I pull them apart as I lick around and around her opening. She’s my new favorite treat.

When her breaths become harder, heavier, and she grips my hair, I lick around her clit, and her hips thrust as she moans. I kiss down her lips then dip the tip of my tongue inside her, then suck. When she cries out my name, I do it again and again gently, because I can't stop tasting her, and I don't want her sore. She immediately starts to rock into me, whimpering, seeking her release. I give it to her with the flick of my tongue over her clit.

“Taste so good, Cielo. So, so good.”

“Oh, oh, oh ... Yes ...” she pants.

I do it again.

“Yes!”

I grab my cock with one hand and squeeze it while I flick and suck, flick and suck, flick and—

“Oh yes. Oh, oh, oh ...”

And again, her sweet, wet heat coats my skin as I suck harder and she continues to come in layered multiples.

Standing, I kiss up her body, grabbing her tits in my hands, pushing them together, sucking and nipping one after the other, feasting on her body, pleasuring it as it should be.

“Oh,” she pants, “my,” she pants harder, “God.”

I release her tits and kiss her mouth as I cup her pussy. Her body jerks as I slide one then two fingers in easily and make peace with the fact I'm going to hurt her, but far less because she's primed.

I break our kiss as I keep fingering her. “You're so tight. So fucking tight and almost ready.”

“Feels ... so ... good.” Her voice quivers as I tap her G-spot, and her hips buck into my palm.

“You. I want you,” she pleads.

I hover over her, sucking one nipple while caressing the other. Her fucking nipples are hard as hell. I would eat those things if I could.

I reach between us and rub my cock up and down her wet slit. “Fuck, Riley, fuck.” I watch her eyes roll as she grips my shoulders. “You’re so fucking beautiful.” I push into her just a little.

When her closed eyes start to open, I almost close mine, not wanting to see one second of pain, but I don’t see pain. I see ... wonder.

“I’m gonna make you feel so fucking good, Cielo, I promise.” I push in more, and she stiffens, but fuck if I’m retreating, and when she spreads her legs wider, I know she doesn’t want me to, either. “You feel so damn good. To good. Fuck. To—”

“Please, Theo, don’t stop.”

“Fuck,” I scold myself.

“Don’t you stop. Don’t you dare stop. I want you inside me, all of you. I want *you*, Theo Rivera, so bad. I want you and me. I want us. I want this.”

I take her face between my hands and kiss her hard as I thrust fully into her.

A quick intake of breath has me pulling back, and when our eyes lock, hers are smiling. Fucking smiling.

I reach between us, rubbing her clit as I continue slow movements in and out of the tightest, hottest pussy I’ve ever been in.

“I’m ... I’m ... I’m going to love”—she closes her eyes —“us.”

“Yeah?” I rotate my hips.

She nods. “Totally.”

“I already love us,” I groan as I slide in and out, harder and faster.

“So much,” she moans.

“So fucking much,” I hiss as I push in hard.

“So good.” She licks her lips. “I love us.”

“Don’t you ever stop.” I thrust harder.

“Never.” Her fingers dig into my arms as her pussy grips my cock like a vice, and then we come, together.

Empty, spent, and feeling her pussy pulse around my cock, I lean in, placing my elbows on either side of her head, and kiss her nose, her cheeks, her chin, her forehead, over and over as we both try to catch our breaths.

“I wasn’t ...” She shakes her head, which I now know is Riley’s sign for erase or delete. “Everything said I wouldn’t ...” She pants some more. “I came my first time.”

“Fuck yeah, you did.” I rub my nose across hers.

“We’re awesome.” She grins.

“Yeah, we are.” I push some of her hair stuck to her lips away and press my smile to hers.

Then I remember something Costello said.

“What do you call your pussy?”

Her eyes open. “Huh?”

“Have you named it?”

“I mean, no, but we’re open to suggestions, I guess.”

I bury my face in her neck and try not to laugh.

“You’re lucky I am who I am.” She wraps her legs around me and squeezes me tight. “Some women may take offense to the man whose peen is invading her princess parts, laughing at her expense.”

I can’t help it. I laugh, and although I shouldn’t be shocked, I am when she somehow maneuvers me onto my back and ends up on top of me.

“Impressive,” I say, looking her over, and then ... then I feel what I’m pretty sure is my cum sliding out of her and onto my stomach.

We both look down, and then at each other quickly.

“Well, damn ... I think a cleanup is in order.” I wrap an arm around her and curl up. “Hang on, little monkey.”

Riley smiles. “Aw, you loved on my monkey.”

“Yeah, and then your monkey spit all that love all over my stomach.”

I walk us across the hall and into the bathroom, kick the door shut behind me, sit her on the counter, and grab a wad of tissues to clean my stomach off and see a slight tinge of pink.

I know what it is. It’s a little blood mixed in with our combined cum, and when she slides off the counter and looks at the counter, no doubt to see if there’s any on it, there isn’t.

I lean over and kiss her head. “Your cum’s even pretty.”

“You think I could shower?”

“Yeah, yeah, of course.” I step over and turn on the water. “You need a minute, or would it be okay If I joined you?”

She nibbles on her lower lip for a second then nods, “I wouldn’t be opposed to that.”

I cup her chin, lean down, and kiss her. “Sharing a shower with a beautiful woman, a night of firsts for both of us.”

Under the water, we continue touching each other, washing each other’s bodies, kissing.

“Fuck, I love my mouth on yours.”

She glances down at my dick, which is hard again.

“Ignore that.”

“Not sure that’s something I’m gonna want to ignore.”

“Not being a little bitch when I tell you I just can’t when I know you’re sore.”

“Honestly, I’m good, big guy.”

“Damn right, you are.”

She wrings out her hair then steps out of the shower, and I realize all I have in here is one towel, and I know my sisters use two; one for their hair, and one for their bodies.

I wrap her up. “Let me go grab you another.”

When I open the door and step into the hall, I hear the guys.

“Fuck.” I glance back. “We need to make a run for it.”

“Let’s do it.”



WHEN WE'RE DRESSED and she's tied her hair up, using a pencil to secure it, we head out to the living room.

“There they are.” JT looks back at us with a shit-ass grin on his face.

“Mind your fucking business,” falls out of my mouth at the same time she says, “Nothing hotter than us.”

Dash and JT laugh, and Koa looks back at me, lifts his chin, and I do the same.

“Looks like you just left all the food to get cold.” JT sighs.

“It’s about to get warmed up and eaten.” I walk to the oven and open it. “Oh, wow, look, another whole pan.”

“You the man, Rivera.” JT jumps over the back of the couch.

RILEY



Chapter 20

Riley

TAPPY

Saturday September 21st

Dear Simone,

It's been a "minute" since I've written, and I must be honest, I'm probably going to be even less consistent than I was last year.

Sorry, not sorry.

With sorority recruitment over, we've moved on to getting to know the new recruits better, and my rush crush is so adorable I can't stand it. Aria is a musical theatre student whose dramatic flair and energy matches mine.

And Ellie, well, she's getting another little, too. This would typically throw her current little into an emotional breakdown. I talked Taya into CDB-ing, and I knew there was no better match for her than Ellie. Last Saturday, we saw her at the football game, and again, she just looked lost. I got her to sit between Ellie and I, and she admitted that it was depressing to be in her dorm room. Her roommate is also our teammate, Kimmie. She's been staying in the room Nalani was supposed to be in since then. She'll be moving into K&T next semester.

Gina, Theo, and I got an A on our group assignment, the highest in the class.

And Simone, I've been exhausted as of late, and it has everything to do with the hockey boy. It's been close to a year since I felt my first tummy flip, and even when I thought he and Drew had something going on (which they didn't), simply looking at him made me hot.

I've been dicked down and deflowered, Simone. I, Riley Park, had my V card punched by the hockey hottie turned crush, turned *drum roll please* boyfriend.

I'm no longer hating on braces because, when I smile, Theo looks at me like I'm beautiful. I don't hate on my itty bitties, Theo loves them, and without my super sensitive nipples, I wouldn't feel hot lava pooling between my legs before he's even touched my "monkey." I don't love my period, but it's part of having "princess parts." Without a vagina, which does have to bleed once in a while, I wouldn't have multiple orgasms. I love men, just not the sadistic motherfuckers who invented heels.

Life is good, Simone. The team is doing great. Bria and I are going to kill it this season.

Ending on 2 highs and a low.

H- I'm the happiest I've ever been in my life.

L- There are only 24 hours in a day.

H- The shower just turned off, and my man is staying over.

Later.

X,

Riley

THEO WALKS OUT, towel wrapped around his waist, abs on full display for my viewing pleasure. But that V is like an arrow pointing lower, and the white towel is doing a shit job hiding the outline of his dick.

“You see something you want?”

“You know I do.” I toss my journal and pen onto my nightstand, move to the end of the bed, and push up on my knees.

His lips are on mine in less than a moment, tongue parting my lips and pressing inside my mouth. A guttural sound escapes from deep inside him as he licks deeper inside my mouth, sweeping against my own hungry tongue.

I love the way he tastes me, the way his hand guides my head to allow him to take control. It’s not overpowering, but the man does know how he wants me. He makes me feel defenseless in the most considerate manner.

I open wider, giving him more of what he’s seeking—a deeper taste. Heat spreads throughout me, my stomach doing flips, as warmth makes moves to my princess parts.

He unties the belt of my bathrobe and slides his hands inside, groaning when he finds there’s nothing underneath it.

Pulling his mouth away slowly, knowing neither of us wants to stop kissing, but as his hands cover my tits, I know where he wants his mouth, and I am not opposed. His pillow-soft lips trace my jaw, kissing, licking, sucking his way down my neck as he works his hand—my God, his hands—kneading my boobs and tweaking my nipples.

Dipping his head, his silky, dark waves tickle my skin while he licks across my nipple, causing a jolt of pleasure to move from my nipple to my clit. He draws my nipple between his lips, sucking, biting, and pulling, and I feel my core getting wet.

His hand, now on the small of my back, drags around to my belly until it's hidden between my legs. He cups me, rubs me, toys with me, mouth and hand working my body into a beautiful frenzy.

Fingers tangled in his hair, I ache for more. I trail my fingertips down his body, landing on muscular, thick thighs. I give the towel a good yank and allow it to drop before wrapping my hand around his swollen cock.

Teeth clench around my nipple, he growls, “Fuck.”

The pain caused by his teeth is quickly sucked to a dull and pleasurable ache that works me up even more as I stroke him faster.

“Fuuuck,” he groans, releasing my nipple from his mouth as his finger slides inside me. “Fucking soaked, Cielo.”

His hips buck as he pushes another finger inside of me, making me gasp at the sudden fullness.

“So tight,” he growls as he curves his finger, hitting that spot that makes my pussy clench and toes curl.

I lean down and lick across his head, tasting the salty moisture at his tip for the first time, and truth be told, I like it.

“Fuck yes.” His hips buck again, and his dick thrusts farther into my mouth, causing me to gag a little.

“Sorry. Fuck. I ...”

He stops talking when I reach around him and grip his big, muscular, hockey ass while taking him in further.

“Feels so good.”

I pull back and grab his cock, lick back up and across his head, before wrapping my mouth around the tip, flicking my tongue over it, and he groans, which makes me want to give him more. I take him deeper, and he pulls his hand out from between my legs, allowing me to lean in farther to take him even deeper. He rocks in and out of my mouth, slowly at first. Sucking harder, enticing groans of pleasure, stroking faster, his hips move, thrusting up on my downward motion.

He grips one of my top knots when I flick my tongue across his head again. Then I lay my tongue flat against the pulsing vein on the underside of his exceptionally hard, incredibly large, and yes, beautiful cock. His thrusts becomes harsher, his grip tighter, and my desire to lead is dwindling as he shows me in sounds, in actions, in pleasing praises just what he needs.

“If you don’t tell me to stop, I’m gonna come down your throat,” he hisses.

I glance up at him, see the dark storm in his eyes, and then take him in farther.

“Fuck yes!” He thrusts. “Fuck yes. Fuck, fuck, fuuuuccckkk!”

His cock jerks again and again as he fills my mouth.

When he finishes, he leans down and kisses me, then flops facedown on my bed. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

I laugh. “No?”

He rolls to his side and looks at me with intense admiration. “Your mouth is magic.”

When my phone alarm goes off, I pull my robe closed, scramble to the top of my bed, and look at the screen.

“Shit.”

“What’s shit?” he says, rolling onto his back.

I quickly tighten my robe as I tell him, “I think you should throw some pants on.”

He looks up at me. “You forget my recovery time is just a couple minutes?”

I shake my head. “And please don’t forget how much you adore me and love us.”

“Okay?”

“Rivera, get some pants on now,” I demand.

He curls into seated position and looks at me.

“Now,” I hiss.

He pushes off the bed and grabs his sweats. Before he has time to put them on, the door opens, and three frat boys come into my room.

“Theo Rivera, you need to come with us ... now.”

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s—”

“You gotta go.” I laugh.

“The fuck is this?” he groans.

“Have fun and be nice,” I whisper as he pulls on his sweats.

He goes to grab a shirt, and Tyler, Grace’s man, closes the door so his boys don’t see him, and Lord knows they don’t hear him, because the girls are all aware of what’s going on, and of course they’re recording it.

Tyler whispers, “We’re supposed to kidnap you. I shouldn’t have even let you put on pants.” He holds out a hood. “And it will give me credibility if you have this over your head and act like I put it on you.”

It suddenly hits him as to what’s going on. “Hold up. I thought I didn’t have to rush or do any weird shit.”

“Your girlfriend wants you to experience at least a little bit of what it’s really like to be part of a fraternal organization,” Tyler whispers.

“She does, does she?” He glares at me.

I blow him a kiss. “Remember you like me.”

“We’ll see.”

As soon as he leaves the room, I jump up, hurry to the door, and watch as two of the brothers take either side of him and as Tyler winks at Grace.

When they’re out of the house, Ellie, Leah, Grace, and Taya all run into my room where I am handed each and every one of their phones. I airdrop four videos to myself, and then we watch the videos and laugh hysterically.

“He’s going to kill you.” Grace giggles.

“Oh no, he’s not. He’s high on head right now.”

Ellie gives me a high-five. “Good call.”

I don’t tell them that’s the first blow job I’ve ever given, or that it definitely won’t be the last.

My man is delicious.

RILEY



Chapter 21

Riley

Letters

Monday October 7th

Dear Simone,

From what I understand, there is no one who knows everything there is to know about Riley Romano Park like you do, because of this, I wanted to make sure that you're kept well informed and updated.

Less than three weeks ago, the girl who claimed to "love us" not only allowed me to be kidnapped, which led to me almost getting killed by a cock—more accurately, The Cock. She not

only allowed this all to happen but assisted in planning the act and made damn sure I was in a weakened state before it all went down.

Yet, here I am.

Less than two weeks ago, she was the cause of me being late for practice for the very first time because I am unable to tell her no when she looks at me—or in this case, my dick—with objectifying eyes and licks her hot AF lips. We skated lines for an hour straight, on a Saturday morning, after I insisted they all attend a party hosted by Tappy—the frat Koa—and I are being used in hope's of their rank going up. They were last, so it couldn't possibly go down—many puked on the ice.

Many.

Yet, here I am.

Less than a week ago, RRP tricked me into getting a manicure and pedicure with her before a date night event we attended together that had me up way past my bedtime, completely

fucking with the schedule I keep in order to keep in top condition for my sport.

Yet, here I am.

One might say I'm pussy whipped, and I wouldn't be the man I have become, the man my father will always be proud of, the man she deserves, if I denied the truth in that.

But the truth, Simone, is deeper. A year ago, I saw her and immediately felt my universe shift. From that first night, I loved her whole vibe and her confidence. Then it was the sound of her voice and the magic in her laughter. In the way all her different smiles hold distinct meanings, and the way her eyes sparkle when she feels joy. I loved the way she celebrated not only her wins, but others, as well. I loved that Riley Park cares genuinely about others, and that she goes out of her way to do things to make people feel seen and heard.

It's been a year since we met, and from the moment I saw her, I've allowed my imagination to construct who she was. Not to toot my own horn, but if this hockey thing doesn't work out, along with my guardian angel, I would make one hell of a psychic. I was right about all of those things, and as haunting as that realization is, it's just the tip.

We stumbled a bit, we skinned our knees, and then we got back up. Against some significant odds, we made it.

I can finally add that I love the way her lips feel on mine, the way she tastes and the way she feels around me. I love the happiness and laughter she inspires and looking at the world through her eyes. I love who she is and who she's to become. And I love the way I, Theo Rivera, love life again.

So here I am, completely enchanted.

Ending on all ups and zero sucks

X,

Theo

I FLOP BACK on my bed, tears falling down my face, probably ruining my makeup, holding the letter I found sitting on top of my journal, in the middle of my bed.

“Hey.”

I sit up and wipe at the tears, careful not to ruin my mascara, and see Ellie leaning against my doorframe, smiling.

“Hey.”

She pushes off the door and nods down the hall.

“What?”

She smiles and shakes her head as music begins to boom through the house.

“What is happening?” I ask, scampering off my bed, shoving my feet into my pink fuzzy Ugg slippers, and hurrying after her.

The music is so loud I have to yell to her, “Wait up, hooker!”

Shaking her head, she walks down the stairs.

Leaning over the balcony to see what the hell is going on, I see Theo standing at the bottom of the stairs.

When the words begin, he looks up, sees me, and beckons me with his giant hands.

As a Swiftie to my very core, my journey to the bottom of the stairs—passing the ghosts of all my Stephens’ past—wondrously ends toe-to-toe with Theo.

He grips my hips while singing along with Taylor. “*It was enchanting to meet you.*”

Tears that have not altogether stopped from the reading of his letter to “Simone” fall as I smile up at him and link my fingers behind his neck, and then we dance and sing and laugh.

When the last chorus begins, he spins me in a circle then releases me as he holds his imaginary mic up and belts out the last chorus, once again serenading me in the dramatic flair I find seriously hot.

When the music ends, he takes my face in his big old hands, leans down, brushes his nose across mine, and says, “You’re my heaven, Cielo.” He kisses my cheek. “I love you.”

“I love you.”

When applause breaks out around us, we break our kiss. He holds his hand in the air, a shirt flies through the air, and he catches it.

“Gonna have to ask that you wear this to every game you attend.” He holds it up in both hands, and I see it’s a jersey, with his name and number on it.

“Gonna have to say you bet your ass I will.”



I LEFT him downstairs with the girls and Cody to take a quick shower. I’d yet to shower because I didn’t expect him tonight. We kind of have a schedule going. We cook together on Thursday nights, and he always stays here. Fridays, we’re typically at his, and Saturdays normally back at mine. Sundays are football watch parties at our place unless Cody has an away game, and then we girls all watch *Say Yes To The Dress* reruns with Kameron.

That’s all going to change, though. His first game is Friday, so he’ll stay at his place with his boys, including Asher and Hank, which is the Lincoln Lions whole first line. It will change again when my season starts.

Change used to freak me out a little, but now I kind of love it.

Just not too much, please and thank you.

As I'm sitting at my desk, finishing up the pigtail knot braid, my door opens and Theo walks in. "Took you long enough." He moves behind me, his lips pressing to the side of my head as he pushes his hand inside my robe, cups my breast, then pinches my nipple.

"Just give me a second?"

"Take your time. I'm not going anywhere."

"Because you love me or my tits?"

"Is both going to get me in trouble?" He squeezes my other nipple, and I moan. Then he rubs his lips over my cheek and kisses up to my ear. "I'll take that as a no." His hand skates down my belly slowly.

"I kind of love that you love all my parts."

He rubs a finger up and down my slit.

"Yeah, there, too," I moan.

"Does that feel good?"

I lean back and whisper, "Incredible." Then I pull his hand away, slide out of my seat, stand in front of him, and lift his shirt up.

He slides out of it, and I toss it aside as I push up on my toes and press kisses down his neck, slowly running my tongue down the center of his throat as I unbutton his jeans and he unties my robe.

Once we're naked, I smile as I flatten my hand to his chest and step toward him until he is at the edge of the bed. "Sit, please."

He does so, and I climb up, straddling him, and resume kissing his neck. Moving lower, I gently push him so he's lying down, one of his hands on my hip, and the other moving between my legs. When he pushes a finger inside of me, a moan escapes as I lick across his hard, broad chest, sinking my fingers into his flesh and flicking my tongue across his nipple. When he inhales a quick breath, I feel myself clench around

his finger at the excitement of finding another spot that gives him pleasure.

Tongue moving across his chest to the other side, I look up into his eyes, so dark, so sexy, and filled with want and promise.

His lips curl softly, and I close my eyes, moving back up to kiss his lips. He groans and tries to control the kiss, which I love, but right now, I feel like Lewis and Clark. I mean whichever one was less of a monster, because I don't know them ... personally. But you get the point. I'm exploring new territory and loving it.

I shake my head at him then kiss his chest again, moving down his six pack, licking and kissing every inch of him that I can.

“Riley,” he moans. “Let me—”

“No.” I move off of him. “I'm on an erogenous zone expedition.”

I take his hard, large shaft in my hand, swipe my tongue across its broad head, while watching as he tilts his head back and growls.

“You found one.”

Stroking him gently, I ask, “Should I put a pin in it?”

I watch his nostrils flare and his jaw clench as he bites down hard, his lips separated, and his teeth slightly bared. “Fuck no, just keep doing that.”

I flick my tongue over his tip and watch the muscles in his jaw flex, and so, too, do my insides.

A noise escapes him that is so raw, so deep, it's animalistic.

I kiss and lick his head again and am rewarded with the same sexy sounds.

“Fuck!” he growls.

I lightly skim my tongue down his cock, to his left inner thigh, where I suck again. His erection twitches, and he fists

my hair.

“Fuuuck,” he growls.

The way he groans and moans is the equivalent of receiving a perfect score on the bars, and I’m going to make damn sure I earn them.

With his shaft in my hands, I stroke him as I lightly run my tongue up him again and am reward as a small bead of his cum forms on his tip. I lap at it, savoring his taste, and then I sheath my teeth as I suck hard, moving down his length until I can’t take any more of him.

“Fuck, Riley, fuck.” The deep and guttural way in which he says my name and the need in it makes my pussy pulse, and I know, I just know, I’m going to have to climb on him soon. But first ...

I move my free hand slowly up his leg to cup his balls as I continue sucking up and down his length, then lick down him, tonguing the bulging veins running down the full length of him, and he grips my hair more forcefully.

“Dammit,” he hisses.

I suck harder as he thrusts into my mouth, causing me to gag slightly.

He looks down almost apologetically.

I reach behind him and grab his rock-hard ass, pulling him closer.

“You suck me so fucking good,” he growls.

His words cause me to burn hotter.

“Fuuccckkk ... Stop before I come.”

So, I do.

I let his cock fall out of my mouth and nearly come myself at the sound of his wet skin slapping against his hard abs as I move to straddle him.

Taking his cock in my hand, I rub him against my opening then slowly slide down, and I swear I could cry at how

incredible it feels.

“Jesus ... shit ... fuuuccckk ...” Theo sputters, and I’m broken out of my moment only to realize I am in fact tugging on my nipples ... in front of Theo.

“Oh, fuck no.” He presses my hands to my chest. “Don’t you stop.”

So, I don’t.



FRIDAY OCTOBER 11TH

It’s been a rough week for Theo. Why? Because someone—Leah—uploaded a video of Monday night’s serenade, and it, too, went viral. Oh, and yeah, his coach found out and rode him and the rest of the team pretty hard.

He’s concerned that they’re going to play like shit because morale is down. To that, I read him the comments from all—yes, every single one—of his teammates that were positive.

At four fifty, I send him a text.

ME:

You don’t need good luck; you’re going to kick ass, and I’m going to be your biggest cheerleader.

HIM:

I expect pom-poms and booty shorts after we hit Bleachers.

ME:

You got it. Kick ass. Love you.

HIM:

Plan on it. Love you.



Chapter 22

Game Day

Theo

Friday, October 11th

“You feeling good?” I ask Koa, who has been on the ice, in class, or in bed.

“I’m feeling pissed and angry. Sucks for me.” He shuts his locker and taps it three times. “But it works for the game. Folks are here.” I open my mouth, and he shakes his head. “Nope, we’re not going there.”

“From an hour before until the game is done, I don’t go anywhere outside of the arena. It’s me, my team, and the win. I was gonna ask if you were ready to fucking kill Rutgers.”

“You know I am.”

“Kid,” Coach calls to me, and I look from my socks—one of mine, and one of Frankie’s—to him. He clasps my shoulder and points out toward the ice. “It’s all yours now, and I expect that you play the same damn way you played in Houston. Play like the kid I recruited because he was the most arrogant little shit I ever saw on the ice, and you had what it took to back that up.”

“Will do, Coach.”

“We never talked about what changed from then until you came to Lincoln, and that’s because I knew you didn’t want to,

and we're not going to do that now, either. But I need you to know, they're here with you."

"Fuck, Coach, this is emotional shit already. Don't—"

"All of them." He nods to section where everyone else's family sits but never mine ... until today.

"How the hell—"

"Now, hold the hell up. Before we go getting into all that, I need you to promise me that I have that kid from Houston on this ice, giving one hundred and ten percent every fucking game."

I nod because fuck, my throat is burning, and my eyes, they are, too.

"I don't give a shit about your viral posts, or that you're signed, or that Dean Costello would probably give his left nut to get you to Brooklyn. I want your word that you'll give me everything this season."

"You've got two more, Coach." I assure him.

"Don't kid yourself." He chuckles. "Go win us our first game and try to forget that the fucking Puck Net and ESPN have basically moved into our house. Fucking bastards."

Over the system comes, "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Costello Arena the home of the Lincoln Lions, winners of the 2019 Frozen Four."

I exhale a breath and step out onto the ice, my team behind me as I do a lap, and I do it avoiding looking at the crowd. But out of the corner of my eye, I do see them, and I see them sitting with Riley's mom and dad, who I invited and didn't tell her. I can't help but smile at the idea that Riley probably knew about my family being here and kept it from me, and vice versa.

During stretches and warmups, Rutgers talks so much shit about us being second line bitches that JT is ready to fight before the game has even begun.

"Save all that for the game, every fucking ounce of your anger, man!" I yell at him. "We're not just winning this game;

it's going to be a shut out so no other team we face comes at us like that again.”

“Hell yes on the shut out,” Hank agrees. “JT, you and Ash keep number 14 from getting to me, and I'll owe you one.”

“Why's that?” Dash asks him.

“His high school girlfriend was hot, and I may have commented on her IG posts daily for a couple years about her being too hot for his ugly ass.” He grins. “Kid hates me.”

“She here?” JT looks at their student section.

Hank nods as he points to her. “She sure is. Faithful to a fault.”

Standing center ice, facing off against a fifth-year senior, I tell him, “Good luck.”

His eyes narrow, lips curl, and I laugh. This pisses him off more than I hoped it would, and when the whistle blows and the puck drops, I've already passed it to Dash before he even gets his head where it needs to be.

Koa is faster than he looks, throwing Rutgers D for a loop as he captures the pass from Dash, two men covering him. They don't even have me in the equation, leaving me wide open and the goal unprotected, which is where they fuck up in the first twenty seconds of the game.

The crowd erupts as the announcer calls my name. “Rivera, number 13, with his first goal of the season.”

The rest of the first period isn't as easy, and the score remains 1 to 0.

Second period plays a hell of a lot differently. Rutgers thinks they have our number. Koa and I both receive cheap-ass shots but, as planned, we don't retaliate only being ahead by one, because that's what they want. They want us off the ice and in the box so they have a chance. They've also underestimated the fact we're a team, and not a two-man show. Against the boards, I manage to pass to Dash, who's in front of the undefended goal, and he dangles the puck through their goalie's five hole, giving us a 2-0 lead.

Facing off again, the whistle blows, the puck is dropped, and I'm tackled to the ground as their center just goes after me. Honestly, all I can do is laugh.

"You smell like desperation, bitch, and a loss, man!"

Dash and Koa skate in. Rutgers' players do the same, assuming we've had enough, but we haven't. We haven't not even gotten started.

JT has the puck as Koa splits from what was about to become a pile and hauls ass down the ice. From my nice, comfy spot on the ice, I watch JT slap the puck straight to the goal, and Koa is right there to tap it in, giving us a 3-0 lead three seconds before the buzzer.

The third period is brutal, but Koa bears the brunt of it by busting through and breaking up every fight those bastards start, and that's all they're doing. At this point, they're not even trying for the puck.

With one minute left, I'm getting elbowed against the boards, almost behind the net, when I say *fuck it*. I shove an unsuspecting number 14, grab the puck, and hit a backhanded shot that straight up had no chance in hell of going in, yet it did.

We're 4-0.

Then I get two hands to the back and decide again, "Fuck it."

I grab number 14 by the shirt and just start railing on him. Within seconds, we're in a pile, helmets and gloves off, and blood is coming from noses and mouths.

Whistles blow, and we're being pulled apart. Somehow, after a game like we've played and as dirty as they've been, I end up in the penalty box.

The whole arena is cheering my name, whoever the hell is in charge of tunes starts playing the Barenaked Ladies, and I cannot stop smiling.

"Kid," you just fucked up. You don't get to smile!" Coach yells at me.

“Sorry, Coach,” I call back to him as I step into the box.

“You’re full of shit!”

“Little bit,” I admit as I turn and Riley, my sisters, my mom, and even my brother all make their way over to me.

Hand over my heart, I look them all over as I finally allow the ice to thaw and myself to truly feel.

“Fuck,” I groan, pinching the bridge of my nose as I repeat over and over again, “Keep it together, Rivera, keep it together.”

Riley holds her hand to the glass, in half a heart, and I hold mine the same way, making it whole. Then she steps back, and six hands touch glass, and I tap them all right down the row, and then I tap two that aren’t visible but will always be there.



AFTER SHOWERS, I turn on my phone and see a shit load of texts, but I open Mom’s first.

MOM:

We’ll see you at Bleachers.

ME:

Love you, Mami, and I can’t wait.

I open the next.

RILEY:

You’re staying with me and the whole Rivera family tonight. Pom-poms and booty shorts will have to wait. But FYI, I’m not wearing any panties, and that’s strange because I know I had them on when I came to the game.

ME:

?

RILEY:

No need to send out a search party, I'm pretty sure they melted away watching you.



PRESS TOOK LONGER than I ever remember it taking, and so did the drive to Bleachers, mostly because I had to stop at Uncle Ronnie's because Costello came for the game and insisted we not break the tradition.

JT, Dash, Hank, and Asher are radio silent, and I know damn well it's because they don't want to make a bad impression in front of Costello.

Once they pile out and head into Bleachers, the three of us fall back.

"Coach is going to lead you to believe I flew your families up, but that's not true. He and Tallman made that happen."

"Seriously?" I ask.

Dean nods. "Hand to God."

"You good with my six staying at your place?" I ask.

"Koa's folks—"

"Have your room," Dean interrupts me. "Riley already went over and cleaned up and changed your bedding." He nods to the bar. "You two get your asses to work."



INSIDE, I see Riley standing on something, and she has her phone pointed toward me, no doubt recording the moment my family rushes me.

After the initial hugs and I love yous are exchanged, Mom hugs me again. “She’s the one.”

“Yeah.” I nod.

“It wasn’t a question. I was simply telling you what I know.” She steps away. “Now come meet her parents. You’re going to love them, especially the mother.”

I already adore her mother, but she’s even better in person. She’s where Riley gets her spunk, fearlessness, and confidence from. Her father is great, too, just quieter.

When I finally get to her, she’s still holding the phone up.

“You think you can put that down and—”

She dives into my arms. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” I laugh.

“I love us.”

“I do, too.” I kiss her cheek.

“And them?” She takes my hands to her face and shakes her head. “I love them already so much.”

“They feel the same.”

“Okay, because you know how I talk and talk and—”

“Rivera, get your ass back here. It’s showtime,” Koa’s voice booms over the crowd.

“Gotta go to work.” I lean down and kiss her much softer than I want to.

“I’ll be right here when you’re done.”

“Always?”

“Always.” She smiles.

*** The End***

Epilogue

August 14th 2020

Dear Simone,

It's been one hell of a few months but along with our families, his, mine, and our Lincoln family we've made the best out of the suck the entire world has lived that we possibly could.

Let me back this up a bit and tell you that the Lincoln Lions football team won their division. The women's team and men's team were on track to again win their championship games, and I was killing it, like honestly had my very best season until all of it came very abruptly to an end.

Someday I will tell my children about the Covid pandemic that terrified and shut down the world we were living in. About how within weeks went from riding the high of being champions to helping friends scramble to find a place to live when the campus shut down.

I'll tell them about days I spent crying and nights I couldn't sleep because my parents became the people on the frontline fighting a war that's enemies was invisible and unknown.

I'll tell them about the day my parents told me I couldn't come home and insisted I stay living at Casa Costello because they didn't want me to get sick if they caught the virus and brought it home to me. I'll tell them how angry I was at them and in the same breath, saw them as the hero's they were.

Someday I will also tell them about binds and friendships and families that are created. How you can laugh and love and still find

moments of joy when there is so much uncertainty.

I'll tell them how the man I love held me together and at times I held him together because his mother insisted, he stay with me because I was his one.

I'll tell them about packing up my vehicle and tricking him into thinking we were going to go on a road trip, and how we slept in the vehicle and took turns driving all the way to Texas so he could see his mother from ten feet away to tell her face to face how much he loved her, on Mother's Day when she and all his siblings had Covid.

I'll tell them how we drove to Mass Gen and cheered on my parents when we saw them becoming visibly depressed after months of shift after shift trying to save lives and not always being able to do so.

I'll tell them how we made silly videos of him singing and us just being goofy on Tik Tok, to bring a

few minutes of joy to others, and how that helped us just as much.

I'll tell them how their father and I got married by Kameron after he signed with the Brooklyn Bears and our parents, friends, and families watched through their phones and computers.

I'll tell them that we bought a house in Connecticut because that's where their Mommy and Aunt Quincy, and Auntie Drew will be finishing college and that it is close enough to Brooklyn where their Daddy was working.

I'll tell them that no matter how hard life becomes, love always wins.

And I'll tell them that, but I should probably tell their Daddy that she's pregnant first.

Ending on 2 highs and a low.

H- My heart is full.

L- Didn't realize it until four months later *period*

H- Best Husband Ever.

X,

Riley Rivera

“HOLY SHIT,” I whisper as I read it over one more time, because... “Holy shit.”

I stand up and look at all the boxes piled up that we still have to unpack and look to see where my wife might be hiding, no doubt recording this moment.

I make my way up the stairs and to our kick ass master suit, curled up in a little ball in the center of our California King bed.

I pull my phone from my pocket and take a picture. Not wanting wake her, I climb into bed, and gently lay beside her and pull her into my arms.

“Find it?” She says in her sleepy sexy voice.

I kiss the back of her head. “Thank you.”

“Love you.” She pushes closer to me.

“Love you.”

Want more?

Of course you do. DREW DANIELS and DEAN... also
CODY WARREN are next in

[The Holiday Hat Trick](#)

Pre Order Now!

One’s a Bear, the other a Knight. I’m their naughty little secret, and they’re my ultimate fantasy.

Three years ago, I threw my cap in the air and left Lincoln University behind, with a degree to prove I was job worthy, a

trophy saying I was one hell of an athlete, and enough experiences in love to know I was never truly in it.

I'm successful in every aspect of my life. I'm proud of who I have become and what I have created, so why does the thought of spending a holiday with my college friends make me want to stoke the fire, curl up with a bottle or two of wine, surrounded by my furry friends, and watch all the classic holiday movies alone?

Two names: Dean Costello, owner of Brooklyn Bears' professional ice hockey team, and Cody Warren, superstar quarterback for the New York Knights, under the same roof ... again.

I've *played* in the minors but never went pro ... until now.

Holiday Hat Trick is a steamy and emotionally gripping 'why choose' sports romance.

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The Broody Brit: For Christmas

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Standalones

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About the Author

MJ Fields is a USA Today bestselling author of contemporary and new adult romance novels. She lives in New York with her daughter, smoochie faced Newfie, Theo, and diva / terror Ellie

When she's not locked away in the cave, she enjoys spending time with her family, listening to live music, watching theatre, singing off key, dancing to her own beat, listening to audio books, and reading— of course.

Forever Steel!

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Thank you

To the reader of this book,

You are my reason why.

All my love and gratitude,

XOXO

MJ

To Ally, Autumn , Kris, Kim, and Geissa,

thank you big!

.