

OUT OF BOUNDS SERIES

LINE *of* SCRIMMAGE

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LINE *of* SCRIMMAGE

BOOK ONE OF THE
OUT OF BOUNDS
SERIES

For the girls who lost themselves somewhere along the way, I see you, and I promise the journey back to finding yourself is truly the most magical, keep going.

To my dad, the ocean will always be where I feel you most. Miss you always.

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CHAPTER ONE



FORD

I ran through the drills today like it was a walk in the park. I felt like I could hit the route with my eyes closed and still come down with the catch.

“Anderson! Great hands today!” Coach Aarons gives me a fist bump as we walk back to the locker room.

Being a tight end in the NFL is the only career I’ve ever envisioned for myself, football has been my life for the last twenty years. Everything I’ve done throughout my childhood and my time in college was to prepare me for a career in the NFL and I don’t take this opportunity lightly. You can easily be replaced when you’re in the league, no one is untouchable. I’ve been playing professionally for the Tampa Knights now for five years and I feel like I’ve finally reached my prime. Like what I’m doing is actually contributing to the success of the team and I want to keep that momentum going as long as I can.

We’re about to start the regular season with our home opener against a division rival and there’s no better feeling than the rush of that first home game. The fans are on their feet and the stadium is electric. I fucking live for that shit.

“Coming over Saturday, Anderson?” Chase Hunt, one of our defensive

linemen, slaps my back as I'm taking off my pads.

"Come hang out for a beer and a game of poker. Let me and Evans take all that money they're paying you." He flashes me a smile.

I shake my head and laugh at him. "Yeah, you fuckers wish."

I rarely go out during the season. Don't get me wrong, I'm close with my teammates and have good relationships with all of them, it's just a personal choice. Limiting my distractions during the season has always just been something I've lived by.

After hitting the showers, I throw on some shorts and a gray t-shirt before grabbing my bag and heading out of the facility. "I'll swing by, Hunt!" I call out to Chase before turning the corner to head down the hall.

One of my teammates, Nate Campbell, is walking out of Coach Aarons' office at the same time. He was drafted to Tampa the same year that I was and we've become pretty close over the years. Suiing up beside one of the best running backs in the league is a nice position to be in, he's a force on the field.

I nod my head in his direction. "What's that about? Everything good?" Nate shakes his head and puts both hands on his hips as I approach him.

"Fucking ball security, I need to do better." He can steam roll through defensive lines like a bull, but he's had a rough camp and preseason with a few fumbles.

"Don't get in your own head about it. Tuck it and just barrel through like I've seen you do hundreds of times."

I slap his back and try to give him an encouraging nod. Nate's always so hard on himself when he screws up. He's one of those annoyingly positive people most of the time, but when he makes a mistake, he dwells on it. Understanding that this game is just as much mental as it is physical is something I learned quickly and I've been trying to drill it into him since we got drafted.

"Hunt's, Saturday." I point to him and he nods his head while he walks past me to the locker room.

Pulling into my driveway, I click my remote to open the garage. Home sweet home. I lived in an apartment up until three months ago. Right after last season ended, I decided I was tired of living downtown, and thankfully landed a nice contract extension, so it made sense to officially plant some roots. Buying a house out by the water is one of the best decisions I've made. Being a little secluded and living moments from the beach does me good.

Once I'm inside I toss my bag on the laundry room floor and make my way into the kitchen. There are leftovers in the refrigerator that have been calling my name all fucking day. After heating up the food and putting *Captain America* on TV, I throw my feet up on the couch. I'm exhausted and my body is aching. Having some peace and quiet in this big empty house right now is just what I need to relax after today.

CHAPTER TWO



“Oh, come on,” I yell as someone cuts me off and I have to slam on the breaks. The traffic in Tampa this morning seems worse than Miami and my patience is running thin. Today is the first day of school teaching in a new town for me. I'm not really nervous, mostly excited and I'd just like to get there on time. I take a deep breath to try and “woosah” the frustration of this traffic away. Finally, I'm pulling into the school parking lot with fifteen minutes to spare.

Heading inside my classroom, I'm met with the smell of cleaning products and fresh paint. Seems like they did some touch up work over the weekend. All of my bags practically fall from my hands down onto the desk and I take a look around the space I've spent the last few weeks decorating and organizing for the students. Giving myself a moment to soak it in, I slowly inhale and exhale. This change feels good, it feels right. I'm determined to make this year my best yet. I'm convinced it can't be worse than last year and seeing as I don't live in the same town as my ex anymore, this year already has a leg up in that area.

When I applied for this teaching position, there was no plan other than “get out of Miami.” So when this job was posted, I jumped at applying. If

anything, I hoped that living closer to my family and hometown again would be helpful for me both mentally and emotionally. Although it turns out that living alone in Tampa isn't cheap. So, once I got the job, I called my brother to see if he'd mind me staying with him while looking for a place of my own, and realistically to give me time to save some money. He's about to start football season so his schedule will be getting busy, but that also means he has stretches of time where he isn't even there. So, the chances of us getting on each other's nerves much are pretty slim.

As the students start filtering into the classroom, I greet each one with a smile and direct them to their seats. I did my best to make the classroom as fun and inviting as possible with the small window of time I had after moving. The students' desks are set up in clumps of four and there are uplifting and motivational quotes plastered all around the room. After a few meetings with the principal, he filled me in on some of the struggles the community sees and shared some less than ideal situations that some of the kids are in at home. I assured him that it's important to me that at least while these kids are in my classroom, they have a stable and welcoming environment.

The final bell rings and the students are chatting amongst themselves. Since it's the first day and with this being my first year at this school, I suggest we start off with a few of those first day exercises. The ones where you get to know a little about each other.

"Well, good morning, my name is Ms. Hunt, but of course you know that." Laughing to myself. Maybe I'm a little more nervous than I thought. "I enjoy being outside and going to the beach. I like the color purple and lilies are my favorite flowers. I love cookie dough ice cream and Christmas time."

A little boy with blonde curly hair and the brightest blue eyes raises his hand. "Do you like vanilla ice cream with sprinkles on the top?"

I love how specific children can be. They will say pretty much whatever comes to mind, and there's something so innocent and freeing about it. As adults, we don't tend to do that. We'll spend time stewing in our own thoughts wondering something about someone and just making our own assumptions rather than just flat out asking the questions on our mind.

"I do like vanilla ice cream with sprinkles on top, but do you want to know what I really love?" My eyes widen for dramatic effect and the kids are all sitting up in their seats hanging on my every word. "I even add peanut butter to it sometimes too."

One of the little girls blurts out, “That doesn’t sound very healthy.” I laugh at her honesty.

“Well, maybe not,” I say. “But sometimes a special treat is okay.”

Once almost all of the children go around the room, it feels like I’ve gotten to know quite a bit about them. They all love ice cream and all hate green beans. Sounds about right for twenty-four six-year-old children. There’s one little girl left to go and she’s slumped down in her desk chair with her jacket hood on over her head.

“I’m Harper...” She trails off as if she doesn’t have much more to say, but I give her a nod trying to encourage her to go on.

“I-I don’t know. I like to play outside.” She shrugs before she takes the hood off her head and a long braid falls out of her jacket. She straightens some of the loose pieces and sits up a little more in her seat.

“I like to color and paint sometimes.” She sighs and sinks her shoulders back into her desk. My heart instantly feels pulled to this little girl. I’m not sure what her story is yet, but I’d like to find out.

By the time three p.m. rolls around, I’m exhausted, but grateful. The day left me feeling excited for the rest of the year with these students. I’ve always liked school, so much in fact, that my brother used to make fun of me when we were kids for how much I loved going to school. Joke’s on him though because I turned it into a job, albeit not a high paying one, but a job nonetheless. Thinking about it, Chase and I are both living out our passions, with him being in the NFL.

I glance at my phone as I’m getting in the car and roll my eyes when I see the three missed calls and a few text messages. All from Andrew, my ex. Scanning through the texts, they’re all an assortment of some half ass version of an apology.

ANDREW

Abby. I made a mistake I know that, just fucking talk to me.

You can’t ignore me forever.

Wanna bet?

ANDREW

You have to come back to Miami sometime. You're being immature about this by not even talking to me about it.

I delete all the messages without reading the rest. God, I need a drink.

CHAPTER THREE



Opening my eyes and seeing the sunlight peek through the curtain, a deep breath fills my lungs knowing it's Saturday. I reach for my phone on the nightstand and check the time, 9:30? Holy shit, I don't even remember the last time I slept in like this. Fighting the urge to stay in bed all day, I swing my legs over the side of the mattress and extend both of my arms to stretch above my head with a yawn. Feeling like a brand new woman after all that rest, I decide to head downstairs for a quick workout. I'm still working through my laundry pile, but I'm able to find a sports bra and a pair of black leggings to throw on before brushing the knots out of my hair and tossing it in a bun on my head.

After some trial and error, I finally find where the gym is located in Chase's apartment complex. He explained it to me, but it was a series of "*go down the east elevator, turn left, down the hall, pass the picture of a sunset...*" People shouldn't be allowed to give out directions using words like east, if you think I know the compass, you are going to be wildly disappointed.

It took me a few missed turns and asking a kind older gentleman in the hallway, but I got there. When I lived in Miami I did spin classes twice a

week and I miss it already. Making a mental list of things to do asap, I add 'find a spin studio' to the top.

Since I have nothing on the agenda today, I decide to take a walk downtown once I've finished. I'm in desperate need of coffee and it's nice and warm out already, so some fresh air will do me good. Just on the corner of Chase's apartment complex is a coffee shop, Marker's Café. It has the cutest curb appeal, with fresh flowers out front next to the sign that lists off a few of the items they have inside. Blueberry lemon scones? Say less. I grab two coffees and some pastries to take back to the apartment for Chase and I. He was sleeping when I left, but should be up by now. I figure if there's any way to say "sorry your little sister had to come live with you out of nowhere," it's through coffee and food.

"Ab, that you?"

I'm setting the coffee and to-go boxes on the kitchen island as Chase walks out of the hallway. He looks like he just woke up, rubbing his eyes and his hair is all kinds of disheveled.

"Hey, good morning! I grabbed some coffee and food after the gym. Which I found, no thanks to you and your confusing directions by the way. Your coffee is the big one and just take whatever food you want, but please leave me one of the blueberry lemon scones."

"Oh, hell yeah, thanks! And what was the matter with my directions?" He bites off a piece of a bagel. "Have a hard time reading all the signs that say 'fitness center' or something?" I roll my eyes as he smiles. He fluffs my hair like when we were kids as I walk past him down the hall to my room.

A shower is the first thing on my to-do list today. I feel sticky and I'm incredibly aware of the amount of sweat that seeped out of me during that workout. Thankfully this place is pretty big for it being an apartment so I'm able to have my own space. There are two bedrooms and three bathrooms, an open floor plan with a giant living room and a dining room that looks out onto a balcony and the prettiest all white kitchen I've probably ever seen. Hard to believe my brother lives in a place like this.

Before getting into the bathroom, Chase calls out to me and nudges my door open after I tell him to come in. He gives me a look, one that says, "I feel weird asking you about feelings, but I'm your brother and I care," as he runs a hand through his hair.

"Hey, you're good right? Well...I know you probably aren't good, but you're doing okay?"

Chase knows everything that happened with Andrew. Mainly because the day I got here I was a blubbering mess and it just kind of spilled out of me. I had every intention of just saying we broke up, but before I knew it everything just poured out of me. Chase, who is normally very level headed and a glass half full kind of person, was anything but as I was telling him how things went down over the summer. He asked me countless times if he should go kick his ass and while that might be exactly what Andrew needs, I know he's not worth it.

"Yeah. I'm good, I promise." I pause for a moment and then try to change the subject. "I'll probably start looking for a place soon too, just so you know!"

As I'm thinking about Chase's question though, it dawns on me that this is the first time I actually believe it when the words leave my mouth. I'm good. I cried for weeks over that relationship and how it all ended. In hindsight, we should have broken up so much sooner because I know I wasn't truly happy for a long time, but it was comfortable and there were a lot of good times too. Clinging to those good parts was how I justified staying through all of the bad. The first night here at Chase's apartment, I promised myself after sobbing in the living room, that I'd never cry over Andrew again, and so far I've made good on that.

"It doesn't bother me that you're here, you know. There's no rush on my end for you to find something."

"No, I know you're not asking me to, I just...I don't want to get in the way of you, your life, your... extracurriculars." I'm stumbling over the words to say because this conversation has taken an awkward turn and of course, I'm the driver. Chase and I haven't spent a lot of time together in the last few years, so I wasn't sure what kind of lifestyle I'd be walking into when I asked to stay with him. An NFL star defensive player sounds like someone who would have a pretty popular social life and the last thing I wanted to do was intrude on any of that.

"Stop. It's fine. I'd rather you be here anyway, in case Andrew tries anything dumb, like coming to Tampa to find you or some shit. As far as my extracurriculars, I'll make do." He shoots me a wink and I shake my head at him. Andrew couldn't be bothered to pick me up at the library fifteen minutes from our house, so something tells me he isn't driving five hours to pretend to care now. Chase turns towards the door but pauses before walking out.

"I'm having a few guys from the team come over tonight for some poker.

You're welcome to come hang out, you know, if you don't have plans or anything."

"It's sweet you think I have a social life and plans of my own after living in this city for just a few weeks. I'll be around." I tilt my head and give him a swift little pat on the shoulder.

He laughs and shakes his head at me as he leaves my room. Once he's gone, I head back to the bathroom that's connected to my room. Item number one: take a shower. Then, I need to look for apartments. A good orgasm would be nice too while I'm making a list of things to get done today, but unless it's by my own doing, that's not happening any time soon.

After finishing the most relaxing shower I've had in days, I throw on my lavender robe, grab my phone and sit on the bed.

SUMMER

Hi I miss you. How's everything going?

Summer. I miss her. My best friend hated that I moved away, but she was also the one to tell me a change of scenery would be good for me. Her and I moved to Miami to go to college together when we were nineteen and lived together until I moved in with Andrew.

Hi! Miss you more. Things are great. I really love my new job. Everything is great and I'm feeling good.

SUMMER

That makes me so happy Ab! How is it living at Chase's? Is he still as much of a slob as when we were kids?

Summer and I have been friends since we were five. She's the closest thing I have to a sister.

Well, I haven't seen his bathroom, but the apartment itself is in good shape so I guess he grew up.

SUMMER

I'm thinking of coming to visit you soon, so once you are settled let me know! I'm having best friend withdrawals.

I would love that! I'm sure Chase would be thrilled to see his bonus sister too.

SUMMER

It bums me out when you refer to me as his bonus sister for the simple fact that given the chance, I would truly bang your brother.

Oh God. New subject.

SUMMER

Okay, Fine. It's Saturday, what are your plans?

Chase is actually having some teammates over.

SUMMER

Oh, and I'm sure your brother's teammates are hot. Dress cute.

If she could only see how far back my eyes roll at that comment. Tossing my phone back on the bed, I reach for clean clothes to get dressed. I'm sure his teammates are hot too, but I'm not going there. A new relationship is the last thing on my radar right now. I'm still putting myself back together after the last relationship that completely crashed and burned. Plus, knowing my brother, he's probably already put some ridiculous "touch my sister and die" fear into his friends.

Thinking back on my breakup, I'd never realized it before, but I lost myself when I was with Andrew. Being his girlfriend was my whole identity. I let my relationship with him define me for three years. *That's Abby, Andrew Fontane's girlfriend.* Three fucking years I was a girl so blindly in love with a man, *not a boy*, who probably couldn't even tell you my favorite color.

Once I'm back in the kitchen, I grab my scone and my coffee before taking a seat at the island. Looking around, everything in Chase's apartment screams "I just moved in," even though he's lived here for a few years. He's barely decorated, has a whopping three photos in his home, all on the fridge and two are of him and his teammates and the last is an old family photo. It has to be from at least twenty years ago. I'm not judging, interior design is probably the last thing on my brother's mind, but would it kill him to decorate a little?

The sound of Chase's bedroom door opening causes my head to turn in his direction.

"I'm heading out, but the guys will probably be over around eight tonight. Don't be anti-social and come hang for a little." Chase points a finger at me with a raised brow.

"Me? Anti-social? You know I could talk until I'm blue in the face." I shove the rest of the scone in my mouth and give him a big grin. He used to

give me a hard time as kids saying, “save some conversation for the rest of us,” because apparently I don’t know how to shut up.

“I’ll be here,” I say in a sing-song voice.

There is nothing that requires my attention for the rest of the day, so I should at least browse online and see what’s available for rent. And Chipotle. I also think I deserve to get Chipotle.

CHAPTER FOUR



FORD

Walking out of my room, I'm already dreading the fact that I've committed to going to Chase's tonight. I'm even contemplating texting him that I can't make it, but decide to suck it up and at least stop by. I text Nate to let him know that I'll just meet him at Chase's rather than stopping by his place first. My phone rings as soon as I put it down and glance over to see Nate's name flash on the screen,

"Hey man," I say as I'm looping my belt through my jeans.

"Hey, yeah that works out. Mia is coming over now anyway. She broke up with that guy Trent? Or maybe it was Brent? Who the fuck knows?" Mia is one of Nate's friends from college and she quickly became one of mine too. She definitely dates her fair share of *interesting* men though, as Nate likes to say every time she introduces a new one.

"No idea. Was he the guy who collected old coins? Fucking weird." I try to recall the last guy we met with her, but I'm not able to remember.

Hanging up the phone, I grab my keys from the counter and head out the door myself.

While making my way up to Chase's apartment, I'm running all of the game plans we talked about this week through my mind. I feel really good

about this team and what we have to offer this season. We have every opportunity to make a real run at the Super Bowl this year as long as we all stay healthy and don't have any off the field distractions. There are so many veterans on the team who know the game inside and out, but then a lot of new guys who bring killer talent. We're all itching for that Lombardi trophy. It's no secret that a few of the guys are sticking around for another year to make a run at it before their bodies tell them it's time to hang it up for good.

Once I reach his apartment door, I knock once and it swings open. Chase has one of the nicest downtown apartments I've been in. It's an open-plan concept in the common areas and then there's a long hall towards the back, where the bedrooms are. I used to live in one similar to this, but he's at the top of this building, just below the penthouse. The view up here is fucking unreal, it looks right out over the bay.

As I'm walking to the dining room I see Nate and a few other guys from the team sitting at the table with cards in their hands, no doubt they've already started a game of poker. To Nate's left is Mia and she's just a tiny thing. She's holding a stack of cards, but I'm not sure she even knows how to play. She gives me a goofy smile and shrugs her shoulders as she fans herself with the cards in her hand, which causes me to let out a laugh. Grabbing a beer from the fridge, I walk past the table and make my way out to the balcony. The sun is just about to set so the sky has pink and orange hues to it. Fucking paradise here. I'm thankful my contract extension is keeping me here another four years at least.

"Anderson! You made it, man." Chase claps me on the back and takes a sip of his drink. I can smell the whiskey on his breath, indicating he's already had a couple.

"Yeah, I figured I'd grace you assholes with my presence just this once," I say, reaching my hand out to shake his. He turns his attention back to Liam beside him and continues having whatever animated conversation they have going on.

From the corner of my eye, a girl sitting in a chair near the balcony catches my attention. She's staring out over the water with her bare feet up and hugging her knees against her body. Fuck, she's hot. I've never seen her before, and it makes me wonder if Chase is maybe seeing someone new.

Her long brown hair falls over her shoulder as she sits there. As if she feels my stare, her head turns in my direction and I instantly feel like I've just been thrown to the ground by a three-hundred pound lineman. She

completely takes my breath away with the way her cheekbones sit high, giving her face this sultry look. And even though it's hard to tell the color of her eyes from here, they sure are fucking captivating. Her lips are so full and pouty, I'm instantly imagining what they'd taste like. I notice the setting sun catches her eye and she turns her attention back to the water. I'm unable to tear my eyes from her though, the way her hair blows in the breeze and the way she closes her eyes and rests her chin on her knees, basking in the moments before the sun hits the horizon. When she finally stands up, I see her long toned legs and slender frame. She's pretty tall compared to most girls, but I'd still tower over her at 6'4. When she starts walking over to Chase, I'm already moving my feet to meet her there. I need to know who she is.

They're in the midst of talking, but when Chase sees me, he clears his throat, "Anderson, this is my little sister, Abby. She's staying with me right now. Abby, this is Ford Anderson." She eyes me up and down and a small smile lands on her lips.

"Hi, nice to meet you. I've seen you play. Well on TV, anyway. Admittedly, it's been forever since I've been to a game." She tucks a piece of hair behind her ear when she says that and looks almost embarrassed as she glances up at Chase.

"So, you've seen me play too, then?" Liam chimes in the conversation with a smile and a wink in Abby's direction. This fucking guy. Chase turns his head towards him but before he can say anything, Liam starts shaking his head, "I'm just fucking with you, Hunt. Relax." Liam jokes as he slaps Chase on the shoulder.

"Better be. It'll be season ending if any of you assholes go near her," Chase shouts just loud enough for all of us to hear. Abby places her face in her hands and tries to shrink herself down, probably out of embarrassment. I run my hand over my chin to try and mask the laugh as I'm looking in her direction, staring as she shakes her head slowly.

After a few moments, Chase goes back to the conversation with Liam and is no longer paying attention to me or Abby. Once she removes her hands from her face, I reach out to shake her hand for a proper introduction. As soon as our hands brush against one another, some wild electricity flies through me. One of those bullshit cliché "*we touched and sparks went flying*" moments I didn't know actually existed until I just fucking experienced it with the beautiful brunette in front of me. She takes a sip of her beer and I'm

already feeling my dick twitch in my pants at the thought of having her mouth on me. My heart starts to race and it instantly feels like I just had a thousand cotton balls shoved in my mouth, it's so fucking dry. I desperately need to get it under control considering Chase just told me this is his little sister and she's definitely *off limits*. Although the thought of that makes me even harder.

“So, you aren't from here?”

She shakes her head, “Not this area, no. I'm from Florida, a few towns over originally, but I've lived in Miami for the last few years.” It's rare that I care to know too much about women, if I'm being honest. I know how that sounds, but it's what works for me. Getting invested in someone is a distraction, a waste of time, and nothing good has ever come from it.

For whatever reason though, unbeknownst to me, my mouth keeps spitting out questions.

“What brought you here then?”

She sighs, heavily. “It's a long story, but ultimately, I needed a change. I'm a teacher so I just networked a little and found an opening here. Viola!” She gives me jazz hands as she grips the neck of her beer while saying that and I can't help but smile when she does. I'm so completely mesmerized by her smile, that I can't help but stare.

She's wearing denim cut off shorts and a black tank top that rides up every time she runs her hand through her hair.

“A teacher,” I say, nodding my head.

“I know. Low paying. Little reward. Overworked. You probably think—”

This time I break her stride. “I think what you do is incredible.” Leaning down to speak closer to her ear. “Being a teacher is one of the most underappreciated jobs there is. You don't get nearly the respect you deserve.” My hand loosely grips the crook of her elbow because the need to touch her again has taken over as we stand against the railing on the balcony. “I think making the decision to teach the next generation is fucking amazing.”

She swallows hard and I watch as her chest moves up and down. “I— uh, wow, thank you,” she whispers. “Excuse me.”

Watching her walk away, my chest starts pounding. *Well, this is an unfamiliar fucking feeling.* Shaking my head, I chug the rest of my beer before heading inside. Mia is standing at the kitchen island and I'm curious if she knew before tonight that Chase has a sister.

“So, Chase has a sister.” It comes out more bluntly than intended.

She doesn't look up from her phone when she says, "Yep. I met her briefly the other day. She's adorable, isn't she?"

Adorable? More like sexy as fuck. The things I'd like to do with her, to please her. I'm pitching a tent just thinking about it.

Mia sets her phone down and looks me in the eye, "Don't get any ideas, Ford." Mia points her finger at me like I'm a child.

Putting my hands up in surrender, I shake my head. "Just didn't know he had a sister, that's all." She gives me a stern look as she walks past me back to the dining room table. I run my hand through my hair and toss my empty beer bottle in the trash, God, I'm so fucked.

We met an hour ago and I can't stop my mind from thinking about what Abby's body would feel like against mine. I haven't felt this pull to someone in years and I'm not sure I like it, but it doesn't feel like I can stop it either.

CHAPTER FIVE



ABBY

I'm sure I just embarrassed myself in front of the most attractive man I've ever laid eyes on. His dark eyes were scanning throughout my body as he was talking and I couldn't help myself from being distracted by the tattoo that ran up his arm. I should be used to being around tall men, considering my brother is 6'2, but Ford's stature took me by surprise. The way he commanded the space between us left my pulse pumping. I just wasn't expecting him to say those things, but more importantly, I wasn't expecting my body to react the way it did when he leaned in close to me. His breath was warm on my neck just below my ear, and he smelled all woodsy and masculine. When our hands touched, my skin felt like it was tingling with electricity. I didn't know what to say other than thank you, so excusing myself and running to my bathroom was the only thing I could think of.

Giving myself a once over in the mirror and a mini pep talk to calm the butterflies, I head back out to the dining room where everyone is still talking and playing cards. To be fair, being around professional athletes isn't something I'm used to, so maybe this is just me being starstruck or whatever. Just because my brother is one doesn't mean I'm used to this, I meant it when I said it's been forever since I've been to a game. Although, that was mostly

Andrew's doing. God, I'm kicking myself for how blind I was to all of the controlling bullshit, mistaking it for love.

"Abby, we're going to play a round of *never have I ever*, do you want to play?" Mia comes up and grabs my arm. When Mia and I met a few days ago, we clicked right away. Her welcoming personality and upbeat demeanor was exactly what I needed.

"What is this, college?" My mouth curves into a smile and I'm already following her down the hall because I'm obviously going to be playing. I've always been a sucker for these games. When I walk past the kitchen, Ford catches my attention. As if he senses my presence, he looks over my way at the same time I look at him. Our eyes lock for a few seconds and I'm caught in his stare, his eyes are so dark, it's like looking into a black ocean. It feels like he's staring straight into my soul with this intensity happening between us, but it also feels a little peaceful somehow, like there's a glimmer of calm underneath the raging darkness that's currently being displayed.

"Abby!" Mia calls which pulls me from my daze and I have a seat next to her.

The next thing I know, Ford sits down directly across from me just before the game is about to begin with a sly smirk on his face. He steals all of my focus the moment he sits at the table. He's muscular and lean, and of course has the most perfect looking face to go along with what I'm sure is a perfect looking body. His biceps fill out the black shirt he's wearing and his dark hair is effortlessly styled, with his facial hair cut just right, giving the perfect definition to his chiseled jawline. He's a beautiful man, there's no denying that.

"I don't have to explain the rules, right? Everyone went to a party in college and has played this game before?" Mia looks around the table as everyone nods in agreement. We all hold up three fingers, waiting for Mia to kick us off. "Never have I ever..." She trails off and taps on her jawline before making eye contact with Nate. "Hooked up with someone at a bar and then the next night hooked up with their roommate." Everyone at the table bursts out laughing as Nate takes a sip,

"That was oddly specific, Mi, felt a little personal." He glares at her, but then shoots her a quick smile. While everyone continues to go around the table, I notice Ford has a bottle of water rather than a beer, like he had earlier. I'm betting he probably doesn't drink much during the season.

After a few rounds, mostly everyone is down to one finger, except for

little old me, holding strong with two remaining. I'm clearly not as seasoned as the rest of them. Then instantly, Mia, Chase and Nate are all completely out, something to do with oral and an airplane, who knows, this is all way beyond my scope of expertise. It's only me, Ford and another teammate Graham left in the game. Mia stays planted in her seat, while Nate and Chase make their way outside.

"Okay your brother's outside, you can actually play the game for real now," Graham says in my direction.

"Oh, I— uh." I laugh softly. "I guess you guys just are more fun than me." I have been playing. In fact, I've been listening to all of these "never have I ever's," just wishing I was more experienced and colored outside the edges a little more. I can feel Ford's stare on me and my eyes wander up in his direction. A small smirk lands on his lips as he inhales a deep breath.

"It's your turn, Princess," he breathes out in a low voice.

Thinking for a moment, I don't even know what to ask at this point, I'm feeling so mediocre compared to all of their experiences. My sex life has consisted of one person, ever, and everything we did would be considered vanilla with this crowd. "Never have I ever hooked up with someone while another person was in the same room?" It comes out as more of a question than a statement and I scrunch my nose up before shrugging my shoulders in defeat.

Both of their fingers close into their fists and they take sips of their drinks. *What the hell.* My jaw hangs, "Are you kidding me? Wow." I probably should have expected that, but still. And why does knowing that about Ford turn me on a little bit though? I've never been bold enough to do anything with another person around, even making out around other people has never happened. It does make me wonder though, was it me not wanting it or was it just that Andrew never did it?

We all get up and as I'm rounding the table to toss my bottle in the trash, I feel Ford close by. "Well that wasn't helpful at all in getting to know you, Princess." Ford's voice is low enough only for me to hear. I throw a small smile his way before walking back outside.

It's a warm night, but luckily there is a breeze up here. Chase is talking with Nate and Graham at the patio table. Mia is inside cleaning up some of the beer cans and Ford has made his way out to the balcony. He takes a seat beside me, but doesn't say anything while we both stare out over the bay. It's dark and eerie at night, but there's still something so beautiful about it. The

city lights are reflecting on the water and aside from the chatter from people outside, it's relatively quiet for a Saturday night.

"How long have you been playing here?" I say softly, pulling my legs up on the chair and turning towards Ford.

"I've been on the team for five years. I'm from here though, so this city isn't new to me."

"Did you want to play somewhere else?"

He doesn't answer right away, like maybe he's contemplating my question. "No, actually." A low chuckle comes from his chest. He almost sounds surprised by his own answer. "I love it here. This is the team I grew up rooting for, so it's a full circle moment getting to suit up for them now." He sits back in the chair a little straighter, it's easy to see he's proud of himself. He should be, making it to the NFL is no easy feat.

We've been sitting out here for almost an hour, asking each other a couple of questions here and there between the long bouts of silence. He's hard to get a read on and doesn't share too many details in his answers, but he's not totally standoffish. I'm guessing there's more than meets the eye with him.

Glancing at my phone, it's almost eleven p.m. I'm normally in bed with a good book by this point and earlier today, that was my plan after brief hellos, but now that I'm out here with Ford, talking to him, I don't want to be anywhere else. There's a pull with him, like my body just wants to be near his. I can feel when he's looking at me, there's a tension when he's close to me. My insides get all jumbled when he talks to me in that low raspy voice. For someone I just met, there is this immense sense of comfort I'm feeling with him.

He stands up, probably realizing the time himself. "I should head out."

God, he's tall. I know I'm still sitting down, but wow, he truly towers over me. I try to stand up, but he blocks me from setting my feet on the ground. Tilting my head to look behind him, it doesn't look like anyone is out here anymore, they must've all gone in. Ford leans down and places his hands on either arm rest, caging me in the chair. I suck in a small breath as he comes in closer to me and it's clear he notices by the way his lips curl into a smirk.

My heart feels like it's about to burst through my chest. I'm forced to press my thighs together because he's causing a throbbing sensation between my legs that I desperately wish wasn't happening right now.

“It was nice to meet you, Abby,” he whispers into my ear and goosebumps instantly cover my body. My brain short circuits at the way he says my name and there’s no way I’ll be able to formulate a sentence of any kind. My chest heaves up and down and all I can do is nod my head as he tucks a piece of hair behind my ear and walks away.

Summer was right, my brother’s teammates are hot.

CHAPTER SIX



FORD

It's been three weeks since I've seen Abby but that doesn't mean she hasn't been on my mind every fucking day. Meeting her threw me for a loop; she's stunning, and not in the overly done up way, she's just naturally beautiful and those green eyes of hers really had my pulse jumping. I have no idea how she got under my skin within a matter of hours, but it's been impossible to get her off my mind. I've heard Chase mention a couple of times in the locker room recently that his sister has been decorating his apartment and he's 'not sure what he'll come home to next.' It makes me picture her walking around in those little cut off shorts, hanging things on the wall or rearranging furniture. Rubbing my eyes as I'm laying in bed, images of Abby's tanned legs take over and I can feel my cock throb. Before I'm able to take care of things, my phone dings with a text. *Damnit.*

LIAM

Hey, let's meet at Nate's before we workout later.

Shit. It slipped my mind that I agreed to workout with them today.

We don't have practice today since it's Saturday, but I'd still like to get a quick run in before we workout. I'll head downtown to run there and then just

go to Nate's after. While I'm that way, it'd be a good idea to stop and check on the progress at the Rec Center too.

Finding a parking spot downtown is usually a pain in the ass, but luckily I'm able to find a small lot that has a few openings. It's a beautiful day out, which means it's perfect for a run by the water, but that also means it's probably going to be busy down here. Lately, my runs have been in my neighborhood, where it's less crowded and less likely for anyone to recognize or stop me.

Just as I'm finishing up, someone calling my name catches my attention as I take my headphones out.

"Ford?" It's a soft voice. A voice I'd never forget. It's Abby.

She's pulling her sunglasses up into her hair as she walks up to me. Her green eyes are sparkling in the sunlight and I'm silently telling my dick to retreat as I feel the not so subtle twitch. Could she be any more gorgeous? She's wearing a sports bra and a pair of those bike shorts I've noticed women everywhere seem to love. The red fabric hugs every curve and leaves little to the imagination. My breath hitches and I'm internally praising the man upstairs for the way her legs look in those shorts and how her hips are swaying as she's walking my way. Her breasts bounce a little as she moves, they're not too big or too small and I'd bet they'd fit perfectly in my hands. When my eyes finally make their way up to her face, she's wearing a huge smile and it's directed right at me.

"Thought that was you!" She smiles and waves her hand at me.

"You caught me." I put my hands up and give her a half smile. She laughs at that and it's a sound I could get used to. Fuck, she's so pretty, but I've got to stop having these thoughts about her, I just need to relay the message to my dick who has his own greeting as soon as I see her. *Now is not the time, big guy.*

Thankfully, my sunglasses are covering my eyes, because I'm staring at her like some psycho. There are people walking and biking past us, and I feel very much in the way of everyone else on this path, but somehow, I don't care enough to move.

"I was just finishing up a run," I say, with part of me hoping she'll put me out of my misery and walk away, but the other part of me hopes she's just as interested in me as I am her. Sweat beads are glistening off her chest, and her shoulders look like they have a slight tint of red from the strength of the sun this morning.

“Oh gosh, yeah of course, I’m sorry for stopping you. I was doing the same and saw you just as I was finishing. It’s time for me to head home anyway, I need to chug some coffee and my laundry won’t fold itself.”

She laughs and without thinking, the words rush out of my mouth, “There’s a coffee shop a couple blocks over, I could use one too.” She tilts her head a little like she’s surprised I asked. *Hell, I’m surprised too*, but she nods her head with a smile and throws her sunglasses back on.

“Lead the way, Anderson.”

Fuck, I’m so screwed.

CHAPTER SEVEN



The last person I expected to see this morning? Ford Anderson.

The last person I expected to grab coffee with, um... ever? Again, Ford Anderson.

How is it that he looks even more delicious than he did a few weeks ago? Even in just a black t-shirt and athletic shorts, he's making my insides do somersaults. His shoulders fill out the shirt nicely and it's hard not to steal glances at his biceps. I'd love to be wrapped in those sculpted arms, even with the very noticeable amount of sweat lingering on his body, I'm turned on. Shaking my head at my own thoughts, I try to think of something different, I can't get all caught up in how handsome he is. I'm supposed to be at home folding towels and t-shirts, not blushing and getting coffee with hot football Gods.

We order our coffees and grab a small table outside the café. As soon as we take a seat, he takes off his sunglasses and runs a hand through his hair before flipping his hat backwards. A gasp loud enough for the table next to us to hear leaves my mouth and I instantly hate how easily I just gave myself away at how that simple move affected me. He smirks at me and takes a sip of his drink. In all fairness, all women react to the backwards hat, so it's not

just me. Plus, it could've been any guy flipping it backwards, it's not just because he's hot and sweaty and licking his lips after taking a sip of his coffee. Yeah, that's what I tell myself. I bite my bottom lip and take a sip of my own coffee to distract myself.

"This coffee is great. I'll have to remember this place for when I'm down this way."

"I used to live around here, so I made it a priority to know all the good spots." He takes another sip and his throat moves up and down as he does. Every movement Ford makes sends my senses into overdrive. How can an Adam's apple be hot? I'm positive that I've never been so physically attracted to someone. It makes me briefly think of Andrew, someone I thought I would marry one day, and I don't recall ever feeling like this around him, even in the beginning stages of our relationship.

"So, you and Chase must be close," he says it as a statement, not a question and it catches me by surprise.

"Kind of. We drifted a little bit over the last couple of years, but that was probably my fault." Actually, that was Andrew's fault, but no need to bore Ford with that detail.

"Do you have any siblings?"

He clears his throat and pulls at his jaw a little, giving me a good view of the massive size of his hands. Hands I'd love to feel around my waist and on my skin. "Only child." He purses his lips together as he says it and leans back in the chair.

We go back and forth a little bit, kind of like the first night we met, having some lulls of silence, but it's never awkward.

"So, you're off today. What's on the agenda for you?" I'm laughing at my own comment because somehow I see Ford having these intense rituals before game day, like eating certain meals or running exactly three miles.

"Well," he says before he pauses, his hands are gripping his coffee cup on the table and I'm trying not to get distracted by the veins in them, or the way they might feel running through my hair.

"I can show you."

He looks at me and I'm trying to hide the deep breath I inhale at the intensity of his gaze, but it's no use. His eyes look lighter in the sunlight today—still brown, but when the sunlight hits them just right, I swear there's a flick of gold.

I should go home. I should ignore the part of me that wants to explore this

attraction further. And I definitely shouldn't be thinking about how it would feel if he pushed me against this brick wall beside us. Every rational part of me says go home, but the small part that's intrigued by everything Ford Anderson does has me wanting to see what's next.

“Okay, show me.”

CHAPTER EIGHT



FORD

The thought of spending more time with Abby today was too tempting to pass up. I know I'm putting both of us in a risky situation, but the logical side of my brain didn't show up today, only the part that can't stop thinking about Abby showed up. I'd like to say I regret asking her to come with me, but that'd be a fucking lie.

It's not often that I bring people with me to the Rec Center and if it's anyone, it sure as shit isn't a woman. It's usually the guys when I've run events here and they volunteer. It's important to me to spend as much time as possible here with the kids because I know once the season really picks up, my free time is limited.

The Rec Center downtown is where the majority of my time and resources go during the offseason. There was no question when I was drafted that giving back to the community would be a priority. If it weren't for this place in particular, who knows where I'd be. It kept me out of trouble and invested in sports. There are a lot of people here to thank for where my career is now.

"Downtown Recreation Center? So, what, after a long run you like to cool down with some more sports... ugh, athletes." Abby reads the sign as

we walk up the steps and she nudges my arm with a smile. I grab the door and gesture for her to go in first.

“You’ll see,” is all I say.

Once inside, she follows me down the hall to a gymnasium that has basketball hoops on either end of the gym. On the next court over, a small volleyball net is set up and there’s an area for kids to socialize and some mats to sit on, or in a lot of cases, they use them for tumbling. This place has seen better days, but since I’ve been in the league, I make sure to invest as much time, skill and money here to help. Kids that come here on weekends or after school will get help with homework if they need it, a safe spot to burn some energy on the courts or even just a place to socialize and make friends.

One of the kids who comes here every weekend grabs my attention. “Mr. Ford! Hey, you have to see this. Watch this dunk!” The net on the basketball hoop is much lower than regulation play since the kids that I normally play basketball with are anywhere from eight to twelve years old. The older kids usually play basketball on the larger court outside.

“Oh, yeah? Let’s see it.” He dribbles the ball a couple of times before scooping it up in his hands and jumping for the hoop. The ball just tips in and he lets go of the hoop, hollering and shaking his hands in the air like he just scored the winning basket in a championship game. I smile and give him a high five as he runs back onto the court. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Abby staring at me, her mouth is slightly open and she looks like a deer in headlights.

“Something wrong?” My eyes narrow.

“I just... had no idea you worked with kids. Obviously, I don’t know you that well, but I really didn’t expect this.” She touches my arm and just feeling her hand on my skin makes me smile. It’s probably the first time I’ve actually let myself smile at her with more than just my usual smirk that everyone else sees. For some reason, having her here with me feels right, it feels normal.

We walk around a little more before we stop and take a moment to talk with the office staff about the plan for the renovation in the art room. It’s scheduled to start next week and we just need to make sure everything is ready to go. Truth be told, the Rec Center needs a lot of help and without sounding like a dick, I have a lot of money and not a lot of people to spend it on. So, I’ve been donating to help get this place back into high functioning shape for the kids. I’m proud of the progress we’ve made here over the last few years and plan to keep making improvements.

I notice Abby keeps glancing at me now and then as we walk around, but it's nearly impossible to tell what she's thinking. She isn't saying much as she takes everything in, which I've learned isn't exactly normal for her. I watched her talk to herself while eating a muffin this morning.

"I'll be done in about five minutes, we can leave then. I'll walk you home," I say, watching her sip what's left of her coffee as she's looking out the window watching the older kids on the basketball court. She nods her head and smiles to herself, while I'm so fucking stuck standing here, just staring at her.

"So that all sounds good, Ford, thank you so much again. You're an angel, dear." I've come to appreciate these women who work here at the front desk a hell of a lot. One of them, Dolly, has been here for twenty years, easily. I remember her from when I was younger. She's obviously a little older now, fragile looking even. Her black rimmed glasses sit at the tip of her nose and her hair is pulled back, but some of the silver strands still fall near her face.

"Anything for you, Doll." She blushes at my comment as she walks away.

I walk over to the window where Abby is standing and the pull between us feels immediate. Our bodies aren't touching, but I can feel the tension between us, the desire to be close to her. It takes everything in me not to put my arm around her waist and scoop her up beside me.

"This is amazing, Ford. You can tell how much the kids love being here. You're making such a difference for them, you probably don't even realize it." Her eyes become misty as she smiles up at me. I'm not one for the mushy shit, so I press my lips together and nod my head.

"Just helping where I can." I'm about to offer to walk her home when she smiles and turns to me.

"What else is on the agenda today?"

CHAPTER NINE



ABBY

My heart cannot handle what I've seen so far today with Ford. I never would've guessed he's the guy who volunteers with kids or the guy who likes churros and sprinkles in his ice cream like a child. He's made me laugh more than I expected and he's surprised me in so many ways since we first met. It's like everything I've learned about him today has only furthered this attraction towards him. Call me crazy, but I'd swear he feels it too. We seem to keep stealing glances at one another and the subtle touches here and there keep sending heat waves through my body. I've caught him staring at my ass a few times too and frankly, who could blame him? I'm well aware that these bike shorts are doing me all sorts of favors.

"Okay, so ice cream and churros were not my plan for lunch, but I don't hate it." I rub my stomach and smile to myself. This has been the best day I've had since moving here, I feel so at ease with Ford. We've fallen into this rhythm today, like this is just a normal Saturday between us and not the second time we've ever met. Part of me wants to get to know him more, but I shouldn't pry. He doesn't seem like someone who would respond well to that. I'm sure if he wants to share something, he will. Also, wrapping myself up in a guy is the last thing I want right now. Not that this is even anything

with Ford; at this point we're merely just friends. Still, knowing as little as possible about him will help with not furthering this attraction. You never know, next he could be showing me the animal shelter he volunteers at and I'll lose the little self-control I have left the second he cuddles a puppy.

God that would probably be so hot.

The clouds have thankfully cast a bit of coverage over the blazing Florida sun, so walking around all afternoon hasn't been all that bad. We've seen countless flower shops, more cafes, a few little mom and pop restaurants and some fancy jewelry stores. We're not far from Chase's apartment, I recognize the red sign out front that reads "LINCOLN ON MAIN." I can't help but be a little bummed that our day together is coming to an end, even though all good things must.

"I'll walk you up to your apartment," he says it as a fact, not a question and I don't bother protesting. It's hard not to wonder if this is out of the way for him though. He did mention that he used to live around here, but I don't know where he lives now.

"Is this out of the way for you?" The words fly out of my mouth as we walk into the lobby. Outside, there are people walking down the street, and you can see the hustle of everyone getting from point A to point B, but inside it's just the two of us, it's quiet. He stops in front of me suddenly causing me to lightly bump into him. I pull myself back to create some space between us before he looks down at me. His eyes meet mine with the same darkness and intensity I saw a lot of the first night we met. He lets out a deep sigh and inches closer to me. I'd just need to step a foot forward and our bodies would be touching. Something inside me wants to test it, to see if he'd back up or let me come closer. My heart rate just skyrocketed in the last ten seconds and I'm obviously not thinking clearly.

Placing one hand in his pocket and using the other to tilt my chin up to face him, he looks me in the eye. "No, Abby, it's not out of my way... and even if it were, I'd still walk you home."

There he goes again saying my name all sultry and smooth and a small moan escapes my lips. The elevator doors open and we both stand still, lost in whatever little moment that's happening between us before we step inside. Ford presses number seventeen to get up to my apartment and we are both standing on opposite sides of the elevator. I swallow the lump in my throat and feel my chest heating. Somehow the air feels thicker and the ease that we felt this morning is gone and all that remains is an intense need to touch him.

My body feels like it's on fire after just that brief moment. It seems like he feels it too, because his eyes haven't left my body. We haven't said a word since we stepped in and as soon as the doors close, his eyes shoot up to mine. The sound of the elevator climbing is more prominent than normal and my heart feels like it's about to burst from my chest as each ding gets louder and louder.

Two, Three, Four...

Before I realize what's happening, Ford slams the emergency stop button on the elevator and closes the distance between us. His large hand moves to the back of my neck gripping my head while the other hand pulls my body flush with his. He stares at me, as if waiting for the okay to go any further. I bite my lip so slightly and as I'm nodding my head in approval, his mouth comes crashing into mine. It's frantic and needy, like we've both been waiting for this since the moment we met. Ford removes his hand from behind my neck and lifts me so I'm against the side of the elevator straddling his waist. His hands move over my thighs and he squeezes as he thrusts himself closer to me. I can feel the wetness pooling in my shorts and instinctively my hips begin to rock back and forth to create some friction. God, everything feels so good, the kiss, his hands, the way my body is craving his. I've never felt like this with someone.

"Abby," he says as he moves his mouth down to my neck and collarbone and then up to my lips again. My body is craving more of him. I've thrown every single caution to the wind at this point and the only thing I'm able to think about is the man holding me and the places I want him to touch me.

"Do you feel what you're doing to me? This is because of you." He thrusts into me lightly letting me feel the bulge in his shorts even more than I already did. His breath is hot on my skin and a whimper leaves my lips. It's empowering knowing that I have the same effect on him that he has on me.

Confident isn't a word I'd normally use to describe myself in intimate situations, but in this moment with Ford, I feel so completely sure of myself. I've never had a man so open with how much he's turned on and it feels good. With one more soft kiss, Ford puts me down and grazes his thumb across my bottom lip before hitting the button to resume the elevator. My feet stumble back to my side of the elevator as I'm trying to regain my composure like I didn't just experience the best kiss of my life. I'm still trying to catch my breath as I glance at Ford from the corner of my eye. He looks so damn good just leaning against the elevator wall with his arms crossed. We smile at

one another as the elevator doors open and he follows me out and down the hall. Once we get up to my door I fumble around for the key and after it's open I turn around and look up at him.

“Chase isn't home,” I say softly, as he pulls me into the apartment and closes the door behind us.

CHAPTER TEN



FORD

I've not a fucking clue what I'm doing right now, all I know is my body is calling the shots right now and not my brain. Leaving without one more taste just isn't an option. Kissing Abby was nothing like I thought it would be. It was so much fucking better than my imagination. She tilts her head back to give me a little smile, *the one that makes me want to do anything to please her*, and her lips still look a little swollen from our kiss in the elevator as she leads me to her bedroom. Shit, that kiss was hot. I'm proud of myself for not completely losing it with her pressed up against me like she was. And the little hip movements she was doing almost sent me right over the edge. I'm watching her hips sway back and forth in those shorts and all that's running through my mind is the thought of peeling them off and tasting what's between her legs.

I should probably text the guys and let them know I'll be late, but fuck it. As we pass Chase's bedroom door, a brief thought crosses my mind that this is wrong. This is his little sister and if he ever found out... fuck, I'm not even going to think about that.

Abby pulls me into her room and shuts the door, and at that moment all of my attention is back on the bombshell in front of me. She has this confidence

about her today that I didn't expect and now that we're alone in her room, I can't get enough of it. She's driving me wild. I take a step towards her, putting one finger in the waistband of her shorts and pulling her closer to me. She doesn't fight it and allows her body to come up against mine. Her head tilts to look up at me and I'm fucking lost in those emerald green eyes.

I bring my mouth to her ear and nibble on the edge before whispering, "Clothes off, Abby. I need you naked."

She bites her bottom lip and stares up at me with a smirk. Hell, she's just as turned on as I am, if not more judging by the devilish look in her eye. She steps back from my embrace and turns around to undress.

Gently taking her wrist and twisting her back around, I kiss the palm of her hand and say, "I want to see you."

Clearly liking my request, she stays facing me but backs up a little bit until her calves hit the edge of the bed. She reaches up and removes her bra, allowing her breasts to spring free. Her perfect breasts hang from her chest and my dick pulses instantly.

"My God, Abby... You are..." I suck in a breath and walk towards her as my tongue runs over my bottom lip.

Her breath snags as I'm getting closer and I place one hand firmly on her breast, playing with her nipple between my fingers. Her back arches and she lets out a soft moan at my touch. My dick is already dripping and I've barely even touched her. I tilt my head and take the other nipple in my mouth and begin to suck, causing a whimper to leave her body. She pulls me closer to her as my tongue sucks and swirls around her nipple before pulling away to look at her again. When she starts to step out of her shorts, my pulse jumps. I've been with a lot of women, but I've never been so attracted to someone, so unbelievably needy for it. Abby does things to me that no woman has ever done before and even though there are so many reasons this is wrong, I can't seem to stop myself and it doesn't seem like she wants to either.

"You are fucking breathtaking."

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Standing in front of Ford Anderson completely naked should be my worst nightmare. Instead, I feel sexy and confident. He's given me more reassurance in the last ten minutes than any man as ever given me, sexually speaking.

"Have a seat on the edge of the bed." His low growl makes me throb. I'm never one for taking orders, but it barely feels that way with Ford. Somehow, this feels like he's doing everything to please *me* at this moment, rather than himself. I'm comfortable with him and feel safe. I know he could tell in the elevator how badly I'm aching for him. I can't even remember the last time a man's touch has sent me spiraling like that.

I take a seat, assuming he's going to join me on the bed, but instead he kneels down and places his hands on both of my knees.

"Open up, Abby."

I swallow hard and take a deep breath. His hands are roaming up my inner thighs as I lean back onto my elbows. I'm already soaking wet for him. The pads of his fingers feel rough on my skin and I'm internally thanking myself for shaving my legs yesterday. He pushes my thighs further apart and hovers in front of me.

“Abby, I said open up. I’d hate to have to ask a third time.” *Oh, God.* His voice is low and stern. Ford inhales and lets out a moan that sounds like it came from the deepest depths of his chest as my legs spread further. “You’re soaked for me, just like I knew you’d be.” He takes a finger and slides it slowly down my center sending my hips to jump at just that simple touch.

A sly smile crosses his lips as he lets out a deep chuckle. “Abby, I’m just getting started with you.” He licks his bottom lip and his eyes are almost black with hunger and they’re laser focused on me. Ford leans his head down towards my center and I can feel his warm breath as his mouth hovers over me.

A small moment of panic washes over me. I’ve never had a man go down on me before. Sure, they’ve gotten me off in other ways, but this wasn’t one of them. Suddenly I’m feeling inexperienced and insecure. Ford clearly knows what he’s doing in the bedroom and it makes me wonder if I’m not going to stack up for him.

“Oh. Y-you, I mean... you don’t really have to do that if you don’t want to. I haven’t showered or anything,” I say shyly, losing a little bit of the confidence from earlier and moving to sit myself up.

“Why would I care if you haven’t showered?” He leans back slightly and my face twists up, not knowing how to admit that I’ve never done this before. “If you want me to stop, Abby, I will, but if you think it’s because I don’t want to...” His biceps flex as he squeezes my thighs. “I promise you, I do.”

Do I want him to? It’s all I’ve thought about since the elevator. I’ve only been with one other person and *this* was never something that we did. I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t wanted him to try this too, he just never did.

“At the risk of ruining this moment, I’ve just... okay, I’ve just never done *that*.” I gesture down with my hand as I’m propped up on my other elbow. “My ex never went down on me... and I don’t know, I just assumed that it wasn’t something men enjoyed.” Embarrassment washes over me as I run my hand down my face.

Ford stays planted between my legs, his eyes roaming my body before landing on mine, his fingers trailing up and down my thighs. “Abby.” He straightens his back keeping his eyes solely focused on me. “Let me be very clear. There is nothing, and I mean nothing, I would rather do right now than bury my tongue between your thighs and taste your pretty little pussy as you come apart screaming my name. ” He stares at me for a second and I’m trying to focus on him as if what he just said didn’t send a tidal wave through my

body. For a man who doesn't say much, he sure makes it count when he does. "Is that something you want?" My head nods up and down quickly, breathing heavily. "Say it, Abby. I need to hear you say it." His voice is low and comes out almost as a growl.

"Yes. Please. Yes," I breathe out.

"Good girl."

Within seconds, Ford's mouth is between my legs, he licks up and down slowly at first and then picks up the pace a little. His tongue laps me while his hands stay gripping my thighs, keeping them from closing together. When he sucks on my clit, my whole body jerks up in response.

"Oh my God," I whisper.

This feels like an out of body experience. I've never in my life felt this amount of pleasure and ache all at the same time. He takes one finger and pumps it in slowly, stretching me out a bit before adding a second and thrusting harder. Between his fingers and his fucking magic tongue, I'm not lasting much longer. I can feel my orgasm building within me as he pumps in and out and presses his tongue into me.

"Not just yet, Abby."

He pulls his mouth away, leans up and kisses me. I'm tasting myself for the first time as he continues to pump into me with his fingers, but slower this time. My body is moving in rhythm with his hand and I've never felt so good. He peppers small kisses down my body and I react to every single one with a light moan. Everything that's happening right now is making my toes curl. He pulls his fingers out and sucks them in his mouth before kissing me once more and then he immediately puts pressure on my clit with his thumb, circling and rubbing. Everything is so sensitive, it feels like I could explode at any moment. Ford leans in and kisses my lower belly, my inner thighs and I can feel his warm breath on my center,

"Now. Come for me." His words send me over the edge like I'm following a direct order. My body is pulsing around his fingers as he continues to thrust in and out riding my orgasm until the end.

"Yes, Ford!" I yell out.

He keeps pumping harder. "Just like that, Abby. Ride my hand, Princess."

If I died right now, I'd die happy. Forget Ford's biceps, his tongue is my new favorite muscle.

My body collapses onto the bed with my chest rising and falling rapidly while I'm trying to catch my breath. "That was... Ford. Wow." I've lost all

ability to even form a sentence after that orgasm. Hands down the best I've had and now the standard I'm sure my body will hold all others to.

Ford hands me a warm cloth that he seemingly pulled out of thin air. What the hell, when did he go get this? I must've blacked out during that earth-shattering orgasm. He sits beside me on the bed with a very noticeable bulge in his shorts. He has to be aching right now. Do I offer to return the favor? I want a taste of him too. Before I'm able to decide, he pulls me into his side and kisses my lips softly. Nothing like the ravaging we did earlier, he's so gentle this time, like he's really savoring it. He caresses my arm as our kiss deepens. After a moment, I feel his phone vibrate in his shorts. He ignores it at first, but then it goes off again.

"You can get that," I say, pulling back slowly.

He throws his head back and lets out a curse as he grabs it. "What!?" The voice on the other end sounds kind of like Nate. "Yeah. Yeah, I'll see you soon. I'm in the building." He hangs up and runs a hand through his hair, then kisses me once more.

Ford reaches behind me, grabbing my robe off of the chair and hands it to me. "I've got to get going." He jerks his head towards my bedroom door before saying, "walk me out" and I nudge myself between him and the doorway to head out in front of him.

Once we're at the door, I'm hit with the urge to thank him for today. And not just for the epic orgasm, but for him offering to get coffee with me, showing me the recreation center and the work that he's doing there, eating junk food for lunch and letting me talk his ears off. *The orgasm is obviously on the list too though.*

"Thank you for today, I'm glad I ended up interrupting your run." I joke. "But it was fun, I could use some friends around here." I admit. It feels strange calling him a friend after what just happened between us, but I'm also not sure what else to call it, so friend it is.

"Uh, no problem." He chuckles and extends his arm out pulling me into a hug. "Friends," he says as he holds me for a moment before opening the door. "I'll see you later, Abby." He presses his lips together in a line, nods his head and walks out.

Closing the door behind him, I lean my back against it and slide down the door to the floor, rubbing my hands down my face. What just happened?

CHAPTER TWELVE



FORD

It's been three days since I've seen Abby. Three days since I've tasted her and my whole damn world was flipped upside down. We definitely let the moment get away from us, but I couldn't help myself and it didn't seem like she could either. I wasn't expecting to make a meal out of her, but after that kiss in the elevator, it was clear she was aching for more and hell I couldn't resist her. One thing I'm certain about though is that it can't happen again, nothing else can happen with Abby. Chase is my teammate and one of my best friends, we've always been honest with each other and truthfully, Abby herself even referred to me as a friend so it's clear she isn't looking for anything more either. Even taking all of that into account though, it hasn't stopped me from thinking about her for the last seventy-two hours or picturing her every time I'm fisting one out. It was so damn easy with her. Abby has this presence that just makes me feel seen, like no matter what's going on in my life, good or bad, I'd be able to share it with her without judgment. She's like a safe zone and I didn't realize I wanted someone like that until spending time with her.

After practice, Chase meets me in the parking lot. "Hey, listen I have a question."

Not sure where this is going, but right now I'd give Chase a fucking kidney if he asked.

"What's up?" I nod my head in his direction.

"Coach wants me to hang back with some of the rookies and watch more footage, but Abby just called me, and apparently her car just took a shit on her way home from school. Is there any way you can pick her up instead of her getting an Uber, and just drop her off? I'm going to have a tow truck grab her car. She's off Kennedy."

Another chance to see Abby, alone? Fuck yes.

"Yeah that's fine. Put her number in my phone so I can text her when I'm close." Without a question, Chase takes my phone and punches in her number.

"Thanks, man!" he tosses my phone back to me and heads inside.

Hey Abby. I'm on my way to rescue you.

It's Ford, by the way. Send me your location.

A text comes in with a pin of where she's located. She isn't far, just a few miles away.

Once I pull up, there's a tow truck already there hooking her car up and she's standing on the side of the road looking like a fucking wet dream in a blue sundress. Her hair is half clipped back and she has an unreadable expression on her face. She's smiling, but it looks forced. It's hard to tell if she's relieved or annoyed.

"Thank you... but I've got Uber on my phone for a reason." She gives me a look as I walk up to her. *Yeah, she's definitely annoyed.*

"Hey, your brother asked. I'm not one to say no to favors for friends." I take her bags from her hands and lead her to the truck and open the passenger door. She hops in and fuck, if she doesn't look sexy as hell sitting in my truck. I place her bags in the backseat and get in the truck. Abby makes herself right at home, flipping down the visor to take a look at her heat flushed cheeks. Although she doesn't need a mirror, I'd be happy to tell her how gorgeous she looks. She slips her feet out of her shoes and I see the purple nail polish on her toes as she places them on the floorboards.

"So, what happened?" I settle myself into my seat as I'm pulling back into the road.

She groans as she closes the visor. "Not sure, some lights came on the dashboard and then she was sputtering. I pulled over and she just never

started again.” Calling her car a ‘she’ has got to be the cutest thing I’ve heard all day. “Can we put some music on?” She reaches to tap the screen but my phone is already connected with Morgan Wallen still playing from earlier. “I like this one,” she says when she sees his name and turns the volume up and rolls down the window. She pops a few Skittles in her mouth that she pulled from her purse as she sways to the music.

Abby takes the clip out of her hair so it’s blowing with the wind and that simple move puts a smile on my face. There she is sitting in my passenger seat and it feels like that spot has been empty all this time just waiting for her.

“Spin You Around” hums through my speakers and I watch her mouth the words. My fingers instinctively tap on the steering wheel to the beat and she glances in my direction. For the briefest moment, our eyes lock as I’m sitting at a red light and she gives me a little smile right before we both can’t help ourselves and start singing along to the words of the song. We’re definitely off key, but fuck I’d sing like an idiot every day if it meant I got to spend time with her.

It’s going to be hard to stay away from this girl.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



SUMMER

TGIF!! See you in a few hours!!

Summer is coming to Tampa this weekend and I'm so excited to see her. I haven't told her anything about Ford yet, but that'll change when she gets here. It would be weird keeping it from her, plus it was literally the best sexual experience of my life. I feel like you're supposed to tell your best friend about that, right?

Speaking of Ford, when he picked me up literally on the side of the road the other day, it was like every fantasy coming to life. A hot man saving a damsel in distress? Okay, so maybe I wasn't exactly in distress but I was definitely annoyed at the car situation and the thought of spending more money to get it fixed is frustrating. When Ford hopped out of his truck, I had to swallow the lump in my throat that immediately formed. He had on shorts and a navy blue t-shirt with a backwards baseball cap. He looked amused at my situation, but also was a complete gentleman as he took my bags and helped me in the truck without me even asking, he just did it. Stuff like this should not take me by surprise, but I'm just not used to it.

I'm on my lunch break at school and have the urge to talk to him again.

We haven't spoken since he dropped me off that day and even though I did thank him then, would it be so bad to send a follow up thank you text?

Thanks again for the ride. I'll be out approximately \$700 later today when I pick her up, but RiRi is worth it.

My phone vibrates with a text back almost immediately.

FORD

Is that her official name? RiRi?

Rihanna, but RiRi for short.

FORD

Big Betty.

I let out a confused laugh while reading his text.

FORD

That's my truck's name.

Very fitting. I love it. She is a big girl. Not sure how you can safely park that thing. I'd never manage.

It's true, I had to hop up in his truck and then carefully let myself down when I was getting out since it sits a little higher off the ground than normal. I'd be terrified to drive it.

FORD

I'm used to managing big things and fitting them in tight spots.

I don't miss the innuendo in his text and take the opportunity to flirt back a little bit.

Is that so?

I pat myself on the back for that one. I'd never be caught dead saying something like this when Andrew and I were dating. He would've thought it was inappropriate. It amazes me that I spent three years with someone who was so mind numbingly dull. Flirting with Ford is fun and carefree. All I've wanted since moving here was to regain the pieces of me that were chipped away in that relationship. My spark went out when I was with Andrew and in just a few interactions, Ford has helped me feel like I'm slowly getting it

back.

As I'm walking out for the day, there's a text from Summer saying she's here, I guess Chase let her in while he was home. Once I get to the apartment and call out her name, she comes running from my bedroom and jumps into my arms.

"Oh my gosh, it feels like it's been forever!" she squeals as she wraps me in the biggest hug. Inhaling her beachy scent makes me feel right at home. She's been my best friend since we were five. Literally, in kindergarten we picked each other as friends and just never stopped. We've been inseparable ever since. My eyes water a little at the thought of getting to spend time with her this weekend.

"I'm so happy you're here!"

She sees my eyes and points a finger at me. "None of that." She laughs as hers start to water too. "Tell me everything! I made margaritas and obviously there are chips and salsa. I also stopped for some queso and things for you to make your famous guacamole. When I showed up with groceries, Chase probably thought he was getting another roommate."

We can eat our weight in chips with salsa, queso and guacamole. It's like our comfort snack, no girls' night is complete without it and that's exactly what we're having tonight.

I change into an oversized t-shirt and throw on some bike shorts to get comfortable. Summer and I have been planning this weekend for the last two days and we decided tonight is a comfy night in, with junk food, margaritas and reruns of *New Girl*. We both sit at the island in the kitchen eating and talking, while I'm telling her about the last couple weeks of school and how I'm loving my students and all of the staff. It's so different from teaching in Miami, but in the best way.

"I'm so glad. As much as it sucks not having you so close, you needed this. Selfishly, I want to throw you in my car and take you back to South Beach with me though." Summer laughs as she takes a sip from her strawberry margarita.

"Did you ever end up going on that date last weekend?" Summer goes on more dates than anyone I've ever met, but not much ever comes from them.

She's so picky it's ridiculous, but also admirable. Girl knows what she wants.

"Yeah, it was fine. He was nice, but that was it. I'm waiting for someone who gives me a little more fire," she says with a little eyebrow wiggle.

"Okay, whatever that means." I get up and refill my glass from the pitcher we made earlier and shove some chips in my mouth.

Summer looks over at me from the living room. "You know, I just need to *feel* something. I want butterflies, the intense heat. I want to feel that connection. I'm going to need more than just a nice guy. You know, like Mary Kate and Ashley said..."

"That can't eat, can't sleep, reach for the stars, over the fence, world series kind of stuff," we both say in unison. Our love for the Olsen twins runs deep.

She deserves all of that and more. Any man would be lucky to have Summer Kincaid on their arm. I've always admired the way Summer doesn't settle, and not just with men, but in life in general. She knows what she deserves and she doesn't let anyone tell her otherwise.

"I get it." I sigh, making my way back into the living room and placing my drink and a fresh bowl of chips on the coffee table. Somehow my mind goes to Ford. "Speaking of men, it turns out Chase does have some hot teammates after all..." I trail off shyly.

"Abigail, do tell!" Summer sits up on her knees and sips her drink while she eyes me, waiting for more information.

"I don't even know what happened. When Chase had that poker night a while ago, his friends came over, one of them is Ford Anderson. I knew he was on the same team as him, but it didn't dawn on me that they would actually be friends, good friends who hang out." I flick my hand in the air and get more comfortable on the floor.

"Anderson. Okay. number eighty-seven. He's hot," Summer says. She actually does know a lot about football surprisingly. Most likely it's because her dad wished she was a boy for the longest time and made her play every sport known to man before he finally realized she was more into ballet and barbies.

"Yeah, that's an understatement. The first night we met, Sum, I felt all the butterflies, we couldn't stop stealing glances at one another." Summer's eyes widen and she presses her lips together waiting for more. "Then we bumped into each other a few weeks later while we were both out for a run and the next thing I knew, we were grabbing coffee together and walking around

downtown, literally all afternoon. Oh, and he works with kids at this youth center here too,” I say, throwing my head back on the couch behind me.

“Oh my God, that makes him ten times hotter.”

“Obviously,” I groan. “But then...” Before I’m able to continue I hear the front door start to open. I look at Summer and quickly say, “Between us. Chase knows nothing.” She nods and we both stand up and walk into the kitchen.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Like two little girls with a secret, Summer and I walk into the kitchen with our lips pressed in a line, hiding the smirks on our faces. Chase looks tired, actually he looks more annoyed than anything else. Summer notices too.

“Have a margarita, Chase, it’ll take the edge off.” Summer tries to pour him one before he holds his hand up.

“No, thanks. I’m going to Nate’s actually. So, I’ll be there for a bit tonight if you need me.” My thoughts go to Ford. I’m sure he’ll be there too then, right? Chase walks into his room and closes the door behind him.

“Does that mean *he’ll* be there too?” Summer questions as if she just read my thoughts. I laugh and roll my eyes at that.

Part of me wants to text Ford again, but there’s no real reason to. Other than the fact that I actually liked talking to him and flirting with him. This is what happens. When I meet a guy and we hit it off, I become utterly engrossed in everything about *them* and ignore everything about *me*. Tonight is about me and my best friend and that’s the way it’s staying.

“Alright, I’m heading out,” Chase says from the kitchen. Summer and I are laying on either end of the couch with our feet meeting in the middle eating empanadas and tortilla chips.

“Don’t make a mess on my couch, you two,” he scolds us like kids while we stuff our faces. Summer puts her food on the coffee table and gets up to go into the kitchen where Chase is.

“You know, you could always bring us along with you.” My head darts over to where she is standing and I’m trying my hardest to make telepathy work at this moment because I cannot believe she just asked him that. Chase doesn’t say anything, just takes a big scoop of guacamole on his chip and shoves it in his mouth.

Between chews he says, “You two wouldn’t have fun. It’s just the guys.” Wiping his hands on the towel beside him he grabs his keys off the table.

“All the more reason, Chase. We’re two single ladies, and hanging out with some guys is just what we need.” Chase rolls his eyes and looks back and forth between me and Summer. Meanwhile, I’m shaking my head and putting my hands up to signal I have nothing to do with this sudden interest in guys’ night.

“Abso-fucking-lutely not. Last thing I need is my friends trying to piss me off by hitting on either of you. Stay home. Have your girls’ night. Sing along to Taylor Swift or whatever it is you do when you’re together.” Summer gives him a pouty look before grabbing the whole bag of chips and bringing them in the living room as Chase walks out the door.

“What the hell was that? Not once did we discuss leaving this couch tonight,” I ask her with a laugh.

“Eh, just testing it out, seeing what he’d say. He reacted about as I expected.” She shrugs her shoulders.

“Now that he’s gone though, let’s pick up where we left off.”

I tell Summer all about the epic elevator kiss and the best orgasm I’ve ever had that followed. All the while she’s gasping and smiling ear to ear about the whole thing.

“Oh, and when he picked me up from the side of the road the other day after my car took a shit, he was a total gentleman. He took my bags for me, he was already playing good music and he didn’t make one single snarky comment about me taking my shoes off in the car.” Of course those things aren’t monumental, but to me they matter. Summer shakes her head and lets out a little giggle.

Her blue eyes are staring at me intently. “He sounds like he might be fun for you, Ab. A little spontaneity would be good.” She wiggles her eyebrows and takes a sip of her drink. I’m not really known for my spontaneity, but I’d

be lying if I said I wasn't a tad bit curious if maybe Summer is right? Maybe it would be good to try and just let myself have some fun.

We spend the rest of the night catching up on what she's been up to in Miami. She's a bartender right now at one of the sports bars on South Beach and she's in nursing school. It's a miracle she was able to come here this weekend with her schedule. I've always valued spending time with her, but now that it's not as easy as it used to be, I'm treasuring it even more.

When shit hit the fan with Andrew, Summer was the first person I called. I stayed with her for a week before even telling my mom what happened. She quite literally picked me up off the floor and helped me stand on my own feet again. She's the one who found the job listing here for me, she's the one who suggested I ask Chase if I could stay with him in Tampa. It's like I couldn't function after things ended with Andrew. I was so embarrassed with how that relationship ended. Who wants to say, *"Yeah, my boyfriend of three years, the person I thought I'd marry, have kids with, yeah, he cheated on me with someone who I thought was a friend and I was too blind to realize it was happening right under my nose."* It was humiliating. I relied so much on Summer in the aftermath of everything and I'm just so thankful for her friendship.

She breaks my thought and asks, "Does the ice cream place down the street deliver?" As if she's seeing the wheels turning in my mind replaying the last couple months, she reaches out and holds my hand. "I could go for a few scoops of cookie dough." She smiles at me and I grab my phone and pull up the menu.

"I'm not sure, but let's find out."

Best friends cure everything.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



FORD

“Bro, what the fuck?” I’m watching Nate and Liam in another video game shouting match. “Get your head out of your ass! We’re getting fucked here!” Nate yells. Liam just shakes his head and looks over at me.

They’re playing *Call of Duty* and I can hear Nate yell from the other room. “Ford, call next. I can’t play with him again.” On the football field, I’ll go to war for these guys, but in a video game, they’re on their own.

“If you think for a second I’m getting involved in this shit show...” I wave my hand around. “You’re out of your damn mind.” They can sort this shit out amongst themselves.

Chase is out on the balcony when I step through the sliding doors. The skyline catches my eye immediately, damn Nate’s got a hell of a view up here. He’s in the same building as Chase, but a few floors down. It’s peaceful out here right now. Later on though, the downtown area below us will pick up with people enjoying a night out and music from the bars and clubs will fill the streets. My mind drifts to Abby and I wonder what she’s up to tonight since her brother is here. Is she home alone? Fuck I’d hate that. Maybe she’s with Mia, they seem to have become friends or at least acquaintances.

I feel a hand on my shoulder and turn around to see Chase beside me.

“Listen man, thanks again for helping out Abby. She’s fucking stubborn sometimes and I wasn’t sure she’d even let you help her.” Shaking Chase’s hand, I remember Abby’s Uber comment. She definitely made it clear she didn’t need the help, but she did graciously accept it.

“Oh, yeah, it was no problem.” We stand in silence for a moment, I’m waiting to see if he has anything more to add, but he doesn’t. His focus is on the water, he’s just staring at it, it’s similar to how Abby was that first night I met her. Looking at it like they’re waiting for some kind of answer.

The sliding door swings open and Nate is carrying a tray of steaks with Liam not far behind him as they joke with one another. They’re obviously over whatever feud they had five minutes ago.

Nate lights up the grill while Liam is telling Chase and me about some college kid he saw on ESPN highlights that he thinks would be a great addition next season to our team.

I chime in. “Well, I don’t know about you, but I don’t plan on having an early draft pick next year.”

The better we play this season, the later our pick will be in next year’s draft.

“As long as you and Campbell start scoring, we’ll be solid,” Liam says, turning his head in Nate’s direction.

“Start throwing some missiles down the field then,” Nate fires back. Chase rolls his eyes at Nate for that one and shoots a sympathetic grin in Liam’s direction. Liam is our quarterback, another guy drafted the same year as me and Nate, but in the third round. Our draft class was definitely a rebuilding year for Tampa and not to toot our own horn, but we’ve rebuilt pretty damn well.

“Fuck off, Campbell. You’re not complaining when you get all of those handoffs.”

Liam’s right, Nate Campbell is Liam’s go to guy for a quick few yards since he’ll pummel through people to get that first down.

Hanging out with the guys right now is just what I needed. A distraction from my distraction. Does it really count though if every time I look at Chase I’m wondering what Abby is doing? I’m trying not to feel bad about what happened between us, because we both were into it, but there is this nagging voice in the back of my head. Chase has never done anything to make me question his loyalty and one green eyed brunette has me losing all sense of control. To be fair, the chances of something actually happening with her

again are probably pretty low. She doesn't strike me as a casual hookup kind of girl and I'm not really in the market for anything serious. She had a need the other day and I helped fulfill it. Plain and simple. She wants friends here and fuck, if that's what I'll need to be, I'll do it. I'm friends with Mia, so how hard can it be to be just friends with Abby?

"Fucking sisters," Chase huffs out as he looks at his phone and seemingly reads a text.

"What about fucking sisters?" Liam shoots back as he walks inside to the table where we're sitting. "Is that allowed?" Chase glares at him and shoves his phone back in his pocket.

"No, the fuck it isn't." Chase rolls his eyes and I can feel my jaw clench tighter when he looks my way. *This guy would fucking kill me if he knew I've tasted his sister.*

After we finish eating, all four of us jump on for a quick *Call of Duty* game. "Liam, I swear to God, I'm going to jump across this couch and knock you out." Chase looks over at me and widens his eyes while Liam looks at the screen with a smirk on his face. Nate is back on his rampage from earlier. "Pay attention to who you're shooting at."

"Something going on, Nate? You need to get laid or what? Dry spell happening?" Nate looks over at me and gives me the finger. I hold back a laugh and Liam chimes in,

"Ford, you know what that means. It's probably been weeks, months maybe."

Liam laughs and Chase lets out an "Ohhhhh."

Finally, Nate speaks up, "Fuck all of you. It's a-a self-inflicted dry spell, for your information." We all glance over at him before turning our attention back to the game.

"Self-inflicted... what does that even mean?" Chase lets out a laugh.

"I'm just choosing not to fuck around right now," Nate answers before Liam pauses the game.

"What the hell, who paused?" Nate yells out.

"You and your bff Mia arguing or something?" Liam asks blatantly.

"What the fuck? No. Why would that even matter if we were?" Nate snaps back. We've all always wondered if there was something going on between Nate and Mia, but they both seem to always be doing their own thing, dating someone or in Nate's case, sleeping with other people. So I've never thought much more about it.

Liam gives me a look and I decide to jump in before this gets much further. “Just a question, man. Let’s finish this game.”

As much as I love getting under Nate’s skin because he does this shit to me all the time, I’d rather not poke the bear any more than we have.

“Alright boys, I’m heading out.” Chase stands and walks over to me with his hand out for me to shake it. “Need to get home and see what kind of mess my sister and her best friend made in my living room tonight. When I left there was Mexican food and margaritas all over my coffee table and the picture I got of them in my old jerseys tells me they’ve had too much to drink already.” He rubs his neck and makes his way over to say bye to Liam and Nate.

I let out a breath of relief, at least Abby wasn’t home by herself tonight. I’m not sure why that makes me so happy, but it does. A smile escapes me while I’m lost in thought remembering how it felt to hold her in my arms.

“What are you smiling at?” Liam swats my arm. Not realizing I’m standing at the couch with a stupid fucking grin on my face thinking of Abby.

“Nothing,” I clear my throat. “I’m going to head out too. I’ll catch up with you guys tomorrow.”

I spent the better half of the night wondering what Abby was doing, which isn’t like me. I normally don’t give women a second thought. Call that being a dick, but it’s the truth. Being with a woman romantically isn’t something I’ve wanted for a while. I’ve been enjoying my life as it is. Football, my friends, random hookups when needed, that’s what’s worked for me. But lately, I’m finding myself actually wanting to be around Abby, wanting to flirt with her and talk to her. It fucking sucks that she’s Chase’s sister. I know that means she’s off limits, but damn, if that doesn’t make me want her even more.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



“That shirt is so cute on you, Ab!”

Summer pulls my arm as we walk through the parking lot. We are heading to the stadium for the football game today and I have to admit, there’s a nervous excitement coursing through me right now. I spent too long going back and forth in my head contemplating what to wear, but landed on my first choice anyway, the comfortable choice. I’m wearing a white crop top with the Tampa logo on it and I opted for skinny jeans with some distressing and a pair of converse shoes.

Mia is meeting us at the gate. She said she goes to most of the home games and since she doesn’t usually bring anyone with her, it’s usually just her and whatever buddies or family want to come.

“Thanks! I’d have to agree.” I shoot a smile in Summer’s direction as we walk. I see Mia up ahead and wave at her. “You and Mia are actually a lot alike, I think you’ll get along so well!”

I greet Mia with a hug and introduce the two of them. They exchange smiles and hugs and start chatting right away just like I figured they would.

“Okay, so you’re just Nate’s friend... who comes to all the games... and wears his jersey?” Summer has no filter and obviously needs to know

everyone's business.

"I know how it looks," Mia says. "Nate and I... we're friends. I'm not one of the masses of women who look at him with 'fuck me' eyes." She laughs as she says that and Summer presses her lips together like she wants to say more but doesn't.

Once we get into the suite, my jaw is on the floor. I've been to football games before, but I've never experienced one like this, I've grown accustomed to the nosebleeds. The view on the field is amazing, we're at mid-field, staring right down the fifty yard line and I can see everything. The room is expansive with an open floor plan, massive TV's on the walls and a fully stocked bar and bartender. These chairs are big enough for me to easily get a full night's sleep, comfortably, if I needed to and don't even get me started on the food they have set out.

"Holy shit," Summer breathes out. "Is this always how it is?"

Mia grabs a piece of celery from the table and plops herself in one of the chairs, bringing her feet up on the chair with her. "Pretty much. I don't always come up here though, a lot of the time I'm in the stands behind their bench. It's actually more fun to be right in the action like that." Mia pulls her brown hair up into a ponytail and pulls out her phone to text someone.

"Sometimes Ford's parents are up here too." *Shit, does that mean they'll be here today?* Why does that make me nervous? "They're out of town this week though," she adds, as if she somehow saw my panic.

The game is finally underway and I spotted Ford the second he showed up on the sidelines. He's hard to miss. Tall and muscular, plus I remembered that Summer said he was number eighty-seven and she wasn't wrong. The back of his jersey says Anderson and my heart skips a beat when he turns around towards the stands. We're in the second tier, so I doubt he can actually see up here, and does he even know I'm at the game? I haven't spoken with him since we were casually flirting in texts the other day.

"Did you tell anyone we were coming with you today? I don't even think I officially told my brother, I just said we were thinking about it," I say to Mia, but keep my gaze on the field.

"Uh huh, the guys know," she says so casually while stuffing a chicken wing in her mouth. A small smile lands on my lips and Summer hip checks me as she catches it.

"Maybe he's looking for you." She raises her eyebrows as she stares down at the field with me. I bite the inside of my cheek and take a seat on one

of the chairs overlooking the field to finish watching the game.

Ford is on the sidelines with his helmet on, waiting to go into the game. I watch him run into the huddle, and then again as he lines up on the field. I've watched plenty of football games so why do I feel my nerves the second the ball is snapped? The quarterback drops back and scrambles to his right, avoiding a hit with just enough time to make a pass. Ford jumps up and brings the ball in before a defender takes him to the ground, but not before he earns a first down for the team. I cheer with the rest of the crowd and feel my blood pumping and heat rising through my body.

There is something about seeing him play today, it's like seeing him do what he does best puts him in a new light for me. Knowing him on a more personal level and seeing him display this level of athleticism, it stirs something in my stomach. I knew he was good, I've seen him on TV plenty of times to know he's a great football player, but seeing it in person makes me feel all sorts of things I wasn't fully prepared for. I swallow the lump in my throat and take a sip of my water, my mouth feels so dry all of a sudden. He's so certain of his movements. He's full of confidence on that field and his presence is commanding. I try to hold back a smile while watching him jog over to the sidelines after the play.

Once the game is over, Summer, Mia, and I head down to the players exit.

"They have to get changed and have their little pep talks afterwards, so there's no rush to get there right away, but I can show you guys around a little bit before we meet up with them if you want?" Mia offers.

"Hell yes!" Summer has no problem soaking in all of this.

We walk down the hallway and pass a couple of other suites on the way, I'm seriously in awe of this side of the fan experience. It's nothing like what I'm used to, which is usually tailgates in the parking lot and hiking a mile to our seats, paying sixteen dollars for a beer and squeezing into the stadium seats. This is literally the opposite in every way and while I don't say it out loud, I could definitely get used to this. I should've started coming to Chase's games years ago.

"And then here's where we can wait for them if we want." Mia leads us through a door and I see a few other women outside, and then there are some fans lined up behind a gate, probably hoping to grab an autograph or picture when the players start making their way out.

Chase is the first to exit and he comes over and kisses my cheek along

with Summer and Mia's before stopping to talk with a few people. I spot Ford walking out of the tunnel immediately. He's wearing dark jeans that cling to his muscular thighs with a black t-shirt and a backwards hat—*that fucking backwards hat*—and looking all kinds of irresistible. I take a deep breath and give him a smile when he notices me too. Nate isn't far behind him, wearing almost the same get up, except his shirt is blue.

“Super Bowl here you come,” Mia says as she shoots her hair scrunchy at Nate and he laughs as he catches it.

They won their game 37-13 and you can tell the guys are in good moods. Ford walks over to us and gives Mia a hug and smiles in my direction.

“Hi I'm Summer!” Shit, I was so busy drooling over Ford, I totally forgot Summer was even standing next to me.

I shake my head. “Sorry yeah, this is my best friend. Summer, this is Ford, that's Nate.” I gesture to the guys. Ford, ever the gentleman, extends his hand to shake Summers and gives her a ‘nice to meet you’ with a nod.

“I'm fucking starving. Let's go to Louie's Bar.”

Everyone nods in agreement with Nate. Sure, I could use a drink.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



“What are you girls drinking?” Ford asks as he leans in to where Summer and I are sitting. His masculine scent pulls me in every time and my heart rate picks up with him being so close to me.

“I’ll just have a beer, thanks!” Summer speaks up first.

“Make it two, please.” I flash Ford a smile and he nods in my direction before walking to the bar.

“Tell me what’s on your mind.” Summer turns to face me as we sit at this high-top table. The music isn’t too loud, so I don’t have to yell to talk to her, thankfully. The bar is pretty big considering the outward appearance makes it look the size of a shoe box. Nate and Mia are over by the pool tables with a pitcher of beer and Liam is with Ford at the bar ordering our drinks.

“What do you mean?” I give her a side eye.

“Oh come on.” Summer laughs. “You look like you’ve been in a daze since the second that guy walked out of the tunnel.” She gives me a look and I know that look, it’s the ‘*I know you’re into him so just admit it,*’ look.

“I don’t know.” I sigh. “Any time I’m around him, I just want to grab his face and kiss him,” I say a little more candidly than expected, but whatever it’s the truth.

Ford and Liam walk over with our drinks and take a seat with us at the high top. We lift our glasses to cheers and we all take a sip.

“Thank you for this.” My eyes lock with Ford’s and his head does a small nod in my direction.

“So, I hear you’re from Miami?” Liam looks at me before taking a sip of his beer. “Why trade South Beach for Tampa?”

I stifle a laugh. “Oh, I just needed a—uh... a change, I guess.” Ford looks at me curiously, like he’s heard that answer before and doesn’t buy it.

“Summer, you still live there?”

She turns her attention to Liam and gives him a nod as she sips her beer. “I do. Once I’m done with nursing school, I’ll probably leave too, though.”

Liam licks his bottom lip as he stares at Summer.

“So, quarterback, huh? Decision maker.” Summer shoots her pearly white smile at Liam.

“That’s me,” Liam replies to her and turns his body so his focus is solely on Summer, as if Ford and I just don’t exist.

“Hm. Shame. Quarterbacks were once upon a time my favorite. Not so much anymore, though.” Summer gets up from her seat and grabs her beer as she walks towards the pool tables.

“Where are you going, blue eyes?” Liam calls after her, but she keeps walking.

“Can’t win em’ all,” Ford says to Liam as he takes a swig of his beer.

I laugh behind my glass seeing Summer smile at me from the other end of the bar.

“First time for everything, I guess.” Liam shrugs his shoulders and gets up. “I’m no quitter, though.” His cocky smile is on full display as he follows in Summer’s direction.

I shake my head laughing. “No chance. Summer dated the quarterback in high school, it ended horribly, I’m pretty sure she’s still recovering.”

Ford doesn’t respond to that, he just sits there staring at me.

“You played a good game.” I try to break the silence with something easy. Leaning on football because I feel like that’s where he’s most comfortable.

His beer is about done as he takes a small sip before looking back at me. He licks his bottom lip before speaking “Thanks.” Something in his demeanor changes. With it being just the two of us at the table now, our knees are dangerously close to touching and I almost scoot closer to him to

make that happen. *Almost.*

He tilts his head low, leaning in towards me. “You should know that you look fucking gorgeous tonight.” His voice is raspy when he says it and my cheeks start to blush.

“Thank you.”

We sit in silence for another moment before a blonde woman approaches our table. She’s wearing a black mini dress that definitely leaves little to the imagination up top. She leans more towards Ford and places all of her attention on him, essentially ignoring the fact that I’m even sitting here. He probably has beautiful women throw themselves at him all the time.

“Great game today, Ford!” She bats her long eyelashes at him while biting her lip and introducing herself. She starts talking to him about the game, but it’s obvious she didn’t watch it and has no idea what she’s even talking about. I’m about to take a sip of my beer when Ford grabs my hand and ushers me out of our seats.

“Excuse us, Jill,” he says to the woman.

“Oh, it’s... um, I’m Julie,” she calls as we’re already walking away. I turn back to look and she’s definitely giving me the evil stare as I trail behind Ford with him leading the way to the end of the bar.

“Not in the mood for any of that tonight,” Ford says as he pulls out a barstool for me to take a seat.

“You probably get that all the time,” I say, letting out a sigh and looking at Ford.

His brow creases a little and he orders us a couple of waters. “It gets old.”

Chase walks over and tells me he’s decided to head home for the night. “You sure you and Summer can find your way back okay?”

“You’re kidding, right? Our building is literally only a few blocks away. Give us some credit.” He pulls me towards him for a hug and gives Ford a handshake before walking out.

“It’s the one with the red sign. Big red sign, Ab, you can’t miss it.” If I had something to throw at him, I would’ve, but I don’t feel like getting glass all over the floor or breaking my cell phone tonight so an intense eye roll in response will have to do instead. Chase is laughing as he scurries out the door. It’s only eight p.m. and I can’t help but wonder if he is actually calling it a night or maybe has plans of his own. Either way, I won’t be out much longer considering it’s a school night.

This bar isn’t actually half bad, considering when I asked Mia about it on

the way she described it like a hole in the wall. To be honest though, those are always the best ones, even though your feet almost always stick to the floor and it usually smells like old beer. I'm sure it gets packed during the day for games with all of the TVs in here. It's dimly lit right now with a few neon signs around on the walls. The actual bar goes in one long line overlooking the rest of the place. The pool tables are further away and the high top tables are in between.

Ford and I are both seated at the bar and he's leaning with his back against the bar top facing out while I've turned with my knees directly to the side of him.

"Fucking idiot." Ford laughs under his breath. He's watching Liam try too hard to get Summer's attention and she's just not having it. I laugh next to him and we sit in another moment of silence. You'd think these moments would turn awkward, but they don't. I'd rather sit here next to Ford saying nothing, than have a conversation with anyone else right now.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



FORD

I'm barely able to think straight tonight. Seeing Abby when I walked out of the tunnel took my breath away. How does she make jeans and a t-shirt look so damn good? Looking at her in my team colors and logo instantly made me hard. It made me wonder what she'd look like with my name and my number on her back too. Mia mentioned they were all coming to the game, but still the sight of her waiting when I walked out was enough to take me out.

Now, we're sitting in this shitty bar, listening to shitty music, surrounded by the smell of stale beer and a sticky bar top, but there isn't anywhere else I'd want to be. Abby's long hair is hanging over one shoulder and her cleavage is peeking out from her shirt. A memory flashes as I remember having those breasts in my hands, and feeling how hard her nipples were when I had them in my mouth. I can feel myself growing a fucking tent in these jeans just thinking about it. Fuck, I've got to remember we're in public. Think of something different, something to turn me off.

Uh... a tree, a shark, the ocean.

All of that works for a split second before I'm imagining Abby in the ocean, water dripping from her body and her doing that slow motion walk out of the water.

“Ford?” I hear Abby’s voice and it breaks my train of thought.

“You okay?” She laughs. “Looks like you were about to break that glass with your hands.”

I glance down at my hold on the cup. I didn’t even realize I was gripping the glass as hard as I was.

“Oh, shit. Yeah, I’m good.” I shake my head and wipe the condensation from my hands on my jeans. When I do, my hand touches her thigh through the gaping hole in her jeans with all of the damn distressing. I pull back quickly and glance up to assess her reaction to the small touch. I’m curious if that light graze made her pulse jump like it did mine.

When my eyes meet hers, she has her lips pressed together, biting back a small smirk. But there’s something in her eyes tonight that I can’t quite pinpoint, like a little spark of fire, it’s something that tells me she wants me touching her. I choose to test the waters a little bit and slide my finger back through the distressing in her jeans on her thigh, moving back and forth slowly, running the pad of my finger over her soft skin.

Her mouth opens slightly and her chest begins moving up and down a little more rapidly than it was a second ago. Fuck, is this turning her on? I move my hand soft and slow at first and then add a little pressure on her inner thigh as I start to stretch out a few of the threads on her jeans. This distressing definitely isn’t made for the size of my hand, but fuck it. I’m sure I hear a soft whimper come from her mouth, it’s so low I don’t even know if I heard it right. But when I glance over at Abby, she’s clenching her thighs together. The rest of my hand forces its way through the hole in her jeans, pushing harder down into her thigh. I move my hand up as far as I can without completely ripping the jeans, even though everything in me wants to tear them from her body.

Who knew that a pair of distressed jeans could be the gateway to such predatory thoughts, and right now all I want is these jeans around her ankles and my face between her thighs. There isn’t anyone around us in this corner of the bar and all of our friends are too busy in their own conversations to pay attention to us.

As if to steady herself, she grips a hand on top of the bar. I lean a little closer into her and I’m hit with her sweet scent, it drives me wild being this close to her. Knowing she’s turned on is only fueling me even more, and I’m ready to take her somewhere more private.

I whisper against her ear. “What do you need, Princess?”

Her long eye lashes flutter in my direction and she blows out a slow breath, releasing the grip her hand has on the bar. She bites her bottom lip and all my self-control is about to fly out the door of this place.

She quickly glances at the pool tables where our friends are and then her gaze darts to the door and back to me. Without giving it a second thought, I take her hand in mine and make strides across the sticky floor to the door leading outside, rounding a corner to our left, gently pulling Abby behind me.

“Where are we going?” She giggles as she tries to keep up with my pace. Leading us around the corner of the bar near an alley, I quickly turn and in one swift movement position her against the brick wall of the bar.

“I haven’t stopped thinking about you in weeks, Abby.” Her throat moves up and down as she swallows and I plant my hands on either side of her head and press my body closer to hers.

“When I saw you tonight after the game...” I run my thumb across her bottom lip. “All I could think about was getting you alone and how badly I wanted another taste of you.”

I run a hand down her body, squeezing her hip, and she relaxes into my touch letting out a breath. She brings her lips inches from mine before whispering,

“Then what are you waiting for?”

Fuck, this woman is unbelievable. I smile at her before lifting her up and pinning her against the wall with my body. She gasps as I do it, but my mouth covers hers before she can say anything else.

She tugs on my hair and runs her fingers down my neck, pulling me closer as my hands roam her thighs up to the exposed skin on the small of her back. She lets out a small moan and I feel her smile against my mouth before she presses her lips back to mine. She licks my bottom lip with her tongue and I return the gesture before our mouths are so in sync, it’s like we were born to do this together. She pulls back and looks at me with those heady green eyes and something shifts in me.

I can’t explain it, but in that instant, I know I don’t want to be kissing anyone other than Abby. She plants one more soft kiss against my lips while I loosen my grip to allow her to slide down my body, both of us panting as she does.

“We should probably get back inside.” Her voice is ragged as she tugs at my t-shirt. I can feel my cock straining in my jeans.

“You go ahead. I have a situation here, I’ll need a minute,” I say

gesturing to the bulge trying to burst from my jeans.

Her thumb swipes the corner of her mouth as she shakes her head and walks backwards away from me smiling. “Tsk, tsk, Anderson.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN



My brain has been one giant tangled ball of yarn for the last week. I knew the closer I got to Ford the more it would mess with me. I did this to myself. I was hellbent on focusing on me, myself and I, yet he's all I've been able to think about lately. I could have turned him down that first day, but instead I'm over here almost every night getting myself off to the dirty words he whispered in my ear or the memory of his tongue making me come apart at his mercy.

After our steamy make out session at the bar, I told Summer when we got back to the apartment and she thinks I should just explore this thing with Ford a little. As much as I'd love to do just that, I know myself. I don't think I can just have casual sex. I can't separate it, that's not how I'm wired. Plus, knowing Ford, that's probably all he would want; the sex part, not all the other stuff.

My mind and body are in a constant battle, because Ford makes me feel so good when I'm with him. Even just sitting with him when he was rubbing my leg, two more minutes and I would have exploded all over the bar, add that kiss outside, I'm shocked I didn't completely ruin that pair of underwear, although they were definitely soaked. I'm not used to being so turned on by

someone. It's never been like this before, but it's like everything he does makes my insides crumble and I don't know how to stop it. Part of me wishes he was just a complete ass so I could use that as an excuse, but he's not even close.

MIA

I'll meet you there in 10!

Mia and I are going to a spin class this morning. She got me hooked on the studio she goes to, so we try to meet once a week for a class together.

"Hi!" she says as she rushes to get on the bike next to me.

"Hi, everything okay?" I reply back. She looks frazzled.

"Oh yeah, I had to stop by Ford's on the way here and today of all days, he decides he wants to be a chatty Cathy. I told him I had to meet you and that got him to shut up." Calling Ford a 'chatty Cathy' isn't something I'd ever do. It makes me wonder what he was so talkative about today.

The instructor gets on the mic and starts the class at the same time I see a notification on my watch.

FORD

Hi Princess.

Oh, that nickname gets me every time.

Holding back a smile, I focus my attention back on the class. Not five minutes pass and another text alert comes up.

FORD

I want to see you.

Mia looks over at me as I keep glancing down at my watch.

"I-uh, I think it's dying." Shaking my head, I decide to just take the watch off. I cannot be distracted by him right now and the last thing I need is Mia seeing his name come up on my wrist.

"So, what made Ford so chatty this morning?" I ask as we walk out of the spin class.

"Beats me. He barely got his point across. I think it had to do with a girl, he's never talked to me about his dating life. I didn't think he had one to be honest, but..." She sighs as she hits a name on her phone and presses send. "I don't know, maybe he does?"

Whoever she calls answers and she begins talking to them while I'm lost in thought. He didn't text me anything after saying he wanted to see me, but the curiosity in me wants to respond. It's no secret that we're attracted to each other. I think I've made it very clear to him every time I'm around him that I can't keep my composure. Thankfully it doesn't seem like anyone around us picks up on it.

"How do you feel about a road trip next weekend? Does Jacksonville peak your interest at all?" Mia asks while she tosses her phone in her bag,

"Why? What's in Jacksonville?" I ask hesitantly.

"Do you not pay any attention to your brother's life? I mean you live with the guy, you're relatives, surely you talk."

She's got a point. I should pay a little more attention, Chase is pretty good about my schedule.

"The guys have a game there. We could go down a day early, go to the beach or bars or both." She elbows me lightly.

"Oh." It actually sounds fun. It might be a nice way to bond more with Mia.

"You don't have to let me know now, just keep in touch." Mia's ponytail sways in the wind as she looks down at her watch. "I know we were about to grab coffee, but can I raincheck? Nate's a needy child and can't do basic things without my guidance apparently."

I laugh and throw my hand up to wave at her as she walks in the opposite direction.

A weekend with Mia. In Jacksonville. Watching Ford play football. *But*, my brother will also be there. It's probably a terrible idea, but I'd be lying if the idea of a little weekend getaway wasn't intriguing. I'll call Mia later and let her know I'm in. For now, I'm going to play 'what would Summer do?' And if I know my best friend, she'd say to just try and have some fucking fun.

Hi Anderson.

CHAPTER TWENTY



FORD

The other night with Abby has had me reeling all week. I know it's a bad fucking idea to even *think* about her the way I have been, let alone all the other shit we've been sneaking around doing. After a quick shower, I throw on some gray sweatpants and a t-shirt and put some waffles in the toaster. We play at home tomorrow and then travel to Jacksonville next week. With the way we're looking so far, I feel good about the upcoming schedule. We're sitting at 4-1, and winning the divisional game against New Orleans helped. Our loss was to Minnesota and it was a close one, I wouldn't be shocked if we saw them again down the road in a playoff game.

I texted Abby earlier on a whim. I wanted to talk to her, wanted to see her even though I know Chase would have my head if he ever found out. I haven't heard back from her yet so I decide to just take today as a chill day since the weather is shitty anyway. The toaster pops and I reach for the waffles and quickly throw one on a plate as I take a giant bite out of the other. The second I sit down my phone dings.

ABBY

Hi Anderson.

Fuck yes.

ABBY

You wanted to see me?

Again, fuck yes.

Where are you?

I already know she went to a spin class with Mia earlier, but since it's a Saturday I know she isn't working.

ABBY

Getting food. I'm starving.

Me too.

I know she's probably rolling her eyes at that, but I smile to myself as I send another text out.

Send me your location.

For the second time since I've met Abby, I'm picking her up on the side of the road. Except this time, she's smiling and willingly getting into my truck. She was at the same café we went to when we spent the day together and it makes me feel good that she liked it enough to go back. When she hops in my truck, she tosses a brown paper bag in the center console,

"I couldn't decide, I'm so hungry. There's a ton of food in there." She laughs as she pops the straw in her iced coffee and places another one in the cup holder.

"Thank you. You didn't have to grab me one, you know," I say, before I put the truck in drive and take off.

"I know," is all she says before taking a sip and reaching for the radio. She's been in my truck a total of two times and she's already assumed the role of 'Passenger Princess.'

"What are your plans today?" she asks while flipping through stations.

"Well." I adjust myself in the seat. "To be honest, I didn't have any. I usually lay low during the season. A movie was probably in my forecast for today."

She finds what she's looking for when *Morgan Wallen's* "Last Night"

hums through my speakers and she turns it up just a bit. I smile in her direction, watching as she softly says the words of the song before she catches me and blushes.

“What?” Her green eyes going back and forth between mine and her fingers fidgeting with the straw in her iced coffee.

“Nothing.” I shake my head, smirking. “I just like this song when you sing it.”

Abby bites back a smile before she focuses her attention back on looking out the window. I notice the dark clouds are beginning to roll in and if there’s anything I’m sure of, it’s that this is the kind of weather that movie days are made for.

We pull into my garage just as it’s started to drizzle. Grabbing the coffees and paper bag from the console, I hop out and make my way over to Abby’s side and open the door for her to get down from the truck.

“Wow, such a gentleman.” She teases as she steps down. Walking into my house, I realize I left in such a hurry earlier that the waffles I made are still on the table and my television is still on.

“Can I use your bathroom quickly?”

Pointing toward the hallway. “First door on your right.”

While she’s gone, I throw the waffles out and quickly wipe the counter where some of the syrup spilled.

There isn’t really a plan for bringing her to my house, but she seemed to be into the idea of hanging out today and I’d rather spend time with her than anyone else. Abby walks out of the bathroom and her hair is up in a bun on top of her head, she’s fresh-faced and her cheeks look like they have a natural pink tint to them. She obviously had another t-shirt in her bag because she’s wearing a different tank top than she had on before, this one is pink and reaches up to her neck. She’s still in the little black bike shorts she wore earlier and damnit if I don’t want to shake the hand of the person who invented those.

“I’d kill for a bathroom like that,” she says as she jerks her hand towards the door she just came from. If she thinks the guest bathroom is nice, she should see the master.

“Dual shower heads were nonnegotiable,” I reply. “So, any special requests for this movie?” I change the TV to one of the streaming apps to see what kind of movies we have available.

“Look at this view, too!” Okay, so, clearly we’re still talking about the

house.

“Yeah, it was probably my biggest selling point.” It’s true. I looked at plenty of houses that were newer, had more updates and fancier features, but the view is what made me offer above the asking price for this one. My house sits right on the water, there’s a dock for a boat, and beach access is within a short walk. The entire living room has sliding doors that span across giving a full panoramic view of the water out back. And the sunsets are amazing.

The first time I saw Abby, she was staring off into the water. I get the feeling it’s almost some kind of comfort for her so I don’t interrupt her while she looks out over the water again now. Even though it’s raining harder than earlier and it doesn’t look like much but a bunch of gray murky water, she still stares like it’s the most beautiful thing she’s ever seen.

She clears her throat and turns towards me and says, “About that movie?” And she grabs the remote and makes herself right at home on the couch.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



We're more than halfway through *The Avengers Endgame* and even though this is one of my favorite movies, I've barely been able to pay attention. Ford's sitting close enough for me to feel the heat of his body next to mine without actually touching me. He's wearing gray sweatpants and a black t-shirt, which is essentially porn to me. Add a backwards hat and I'd be done for. I can't sit still and keep shifting my weight on the couch, trying to relax a little bit.

"Are you uncomfortable?" He turns to face me, and Lord help me, he looks so good. I love the scruff he's got going on, but I'm sure he will probably shave and clean it up before tomorrow's game.

"No, I'm okay. I think my legs are just restless. Maybe from the spin class earlier." I wiggle myself into a different position and he grabs my calves and places them across his lap and starts massaging. His touch is so gentle even though his hands are rough and calloused.

"Before you tell me I don't have to do this, I know I don't." He doesn't look at me while he says that, he just continues to face the movie. Me on the other hand? I'm not able to focus on anything other than each movement his fingers make. I lean back against the curve of the couch and relax my legs a

little more with each stroke of his hand. His fingers go up my leg to just above my knee, kneading back and forth and down to my toes where he presses firmly with his hands.

“Oh, that feels really good.” An unintentional groan leaves my lips when he moves a hand a little higher to the back of my thigh. The heel of my foot brushes against him and I can feel his erection, those sweatpants leave nothing to the imagination. I can barely hear the movie over the thunder booming outside, and the lightning strikes are coming more often causing the house to light up in an otherwise dark room aside from the television being on.

A chill runs through me and I shiver, causing Ford to look over at me. He lifts one of my legs and places it behind him as he positions his body between my thighs and leans up to me. His hands are planted on either side of me and instinctively, my legs spread further.

“Are you cold?” I swallow hard and turn my head, noticing a blanket on the other end of the couch. Before I can reply, Ford gets up and disappears down the hall. When he comes back he has a hoodie in his hands.

“Arms up.” He shimmies my arms into the sleeves and the bun on my head pops out of the top. The hoodie swallows me, it’s so big, but it smells like Ford and it’s intoxicating. Laying back down, I get in the same position as before and Ford comes to lay with me. He spreads my legs so his face is down on my stomach as he settles comfortably between my legs. We lay like this for the rest of the movie, with him stroking my arm and me touching his hair every now and then.

Once the credits are rolling, I don’t feel Ford move at all, I just hear deep breaths and the sprinkles of rain still hitting the pavement outside. *Did he fall asleep like this?*

His phone on the coffee table vibrates and it jerks him awake. He sits up and presses his fingers into his eyes.

“Shit. Sorry. This weather gets me every time.” He smiles at me and reaches for his phone but stays planted where he is.

“It’s okay, the movie just ended.” I scoot back a little bit so he has room if he wants to get up, but he just settles himself further into his position.

Tossing his phone back on the table, he turns and looks at me. My heart stutters every time Ford looks at me like this. Every time I’ve been with him, we’ve been doing the most normal, mundane things and my heart still wants to dance out of my chest. I’m trying so hard to not overthink any of this. I

know I need to do some healing and spend some time focusing on myself, but damn it, a girl has needs too and Ford could easily take care of them for me.

I move my hips to get myself free from his grasp and get up to go to the kitchen where the paper bag still sits with the food from earlier.

“Want any of this?” I offer, rummaging through the bag and grabbing a chocolate croissant. Feeling warmer now, I take the hoodie off and place it on the barstool at the island.

Ford gets up and makes his way over to the kitchen where I’m standing and places a hand on the small of my back. Turning my head to look up at him, it’s clear he’s not even paying attention to the food on the counter, he’s just staring at me. I’m wondering how much longer I can fight the urge to just kiss him. He moves his hand slowly across my back and turns me around at the same time.

“Ford.” His name leaves my lips in a sigh. He tilts my chin up with his finger so I’m looking right at him.

“This is your play, Princess.” He’s inches from me and I can feel his erection against my stomach, his lips are dangerously close to mine. “If you want to go back to the couch and start another movie, I’m in. But if you want me to show you just how much I’ve missed you in the last week...” He runs his thumb over my bottom lip. “I’m game for that too.”

Damn him. Without a second thought, my arms reach around his neck to pull him closer as I bring my lips up to his. Ford’s hands grab my thighs as he picks me up and places me on the kitchen island. He positions his body between my legs, pulling himself closer. His hands roam up my shirt, holding my waist as he kisses me with so much passion and lust. My hands move from his neck down to his shirt, and I run my fingers up his bare skin feeling every groove and muscle in his back. In one swift movement, he pulls his shirt from his body and tosses it on the kitchen floor. I pull back for a moment to take in the sight of a shirtless Ford Anderson. Looking him up and down, I notice every vein and ripple in his chest and arms, and the tattoo that extends from the left side of his chest down his arm creating a full sleeve.

“You let me know, Abby.” He leans himself against the counter and rubs his jaw with his hand before crossing his arms over his chest. His sweatpants hang low on his hips and I can see the V-shape that goes down, leaving me wondering what the rest looks like.

“Uh sorry, what?” I shake my head to get myself out of the daydream and back to whatever it was Ford just said.

“Let me know when you’re done eye fucking me so we can pick up where we left off.”

“That is not what I was doing!” I protest.

“No? You’ve got a little something right there.” Ford reaches for the corner of my lip and I swat his hand away.

“It isn’t a crime to just appreciate... you know, all that.” I wave my hand in front of him and he grabs it mid air and kisses my palm.

“You can do anything you want, Abby.” Ford teases me with kisses all the way up my arm until he gets to my shoulder. “This shirt has an awfully high neckline. It can’t be comfortable. You should remove it. There’s not enough balance here with me being shirtless and all.”

Gesturing his hand between the two of us, I roll my eyes and slide off the counter.

I’m not entirely sure what comes over me, but I’m different when I’m around him. I’m more confident and I find myself in situations that normally I’d never entertain, but something comes alive within me when I’m with Ford. He makes me feel as if I’m the most beautiful woman he’s ever seen and it just fuels me. I’ve never had a man make me feel this way.

“How about...” I pull at his sweatpants a little before letting go and walking back into the living room. “I’m going to call the shots this time. Sit on the couch, Anderson.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



FORD

There's my confident girl. The one I get glimpses of every now and then. I can tell when Abby wants something but is too hesitant to ask or go for it, like someone made her feel inferior or unworthy. It makes my jaw clench thinking someone could ever make her feel less than fucking irresistible, because that's exactly what she is. As I'm following Abby into the living room, she gestures for me to have a seat on the couch. I'd never want her, or any woman for that matter, to feel like they have to do something they don't want to.

But before I can speak up, she says, "I've been wanting to do this for a while, Ford." And I throw my head back on the couch with a low growl as she sits herself down between my knees. "Please."

Fucking hell, she doesn't have to beg. I'd give her anything she wants at this moment or in any moment, probably.

She gives me a seductive smile as she pulls at my sweatpants and then my boxer briefs, freeing my aching cock. "Oh my God!" Her eyes widen and a feeling of satisfaction comes over me. "You're... Oh wow."

I watch as Abby bites her bottom lip and desire fills her eyes. Her chest starts moving up and down more rapidly. She takes her thumb and skims it

across the tip of my cock, taking the precum with her. She licks her thumb and brings her mouth down around me and I see fucking stars. She swirls her tongue around and licks from the base to the tip and back down again before putting my whole length back in her mouth and sucking.

“Abby, fuck. You’re doing so good.” Holding myself back from thrusting into her too hard is taking all of the restraint I have. Every time I look down and she’s staring up at me, her pretty green eyes begin to water as she opens her throat to take me deeper. She keeps rubbing her thighs together and readjusting her position below me.

“Is this making you wet, Princess? You need relief too, take it. Touch yourself.” She pulls herself off me for a moment and I love seeing me all over her lips like this as she licks the corners of her mouth. Reaching down, I help her shimmy out of her shorts and she’s left in the smallest piece of fabric that’s considered underwear, even though it looks like a piece of floss.

“Touch yourself,” I command again as she settles back down below me. I wrap her long hair around my fist and gently tug as she sucks and pulls at me with her mouth and her hand while her other hand slips beneath the fabric of her underwear. She moans when she touches herself with me in her mouth and the vibration makes me move even faster.

“Abby. Fuck, this feel so good.” I’m watching how deep she’s taking me and it makes me want nothing more than for us to come together. She needs to see how fucking amazing she is at this. Watching her play with herself has me on the edge and ready to blow. I’m having to clench my ass to hold it in a little longer until I see her body start to shake on the floor and she sucks hard as she lets a moan out, letting her orgasm release. As if on cue, I explode down her throat, my body jerking with every little suck and tongue flick she gives until I’m empty.

“Abby, that was unreal. Such a good fucking girl.” She sits back and I pull her up on my lap and take her fingers into my mouth and suck. “So fucking sweet”.

She has this glossy, satisfied look in her eyes as she relaxes into my arms and settles herself in my embrace. My hand cups her cheek and I rub my thumb back and forth.

“It was good?” she asks quietly as she turns to face me.

Good? It was fucking amazing. Why would she even have to question it?

“You’re kidding, right?” I’m shocked she just asked that. A confused laugh comes out as I look at her, but there’s nothing in her expression that

tells me she was kidding. She needs to know this was good for me, all of her confidence is riding on this and she wants reassurance.

“Abby.” I take her face in both of my hands and kiss her forehead. “Aside from that being the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever experienced, you were unbelievable. I don’t know who made you feel like you need to question yourself, but I can promise you I’m always going to think you’re incredible.”

For the next hour, Abby talks my ears off, but I’d listen to her voice all day on repeat, if I could. Her laugh, the little lip smack she does when she’s thinking about something, even her little yawn is so goddamn cute. She’s been telling me about her students and all the reasons that she loves teaching, which just proves to me that she’s a good teacher. I’d never understood how someone would want to be in a classroom with a bunch of rowdy kids until I started helping at the Rec Center. Being a good role model and knowing that a kid is better off because of something you helped them with or taught them is a good feeling.

“And then she literally told me that’s probably why I didn’t have a husband.” Abby hasn’t stopped smiling and laughing the whole time we’ve been talking and being on the receiving end of all of her happiness right now is addicting. Her phone rings as she sets down a piece of pizza that we ordered.

“It’s Chase. He doesn’t know that I’m here, right?”

I shake my head mid chew. “No, of course not.”

Instead of answering, she sends him a text and then gets up to put her plate in the sink. While she’s in the kitchen, she slips back into the hoodie from earlier and grabs her bag from the barstool.

“Would you mind dropping me off?” I’ve been dreading her leaving all day, but the reality is that she’s still Chase’s sister and still very much off limits. Even though I haven’t seemed to have given a single fuck about any of that lately.

Watching her get out of my truck a block down from the apartment puts a tight feeling in my chest. I don’t fucking like this. While it should be because I don’t like going behind Chase’s back, it’s more because I don’t want her to leave.

She pulls her arm through the sleeve to take off the hoodie. “Keep it,” I say, trying to stop her.

“I can’t... Chase will ask questions.”

Fucking Chase. The guy is my friend, but right now, he’s in my way.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



During my drive to work, my mind drifts to thoughts of Ford. We haven't talked since we were together on Saturday and I fell asleep halfway through the game last night, but that doesn't mean I haven't wanted to text him. We've already crossed so many lines, I can't keep putting myself, or him, in situations like that. Everything on Saturday was initiated by me and while it was *another* amazing experience, I can't live the *Summer* way of just casually having fun with gorgeous men. If Ford wasn't teammates with my brother, or if I hadn't just got out of a shitty relationship, then maybe things would be different, but the fact of the matter is both of those things are true.

"Ms. Hunt, what are you going to be for Halloween?" It's barely October, but the kids are already planning out their costumes and excited for the party we'll have at the end of the month.

"You know what, I'm not sure yet. Have any ideas for me?" I usually love Halloween. Growing up, we had so much fun going trick or treating; Summer and I would stay up late even if it was a school night, sorting through all of our candy. I'd trade her all my Snickers for all her Skittles and we both always made out like bandits. It's hard to recall the last time I actually had fun on Halloween to be honest, though. Charlie and another little

boy, Karson, are standing next to me on the playground as the rest of the children are running around and playing freeze tag.

“I know what you should be!” Karson chimes in.

“What’s that?”

“Just go as a teacher, you’re already good at that so you should just be that. I’m really good at running, so I’m going to be Flash, it just makes sense.” Hm. *It just makes sense.* I smile as the boys run off with the rest of the class and take a seat in the shade, glancing at my watch. Fifteen more minutes of this God forsaken heat then we can go back in.

“Mia, I didn’t think we’d need to leave this early. Jacksonville is literally only like a three hour drive.” I yawn as Mia gets out of her car. She greets me like she’s been awake for hours and is ready to conquer the day and it’s only six a.m.

“We’re making the most out of these twenty-four hours, Abby,” she calls as she lugs my overnight bag and tosses it into her trunk, while I collapse into her passenger seat.

“Who else is coming?” I ask when I notice three coffees in the drink carrier.

“Just us. I figured you’d need a now coffee and a later coffee.” I snicker, bless this girl.

Once we get to Jacksonville, I’ve already had both of my coffees, a breakfast sandwich from *McDonalds* and half of a giant cookie from a gas station. I feel equally energized as I do full, but it turns out that Mia was right, and getting here early was actually a great idea. Between the stops and some traffic, it ends up taking us closer to four hours by the time we pull up to the hotel we’re staying at.

“Is this the same one the players stay at?”

“Yeah, the same hotel. Full disclosure, I’m sure their rooms are a lot nicer, though.” Mia pulls her phone out and does some electronic check in. “Okay, we’re all set! Room 417. Let’s go put our stuff down and then we can drive to the beach. It’s not far.”

Heading into the elevators, I see several tall athletic-looking men standing by the entry to the restaurant. They must be a few of the players, just based

on their stature and the way people are staring at them. I probably should have texted my brother to let him know we got here safe and sound, he was actually really happy I was coming with Mia, which was a nice surprise. Ford knows I'm coming, but we haven't spoken all week. As we are getting in the elevator, Mia presses four and all of a sudden, a familiar scent catches me by surprise as the doors close. Looking to my left, I see long legs in dark denim, raising my eyes up to a crisp white t-shirt and a clean-shaven face. He looks like sex on a stick and he knows it.

"Hey ladies, did you just get here?" Nate addresses Mia and I before hitting the number nine. Ford just stands there in silence as the elevator begins to rise.

Elevators and Ford Anderson are a bad combination for me. Luckily this time there are other people to create a buffer.

"We're just putting our stuff down and then going to the beach for a little." Once we get to our floor, Mia and I walk out and I offer a small wave to Nate and Ford as the doors close. Ford's lips lift into a smirk just before the elevator closes behind me and I can't help but bite back a smile. I'm finally able to release the deep breath I feel like I was holding that whole ride up.

Our room has two queen beds, it's your standard run of the mill hotel room. A decent size bathroom with horrible lighting, one window in the room that looks out to a parking lot and tacky hotel art on the walls with a television and a mirror. It'll be fine for a night. I change into a black two piece swimsuit, a pair of white denim shorts and a pink oversized Nirvana t-shirt and quickly braid my hair so it doesn't look like a rat's nest on my head all day.

Grabbing my sunscreen in one hand and my phone in the other, I feel the vibration and look down to see a text from Chase.

CHASE

You guys make it in okay?

Yep! Just got to the hotel room. Changing, then beach. Catch up later?

CHASE

Nice. Sounds good.

When I look over at Mia, she's smiling at her phone.

"And who has us smiling like that?" I tease as she shoves her phone in

her back pocket of her denim shorts.

I've not a clue about Mia's dating life or if she even has one. She spends so much time with Nate and I've never seen her with any other guys, so I've just been assuming she didn't have a dating life at the moment.

"No one, it's just Nate being annoying," she replies and grabs the sunscreen from my hand and throws it in her bag.

Wow, this beach is actually nicer than I figured it'd be. I'll never get over the view of the ocean. As we step onto the white sand and set up our chairs and umbrellas, there's nothing but a long stretch of beach on either side and open water in front of me. I grab my book from the beach bag and open my container full of fruit and prepare myself to bake in the sun for the next couple of hours. I'm so glad I agreed to come, this is exactly what I've been needing.

After a few hours of us both reading and making some small talk, Mia takes off her sunglasses and looks my way.

"You know," she says, clearing her throat. "There was something once. With Nate. Nothing ever happened, we've never crossed that line between friends to something more, but there was a time when I thought just maybe we might." Her confession itself doesn't shock me, I see how they interact, but I'm surprised she's telling me.

"Really? Why are you telling me this?" She gets up and starts packing up the beach bag and her chair as I glance at my phone to check the time. It's almost four so we definitely need to get going. I'm beginning to gather my things as Mia shrugs.

"Playing it safe has always been my thing. *Reliable Mia*. Always making the right choices. In college, Nate would've been a risky choice. We've always been friends and the thought of ruining that... Well, I'll just say being his friend was the safer option." She pauses before continuing, "I guess I'm telling you because it feels like I can trust you, and also sometimes, it makes me wonder if I should've been a little more spontaneous."

Her words get me thinking. Does she have regrets for not trying to pursue something with Nate? It takes me back to the conversation I had with Summer when she was here... I'm someone who rarely takes chances, but

maybe that's something I should think about changing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



FORD

“Order me a bacon cheeseburger and tater tots... and a side salad.”

Nate’s in my hotel room and Chase will be over in a minute so we can hang out and eat something before calling it an early night. Our game is at one tomorrow and then we head straight back to Tampa to get ready for next week.

“This adjoining room thing is still not my favorite,” Chase says as he walks through the door that connects our two rooms. Nate is a few doors down, also on the 9th floor.

“Think we can hear each other through the walls?” he asks.

“Fuck, let’s hope not. Last thing I need is to hear what goes on behind closed doors with you,” I sneer.

After we eat and talk a little about tomorrow’s game and what we’re expecting, Nate and Chase both head out. I’ve been fighting the urge to text Abby all day, hell all week really.

“*Damnit, I’m just going to text her,*” I mutter to myself and grab my phone off the nightstand and lay on the bed.

How was the beach?

ABBY

You'd think being a native Floridian, I wouldn't forget to use sunscreen on my nose.

Let me see.

A few minutes go by, and she still hasn't replied. She probably looks so fucking cute with a little red nose now all sun kissed. Damn, I want to see her.

Come to my room.

ABBY

No on both accounts.

Please.

ABBY

You can't see me in this condition. I look like a stop light.

I'd take you in any condition.

She doesn't answer for a few more minutes, and I'm about to text her again when my phone vibrates.

ABBY

Five minutes. Room?

Fuck yes. After sending her my room number, within fifteen minutes she's at my door. Her brown hair is cascading down her back, it still looks slightly wet probably from a shower. She has on gray shorts, those soft stretchy ones along with a Tampa Knights t-shirt that swallows up her whole body. I'm assuming it's something she grabbed from her brother's closet. Her nose is a shiny shade of pinkish red and her cheeks also have a rosy look to them, but she still looks fucking gorgeous.

"See." She points to her nose before she even says anything else. "I'm Rudolph."

I can't help but laugh at that as she pushes my chest and walks past me into the room. She notices the adjoining room door right away.

"Oh man, who's your bedroom buddy?"

"It's uh, actually your brother." Abby's eyes widen and she puts her hand on her mouth before stalking up to me and hitting my forearm.

"Ford! You couldn't have led with that before I just walked into your

room?” She’s doing a whisper-yell thing and it’s cute as hell seeing her get all heated about it. Earlier when Chase asked if we could hear in each other’s rooms, I really don’t know if we can or not, but I’d imagine it’s not totally sound proof. She crosses her arms and turns to the window.

“You don’t have much of a view either,” she says as she looks out into the night. I’d have to disagree though, because seeing her in these little shorts, with her long legs tanned from the sun, I’d say I have the best view in the house. She turns around and faces me, both of us let out a little breath and I walk towards her and close the blinds.

I’m not really sure what’s going on between Abby and I. I know she’s the only girl I’ve thought about in weeks and since we had that first kiss in the elevator, I haven’t kissed anyone else, haven’t even glanced in another woman’s direction, actually.

My eyes follow Abby as she strolls around my room, like she’s taking inventory of the things I bring with me on away games.

“Cute key chain.” She giggles as she holds up the unicorn attached to my key ring. “Baker’s daughter made it for me. It’s mine, you can’t have it.”

Mason Baker is our punter, he has a shit ton of kids, white picket fence, and a wife—the whole nine yards. I give him shit sometimes about his picture perfect life, but truth be told, I think it’d be nice to have that one day down the road. Abby smiles as she places it back on the desk and sits on the bed.

Unable to take the distance between us anymore, my hand reaches for hers as I walk towards the bed,

“It’s good to see you,” I say.

She places her delicate hand into mine and as if it’s the most natural thing in the world, she stands and leans into my chest as I inhale her scent while we stand there just soaking in the moment with each other.

“I’m not sure what we’re doing, Ford. What this is…” She breaks our silence, but whispers as she says it.

“What, what is?”

“This, Ford. Us, hanging out randomly, texting, kissing, the… other stuff.” She pulls away slightly so she can look up at me, but she’s still holding her arms around my waist and I haven’t let her go yet either.

“It’s pretty obvious we’re attracted to one another. I just… I don’t know how to do anything half ass, and to me, casual sounds an awful lot like half ass.” I’m getting the idea she’s just working this out amongst herself, so I continue to just listen because honestly, I don’t really know what this is that

we're doing either.

"It's just... you're friends with my brother, for God sakes." She fully steps out of my embrace and runs her hand through her hair and sits down on the bed.

"Plus my last..."

She shakes her head and cuts herself off before finishing that sentence and part of me wishes she wouldn't have. It sounds like there's something there, but I'm not going to pry.

"Hey." I sit down next to her and let out a sigh before continuing. She's leaning forward with her elbows on her knees, clearly having an internal battle with herself over whatever this is.

"You're right. We're obviously attracted to each other. I'm friends with Chase. You don't do casual. I get it. But here's what I know. I like being around you. I want to be around you and I'll take it in whatever capacity you're willing to give it."

She sits up and looks at me, her green eyes look red and glossy, like she's fighting back tears.

"It's just... you're so... I wish the situation was different." This isn't exactly how I thought seeing her tonight would go, but I guess one way or another, a conversation like this was bound to happen eventually.

As if she just had some kind of epiphany, Abby turns towards me and puts a hand on my thigh, and while I'm not complaining about the sudden contact, I'm a little taken back by it.

"Maybe we can figure something out... maybe I could do something casual. I've never actually tried and I-I can't keep fighting *whatever this is* with you. I'm not able to explain it, but I'm drawn to you. So, let's just... scratch the itch."

I'm sorry, what did she just say? "Scratch the itch?"

I pull back to get a better look at her and she scrunches up her sunburnt nose and smiles softly. "Friends... with benefits. Secret friends with benefits?" She adds a questioning tone to the end of that sentence. I don't say anything for a moment and she starts to turn her face away from me and get up.

"Oh my God, I'm sorry, that probably came off so rude." I pull her back down and settle her into my lap, wrapping her in a hug.

"Secret friends with benefits. Okay. Any other rules?"

She bites her lip and tucks her hair behind her ear.

“Just fun. No feelings. And no one else. Can you do that?”

“Fun, good. Feelings, bad. Only Abby. Yeah, I think I can manage.”

Can I though? It already feels like some lines are blurred between fun and feelings, but I’m willing to try this her way.

“Oh, one last thing, you can’t do that thing with your eyes.”

I roll my eyes and let out a sigh. “You’re going to have to be more specific.”

Abby sits up straighter in my lap and her movement makes my cock twitch with excitement.

“The staring thing. Your eyes, they get all dark and intense sometimes when you’re staring at me, it makes me feel... things. You look at me with this—”

“Desire,” I cut her off, shrugging my shoulders. “Sorry, Princess. That’s not something I’m really able to control.”

“Why not?” Her bottom lip curves into a pout and fuck, if I don’t just want to take it between my teeth.

I move her off my lap and lay her back on the bed. Setting myself up between her thighs, she spreads her legs and I plant my hands on either side of her head.

Whispering low next to her ear, I say, “Because every time I see you, Abby, especially now that I know how you taste... how you sound, the little moans and whimpers you make... the desire to pin you against a wall and worship your body is always going to be there.”

Abby’s eyes widen and her cheeks turn an even brighter shade of red as she turns her face to hide a smile. In this position, I can already feel my erection growing and I’d bet anything that if I were to touch her, she’d be wet for me too. When she turns back to face me, my lips kiss the tip of her nose and I lean down to whisper against her lips.

“Can you be quiet like a good girl so we don’t wake our neighbor?” My head tilts towards the door as Abby runs her hand up my shirt, and pulls me closer to her before flicking her hips up towards me and giving me a sly little grin with a bob of her head.

That’s all the confirmation I need before I’m ripping my shirt off and bringing my mouth to hers. She swipes her tongue on my bottom lip and I welcome her sweet taste in. I groan as she pulls at my shorts, she gets them down just enough with my boxers to free my cock that’s already standing at attention for her. The feel of her fingers on the head makes my eyes roll back

as she rubs the beads of precum that are lingering.

“Abby,” I growl.

“I want you, Anderson.”

Fuck, this woman is something else. I sit up on my knees and stare at her, really take her in. She’s still fully clothed, but damn it, I’m already ready to spill just looking at her like this. Her lips are pouty and a little pink, probably from the sun and our kiss. She slips herself out of her shorts, leaving her in a pair of pink lace underwear that I’m dying to slip my tongue under and the t-shirt she was wearing when she came in. I pull her up and reach out both of my hands to grab her waist, running my fingers up to her rib cage and pulling the shirt up with me as I go until it’s completely off of her body.

She came here without a bra? I’m biting back the huge fucking smile that wants to take over my face because the animalistic need for her, to touch her, has taken center stage.

“Lay back down,” I demand.

She lowers herself to the bed completely and I nudge my knee towards her center, feeling the wetness from her pussy on my skin. When she feels my knee, she rocks herself against it, creating friction and leaving her arousal on my skin, showing me just how ready she is for me. Reaching to my bag on the floor next to me, I grab a condom.

“Tell me you’re sure, Abby.”

As if she wants to torture me even more, Abby takes one of her breasts in her hand and squeezes as she pants out, “I’m sure.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Secret friends with benefits. I can do this. Thinking back to my conversation with Summer when she visited, she encouraged me to be a little more spontaneous, and have a little fun. Maybe this advice of hers will be good for me. Plus, after hearing Mia's confession today, it made me feel like I should start trying some new things. There's no denying my attraction to Ford. I'm barely able to think straight when I'm around him, so I'm going to try and do this Summer's way.

Ford puts the condom on and I'm mentally preparing myself to figure out how the hell he's going to fit. My clit is throbbing for his attention, he's all I want right now.

"You're so wet for me." He slides his finger down the fabric of my underwear before pulling them completely from my body and swiping a finger into my bare flesh. I let out a moan, louder than intended, at his touch. He licks his finger and then comes to kiss me. It's hard and deprived, like he's afraid that if he doesn't make the most of this moment, it'll slip away. When he finally pulls his lips from mine, he softly kisses all over my body. He starts on my cheek, then moves to my shoulder, between my breasts and down to my stomach. Keeping his fingers in my hair the whole time. I've

never felt as sexy as I do when I'm with Ford. He makes me feel like the only woman in the world, he makes me feel desired and having his full attention is almost more than I can handle.

He lines himself up with my center and glides back and forth, coating himself with my arousal before slowly sinking in. At first, it's just the tip and even that feels like it fills me up but I want more.

"All of it. Ford, please." A possessiveness shows in his eyes, like me asking for more just sets something on fire within him. He moves deeper, still taking it slow until he's all the way in, stretching me further than I've ever felt before.

"Oh God," I cry out before covering my mouth with my hand.

"If anything hurts, just tell me and we'll stop."

"No, no, it feels so good. Move. I need you to move." I rock my hips a little to insinuate that I want the movement and he takes the lead, thrusting in and out until we're at a steady pace together. My fingers pull at the back of his neck and then my hands down his sides, to his ribs, pulling him closer to me.

"Fuck, Abby. You're so tight, so perfect." Ford keeps us together as he reaches a hand between my legs and presses onto my clit. I gasp as the feel of his thumb sends a wave of pleasure through me.

"Yes, more."

He rubs and circles while continuing to pump into me and the combination of him inside me and the friction on my clit sends me right to the edge almost immediately. I'm already feeling my orgasm building with every flick and thrust.

"You ready, Abby?" he growls in my ear as his body is pressed against mine with more weight than I've felt before. He brings his lips down to kiss mine and I suck on his tongue the moment it enters my mouth, causing him to move his hand even faster on my aching clit. With one more pulse in and out, I'm falling apart underneath him.

"Yes that's it, Princess." He keeps up his momentum as he moves back and forth before taking my legs in his hands and placing them on his shoulders. The change in position feels so good.

"You're going to give me one more," he commands as he runs his hands up and down my thighs, squeezing while we both breathe heavily.

"I don't know if I can. I-I've—" Before I can finish telling Ford that I've never gone more than once like this, he pushes deeper, harder and faster.

Both of us are panting with each bit of movement, the sweat is dripping down my neck, but none of it even phases me. What he's doing right now, the way he's making me feel, I never want this to end. He lets one of my legs down, opening me up even more.

With our bodies clashing together and the smacking sound getting louder as we go on, I reach up to pull his lips back down on mine as I come apart underneath him again, his mouth muffling my screams. I feel the jerk of his body and hear the moan from him that tells me he's coming apart too. He brings his forehead to mine as we both collapse to the bed.

I can officially say that was the best sex of my life. Ford is a man who knows how to please a woman and he's well aware of it judging by the smirk on his face as I turn to look at him. He gets up and walks over to the bathroom, and as he does I'm watching his muscular body move. Every inch of him is lean, but strong. He hands me a warm towel and grabs the t-shirt he was wearing and tosses it to me.

"You can wear this one." I don't miss the tone in his voice when he says that, clearly telling me not to put my brother's t-shirt back on.

I slip into the one he hands me and after getting cleaned up, I stand at the edge of the bed.

"Does this count as hooking up with someone else in the same room?" Ford teases as he pulls me towards him. He's seated on the bed in his boxers looking up at me and he wraps his arms around my waist.

"This is about as close as I'll ever get, so I think I'll check it off the list." It makes me laugh knowing he remembered that from the game we played the first night we met. Ford pulls at the hem of the t-shirt he gave me, it's black with the Tampa logo on it and it smells just like him, woodsy and masculine.

"Fuck, you look beautiful wearing my shirt." He bites at my nipple through the shirt before I pull away with a laugh.

"Okay, Anderson. It's time for bed." Grabbing my other t-shirt from the floor and my phone off the table, I lean in to give him one more hug and he wraps me up in the tightest embrace, like he doesn't want to let go and I don't want him to either, but we both know I can't stay.

"You're incredible, Abby. I'm going to be thinking of your tight little pussy all night. I'll be lucky to get any sleep," he whispers in my ear.

"Well you better try, you have a big game tomorrow." I quickly tease and pat him on the arm before turning away. He does a half groan, half laugh as I'm walking towards the door.

“G’night, Princess.”

“Night, Anderson.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



FORD

We've been on a hot streak for the last three weeks, winning every game by a long shot. This weekend is Halloween and there's an event going on at the Rec Center. Thankfully as well, it's our bye week and I don't have a game I need to be prepping for. Today after practice, Coach Aarons gave us one hell of a mid-season speech. We're sitting pretty right now and he wanted to drill into us that even though we're looking good in the standings, there are still plenty of things for us to clean up.

"And the holding penalties? Done. No more, men. Whether it affected the outcome or the game or not, it doesn't matter. Cleaner football needs to happen if we plan on being a contender in the postseason." He'd spoken with such certainty in his words. He never stutters or hesitates when he speaks. He's straight forward and doesn't beat around the bush. We all nodded our heads as he went on about the rest of his expectations for this season and then he dismissed us for the weekend, reporting back on Tuesday after the bye week.

"I barely even tugged his fucking jersey," Chase says as he tosses his helmet when we get in the locker room. Both calls last game were on Chase, and I know he doesn't think he fucked up, but watching the game tape, they

were pretty obvious. But I'm not telling him that.

"We still won. Doesn't have to be pretty, just needs to get done," I tell him, slapping my hand on his shoulder. My phone flashes with Abby's name as a text from her comes in and I grab my phone quickly so Chase doesn't catch it.

"What's with the fast reflex there, Anderson? Hiding something?" He laughs, but I know if he knew the truth he'd be doing anything but that.

"Nah." I try to casually change the subject by asking him about his Halloween plans.

"My sister has something going on with the kids at school tonight that she asked me to help with. She needs a Hulk."

I let out a laugh at the same time Graham and Nate walk over to us.

"If your sister needs a Hulk, tell her look no further," Graham spits out as he flexes his arms.

"Don't even fucking think about it," Chase seethes through his teeth as he finishes getting dressed.

I don't say another word, just thank my lucky stars that Chase has no idea about the things I've done with his little sister.

Please tell me you're dressing up as a sexy Black Widow tonight.

I know Abby had a school function yesterday, but Mia is throwing a small Halloween party tonight and normally it's not something I'd go to, but I told her I'd come this year.

ABBY

I'm thinking Dr. Strange.

She's fucking with me, right? I'm waiting for a "just kidding" text to roll in, but no such luck. I told Dolly I'd come help hand out some candy for a few hours with the kids, so I shove my phone in my pocket before walking inside. They really did a good job here with the decorations, there are skeletons everywhere and so many pumpkins and fake spider webs that are hanging from the corners of the ceiling and flowing down the window panes.

"Kicked out the real spiders to put some fake ones," Nate jokes as he

grabs a bottle of water from the table. He decided to come volunteer here with me tonight.

“Mr. Anderson!” Nate and I both turn around to see Dolly and a few other staff members, decked out in witch costumes, holding buckets of candy.

“Thank you boys, for coming in tonight. You don’t have to stay very long.”

I reach out my hand to her. “Doll, we’ll stay until the candy runs dry.”

She smiles and fixes her glasses on her nose. They set up two haunted houses here and there are plenty of volunteers, so I know that my help isn’t exactly *needed*, but I want to be here. I set myself up at the exit of one of the houses, while Nate takes the other. I’m not normally someone who dresses up for Halloween, but with this being a kids event, I wanted to be festive. The kid in me used to love dressing up as superheroes so I decided a Captain America costume would be fitting for tonight, it’s equipped with the shield and all. A few of the younger women stop to talk to me and while I’m polite, I’d love nothing more than for them to keep walking. I’m not off the market, but I’m also not *on it*. The only woman I want ogling my ass in these pants is Abby.

After a couple hours of handing out candy, catching up with the kids and doing a quick walk through the center, it’s almost nine p.m. and even though I’m exhausted, I told Mia I’d come over. Plus I’m not missing a chance to see Abby, even if Chase will be there.

“Ready to head to Mia’s?” I ask Nate, interrupting him as he talks to Laura, one of the regulars who volunteers here.

“Hi, Ford. Happy Halloween! Nate, it was nice chatting with you, have a good night.” She waves and walks away and I watch Nate’s eyes follow her down the hall.

“What’s her story?” he asks.

“Hell if I know. I’ve met her maybe twice.”

He just nods his head and keeps walking with me out the door.

I’ve seen Abby at least once a week since we officially decided to try this ‘friends with benefits’ arrangement, but we’ve texted every single day, multiple times a day. We text about everything from her coffee order being wrong and ruining her day, which then prompted me to have a delivery sent to her classroom with three different coffee options to choose from, to watching *New Girl* reruns together, but separately and texting about it. She’s even chattier in text messages than she is in real life, which I didn’t think

would be possible. The weird thing is that I fucking love it. I love talking to her all day. I'm finding myself wanting to know every little detail about her day.

Last week she told me that she wanted to eat fried chicken and watch the sunset, so that's exactly what we did. I picked her up from the coffee shop we both love, we ordered take out and walked down to the beach by my house and ate so much greasy food, my stomach was killing me for days after. It was worth it to see her so happy and smiling so big. I have zero complaints about this situation with Abby and the sneaking around aspect just makes it all that much hotter.

Mia slings her arms around Nate and I as we walk in and it's obvious she's already had quite a bit to drink. Nate pulls her arm off my waist and carries her to the couch where he sits her down.

"You need a breather, Mi." She pouts as he takes the cup away from her, but she stays put and Nate sits down right next to her. My eyes scan the room looking for Abby when they finally land on her.

There's my girl.

She's wearing skin tight black leather pants and a black corset that pushes her breasts together so perfectly. She has on a short burgundy wig and black combat boots. The urge to shove her in one of these bedrooms and rip everything from her body is strong, but I know there are too many eyes here to have any slip ups. She notices me staring at her and she dips her head as she smiles and takes a sip of her beer.

Dr. Strange, my ass.

Stealing glances is how we spend most of the night. I've watched her play two games of flip cup, in which she's surprisingly good, and she's talked to probably every single person in this house. When the crowd starts to fizzle and people spread between the patio and the kitchen where I'm standing, Abby casually strolls in. Her eyes have a glossy look to them and her cheeks look a little flushed, she's probably got a pretty good buzz going on right now. She walks up beside me and nudges her hip into my leg.

"Hi," she says softly. "I like this."

She stumbles a bit backwards and waves her hand around my body, complimenting my awesome Captain America costume.

"Yeah?" I lean down so that to others, it looks like I'm just leaning on the counter, but I'm close enough to her ear to whisper. "You have no idea how badly I want to get you out of this."

I hook my finger in one of the holster straps she's wearing with her costume and her eyes flutter up to mine and hold my gaze.

I've seen how some of the guys here tonight have looked at her. They all know she's Chase's sister so no one has been too forward, but they've all been taking looks and I'd be lying if I said it didn't make my blood boil. The only person who can look at her body like that is me.

"I'm exhausted, walk me home?" Abby straightens up and looks over across the room where Chase is standing and takes out her phone. "I just told Chase I'm leaving, let's go."

"You told him I was walking you home?"

She doesn't answer, but the look on his face has me a little confused as he walks up.

"What's the matter, Ab?" He picks up her empty beer bottle and shakes his head. "Let's get you home. Let me say bye to Mia and we'll go."

"Hey man, I'm heading out anyway so I'll make sure she gets back home safely."

Chase eyes me, and I can tell he's unsure, but he nods hesitantly before saying "Alright. Yeah. Thanks, man. Text me when you're home, Ab." He kisses her cheek and I let her lead the way out the door.

It's only a few blocks from Mia's to where Abby and Chase live. But truth be told, Abby doesn't look like she's in any shape to be walking.

"Here, let me help you." I crouch down in front of her and gesture for her to get on my back. This is probably a fucking sight to be seen for any onlookers, Captain America hauling Black Widow down the sidewalk.

We don't make it far before Abby stops me. "Ford," she says with a sharp edge in her tone. "Ford. Stop."

I stop where we're at and slide her down my back. "Are you okay? What's the matter?"

"I think I'm going to be sick."

Sure enough, Abby lets all of the alcohol out of her body and into a bush along the sidewalk. I stand behind her, blocking her from the view of anyone walking by. Once she sits back on the pavement, my finger reaches for her chin and wipes the corner of her mouth.

"Oh my God. This is so embarrassing. Just pretend you didn't witness any of this." Her hands cover her face before she attempts to stand up.

At this moment, all I'm thinking about is just taking care of her. "It's okay, Abby. I've got you."

I help her up to her feet, into her building, and up to her apartment. She slides the key in and turns to me, staring at me with those puppy dog green eyes. “Thank you, I’m going to go lay in the shower now and wash all of this alcohol and vomit stench off my body.”

She walks through the door and starts to close it, but my hand stops it. “I’m not leaving you alone like this. I’m coming in.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



“I’m really sorry.” My throat is dry and it comes out more like a croak. Ford steps out of the bathroom and walks over to where I’m seated on the bed.

I feel so stupid. It’s been so long since I’ve been sick from drinking, I guess I just wasn’t paying attention tonight. After the shower and chugging two glasses of water, I’m already feeling so much better. Reaching for my brush, I start to comb through the strands of wet hair.

“Let me.” Ford places his hand on mine and takes the brush from me as I kneel on the bed in front of him. “And you have nothing to be sorry for, Abby.”

He gently strokes the brush through my hair, every so often running his fingers through it and softly massaging my scalp. My eyes close, allowing myself to just appreciate the moment happening between us. He places the brush on my nightstand and cups my cheek in his hand tenderly as he leans down. “Let’s get some rest.”

I don’t know why I let him come in, especially now that I’m feeling better. I should tell him he can leave. We’re not a couple, we’re strictly friends. Friends who sleep together, but he isn’t obligated to stay and I need to remind myself of that.

“I’m feeling better now, you don’t have to stay, but thank you for bringing me home.” But Ford’s big body starts to break free of the Halloween costume he’s been sporting all night and he’s down to just his boxers when he pulls back the comforter on my bed.

“I’m staying, Abby. Get in.”

He snuggles up behind me, placing his hand over my stomach, and pulls me close. We’re stepping into dangerous territory here, the only time we’ve ever been in a bed together is during sex and we haven’t had any sleepovers, keeping this strictly casual and nothing more.

His breath becomes more and more shallow as we lay there in silence and I’d bet he’s probably fallen asleep. Shifting my body so I’m laying on my back, his arm falls to my lower belly. His eyes are closed and his lashes are flickering every few moments. I take the moment to study his face, the bone structure, and I notice a scar on his chin. It’s so faint, but being this close, I can see it well. He smells a little like coconut tonight and it makes me smile, realizing he probably used one of my lotions while he was in the bathroom. A few minutes pass and he stirs awake.

“Shit. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I was just admiring the view.” The smile stays on my face a little longer than I’d intended before settling back into his embrace.

He kisses the top of my head and we lay there a few more moments not saying anything, not moving, just simply existing with one another. There are so many thoughts racing through my mind. One being, I’m really hoping Chase doesn’t come home any time soon. And two, I’m just thinking about how different my life is right now compared to just a few months ago and it causes a smile to form on my lips.

“Talk to me.” Ford nudges me seeing the smile on my face, he starts tracing circles on my lower belly as my t-shirt rides up.

“Andrew never would’ve stayed with me.”

“What?” Ford’s confusion is written all over his face.

“My ex…” I sigh. “He would’ve walked me home and then left to go back to the party.”

“Well. He sounds like a real piece of shit.” A hearty laugh escapes my lips, causing Ford to let one out too.

“We started dating at a really vulnerable time in my life. I was… broken and he promised me the world. And like an idiot, I believed him. Tale as old as time, you know.” My head shakes back and forth as I’m recounting the

night Andrew and I met.

Ford strokes my cheek with the pad of his thumb. “What happened?”

Oh gosh, was I really prepared to go down this rabbit hole with him? I know I’m the one who opened this door, but now I’m having second thoughts about sharing any more. We said no feelings and it already seems like we’re stepping all over that right now. The closeness of Ford is such a comfort though. Yeah, we’ve had sex and have been close in that way, but this is so different. This feels more intimate. Like if I share this part of me with him, it might change our current situation and I like our situation—having fun, no messy feelings. It’s allowing me to make my own choices and find myself again and do what I want to do. Ford’s helping me get back to the version of myself that I once loved.

“Abby.” My eyes start to water recounting everything that got me to this point. To this conversation in this bed with this man. “You don’t have to share anything you don’t want to.”

“It’s okay,” I say, wiping at my eyes as we lay there together. “My dad died. I was nineteen. I had just moved to Miami for college and I was ... devastated. I was angry, I was in denial, numb, hurt, all the things. You name it, I felt it. I met Andrew the first night I decided to go out after it all happened. There I was, this broken little freshman drowning my sorrows in a bottle of tequila, when the popular Junior asked me to be his beer pong partner.”

My eyes risk a glance up at Ford and his jaw muscle flexes as he watches me talk. “From that point forward, I was Andrew Fontane’s girlfriend. I’d fallen for all of the charm, all the lavish vacations and the stupid perks of being on his arm.”

It makes me laugh now, thinking back to my stupidity.

“So dumb,” I whisper as a tear falls from my eye and Ford catches one on the other cheek with his thumb. “Everything we did was on his terms, what he wanted to do, where he wanted to go and I just lost myself. It happened so slowly, I’m not even sure if I would’ve noticed if it weren’t for Summer. I was a fucking trophy to him, never anything more. I know that now. If I made a silly joke or something with his friends or family around, he’d scold me about it when we were alone. Telling me I needed to act like a sophisticated adult. He hated that I was going to be a teacher, but thankfully, I didn’t let him talk me out of that. Chase and I barely saw each other the whole time we were together. I’m pretty sure Andrew was intimidated by

him, honestly.”

“He fucking should be,” Ford cuts in with his jaw still locked and his nostrils flaring.

Sitting up on my bed, I take the comforter off my legs and pull my knees to my chest. My oversized t-shirt hangs over my shoulder exposing my skin and Ford sits up and places a small kiss in the crook of my neck near my collarbone.

“He never asked about my dad. There was a night I had a complete breakdown. I sat outside of our apartment and looked at the ocean from our balcony. The water was so calm that night, but inside my head, in my chest, it was a complete storm. I couldn’t stop the tears from coming. He walked out onto the terrace and handed me a napkin, told me to clean up and come back inside. There was no compassion in his voice, no love or empathy. He was so cold.” I snuffle, but keep my composure as Ford runs his hand through his hair.

“Two months later, Summer told me she overheard some girls at the bar she works at talking about him sleeping with their friend. When I confronted him, he... he didn’t even deny it. He just said it was a mistake and something we would work through together, as if it was something I made him do or somehow my fault. He said it wouldn’t happen again, but in my heart, I knew it would, and I knew that this was my out too. So, I called Summer and one thing led to another and now I’m here.” I let out a hefty sigh and look over at Ford who is now sitting with his back to me on the bed, elbows propped on his knees.

“Ford? I’m sorry, that was a mouthful of information and a lot more than you ever needed to know about your ‘friend with benefits.’” My hand reaches for his shoulder at the same time he turns around. His eyes are as black as coal as he looks at me.

“Don’t you ever let him or anyone else ever make you feel like you’re not fucking amazing. You’re smart and you’re kind. You’re chatty as all hell, but you make everyone feel important when they’re around you. You’re so much more than just someone’s trophy on their arm. God, you shine so fucking bright, and you don’t even realize it because someone made you feel like you lost the glow. I promise you, Abby. You’re worth so much more than you realize.” The words come out slowly and he says them with such precision. I’m taken back by Ford’s reaction, his words, his body language. We’ve spent time getting to know each other over the last month and I’m certain

I've never seen this side of him.

“You deserve someone who values you. Someone who respects you. Someone who knows you're too important to lose.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



SUMMER

Oh, Abby, you are so screwed. He's gonna make you fall for him, you know that right?

I texted Summer a pretty lengthy breakdown of last weekend and she didn't hold back in what her thoughts were. I sigh at her message and toss my phone onto the passenger seat as I'm getting in the car. Today felt every bit of the Monday that it was.

I barely slept all weekend. Saturday night, Ford stayed with me until around four a.m. when he set an alarm to wake up and sneak out before Chase saw anything. The poor guy had to put that Halloween costume back on and walk downstairs to his truck in the parking garage. Then yesterday, I gave myself a full Sunday reset. I went to the gym, grocery shopped, prepared meals and deep-cleaned the apartment. Chase was very thankful for that last bit. By the time the evening rolled around, I'd realized I hadn't heard from Ford all day long and a pit formed in my stomach.

I overshared.

Even though this is only casual between us, I still enjoy his company and his friendship, and I'm *really* hoping I didn't fuck that up with my whole sob

story the other night. We didn't even hook up, we barely even kissed when he was over; we just laid together, talked a little and fell asleep, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't love it. Those were the parts of relationships that always mean the most to me. And the connection that Ford and I have so effortlessly makes my head spin.

Before heading home, I'm making a pit stop at the Rec Center downtown. I've been peeking in every so often to see how it's coming along. Last week when I dropped by, Dolly and I talked for at least thirty minutes. She's so sweet and seems so excited for all of the expansions coming to the center.

"Hi Dolly." I wave as I'm signing into the log before walking back towards the construction zone. I'm not able to go too far, but looking through the glass, it's clear they've made great progress. They have a lot of the shelving and cabinets up where they'll likely keep the supplies and the sinks are installed now too.

"He's got such a great eye for this kind of thing." I hear Dolly's soft voice come up behind me. She reminds me of my grandmother, small and slightly hunched over with her silver hair, trendy glasses, and bold lip color.

"What do you mean?" I ask her as we stand in the hallway.

"Oh, Ford. He's always been so sharp with his mind, his visions for how he sees things coming together. Like with football, you'd think he can see the play happen before it does."

It's so endearing to me that she and Ford have stayed so close over all of these years, she's watched him go from a child to the grown man he is now and I'm sure that even though he isn't her son, she feels some sense of pride.

"He's a good boy. He might not always say a lot, but he's always wanting to help others out. Actions. He's an action man." She pats my arm as we head back towards the front door.

I smile over to her. "Well, things are looking really good in there. I'm looking forward to some of my students spending time here."

"Hi Mom!" I answer the phone as I'm walking through the door of my apartment. She asks how I'm doing, how things have been, the usual check in she's been doing every week since I moved to Tampa. "Thanksgiving, right. I'd love to see you and Aunt Joanne." My mom and her sister will be coming

to town for a couple days and since Chase has to play on Thanksgiving, we decided to forego a big dinner and go to the game.

“Hey, Ma,” Chase yells out when he realizes I’m on the phone with her. Setting the phone down on speaker on the counter, she tells Chase and I all about the cruise she just got back from.

“Sounds fun, when are you taking me on one?” Chase blurts out as he walks down the hall, popping almonds in his mouth laughing.

“Ignore him, mom. I’m glad you had a good time.” After wrapping up the call with my mom, I head into my room to change into something more comfortable. Before I’m able to even get a fresh tank top over my head, my phone is buzzing again.

FORD

Pizza or chicken wings?

I don’t know how I feel about the smile that spreads across my face when his name pops up on my screen, but I can’t stop it. It’s felt so good lately to do things on my own terms, do things I want to do and not feel like I’m walking on eggshells all the time. Whether I want to admit it out loud or not, I know Ford has something to do with the confidence that’s replaced a lot of my timidness.

Depends.

FORD

On what?

Pizza goes with movies and ice cream. Chicken wings go with beer and nachos.

That’s my logic and I’m sticking to it.

FORD

Coffee shop, fifteen minutes.

Biting my bottom lip to smother another smile caused by this man, I throw on a pair of shorts, grab my shoes and open my bedroom door. The moment I do, I run right into Chase as he’s walking down the hall to his own room.

“Woah, where are you headed?” I probably should have thought of an excuse before barreling out of my room,

“Oh um... Mia’s.”

He stares at me for a second before nodding his head and says, “Have fun.”

Somehow dodging any other questions, I head out the door and make my way to the coffee shop to meet Ford.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



FORD

I've been replaying the conversation Abby and I had the other night over and over. How the fuck could someone treat her like that? Every time I thought of her ex dismissing her feelings about her dad or the way she described their interactions, my fists would clench and rage would flood my body.

I know this situation between us is strictly friends, friends with benefits, to “scratch the itch” as she refers to it. And I'm willing to go with that, for now, but something ignited within me the other night. Suddenly, a rush of protectiveness filled me, and as long as Abby is in my life, as a friend or otherwise, I'll never let anyone treat her like that again.

I'm pulling up to the coffee shop to pick her up and I see her standing there in a tight tank top—it looks the same shade of green as her eyes—and cut off denim shorts, the ones that show off her legs. When she hops in my truck, she immediately flips her shoes off, something I've noticed she does every time she's in the passenger seat, and it makes me wonder if she even drives with shoes on.

“So, what's with the impromptu hang out, Anderson?” she blurts out while she buckles her seatbelt.

“I needed to eat. I figure you need to eat too.”

She eyes me and then runs a hand through her hair, something that drives me fucking wild every time. The more time I'm spending with Abby, the more I'm picking up on the little things she does and it turns out that all the little things are things I like, a lot.

"Uh huh..." She flicks her wrist in the air and rolls down the window slightly.

"Just trust me," I say to her while keeping my focus on the road.

"Okay," she whispers while she looks out the window.

We pull onto my street, but I continue to drive past my house. The beach access entrance is just at the end of the road here and I asked one of the volunteers from the Rec Center to set something up for me while I picked up Abby. She doesn't ask any questions as she gets out of the truck when we pull up and I see a little smirk inching up on her face. The entrance here is private, only residents on this street can access it and luckily, there are only a handful who are home right now. Most of them are older couples who don't live here full time so I basically have this spot to myself most of the time.

"Ford, what is this?" She jogs out in front of me and grabs her shoes from her feet to run into the sand ahead. There's a blanket set up with some cushions and a small cooler with water bottles and a few beers, if she wants one. There will be pizza, chicken wings and nachos dropped off in five minutes and I brought my iPad if she wants to watch a movie on it. And there's an ice cream truck that will make its way down here in about an hour.

Abby turns around and stops to wait for me as I pull my socks and shoes from my feet and toss them in the bed of the truck. She smiles at me and her eyes sparkle in the sunlight as she stares in my direction. I've never done something like this for a woman, hell a woman I'm not even dating no less, but with Abby, I'm just finding myself wanting to give her anything she wants or needs and I felt like she needed something like this.

The sun is about an hour from setting, so we're right in the middle of the golden hour and I'm just soaking in the way that Abby looks in this setting. She looks peaceful, happy, and comfortable. A text comes in that the food is here so I excuse myself and run to grab it. When she sees me walking back, her chin drops and her mouth hangs open as she sees what's in my arms.

"You didn't!" she squeals.

"Pizza, nachos, and chicken wings. Pick your poison, Princess."

"Oh my gosh, it's heaven."

She grabs a water bottle from the cooler and we both sit there inhaling

our share of pepperoni pizza and loaded nachos. She doesn't even hesitate to scarf down three of the buffalo chicken wings either. I fucking love that she can eat.

Once we've finished eating, I pull her closer to me and have her settle herself in front of me. She lays back on my chest holding her stomach,

"I'm so full, that was delicious, thank you."

"There's still dessert to come." She elbows me in the ribs, assuming I meant *that* kind of dessert and not actual food. "Ugh, easy tiger, I mean literal dessert. Food. Christ."

She turns to face me and laughs. She plants a small kiss on my cheek and relaxes her body into mine as she stares out over the water watching the sun on the horizon.

"Will you tell me about him?" I ask her.

"Tell you about who?" She takes a sip from her water and twists the cap back on.

"Your dad."

CHAPTER THIRTY



My eyes are already stinging at Ford's question, but I blow out a breath as he runs his hand down my arm.

"Where do I even start? He was... the best." I quickly wipe a lone tear that falls from my eye.

"He wasn't perfect, but he was such a good dad. My love for the ocean comes from him. He helped make my childhood so much fun. We'd spend time on the water every weekend, whether it was on the boat, out riding the jet ski, fishing... Aside from Chase and I, there wasn't anything my dad loved more than the ocean. It was like his home away from home. You could just tell he always felt so much peace when he was on the water."

My fingers trace along the tattoo on Ford's forearm before he caresses my cheek with his other hand,

"He sounds like he was a great dad," Ford says softly.

"He was, he was also insanely sarcastic, he was so quick with it, so funny..." I let out a laugh as my mind runs through memories. "You'd never expect half the things he'd say to come out of his mouth."

"Ah, so that's where it comes from." I scrunch my nose up at him and smile.

“I guess the apple didn’t fall far from the tree, huh?”

Ford and I sit there while I’m continuing to tell him more about my dad and growing up, splitting holidays and every other weekend. My parents divorced when Chase and I were so young, we didn’t know any alternative. We never knew a life where they were together.

“They became friends as Chase and I got older. My mom always says she wished they would’ve tried harder in their marriage, but finally, years after the divorce, they came out as friends and I was always thankful for that. I think they were too.”

“So, he’s the reason why you and Chase are always getting lost in the water then, I take it? I noticed the first night I met you, you were hugging your knees in that giant chair out on the balcony. You were staring out at the water, like you were waiting for something to happen. I’ve noticed Chase does the same thing sometimes.”

I sit up and turn to face Ford, placing my hands in front of me, playing with a loose string from the blanket.

“I guess so, it’s where I feel most connected to him. Some people go to tombstones to visit their loved ones or a certain spot on a map, I guess, to revisit memories. With the water, I could be looking at any ocean in the world and I feel him, I feel his presence.”

Ford blows out a breath and my lips curl into a smile at the way his eyes look in the fading sun, they’re a lighter brown, like whiskey and my breath stutters when he looks at me. He leans down and gently places a kiss to my lips, soft and sweet, there’s nothing but compassion in this kiss and I’m just letting my body melt into his..

“He raised a good man.”

I nod at Ford’s compliment towards my dad and Chase.

“And an incredible woman.”

A single tear falls from my eye and Ford wipes it with the pad of his thumb before helping me to my feet. Standing in front of him, he wraps his arms around me and we watch the sun fade into the water. I silently say goodnight to my dad as I do every time I’m watching a sunset over the ocean and give Ford a playful nudge to his chest with the back of my head. He turns my face towards him, places his hand on my jaw and kisses me, deeply as the sun officially goes down and we stand in the afterglow.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



FORD

ABBY

Sorry about the game. Nice TD though!

I see Abby's text once I'm back in the locker room. We lost our third game of the season and the second one in a row. My patience is running thin, there's no excuse for it, we're just playing like shit. We're more than halfway through the season, and this isn't the time to lose our fucking momentum. I'm just ready to get on the damn plane and fly the hell home.

"Care to explain what that was about?" Nate gets a little too mouthy with me while we're getting changed, and I'm in no mood for his bullshit temper tantrum right now.

"What are you talking about?" I ask, throwing my shit in the bag beside me.

"You should have made that catch, Ford. You've run that play a fuck ton of times in practice." Truthfully, he's right. I've made that catch every other time, shit I could make it in my sleep. So why'd I miss the catch that would've given us a first down? Who the fuck knows?

"Fuck off," I say. It's all I can muster up right now, and Nate shakes his head and walks away.

“Head up, man. It’s alright. We have a home game coming up. Thanksgiving, the big show. You’ll bounce back, we all will.” I appreciated Chase’s positivity, but I don’t have it in me to reply. I’m feeling too defeated right now, too exhausted, too angry.

As soon as the plane lands, my eyes fly open. It’s rare that I ever fall asleep on flights, but I don’t even remember the take off. It’s late, but I text Abby back knowing she’ll probably see it in the morning. After everything she told me a couple weeks ago about her dad, it makes me feel like I understand her more. Hell, it makes me feel like I understand Chase even more and he doesn’t even know everything I’ve learned. This thing with Abby is feeling a lot more like *something vs nothing* lately, and I’m not sure what to think of it. Chase walks by me on the tarmac and heads to his car while I’m heading in the opposite direction towards mine, but he calls out to me before I’m too far.

“Ford. Let’s grab a beer, you and me, this week.” Suspicion sets in, but I don’t let it show. I wave my hand and nod my head before getting in my truck and driving away. No idea what that’s about, but I don’t have the energy to try and figure it out right now.

The next morning, we don’t have practice, thankfully and since Abby is on Thanksgiving break from school, I’m surprised to see a message from her so early.

ABBY

Want to go for a run with me?

Do I want to go for a run today? Not particularly, but getting to see her? Sure.

What time and where are we running?

ABBY

Can you be here by 9? Chase isn’t home so you can come right up.

See you then.

Yeah, I know Chase isn’t home because he’s at a volunteer event today and I’m scheduled to be at one tomorrow.

It’s still hot as hell outside here so there’s no need to grab a jacket or long sleeves for the run, a navy blue t-shirt and gray shorts will do just fine.

I knock on Abby's door and hear her yell "come in," from the inside, so I press the door open and I'm hit with the most delicious smell. Maple syrup and bacon fill my senses and I'm practically running to the kitchen to see what's going on. To my surprise, Abby isn't in workout clothes at all, she's in baggy sweatpants and a tank top with her hair on top of her head in a bun, a bunch of loose strands falling out. I'm pretty sure there's some kind of batter on her forehead when I get close enough.

"Okay, so I'm not really the best cook." She laughs and my lips land on hers, they taste like syrup and I'm ready to go back in for seconds.

"What have we got here?" I grab the pancake box that's fallen over on the counter and open the oven to see bacon inside. It looks like she made eggs, bacon and some pancakes.

"I realized that you probably got home late last night and a run didn't sound as fun, if you were exhausted. Also, you know, I need to eat breakfast and you need to eat too." She shrugs her shoulders and pulls the bacon out of the oven and turns off the griddle with the pancakes.

"Everything smells fucking amazing." I kiss her one more time. "And tastes even better. I'm starving," I say, backing her into the kitchen island.

"A growing boy needs to eat, Ford."

She teases me with a flutter of her lashes and licks her lips and it's impossible for me to control myself when I'm alone with her. I lift her up on the counter and spread her legs so I'm standing between them and plant a kiss on her maple flavored lips.

"Take these off." I'm pulling at her sweatpants that are two sizes too big for her. I take a deep breath after seeing the black lace thong she's wearing as her sweatpants slide down to the floor. She then slips her tank top off of her body and again, she's not wearing a fucking bra as her breasts bounce when she scoots herself close to the edge of the counter.

"Abby, are you trying to kill me?" I groan as she works her hand up my shirt and then back down to my shorts where she pulls them down far enough to free my cock. My boxers and shorts are around my ankles as she takes my cock in her hand gently and rubs the head. She grabs my shirt and pulls me in for a kiss. It's a hungry kiss, a needy one. It feels like we both need this today, and who am I to tell her no?

"Tell me what you want," my words breathing right into her ear.

"You, I want you."

Her heavy voice against my lips, the way she's looking at me and the way

her body is already thrusting towards me, fucking hell. I give her a devilish smirk and bring my forehead to hers,

“God, I fucking crave you, Abby. If you think you can walk around looking this good first thing in the morning without me needing a taste, you’re out of your fucking mind. Lean back, Princess. Now.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



I've been soaking wet since the moment I woke up this morning, thinking of Ford. Something happened a couple weeks ago between us, something I don't want to even really admit, but I just know I'm in over my head here.

Ford nudges me back on the kitchen island, the cold marble gives my skin goosebumps as my lower back hits it. He looks so damn good like this. He licks his lips and gives me that grin that instantly makes me want to jump his bones.

"Look at you. So wet for me already." He pushes the fabric of my underwear to the side and flicks my clit with a finger causing my body to arch at his touch. Pulling his finger back, he sucks on it.

"Just what I needed," he huffs out, before reaching for the sides of my thong and pulling it down to the floor.

I'm completely naked, laying here on the kitchen island and I've not a care in the world about it. I'm about to be ravished by the most amazing man I've ever met and it's almost thrilling that we're doing this out here in the open.

I've never known a man to love this as much as Ford. Granted, my experiences have been limited, but I never thought this was a possibility. I

feel like I've been deprived sexually until now. He places his hands on my thighs as he pulls his tongue through me, slow and steady, stopping at my clit to circle with his tongue. He sucks hard and his tongue is working softly, making my legs already feel like jello.

"Ford, I'm not going to last like this."

He pulls his mouth away and I'm coated all over his lips as he licks them. He smiles up at me and doesn't break eye contact as he shoves a finger in so hard that it causes me to let out a loud moan. Fuck, this feels so good.

"Ford!" I'm panting as his finger works me.

"Yes, Princess?"

He pushes in another finger as he continues to pump his hand in and out, leaving room for his thumb to circle my clit, nice and slow. I sit up slightly as he pulls one of my breasts to his mouth, nipping and sucking on my nipple. He goes back and forth giving each one the same attention while his hand is doing amazing work elsewhere.

"You feel so fucking good. You're fucking perfect, Abby. Do you know that?"

He pushes in harder and I'm crying out with pleasure. He flicks my clit faster with his finger and sucks harder on my breast as I let go and come apart all over his hand. This feels like the longest lasting orgasm I've ever had. My body can't stop shaking and I can feel the sweat dripping down my neck and back while I'm convulsing in his arms.

"That's my girl. That's my good fucking girl, Abby."

I've never been called a "good girl" before Ford, but I'll no longer be accepting anything less.

He picks me up from the counter and carries me to my bedroom. Ripping open a condom, he growls, "Hands and knees."

I do as he says and the moment I'm on all fours I feel a sting and hear a loud smack as my ass cheek starts to throb. I gasp at how unexpected that was, but also at how surprising it is that I liked it.

"Fuck, do you realize how beautiful you look like this? I can't promise I'll be gentle. Not with how bad I know we both want this."

Turning my head to look back at him, I whisper, "Don't be."

I'm craving something rough and I don't want him to hold back. Every piece of himself that he has to give, I'll take it. He runs a hand down my back before he lines himself up and I feel the fullness of his cock inside me. He brings a hand around to my clit and continues rubbing circles as he's shoving

himself in and out.

“Harder, Ford. Please. I want more.”

He growls in my ear as he pulls out and thrusts back in with so much force it almost pushes me over. All I can hear is our heavy panting and our bodies clapping together as we move in fluid motion.

I didn't even know I could love sex this much. Also, how does he make me want to be so dirty in the bedroom? I ooze confidence around this man when we're together like this and it's such a foreign feeling to me, but I'm addicted to it. I can officially say, everything I've done up until meeting Ford has been boring.

“Ford, I'm so close.”

He turns me over so I'm on my back and he continues the pace.

“Don't. Not yet.”

He stares at me and I can't take my eyes off of him either. I reach up and put my hands around his neck and in his dark hair, pulling him closer to me while bringing his lips to mine to cover a moan.

With one more pump in and out, he breathes, “Now baby, come with me.”

As if I'm on some kind of remote control, my body releases and I feel his body stiffen and then jerk with his own release. We let go together and it's the most incredible experience I've shared with him thus far.

He strokes my hair as we lay there together in my bed, not saying anything, just listening to the beating of our hearts and the slowing of our breathing and I feel so much peace.

“I'm sorry about your game.” I turn on my side to face him while he lays on his back with the blanket hanging just by his hip, exposing his perfectly sculpted chest and abs. My fingers run over the tattoo on his chest as he sighs.

“Rough couple of weeks...” He starts to trail off and I can tell he feels the pressure. I saw the game and when the camera cut to his reaction after he missed that catch, he looked more than mad, he looked sad, like he was disappointed in himself. Part of me wants to console him, tell him it's okay and it's just one game, one pass, but I know athletes enough to understand things like that don't help. One game or one pass could be a season ending situation in their world.

“I'm going to go grab our clothes from the kitchen so Chase doesn't come home and we have to explain all of this.”

Tossing on my robe, I make my way to the kitchen, grab our clothes and bring them back to the room. The minute I'm about to speak, I hear the front door open and my eyes go wide as saucers.

"Oh my God!" I whisper as Ford stays laying the bed, casually, as if this isn't a bad situation for him just as much as me. "Get in the closet!"

He looks at me with an amused stare.

Okay, I'm aware this isn't ideal, and hiding him in my closet like this is high school is probably a bit extreme. It's not like Chase comes in here regularly, but today I'm just not taking chances.

"You're kidding, right?" he whispers, but I'm already yanking his arm to get him up. He's still completely naked as I'm shoving him in and tossing him his clothes before shutting the closet door.

"Sorry," I squeak out against the door before throwing my sweatpants and tank top on, and head back to the kitchen.

When I'm back in the kitchen, Chase is standing over the stove eating some of the bacon that Ford and I never even touched.

"What's with all the food? Expecting company?" He raises an eyebrow at me and I do my best to not act awkward right now.

"No, I was hungry and didn't know when you'd be home so, you know, I just cooked."

He eyes me up and down as he chews the bacon and pours himself a cup of coffee.

"Uh huh... well, nice surprise. I've never known you to be much of a Betty Crocker, but so far, so good."

He makes himself a full plate of food and takes a seat in the dining room. Shit, how the hell am I supposed to get Ford out of here when Chase is sitting here?

"You're back earlier than I thought you'd be though."

After he takes a sip and clears his throat before explaining, "I actually thought I'd be later too. Turns out they didn't need all of us there too long, so a couple hours today and I'll go back for a couple tomorrow." I nod my head as I'm standing next to the table. "Are you going to eat with me or what? You made all this food..."

"Yes. I am going to do that. But, um, first, I need to take a shower. Like you said, I'm no Betty Crocker, this really had me working up a sweat."

Regret isn't something I feel too often, but as soon as that poor ass excuse left my mouth, I felt it. A big heaping pile of it.

“You okay? You’re acting a little off.”

“Headache!” Apparently blurting out random things is also something I’m doing today, in addition to locking men in closets.

“I have a headache. Migraine actually, I should shower and lay down. Do you have any medicine in your bathroom?” I already know I have some of my own, I have purse Advil, home Advil, and car Advil. I’ve learned to never go without the stuff, but at this point I’m looking for any excuse to get Chase out of the dining room so I can get Ford out of the apartment.

“Yeah, it’s in my medicine cabinet at the top, you can grab it.” Rolling my eyes, I let out a sigh. “Actually, can you just grab it? It feels weird going through your medicine cabinet. It’s not my business what’s in there.”

Chase is either pretending he’s not suspicious of something or he’s just completely oblivious. I’m acting like a damn fool right now. He gets up, and I follow him down the hall and run into my room as soon as he’s gone into his.

“Okay, sorry to kick you out but...” My hand gestures for him to get a move on it as Ford steps out of the closet with a shit eating grin on his face while I’m yanking his giant body down the hall as quickly as possible.

“So, headache, huh?” he says as he smiles once we get to the front door.

My hand lands on my hip and I roll my eyes at his comment before moving to shut the door quietly.

“Goodbye, Anderson.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



FORD

“Happy Thanksgiving!” Mia yells as I’m walking into Nate’s to pick him up for the game.

Mia is heading over to her dad’s house today instead of coming to the game, which is understandable since it’s a holiday. Although, she does have this tradition of making cinnamon rolls and watching the Macy’s Day Parade and it’s something she’s roped Nate and I into. But I’m not complaining, I’ll devour a pan of cinnamon rolls. I plant a kiss on her cheek as I walk past the kitchen, it smells amazing in here. Give me cinnamon anything and we’re solid.

“Smells good, Mia,” I say before throwing myself on the couch across from Nate.

“Your folks coming to today’s game?” Nate asks, turning his attention to me and then back to the parade.

My parents will be at the game today, which will be nice. I’m pretty sure they’ve only made it to one other one this season. But, my parents are... in a word, exhausting. I know they mean well, but it wasn’t always easy growing up with Howard and Ruby Anderson as your parents. They’re well known around town. They have standing tickets to every home game—if they want to

show up, but with their schedules, it's been hard to see them consistently. My dad is in real estate and even though he doesn't need to work anymore, he refuses to retire. My mom stays busy with the charities she handles and she started a local organization to help new and upcoming artists get their work out there and noticed.

I try not to complain, growing up I had a pretty good childhood, never wanting for much. Except if you count wanting to spend actual time with your parents. They are great people, but just always keep themselves so busy. Thankfully, I've always had sports to keep me in line and the Rec Center to fill my time since my parents were absent so much.

"Yep, heard from them this morning, they'll be there." We've only got about an hour before we need to leave, so Mia sets the cinnamon rolls and coffee with the cinnamon flavored creamer I fucking love on the coffee table and has a seat on the couch next to me. We watch the parade and eat as much food as we can stomach on game day before heading out.

This is my first time playing on Thanksgiving Day. I'm usually at home watching with the rest of America. Today, we play Detroit, and while I know they're on a streak, we want this win, we fucking need it. I see Chase walk into the locker room and still can't believe what happened the other morning with Abby. She literally shoved me in a closet to avoid having him catch us. Although, it's understandable. Even though Chase is my friend, he wouldn't be thrilled if he found me like that with his little sister.

"Want to grab that beer tomorrow night?" Chase asks.

"Yeah, sure. Something on your mind or do you just miss me and want to spend time with me?"

I try to get a feel for what this is about since it feels sudden, or maybe that's just me being paranoid.

"Little of both, I guess." Huh. Now, my head is spinning.

If he knew something was going on between Abby and me, I'd already have a bloody nose, so it can't be that. We all finish getting suited up and head out on the field for some warm ups. One hour until game time. Time to get in the zone.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



“Mom, traffic is always really bad around the stadium, we need to leave, like five minutes ago!”

My mother, God love her, is one of those women who can't go anywhere without a full face of makeup. She doesn't need it and I've told her this countless times, but she says it makes her feel good so who am I to shit on something that gives her some confidence? Aunt Joanne and I are standing by the front door as mom comes out of my room and meets us at the door.

“Alright, alright, let's go!”

Just as I'd predicted, traffic is out of control for this game. We manage to make it into the stadium and into our seats right as they're doing the player introductions for the starting lineup. Once the lights brighten back up, mom scans the bench looking for number ninety-seven.

“Chase! Chase! Hey, ninety-seven!” My mom and aunt yell from the stands while my focus is on the 6'4 wall of muscle wearing number eighty-seven. I'll never get over seeing Ford play in person.

“Oh, look honey, there's Nate too!” she says as she waves her hands. You'd think my mom was just a Tampa groupie with the way she's acting, but nope, just a very involved and proud mother. Since we're in the stands for

this game, we're closer to the bench and the guys can definitely see us if they know where to look. Ford, Liam, Nate and Chase are all standing next to one another. Lined up together, they look intimidating, borderline scary even. They're all easily over six feet and have muscles for days.

Chase notices us and waves which causes a chain reaction and Liam, Nate and Ford all turn around to see who he's waving at. My hand hesitantly lifts up into a wave and the moment Ford's eyes lock with mine, my stomach starts fluttering. I bite my lip while attempting to hide a smile and I don't miss the subtle wink he sends my way before he turns around and the game begins.



"Shit," I mutter under my breath as Detroit scores another three points.

We're down 27-21 and so far, it hasn't been pretty. They kick off the ball and our special teams makes a decent return run up to the forty-five yard line. Ford jogs onto the field and into the huddle before he lines up for the play. Nate is set up behind Liam, making it look like it'll be a hand off, but the second the ball is snapped, Nate darts out and provides a block to one of their linemen, which briefly creates a hole that Ford is able to slip through. Once he breaks free and turns his head back to Liam, the ball is in the air. I watch as Ford's massive body flies down the field. A couple of defenders are right on Ford's heels, but he's got a good couple inches on them and as he positions his body to catch the ball, they don't stand a chance. As soon as the ball lands in his grip, he darts the remaining fifteen yards to the endzone and the crowd erupts.

The guys all run over to Ford and jump to him, slapping his back and yelling out. He fist bumps Liam and tosses the ball back to the ref before jogging over to the sidelines. Everyone on the bench makes their way to him to throw out a "congratulations" and there's this sense of pride I'm feeling watching it unfold. He's so good at what he does and he's so humble about it. It was easy to see he was happy and proud of the play once he took off his helmet, the smile on his face was too big to miss, but he wasn't overly showy about any of it and somehow, I loved that about him.

"Two minute warning."

My mom nudges my arm and takes a pull of her beer. She's been so antsy

all game. She's always been like this actually, every time she watches Chase play. On the edge of her seat, praying for the win.

We've edged out to take the lead and as long as we can keep Detroit out of the end zone and out of field goal range, this game will be over and we can celebrate the win. Chase jogs onto the field and lines up opposite their offensive line. I honestly don't know how these players do this for a living, their bodies take such a beating, I'd never be able to willingly put myself out there for some massive opponent who is just waiting to throw me to the ground.

The clock keeps ticking down, only fifteen seconds left and Detroit is out of time outs. At this point, I'd assume they have one, maybe two more plays left.

"Alright, let's get this win. I'm starving and stadium food is no longer cutting it." My aunt Joanne whispers in my ear with a laugh. I agree, I'm ready for something more substantial, but not before I see these guys leave with a win. Just as the quarterback gets the ball, Chase is somehow unblocked and comes flying around the linemen heading straight for Detroit's quarterback. I throw my hands on my head and wince as I watch my brother initiate a hit so hard, it's almost like I felt it in the stands. You can hear a collective "ohhhh" from the crowd as he slams to the ground and the ball comes flying out. One of our guys lands on it and that sends the stadium into a frenzy. The game is over with that play and Tampa has won. Chase runs towards the bench, pumping his fist, grinning and yelling out to his teammates.

Moments like this remind me of watching Chase play when we were younger. He played football in high school and I rarely missed a game. I've always loved watching him play and excel at something he so obviously loves and is great at. Seeing him play at this level is something special. It makes my heart sting wishing our dad was here to see it all unfold.

"Do you want to meet Chase back at home or wait for him at the exit over there?" I point to where I went the last time with Mia where the guys all walked out.

"Let's get back to the apartment, we can start cooking a few things so food is ready when Chase gets home," Mom says through misty eyes. Even now, she tears up when my brother wins games.

I send a text off to Chase congratulating him and letting him know we'll have dinner ready when he gets home. It also seems only fair to send a text to

number eighty-seven, because after all, it is a holiday.

Happy Thanksgiving, Anderson.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



FORD

“Well played, son.” My dad slaps his hand on my shoulder as I greet him with a handshake and give my mom a kiss on the cheek.

“Thanks, pops. Hi, mom.”

“Oh, honey, great game, and on Thanksgiving? How wonderful!” My parents have always been supportive of me playing football, which I’m thankful for. I wasn’t pressured into following in my dad’s footsteps with real estate and they never told me that nothing would come of football or that it’s just a hobby. Aside from all of their other faults when it came to my childhood, my parents did always believe I was good enough for the league.

“You know who we saw the other day, honey? Katie Turner. You know, Estelle and Rob’s daughter? She’s grown up to be such a lovely girl.”

I give my mom a confused look. “Isn’t she pretty young?”

My mom is setting the table as I grab a roll out of the basket and take a bite.

“Well, she just turned twenty-one.”

My dad walks in the room as she says that and lets out a grunt, “Ruby, please.” He looks even more annoyed by her comment than me, but I offer my mom a smile. I know she means well trying to get me married off or

something, but I've told her plenty of times I'm not interested. And when the time comes, I'm capable of finding someone on my own.

"I'm just catching up with our son, Howard," she says behind clenched teeth. They must be having an off day today, as they seem overly agitated with each other.

We eat our dinner in mostly awkward silence. It's interesting how silence with my own parents can feel awkward, yet when it's with Abby, it somehow feels comfortable. My dad shares a little about what's going on with the properties he has across the area and mom asks a few questions about the Rec Center. She has decided to help oversee a few things with the art department renovation and rather than argue with her on it, I graciously accept. I'm only getting busier right now anyway, so having her around would actually be helpful.

Peeking at my phone, it's just after eight p.m. and my body is spent. I get up from the table, but not before grabbing one more dinner roll and peek my head into the kitchen.

"I'm probably going to take off, mom."

"Oh, really? Already?" I nod at my mom and kiss her cheek and shake my dad's hand, they both give me encouraging smiles as I head towards the door.

Once I'm home, I change into some shorts and forego the shirt because it's still fucking eighty degrees here and I'm sweating.

I remember that tomorrow I'm meeting up with Chase, but for the life of me I'm not able to figure out what the hell it's about. It can't be about Abby, because that's not a conversation he would schedule. He wouldn't wait to lay me out, he would've done it already.

I open up my texts and see the one that Abby sent earlier that I haven't replied to yet. It was great seeing her at the game today and I looked over at her every chance I had. It was too easy getting distracted by her jumping up and down and yelling at the refs for doing a shit job on some of the calls. She definitely made me laugh a few times as I watched her.

When I should have been watching my teammates help us win, my focus kept landing on her. I even missed the beginning of Chase's big play because it was mesmerizing watching her. She looked nervous, and the only reason I even turned towards the field was because of her concerned expression.

I'm not used to this. I haven't had someone in the stands for me since college and even though Abby would've been there regardless, it still felt like

she wanted to be there rooting for me.

After an hour of sitting outside in the dark and listening to the waves, I text Abby back. She was with her mom today so it felt important to give them some uninterrupted time together.

Happy Thanksgiving. Gobble Gobble.

That was fucking lame, but alright... I guess that's what we're going with tonight.

ABBY

Hungry?

For you? Always.

After I press send, a few moments go by before my phone starts ringing with a FaceTime call from Abby. We've never FaceTimed before and I'm almost naked. I think about grabbing a shirt, but decide she'd probably prefer this version of me.

"Are we FaceTiming now?" I ask running my hand through my hair and leaning back to get comfortable in the lounge chair.

"We are."

She sits up on her bed and has a plate in her hands. I'm assuming her phone must be propped up on something.

"So, uh, you're fast. Where'd that speed come from?"

She takes a bite of the pie on her plate and some of the cool whip lands on her nose before she swipes her finger over it and sucks it in her mouth.

"Hello?" She snaps her finger into the camera to get my attention. I was too distracted by the motion of her mouth and fucking dreaming about having my dick on the receiving end of that sucking.

"I don't think I can FaceTime with you." I blurt out and press the palm of my hand into my eye. Her head falls back and all I hear is laughter from the other side of the screen.

"Oh my gosh, Anderson. Get it under control. Maybe I shouldn't be FaceTiming with you. You're lacking proper FaceTime etiquette, you know... with all that on display. You're underdressed." She points her fork at the phone and then licks it clean.

"Or maybe, you're overdressed," I shoot back at her, causing a blush to form on her cheeks. We chat a little more about the game and she tells me all

of the reasons why I should add Taylor Swift to my pre-game playlist. Once we fall into a silence, it's clear she's tired as she's laying on her side and her eyes keep opening and closing,

“You're tired, Princess. Go to sleep.”

“Wait. I know you're outside. I can hear the ocean, is it weird to ask you to stay on so I can fall asleep to the sound?”

My chest constricts at her request because I know what it means to her. Honestly, is it weird? Maybe a little bit to someone else, but we are so past the “is this weird” part of our arrangement, and I'd do just about anything Abby asked me these days.

“Of course I'll stay on.” She sleepily smiles as her eyes close and before I disconnect the call, I'm finding myself staring at her through this fucking phone screen wondering how the hell I'm going to be able to handle this much longer.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



FORD

CHASE

I'm running a little behind, should be there in 10.

Chase is coming by today, and normally I wouldn't be giving this a second thought, but the fact that he's hounded me for a week now about us getting together has my head wrestling itself trying to figure out what the hell this is about. I throw ESPN on in the background and turn the volume down so it's merely background noise.

Chase's loud thud on the door turns my attention to the foyer and he lets himself in. I'm seated at the kitchen island at the bar when he walks over and gives me a tap on the back and we shake hands.

"Hey, man, how are you feeling?" I let out a sigh, how am I feeling? Well right now I'm a little nervous, but I'm not letting a sliver of that show.

"Good." My legs stretch under the counter as I'm nodding my head at him. "Want something to drink?"

Chase has been here enough times to know where things are and we're close enough that I'm fine with him helping himself, so he grabs a water from the fridge and takes a seat at the other end of the bar.

"So, listen." He lets out a strained sigh.

“I know we don’t usually talk about heavy stuff. But, I don’t know, I just feel like out of the group, you’ll be the one to shoot me straight without any extra bullshit.”

Clearing my throat, I give him my full attention. “What’s going on, man?”

Chase stands up and then comes back around the stool, and then walks back towards the fridge. He can’t seem to stay in one place, I can tell something is really eating at him.

“I’ve been seeing this girl, casually, for the last couple of months...” He trails off and runs his hand through his hair while placing his hat on the counter. I’m sitting there eagerly waiting for him to go on and end the mystery of this conversation. Abby mentioned that she thought maybe he was seeing someone but she wasn’t positive and said she isn’t one to pry into her brother’s personal life.

“A couple weeks ago, she... well her and I, we’re not exclusive, it’s just been casual and fun, it’s not something we wanted long term, but, fuck!” He slaps his hands together.

“She’s pregnant,” he says with an exasperated sigh as he sits back on the stool.

“Shit, really?” I’ve never seen Chase look so conflicted. His brow is furrowed, and he looks like he hasn’t really slept in days, but he does actually have a small look of relief on his face, too. I’m sure something this big has been weighing on him, maybe yesterday’s hit on Detroit’s QB was him taking out some frustration about this whole situation.

“Yeah. We’re always fucking careful. I have no clue how the hell this is happening to me. I even asked if she was sure it was mine, which was a fucking dick thing to do, I know, but I panicked. I’m not ready for this.”

Chase places his face in his hands and his body slumps back in the chair, he looks so defeated, I feel for him at this moment. It makes me fucking hate myself for the secret I’m keeping about his sister when he’s sharing something so damn personal with me.

“What are you planning to do?” I ask and without hesitation, Chase mans up like I’d expected he would because he’s a good guy who does the right thing even when it’s hard.

“Whatever I need to, whatever she needs. I’m just still wrapping my head around it. I need to tell my mom and Abby.”

I nod my head, realizing I’m probably the first person he’s told.

“You’ll make a hell of a dad, Chase.” I stand up and slap my hands on his shoulders, giving him an encouraging nod. If what I’ve learned from Abby about their dad, Chase had a great example of a man to model after, he’ll make an awesome father. “Whatever you need, man. Let me know.”

He nods his head. “I appreciate it. Just keep it between you and I for now.”

Not telling Abby is going to be hard, but fuck, I’m not going to be the one to spill something that serious about him to her.

Chase heads out after an hour or so of us bullshitting and putting some golf balls off the small green in my backyard. I can’t imagine the things going through his head right now, he probably sees dollar signs and is thinking the worst, that this chick is going to take him for everything he’s worth, especially since they weren’t really together, just fucking. Once Abby finds out though, after the initial shock, she’ll be over the moon. She loves kids. Shit, speaking of kids, she said there are some students of hers that she knows will be interested in coming to the Rec Center once the art room renovation is complete, so I need to remember to make arrangements for that.

“Oh, shit that’s a safety!” Liam shouts while they’re playing some Madden in my living room. After Chase’s news, I offered to have the guys over for some beers tonight. This completely goes against everything I’m normally preaching during the season, but fuck it, I’m already doing a bunch of shit I’m not supposed to or don’t normally do so might as well keep adding to the list.

“Don’t be a little bitch, Nate. I see your pout all the way over here,” Chase barks out as he watches Nate and Liam on the couch in yet another heated video game session.

Nate’s phone rings while he’s playing and he tosses it in my direction. “It’s Mia, can you grab it?”

Once I grab the phone, I realize it’s an incoming FaceTime from Mia and not just a phone call. *What the hell, is this the new thing people like doing?*

“Hey Mia,” I say as the screen fills with her face and instantly my attention is stolen by the green eyed beauty to her right.

“Oh, hello, Ford. Where’s Nathaniel?” No one ever calls him that, not

even his family, but somehow Mia is the only one who can without him throwing a fit.

“He’s currently getting his ass kicked in Madden.” I point the phone in his direction as he flips me off.

“Hey, that better not be towards me, you jerk!” Mia yells as she sees his gesture.

“What are you girls up to?” My eyes stay trained on Abby the whole time, not even trying to hide the smirk that crosses my lips when she bites her lip and smiles at me.

Keeping us a secret is getting to be so fucking hard. I want to be able to kiss her whenever the hell I want, in front of whoever I want. It’s tough to tell if that’s what she wants though. Being friends with benefits feels too casual for what we’re doing, it feels like more and I can’t even believe I’m thinking it, but I want more. Even if it’s still in secret, for now. I want to be able to fully claim her as my girl. I can’t even technically call her mine right now, even though I feel that way, it’s not true. I do know I’d fucking pound any other guy who even thinks about touching her.

“Well, I was calling to see if you guys wanted to come bowling with me and Abby, but it seems like you’re too busy being twelve year olds tonight.” I see Abby snicker at that comment.

“Hey, watch it. Some of us are grown men,” Chase chimes in next to me.

When Chase nods his head up and down agreeing to Mia’s plan, I’m following his lead. “You know what? Yeah, if we can get a couple lanes, let’s do it.” Who the fuck am I? Jumping at going out and socializing? I’ll tell you who I am, I’m a guy who wants nothing more than to spend some time with the girl on the other side of this phone screen and maybe see if we can talk about our little arrangement.

Nate and Liam finished their game finally, so we’re headed out to meet the girls. I’m not a big bowler, but I’ll easily sit back and watch Abby strut up and down the lane. Luckily, going out in public isn’t too bad; we keep our heads down, and when someone does come up to us, we’re quick with the photos or autographs. I try really hard not to turn people down, but sometimes I have to. This night is no different, as the four of us walk in, we see the girls at the very end of the alley with a couple of lanes not surrounded by anyone else.

I’d be able to spot Abby a fucking mile away with her long legs and bright smile. She’s wearing a dress that hits just above her knees and hugs her

waist so perfectly. Red is definitely this girl's color and just looking at her makes my dick hard. This place smells like feet and old popcorn, but they're playing some decent throwback music.

“Okay, so teams! We'll split up!” Mia gestures between herself and Abby. “Ford, you come here with Chase. Liam and Nate, go over to Abby's side.” Mia doesn't waste any time getting everyone programmed into the computer, no matter how much I protest that I simply planned on being an observer, she isn't hearing it.

As the frames go on, it's clear that I'm shit at this game, but I don't give a fuck. Abby and I end up walking up to the line at the same time and I glance her way out of the corner of my eye,

“Can you steer clear of the gutter this time, Anderson?” she whispers before she launches the ball down the lane and hits a strike. A laugh erupts in my chest and I try to be as graceful as possible when I launch the bowling ball, but there's too much force behind it and it spins to the edge, hitting a single corner pin before falling out of sight.

“Fucking bowling,” I mutter under my breath as I turn and walk back around to the table. Abby's seated across the table and she gives me a small grin before she licks her lips,

“I'm running to the restroom,” she announces and looks my way.

“I'm going to grab more beer before we start the next game.” Fuck, here's to hoping I'm picking up what she's putting down.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



I probably shouldn't be hoping that Ford follows me into the bathroom, but my willpower around him lately is slipping more and more. He looks so damn good and smells incredible. The white t-shirt he's wearing hugs his chest and biceps and every time he's walked by me tonight, I've been hoping he'd somehow brush against me just so I could touch him. It's crazy how one smile and a sharp jawline can turn me into a puddle every time. I push open the bathroom door and as soon as it clicks closed, a whoosh of air flies at me as the door opens again and I'm engulfed in Ford's masculine scent as he closes the space between us and cups my cheeks in both his hands and plants a soft kiss to my lips.

"Hi." He pulls away and smiles at me as my breathing starts to regulate again.

"Ford!" I whisper. "Someone could be in here."

"If anyone is in here, time's up," he calls out as I shove my hand into his chest playfully. There are only two stalls in this bathroom and thankfully, both are unoccupied.

"I haven't touched you in days," he huffs in my ear as he walks me backwards, my lower back pressing against the sink. Considering we're in a

public bathroom, I've got to admit it's not as grimy as I would have thought. He runs his hands over my body and pulls at the nape of my neck, making my eyes flutter shut and my head tilt back.

Ford reaches his long arm towards the door and flicks the lock before turning back to me.

"Have you missed me, Princess? Because I sure as hell have missed you," he growls in my ear. All that comes out is a moan as he slides the straps of my dress off my shoulders and kisses up and down my neck. He unhooks my strapless bra and my breasts bounce free.

"I've missed this." He takes one of my nipples in his mouth and bites gently before sucking hard. I can feel myself throbbing for his attention.

"Ford," I breathe out and push my body closer to his. He grabs me by the back of my thighs and lifts me on the counter next to the sink. It feels cold on my skin as he reaches under my dress and gently cups me over my underwear.

"Fuck, Abby. Tell me what you want." I push myself into his hand in hopes he'll put pressure on the spot that's craving his touch.

"Please, Ford." He places his forehead on mine.

"Fuck Abby, you don't even have to beg. I'll give you the release you need, and then..." He nibbles my ear as his fingers slide up and down the fabric of my underwear.

"I'll fuck you so hard, you'll feel me in that sweet pussy all night, for days, and for only us to know."

A whimper falls from my throat as he clashes his lips to mine. My hands reach for his jeans at the same time he's shimmying me out of my underwear and I cry out with pleasure the moment he drives his finger into me.

"You'll have to be a good girl and keep your voice down, can you do that?"

There's absolutely no way that's happening when he has his hand working me like this. I can feel his calloused fingers driving in and out and his thumb is doing circles over my clit sending me thrusting into his hand, ready to explode. He brings his lips to mine and I'm shoving his pants and boxers down to free his cock, stroking in a similar rhythm to his movements on me. I hear a hiss come from his chest as my thumb runs over the head to swipe the precum off.

"Abby," he says in an intimidating tone.

I lick my thumb that's coated in him while continuing to stroke him with

my other hand. Ford fingers are pumping into me, sending nothing but pleasure through my body. One more flick on my clit and I'm experiencing my first public orgasm at the hands of Ford Anderson and yelling out curses I never thought I would in a bowling alley restroom. Ford pulls me off the counter and pushes me against the wall, he quickly rips a foil package open and rolls it on before he slams into me, hard and possessive. I let out a loud cry and he places his hand over my mouth to muffle out any more of my screams. He moves his hand lower to my neck gripping lightly and I'm surprised at how much I'm loving this dominant side of him tonight. He keeps his hand there, holding firmly but pressing gently as he thrusts into me, each push has me begging for the next.

"You're so goddamn perfect, Abby."

Ford brings his hand back to my clit as he moves inside of me, pulling all the way out and then pushing back in, filling me up every time.

"Ford, I'm... I'm so close."

Within a matter of moments, I'm coming all over him and he empties himself at the same time. He stills himself on the wall as his cock jerks within me, spilling every last drop.

Sliding down his body, he kisses me once more, softly and passionately before steadying me on my feet. My body feels sweaty and sticky, but so fucking satisfied. Ford hands me some paper towels and takes some for himself as we both clean up. I take a quick look in the mirror, pretty impressed with how my appearance stayed intact for the most part. I'll just fix some of my hair that got a little wild and I'll straighten out my dress, but other than that no one will know I just had amazing sex.

I look over at Ford wiping some of my lipstick from his mouth. "Checking me out?" he asks, his lips turn up in a smile and I'm immediately blushing at him.

I'm shocked at myself for what we just did. Public sex, who am I?

Once we both feel we are presentable enough, I turn the lock and tell him to go out first after the coast is clear. Giving myself one more glance in the mirror, I let out a deep breath and smile to myself. Was that the most sanitary thing I've ever done? No, definitely not. But was it also the hottest and most satisfying? Hell fucking yes.

"Oh okay, so you didn't get kidnapped, that's good to know," Mia yells as she sees me walking back to the lane. I stopped to get some nachos to try and help justify my extended absence. She rolls her eyes at me as I take a seat

and a sip of beer.

“Sorry, there was a long line and then I wanted food. Hence, nachos!” I’m pointing down to the food in front of me when Ford walks over and stands behind the chair beside me.

“Nachos. Nice.” He scoops up a bite and jogs down to grab a ball. My eyes instinctively follow his path and without realizing it, I bite my lip and smile.

“Ahem!” Mia shoots me a wide eyed look and I just take another sip of my beer. I’ve been really fucking sloppy tonight about this whole secret friends with benefits thing.

“Okay, so Chase is really good at football and bowling, noted.” Mia jokes as we’re all putting our regular shoes back on. I’m exhausted and Ford wasn’t lying when he said I’d feel him all night. I’ve had to clench my thighs together a couple of times, feeling like I was still turned on. I swear he caught me at least once, because I saw him rub his jawline to try and hide a smile in my direction.

I’ve noticed my brother on his phone a lot more tonight than normal, and while he seems to have had fun, I can’t help but wonder who he’s texting every five minutes. I swear he’s been seeing someone lately and just keeping it to himself.

My eyes start to get heavy as Mia and I link arms and walk out into the warm night breeze. There’s still a pinch of humidity in the air, even though it’s practically December. The guys are paying their tabs inside, and Mia dragged me out here to wait for them.

“So how long?” Mia turns to face me as she raises her eyebrows.

“How long, what?” I say through a yawn.

“Don’t play dumb, Abby. I saw it tonight. I’m not sure what I was seeing, but it was something.” She places a hand on one of her hips as I turn my head in the opposite direction.

I stay silent for a moment, which essentially gives me away, even though I don’t think I could have lied to Mia even if I wanted to. Once my head turns back towards her, she has a small smirk on her lips.

“Is he a good kisser?”

“Mia!” I look around to make sure they haven’t come out yet.

“They’ll be a minute, don’t try to avoid the question. His whole face changed when he saw you were on the FaceTime call with me and then you both took an awfully long time getting beer and using the bathroom. So, spill.

Please.” She bats her eyelashes at me and I can’t keep it from her any longer. I’m used to telling Summer everything and while I’ve been keeping her up to date via text, it would be nice to have someone else who knows that I can talk about it with.

“Yes.” I glance towards the door.

“Yes, what?” She pops her gum and stares at me.

“He’s a good kisser.” My cheeks begin to heat as I’m shaking my head and smiling,

“I knew it!” Mia runs her fingers across her mouth and then motions like she’s tossing a key over her shoulder. “Safe with me.”

I nod my head and see my brother through the glass door about to walk out. I don’t elaborate on anything, because right now, having Mia know that we kissed is plenty. I don’t need her knowing how well Ford just wrecked my whole damn body.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



FORD

“Ford Anderson has had a record-breaking season this year, Greg. No other tight end in Tampa history has had as many single season touchdowns as him, he’s got to feel pretty good about that.”

I don’t usually listen to any game commentary, but I’m at my parents’ house and my dad has ESPN blaring down here in the den, so it’s a little hard to really tune it out.

“Hell of a season you’re having, son. Everything is almost doubled, between your receptions, yards after catch, touch downs... looks like you’re having a breakthrough year.” He walks up to me and reaches out his hand. “Don’t fuck it up.”

I knew he’d toss something like that in at the end, so it doesn’t take me by surprise. I press my smile into a firm line and shake his hand before walking out and grabbing the bag of donations I stopped by to get from my mom.

Truthfully, this season is the best I’ve felt in a long time. Probably since my rookie year, when I was all wide-eyed and excited for everything. I lost that a little over time and this season it’s somehow snuck back in. My mind wanders to the one thing that’s changed from previous seasons and there’s no denying that Abby’s presence in my life has been a good thing. Despite my

efforts, or really lack thereof, to be honest, to not let her become a distraction, she's actually become a driving force for me. When I know she's in the stands, it fuels me. After last weekend, I'm craving more, consider my *itch* officially scratched and I need her to be mine. I have no fucking clue how we'll navigate it with Chase, but it's a hard conversation I'm willing to have with him if it means Abby is mine.

“Wow. This place looks great, Dolly. What a turn around. How much longer do we have until we can officially open the doors?”

We've had contractors here working on the Arts department of the Rec Center for a few months. They had to gut the whole room and since it was just one big space, we drew up some changes to section it off, allowing for two rooms separated by a wall of windows and doors on either end. One side will be reserved for younger children for painting, drawing, coloring, anything like that and then for the older ones, we'll have pottery stations and larger canvases for them to use, in addition to sewing machines and even some stencil and calligraphy stations. While I'm not that into art myself, I know how damn cool this will be for the ones who are.

“Oh, it's coming together so nicely, Ford. The most recent estimated date is just after the new year. We can do a little ribbon cutting for the kids.” She beams up at me, holding her white notebook with a pencil sticking out of her ear.

“You've done a great job overseeing all of this.” I gesture around to the room that looks completely different than it did just two months ago. I walk out with Dolly at my side, she's a little slower these days so I'm taking smaller strides to maintain her pace.

“The girl that has come by too has been so lovely.”

Now that stumps me. *Girl? Who is she talking about?*

“Who?” I ask with a raised brow. I haven't asked anyone to come by other than my mother and Dolly knows who she is.

“I'm not able to recall her name, dear. I'm sorry. I'll look at the logs, though. She's been checking on the progress almost every week. She always mentions how excited she is for her students to spend time here when it's finished.”

Oh. *It's Abby.*

My heart constricts in my chest hearing that Abby has come back here without me. The Rec Center is important to me and knowing that Abby has shown an interest in that pulls at my emotions.

“No, no need to check. Thank you, Doll.” I lean down to kiss her cheek and I walk towards the exit.

The whole drive home I'm thinking about the fact that Abby's been going to the Rec Center every week. Why the hell didn't she tell me, first of all? And secondly, fuck. It just does something to me knowing she's as excited about it as I am.

Pulling into the driveway, I hit the garage button and slowly pull my truck in. I kept the back blinds open when I left this morning, so walking into the house right now I'm hit with the sunlight streaming through the glass doors.

“Fuck.” I say, lifting my arm to shield my eyes before heading to my room for a shower and hopefully a nap. My body is aching and I know a hot shower and some decent rest will help ease some of the tension from the last few weeks of brutal hits I've taken.

After grabbing a fresh pair of sweats and slinging a t-shirt over my head, I throw myself onto my bed. Just as my eyes begin to close, my phone vibrates.

ABBY

We need to talk.

Shit. The four words everyone hates to hear. A thousand fucking things run through my mind. Is she done with our arrangement? Done with me? Damn, I didn't even consider this ending, I probably shouldn't have been so fucking naïve.

Ok. Coffee shop?

ABBY

I'm already here.

Unsure what kind of conversation is going to come from this, I race to the coffee shop. This place has kind of become our neutral meet up spot to avoid me showing up at the apartment when Chase is home. Abby opens the passenger door and climbs up in my truck, placing a coffee for each of us in the cup holders and gives me a sweet smile. Okay, so she doesn't look like

she's in a bad mood. Maybe this won't be a bad conversation after all.

"Thank you," I say while merging back into the lane to drive home.

"We have to be more careful, Ford."

I give her a quick look from the corner of my eye, "Okay..." I trail off.
"What happened?"

She brings her bare feet up on the seat as she looks my way.

"Mia knows about us. Well, at least she knows that we've kissed. I didn't give her any other details, but just wanted you to know that she figured it out."

Phew. I blow out a loud sigh.

"Why are you smiling?" Abby looks at me confused.

It doesn't bother me if Mia knows about us. Hell, I'd love for everyone to know, and I understand that Abby doesn't right now, but I already plan to have a talk with her about my feelings soon.

"Honestly, Abby, I don't care that Mia knows. Hell, you can tell her whatever you want." I let out a laugh, taking a peek at her expression while I'm driving. She's eyeing me intently, like she's not sure what to make of my reaction to Mia knowing, or lack of reaction.

"Okay...?" she says with a questioning tone. The wheels seem to spin in her head as we make the ten minute drive through downtown into my small beach community. The more I've thought about this whole thing over the last couple of days and weeks, I know I've broken her biggest fucking rule that she set in place for this arrangement. I know for me this feels like more than just fun, but I can't figure out if that's how she sees it too.

"You live alone in this big house... you should have a pet. A dog, probably. German Shepard. You strike me as a German Shepard kind of guy," she casually says as we're pulling in. She's so goddamn random sometimes, I fucking love it.

"One day maybe."

Abby's been over enough by now that she lets herself in and makes herself at home and fuck, if that doesn't make me happy every time. Sometimes I think she also feels like we've crossed some lines with this whole friends with benefits thing. We've spent practically all of our free time

together since that weekend in Jacksonville and I haven't even entertained the thought of another woman, although not for their lack of trying. Any time I'm out with the boys or on the road, there are still plenty of women lining up to see who they can wrangle in for a night and a few years ago, hell even just a few months ago, I may have been the guy to take them up on that offer. But now? Now I race back to my phone after a game to see Abby's post game text that is usually waiting for me. There are fucking Skittles stocked in my pantry because I know they're her favorite. I purposely put her in my shirts before she leaves so she's slowly, but surely, growing a collection because there are few things sexier than seeing her in my clothing. Shit, I'm keeping secrets from my best friends because it's what she wants right now. I'm so far in over my head with this girl and I never even saw it coming. Sure, I knew I was attracted to her physically, but over time it's grown to be so much more than that. Everything about her is beautiful. Her kindness, her compassion, her sense of humor, she's one of those rare souls that you meet once in a lifetime and you don't let go.

Grabbing her hand as she walks through the sliding glass door, we make our way down towards the edge of the pool and take a seat on a lounge chair. I pull her back flush against my body as she sips her coffee and watches the waves on the shore, a sight and sound that I know is comforting for her.

"You're going to be up all night drinking that coffee this late." Abby turns her head to face me and I plant a small kiss on her forehead.

"Good thing neither of us work tomorrow, then."

She winks and turns back towards the waves. The wind is starting to pick up and I can see the white caps start to form over the water. I keep my grip on her as she leans into me and we just listen to the sound of the waves together.

"Hey, Abby." Her phone ringing interrupts my sentence as she glances down by her feet to check the caller ID.

"It's my mom, I'll call her back." She settles back into me before trying to pick up where we left off. "What were you saying?"

I run my hand through my hair and try to find the words again to let her know that I want us to be more than what we are, but the smallest sting of fear that she doesn't feel the same takes over and I keep it to myself. The phone call interrupting me was probably a good thing.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



Telling Ford that Mia figured out there was something going on between us was so much easier than I was anticipating. I had myself so worked up over it, I couldn't stop thinking about it all morning and it was something I wanted to let him know in person, rather than a text or phone call. I haven't known Mia long, but there's just this feeling I have that we can trust her not to say anything. Plus Ford must be extremely confident in that since he didn't bat an eyelash about her knowing.

As we sit out on his patio, Ford has his strong arms wrapped around me, holding me close against his chest, my fingers lightly grazing the outline of one of his tattoos. Sitting here with him brings me so much comfort, like I don't have to put on any kind of mask or dull down any part of myself when I'm around him. It seemed like he wanted to say something earlier, but after my phone rang, he opted not to. We've been enjoying the sound of the waves as I down the rest of my coffee and he's definitely correct, I won't be asleep any time soon having this so late in the day.

I turn myself to face him and bring my legs in front of me to sit *criss-cross applesauce*, as I call it with my students. His dark hair is so unruly right now and he definitely has some extra scruff on his face that isn't normally

there, but this is one of my favorite looks on him. He looks at me sweetly, and his eyes become a lighter shade of brown, almost gold-like, as his expression softens. The way his sweatpants sit low on his hips is all kinds of distracting right now, especially paired with the black t-shirt that puts the outline of his biceps on display. He catches me checking him out again, and taps my chin with his index finger to nudge my eyes back up to his. I don't even hide it this time, I just give him a little shrug and a smile as he shakes his head with a grin.

Ford gets up and extends his hand out to me,

“Dance with me.” His smooth voice runs through my body like a warm shot of whiskey. I stare up at him and put my coffee down beside me,

“There isn't any music.” His arms pull me into him and his chin rests on my head,

“I don't need music to hold you like this, Abby.” My arms drape around his neck as I'm resting my head on his chest while he holds me close and we move back and forth with only our heartbeats and the waves as the soundtrack.



The Monday back to school after Thanksgiving break is always chaotic. The kids are officially in Santa mode and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't too. After a busy week with my mom in town and then spending practically all weekend with Ford, I'm definitely feeling sleep deprived today. I gave the students an assignment to look around the room and find objects that start with certain letters, something that I'm hoping will give me some time to get the rest of today's plan underway.

“D. Desk, door, donuts, dummy,” Karson says as he walks by Harper.

“Karson, we don't call anyone a dummy. That's not a kind word. Please apologize.”

He tilts his head and looks over in Harper's direction. “Sorry,” he says flatly and he continues off on his list.

I let out a big sigh and walk over to Harper's desk as she's writing out things she sees that start with 'G.'

“You okay, Harper?” She looks up at me and offers a smile, “Yeah, I'm good.”

I've been waiting to tell Harper about the Rec Center downtown until the Art room is completed. I'm sure it's something she'd love and with them having after school programs, I definitely plan to mention it to her mother next time I speak with her. Harper's mom tries to be as hands on as possible, but a lot of the time Harper is with a babysitter. She shared that it's just her and Harper, so she works a lot to make sure Harper doesn't go without, and honestly, I really admire her for that.

"Green eyes." She points up at me and begins to draw small ovals on her paper, resembling eyeballs and grabs a green crayon to color them in.

"Very good, just like yours." We exchange smiles as I head back up to the front of the class to begin the rest of the assignments for the day.

"Ms. Hunt, I'm glad I caught you before you left for the day!" One of the P.E. coaches flags me down as we're both walking out into the parking lot.

"Hi, Coach Ben." I continue walking but try to give him my attention.

"You can just call me Ben." He lets out a quick laugh.

"Just Abby," I say in reply to him.

Ben is one of the staff members I met the very first day I stepped foot on campus for my in-person interview. He was kind and funny, and he's attractive in the general sense. He's the typical blonde hair and blue eyes former athlete who now gets to hang out with kids and do fun sports all day as a P.E. coach. He's not much taller than me, but his large personality makes up for it.

"A few of the teachers are going out for happy hour on Friday night at Louie's downtown. We'd love for you to join!" He begins naming off the teachers that will be there and random quirks about each one. I've zoned out almost completely, but I do catch the end of it.

"So yeah, figured I'd catch you today so it's not last minute." I do appreciate the heads up, plus I haven't really bonded with many of the teachers, only the few that I'm interacting with daily, so this could be a fun way to get to know some of the others outside of the classroom.

"I'll keep it in mind and let you know." That answer seems to be good enough for him as he shoots me a smile and turns back around.

CHASE

You on your way home yet?

Getting in my car now, yeah.

CHASE

Cool, see you soon.

When I get home, I place all of my bags on the floor as soon as I'm inside and head straight for the kitchen. I'm following my nose at this point as the aroma of garlic and pesto, two of my favorite things, take over my senses. "Mom? Hi, I wasn't expecting you!" I give her a tight squeeze as if I didn't just spend the whole week with her. She still lives in our hometown which is only about two hours from here, but I'm still wondering why she made the trip down again.

"Yes, well your brother wanted to speak with me, both of us actually, but instead of you two driving to me, I said I'd come back here for a night."

She's stirring the sauce and I'm brought back to my childhood and Sunday dinner with her, Chase and my grandparents. The weekends we were with my mom, we'd always do Sunday dinners, usually pasta of some kind, I always looked forward to it.

Chase comes walking out of his room and meets both of us in the kitchen, a nervous look on his face that we don't often see. His brown hair is hanging in his face and his brown eyes look heavy under his eye lids.

"What's up?" I say, gesturing to me and mom.

For the next thirty minutes, the three of us sit around the dining room table eating as Chase lets us know his news. While the initial shock hasn't left, there's also all of the excitement. I'm going to be an aunt and my mom is getting a grandchild. I know this isn't the ideal situation for Chase, but he seems to be handling it pretty well. He said he's known for a little while now, so it appears he's had some time to come to terms with it.

"So, yeah. I'm going to do what needs to be done. I want to be involved, there's no question about it."

My eyes fill with tears as I'm looking at my brother with such pride. He is a good man. I glance at my mom who has a similar look on her face as she gets up to hug him and I see his shoulders relax as she does. It was obvious he was nervous to tell her, knowing that this isn't how he'd ever expected to become a dad, but still fully embracing and accepting this new reality.

While we have the standard questions of when's the due date, how far along is she, does he hope it's a boy or a girl; he's quick to answer anything he can. My mom of course wants to meet her as soon as possible and asks if they're dating, but Chase swiftly replies that they're not together.

Another piece of surprising news? Chase said the other day he needed

someone to talk to about it and went to Ford. For a moment, I'm bothered that Ford didn't tell me, but at the same time, I know my brother asked him not to say anything so I actually find it endearing that he kept Chase's secret.

CHAPTER FORTY



FORD

We leave tomorrow for an away game in Dallas and all I want to do tonight is get a good night's rest. My sleep has been shit lately and not even for good reason. I haven't seen Abby all week, but we've texted almost daily. She finally knows about Chase, which is great because one secret is enough for me to keep.

Part of me wants to call Mia and ask her what she thinks I should do in this whole Abby arrangement. She would probably know if Abby is actually interested in more or not. And the last fucking thing I want is to be embarrassed like all those years ago. I thought Grace was all in too, but the joke was on me. As far as I knew, we wanted the same things, had the same idea for our future, but I couldn't have been more wrong and I'll do anything to make sure I don't end up in a situation like that again.

Before heading outside, I grab a Gatorade from the refrigerator. I pull my phone out of my pocket and hover over Abby's name. The desire to just simply hear her voice is too strong to ignore, even though I know she said she had plans tonight with some co-workers. It isn't like she's my girlfriend and honestly, I shouldn't even be checking in, but I'm not able to stop myself from pressing her name. It rings a few times before I hear background noise,

loud music and a deep voice on the other end. The moment I hear it, my body stiffens.

“Give me that!” Abby’s soft voice comes through the noise. “Hi, sorry it’s so loud in here.”

Without even greeting her back or thinking about what I’m doing, I’m sitting up straighter in the chair and balling my hand in a fist so hard, I’m sure it’ll leave indents. “Who the fuck was that?” I growl into the receiver.

“Sorry, it was my co-worker, Ben. I was at the bar when it rang, he handed it to me.” I can hear her much clearer now, she must have walked away from the fucking screaming banshees she was previously next to.

“Come over,” I demand, already standing from my seat ready to go pick her up from wherever the hell she’s at.

“I can’t, I’m still out with some co-workers. I thought you were having an early night anyway, Anderson. You need your rest.”

Now I’m pacing the patio a little bit, my mind running rampant with a bunch of scenarios. She doesn’t sound drunk, so that’s a plus.

“I just... I want to see you.” I blow out a breath and relax my tone a little bit. Just talking to her, hearing her voice calms me down.

“When you get back on Sunday, I’ll come over, I promise.”

I nod my head even though I know she can’t see me. “Alright.”

I concede for the moment, giving her the space that’s rightfully hers, even though it fucking sucks. Next chance I get, I’m letting her know that this whole friends with benefits arrangement can fuck off. I want her to be *mine*.

“Oh, and Mia just walked in! I’ll text you later.” She hangs up before I’m even able to reply and all I want to know is why the hell that tool answered her phone for her? Are they close? She’s never mentioned anyone from work other than her students now that I think of it. Pulling out my phone one more time, I click on Mia’s contact. I’m acting like a jealous boyfriend right now, but I can’t fucking help it.

Keep an eye on her tonight.

MIA

Oh Ford, you’ve got it bad.

Just fucking keep an eye. Please.

I shove my phone back in my pocket and head inside to get ready to pass out. As I walk through my quiet, empty house, the comment Abby made the

other night about me getting a dog honestly doesn't sound all that bad, except for the fact that I'd have away games to think about. Am I going to have someone come over whenever I'm gone for a couple of days at a time? I shake my head, this isn't a scenario that needs thinking about or solving right now. I pull back the comforter and grab my phone to throw it on the charger, but not before seeing there's a text from Mia from a few minutes ago.

MIA

She can hold her own. I've already witnessed her handle a few wandering hands, she's good.

That one text is all it takes for me to see red. I'll be damned if another man has his hands on her. Who the fuck is touching my girl without her consent?

Where are you?

MIA

She's fine, Ford.

Where, Mia?

She sends me a pin of her location and I've never gotten dressed so fucking fast in my life. Do my shoes match? Fuck if I know. All that matters right now is getting to Abby and bringing her home with me.

I don't bother finding a parking spot or an open parking garage, I pull right up to Louie's like I fucking own the place. It's easy to spot Abby as soon as I walk in. Like a magnet, I find her and I'm pulled to her. She looks absolutely gorgeous with her long hair up in a high ponytail, a pair of my favorite skinny jeans she wears so well and a white tank top that looks so damn good on her tanned skin. She's easily the most beautiful girl in this room, hell she's the most beautiful girl in any room. Her sparkling green eyes find mine as I'm standing in front of the bar glaring at the man to her left. He's standing too close, talking too much and touching too often. She says something to him before she walks in my direction. I turn and open the door to lead us both out front where it's easier to hear one another.

"And what are you doing here, Anderson?" She smiles at me, but doesn't reach out to touch me or anything.

Because we're in public and we can't show affection in public because she's not my damn girlfriend.

She doesn't seem angry that I showed up, she almost looks happy that I'm here, but I'm in no happy mood at the moment. Just before I'm about to speak, her co-worker, *Tweedle-Fucking-Dee*, comes rolling out of the door and almost bumps right into Abby as she stands against the wall. I quickly place my large body in front of his, blocking her entirely,

"Time to go home, you've had enough." I try to keep my composure, while also hoping my tall frame is intimidating enough for him to get the hint.

"Abby, my bad! Oh shit, you're Ford Anderson!" He laughs and tries to shake my hand, something I'm in no mood for so I let him leave his arm extended and turn around to Abby.

"We're leaving," I say, harsher than I intended towards her. The guy looks at me and then back at Abby, but I barely give her a moment to react before I'm pressing the start button on my keys to get the truck running.

"Ford," she says calmly, grabbing my forearm with her delicate fingers.

"Get in the truck, Abby." I can't mask my frustration. I can't mask any of it anymore, my feelings for her, my anger that another man was close to her, touching her, even if she didn't reciprocate any of it. I feel blinded by my need to just get her in the truck and to my house.

"Dick," the guy mutters under his breath as he opens the door to walk back inside, leaving Abby and me alone once again. Abby doesn't say anything, but between me holding the passenger door open and staring her down, I think she gets the hint that I'm not taking no for an answer.

"I'm texting Mia goodnight," she huffs as she gets in the truck and pulls the door to slam it shut. That was done with a lot more force than normal, so the chance that she's annoyed with me now is pretty high, but it's alright. We're going back to my house where I plan on telling her everything I've been feeling for the past... well, since day one.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



I never would have expected tonight to go the way it has. Ben and the rest of the group were a lot of fun at first, but ultimately became a little more unruly than I'm comfortable with. Seeing Ford standing in the doorway of Louie's, I knew he had come because Mia probably texted him, or he texted her asking where I was. Although it was unexpected seeing Ford tonight, I wasn't complaining, *at first*.

His tall frame was hard to miss standing in the doorway. My eyes and body were instantly pulled towards him as he stood there, glaring in my direction. In his signature black t-shirt and dark denim jeans, I could feel my body reacting to his presence almost immediately. It wasn't until we were outside and he acted like a possessive animal that I understood exactly why he showed up.

Sitting in his passenger seat, I don't say anything as we drive through the streets of downtown. The stop lights and city lights shine brightly through the windshield and I can hear the faint sound of music as we pass some of the bars and clubs on the street. Part of me wants to ask him to just drop me off at home, but I decide against it. If nothing else, I want to address whatever that was back there and we can't do it when Chase is around. Once we get to his

house, I don't bother waiting for him to open my door like normal, I let myself out and head right into the house, taking off my white converse shoes and pulling my hair out of the tight ponytail that's been giving me a headache all night. I run my hands through my hair and scratch my scalp a bit, probably one of the best feelings when you let your hair out of a ponytail that's been killing you for hours.

Ford puts his keys down in the dish next to the door and I take a seat at the kitchen island after grabbing a water bottle from his fridge. He hasn't tried to say anything either, and I'm sure he senses my annoyance. I'm not even mad he showed up, I'm just embarrassed at how he acted. Those are my co-workers and I have no clue how I'll explain that come Monday.

"So, what was all that about Ford?" I'm gripping the water bottle in front of me because I don't like confrontation and it feels like I need something to brace myself.

If this arrangement we have going isn't working for him, I want him to tell me. Sure, it'll suck, but I'd rather know now.

"Abby," he starts, but I interrupt him.

When I was with Andrew, I'd always let him explain himself first, I'd let him run all over me with excuses and reasons for doing the things he did and then when it came my turn to speak, it felt like anything I said didn't even matter because he had already said what he wanted to. So this time, I'm doing things differently.

"Actually, wait. I'll go first." He nods his head and gestures his hand out for me to continue.

"You embarrassed me, Ford. Those are my co-workers, and yeah, they were a little wild for my taste. I limited myself to two drinks tonight, so I knew nothing would get too far gone, but you wouldn't know that, would you? I don't really know what that was all about, but I don't need protection. I appreciate you wanting to look out for me because I'm Chase's sister, but I don't need it." I pause to steady my voice. I'm one of those girls who cries at all the emotions, even if I'm not sad, being mad or frustrated can release the dam just as easily.

His face softens and he looks almost upset at what I just spewed, but I needed him to know those things. He leans himself against the counter with his arms crossed over his chest before blowing out a large puff of air through his lips.

"It has nothing to do with you being Chase's sister, Abby. I'm sorry... It's

just... That fucking guy... co-worker or complete stranger, it doesn't fucking matter. I won't allow another man to touch you." His hands both rake through his hair as he walks around the island closer to me.

"I'm pretty sure he was just drunk and it was innocent, nothing to get all macho about, Anderson." Once he's in front of me, I try to nudge him with my elbow to lighten up the mood a little bit, but he pulls back before my skin touches his. My chest immediately feels like it's caving in.

Did I just ruin this? I just wanted him to know that I didn't need him to come barging in like some caveman, especially when whatever we're doing is supposed to be a casual thing. Nothing was going to happen with Ben, or anyone else.

"I'm tired of this, Abby. Doing this dance." I open my mouth to speak but he continues. "It's like we're going in fucking circles, avoiding the fact that this isn't more than just fuck buddies when we both know the truth."

My pulse starts to race as I'm waiting for him to go on.

I can see the ache in his whiskey colored eyes. "And what's that, Ford?" I whisper.

He closes the distance between us almost completely, leaving a space so small, it has my body longing for him to take the extra few inches forward and wrap me in his arms. I can feel the heat coming from his body as we stand there in his dimly lit kitchen.

"I'm tired of forcing myself to look the other way when you walk into a crowded room, I'm tired of not being able to kiss you whenever I want." He trails his fingers down my arm so lightly, it gives me instant goosebumps. "I'm tired of not being able to tell every goddamn person I know that you're mine. The biggest fucking thing I'm so damn tired of, though?" He closes the remaining distance between us and places soft, slow kisses on my neck causing my head to tilt back to give him better access.

"What?" I breathe out.

"I'm so tired of pretending that I'm not in love with you. I'm tired of pretending that you're not the best damn thing to ever happen to me. I've never needed someone the way that I need you. There's no one else for me, Abby. That's so abundantly clear to me. Not now, not ever, it's only you. It's been you since the first night I saw you and it'll be you every night going forward."

Tears begin to form in my eyes from his confession. Love? He's in love with me? It's not a secret that I've been slowly falling for him too, but I've

been trying to push it to the side and pretend that it wasn't there. My whole body instantly feels weak.

“You don't have to say it back right now. I'll wait until you're ready, however long that takes, but I couldn't go another fucking day without you knowing where I stand. I want you to be mine, I *need* you to be mine, Princess.”

Hearing him express his feelings so easily and openly is all I've ever wanted from a man. Someone who communicates honestly with me and here Ford is doing just that.

I can't deny that even though this started as just friends with benefits, somewhere along the way, the lines I tried so hard not to cross, somehow got blurred and I slipped right over them. Hearing him tell me he wants me to be his sets off a fire inside my belly that I can't ignore. I've never felt so deeply wanted by someone and I hate to keep comparing this situation with my relationship with Andrew, but it's the only thing I have to go off of. I'm scared to let myself really fall for someone else again, it's why I've tried so hard to shove any feelings for Ford down so deep. But Ford is so different from Andrew, though. In every possible way, they're opposite.

“Say you'll be mine.” He pulls me from the chair and runs his hands down my body, from my ribs down to my hips, gripping tightly as he reaches my hip bones. I relax into his touch and all my frustration from earlier slips away when I'm in his arms. He brings his forehead down to touch mine as he pulls my hips against him. The feel of his calloused hands leaves goosebumps on my skin and I'm instantly feeling warm. Just like every other time Ford touches me, he sends heat straight through me. Knowing I can no longer resist him, I tug on his t-shirt to pull him into a kiss. He yanks me by the hips onto the counter and flashes me that devastatingly handsome grin before he pulls the strap of my tank top down my arm, exposing my shoulder where he slowly works his way from there back up to my lips.

“Yes,” I breathe out in between kisses.

Nothing about this moment right now feels rushed, we're both savoring it and taking our time. I don't know how we'll tell Chase, but we won't be able to hide this much longer, however that's a problem for a different day.

“I'm yours, Anderson.”

He pulls back as his eyes darken with desire and he licks his bottom lip before picking me up and carrying me into his bedroom.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



FORD

My eyes take in every movement of Abby. She's mine. I'm watching her body move, wanting to memorize everything about it as she slips out of her jeans and pulls her shirt over her head. She's standing in front of me like a fucking offering and I'm more than willing to accept. Her black lace bra and underwear are all that remain as I bring my hands around to cup her perfect ass in my palms. She squeals as my hands firmly squeeze and I let out a deep moan of satisfaction.

“Mine.”

She reaches for my jeans and unfastens them slowly, never breaking eye contact with me. She pushes them down just far enough for my cock to break free and strokes it delicately as I let out a hiss of pleasure at her touch. Gripping the back of her neck, my lips move down to hers and she opens her mouth without hesitation. My fingers unhook her bra and I take a moment to marvel at her perfect breasts. Fuck. We move together as I'm positioning her gently back on the bed and working my way down her body, kissing every inch as I go. My mouth hovers over her breasts and I take one nipple in my mouth and circle it with my tongue before pulling lightly with my teeth. She's all I fucking want as my hand reaches for her pussy and I cup her over

her underwear, firmly pressing my hand into her clit. She lets out a whimper and thrusts her hips up towards me.

“We’re taking our time tonight, Princess.” My teeth graze her ear.

She reaches her hands in my shirt and pulls it off over my head.

“Ford.” Her eyes lock with mine. There’s a pale light coming from the other room, but aside from that it’s dark, although I’d be able to see her green eyes sparkle anywhere.

“I’m on the pill.” The words leave her mouth and I’m hoping it means what I think it means, but I don’t want to get my hopes up.

“Only if you want to. I haven’t been with anyone else since we’ve been together and I get tested before every season.”

“I trust you.” Her head nods up and down as she glides her soft fingers along my jawline and then to my neck into my hair. Lying here with her underneath me, wanting me to take her, feels so fucking right. What started out as merely a physical attraction has turned into so much more and I’m such a fucking goner for her.

“I really wanted to take our time tonight.” I let out a laugh. “But I’m not sure if I can now. I’m fucking dying for you over here.” I nudge my cock on her thigh as it throbs and drips, ready to feel her tightness around me. I slide her underwear to the side and swipe the tip of my finger down her center. She coats it completely and that just pulses my cock even more. She tastes so fucking sweet as I lick my finger and growl in her ear before yanking her underwear off completely and spreading her legs to line myself up with her.

“You’re soaked, Abby.” Her center is glistening as her legs are spread and a small pink blush covers her cheeks as she bites her bottom lip.

“All for you,” she teases. When she gets confident like this it just fuels my possessiveness towards her.

I arch my head back and let out a moan so loud, it’s a good thing we’re alone in this house. The thought of feeling Abby with nothing between us is enough to send me over the edge as it is.

“Are you ready to let me please you all night, Princess?”

A sinful grin lands on her lips just before I push myself into her. I hold still for a moment, giving us both a chance to adapt to the feeling. I’ve never felt something so fucking good in my life. She lets out a cry as she grabs my shoulders and runs her hands down my back to pull me closer.

“Oh Ford. Move, please.” My hips thrust in and out at a steady pace, giving both of us what we’re craving..

“Don’t stop,” she warns. “Please, harder.”

Her wish is my command. I’m shoving myself deep inside, pushing in and pulling out. My thumb finds her swollen clit and I waste no time rubbing back and forth aggressively. She feels so good wrapped around me.

“You feel so fucking good, Abby. This pussy is all mine, do you hear that?”

It only takes another moment of my hand between her thighs before she’s falling apart and screaming my name. She lets out a loud moan as her body shakes underneath mine, all the while I’m still pumping in and out, feeling her pussy pulse around me.

“Good fucking girl, Abby.”

Once she settles from her first orgasm, I flip her body around so she’s on her hands and knees. Her ass is up in the air and if a perfect view exists, this is it. Her skin is so soft and warm to my touch, I run my palm over her ass cheek and catch her looking back at me with a hazy smile. My hand connects with her skin, giving her a light slap and she jerks forward with a gasp.

“You like that?” She nods her head, but I need to hear her say it.

“Tell me. Tell me you like it.”

“I like it.” My hand gives her one more smack, not as gentle this time and she cries out with pleasure as she pushes her ass back into me again.

I drive my cock into her pussy from behind and from this angle, it feels like I can go so much deeper.

“You take me so fucking well, Abby.” As I’m grabbing her hips, I keep moving faster and a little harder each time until both of our bodies are shaking and coming together. We both collapse on the bed, in a fit of smiles and deep breaths.

“Well, tonight was an interesting turn of events.” Abby jokes as she lays there, completely naked and spread out for me.

Seeing her laying here like this makes me want just one more taste. I watch her chest heave up and down, catching her breath. My hand inches down and I pull at her thigh, moving my fingers closer to her center. I lift myself up from the bed and spread her legs even further apart as I settle in between.

“Just a taste.” I’m looking up at her sated face as she bites her lip. She looks so gorgeous laying there.

“Wait!” Abby reaches her hand in my hair.

“I should clean up.” She tries to pull her legs up, but I grip my hand just

beneath the crook of her knee, holding her in place.

“That won’t be necessary.” My eyes don’t leave hers while I dust my fingertips over her hip bones, watching the goosebumps spread across her sensitive skin.

“Make no mistake, Abby. When I say I want you, it means as you are. A weaker man may have had bullshit requirements for you to follow, but all I care about is pleasing you.”

She bites her lips together as the corners of her mouth twist up. I waste no time slipping my tongue down her center and licking up and down as her hips buck into me. When my tongue meets her sensitive clit, I press firmly on it and make small pulses.

“Ford,” she breathes out as she’s trying to clench her thighs together. My tongue works her aggressively, but I keep my hands firmly placed on her thighs, holding them in place.

Pulling myself away briefly and licking my lips, I stare at this beautiful woman beneath me. I’m so fucking happy she agreed to be mine. She sure snuck up on me because I never thought this could turn into something more so quickly, but I was dead wrong. She’s been the highlight of my day for the last four months and while no one else knows it but the two of us, I’m so goddamn in love with her.

Bringing my lips back to her inner thighs, I kiss each side before moving back to her clit. She’s breathing heavily as she waits for my tongue to revisit her. I push her thighs down, spreading her even further and thrust my tongue into her sweet pussy. She tastes like a fucking dream as I’m licking up and down, seeing her like this has me wanting to act like a wild animal.

“Ford,” she breathes out my name again as her hips push into my face. I fucking love when she says my name like this. I’d happily stay in this position all fucking day if it meant I’d get to watch her like this. Her hands are in my hair, pulling as if she’s doing anything she can to be closer to me. I suck on her clit while letting both of my hands roam her breasts, squeezing and brushing over her sensitive nipples every chance I get. She rocks her body and I listen to her moan at every movement of my tongue. Abby rides my face until her orgasm rips through her. She shakes above me, yelling out my name.

Once I pull myself back, I savor her sweet taste and run my tongue along my lips to make sure I don’t miss a drop. She tastes like heaven.

“Fuck, you’re incredible, I could do that every day.” Abby’s hand covers

the side of her face as she turns her head and smiles.

After we both clean up, I toss her one of my shirts to sleep in, adding to her collection.

“You’ll stay here tonight.”

She throws the shirt over her freshly showered naked body but shakes her head at me. “You leave tomorrow for a game, plus Chase will wonder where I’ve been all night.”

My jaw clenches at her statement, because I know she’s right, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it. She approaches me slowly, extending her hand into mine where it fits so perfectly.

“I just need to figure out how we’re going to tell him. It can’t be me walking in the door tomorrow morning, wearing your t-shirt.” She brings my hand to her lips and softly kisses my knuckles.

Everything I ever thought I knew about love was bullshit until I met Abby. She’s shown me that I can love someone deeper than I ever thought possible. Like the waves against the shore, she came crashing into my life and I haven’t been the same since.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



FORD

ABBY

I miss you.

“Who’s texting you that they miss you, Anderson?”

Nate glances down at my phone as the text from Abby comes through. The other night, Abby switched her name in my phone from Abby to just the princess emoji, and now I’m thinking I also need to find the setting that hides the text preview too.

“Don’t worry about it,” I snap before tossing my phone in my bag and put the whole thing back in the locker after I grab a change of clothes.

Our game in Tennessee just finished and last week we were in Dallas. After two back to back road games, I’m ready to stay home for a couple of weeks to close out the season. I’d love to say we won today, but that’d be a bold faced lie. Somehow things got away from us in this game and all I want right now is to get back home to my girl.

My girl.

We still haven’t mentioned anything to Chase yet, both of us seem to be avoiding the topic when we’re together, but it’s like the black cloud that hangs over me every time I see him.

Once we get on the plane, Chase takes a seat next to me and I notice the background of his phone is a sonogram picture. For someone who was nervous as hell when he told me, he sure has warmed up and embraced this whole dad role he's going to be in.

"Look at you." I point to his phone with a smile.

"Yeah, she had an ultrasound done last week." I nod my head and shut my eyes as we take off and ascend into the air, I plan on relaxing the rest of the flight.

About half way through the short flight, my relaxing flight plan is interrupted when I hear Liam yelling a few rows back. My head whips back to try and see what's going on, but it doesn't help. Before I know it, I'm pulling myself up from my seat and making my way towards him and Graham, both in a heated argument over who the hell knows what.

"If I don't have fucking time in the pocket, I can't make throws. It's just common sense and you know it!" Liam shouts.

"Move a little bit then, Evans!" Graham shouts back.

Nate stands up and moves between the two of them before they do something stupid, or worse, before Coach Aarons overhears this mess and walks back here.

Tensions are high as we approach the end of the season. I feel it too. Not enough to lash out at my teammates, but I get it. We've had a good season and we're first in our division, but not the overall number one seed for playoffs like we would have hoped. We have to win out the rest of the season and then gear up for the playoffs.

"Bunch of fucking kids," Chase says as I sit back down in the seat next to him.

Letting out a sigh, I say, "Got that right. Liam should know better than to engage in Graham's shit." Chase nods his head but keeps his eyes closed. I follow suit and close my eyes for the rest of the flight, hoping I'll sleep, but knowing that probably won't happen.

CHASE

Hey, let's do COD tonight. At my place around 8, my sister said she'll make tacos.

LIAM

Your sister will be there? I'm in.

CHASE

She lives here you fucking idiot, and if you go anywhere near her, we'll be using our second string quarterback for the rest of the season.

NATE

Fuck Liam, can you keep it under control for once?

LIAM

I need my hands for a lot of things, so I guess I'll have to try, won't I?

Under normal circumstances, Liam's comment wouldn't get under my skin. With recent events though? I want to break both his hands.

Yeah sounds good.

As I walk into Chase's apartment, I see Abby's in the kitchen mashing what looks like guacamole and has a bunch of taco fixings all set up on the counter. She gives me a big smile when she sees me and I can't help the one that beams on my face in return. It's a smile that reaches all the way up to her gorgeous green eyes. She's wearing an oversized t-shirt that says "nacho business" and I'm sure she has those little bike shorts underneath but you can barely see them. Her hair is flowing down her back as her bare feet shuffle around to get everything out on the table.

"Cute shirt." I pull at the hem as I walk by to grab myself a drink from the refrigerator.

"You said you weren't much of a cook, but here you are with a whole taco bar."

She keeps her distance with the guys playing the game in the next room, but holds out a spoonful of guacamole for me to try.

"I can make like five things. Guacamole is one. The rest of this..." She waves her hand over the counter. "Is basically just browning some beef and opening containers."

"Where's my chip? You don't expect me to eat this by the spoonful, do you?" I'm looking over her shoulder to find a tortilla chip or something to eat with this hunk of avocado she just laid in front of my face.

Abby throws a hand on her hip. "It's just a taste, I'm not asking you to eat the bowl." I grab the tortilla chip bag on the counter and pull it open.

"How can you just shove a whole tablespoon of that in your mouth?" Scooping the guacamole off the spoon with a chip, I take a bite.

Damn, it's pretty fucking good. I don't even like avocados that much, but whatever she's got mixed in here is something I'd eat. My head nods in approval as I'm chewing and I walk by her to toss the spoon in the sink.

She leans back towards me once I'm close and I hear her mutter. "I'm good at shoving lots of things in my mouth, Anderson." Her words stop me dead in my tracks. She can't be saying shit like that when we're around everyone, not yet anyway, not when I can't just throw her over my shoulder and bring her to the bedroom.

"Abby," I say sternly.

She shrugs her shoulders and bounces around the kitchen as she finishes getting everything out. I turn on my heel to make my way to the living room where Chase, Liam and Nate are, but not before sneaking one more glance at Abby.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR



ABBY

After the last couple of weeks with Ford, I've realized a lot of things. Many things I probably already knew, but was too scared to admit. Being with Ford feels safe, it feels secure, there is just this overwhelming sense of protection, like he would never ever hurt me. It's amazing how you can go from one destructive and toxic relationship to the next one feeling the complete opposite. He supports me in ways I didn't even know I needed or wanted, honestly. And even though this is still a new feeling for me, I know it's right.

When Chase mentioned that he wanted to have a guys' night, it was clear Ford would be coming over, so offering to help make some food just flew out of my mouth. Like some kind of sixth sense, I felt Ford's presence the second he walked into the kitchen. His denim clad thighs waltzed in like he owned the space and I had to remind myself not to lunge into his arms at the sight of him. He looks so good tonight, which isn't different than any other night, but lately, I've been paying even closer attention. He's wearing a crisp white t-shirt and his face looks freshly shaved. His backwards baseball hat, which I'm convinced he wears just because he knows what it does to me, sat perfectly placed on his head as he crossed his arms over his chest and watched me move around the kitchen.

“Everything’s pretty much done,” I say walking into the living room where the guys are sitting. Ford looks in my direction immediately, but I don’t keep my stare on him for long before I’m heading back to the kitchen to get myself a plate. There are enough tacos loaded on my plate to feed a small village. As I’m sitting down to eat, my phone dings.

FORD

I need you to put some pants on.

Why’s that?

FORD

Because I’m 2 seconds away from breaking Liam’s fingers one by one if he keeps staring at your ass in those shorts.

FORD

Also, you’re tempting me.

Says the guy in the backwards hat.

I shake my head and start to eat my plate full of tacos. The guys come trailing in one by one, with Nate taking a seat to my left and Chase to my right.

“Fuck yes, Abby! This looks so good!” Nate reaches over the table to grab the sour cream and salsa.

“Tacos are easy,” I say through a mouth full of food.

“Yeah, Abby, everything looks great.” Liam winks at the end of his sentence and I already know that’s got to be sending steam out of Ford’s ears, so I don’t even look in his direction.

Growing up, I didn’t hang out with my brother and his friends a lot. We aren’t very far apart in age, only four years, but I spent all of my time with Summer and he either had a girlfriend he was with, or he was out with friends at parties or playing football. It’s nice to see him interact with the guys tonight, it’s a side of Chase I’ve only gotten glimpses of. He’s a great brother and spending time with these guys all together tonight proves that they’re all more than just teammates; they’re friends, close friends. The thought pulls at my chest a little harder than I’d like. I hate lying to him about Ford, we have to just tell him about us. For all we know, maybe he’ll be okay with it. It seems like out of all of them, Ford is the one he trusts the most, considering the whole pregnancy thing.

Once I start cleaning up in the kitchen, Ford comes to my side with some

of the plates from the table. “You don’t have to do that. I’m just cleaning up a little and then going to bed. I have school in the morning, it’s the last week before Christmas break.” I yawn through my words and run my hand through my hair.

“You’re tired, let me help you.” My heart soars at his words. Simple, yet so genuine and thoughtful. Since the beginning, Ford has been doing and saying things that shouldn’t sweep me off my feet, because in reality, they’re normal things like holding my bags, opening my doors, staying with me when I don’t feel well. The fact of the matter is though, they just aren’t things I’m used to. I’ve never had a man, other than my father, put me first. Instead of a reply, I simply smile at Ford and continue loading up the dishwasher.

Thirty minutes later, everything is cleaned up and I’m just wiping down the counter. I can hear the guys yelling about something in the game, not arguing, but just yelling out directions to one another about something. It makes me laugh as I make my way to the side of the sofa. I watch on as they yell into headphones and fist bump each other over who knows what.

“Going to bed, Ab?” Chase stands up, still holding a controller, but walks over to kiss my forehead.

“Yeah, I’m beat.” I say goodnight to the guys, letting my eyes linger on Ford for longer than necessary but it doesn’t seem like anyone but him notices.

Once I’m in my room, I open up my closet to get out clothes for tomorrow. Three more days until Christmas break. I’m so ready to dive into all of the holiday festivities that I haven’t had time for recently. As I’m shuffling through my very limited selection of cardigans and blazers, I hear someone clear their throat behind me and I whip my head around to see Ford standing in my doorway, leaning against the frame with his arms crossed over his chest. His hat is still snugly placed on his head and he’s got that stupid, sexy grin on his face as his eyes work up and down my body.

“Trying to get caught or something?” I whisper, walking over to him.

“Why? Are you going to try and throw me in your closet again?” He lets out a low laugh. His hand grips my waist and he pulls me in for a quick hug and I instantly relax into his embrace. “I told the guys I needed to use the bathroom.”

He places his hands on my cheeks. “I just wanted to say a proper goodnight to my girlfriend.”

I tilt my head at the word because even though I know that’s what this has

become, it's the first time he's said it. He plants a quick kiss on my lips and my eyes flutter shut at the feeling. Right as the moment begins, it's gone just as fast.

"Girlfriend, huh?" I pull back, smirking,

"Yeah. Didn't you know? I'm dating this fucking knockout."

He winks at me and caresses his thumb over my bottom lip,

"G'night, Princess"

"Night, Anderson."

"I can't wait to hear all about your break when you get back!" I call out as the children scatter out of my classroom for Christmas break. I'm itching to do some decorating around the apartment and I haven't had the chance between work and spending Ford's free time with him. Once my classroom is all tidied up from the day, I gather up my things and head out to the parking lot. Just as I'm reaching the double doors, I catch a glimpse of Ben. We haven't actually seen each other since that disastrous night we all went out. He doesn't seem to be phased by it as he nods in my direction and tells me, "Merry Christmas." *Thank God.* I couldn't handle an awkward co-worker situation.

Summer told me the other day that her parents will be in Greece for the holidays, so without hesitation, or asking Chase, I offered for her to come spend Christmas here. She's on break from school and was able to take off a good chunk of time from the bar, so she'll be here the whole week of Christmas and I'm so excited. The guys have two more regular season games and then they'll have a better idea of what's going on for the playoffs. I've tried to really pay attention this year, to understand the game better and overall to just be more interested. It turns out it's not all that hard when your focus is on a 6'4 man who towers over opponents and wears tight pants for three straight hours. I should have been paying attention to it a lot sooner.

After spending the car ride mentally planning out where all of the Christmas decorations will go, I make a stop at a few craft stores. I saw this idea on Pinterest to make homemade ornaments. I'll put my own spin on it, but I loved the idea of what I saw. Considering Chase hasn't once mentioned anything about decorating, it's probably safe to assume he's not interested in

it one way or another, which hopefully gives me full creativity to do as I please in the apartment. Searching through the aisles of this store, I finally find the string and small holiday bows I'm looking for and head to the checkout line.

As I'm walking up to the crowd of people at the checkout line, there's a woman standing there who looks familiar the closer I get.

"Dolly?" I ask, smiling at her as I get in line. I'm probably going to be here for a while, it seems like everyone had the same idea to get creative today.

"It's Abby. Ford's friend." She looks at me again and nods her head quickly.

"Yes, yes. Abby. Hello, dear." She reaches for my hand and holds it in hers for a moment. She has a basket full of items, many small wooden ornaments, paint sets and red, gold and green jingle bells.

"What's all this?" I gesture to her basket.

"Oh, I always bring some things to do with the kids. I don't have any grandchildren of my own, so I always like to do easy crafts with the little ones." She laughs to herself and pulls her basket closer to her chest. I liked Dolly the moment I met her. She's kind and compassionate, but I've seen her get feisty when some of the kids get a little too rowdy.

"He's very happy, you know." She smiles in my direction and I don't need to ask who she's talking about or what she means when she looks at me with her pale blue eyes. The line moves a little forward and we both follow suit. She moves closer to me and takes my hand in hers once more.

"He cares for you. I've known Ford for a very long time and I've seen him hold himself together through some very hard times. I never had children of my own, so I always threw myself into my time downtown, with the kids." Her eyes become misty as she speaks. "I've known that boy since he was eleven years old. I've seen all the stages of life he's gone through, the good and the bad. As a young boy, I remember Ford being just wild, as all boys are, you know, but the sweetest boy."

I nod my head at her comment. "I care about him very much, too."

"I'll tell you something," she says as we get closer and closer to the cashier. "When he first got drafted, oh, I remember it like it was yesterday. He was over the moon. He was so happy. He wanted nothing more than to get right to work, you know how determined he is with his sport." She looks me in the eye and smiles. "He came to the Rec Center a few weeks later and we

talked, and I said, well I bet Grace and your parents are just thrilled.”

Wait. Who is Grace?

I’d have to assume an old girlfriend, surely, he’s had girlfriends before me, I mean look at him. “I’m sorry, Dolly–Grace?”

This is probably a question I should ask Ford himself, but now she’s piqued my interest. Dolly just shakes her head and huffs out a big sigh.

“Oh Grace Billups, she was... well, we all assumed that she and Ford would get married. All throughout high school and college, they were inseparable. She was at his side for everything.” Dolly clears her throat and turns her head as she takes another step forward. We’re getting close to the checkout here and I need to finish this conversation before that happens.

“Until she wasn’t.”

Confusion swirls in my head. Why didn't he tell me about her? To be fair, I never asked, but still if Dolly seems to think it was that monumental of a relationship then surely, he would’ve at least mentioned it before. It wouldn't be a complete surprise hearing her name.

“Anyway, that draft day was the last day I’d say he was truly happy... until he met you.” Dolly squeezes my hand as it’s finally her turn at the counter, leaving me with an abundance of unanswered questions.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE



Chase texted me earlier to let me know that he was staying at the training facility later today to work out with the guys. So once I'm home, I unload all of the stuff from my car and change into my oversized t-shirt and shorts.

"Alexa, play Christmas hits." It's not so bad having these little robots at our service for a bunch of random things like making grocery lists and setting reminders, or asking questions like "where's the deepest part of the ocean?" Ford and I spent an embarrassing amount of time one night researching ocean depths to find the deepest part. It's the Mariana Trench, by the way.

The music is blasting louder than normal so I can really get into the mood. It may still be eighty degrees outside, but I'm going to make it a winter-freaking-wonderland in here.

Right as I'm about to belt out the chorus of Mariah's "All I Want For Christmas Is You," the front door opens and Chase, Ford and Nate walk in the apartment. I have a string of Christmas lights hanging over my shoulders and there is so much flock from the tree I just opened all over the floor. I give the guys a quick wave before asking Alexa to turn the volume down as they all walk past me and look around at what I've been doing for the last two hours.

“Don’t stop on our account,” Nate jokes as he grabs a candy from the dish and pops it into his mouth.

Chase reaches for the lights on my arms and pulls the ones that got slightly tangled in my hair. “I can help you put these up later. Go get changed.”

I give a confused look to Chase and then glance over at Ford and Nate, both still curiously looking around the apartment at the epic Santa invasion that has taken over.

So, I love Christmas. That’s not a crime.

“Why? Where are we going?”

“Mia said there’s this Christmas in the park thing happening and she’s roped me into going so I’m forcing these two to come along. Looks like Chase is forcing you,” Nate speaks up.

Mia did mention that to me earlier in the week and shit... I completely forgot. I head into my room and throw on a pair of leggings and a red sweater that hits just below my butt. It’s not freezing out, but anything below sixty-five is too cold for me. There isn’t really much time to fix my hair or make up, so I run a brush through my tangled hair and pinch my cheeks to give them a little color before walking back out to the living room.

I catch Ford’s eye as soon as he looks up and when he smiles at me, the butterflies start their dance in my stomach. Thinking back to what Dolly said, I have so many questions to ask him the next time we’re alone.

The cool breeze hits my face as soon as we step outside. Since the park is only a few blocks away, we decide to walk instead of driving. With the sun already set, you can see the lights of the city clearly. Red and green illuminate the streets, there are even fun little decorations up on some of the lamp posts as we walk by and all of the restaurants have Christmas music playing as we pass them. Everyone looks happy to be here. The holidays are such a special time of year, although it always makes me painfully more aware of the empty seat at the table.

“Over here!” Mia yells from the spot on the grass where she has a blanket set up. She’s sitting with another girl I’ve never met before, but she’s gorgeous. She has blonde hair that’s cut short into a bob and big brown eyes. She’s wearing a black leather jacket that looks like it probably costs more than my entire wardrobe.

“You guys know Nat. Abby, this is Natasha.” I wave hello and Mia stands up to give me a hug. Natasha greets the boys as if she’s known them

forever, and hell maybe she has, it wouldn't be the first new piece of information I've heard about Ford today.

Once I take a seat on the blanket, Ford's body sits to my right almost immediately. His arms are covered in a black long sleeve henley and his scent comes breezing through as soon as he settles in next to me.

"Hi." He nudges my body with his and I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear before giving him a quick smile back.

"Hi." It's physically impossible not to look at him whenever he's close by, it's like he just pulls me into his orbit. I study the veins on his hands and think about how it's been days since he's properly touched me. I miss feeling him grip my waist or run his fingers through my hair. There are easily hundreds of people down here, but I can't focus on anyone or anything other than him.

There's a stage for a band set up down by the river and food trucks line the street.

"Want to take a walk?" Ford reaches his pinky and hooks it into mine as I nod my head and stand up with him.

"We're going to go find some hot chocolate," Ford yells out to Chase and the rest of the group, they just nod their heads and continue in conversation. Once we're out of eyesight from the group, Ford leads me to a parking garage and pulls out his keys.

"Where are we going?" I take his hand as he helps me climb into his truck and he shuts the door behind me before answering and walks to the drivers side.

"I just wanted to get some alone time with you." He smiles at me and pulls me over the center console to sit closer to him. I nuzzle myself into his neck, letting him wrap his arms around my body. The sense of security I get in his arms is something I can't explain.

He asks how my day was and I ask about his day in return, I can tell he's excited about the playoffs, who wouldn't be?

"It's looking like it'll be Minnesota, but we'll see." He kisses the top of my head and I feel his heartbeat steady as I'm laying my head on his chest. The conversation with Dolly replays in my head and I want to ask him about Grace. I'm not mad that he didn't mention her, after talking with Dolly, I'm just curious.

"So funny story, I ran into Dolly today at the craft store." I sit up and turn to look him in the eye,

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yep, we were in the checkout line together. It was like a mile long, so we had some time to chat.” He looks at me lightheartedly,

“Uh oh.”

I don’t respond right away, I just sit and try to think how to word the next part of my sentence.

“Wait, uh oh for real or?” His expression turns worried when I don’t respond immediately, but I shake my head as I gather my thoughts.

“No, no... everything is good,” I say.

“I just... it’s weird. She did say something and you don’t owe me any explanation, I’m honestly just curious about something she said.” Ford’s jaw clenches before he relaxes.

“Whatever you want to know, Abby, I’ll tell you.” I put my hand on his thigh and bring my eyes up to his.

“Who is Grace?”

Ford turns his head to face forward, breaking our eye contact. His body stiffens and he lets out a giant blow of air before running his hand in his hair.

“God, I haven’t heard someone say that name in a long fucking time.” I cup his cheek in my hand,

“If it’s too much, you don’t have to—” Before I can finish my sentence he’s shaking his head.

“No, no. It isn’t too much. I just haven’t talked about her in years. We dated in high school and college. Like I said I’m from here, so I stayed local, thankfully, when I got my scholarship. Her and I always talked about the future and what it would look like for us when I made it to the pros. I thought I’d marry her, if I’m being honest.”

He looks over at me but I can’t read his expression. He doesn’t look sad, in the sense that it happened, but he looks embarrassed, maybe? If this was someone he considered marrying, this can’t be easy to retell.

His voice doesn’t waver as he speaks about their relationship, he’s firm in his words and everything he says is in the past tense, probably to assure me that it isn’t still how he feels.

“On draft day, after we found out I was staying in Tampa, we talked about getting married. Thinking about it now, I can’t imagine being married at twenty-two, but she was the only girlfriend I’d had my whole life. People thought we had the perfect fucking relationship. On paper we did. A cheerleader and a football player. High society families. It just made sense.”

I sit and listen as he recounts pieces of that time, keeping my hand placed on his thigh.

“We were just two stupid kids, completely naive to the realities of the world.” He clears his throat before continuing. “Anyway, a few weeks after the draft, right before we were going to sign a lease on an apartment, in your apartment building actually, she told me she couldn’t do it. That it wasn’t her dream to play doting NFL wife, she didn’t want to put her own dreams on hold, even though I’d never asked her to do that. I tried to replay all of our conversations in my head, to make sure I never even hinted that I wanted her to do that. For the longest time, all we ever talked about were our dreams together and as far as I knew we were on the same page.” My eyes well up as I’m watching him shake his head. I’m sure the moments still feel hard for him to relive even after the years have passed.

“Hey.” He rubs a thumb over my cheek.

“No, it’s not a sad story.” I look up at him, we’re sitting in the darkness of his truck but I can see the way his whiskey brown eyes are shining back at me.

“Are you kidding? That’s like a textbook sad story, Ford. You basically had the rug pulled out from under you by someone you thought was your entire future.” I choke out a laugh through a sob. Shaking his head, he places both hands on my cheeks.

“No, Abby. It’s not sad.” He pulls my legs to rest over his lap, running a hand over my thighs.

“I’ve spent the last few years moving on auto pilot, going through the motions. I entered the league, competed for my team, I put football first... above everything else. I threw myself into the sport I loved because it was the one thing I knew I was doing right. On the field, I’m Ford Anderson, Pro Bowl Tight End. That’s the only person I wanted to be for the longest time.” The lump in my throat settles as I take a deep breath.

“Who do you want to be now?” My voice is quiet as my eyes stay focused on him.

He tucks a piece of hair behind my ear and my eyes flutter shut for a brief moment at his touch. “Now, I want to be the guy who kisses you goodnight, the guy who listens to the same songs on repeat because they make you happy. I want to be the guy who buys organic fruit at the store because you insist it’s better, even though it’s definitely the same as the regular shit. I want to spend my nights with you watching reruns of *New Girl* because I

know it's your favorite. I just want to be the man you deserve, I want to spend my time proving to you how much you mean to me, and how much I love you." A lone tear falls from my eye. "So no, what happened with Grace isn't sad, because it gave me you. She wasn't my future. You are, Abby. You are my future."

Looking into Ford's eyes, telling him how I feel is on the tip of my tongue. *This* is love. This feeling that I've had in the pit of my stomach for weeks, it's been love. I've never experienced it, not truly, but if it feels like flying while also being swept up into a wind storm at the same time, then I feel it. Magical and scary all at once. Falling in love with Ford didn't even feel like falling, it was like he gently picked me up and carried me into his heart and I was safe, I was home. I can't possibly understand how someone let a man like him go, but I have to be thankful that both of our journeys have led us here, to one another.

Before I get the chance to even open my mouth to say anything, his finger is pulling my chin towards his lips. There's no rush, he's tender and soft. His tongue moves between my lips and I open as he swipes through. I pull him closer to me by the collar of his shirt and he scoops me into his lap, where I settle comfortably. The low moans that escape his chest through our kiss have my heart racing with desire for this man.

Being with Ford feels like coming up for air. Like I've been submerged underwater this whole time and finally, with him, I'm at the surface again. He nips at my bottom lip before pulling away and running his thumb over my cheekbone.

"We should probably get back out there before Mia sends out a search party for you." He jokes, recalling our bowling alley extravaganza.

I rest my head on his chest in the crook of his neck and inhale deeply as I close my eyes. I want to make sure this moment is engraved in my memory. I never want to forget the moment that I knew I was in love with Ford Anderson.

When we get out of the truck, I grab Ford's hand and hold it tight as we walk through the parking garage. I know I can't hold it the whole time, but something in me just aches for his closeness, to always be touching him somehow. If his smile tells me anything, it's that he's more than fine with my sudden act of PDA.

Once we're at the stop sign and closer to where everyone else is, we release each other's hands and both give one another a reassuring smile.

“Oh, we should probably actually get hot chocolate.” Laughing, I point to the cafe up ahead with a sign that reads Hot Chocolate and Hot Cider. We order six of them and are holding the cup carriers as we walk back out onto the street. If nothing else, we can at least use the excuse that we ordered six drinks to make up for some of the time we were away.

“Hi Ms. Hunt.” I hear a small girl's voice as we stand at the crosswalk. Looking down, I notice Harper there with a young woman, probably her babysitter.

“Harper, hi.” I address the woman next to her as well and she shakes my hand with a kind smile. Harper cranes her neck to look up at Ford. “He’s tall.” She jerks her thumb in his direction as she looks at me. I can't hold back the laugh that bubbles out as I smile over at Ford, who then bends down to meet Harper at eye level.

“This better?” He smiles and extends his hand.

“I’m Ford.” A tsunami of emotion washes over me watching their interaction. I’ve seen him with the kids downtown a handful of times, but this feels different. This is someone from *my* world he’s connecting with and damnit, if that doesn’t just twist my heart up.

Harper is holding a piece of paper in her hand with a drawing on it, it’s one of those Caricature drawings where you sit in a chair and someone draws you as you’re in front of them. Ford takes the paper out of her hand and holds it up next to Harper’s face as if checking the resemblance between the two.

“Pretty cool.” He nods his head as he hands it back.

“I could do something better,” Harper blurts out. She really has no filter sometimes.

“Oh yeah? You’re into drawing?” Ford looks up at me and I nod my head enthusiastically.

“Well, there’s a cool place where you can come and draw whatever you want. Maybe Ms. Hunt can show you when it’s done.” Ford stands up and picks up the hot chocolates—that I’m sure will now be more like regular chocolate milk—from the ground next to him.

Harper’s eyes widen with excitement as she nods her head before the crosswalk changes and we head in opposite directions.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX



Christmas is in five days and I have a million and one things that still need to get done. My mom is coming over on Christmas Eve and staying the night, plus Summer will also be here. It'll be just like when we were growing up, except for, of course, the absence of dad.

There are certain traditions I'll always remember doing with him, small little things, he wasn't really over the top or anything with holidays, but it didn't matter. They were always perfect because they were ours. It used to be a running joke that I definitely didn't get my cooking skills from him, since I'm severely lacking in that area, yet he made it look easy. He'd make his own gravy for the turkey every year on Thanksgiving and my gosh, if it wasn't the one thing I looked forward to the most.

As the years have gone by, I've been able to find a lot of joy again in the holiday season. I've been learning how to navigate this new normal, and even though I don't like it, I've reached the acceptance stage of grief to be able to realize this is my reality now. It's strange when you lose a parent. One moment they're the people you've known the longest in your life and the next they're just gone. I'm still learning how to exist in a world where my dad doesn't.

“Hey, Ab.” Chase taps on my bedroom door, bringing me out of my thoughts.

“I’m heading to the stadium, I’ll see you later.”

My door swings back and forth as his bag bumps it on his way out. There’s a game this afternoon and I told Ford I’d be there, but truthfully, there are so many things that I need to do before Summer gets here tomorrow. I grab my notepad from the nightstand to make a list. Number one is definitely “shower.” It might not be necessary to put things like showering on a to do list, but there’s something satisfying in simply crossing it off.

After Friday night with Ford, I haven’t stopped thinking about him. Not like that’s much different than lately anyway, but instead of being lustful thoughts, they’re now more emotional. Like, I’m almost even more nervous to tell Chase now because what if he absolutely hates the idea of Ford and I together? How would I even handle a situation where the man I’m in love with and my brother end up hating each other?

Summer’s timing is always impeccable as my phone rings mid freak out mode with all of these thoughts now swirling in my head.

“I can’t wait to see you!” she says as I answer.

“I’m counting down the hours.” Naturally, she can sense some kind of conflict in my voice.

“What’s the matter?” I haven’t actually talked to Summer on the phone in weeks, so the last thing she knows is Ford’s whole love confession and the fact that we’re now trying to actually be more than just friends with benefits.

“I think I’m in love with Ford!” I blurt out, throwing myself back on the bed like a toddler having a tantrum.

“Yes... and?” Summer’s tone is flat and direct, as if what I’m saying isn’t brand new information to her.

“What do you mean *yes... and?*”

“Okay, well you’ve done a shit job at hiding that if that was your goal.” The great thing about best friends is they know you so well. The annoying thing about best friends is also that they know you so well.

“I don’t know how to tell Chase. Hell, I haven’t even told Ford yet. It feels like I’m overthinking this, but at the same time, this is a big thing so overthinking it doesn’t sound like it should be a problem, right?” My head is spinning just thinking of these conversations I need to have with the two of them.

“Abby, listen. Are you happy?”

“Yes,” I say without hesitation.

“Then just let yourself be happy. Don’t worry about what your brother will think. When he sees how happy you are, he’ll be happy for you.”

I know she’s right. Even though Chase may not love it at first, he’s always cared about my happiness, I can’t imagine this would be any different.

“Yeah... yeah, you’re right.”

“Listen, as your best friend, all I want for you is someone who treats you right. Someone who doesn’t downplay your feelings or make you hide parts of yourself. The *It Takes Two* kind of love, remember? Someone who loves you without question, so fucking much that they’d do anything for you. A guy who would move a damn mountain for you and if it made you happy. You have that with Ford and I think you know that, but I also think it scares you,” she pauses and takes a deep breath before going on. “The only real boyfriend you’ve had was a complete piece of shit. He used you and manipulated you, he was a little boy compared to Ford and it’s normal that you have fears of allowing yourself to fall for someone again. But Ab, Ford’s your guy. The one we always talked about finding growing up. He’s it. You’ve found him.”

People used to rag on Summer for being a “dumb blonde” back in school, but there’s no one smarter than her, especially at this moment. Her words hit me at my core and I know that she’s right. Ford is everything I could have ever hoped to have. I release a loud sigh into the phone before we both settle into a laughing fit together.

“How’d I get so lucky? I swear every time I’m having a classic Abby freak out, you’re my saving grace.” I sit up on my bed, feeling a wave of reassurance and confidence coursing through me.

“Best friends are the soulmates. The guys are just for fun.” She jokes before we end the call.

I’m feeling so much better after talking with Summer. I’m ready to tell Ford how I feel and then we’ll find a way to tell Chase together. I’m done hiding how fucking happy I am.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN



FORD

“It’s going to be fucking Minnesota and I plan on tossing bullets over their defense all fucking day,” Liam says.

We’re up at halftime right now in our second to last game of the regular season and at this point, we all just want to finish this game and the next one to get to the playoffs. There’s a different energy in the playoffs. It’s like you’re starting the season from scratch with a clean slate and it doesn’t matter what the hell happened in the regular season. Playoffs are anyone’s game.

“I agree. I think we’ll have to make our way to Minnesota in a couple weeks.” Nate sits next to Liam on the bench before Coach Aarons comes in for a half time pep talk.

“Evans, Campbell, keep up whatever the hell you two have going on. Seems they can’t read you and your running is clean.” Coach gestures to Liam and Nate and then turns his attention to Chase and the defense.

“Hunt. Good work on the line.” Chase nods as Coach moves on to special teams and addresses them as well.

I adjust my pads and take a quick peek at my phone in the locker. Nothing from Abby since earlier today, I don’t even know if she’s at the game, actually. After Friday and her asking about Grace and my past, I really

thought she was going to be upset that I didn't tell her. Hell, maybe I should've told her sooner, but there isn't much to tell. We dated, we broke up, I focused on football, end of story. At least Abby understood and didn't seem mad, she actually looked like she felt sorry for me, which is the last thing I want. I meant what I said after telling Abby that I'm in love with her and that I'd prove to her just how much she means to me. From what I've heard about her ex, he was a piece of shit who never should have had her attention in the first place and if I ever happen to see him, I'll gladly tell him just that.

The second half of the game goes by in a flash and I'm the first guy to run back into the tunnel afterwards.

"Hey, hang on, Anderson. What's the rush?" My helmet hangs from one hand as I'm jogging down the hall to the locker room with Nate on my heels. A few other guys come shuffling in after us, but I reach for my phone to check it again.

Nothing.

"*What the fuck?*" I mutter to myself.

"Hey man, are you okay?" I see Nate from the corner of my eye as confusion swirls in my head. Maybe she didn't make it to the game after all. Even still though, there's usually always a text waiting for me. I quickly try to gather all of my things, completely ignoring Nate's question again. My mind is just focused on calling Abby and I can't do that standing in a locker room with her brother.

"Anderson!" Nate shouts, causing more than one of the other guys to also turn their head. Nate stalks towards me, an annoyed look on his face. I can't blame him, I've been a dick for the last ten minutes. He catches up to me as I'm walking out and finally I stop when he reaches me.

"Is something going on? A problem you want to share?"

Letting out a deep breath I shake my head. "No, man. Sorry. My head's in a weird space today. Just need to get home."

I start to walk again and feel Nate's presence keeping up with each of my strides.

"Listen, if it's something you want to talk about..." He trails off as I watch him look down at his phone.

"Mia texting you?" I growl out, a little more sarcastic than I'd like and then hear a laugh bellow from Nate's body.

"Oh, is that what this is about then?" His comment stops me in my tracks.

We've just reached the exit and we're standing in front of the doors that lead outside.

"What does that mean?" My eyes narrow at him.

"Your attitude. It's about some girl, isn't it?" I can feel my patience growing thinner and thinner. It's not just *some girl*.

As we stand there in a stare off, I'm about to speak when I see Chase rounding the corner with his phone pressed to his ear. I close my mouth the moment we make eye contact and it's obvious that Nate notices my change in demeanor.

"Later, guys!" Chase says as he passes us in the hall, still in conversation with whoever is on the other line.

"No. Anderson. No. Fucking. Way." Nate's words cause me to let out a deep breath and run a hand through my sweaty hair. I'm tired of standing here and I just wanted to get to my truck and call Abby, but Nate's delayed my whole process. I don't have it in me to deny it to him, not anymore.

"Have you lost your mind? Do you have a death wish? Fucking his sister, Ford?" Nate jerks his head back and shakes it,

"It's not like that!" I shout, anger coursing through me.

"Oh, no? What is it then? A relationship? Bullshit." His voice is low, but still bears some sarcasm.

I move past him to walk out the doors and barrel my way to my truck. Of course, Nate is parked right next to me.

"I don't buy it. I've never seen you in an actual relationship, never heard you express the want for one either. Just call it what it is. She's hot and you're a guy." I shove Nate's body against the truck with just enough force to let out some frustration. He doesn't have all the facts yet so I just need to say what's on my mind.

"Don't fucking belittle her like that." I'm standing inches away from him before backing up and pacing beside the truck.

I toss my bag in the passenger's seat and return my attention back to Nate, who is now just staring at me waiting on answers. Gripping the back of my neck I let out a sigh. I'm done hiding how I feel about Abby from people.

"C'mon, if there's something you need to get off your chest you know you can talk to me about it. What's going on, man?" Nate's tone has now turned from cocky to concerned.

"At first, yeah, maybe it was just because she's gorgeous, but it's not like that anymore... it hasn't been for a while."

Nodding his head, Nate looks at me. “How long?” He crosses his arms over his chest.

Do I even know at this point? The first night we met, I should've just hung up my bachelor card then, because looking back, everything changed the moment I saw her.

“I don’t know, man... a few months. We started it off as just a friends with benefits deal, something she suggested. Obviously, Chase doesn’t know... but within the last couple months, it started to feel like more and now I just... I can’t stop thinking about her, I’m completely out of my mind for her.”

Standing across from me, Nate reaches his arm out and slaps my shoulder.

“So you love her?” His face softens and a smile takes over.

I don’t even need a second to think about it.

“Yeah.” I nod my head and see Nate do the same as he walks over to his truck.

“You’ve gotta tell him,” he shouts before getting in and driving off.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT



After my conversation with Summer, I've decided that tonight I'll tell Ford how I feel. He's been so open with me about his feelings and again, that's another thing I'm just not used to. I guess now, knowing his story, making his intentions and his feelings crystal clear makes sense. Usually, I'll text Ford after the game and let him know I'll meet him at his house or at the players exit, but today when the game was over, I blew past everyone in the stadium as fast as I could to get my plan for the night started.

SUMMER

Don't forget heels.

Already packed them!

I know Ford doesn't need a grand gesture from me, but I still want to give him one. From day one, he's given me nothing but reassurance, confidence and honesty, and that's exactly what I plan to give him in return. I decided to pick up churros and ice cream from the food trucks that we went to on our first date. Even though I'm not sure he looks at our unplanned walk around downtown as a date, it's how I look at the timeline of our relationship starting.

Before I met Ford, I made a promise to myself that I'd work hard to regain all of the parts of me I lost over the last few years. When Ford and I agreed to our friends with benefits arrangement, I wasn't looking for love and sure as hell didn't think I'd be finding it with him. I'm finally feeling like myself again and these last few months with him played a part in that.

As I wait in my car in Ford's driveway, the anticipation of what tonight means has my heart fluttering. I pull down the visor mirror to check myself for probably the twentieth time, even though I know for Ford, it doesn't matter what I look like.

My long brown hair is down and curled in soft beachy waves and I kept my makeup to a minimum except for the red lip I decided to sport tonight. I pull the coat I'm wearing slightly open at the collar and peek down at my undressed skin. Nothing but a pair of black lace underwear and heels. This is so unlike me, but feels so right at the same time. It's one of those things I've always heard about women doing, and I always wondered if I'd ever be confident enough to try something like that. Turns out, when Ford is the other party, hell yeah, I'm confident enough.

Glancing in the rearview mirror, I see headlights slowing down behind me and Ford's truck turns into the driveway and pulls into the garage. I thought about seeing if Mia had a key to his house so I could be waiting inside, but I didn't want anyone to know about this. I wanted it to be an intimate moment for just the two of us. Well, and Summer I guess, since it was technically her idea that I do something like this.

I get out of my car and walk up the driveway in my heels and coat, with a small overnight bag over my shoulder. It is pretty cold out, so I don't think he'll question the coat to be honest.

He smiles when he sees me walking towards him and reaches out to grab my bag as he kisses the top of my head.

"I didn't hear from you after the game and you didn't answer when I texted you..." He looks at his phone. "Seven minutes ago."

"Sorry." I blush. "I just wanted to talk to you in person."

He takes my hand and pulls it to his mouth, placing a kiss on my knuckles and leads me inside.

He puts my bag down along with his own and I quickly grab the churros and ice cream out when he walks into the bathroom. Placing the ice cream in the freezer, I fluff my hair one more time for good measure. Once he begins to walk out of the room and I hurry to the center of the living room. Pulling

my hair over my shoulders on either side so it falls down over my chest and then positioning one hand on my hip, while keeping the other close to the tie on the coat.

“You want to eat something?” Ford says as he walks out with his phone in his hand looking down. When he brings his eyes up and sees me standing there, I consider this a homerun of an idea, or should I say touchdown.

“Abby.” His eyes light up as he drops his phone on the couch and slowly makes his way over to me. His dark hair looks a little grown out and he has the extra scruff on his face that he knows I love running my fingers over. His black t-shirt and denim jeans bring me right back to the first night we met. I’m absolutely swept off my feet by this man.

My smile grows as he gets closer and brings his lips to mine. His tongue swipes over my bottom lip and I open to give us both the deeper kiss we’re craving. When he pulls away, I wipe a bit of red lipstick that got on the corner of his mouth,

“So, I thought it was about time I shared some feelings tonight.” I stand up straighter and press my fingers into the corners of my lips to clean up any lipstick there on myself too.

Ford places both hands on my hips as he moves me closer to him,

“Are you going to make me wait to see what’s under this coat or can I have a peek now?” His fingers press into my hips, giving me goosebumps.

Lightly pushing his chest, I look up at him.

“Oh, you’ll have to wait,” I say with a pout, causing a loud groan to leave his lips as he throws his head back dramatically and takes a step backwards.

“You know, I wasn’t looking for anything when I moved here.” I slowly pace the living room, toying with the tie on the coat as I do. “I wasn’t planning on falling for someone so soon after everything I’d been through.” My voice stays steady and soft, I talk slowly, wanting to make sure I’m perfectly clear in my confession. Ford’s body is leaning against the frame of the sliding glass door. He doesn’t take his eyes off of mine while I’m speaking.

“But then along came you.” I stare into his eyes, a soft smile on my lips. “I slowly found myself wanting to spend time with you, wanting to talk to you all the time, and tell you about my past. It was simple, it was easy. It was also consuming and intense.” Ford’s chest moves up and down as I look over his body, standing so tall and still against the glass.

“I wasn’t looking for anything, and then suddenly... I realized I found

something. With you, I'm safe, I feel seen, I've never been more myself than I am when I'm with you." My body moves towards him, beginning to close the distance between us and he does the same.

Ford takes my cheek in his hand and I lean into it, the feel of his rough hand against my skin is everything I'm craving. Our bodies are inches from one another and my heartbeat has started to pick up as I'm nearing the end of what I planned on saying to him.

"You took me by surprise in every way imaginable. I can't wait another second, I don't want to wait anymore. I love you, Ford. I'm so ridiculously in love with you, it's insane." My eyes begin to fill with tears as a sob comes from my chest louder than I intended.

Without another second passing his lips are on mine. His kiss is possessive and greedy, and I pull him towards my body in the same needy way.

"You have no idea how much I fucking love you, Abby." His hands cup my face and his thumb swipes my cheek to catch a single tear. "But I plan on showing you, every day, just how much that is."

I bring my hands to the tie on the coat, "Well actually, I was kind of hoping I could show you how much I love you, first."

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE



FORD

When I got in the truck after the game, the last thing I'd expected to find waiting for me in my driveway was Abby. Now I'm looking at her standing in my living room, red lipstick smeared on her lips and rosy red cheeks. She *loves* me. I've wanted her to love me back the same way I love her so badly, but for the last few weeks, I've made it a point to never pressure her into saying it back. I've always given her an out, I'd capture her mouth to mine before she had time to respond with anything, but now that I know she feels it too, every part of me wants to put up a damn billboard that tells the world she's mine. To hell with what anyone may think, Abby is it for me.

Abby takes a step back from me and loosens the tie on the coat she's wearing and lets it slowly slide off her shoulders, exposing more of her golden skin.

"Abby, baby," I say, inching a little closer to her. My dick is already throbbing in my jeans from the way she looks right now.

My girl showing up tonight in this coat and seemingly nothing else is lighting a fucking fire within me. She lets the remainder of the coat fall as the black fabric pools around her feet and it's like I've just been sucker punched in the gut. All the air leaves my lungs as she stands there in nothing but black

lace underwear and a pair of heels. My throat feels thick and I can't take my eyes off of her perfect breasts just waiting for me.

"Fuuuuuck. Are you kidding me, Abby? Look at you... you're perfect."

She takes her bottom lip into her mouth and smiles at me. I walk up to her slowly, trailing my fingers from her shoulder, down her arms and as the goosebumps spread over her skin. Reaching up to her breasts, I pinch one of her nipples, which causes her to let out a quick whimper at the contact. Abby reaches for my jeans and as she does, my other hand finds the string of her underwear on her hip. I flick it against her skin and grab her, pulling her closer to me.

Abby's hands shove my jeans and boxers down and my cock springs to attention. It's been hard since the moment I saw her get out of her car looking like she did tonight. Bringing my hand to stroke my length, I whisper into her ear, "You did this."

Before I can say anything more, she sinks to her knees right there in my living room. I can't even believe this girl is fucking real right now. More importantly, I can't even believe she's mine, but she is.

"I've been wanting to do this all day." Abby takes her tongue and licks the tip, sending my head falling backwards at her delicate touch.

"My cock has been dripping for you since the moment I saw you tonight, Princess. It's yours. If you want it, take it." I fist my hand in her hair, grabbing a handful and yanking her head to look up at me. A devilish smile spreads across her face as she licks her lips, getting ready to take me.

Fucking hell, this is hot. She's never gone this deep before but tonight, Abby has me so deep in her throat, there are tears building in her eyes threatening to pool over. Every time I've tried to pull back slightly, to ease some of it, she pushes herself forward more.

"Fuck, Abby. This feels so damn good." Her head moves back and forth with my movements and I can feel my orgasm building every time she sucks harder. Abby's hand cups my balls as her throat opens even more, somehow, causing me to put both hands in her hair to steady myself before I fucking lose it.

She licks up and down my length one more time before pulling her lips away briefly and staring up at me. Her lips are puffy and pink and she looks so damn good right now. She takes my cock in her hand again and puts just the tip in her mouth and sucks on it, hard.

"Fuck!" I yell out.

That's it. I need to be inside her, I can't wait any longer to feel her pussy clenching around me.

"Come up here, baby." I gently pull her up to me and walk us to the couch and sit down. Abby stands between my legs and pulls my shirt up over my head, tossing it to the side. She runs her thumb across her bottom lip and then sucks it.

"I wasn't done," she pouts, sticking one of her hips out and placing a hand on it.

"Oh, I'm not either." My fingers hook into her underwear and yank them down her body to let them fall to her ankles and she slowly steps out of them. She's absolutely soaked for me, just how I like her. I pull her body onto mine and line her up with me.

"I love you, Princess." I whisper against her ear. Abby sinks herself down onto my cock, taking the whole thing in at one time.

"I love you," she moans as she sits with me filling her up.

She rocks her hips and pulls at the nape of my neck. Every movement with her feels so in sync, I can't imagine ever coming close to feeling like this with anyone else ever. Lucky for me, I never plan to. I know Abby is the one for me. My future. My forever.

I grab her hips as I'm picking her up and down, watching her face and hearing her yell out in pleasure with every push.

"Faster, please," she begs and we pick up the pace. Her perfect breasts bounce in front of me as she leans her body and head back in pure ecstasy.

"That's it, Abby. Fucking ride me."

Abby's moans are only fueling me to keep going, harder, faster, just like she asked. I want to feel her pulsing around me as she comes apart with my name on her lips.

My thumb finds her swollen clit and as soon as I touch her there, she screams my name with pleasure. I pinch and rub slowly, then pick up the pace to keep up the momentum of her riding me.

"I'm so close," she yells out, picking herself up and slamming herself back down on my cock. I move in circles, back and forth on her clit until I can feel the clenching of her body.

"Ford! Oh my God." Abby's body shakes and her orgasm only sends me coming right along with her. The way her tight pussy feels is something I want to experience every day for the rest of my life. Every last drop I have empties into her as she slows her motion and brings her forehead to mine.

Sticky and sweaty, we both sit still, panting and trying to catch our breaths with giant smiles on our faces.

We rinse off in the shower, where our lips spend practically the whole time connected. Abby steps out of the shower and grabs the towel from the rack before heading into my room. I follow her out and grab myself a pair of sweatpants from my drawer and toss a t-shirt of mine in her direction.

“I’m starting to build a collection of these you know.” She jokes as she pulls it over her head.

“That was the point,” I say with a grin.

My house feels so much more like a home with her in it. I’m finding myself wishing she were here all the time lately.

“I brought churros. And ice cream.”

Dream girl.

“From the food trucks we went to the day we walked around downtown. I had to rack my brain for the name of the churro food truck, but eventually it came to me.” She sticks her hand in the bag, reaching for one of the churros and dipping it into a scoop of ice cream.

“Our first date.” I have no idea if she considers that a date, but I do. Abby’s smile confirms she feels the same as she brings her body over to mine. I take a bite of the churro she has in her hand and moan as the cinnamon hits my pallet.

“It’s just a churro, Anderson. Calm down.” Abby’s tone is playful and sarcastic as she teases me.

“You know how I feel about cinnamon.”

Nodding her head, she grabs a heaping spoonful of the cookie dough ice cream and shoves it in her mouth before walking into the living room.

“*New Girl?* I’m sure you’re dying to see what happens between Schmidt and CeCe.” She smiles as she grabs the remote off the table.

“Oh, they’re end game, I already know it,” I say before digging my spoon in for a bite of the ice cream.

“You’ll have to keep watching to find out.” Abby’s shoulders pop up and down with a shrug as she throws herself on the couch wearing only my t-shirt.

Fuck I love her. And I need to talk to Chase.

CHAPTER FIFTY



I snuck out of Ford's early this morning to get back before Chase woke up, but also because Summer is coming into town today. I'm excited to tell her how my 'bold statement' went. Summer encourages me to do a lot of things outside of my comfort zone and usually I don't take her up on most of them, but last night's idea actually sounded like a lot of fun and as expected, Ford loved it.

As I'm heating up a bowl of oatmeal, there's a knock at the door and I know that it's Summer. The moment I open it, she flies in and pulls me into the biggest hug.

"You had sex!" she shouts. Summer really needs to work on her inside voice.

"What? I did not just have sex. Also, keep your voice down!" I'm turning around to make sure Chase isn't out of his room yet.

"Well obviously not just now. Last night. Right? He loved the coat and gave you the orgasm of a lifetime for it. I'm right, just tell me I'm right." She has me rolling my eyes before I nod my head.

"Yes. It was a great idea, one of your best," I say, grabbing her bag from the floor and walking it into my bedroom. She follows behind me and taps on

Chase's door as she walks down the hall.

"The fun one is here." Summer calls out. I can hear Chase's door open as I'm tossing Summer's bag in my room and walking back out to the kitchen.

"You mean the trouble maker? You're a piece of work, Kincaid." Chase pulls her in for a hug and I busy myself with pulling my oatmeal from the microwave and putting it at the table.

"I can't believe you're going to be a daddy." Summer's voice has a playful tone to it, but she was completely shocked when I told her. She may need to see the actual baby before she believes my brother is going to have a child.

As I'm sitting down to eat since I've eaten nothing since churros and ice cream last night, my phone dings and I see the truck emoji pop up. Ford thought it was only fair to change his name to an emoji in my phone since I changed myself to a princess in his.

FORD

Hi Princess. Next time wake me up before you leave.

I didn't trust myself to wake you up and not get distracted. I needed to get home.

It's true. The way the comforter hit Ford's hip just right in bed this morning, made my thighs press together in reaction. He looked like a damn GQ model laying there, so perfectly sculpted. Athletes and their annoyingly wonderful bodies.

With Christmas being only a few days away and Ford having to do some volunteer work over the next couple of days, I probably won't see him a ton. I've made a small list of the things that need to get done beforehand and thankfully, Summer is here and can help with quite a bit.

After we eat and get changed, Summer and I tackle the to-do list. Having her around always makes everything feel easier. She just has this carefree, happy personality that she doesn't take life too seriously, but also, she's a piranha and she'll take off someone's head if they're an ass to me or anybody she cares about.

"I'm glad you're stepping a little out of your comfort zone lately. You need it. You've got this new badass confidence about you, I can't tell if it's me rubbing off on you or just that you've found your little bit of sass now living here, but I like it." Summer swings her arm around my shoulder as we walk through downtown. It's busy here today, everyone is probably running

around at the last minute trying to get things done before the holiday.

“Probably a bit of both. I feel so much like my old self again. It feels good.”

We cross off everything on the list and head back to the apartment for the night. I haven’t talked with Ford since earlier but I’m not expecting to. I know he was doing a few volunteer events with the team and he knows Summer is in town too. It’s so nice, and it feels so mature to be in a relationship where we don’t have to check in every hour, where Ford isn’t texting me asking when I’m coming home or why I haven’t texted him. Welcome to an adult relationship, Abby.

Minus the part where it’s still a secret from my brother.

“So, what are the odds you’ll be in the Super Bowl? You’re going to have to play Minnesota in the playoffs, you know that right?” Summer and my brother are going back and forth about football while I continue wrapping presents for my mom. I found the coolest clock for her at this antique store downtown. She collects old clocks and this one has a cardinal engraved on the top. It looks pretty weathered, but she’ll like the look of it.

“You’ll have no excuse not to come to the Super Bowl since it’ll be in your backyard.” I hear Chase’s words, but don’t think anything of it, until it registers that the Super Bowl is being held in Miami this year. I had no plan to go back to Miami, at least not any time soon. Not when it would be too easy to run into Andrew at any given time. I guess the odds of me seeing him are slim, but not zero like they are here, and I’m a big fan of zero.

A puff of air blows through my lips and I already know that we’re making a trip to Miami in February. The team is too talented and too resilient. They deserve it. Damn it, out of all the stadiums and all the years... Why the hell does it have to be Miami?

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE



FORD

I know we said we weren't doing gifts, but I couldn't help myself.

ABBY

Anderson! Come on, now you're going to make me feel bad.

Don't. It's technically a gift for both of us.

I've got another hour before I need to be at my parents house for Christmas Eve dinner and part of me is thinking of making an excuse and ditching altogether. Holidays with my parents are always a show. My mother throws a party every year and invites anyone who's anyone over for dinner and drinks. I'm not even able to recall a time I truly enjoyed it. Maybe when I was a teenager, and it was cool to sneak some of the booze upstairs with Grace, but even that doesn't bring me any memories to really smile about.

It's 7:43 and my mom asked me to be there promptly at eight, so taking the fifteen minute drive into account, I should maybe put some clothes on that would be presentable for fifty people I barely know. People who will, no doubt, come to me with remarks and questions about the season, ask if I've met a *nice girl* yet, or when I'm getting them tickets to a game. These people

have more money than they know what to do with, they can buy their own tickets.

I show up at eight on the dot, because despite all of my desire to be anywhere else, this means a lot to my mom and I want to do right by her.

“Hi, honey! Merry Christmas!” Mom comes rushing to the door as I’m walking in. She’s wearing a beautiful long red dress with sequins and a necklace that I’m sure she bought just for this event.

“You look handsome.” She pulls at my tie, straightening it out as I pull at the collar of my shirt that’s suffocating my neck. There are few times you’ll find me in a suit and this is one of them. I own one and this is it.

“Looks great in here, mom.” Leaning in, I kiss her cheek and take the empty tray she’s holding in her hands to bring back to the kitchen.

“Don’t you hire people for this kind of stuff?” I say, gesturing towards the tray now in my hand.

“Well, yes but it was sitting outside empty so I just wanted to bring it in. I’m not above clearing a table Ford.” She raises an eyebrow at me before turning back to the door as someone else walks in.

I head into the kitchen and drop the plate near the sink. My parents hired caterers for tonight's event and all I can smell is fresh basil and garlic as I’m walking around the kitchen island. They never go easy on the food and I’ve got to say, I’m thankful for that.

“Ford!” I hear my name from a high-pitched voice coming from the dining room. Turning around, there are probably five or six women standing there in long evening gowns, waving in my direction. I give them a polite nod and continue about my business, looking under every tray to see what I’ll be scarfing down in the next hour.

The Christmas tree in my parents home is larger than necessary, but over the top decorations are definitely my mother’s thing when it comes to holidays. I’m sure Abby would love this shit. She completely changed Chase’s apartment into Santa’s little village and it’s equally adorable as it is obnoxious. I see my father and a few of his colleagues outside and make my way through the small crowds of people over to him. There is classical Christmas music playing over the speakers that you can hear inside and outside of the house. There are torches lit up around the pool creating a cozy vibe out here. It makes me wonder why this is such a black tie event when we could easily all show up, eat and drink in sweats just the same.

“Hi, son.” I shake my father’s hand as he introduces me to a few men he’s

standing with. I've definitely met them before, but I don't bother correcting him.

"You're having a great season, Ford. If I were a betting man, I'd have money on you getting a ring this year."

"Thank you, sir. I plan on that being the outcome too."

We exchange polite conversation about football for the next twenty minutes before it's time to eat. I take a seat next to my mother at the long table she had professionally set up under a canopy outside. There are a few heaters lined along the way outside, but truthfully, it's not even cold enough for them.

My phone dings as soon as I'm ready for seconds.

ABBY

How is the party?

It'd be a lot better if you were here.

I stare at my phone for a moment and don't bother to hide the smile on my face, until I feel a hand on my back.

"Who is she?" My dad's voice is rough, but not in a bad way. More in the way that he's probably smoked too many cigars tonight and had a few too many glasses of scotch. Lying to my parents about Abby isn't something I think I'm prepared to do, especially when I plan on actually introducing her to them as my girlfriend and the woman I plan to spend forever with one day.

"Someone I've met." Keeping it honest, but vague will have to do for now. My mother, God love her, is a gossip and I know if I tell my dad, he'll say something to her and somehow the whole city will know before I even get home from this evening. My dad doesn't press the subject, he simply nods his head before walking back into the house.

After a few more empty conversations, I say goodnight to my parents. Chase invited me and Nate over for brunch tomorrow, and I'm not passing up the opportunity to see Abby.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO



When Ford said his parents were having a big party for Christmas Eve, it instantly reminded me of Andrew's parents and the big over the top parties they would throw. Although, unlike Andrew, Ford hated the idea of making pointless small talk with a bunch of strangers, whereas Andrew thrived off of it. It's one thing to just be polite, but Andrew was so fake with everyone at those things. It used to drive me nuts.

"Merry Christmas, honey." Mom taps on my bedroom door, edging it open slightly. Summer and I passed out so early last night, probably from all the margaritas we decided to make.

"Hi, mom. Merry Christmas!" I push the comforter off of my legs and turn to see Summer still passed out to my right. Quietly, I get up and meet my mom in the kitchen. The house is quiet and it looks like the sun just came up. Mom and I grab cups of coffee and head outside to sit on the balcony. My mom pulls a blanket over her legs and brings the coffee up to her lips, softly blowing on it as steam drifts off the top.

"We have about an hour before we should start getting brunch together. Summer will be up by then won't she?" Mom laughs as she takes a sip and I nod my head.

“Yeah, I’ll give her thirty more minutes before I jump on the bed.”

We both laugh and then settle in silence for a few moments, just taking in the sun and the way it sparkles on the water. Any time I’m out here now I picture the first night Ford and I met. It’s like a moment that’s engraved in my mind, something I never want to forget considering all of the wonderful memories he’s given me since then.

“What’s that look?” My mom is staring at me with her eyebrows raised.

“What look?” I try to play dumb, but I’ve never been able to pull a fast one on my mom. She’s like Summer, she knows me too well, which is both a blessing and a curse.

“Hm. You’re happy,” Mom says quietly with a smirk, directing her attention back to the water. “I see it. You’re happy again.” My eyes begin to sting with tears, but I don’t let them bubble over. Not yet.

“It’s all I ever wanted for you. For both of you. To be able to look at you one day and just see my kids happy again.” She swipes a tear from her face and that releases one of my own. I blink my eyes quickly and wipe my cheek.

“I’m happy,” I say, my throat feeling thick like there’s something stuck in it. She grabs my hand and squeezes, giving me a reassuring look that only a mom can.

“Merry Christmas! Should we add some Baileys to our coffees?” Summer comes barreling through the sliding glass door holding a coffee cup and a bottle of Baileys.

“And that’s my cue to start cooking!” Mom gets up and kisses me on the cheek and hugs Summer before she walks in.

“No Baileys for me,” I say, holding up my hand.

Summer pours some in her coffee and turns around to walk back inside. “Go get dressed. Your man’s coming over for brunch. Maybe you’ll be his first course.” I throw a pillow from the chair in her direction, but she dodges it and closes the door as it hits the corner.

That doesn’t sound half bad, come to think of it.

The smell of French toast, pancakes and bacon waft through the apartment as I make my way inside. Mom’s been busy in the last thirty minutes. I start cutting up some of the fruits for the French toast casserole and Summer is mixing eggs in a bowl next to me.

“Smells good in here!” Chase says as he finally emerges from his room.

“You know, once you have a baby, your days of sleeping in like this are long gone.” Summer has mentioned his upcoming role as ‘dad’ every chance

she's gotten since she's been here.

Chase rolls his eyes at her and kisses mom and I both on the cheek before pinching Summer on the back of her arm.

"Ouch!" she squeals like it's the first time he's done that and she wasn't expecting it, but he'd do it to us as kids all the time. He just stopped with me and not her.

Once mom officially says she doesn't need our help anymore, Summer and I make our way into my room to get ready. I reach in my closet and grab an emerald green off-the-shoulder top, holding it up for Summer to take a look.

"Thoughts?"

She twists her head, looking at the shirt and back at me.

"What about..." She walks past me and grabs a black long sleeve bodysuit from my closet. I've never worn it because the neckline goes a little deeper than I'd normally like. "This. Wear this."

My eyes go wide at her. "It's brunch, Summer. I'm not going to a club. It feels like too much for a brunch."

Summer doesn't pay any attention to me as she strips out of her pajamas and pulls a white body suit on with a pair of dark wash skinny jeans.

"It's not *just a brunch*. It's Christmas. Plus, Ford will be here. Also, you should just know to trust me." She looks at me, her giant blue eyes doing that pleading look. Finally giving in, I grab it from her hands and get changed.

Okay, so maybe she was onto something, because this outfit works. I decided to wear the black bodysuit and a black skirt, but made sure I added some pops of Christmas color by wearing a festive headband and fun Santa earrings. I keep my hair down and straight, while Summer's blonde hair is down in big loose curls.

Just as I'm throwing on some clear lip gloss, I hear Ford's voice in the kitchen and my pulse starts to rise. No one but Summer knows we're together, but this is *kind of* our first Christmas together and I just want to make it special. Yesterday, Ford said he got me a gift, even though I thought we laid down a very strict no gift policy.

"Merry Christmas," I say while walking into the kitchen. Ford is standing there next to my brother and Nate.

"You know this brunch is just happening in our dining room, right?" Summer hits Chase on the arm as I give him an evil stare for that comment.

My attention turns to Ford and his eyes trail up and down my body. He

stops when our eyes lock and I don't miss the way he adjusts himself in his jeans before he says, "Merry Christmas" back to me. It makes me blush every time. He's wearing a hunter green t-shirt, something different than his normal black or white, but looks just as delicious in. His jeans hug his thighs and I'm well aware that he's happy to see me as my gaze lands near the bulge by his zipper.

"Ahem." Summer clears her throat and I shake my head looking up at her smiling in my direction. Ford notices and I hear a low laugh from his chest as he moves to help my mom take something from the oven.

For the next two hours, we eat and open a few gifts, and my mom suggests a round of Scattergories which has Summer and Chase jumping out of their seats. They're so competitive with one another, it's annoying. Ford and I lock stares, somehow quietly deciding that we aren't playing and both get up.

"I need to run to my truck, I'll be right back." Ford excuses himself and I walk outside to the balcony. It's gotten colder as the day has gone on and I'm suddenly thinking I should go in and throw some sweatpants on when Ford opens the sliding glass door. He has a small bag in his hand and I'm about to question how he made it out here with a gift and no one stopping him before he answers it for me.

"I sprinted through the house as they were all trying to think of things that start with the letter S." Biting the inside of my cheek, I smile at him and take the bag.

"We agreed on no gifts. What's with you and breaking rules, Anderson?" I raise my eyebrows at him.

"I told you, it's technically a gift for both of us."

Glancing behind him, it seems like we're not in view of anyone inside so I reach my hand in the bag and pull out a piece of tissue paper. Under the tissue paper, I see red fabric with some stitching on the back.

"You got me a jersey?" It comes out as a squeak before I'm looking up at him as I pull the whole thing out of the bag.

"A gift for you. And for me."

I give him a questioning look while holding the jersey up, focusing on the giant number 87 on the front and turning it around to see ANDERSON on the back, my cheeks begin to blush.

"I love it. Thank you, but how is this a gift for you?" I laugh, folding it up and putting it back in the bag. Ford inches closer and his hands land on my

hips. We're dangerously close to being within eyesight of everyone in the house, but he's too tempting to pull away from.

Ford's breath hits my neck below my ear as he whispers, "While this outfit you have on right now is fucking hot as hell, Abby, there won't be anything sexier than seeing you with my name on your back." My breathing stutters as I reach my hand up to his cheek and smile.

The moment I push myself onto my tippy toes and lock my lips with Ford, I know I should've pulled away.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE



FORD

“Chase... man it’s not what you think.” I’m trying to remain as calm as possible when I see the horror on Abby’s face as she backs away from me.

“Oh? It’s not? Care to explain what the fuck it is then?” His voice draws Nate, Summer and Diane out to the balcony where we are now apparently doing this with an audience. Abby’s hands cover her face and Summer walks over to her.

“Chase, calm down.” Abby tries to relax him with a soft tone, but he snaps at her.

“Don’t tell me to fucking calm down, Abby. I walk onto *my* patio and see *my* sister hanging off of *my* best friend. What the fuck is going on?”

“Hey! *He’s* your best friend?” Nate interjects and we all whip our heads in his direction. *It’s not the time to debate best friends like we’re children, Nate.*

“Don’t yell at her.” I take two steps in Chase’s direction. Hearing him raise his voice at her like that, if it were anyone else I would’ve had my fist in their teeth. “It’s on me. You want someone to lash out on? It’s me,” I say, patting my chest.

“Chase.” Diane steps to Chase’s side. “Let your sister talk to you.”

“No.” Chase stares me down, not even giving his mom a glance. “I want to talk to him.”

I give Abby a nod as she makes her way inside with everyone else. Chase is pacing the patio like a mad man, you’d think he just walked in on us full on having sex.

“Listen—” I begin, but he cuts me off.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, Anderson? That’s my *sister*. I’ve trusted you around her. Trusted you to respect her. Hell, to respect me, as your fucking friend. Do you even know the bullshit she’s gone through?” He runs his hands in his hair before speaking again. “I’m supposed to look out for her, make sure she doesn’t get hurt. Again. Fuck, there’s just so much you don’t know, Ford. Whatever this is, just stop. Leave her alone. She can’t handle you, or the loss of you that will inevitably come.”

His words are a blow to my chest, *the loss that will inevitably come...* does he really fucking think that low of me? That I’d just fuck around with his sister and then leave her when I’m bored or some shit.

“No,” I say, I’m almost wishing he’d just punch me in the face rather than have this conversation with him. Chase squares his shoulders up to me, he may have more weight on me, but I’m still 6 '4 and I don’t feel the need to back down at this moment. I also probably deserve his fist, so if he wants to hit me I’m not planning on swinging back.

“I know you, Ford. You’re not stupid, but this...” He gestures between us. “This would be stupid on your part.” I hang my head and pull a few steps back.

“She told me what she’s been through, Chase, I know about all of it.” He looks at me like I just betrayed him and I guess I have been, but I’ll prove to him that his sister is safe with me, that this isn’t just some fling.

“You don’t know shit,” he says with a clenched jaw and turns away from me.

This whole thing with Abby started as one big secret, a lie to someone we both care about, but right now? Right now, I’m going to be as honest as humanly possible with Chase.

“I know I love your sister. I’m not sure how it happened, but somehow, your stubborn, chatty, fucking incredible sister changed me. And yeah, maybe I used to be the guy who didn’t want attachments, the guy who would just fuck around when I felt like it, but I haven’t so much as looked at another woman since the day I met Abby. She told me that her ex cheated on her, that

he made her feel like she wasn't the best damn thing in the world, but she so clearly is the best thing in mine. Abby is everything. She's everywhere. Shit, when I should be running plays in my head, I'm thinking of her. She's completely consumed me."

Some of the tension in Chase's body seems to relax at my confession. I didn't plan on being this open and vulnerable with him, but at this point I just want everyone to know how much I fucking love her.

"Listen, I know I fucked up your trust and really, I'm sorry for that. Maybe we should have told you sooner or maybe it wouldn't have made a difference, but I promise you this isn't a game with her, this isn't some fling, I love her. I'm in love with her."

I let out a sigh as we're both standing there. Neither of us say anything for what feels like minutes, even though I'm sure it's only a few seconds. Finally, Chase glances towards the door where Diane is standing, not so subtly, and watching the whole thing. I'd be embarrassed but I'm too fed up with the whole facade to care.

"And she feels the same?" Chase looks hurt, but I also see something else. Relief? I can't imagine what it feels like to lose a parent and then feel the invisible weight of wanting to step up and protect your family the same way they would have. I think without flat out saying it, that's what Chase meant when he said he's supposed to protect her. He probably feels some sense of anger towards himself for what Abby went through with her ex, even though he couldn't have stopped it from happening.

I nod my head yes at his question and he turns to the door to head back inside. "It doesn't mean I like it."

The door slams and my head hangs, feeling defeated, but also relieved that he knows now, even if the way he found out wasn't ideal.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR



Turns out, the sliding glass doors aren't soundproof, especially when the people on the other side aren't speaking quietly. Ford defended our relationship with so much passion and confidence and it just filled me with so much hope.

Chase barely said two words to me after he came back inside, and Ford left shortly after that. Based on what Ford told me downstairs when I walked him out, Chase wasn't so much angry as he was hurt, and even though I think Ford told me that in hopes it would make me feel better, it doesn't.

"He'll see it soon, honey. Don't worry." I hear my mom's voice as I'm sitting on the couch in a daze. Chase has been avoiding me since earlier and even though I want to talk to him, it's best to just leave him alone for the night.

"I really wanted to tell him, but I just never found the right time and now the last thing I want is for any of this to come between their friendship. And their team... it can't affect them on the field, not with what's at stake right now."

My mom shakes her head and sits next to me,

"Whether they wanted me to or not, I saw and heard the whole thing.

Your brother loves you. He wants to protect you. I think Ford just proved that he also wants to protect you and maybe... your brother wasn't ready to hear that. It sounds like they both care about you and need to give each other the room to do it."

Wiping a tear with my sleeve, I lean into my mom's shoulder. I don't want Chase beating himself up over what happened in Miami. If he feels any kind of guilt over that, he shouldn't, because there's absolutely no way he could have changed anything.

Laying here with my mom as she strokes my hair is such a comfort. When I was younger, she'd always do this if I had a bad day or didn't feel good and even at twenty four it still comforts me.

"Once he sees how happy you are, it'll all be fine." She kisses my head and a wave of calmness washes over me as I close my eyes and soak up the rest of the night with her.

The last few days have gone by in a haze. I haven't seen Ford, but we've been texting every day. Summer and my mom both left this morning and Chase left early for the game so I'm finally alone for the first time in a week. Today is the last regular season game before the playoffs start and I know how important this is to them. Ford said practice has been fine, but I'm sure he probably just doesn't want me stressing over it. Chase has started talking to me little by little, but it's been only about necessary things.

I want to regret the way things played out. I want to regret this whole situation I'm in because of how awkward it's made things between Chase and me, but I can't. If I would have done one thing differently, I may not have ended up with Ford and that's not a scenario I'm willing to entertain right now.

My mom is right. Once Chase sees that I'm happy, how truly happy Ford and I are together, he'll be okay with this, or he'll learn to be.

"Oh, look at you in your fancy new digs." Mia pulls at the jersey I have on over a pair of black leggings. We just sat down in our seats for the game. I haven't seen Mia in a few weeks, but since Nate witnessed everything the other day, I know he told her.

"Your brother will be fine!" Mia yells over the crowd noise that erupts as the players are all introduced onto the field. I nod my head at her and then direct my attention back to the field. I'm just trying to focus on the game today and not about how much my brother hates my relationship.

When Ford catches my eye, I turn around for him to see his name on my

jersey and when I look back, he has the biggest smile plastered on his face, causing one to grow on my face as well. Once Ford turns back towards the field, Chase is staring at me. And for the first time in days, he gives me a smile instead of a scowl before he turns around as the coin toss begins, giving me the slightest bit of hope.

Mia and I spend the entire game on our feet, yelling and cheering for the guys. It was definitely one of the best games I've been to all season. They came out with the win which only boosts their confidence going into the playoffs next week.

"Do you think you'll travel to Minnesota for the game?" Mia's question catches me off guard.

"I hadn't even thought about it, but honestly I don't think so. School starts back up soon since Christmas break is over." She nods her head and links my arm with hers as we walk to the exit.

When we get there, Liam and Chase are walking out almost at the same time that Mia and I arrive.

"Great game!" I say to both of them, holding my hand out to high five Liam while Chase walks up to me and gives me a quick hug.

Okay, another normal interaction, we're making progress.

Ford's tall body exits the doors and I'm bouncing on my toes, so excited to see him for the first time since Christmas. He scoops me up in a big hug and fuses his mouth with mine. It's the first time we're able to show this kind of public display of affection and I'm soaking it all up.

"Can't wait to get you out of these clothes later," Ford whispers in my ear as he drapes an arm over my shoulder and turns to walk me out.

"Actually." He pulls at the jersey bearing his name and number. "You're going to keep my jersey on tonight while I make you fucking scream." Heat fills my body and there's an ache between my thighs at his words.

Can't wait.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE



“Oh my gosh, come on!” Mia yells at the TV and paces the living room. There are only two minutes left in the game and this has been a close one. Right now, Tampa is up by three but Minnesota has the ball and is trying to make their way down the field.

“Can’t your brother just use all of the aggression he’s feeling towards Ford and power it into their quarterback, cause a fumble and allow one of our guys to land on it? Is that seriously too much to ask?”

I love how into the games Mia gets, she always makes me laugh with her commentary on the refs and the plays. We both stand in front of the TV holding our breath as the clock continues to tick down. It feels like I’m already watching the Super Bowl with how nervous I am, I don’t know how I’ll survive watching if they actually go.

“Sack! Sack! We got a sack!” Mia’s small body jumps up and down and her fists pump into the air.

We both cheer as Minnesota rushes to the line but they don’t have enough time for more than one play and it’s an unsuccessful hail Mary. We both jump up and down, hugging and acting like we’re the ones who just won a football game.

“Ford’s going to be in a good mood when he gets home tomorrow.” She winks as she cleans up some of the mess we made on the table.

“Oh, I’m looking forward to it,” I fire back.

Once Mia and I finish cleaning up and she leaves, I send Ford a goodnight text. I’m exhausted and I know that we have a busy week coming up. The new and improved art room is officially opening at the Rec Center this week and I told Dolly I’d help after school.

As I’m about to close my eyes, my phone dings.

FORD

Night Princess. I can’t wait to see you when I get home. I love you.

Will I ever stop getting butterflies when he calls me Princess?

Taylor Swift’s “Shake It Off” streams through the speakers as I make my way into the lobby of the Rec Center and my hips throw a little wiggle in at the beat. Ford catches my eye as I’m hugging Dolly and gives me a handsome smirk before I make my way over to him.

“Well hi, handsome.” His arms wrap around me and pull me close to his chest. His masculine scent surrounds me and I feel like I could get a high off of inhaling him.

“Everything looks great, how’d it go today officially opening it?” My eyes search his and there’s so much pride beaming from him.

“Couldn’t have gone better, actually.” He turns his head, smiling, looking into the glass where at least twenty kids are doing some form of artwork.

“Your girl came. She’s over there.” Ford points to the back of the room, near the painting easels and I see Harper talking to a little girl next to her, smiling with a paint brush in her hand and I swear I could cry. I wasn’t sure if her mom would be able to get her here, but it looks like they found a way.

Once she sees me, she motions for me to come over to where she’s standing.

“Hi, Harper. Wow, what’s this?” I lean over to get a better look at the painting she’s doing. It’s beautiful, there’s so much color and different stroke patterns.

Putting her paintbrush down and wiping her hands on her smock, she reaches over and hugs me. “My mom said I can come here every day after school if I want to. Thank you for telling her about it.” Her green little eyes look up at mine and she gives me the biggest smile I think I’ve ever gotten

from her.

“He said I’m allowed to use whatever I want here. He’s really nice, Ms. Hunt. If he’s your boyfriend, does that mean you’re going to marry him?” I turn around to look back at Ford who is still standing outside of the room, staring in. He smiles at me as our eyes meet and I bring my attention back to Harper.

“Maybe one day, Harper.” Her and I exchange smiles before she’s back to work on her painting.

Just like the first time he brought me here, it’s almost more than I can handle today. I didn’t expect Ford to be who he is. I’m so completely in love with everything about him.

I take his hand as we walk out of the Rec Center and squeeze it tight. Now that we’re no longer keeping our relationship a secret, I want nothing more than to be touching him at all times. His hand engulfs mine and as we walk down the sidewalk towards the apartment.

Harper's question lingers in my head. *Would I?* Would I actually marry Ford if he asked? I’m not getting ahead of myself here and I’m not thinking that’s happening any time soon, but *would I?*

“What’s going on in that pretty head of yours? You're quiet.” He stops to kiss my forehead as we wait for the elevator in my apartment lobby. Not wanting to sound like a crazy person, I opt to forego the conversation with Harper.

“Nothing, just happy.” I smile up at him as the door opens and we walk in. I’m having another flashback of our first day together and how that elevator ride ended and I’m sure he senses the memory replaying in my mind when he says,

“Round two?” Ford’s hand hovers over the emergency stop button on the elevator as he leans against the wall. “Say the word, we’ll stop this thing.” His smile is devastatingly tempting.

Without saying anything, I reach in front of him and stop it myself and pull his shirt towards me.

“Come here, Anderson.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX



FORD

If five years ago, someone told me that my life would be playing out the way it is right now, I would say you're out of your damn mind.

I've never been so fucking happy in my life and I was drafted into the NFL on my dream team, so that's saying something. We have two more games to win before we're on the way to Miami for the Super Bowl and I know there's still a lot that can happen in those games, but I'm more confident than ever right now. Maybe it's just the fact that I know this team is unstoppable or maybe it's got something to do with a certain brunette who makes me feel like the luckiest man alive. Either way, I don't take any of this for granted, I'm living the dream right now.

ABBY

Good luck today! See you afterwards. Love you.

Game two of the playoffs today and we're favored to win, but I know at the end of the day, that doesn't mean shit. We have to show up and put in the work. At least it's a home game and I'll get to see Abby right afterwards.

"Fuck yeah, Anderson!" Liam's jogging over to me in the endzone after the bullet he just threw me, getting us six and essentially securing the win.

There are only ninety seconds left and we're up by ten now. Once the clock finally runs out, we all celebrate knowing we're now officially going to the Conference Championship game, the last stop before Miami.

"That catch is probably going to score you some points for later. How high did you jump?" Liam's comment isn't quiet. In fact, it's loud enough for the entire locker room to hear, which includes Chase.

"How's your girl anyway? Tell her to bring her friend Summer back to town soon." Liam doesn't know when to shut the fuck up and what not to say around certain people because without me even answering, Chase walks by.

"Keep my sister and her friends out of your mouth, Evans." Chase says as he passes, headed towards the door.

"Fuck, Hunt. I'm just messing around. I'm not the one fucking sleeping with her."

Liam is my friend. He's my teammate, but also my friend. Does that stop me though from getting in his face like this is fucking high school? No, it definitely doesn't.

"Can you shut the fuck up for five minutes, Evans? You don't even know what you're talking about!" I don't even care if the rest of the team is watching. I'm tired of Liam thinking he can just shoot off his mouth and not be called out for it.

Liam scoffs at me and walks away. My adrenaline is at an all time high, from the win and then from that little bullshit encounter. I know Liam doesn't know the whole story, but fuck, if he can't just keep his mouth shut. I pinch the bridge of my nose and let out a sigh as the rest of the team goes back to whatever they were doing before our little show caught their attention.

After the game, I don't bother telling Abby about the whole fiasco in the locker room. We hop in my truck, her bare legs sitting on the seat next to me and she's wearing my jersey with a long sleeved white t-shirt underneath. I'm a sucker for her long legs, so I place my hand possessively on her thigh as I drive us away from the stadium.

"That catch was something else. I'll never understand how you can jump so high." Her laughter fills the silence and I just give her thigh a tight squeeze. I feel the warmth from her skin on my hand as she runs her nails on the back of my neck. Something that I didn't realize would be as soothing as it is, but now it's my favorite thing she does while we drive.

The next few days fly by. Abby's been so busy with school and I've been practicing longer hours than normal to prepare for the game this weekend. My parents will be at this game and I want Abby to meet them. I could sense her hesitation, and I don't really blame her considering I've probably made my parents sound like snooty rich people.

"I promise they'll love you. What's not to love? Look at you," I say to Abby through the FaceTime call we're currently on this morning. She's getting ready for work and I don't have to be at the facility until nine, so she called me to "get ready with her."

"I'm just nervous. I've only met one boyfriend's parents and they sucked." She's standing in front of the mirror holding different sweaters up to her body trying to decide what to wear. If we had more time, I'd make use of this unplanned phone date since I'm lying here in bed with morning wood that won't go away thanks to watching her barely clothed body on the other end of this screen.

"The purple. Wear the purple sweater." She turns to face the phone, her brown hair up in a ponytail and I can tell she just brushed her teeth before she called because there's a small amount of toothpaste on the corner of her lip that I wish I could lick off.

"Yeah? You think so?" Her head tilts as she looks back in the mirror. I watch her hips shift back and forth as she pulls on a pair of black pants, causing my dick to twitch.

"Yeah. I like it. Plus, it's your favorite color anyway, wear it."

Abby's face scrunches up and she grabs her phone.

"I don't think we've ever even had the favorite color conversation, how did you know that?"

I pull one arm behind my head and stretch my torso out a little as the phone hovers above my body, giving her a good look at my chest and tattooed bicep I know she loves.

"Your lunch box is purple. The pen you use to leave all the notes around my house is purple. The little bathrobe you run around in... purple. Your toenail polish has been some shade of purple since I've known you, except for Christmas when you used red."

Abby's mouth drops almost in slow motion, her jaw hangs as she looks at me.

"You noticed all of that?" Her green eyes stare directly into mine, and fuck I could look into those forever.

“Abby, I notice everything about you.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN



The buzz in the stadium today is electric. I have never experienced anything quite like this and I can't even imagine how it feels for the guys actually playing in the game today. I saw Chase and Ford on the sidelines together, I don't know if they were saying anything, but it seems they can at least be in the same space on the same field without it being a problem and right now that's all I'm asking for.

Ford said his parents would be at the game and then they want to have us over for a late dinner and drinks. I feel like I'm great with other people's parents, but even with all my efforts to win over Andrew's, I still don't think I ever fully got the job done. I think they tolerated me because Andrew told them to, but they knew from the start I wasn't anything like them, therefore I wasn't who they pictured for their son.

"Picture Ford, thirty years from now, still hot but just older looking." Mia has met Ford's parents a couple of times at games and has assured me that even though his mom is a talker and his dad is all business, they're nice people.

"I'm not going to imagine Ford's dad as hot, that feels... weird... and wrong." I shake my head at her comment as we walk to our seats.

Fourth and two yards, I'm honestly convinced the few gray hairs I've seen in the last couple of weeks are from the stress of watching these games. I have my hand clenched so tight on Mia's that I'm afraid I might completely cut off her circulation.

"I think I might pass out, I'm so nervous!" Mia looks at me as we wait for the play to begin. The guys are all lined up and I see Ford on the other end of the field, opposite a guy who looks like he definitely matches his height and weight, which is a first.

If they get this first down, if they win this game... they are heading to the Super Bowl. This is Ford's dream. It's my brother's dream. Hell, right now, it's my dream.

Liam drops back once the ball is snapped and Ford takes off down the field. Nate's hovering right near where the first down marker sits and I see Liam's head turn, scanning the field to see what his options are. Just as someone comes charging towards him after breaking a tackle on the offensive line, Liam shuffles his feet to the right and does a quick flick of the ball in Nate's direction.

"First down, Tampa!" The announcer calls over the speakers and the stadium erupts in cheers. You can even see some of the guys on the sidelines start to get excited and jump up and down, my brother included. With only a few minutes left in the game, and the other team having no time outs to stop the clock, they can just run out the time on the field and secure a win and a trip to Miami.

I can feel my eyes sting and the tears that threaten to fall as the guys run on the field and the confetti shoots from the cannons once the game clock is at zero. Mia and I flash our passes to the field security and run down to where the team is celebrating. You'd think they just actually won the Super Bowl with all the excitement that is coursing through everyone. I find Ford in the chaos of people on the field and jump into his arms. My mouth clashes with his as he lifts me off the ground and spins me.

"We're going to the Super Bowl, baby! The fucking Super Bowl!" he yells and I see the emotion in his face as his words almost take him by surprise. A childhood dream playing out right now for these guys and I couldn't be more thrilled. Once Ford puts me down to go talk to a reporter, I look for my brother. I find Chase talking to a guy from the opposing team as I approach him and he breaks away from their conversation to look at me.

"Congratulations, Chase! I'm so proud of you." To hell with whatever

awkwardness he might be feeling towards me, I wrap my arms around his middle and hug him tightly. His arms pull me in even closer and he kisses the top of my head,

“Thanks, Ab.” His voice chokes a little, but he clears his throat once one of the coaches comes over and starts ushering the guys to one end of the field. He lets go of me, but gives me a smile, *a real smile*, before turning to meet his teammates.

What in the *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* hell is this place? Ford failed to tell me his parents lived in a castle. Okay, maybe not really a castle, but it’s damn near close. As we pull into the private gate, Ford drives down a long driveway. It’s dark outside, but I can still see a lot of the landscaping as we drive in. Plenty of flowers and is that a little waterfall? I thought Andrew’s parents were rich, but it seems like Ford’s have them beat and we haven’t even been inside yet.

“I already told them we aren’t staying late. I want to get you home and have you to myself.” Ford’s words make me blush as he turns off the truck before getting out.

“Hi, honey! Oh, great game! We’re so proud of you!” Ford’s mom greets us as we walk in. “You must be Abigail. We’ve been so excited to meet you. Howard! Ford’s home with Abigail.”

She ushers me inside and I hand her the platter of cookies I offered to make.

The easy ones where you just pull apart the dough and plop on a pan for eight minutes at three hundred and fifty degrees.

“It’s so nice to finally meet you both, you can just call me Abby.” I reach my hand out, but she pulls me into a hug and Ford stands behind her and mouths “sorry.” He has nothing to be sorry for, his mom is so welcoming, it’s a big difference from what I’d been accustomed to. His dad walks into the kitchen and I’ll admit it, Mia was right. He looks exactly like Ford, just older. So, sure if this is what Ford will look like in thirty years, he’d still be hot.

Watching Ford interact with his family, it becomes clear where his assertiveness comes from. His mother has everything for the evening set out and there’s no question about how she intends for things to go. While his dad

is so precise in how he speaks, he doesn't leave any room for misinterpretation and I actually really appreciate that.

Ruby is elegant and beautiful, wearing a cream colored blouse with black pants and heels with her short blonde hair in loose curls. She's probably my height without the heels on, I'd say they give her a couple of inches. Her eyes are the same color as Ford's, and I watch as they change to a slightly darker shade as our conversations change in intensity, similar to how Ford's do.

Howard takes a pull from his cigar as I notice him and Ford outside talking. Wow, they really do look alike. His dad is a few inches shorter than him, but still has a very muscular build considering he's probably in his late fifties to early sixties. He's wearing a pair of denim jeans and collared shirt as he takes a sip of the amber liquid in his glass.

"I'm so happy Ford brought you to meet us. He hasn't brought anyone home in years." My smile spreads from ear to ear while talking with Ruby. She's kind and while Mia was right again that she does like to talk, that doesn't bother me because I'm the same way. I've loved getting to know her and she even pulled out an old album from when Ford first started playing football. He looked so cute as a kid with a giant helmet on and huge shoulder pads.

"It's been fun, mom. But I'm taking my girl home now." Ford's voice carries through the kitchen to the dining room where we're seated with the photo album. He walks over and leans down placing his arms around me from behind the chair,

"Let's go, baby," he breathes in my ear as I try to cover a yawn with my hand.

Saying our goodbyes and walking out, I can honestly say that I'd love to do that again. I felt so welcome and so comfortable with his parents.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT



FORD

It never even crossed my mind that my parents wouldn't absolutely love Abby and seeing how well she got along with them, only solidified what I already knew. She's it for me. I'm looking over at Abby sitting next to me in the cab of the truck, her hair slung over her shoulder and her leather jacket keeping her warm, she looks beautiful. The way the street lights glimmer off of her skin and her pouty lips sit perfectly, waiting to be captured by mine. I've waited too long to be inside her this week and now like an addict, I need my fix before I lose control.

Abby hops out of my truck before I can come around to open the door and tosses her purse and shoes in the laundry room. I pull at the collar of my white button up and start to take it off as soon as we walk through the door. Abby does the same with the jacket she was wearing and she's left in black skirt and a white long sleeve shirt. It shapes her body so well, leaving nothing to the imagination as she twirls a piece of hair between her fingers.

"Let me know when you're done," she says, snapping me out of the dirty thoughts running through my mind as I watch her.

"Huh?" I ask, getting back to removing the shirt from my body, leaving me in just my jeans.

“Let me know when you’re done eye fucking me, so we can go do it properly.” It’s not lost on me that I said the exact same thing to her one of the first few times we hung out. It feels like everything between us lately is coming full circle and I fucking love it.

I let out a growl and move my feet towards her before throwing her body over my shoulder and cupping her ass in one of my large hands as I take us back to the bedroom.

“You’re going to pay for that attitude, Princess.” A giggle leaves her mouth as I toss her onto the bed and pull her skirt down.

“What the fuck is this?” I say staring at the buttons on her body suit.

“Another fucking layer between me and what I want? What’s with all the buttons? A man definitely didn’t invent this shit.” I reach and unsnap the buttons finding a pink lace thong underneath and it’s doing a shit job at covering anything because there’s already a glistening wet spot on them letting me know she’s ready for me.

Abby sits up and pulls the rest of the shirt off over her head, letting me see those perfect breasts of hers. I unbutton my jeans and pull them down with my boxers, and Abby’s eyes dart to my cock. Her tongue runs over her lips as she reaches for the tip with her thumb and licks it clean. I hiss with pleasure at just the slightest touch from her.

She lays herself back on the bed and shimmies her thong off her hips, lifting them to make it easier as I’m watching her. Hovering my body over hers, the heat between us is undeniable. My cock lands on her thigh as I pull my body up over her, cupping one breast with my hand and nipping the other with my teeth before pulling it in my mouth and sucking. Abby’s hips thrust up at me and her little moans make me aware that she wants me between her legs, but I told her she’d pay for that attitude out there and I intend to keep my word.

“Something you need?” I tease as my fingers trail up and down her sides, laying kisses from the swell of her breasts down to her inner thighs.

She whimpers as my breath hits her center and I watch as her face turns into a pout when my mouth pulls away.

“Beg for it, Princess.” I stay on my knees between her legs and stroke myself a few times, watching her watch me as she bites her lip and moves her hips.

“Ford, please.” Her voice is raspy and pleading, like she needs this more than she needs air to breathe.

“Fuck, look at you Abby.” I slide my dick up and down her, coating myself with her as she drips for me. “Tell me what you want. You know I’ll give you anything you ask for, Princess.”

“I want you.” Abby’s eyes focus on mine and I give my girl exactly what she’s asking for. I thrust all the way in with one solid movement and she gasps as she takes all of me. Her tight pussy is clenching around my dick as we both catch our bearings for a moment.

“Fuuuuck. Abby, you’re so tight for me. This feels so good.” Her hips move underneath me and I push in and pull out in quick motions while her nails dig into my back, pulling me closer.

Reaching my hand between her legs, my finger finds her swollen clit and flick back and forth, slowly while Abby cries out.

“You like when I touch you here?” I flick her clit again. “While pushing inside you like this?” I thrust in hard, holding myself still giving her a second to answer me. Her head nods up and down,

“Oh, God. Yes.”

When Abby gets like this, there’s no holding back for me. I can tell when she wants things harder and rougher and when she wants things to be slower and more intimate. Tonight? Tonight, my girl wants it rough and I’m more than willing to give it to her.

Circling her clit with my finger as my thrusts continue, she pulls my mouth to her and parts her lips for my tongue. Her lips suck on my tongue and I have to use all my willpower not to combust at the feeling of her mouth and her pussy, both clenching and sucking me so well. Abby’s body starts to move faster underneath me, a sign that she’s usually close to her orgasm.

“Do. Not. Come.” My voice growls in her ear as her whimpers get more and more frequent,

“Ford, it’s so good.” The sweat from both of our bodies is mixing together as we pant between words. I want us to come together. I’m going to give her the most unbelievable fucking orgasm of her life tonight. My body slams into her over and over, pumping in and out. Abby’s breathing is more erratic and she’s calling out my name every other word. Hearing her sounds and with the way she feels, my own orgasm is about to explode.

“Now, baby. Come with me.” Our bodies frantically pick up pace for a few seconds before we both yell out, both completely falling over the edge with one another. I’ve had a lot of sex in my life, but none as good as it is with Abby and I know it’s because I’m so madly in love with her.

One more hour until we touchdown in Miami and we're officially on the clock for the game. I know the whole city is going to be wild just because the Super Bowl is made into a whole week's worth of events for the fans to experience. Honestly, the shit they have lined up sounds pretty cool and if we weren't under strict instruction to keep a low profile this week then I'd be out at a lot of the events.

"Wake up, Sleeping Beauty." I lean over to Nate as we land. His eyes barely open as the wheels hit the runway. "You never sleep on flights. What's keeping you up?" I grab my bag and stand up.

Nate stretches and yawns. "Sex."

I'm almost choking on my own saliva at his reply. Yeah, it's no secret he gets around, I just wasn't expecting that candid of an answer.

"I've been having a lot of good fucking sex." His mouth curves into a smile and we both walk off the plane over to the buses waiting.

Driving to the hotel where we are staying is surreal. I can't even believe this is happening right now. It's obviously something I've wanted my whole life, but to actually know it's within my grasp, that I'm this close to holding a Lombardi trophy, getting to call myself a Super Bowl Champion... I'm getting fucking emotional just thinking about it.

Liam and Chase seemed to have squashed whatever they had lingering from that locker room incident a few weeks ago because I see them both deep in conversation as I walk in the doors of the conference room at the hotel. We're having a meeting with the team and I'm expecting it to be the usual pre-game speech, but with some added seriousness considering the arena we're in. Coach Aarons gets emotional as he talks about how far the team has come, how proud he is and how he feels confident about our team going into this game. It's a heartfelt speech but with a good piece of fire at the end to really pump us up.

The game is still a few days away, so Abby won't be coming down until Friday. She said she took a personal day so she and Mia can drive down and they are staying at Summers for the weekend. All three of the girls will be coming to the game on Sunday and she also mentioned that if we were able to come to Summer's bar on Friday night for drinks, that's where she'd be. I know Coach probably wouldn't want us drinking, so I definitely won't be taking any chances on being benched for the biggest game of my career, but

I'll definitely take the opportunity to see my girl.

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE



“Look at us! Another road trip under our belt!” Mia swings her door open as we pull into the parking spot at Summer’s apartment. I get up and stretch my legs because a five hour drive with only one stop is not ideal for my bones.

Ford and I took advantage of every spare second we had last week to be with each other since we knew it would be impossible this weekend. I’m still sore in just about every place you can think of, but it was worth it.

Thankfully, Summer is only on the second floor, so there aren’t a million stairs we need to climb since her complex doesn’t have an elevator. I’ve been so spoiled living with Chase and having elevators at my beckon call.

“Hi!” Summer’s bright smile welcomes us as she opens the door and naturally, has a pitcher of margaritas in her hand.

“Don’t you work tonight?” I say reaching in for a hug after we walk in.

“Yes, but you girls don’t, so these are for you!” Mia wastes no time taking Summer up on the offer and grabs a glass from the kitchen to pour herself one.

“So how excited is Chase? He’s probably flipping the fuck out. Remember when we were like fourteen and he was going on and on about being in the Super Bowl one day? God, I thought he was being so annoying.

Guess I owe him an apology.” Summer’s legs kick over the couch as we all get comfortable and settle in. I could definitely use a nap if I’m planning on going anywhere tonight.

“We still haven’t talked a ton, but it’s been better. I know he’s so excited though.” I pull my phone out, wanting to text Ford that we’ve made it.

“He’s still giving you the cold shoulder? What the hell, it’s been over a month.” Sighing while scrolling through my phone, I nod my head at her.

“I know... like I said it’s better. I still have no clue how he and Ford are though. Ford doesn’t tell me anything and I don’t ask.” Knowing that Chase is shitty to Ford won’t do me any good, so I’d rather just not ask and not know whether they get along at practices or not.

After Summer fills us in on her latest date from hell, I take up residence in my old bedroom and decide to actually try and nap. I told Ford we got here safe and sound and he confirmed that he would be able to come by tonight, but only for a little while and he wasn’t drinking. Summer said she mentioned it to Chase too so he will be out as well. Before I can form any more thoughts in my head, my eyes close and I drift to sleep.

A hand in my hair stirs me awake and I instantly want it to be Ford, but once I open my eyes, it’s Mia standing over me with giant curlers in her hair and string cheese hanging out of her mouth.

“Come on. Get up. It’s time to get ready!” Her voice feels so loud in my still sleepy state even though I know she’s speaking in her normal tone.

“I need to shower. When do you want to leave?” Mia is pulling out the clothes she brought with her and laying them on the bed to choose what to wear.

“When Summer left, she said it’s about twenty minutes away and to get there around nine, so I guess we could leave in an hour or so.”

That gives me plenty of time to shower and get ready to go hang out at my old stomping ground.

The Uber pulls up to *MJ’s Bar*, where Summer works and where we used to hang out all the time when we were in college. A pit forms in my stomach at the very real possibility of running into someone I know, someone I’d rather not see. My black heels feel heavy as I walk up to the sidewalk, and it suddenly feels like the black cropped tank top I’m wearing is suffocating me as I try to take deep breaths. I can’t remember the last time I was here, but it would have been when I was dating Andrew.

“Oh, don’t you two look gorgeous!” Summer’s voice carries from behind

the bar. She has the exact personality of someone you'd want as a bartender at your business. Bubbly, flirty, fun, but also takes no shit so when people get rowdy, she isn't afraid to put them in their place.

Mia and I take a seat at the bar and order beers while we wait for the guys to show up. I try to do a quick scan of the room to make sure I don't see any familiar faces and thankfully, so far so good.

Mia's dress looks like it was tailor made for her. It makes her legs look ten times longer than they are and it's this navy blue color, which looks so pretty on her tanned skin and against big loose curls. If I would've had time, I would have curled my hair too, but alas, I chose a nap so straight hair it is. No regrets.

Like a moth to a flame, I sense Ford's presence before I see him. Turning towards the door, it's hard to miss four giant men walking through, each one just as handsome as the next. Except I'm partial to the one with a tattoo sleeve and backwards hat, looking like a straight up sex God.

There's no stopping me once I see him, I'm off my bar stool and in his arms in a matter of seconds and he happily scoops me up and gives me the best kiss of my life. Every kiss with Ford is the best one of my life.

"Hi, Princess." He slaps my butt as he puts me down and we walk back over to the bar where Mia and Summer greet everyone. Summer hands them all glasses of water and winks, knowing that they aren't drinking tonight. I wish Summer wasn't working and could actually hang out with us tonight, but she said it's more fun for her and less chance she gets in trouble, whatever that means.

"Is your fourteen-year-old self just freaking out right now?" I hear Summer ask Chase and watch them get caught up in conversation as the rest of us talk about the game on Sunday and Ford asks how our drive down was. Similar to how I can feel Ford's presence, apparently I can also sense an unwelcome presence or when something is off and doesn't feel right.

I twist my head around, desperately searching for someone I don't want to find when Summer grabs my attention.

"Abby." She stares at me with a look of encouragement, silently telling me that I can do this. That I can be in the same place as someone who caused me so much pain, and still be okay.

"Abby, don't freak out. You're surrounded by walls of muscle." She gestures to Ford and the guys standing near me. "It'll be fine."

Summer's eyes move to my left and I turn around to see Andrew's smug

face looking in my direction.

CHAPTER SIXTY



The taste of bile rises up my throat. I haven't seen him or spoken to him since I officially moved my things out and he told me that I'd be back because I'd never find anyone better than him. *Ha.*

Ford senses my change in demeanor and looks at Summer who mouths "Andrew" at him. Like something out of a movie, Ford stands from his stool and the legs scratch against the ground so loud, it causes people to turn and look in our direction. As if summoning the *Avengers*, Nate, Liam and my brother end up at the edge of the bar next to Ford, as Andrew waltzes his way over to where we're standing. My legs feel like they're about to give out and everything in me wants to scream at the coward in front of me.

"Abby, didn't know when I'd see you back here again." Andrew reaches for my hand, but I pull back just as our fingers lightly touch. It sends chills down my spine and not the good kind. I'd like to slap the smile right off his face. The fact that he thinks he can just walk up to me as if nothing has happened and be friendly, astounds me.

Before I can say anything Ford steps in front of me, but I gently grip his forearm,

"No." My voice is low as I pull Ford back to me.

I move my body in front of Ford's to face Andrew. Looking at him now, I have no idea what I saw in him for so long. On the outside sure he's fine to look at, but everything inside is black. He's completely heartless.

I take a deep breath and focus my stare on him. "You know... I was drowning when I met you." I point to Andrew, keeping my voice calm and centered. I don't know where the sudden surge of confidence comes from, but I'm sure it has something to do with the people standing behind me. "Drowning in grief. Then you worked your charm on me. I became your shadow until I was drowning in that too. It's like you slowly sucked the life out of me, but you never even realized it because you were too busy with your own agenda to consider anyone else's feelings. You cheating on me was equally the most humiliating and the best thing to ever happen to me. And you know what? In some weird twisted way, I hope this fixes you. I hope that you realize all the shit you put me through and it opens your eyes to what an awful person you were in our relationship. Maybe you'll be better in your next one or maybe you won't. Who knows, but I won't be around to care." I step closer to him as his eyes stare into mine, looking shocked that I've said anything at all to him.

"Don't ever touch me again." Those words come out slow and clear so he gets the message.

When I turn around, Summer has the biggest smile on her face. Instantly, an enormous sigh of relief leaves my chest. It's like everything I just said was weighing me down and I'm feeling lighter and even happier, after getting it all off my chest. Ford leans down and kisses my lips softly before wrapping me in his arms,

"I forgot how fucking dramatic you are, Abby. Thanks for taking her off my hands, bro. Good luck." My mouth opens in shock at what Andrew just said. Does he not see the size of the four giants I'm with? *He can't be serious right now.*

Andrew begins to walk away, but Ford clears his throat to grab his attention. Ford takes a few steps towards him with a smug smile on his face and tilts his head down to look at Andrew.

"You never had what it takes to handle a strong woman like her. She'll be in my hands a hell of a lot longer than she was ever in yours. I know how to respect and satisfy my woman, I don't need luck. Here's a tip for the road." Ford turns back and winks at me before continuing. "If you ever come near my girlfriend again, I will break every fucking bone in this hand." He lowers

his voice and motions towards the hand holding Andrew's beer. "And then, I'll move to the other one and break every bone in that hand too, making sure you can never touch a woman again. You will never have the honor of speaking to or touching Abby again. Do you understand?"

Andrew's breathing picks up and he shakes his head back and forth before he glances at his friends in the corner.

"I said, do you fucking understand?" Like venom rolling off his tongue, Ford stays planted in front of Andrew waiting for a reply.

"Got it," Andrew says through clenched teeth, rolling his eyes before he walks away.

I'm watching Andrew walk out the door with nothing but peace and happiness. Here's to hoping that's the last time I'll ever see his face again.

"Well, I don't know about anyone else, but I need a shot!" Summer lines up shot glasses along the bar and even though the guys can't take one, I'll take enough for all of us after what just happened in the last fifteen minutes.

"Tequila!" Mia yells, as we down our shots and I place the glass on the bar before turning to face Ford.

"You didn't have to do that for me, you know. But thank you." I lean in to kiss him and he pulls my body close to his as we stand next to the bar top.

"I'd do anything for you, Abby. You have to know that by now." I nod my head against his chest and close my eyes, feeling the safest I've ever felt in his arms.

"You did a great fucking job holding your own, though." He looks down at me with a proud smile and it hits me right in the chest.

Thankfully, Summer's boss didn't completely lose his shit when he saw her take a shot, he just told her to clock out for the night which worked out for us because she was able to hang out for a little before the guys left. Between us girls, we've definitely had our fair share of shots and are ready to call it a night. Once our Uber arrives, I text Ford that we're heading back to the apartment for the night.

"I can't believe you and Nate haven't ever hooked up. Really, it doesn't make sense." Summer on her own has very little filter, but Summer with a few shots is completely unhinged and doesn't know what a filter is.

"Ne-ver," Mia sounds it out as her words slosh a little when she speaks. It's a miracle none of us have gotten sick with the way this Uber is weaving in and out of downtown Miami traffic.

"I mean have I wanted to? Okay fine, maybe once... but... but..." She

trails off, seemingly losing her train of thought. “But, I’m responsible.” Her words are so slurred, I’m shocked I understand it.

Once we make our way back to the apartment, the three of us throw ourselves on Summer’s bed without even bothering to take off any makeup or change our clothes.

The headache hits me like a ton of bricks and the sunlight shining through the window isn’t doing anything to help it either.

“Coffee... I need coffee,” I hear Summer’s muffled voice and look around to see Mia on the floor cuddled up into a blanket with the pillow over her eyes and Summer is laying face down on her bed.

Before I can respond my phone dings.

FORD

Reinforcements will be arriving shortly.

What? I read the text out loud to the girls. “That’s from Ford...” Mia sits up and Summer turns over, keeping her arm slung over her eyes. Before any of us say anything else, we hear a light knock on the front door.

Summer groans as she gets up. “There better be a large coffee in my hand if I’m getting out of bed right now.”

She opens the door and all we hear is a loud sigh before she says, “Seriously!” Summer walks into the room smiling carrying a tray of coffees and two brown bags, presumably filled with food. “You and Ford are annoyingly cute. You have the best boyfriend and I’m officially jealous.”

Like scavengers, Mia and Summer rip open the bags and start sipping the coffee as I take a look at the note on the piece of paper that Summer handed me.

Abby,

Coffee runs have sort of become our thing when we want to talk to each other, but I don't want to interrupt your time with the girls, so I figured I'd leave you a quick

note with what I want to say.

I used to think having football was all I needed and anything else I'd figure out when this was all over. I thought that when I made it to the Super Bowl, that would be the highlight of my life, my greatest achievement.

I was wrong.

You are the highlight of my life, Abby. The greatest thing I'll ever do is love and be loved by you.

Always,

Ford

P.S. Don't let the girls give you shit for this letter, you know they're just jealous ;)

It's hard to see between the tears clouding my vision when I look up at Mia and Summer. I don't know how I got so lucky in meeting Ford and our "arrangement" becoming what it is today, but I'm so goddamn happy.

"I'm literally making any guy I date from now on take lessons from Ford. Who knew he was such a fucking swoony mush?" Mia says that with a straight face as she takes a bite of a croissant and it makes me bubble over with laughter. I fold up the letter and put it in my overnight bag before grabbing a blueberry lemon scone and my coffee. Sometimes the finish line of one race is just the beginning of another one, a better one.

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE



FORD

I'm not superstitious, but I do have a playlist I've been listening to for the duration of the playoffs and we've done well, so why change it up now, right? I hit play on my phone and put a headphone in one ear.

Abby and the girls loved their hangover remedy yesterday morning. I knew they'd need it after watching Abby take her second shot of tequila. She did let me know that while they all "felt like death" – *her words*, no one actually got sick.

"Anderson!" Chase walks my way in the locker room as I'm about to put the other headphone in, but I pause as he gets closer to me. Nodding in his direction, he extends his hand to me.

"Listen, what you did for my sister the other night with that dickhead... I'm glad she has you to look after her." This is probably the most we've spoken in weeks.

"Of course, man. Your sister is tough, though. I'll always protect her, but she's strong too, you know." Chase and I exchange looks and a handshake before he pulls me into a hug. I've never gotten emotional when hugging a friend, but this would probably be the closest encounter. The last thing I wanted to do was fuck up my friendship with Chase, but I would've done

anything for Abby and I'm glad he sees that now.

"Ten minutes!" Coach Aarons yells from the other side of the room and Chase and I go our separate ways to finish getting ready. Pulling my phone back out, I press play on the music and I see a text from Abby.

ABBY

Good luck tonight, Anderson. I'm so proud of you and I love you.

I take a moment to stand at the locker, being thankful for where I am right now and who I have in my corner. I know that at the end of the day, win or lose, we did something great with the organization this year and I'm fucking proud of that.

I know to a lot of people sports are just a game. Maybe if I wasn't so heavily invested and intertwined in all of it, I might think similarly, but the fact is that I'm right in the middle of it. I see the blood, the sweat and the tears that go into these games. The players who become more like brothers, the coaches and training staff, the crews who work the games, the fans, it's a family. Football isn't *just* a sport to me, it's not *just* a game. Athletes work their asses off to achieve their goals on the field and I'll be damned if I'm not going to give every last ounce that I have tonight to try and help my team win this thing.

"Let's go, boys!" Liam shouts.

The tunnel before we walk out is so electric. We're all hyped up and ready to leave it all on the field tonight. I look around at these men next to me, some of them my closest friends, and as if we can all collectively read what the others are thinking, it's a silent nod and steadfast stare that we exchange before we run out of the tunnel and onto the biggest stage we've ever played on.

We started off slow, allowing New York to score first. It doesn't help that at the end of the first quarter, I dropped a pass that would've given us a first down and a new set of downs. I couldn't even tell you who played the halftime show because I was still beating myself up over missing another throw that would've been a touchdown. So far, I feel like we're losing our spark. This game is too close for my liking and even though we're ahead, a seven point lead doesn't feel like enough to me in a game like this.

"It's going to you, Nate." Liam changes the call as we enter the third quarter and I know that's my cue to use my body as a blocker. Once it's

snapped, Nate has the ball immediately and I charge out in front of him, taking one of New York's defensive lineman with me, opening a path for Nate to sprint down the field. He's got miles of green in front of him and before you know it, we're running to the endzone to celebrate his touchdown.

"Fuck yeah!" I bump helmets with him before we jog off the field to the sidelines. Our defense holds strong and doesn't allow New York to score anything in the third quarter, keeping our lead.

Five minutes. We are five minutes away from being named World Champions. Looking in the stands, I find Abby. I swear I'd be able to find that woman in any crowded room. Her hair is down in curls and she's sandwiched between Mia and Summer as they all yell and shout with the rest of the fans. I watch her as she laughs with them and Summer pulls out her phone and it looks like she takes a picture of the three of them. Abby doesn't catch me staring and it's probably for the better, my heart's already pounding to get out of my chest just watching her. Having her gaze lock with mine would surely pull it right out. All I can think about at this moment is winning this game for her. For us.

I didn't think I wanted anyone in my life right now, I was content with how things were going, but she blew right into me like a category five hurricane and I haven't been the same since. I'm a better man on and off the field because of her.

"Hunt! Watch twenty-four!" I yell to Chase as he jogs onto the field to line up. Their running back has been trying to slip by Chase all game and he's gotten through a couple times, but if we can hold them here, they'll be forced to punt or go for it on 4th down and 4th and long is no easy feat.

The ball snaps and sure enough they try to run it into Chase again, except this time he's a fucking wall. A brick wall that stops even a single yard from being gained. Our sidelines erupt as the defense comes off the field. We're so close. I give Chase a fist bump when he comes off the field, knowing in my bones that he just won us the Super Bowl.

The clock winds down and I can't hold back my emotions when it hits zero and the score sits at 27-17 Tampa. The stadium is so loud, I can't even hear myself think. I pull off my helmet and take a look at my surroundings. People are running up and congratulating me, there's a reporter trying to get my attention and Liam's saying something on my left, but I can't focus on any of it. The only thing that allows me to focus is Abby. Her eyes find mine as she's running towards me on the field and the moment she jumps in my

arms, the fog fades and the buzz of everything around me sets in.

“You did it! I’m so proud of you!” Abby’s eyes fill with tears as she kisses my cheek and wraps her legs around my waist.

“None of this would have happened without you.” I grab her face and plant the biggest fucking kiss on my girl’s lips. I’m standing in the middle of the field, holding the girl of my dreams with my family in the stands and my closest friends celebrating next to us and I’m so fucking thankful.

For the longest time, I thought that being with someone, actually dating them, would be a distraction to my life on the field. In some ways, maybe Abby still is a distraction, but not in the way I thought she would be. She distracts me with her cute little habits she probably doesn’t think I notice. The way she scrunches up her nose when she’s confused, with her undeniable beauty that I know she doesn’t see. When I feel like things in my life seem too heavy, she distracts me from it and brings me so much peace.

If anything, with her my focus is clearer. She centers me. She makes me believe that one shitty thing happening doesn’t mean you’re destined for a shitty life. My house feels like a home when she’s in it and I couldn’t draw up a better outcome than I’ve been given.

The best part of it all though? I wasn’t even looking when our paths crossed, but since that night, everything’s changed.

On the football field, there’s this thing called the line of scrimmage. It’s imaginary, but both sides know it’s there. It’s what separates the offense from the defense on the field and neither side is supposed to cross it until the play is in motion. *The line you aren’t supposed to cross.* The way this thing started with Abby kind of reminds me of that. I knew the moment I met Abby that I’d be crossing a line with her and thankfully, she crossed it with me.

THE END

EPILOGUE



ABBY

THREE MONTHS LATER

I can't believe we're about to be in Hawaii for my twenty-fifth birthday. I've barely traveled anywhere, let alone Hawaii. After the Super Bowl win, Ford asked me to move in with him. Officially moving in did feel kind of fast, but I spent all of my time there anyway, plus I needed to give Chase his space back considering he was about to have a newborn.

"Are you almost ready? We need to pick up your brother and Nate on the way." Ford's arms wrap around me from behind as I stand in the bathroom putting on some chapstick and throwing the rest of my toiletries in my bag.

Making this a group trip was my idea and I'm over the moon excited. I've always wanted to go big for my "golden birthday," but I couldn't have pictured something like this. I had to explain to Ford what a "golden birthday" was and he still thought it was kind of silly, but when your age matches up with the same number as your birth date, that calls for celebration.

"I'm just about done. We need to make sure we have all the phone chargers! Can you check my nightstand?" He pinches my hip just above my hip bone before turning back to the bedroom to check.

"Not here, so you must've packed it."

Once I have everything I need, Ford brings our bags to the truck and we hop in. My bare feet rest on the dashboard as Ford's hand grips my thigh as we drive.

MIA

I'm ready to party!

SUMMER

I already started drinking at the airport!

Summer sends a picture to the group chat of herself with a margarita the size of her head and I laugh out loud. This trip is so needed for all of us.

We pull in and once we walk out onto the tarmac, I see Liam and Mia already standing by the plane waiting for us. We picked up Chase and Nate on the way here and raced over to make our flight on time. Summer is flying in from Miami, so we'll meet up with her once we get there.

"You said *'be there by nine, Liam and don't be late.'*" Liam looks at his

watch. “I was here at 8:53 and you fucks stroll in at 9:07.”

“Blame Nate. He was up too late having sex to bother packing so he had to finish it this morning.”

“Bro? What the fuck!” Nate punches Ford’s arm at his comment.

“Really, Nathaniel? Being late due to sex is not a valid excuse.” Mia’s hands both firmly sit on her hips as the flight crew takes our bags and places them in the containers below the plane.

“It’s the only valid excuse.” Nate rests his elbow on Mia’s shoulder as he stands waiting for us to be told we can board.

I take a seat across from Ford as we board and pull out my book and the snacks I piled into my tote. Ford buckles his seatbelt and winks at me as the plane starts to move for take off. I don’t think I’ll ever get over how attractive this man is or how crazy I am about him.

After what feels like the longest flight in history, we finally land. I should probably be exhausted considering I didn’t sleep a wink on the flight and I’ve been up since five a.m. Florida time, but I’m wired. It’s probably the adrenaline keeping me going, but whatever it is, I’m planning on running with it.

“Aloha!” We’re greeted as we enter the resort on the island with leis and drinks right away. Ford said this is his favorite resort out here and since I’ve never been, I told him to just book whatever he thought I’d like best. I’d say he did good.

I’ve never ever seen a view like this before. The water is truly stunning and the island is beautiful, overflowing with greenery and flowers.

We found Summer at the pool after we put our bags down and all headed down to the beach. I take out my phone and snap a quick picture of the water before tossing it back in my bag and pulling a lounge chair up next to Mia and Summer.

“We’re going to go make some dinner reservations. Be back in a few.” Ford leans down and kisses me. “You look hot,” he whispers in my ear before he walks away.

“You guys are so annoying.” Mia laughs as she sprays sunscreen on her chest.

“Aren’t they the worst?”

I just roll my eyes and laugh at Mia and Summer’s comments and put sunscreen on myself, making sure not to forget my nose this time.

“Nate, can you get my back real quick please?” Mia asks, handing him

the sunscreen and he sprays it on the middle of her back before rubbing it in.

“Oh, my God, why are you pressing so hard?” Mia laughs as she twists her body away from Nate’s hands.

“I’m barely touching you. Relax, Mi.” Nate laughs and grabs his hat from the beach chair and tosses it on his head before running to catch up with the guys. Summer and I watch their interaction from our chairs and exchange smiles and eye rolls. They’re apparently the only ones who don’t see what everyone else does.

We’ve easily been out here in the sun for hours and I need to get changed before dinner. The guys said they made a reservation for eight p.m. to eat, but Ford wanted to show me some spot he loves before we meet everyone for dinner. So I’m heading back to the room early so I have plenty of time to get myself ready.

As I’m walking back to the hotel suite, I see Chase standing next to the bar.

“Last little adventure for you until the baby gets here, huh?” I toss my empty cup into the trash as I approach him. His smile grows bigger and bigger every time someone seems to mention the baby lately.

“This weekend is about you, Ab. But, yeah I guess you could say that.” He sips his beer before continuing. “Listen, I never really apologized for being a royal dick to you a few months back, but I’m sorry. And I get it now, I see it. You’re happy.”

We exchange smiles and a hug and he walks to the other side of the bar where Liam is standing before I continue my trek up to the room to get ready.

“Wow, don’t you look handsome.” Ford always looks good, but his skin is golden from the sun today and his hair is a little longer than he normally keeps it during the season, which I love. The ocean blue shirt he’s wearing outlines his chest and biceps and he has on a pair of dark wash jeans. He runs a hand through his hair and makes his way close to me.

“Me? Have you looked in the mirror? I have half a mind to just say fuck the dinner and keep you here in this little dress and worship you all night long.” Biting my lip, I shake my head and move out of his grip.

I do love this dress I’m wearing. It’s new, something I bought just recently when I went shopping with Mia. It’s white with pink and orange flowers on it. It seemed perfect for Hawaii. The dress hugs my body, but not too tight so it’s still something I’m comfortable in. It has a deep neckline, something I knew that Ford would love. Fluffing my hair one more time, I let

the curls fall down my back and around my face as I walk out of the bathroom ready to go. I smile in Ford's direction as he looks me up and down.

"I'm the luckiest man on the fucking planet."

We take each other's hands and walk out of the resort and onto the beach. The sun hasn't set yet, but it's close. The water is starting to calm down from the day and the sky is beginning to get that orange and pink look to it.

"There's this little trail down here by the beach with the best view, I want you to see it. Don't worry we aren't hiking any cliffs." His devilish grin makes my eyes roll as I follow his lead. We walk another few minutes hand in hand before reaching a secluded strip of beach away from the resort.

"Wow... I could definitely wake up to this view every day," I say, letting go of Ford's hand and walking out closer to the water. I close my eyes to feel the breeze on my face and just stand still for a moment, letting the sound of the ocean seep into me.

"Abby." I hear Ford's voice behind me as he softly says my name.

I turn around slowly, expecting to look up and find his eyes, but instead of towering over me, he's crouched down in front of me, on one knee with a small black box in his hand.

"Ford." My voice begins to crack as I say his name and he takes my hand in his.

"I thought being in the NFL would be the best part of my life. That it was the one thing that would always make me happy, the one thing I couldn't live without. Until you. I didn't know what I was doing when we met, all I knew was there was this incredible girl I wanted to spend time with and I was willing to do whatever it took to be able to be near her." I kneel down to his level, cupping his cheek in my hand as my eyes fill with tears.

"You give me purpose, Abby. I love you. I love everything about you. I love that you save all the red Skittles to eat until the end of the bag because they're your favorite. I love that you think every new month should start on a Monday. I love how your nose scrunches up when you're confused. You take your shoes off every single time you're riding in my truck and I love that too. I want every part of you. Every single day. There isn't anything I ever want to change about you, except your last name. Marry me, Princess. Please. Let me love you for the rest of our lives."

The box in Ford's hand slowly slides open displaying the most beautiful ring I think I've ever seen. To hell with keeping my composure for the sake

of my makeup, that ship sailed about five minutes ago.

“Yes. Oh my gosh, yes.” Ford brings his lips to mine and lifts me off the ground as he stands, spinning me around. He places the princess cut single diamond on my finger and I hold my hand up in the air, staring at it through tears, in awe.

“Oh my gosh, now I need to go fix my makeup!” I whip my head around to find Summer, Chase, Nate, Liam and Mia walking towards us. Summer’s hands gripping at a scrap of a napkin she’s holding as tears are running down her face.

The guys congratulate Ford, while Mia and Summer obsess over my ring. All the while, I’m staring at Ford. *My fiancé*. I can’t believe it.

“He asked me after the Super Bowl,” Chase whispers in my ear while giving me a hug. “After we won, we were still on the field. He asked me then. I told him to ask me again tomorrow when the high and adrenaline ran out.” Chase throws his arm over my shoulder and we take a couple steps out towards the water.

“He fucking called me at seven in the morning the next day and had me meet with him so he could ask me again.” I laugh and shake my head.

“I love you, Ab. I just want you to be happy and safe and I know you have that with Ford. Even if it started as a big secret.” He raises an eyebrow at me.

“Yeah... still really sorry about that.” We laugh and he pulls me in for a hug,

“Dad would like him. Probably like him better though if he played for Dallas.” My brother squeezes my arm as I wipe a happy tear from my eye and laugh before he kisses my head and walks away, giving me a moment.

My dad would have loved Ford and as I stand on this beach with my eyes on the water, it stings that they were never able to meet. But in some ways, it feels like Ford was sent directly from him. Like through all of the grief and the heartache that followed, I was still able to find happiness again. I guess that’s how it goes though, right? You walk through all of the storms and trials, the things that are meant to nearly break you, but you climb out and fight like hell to find yourself again, to find what makes you happy.

“Ready for dinner, *fiancée*?” Ford whispers in my ear as he comes up behind me.

My eyes land on his as I tilt my head up to look at him, smile and say, “Ready.”

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COMING SOON

Follow me on social media for more information on book two of the *Out of Bounds* series—Mia and Nate's story. You can find me on Instagram and TikTok @erinmackenzie.author.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erin Mackenzie is from a small town in central Florida where she lives with her husband and daughter. Her love for reading started at a young age and then was rediscovered after she became a mom and wanted something that was just for her. When she isn't reading or writing, you can find her trying out new recipes to cook or bake, spending time outdoors or rooting on her favorite sports teams.