

NOT
On Your
LIFE



Jenessa Fayeth

A SWEET ROMANTIC COMEDY

NOT
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LIFE

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Chapter 1

Maddie

Oh look, the devil is here. I thought it felt warmer.

“Maggie.” Connor Quinn perches on the edge of my desk. His extra-long leg brushes against my arm, and I fight every ounce of annoyance I harbor for the arrogant man. I will not cower first.

“No one’s ever going to hire you to be their lawyer if you can’t remember their name,” I say, eyes firmly planted on the legal document on my screen.

I will not make contact with the devil’s piercing hazel eyes or the thick beard that so perfectly defines his jawline.

I also won’t think about the burning sensation in my arm. It’s hot in hell, after all.

“Aw Mads, always a pleasure.” He nudges my potted plant out of its assigned space, and I push it back where it belongs.

My hand grazes his.

I try not to shudder at his touch. Try not to move at all. When he touches me, he burns me in a way only the devil can. The feeling is hatred, and it's mutual. We've spent the last four years like this—launching insults like grenades over enemy lines. I win some battles, and he, unfortunately, wins others.

Connor leans closer, his body and cologne invading my personal space. “When are you going to let your hair down and have fun?”

One: I like ponytails, they are quick, and I have a great face shape for them. Two: I have fun. But he doesn't deserve to know any of this.

I inch to the farthest corner of my cubicle and steel myself. “What do you want, Connor?”

He flicks my ponytail, like the immature adolescent he is. “I think we both know what I want.”

“Harassment,” I say loud enough for Jessica, the receptionist, to glance up.

She knows Connor and I can't stand each other and would, hopefully, take my side. Female empowerment and all that. I catch the end of a wink from Connor to Jessica, and the young woman all but swoons so far to the left I'm surprised she doesn't fall off her chair.

Feminism apparently carries no weight over a charming grin.

Connor finally removes his butt from my desk. “Someday you'll change your mind.”

“When hell freezes over.”

He raises a brow. “I believe in climate change.”

“I believe in boundar—”

“Oh good. You’re both here.” Our boss, Mr. Lawrence, approaches my desk.

I spring out of my chair so fast it shoots back, and I stumble into one of Connor’s broad shoulders.

He snorts.

“Yes, sir,” I squeak, straightening my blouse and giving Mr. Lawrence my most confident smile.

Connor and I are at the bottom of the totem pole in this department. Fresh out of law school. Even Jessica has been here longer than us. So we are both eager to prove ourselves. A few paralegals walk by, and I catch one wave slyly at Connor.

Correction. *I’m* at the bottom of the totem pole. Connor’s getting dragged up the rope by all the single ladies.

“I’ve got an assignment for you both,” Mr. Lawrence says, holding up a Manila envelope.

I swallow hard at the word *both*. I worked with Connor enough before graduating from law school. I never imagined I’d be stuck with him afterward. But then he had to go and apply for the same internship. And to my utter shock and horror, we were *both* hired on after graduation last month.

I’ll never understand what I did so wrong to deserve this kind of fate.

“I want you two to examine my case. I’ve already made my decision, but whoever comes to the same conclusion as me first, or a better one, gets to take it to court.”

My stomach plummets to the floor. Every other lawyer would be excited to get their first real court case, even if it is only someone refuting a parking ticket. But I have one *teeny* problem. It’s not that I don’t think I can win a case. I’ve won several mock trials through the years. Heck, I even got Crew to eat celery sticks the other day. If I can convince my best friend’s picky child to eat a vegetable, I can convince a jury of anything.

As long as none of them are looking at me.

An audience of one or two is fine, but more than that, and all I can focus on are the judgy eyes. That’s when I panic, making my ability to present the evidence in my favor fly right out the window. In law school, I developed the method of staring directly above or below someone’s eyes while I presented my arguments. If that didn’t work, I’d stare daggers at Connor who always happened to be in the room somewhere, watching and waiting for me to mess up. But I’ve yet to discover how I’ll manage either of those things in an actual courtroom.

“Take this to the conference room and get started. You have until the end of the day.” Mr. Lawrence drops the file onto my desk with a resounding thud. No matter how much it scares me, I snatch it before Connor can. It’s a competition, after all. And I excel at those.

“You sure you want to take this case to court?” Connor asks, casually matching my stride on the way to the conference room.

“Why wouldn’t I?”

He shrugs, a motion that appears innocent enough on anyone besides cast-out archangels. “You don’t seem to enjoy public speaking.”

I make a noise somewhere in the realm of a “pshlsh.” How? Of all the people in the world, how did *he* pick up on that?

“I think I’m pretty good at fighting for what’s right.” I flip my hair, grinning when it smacks him in the face. “Why else would I waste my breath on you?”

“I didn’t say you weren’t good at fighting,” he says as we reach the door, and he has the audacity to pull it open for me and let me pass through first. I skim the edge of the door frame to avoid brushing his chest. “In fact, it’s one of my favorite activities to engage in with you.”

I trip over the nonexistent threshold then right myself like nothing happened. He won’t intimidate me with his false seductions.

“It’s the talking in front of other, less annoying people that seems to stress you out,” he continues.

“So, you agree you’re annoying.” I slam the folder onto the table directly in front of me and sit down. I don’t have to share this case with him. In fact, maybe I won’t.

“No more than you, darling.” Connor slides into the chair next to mine, dropping his suit jacket on the chair beside him and rolling up his sleeves.

He lasted a whole two hours in his suit today. Not that I pay attention to how often he sheds his clothes.

He leans closer. “Some people are better at taking the heat than others.”

I can feel his warmth and his smirk, like it’s a bug crawling up my skin. It throws me off kilter and I’m unable to respond with a jab he perfectly set up for me.

“Let’s just get this over with.” I open the file and start pouring over the papers. This is the part I’m good at—sorting through information, finding connections, spotting flaws, and putting together a solid case.

What I’m not good at is waiting. And I’ve been waiting five minutes for the page Connor is reading. Is he purposely reading this slow to annoy me? It’s Connor, of course he is. It’s fine. It doesn’t bother me. There’s not a ticking clock on this or anything.

I tap my pencil on my leg while counting to sixty.

That’s it. That’s all the patience I’ve got.

“Can you read any slower?” My voice echoes through the glass room.

The conference room sits in the middle of the office building. It feels less like a secure meeting space and more like being a lab rat on display. A movement catches my eye,

and I see one of my least favorite paralegals, Bri, gawking at Conner on the other side of the glass.

Am I the only one in the universe who sees him for who he really is?

“I could, yes,” Connor mutters. Reading seems to have put him in a foul mood. He makes a show of using his pen to underline something on the top line then slowly skims the page again.

I clench my fists under the table. “I’m not going to let you ruin this for me.”

His eyes harden, an uncomfortable heat radiating from them. “Because it’s all about you, right?”

“Oh grow up.” I push from the table. “I’m going to get some coffee. Try to be done with the first line by the time I come back.” My heels make a stiff click against the tile as I head for the door.

“They don’t keep the tampons in the breakroom.”

“You would know,” I toss back.

“And you would know how to cheat to win.” He says it softer, but he could whisper, and I’d still hear it in this blasted room.

Ice slices down my spine.

I have dealt with his immature ways for the last four years. I’ve put up with his incessant teasing, his conceited comments at school and in the office. But calling me a cheater?

I roll my shoulders, holding myself higher, and push out of the room.

“That egotistical jerk,” I mutter under my breath.

I’ve worked as hard as everyone else in this office to get here. I put myself through my undergrad by playing collegiate volleyball, and I worked my tail off every day in law school, all while helping my best friend raise her son. “I’ve never cheated to get ahead.”

“That’s not what I heard.”

My head snaps up, and my eyes connect with Bri’s. There’s a gleam in her eyes, as well as a hint of mischief.

“Excuse me?”

She pushes from the counter housing the coffee pot. “Oh, do you not know?”

I swallow hard. I don’t like where this is headed. “Know what?”

She flicks an invisible piece of lint off her shoulder. “That case you got the first week on the job. Newbies don’t get high-profile cases.”

Is she referring to the case where my best friend was almost kidnapped? The one I got to sit in on at court. I didn’t say two words during that trial.

“I guess the boss made an exception.” I shrug and reach around her for a mug.

“Or...” She steps closer to me, blocking my access to caffeine. She pauses, dangling that single word above me until it’s time to strike. “You *cheated*”—her eyes rove down my body then back up again—“to get to the top.”

It takes a full ten seconds for her words to sink in. My ankle gives out, and I stumble back, trying to gain footing on the solid ground. “Are you insinuating that I...?” I can’t even bring myself to say it out loud. Does she really think I would stoop to that level?

She takes a nonchalant sip of her coffee. “That’s the story going around the office.”

My heart drops like a rock, burying itself somewhere in my stomach. That’s why I keep getting winks and whistles from a few of the men, and why none of the women will talk to me. Everyone thinks I’m the office skank.

“That’s a lie!” My voice borders on hysterical. “Who would start such an awful rumor?”

Bri tilts her head to the side and gives me a pitying smile. “Who do you think? Everyone knows you and Connor hate each other. But if it is indeed a rumor”—she picks lazily at one of her fake nails—“even I’ll admit he went too far.”

The devil.

I barely register my feet moving until the door to the conference room slams shut behind me.

Connor glances up at me.

“What is your problem?” My jaw barely cracks open.

His eyes narrow like he's been waiting a long time for this moment. He stands and stalks toward me; every step he takes closer puts him in dangerous territory, but it doesn't slow his approach.

When he's less than a foot away, he stops and folds his arms. The action *does not* draw my attention to his very average-sized biceps or his veiny forearms. He really needs to wear clothing the appropriate way.

“My problem is you.”

I clench my fists at my sides. “That's your excuse? That's why you did it? Do you truly hate me that much?”

A touch of the flame in his eyes dies, and his forehead scrunches. “What are you talking about?”

I stomp closer. “If you're going to talk about me behind my back, be man enough to admit it to my face! Did you start that rumor?”

His lips turn down. “What rumor?”

My blood boils. “Haven't you heard? Apparently, I slept my way to the top of that case last month.”

His face pales. That's all the confirmation I need. My hands are around his neck, and I don't know how they got there, but they are intent on strangling him.

How could he do this to me? Irritating me before every mock trial, or stealing my sandwich from the breakroom is one thing, but spreading lies like this?

Connor pulls my hands off his neck and pins them behind my back, trapping me against his chest.

“Let go of me.” I struggle against his hold. I won’t stop until I claw his eyes out.

He tightens his hold, and I hate that my heart reacts by trying to jump ship right into enemy territory. My chest rises and falls next to his with pent-up anger.

“Maddie...” His voice comes out low and gravelly. “I don’t understand.”

He doesn’t understand? I don’t understand how he could be so cruel. Once upon a time, I considered the reason he annoyed me was because he had some sort of crush on me. But now? I’ve never been surer of anything in my life.

I hate Connor Quinn.

The fight leaves me, and my anger dissolves into a sea of pain.

Something foreign lands on my cheek.

A tear?

No. I don’t cry.

“Whoa, Maddie, I...” Conner says, his voice softer now. He loosens his hold, and I wrench myself out of his grasp. He’s still talking, but I don’t register his words. He might as well be on another planet. I can’t hear him. He won’t charm his way out of this.

I sniff and gather what's left of my dignity, narrowing my eyes so the red rims are even more menacing.

“I did not sleep my way to the top or anywhere else.” The words taste like acid in my mouth.

I can't place the expression on his face. Shock, disbelief?
“But Maddie I—”

“No.” I hold up a hand, cutting him off. “Don't ever talk to me again.”

Chapter 2

Connor

A very angry—albeit very justified—Maddie storms out of the conference room. And my mind races through the last few minutes. She accused me of starting a rumor. At first, I'd been confused, but then it all came rushing back to me. And though I always hate to admit it, even though it happens more often than I'd like, she's right.

It was almost a month ago when the attempted kidnapping case went to court. I'd been ticked when Maddie was allowed to sit in on that trial. In return, I had to do her job as well as my own for three weeks. And everything possible went wrong. Cases all over the office went south because of evidence I had overlooked. The night of the trial, though, I spiraled. I was intent on fixing my mistakes and couldn't make myself go home. It was late, Bri and I were the only ones in the office. I'm not sure why she was even there, to flirt or be a pain in my side most likely. She knew I was ticked and asked why Maddie got the case instead of me?

I've never been the best at controlling my tongue when it comes to Maddie, and I said, "Of course, the boss would give the beautiful girl a case over me."

She leaned forward in her seat, her intense blue eyes gleaming. "Do you think they are sleeping together?"

"They have to be."

Not that Maddie couldn't get that case on her own merit. In fact, she's the most determined person in the office. I knew she'd earned it. My stupidity evolved from something much more pathetic. Because Maddie got that case, I didn't. Which meant I hadn't impressed the bosses like she had. Once again, I didn't measure up, and I let my insecurities about losing in our imagined competition take over instead of being happy for her.

Bri brought it up again the next day at work, but I shut the conversation down, thinking that was the end of it.

But apparently, Bri took the liberty of sharing my idiotic ramblings with the entire office. Always the giver, that one.

Truth be told, I haven't thought about that night since it happened. Until five minutes ago when Maddie came raging in here like a one-woman army, on the attack.

So, yeah. I deserved Maddie's anger. I also deserve the brick of guilt settling in my stomach.

I scrape my fingers over my head, pulling at the ends of my hair until my scalp screams.

What have I done?

I drop my hand to my side. I need to apologize. She won't believe it, but I have to try.

I exit the conference room in time to see the boss striding out of his office, his gaze trained on Maddie. Bri pokes her head out behind him.

Uh oh.

"Mr. Lawrence?" I jump in front of him, blocking his way to Maddie. "I was wondering if I might talk to you for a moment."

"Not now, Quinn," he barks, and I fall out of his path like a bowling pin that's barely been tapped.

"Miss Cardozo." He comes to a halt beside her desk, and Maddie's head shoots up.

She takes in the scene, including me and Bri, and her face pales.

Mr. Lawrence folds his arms across his round belly. "Gather your things. You're fired."

"W-what?" she sputters, jumping to her feet.

"I saw the footage. You attacked a colleague. Gather your things now or I'll be forced to call security."

Maddie blinks rapidly, shifting between me and the boss before aiming a finger at me. "But he started a rumor—"

"Save it." Mr. Lawrence barks.

I may be only two steps above dirt right now, but I can't let her take the fall for this. I do have *some* integrity.

I stride toward the two of them. “She’s right. I—”

My comment dies when the boss throws a hand in the air, an inch in front of my nose. “Unless you want to be the next one fired, shut up. A good lawyer can take criticism without wringing someone’s neck.”

Maddie shrinks, her shoulders curving in as she wraps her arms around her middle.

If I could go back and erase the last ten minutes, I would. I’d grab her and pull her into my chest sooner. Lock us in a closet so she could throttle me like she deserves. Anything but this.

“What if you had lost your cool like that in court? There are more infuriating lawyers than Connor out there.” Mr. Lawrence scrubs a hand down his face. “I’m sorry, Maddison, but you’re a liability, and I have to let you go.”

For a moment, I think Maddie is going to cry. I would if our roles were reversed.

But then she sees me, and her jaw sets.

“I understand.” She nods once then starts packing her things.

Mr. Lawrence leans in closer to her, to say something that the rest of the eavesdropping office can’t hear, and she nods again. This time her chin quivers, and I can see her fighting with everything she’s got to remain collected. For her sake, I hope she does.

Maddie and I have our differences, but I respect her. Though I can’t help but wonder what it would take to make her truly

show her feelings—feelings that don't include wanting to murder me.

I have to admit, for a second there, after I'd removed her arms and pinned her against me, I'd been tempted to kiss her.

Clearly, it had been a lapse in sanity. The woman is getting fired, and it's my fault.

She finishes gathering her things and carries only a stuffed purse and two plants.

Mr. Lawrence and Bri have disappeared, and I race after Maddie, catching her at the elevator.

“Maddie, wait.”

She stops and spins on her heel, turning on me with a look I'd imagine coming from Lord Voldemort.

I'm not brave like Harry. I'm a trembling Ron.

She pinches her red lips. For the better part of the last four years, I looked forward to every color she would wear on those lips, every shade from dark red to almost purple. Today, the angry red is fitting. “You already got me fired. What more could you possibly want?”

“I never meant for you to get fired.”

She tosses her jet-black hair over her shoulder, pinning me to the spot with her coal-dark eyes. “You meant to ruin my life then.”

“No, I...” I shove a hand through my hair. “You know that wasn't my intent.”

“The only thing I know for certain when it comes to you is that you don’t care about anyone but yourself. People are stepping stools for you to get to the top.”

Her words slice into my skin like a million little shards of glass.

“Well, no one ever accused you of being an angel.” I didn’t mean for that to slip out, but it’s a natural reaction around her. I push, she shoves, and the game continues. It’s addicting and foolish, considering I’m the only one who understands why it began.

Maddie grants me a glare, one I’ve grown familiar with in the last four years then shakes her head. “Congratulations, Connor, you win.” She turns to the elevator then glances at me over her shoulder. “Now who’s the cheater?”

Her comment hits like a punch to the gut. My mouth falls open, but I have no defense. No time for one last appeal. I’ve lost this case.

The elevator opens, and she steps inside. I don’t follow her. Nothing good will come of it.

I turn as the door closes and walk numbly back to my desk. I can practically feel the weight of the world closing in on me, crushing my lungs until I can no longer breathe.

I have to fix this.

My phone rings and I glance at the caller’s I.D.. My sister.

“Hey Millie, I can’t talk right now,” I say. Correction: I don’t *want* to talk. I can’t even think straight right now.

“Hey, didn’t you pay the property taxes?”

I rub my jaw, my brain trying to focus on something besides the pain in Maddie’s brown eyes. It doesn’t work. The image has been branded into my brain forever. “Yes.” But even as I say it, I’m not sure that’s correct. “Why?”

“We got a new bill in the mail. For three thousand. Is that what you paid?”

“*Three thousand?*” I clench my eyes shut and bring a fist to my forehead. We can’t afford that. We can’t even afford the mortgage for our parents’ home.

What on earth am I going to do?

“It’s not a big deal. We have time, right? We’ll figure it out,” Millie says. I wish her optimism came with a cash advance.

We need every penny we can get to fill the giant hole left by our parents. Which means...I can’t lose this job. Not for Maddie’s sake, or mine and my sister’s. The pit in my stomach turns into a gaping crater.

“Hey, you okay?”

I swallow the thick lump that has taken up residence in my throat. “Yup.”

“You know, for a lawyer, you’re not very convincing.”

“I just have a headache.” *And this conversation isn’t helping.*

“My friend Laura was telling me about this magic stuff that’s supposed to help relieve stress and can take away a headache in minutes, I could get you some. She said the guy who sells it

works in the back of a laundromat around the corner from the salon, I think.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Millie, please don’t become a drug dealer.”

”There’s something I haven’t tried yet.” She muses. ”It would be way more lucrative than doing hair.”

I do not have the energy for this right now. ”Millie.”

”Fine.” She mutters something I can’t understand. “Well, do you want to talk about it?”

My jaw tenses. That is the last thing I want to do right now. “I’m fine.”

“Geez, you sound about as mad as you were when you left your white shirts in the washer with my red bra.”

I press a fist to my head as it begins to pound. “Again, that was *your* fault.”

’I’ve heard it both ways.”

“Millie, that doesn’t even make sen—”

Click.

And she’s gone.

I drop my head to my hands with a groan. No matter what I do, I’ll let someone down. Better to be Maddie when she already hates me.

Chapter 3

Maddie

Four months later

I drop my athletic bag onto the counter and log my hours into the computer. It's time for a nice long bath and a good night's sleep.

Gunnar slides up next to me, his childish cologne mixed with the ever-present BO making me instantly nauseous. "Hey Maddie, hope you weren't heading home. Someone requested you for personal training at four."

That's in twenty minutes.

"Nooo." I whine like any self-respecting twenty-six-year-old. "Why can't Rachel take it?"

Gunnar shrugs and leans against the counter "I gave him a list of everyone, but he insisted it had to be you."

"Did you make sure he's not a creeper?" I groan, giving in to the inevitable. I can't afford to be picky. Beggars can't be choosers, and until I get back into law, I'm the definition of a

beggar. This is what I get for being fired from my first real job as a lawyer. A smelly gym, and questionable clientele. Can't forget the disappointment I am to my mother. I can *never* forget that.

"If you want me to protect you, all you have to do is ask." Gunnar slings an arm around my shoulder, but I shove him off.

"No thanks. But feel free to review the sexual harassment clause in your contract at your earliest convenience."

His unflappable laughter booms through the front entry.

I push past him, making my way to the employee locker room.

"You know you want me."

"Keep dreaming."

"How'd you know I dream about you?"

I roll my eyes so far back I can almost make out my brain. The very one that is not being used the way it was supposed to be.

The locker room is blessedly empty, and I dump my bag onto a bench then sink down beside it. My head drops back against the wall of lockers and I close my eyes. I'm exhausted. I spent my morning appealing to three different law firms to no avail, and the rest of the afternoon taking my frustrations out with a high-intensity interval training class, followed by two personal training clients. The never-ending job search is defeating. For some reason, people don't take too kindly to a first-year lawyer attacking other employees.

Okay. I can be strong enough to admit I have a teeny anger issue. Which, in my defense, only helps in the courtroom. Not that I ever got the chance to plead my case in an actual courtroom. Bri and Connor ran straight to the boss with their testimonies, and I was sentenced to life without law. No chance for a rebuttal, though what was the point?

I put my hands around Connor's neck, and I'm still not sure why. I lost control, and I deserved to get kicked to the curb. That doesn't mean I don't blame Connor for the role he played. He's enemy number one and always will be.

After that dreadful day, I sought refuge at the gym. There was so much anger and frustration pulsating through me that I spent hour after hour, day after day, torturing my body as punishment for my mistakes. The noise in my head was neverending, so the workouts became neverending. I couldn't get my job back, but I could push my body until I became numb to the pain. Two weeks later, a coaching position became available at the gym and since I used to work here during my undergrad, I jumped right back in, needing something until I could find a firm willing to take me. Four months later I'm still here, hopelessly waiting for a call I know isn't coming.

I pull my canister of pre-workout from my bag and drop a full scoop into my water bottle, needing all the energy I can to make it through another workout with what's bound to be a pervy man.

I know not all men are perverts. But those ones don't request me.

I chug the drink, ignoring the tingling feeling in my lips, and put on a fresh coat of deodorant. After I stuff my bag in my locker, I return to the front. The client who requested me hasn't arrived yet.

I turn and pace the front hall, shaking out my hands to gain control of my jitters. I've never taken two scoops in a day before, and my heart is beating at an unnatural pace. Or maybe it's in my stomach because I'm not feeling so well.

I bounce on my toes, my nerves creeping up there with my heart rate. If he's going to go through the effort to request me, he should have the decency to show up on time.

My stomach clenches again, and I walk faster.

I make three laps around the front display table, piled high with bottles of protein powder. I stop to straighten the singular jar on the top of the impressive pyramid. There, perfect.

"Maddie."

I jump, dropping my hand too quickly and ramming my hip into the table at the same time. The pyramid collapses and with it, my pride.

"Come on, I just finished making that." Gunnar groans behind me.

"Well, then, you know how to fix it." I press my lips together and flip around.

Gunnar isn't alone. The man standing next to him is the last person on Earth I expected to see.

He's my client? That smug, self-righteous, son of a—. My stomach sinks faster than the protein tower I demolished. And then it rises right back up... and doesn't stop.

Chapter 4

Connor

I've imagined my reunion with Maddie many times. In my head it goes one of two ways: she picks up where she left off four months ago, wraps her hands around my neck, and tries to kill me, or she throws out a few choice words and stomps off.

But not once did I imagine her puking on me.

I'm so stunned I can't move.

"Ew!" Gunnar jumps back from the slosh. "You got vomit on my new shoes!"

I don't need to inspect my shoes to know she got me too. It seeps in through the holes above my toes, and it's extremely unpleasant.

Maddie's eyes are wide. So wide I can see every emotion she's fighting through. Embarrassment, pain, betrayal... She's as beautiful as she's always been, but I immediately notice the lack of lipstick. Of course, she wouldn't wear it to the gym. It's not like I've been picturing those lips for the last four

months, wondering if I'd ever see them turn down at me again. Then as luck would have it, my sister got an advertisement for this gym last week with a picture of Maddie front and center, squatting an impressive weight and looking gorgeous doing it. The advertisement offered a free four-week gym membership with fifty percent off a personal training session, which I am currently taking advantage of. I'm here to fix things with Maddie. Making her sick was *not* part of the plan.

I clear my throat. "Hey, Mads." The nickname I was never approved to use is all it takes to turn her face to stone.

And then she disappears.

There's the reaction I expected.

"I'm going to be sick." Gunnar runs off somewhere in the same direction as Maddie, but I'm rooted to the floor. One, because I'm too scared to move and make the situation on the floor worse, and two, because I don't know what happens now.

But then I remember where I am, in the main hall, puke at my feet and protein bottles littering the floor while people skirt around me like I'm carrying the plague.

Maddie would be happy with that outcome.

I duck into the closest bathroom and rip off my shoes. I'm not leaving. If she thinks she can scare me off with a little puke, she's going to have to try harder than that.

But I really hope she doesn't.

By the time I return to the main desk, Maddie is there with a woman. Gunnar is nowhere to be found. And the front entry is, thankfully, puke-free.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” the woman asks Maddie.

She rubs her hands up and down her arms. “Yeah, I just took too much pre-workout.”

The woman nods like this kind of thing happens often. I’m not a gym regular, mainly because I can’t afford it, but I don’t think trainers should make a habit of throwing up on clients.

“I can take over your session if you need,” the woman offers.

Maddie opens her mouth to respond when she sees me. Her face morphs into a grin—an evil one. If I wasn’t immune to that expression by now, I’d be quivering in my soggy sneakers. But instead, it feels like coming home.

Maddie turns to the woman. “Actually, I feel great now. Thank you, though. I can’t wait to train my new client.”

She’s going to go through with it? The better question is, am I? She already vomited on me. How can it get worse?

“Okay,” the woman says before busying herself at the computer.

Maddie rounds the desk and approaches me.

“I can come back next week if you aren’t feeling well,” I say. Step one of the make-it-up-to-Maddie plan is showing her I’m not a despicable human being.

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to make you come back. I’m sure they’re missing you in hell.” She smirks.

My lips twitch. I’ve missed her little digs, her challenges. My retaliation comes as an automatic response. “I believe they’re missing you more. There were posters on pitchforks and everything.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t bring one to shove into my back.”

My grin slips. There’s that brick in my stomach—the one that’s been festering for the last four months. I open my mouth to retort again, but that is exactly what I came here to rectify. I’m not that jerk anymore. At least, that’s what I’ve tried to convince myself.

I close my mouth. The look in her eyes is lethal and ice skids through my veins. I knew the potential dangers of this plan going in, which is why I have been working out at home to prepare. Push-ups, man-jacks—modified jumping jacks so I don’t punch the ceiling—and nice little jogs around the neighborhood. I’m not a bodybuilder like that guy over there with muscles bigger than my head, but I’d like to think I do a good job of staying fit.

I’m not scared.

“Why are you here?” she asks.

“I came to talk to you.”

Her eyes narrow. She already knows where I’m going with this.

“All I want is a chance to explain what happened four months a—”

“Motion denied,” she cuts me off. “Either get out of here or let’s get started.”

I don’t have time to hesitate even for a moment, because she’s gone. It takes me almost ten seconds to find her again. Which shouldn’t be so hard to do, given the fact that since I first met her nearly five years ago, I’ve barely been able to take my eyes off her. Her long black hair swishes in a high ponytail over her sculpted shoulders that her lavender tank top leaves on display. Her legs are miles of lean, toned muscle.

The only imperfect part of Maddie is that she never understood. She never figured out the reason I tested her, tried her at every turn, wasn’t because I wanted to be the best—okay that was part of it—but what I wanted, *all* that I ever really wanted, was for her to notice me.

I guess she did. But not in the way I wanted her to.

Maddie stops in front of the treadmill so quickly I almost slam into her back. “Jog for ten minutes at your warm-up pace.” She hops on the nearest one and puts her earphones in.

There will be time to talk later, I guess.

I step onto the treadmill next to her and hit six. That’s a good warm-up pace. I peek at the screen on Maddie’s treadmill. Six point five.

Hmm. Six feels a little slow. I punch the button for seven.

Maddie ups hers to seven point five.

My breath comes harder, but that's what the warm-up is for, right? Increase my heart rate?

Eight sounds about right for that. My soggy shoes squelch and squeak but I keep my pace.

Maddie doesn't change her speed for a full minute.

I raise my chin, my steps coming easier. I win.

I focus on my breathing and not the traitorous air bubble stuck to my side. *It's not there. It doesn't exist—*

Beep.

She's at eight point five.

Oh, come on!

She's not even breathing hard. In fact, is she... *smiling?*

I hit nine. I needed to amp it up, anyway.

Maddie goes right past nine point five and straight to ten.

I hate her. How is she running so fast? She's tall but not as tall as me. I should be able to beat her at this.

I knock my treadmill up, ten, ten point five, eleven. There. My feet pound so hard and fast below me they become a blur. A very loud blur, causing several people to glance in my direction, questioning my sanity with the thinly veiled judgment in their eyes.

I try to make it appear natural like I'm not dying. My body has other plans. My foot slips on the wet belt, and I have the undeniable feeling of death creeping in.

Once I had a dream where I slipped off a treadmill and right onto the one behind me. I went on for miles, being hurled off one treadmill only to fling onto another. Over and over again.

I grip the rails, using every muscle in my body to prevent my dream from becoming a reality. My other foot makes solid contact with the outer edge, and I cling for dear life.

Maddie yanks out the emergency clip in front of me, and my treadmill stops. I take a moment to drag a healthy dose of air into my lungs.

“You should probably wear this next time.” She says, dangling the clip in front of my face with a haughty grin.

I straighten and pull out a flirtatious smolder, one that has been known to make a girl or two swoon. “Is that what that’s for?”

Maddie glowers. “Yes. It’s for idiots. Like you.” She drops the clip and steps off her treadmill. “Let’s go. I hope you’re warm.”

I’m warm. Also embarrassed and more than a little terrified on account of almost dying, but I shake it off and follow her. It was my own stupidity that nearly got me thrown off the treadmill, like my own stupidity got her fired.

I don’t need to win everything. I can sit back and let her—oh great, pull-ups. I did not practice these.

“Today I want to get a baseline to see where you’re at. Start with ten.” She points to the bar above my head.

I don’t remember the last time I did *one*.

“Okay.” I rub my hands together then drag them along my shorts for no other reason than to avoid the inevitable. Ten pull-ups. I can do this. At least I could in college.

I jump up onto the bar. The first two come faster than expected. Around five, I slow down. At seven, I have to dig into it. Eight has my arms shaking.

“Can you do two more?” Maddie asks, a competitive edge to her tone.

I huff out a breath. *Of course, I can.*

I use everything that wasn't thrown out of me when I was nearly catapulted off the treadmill and pour it into my upper body.

Nine. Ten.

Whoa. I've still got it. I grin and drop from the bar. “Is that it?”

She lifts a single brow, a look that's always been attractive on her. It's both tempting and adorable, drawing me in and pushing me away simultaneously. “Oh, we've just begun.”

Perhaps I'd been a tad overconfident.

“Bench press, man makers, and burpees are up next,” she says, a wicked glint in her eyes.

I only know one of those words. *What did I get myself into?*

After what I put her through, that calculation on her face can only mean one thing. She plans to torture me. But she doesn't know she's been torturing me since the first day I met her.

Mentally, emotionally.

Surely nothing she can do will hurt me more physically.

Then, after she's had her fun, we'll talk.

By the time my hour is up—I should have opted for the thirty-minute training session—I haven't gotten so much as two words out. Mostly because she pushed so fast through the circuit, I needed every breath I could wheeze into my lungs to remain in a vertical position. But also because she shut me down quicker than I could get a word out.

I should have tried to right my wrongs over something I'm good at. Like sitting. Or eating.

I could definitely beat her at eating. I wonder if she's still on that weird diet. The no gluten, dairy, and sugar-free. I'm not even sure what she eats. Is there anything left?

“That's it,” Maddie says, stopping her treadmill. I was supposed to be doing a cooldown. But when Maddie hit eight on her screen, the only logical thing to do was follow her lead.

I yank the clip out, and my treadmill immediately stops. But my legs don't. Both of them turn to pool noodles, trying to hold up my giant-sized body, and I grip the handrails again.

I'm getting sick of this machine.

“So...” I follow Maddie to the front, practically running to keep up with her, which is hard to do with the cramping muscles in my legs. “About that talk.”

She stops short, and this time, I do ram into her.

I drag myself back, but my knees buckle, and I reach for the nearest machine to keep me stable. My sweaty palms slip, and I narrowly miss smacking my face into the metal bar.

Her eyes flit over me like I'm nothing more than a fleck of dust swirling through the air.

“I don't get paid to talk; I get paid to train. And your time is up.”

She spins, flipping me with her two-foot-long ponytail as she retreats. The citrus, beachy scent momentarily disables me. That's always been her favorite move. Mine too.

I shake my head free of the haze I'm under and hobble after her. “So, I'll pay you to talk.”

She sends me a narrow glare over her shoulder. “That's highly inappropriate and could be misconstrued. You, of all people, should know that.”

“I'll be back next week then.”

If I can walk.

“Fine.” She stops at the front desk and types into the computer, ignoring me like...well, like she always has. Like I'll never be worthy of her attention.

“Come more prepared next time,” she says flippantly.

Prepared? She's the one who threw up on me and made our session start late.

I bite back the retort. This feud with her is childish.

“Will do, master.” And I have not matured.

She scowls before retreating into the employee locker room.

I scratch my head, grimacing when all the muscles in my arms strain with the simple movement. This was a stupid plan.

Chapter 5

Maddie

I push out of the gym and stride through the parking lot, shoulders tense, head on a swivel to ensure Connor is long gone. That's the problem with the devil. I think I've cast him out, but he butts right back into my life when I'm least expecting it. Darn demon.

My phone buzzes, and I pull it out to see my dad's face pop up on my phone screen.

The tension in my body dissipates. "Hey, Dad."

"Hey Mads, How are you?"

"I'm good. How are you?"

"I could be better. Your mom's making me go to Bingo tonight instead of letting me stay home and watch the game."

I chuckle at his displeasure. "You know you can record the game. I've shown you how to do it." *A hundred times.*

"But it's not the same." He huffs, "You know I have to be in my chair or they'll lose. And after Sunday's game, they need

all the help they can get. Did you see it? I don't know what that coach is doing running a defense like that.”

There's a flier trapped under my windshield wiper, and I yank it out while my dad launches into his usual spiel. I scan the paper, *Temporary Volleyball Coach wanted at East Heights High School*.

Weird. Why would a school advertise a coaching position with flyers on cars? That's incredibly unsafe.

Visions of easier times flit through my head—playing volleyball through high school and receiving a scholarship to play collegiate. That was one of the happiest days of my life. My mom was less than thrilled, and I was lucky I even got to play with how against the sport she was. But at the end of the day, the scholarship was what sold her. She wanted me to be more successful than she was and made me promise to achieve greatness.

My gaze catches on the mediocre gym I just left. I achieved it all right.

I want to laugh at how badly I've screwed everything up. But then I'd probably end up crying, and I made myself stop doing that two months ago.

I fold the paper and stuff it in the side of my duffel before hopping in the car. I miss playing. I could join a league. But those people are always too friendly and will want to know what I do, and then I'll remember how far I've fallen and... I'm not ready for that yet. I put the car in drive and pull out of the lot.

“Is that Maddie?” My mother’s heavily accented voice enters the conversation I forgot I was part of. “I need to talk to her.”

I exhale, bracing myself for the inevitable. I don’t know who was more upset when I lost my job as a lawyer: me or my mom. And for the last four months, she has been trying to “help” me get back into the profession. But being from Brazil, English is her third language, right behind Portuguese and telling me what to do with my life.

“Filha, I found you a job.” She dives right in. “It’s in Vegas!”

I grimace. What kind of job did she find me? “Mom, I don’t think—”

“You’ll be the strip!”

“Mom!” I jerk the steering wheel and nearly cut someone off. This woman is going to kill me.

“I mean *on* the strip. In those big buildings. Or the other side, I don’t remember. But you be in law again!”

I can see it now. My face on a billboard with the tagline: “Ruined your life in one night? Let me help.” My mom would even pay for it.

I rub my forehead and the headache blossoming there then take a long gulp of my water before responding. “I don’t want to work in Vegas.”

“You have a point,” she concedes. “It will be hard to come home for holiday and for me to see the grandbabies.”

Oh yes, I almost forgot about the spouse and children I don't possess along with a career I also don't have. I'm a disappointment all around.

"But you might enjoy such fancy life. They even do your makeup for free. And they have cute outfits for you to wear."

I'm ninety-nine percent sure she did not find me a job as a *real* lawyer.

I'll have to get a new billboard.

"Thanks, Mom, but I'll figure it out, I promise."

"I know you will. You are the smartest girl in the world."

If that were true, I wouldn't be in this position right now.

"I'll see you next week."

"Bring a boyfriend this time," she says, and then the line goes dead.

Sure. I'll find a job and a boyfriend in a week and a half. As if I haven't been searching for the last four months. For the job. I couldn't care less about the boyfriend thing.

I've exhausted every law firm in the Phoenix area. And myself. The only place willing to take me was the shady public defenders working out of the back of a Chinese barbecue. The restaurant and the job were equally suspicious.

I call my best friend.

I need to vent, and she'll understand.

"You'll never guess who my new client is," I say the second Lyndi answers the phone.

“Oh, okay, um...Shawn Mendes? Tom Holland? That girl from TikTok, Charli something?”

“No.” Seriously, where does that woman’s mind go sometimes? “The devil.” I pull into my apartment complex and get out of my car.

“Like the one and only?”

“No!” Haven’t I complained enough about Connor in the last four years that she should never forget? Just because she’s off living her fairytale doesn’t mean the rest of us are. “Connor.”

“Oh! The ogre,” she says, understanding in her voice.

She does still love me. “It was a hunchback, but yes.” I drop my bag in my room and kick off my tennis shoes.

“Okay. Start over now that I know we aren’t talking about a red guy with horns and a tail.”

Technically, I have yet to confirm the tail.

“He *requested* me.” I’m still dumbfounded by it myself. How stupid could he be to put himself in that position? “He claimed he wanted to talk. But of course, I didn’t let him.”

“Seriously, what did he—? Why are you naked?”

I frown at my fully clothed self in my bedroom mirror.

“Please tell me you’re talking to Crew and not your husband.” I grimace.

She and Ward got married two months ago and are still in that honeymoon stage. After what she’s been through raising

her son by herself, she deserves the world, and he's given her that.

I may be a tiny bit jealous.

But there is nothing wrong with being single. Unless I'm talking to my mother.

"No, I don't see any more moles."

Lyndi sighs before returning to me. "Crew, of course. He was hoping he had more moles than Jaxon, but he only has three and Jaxon has seven."

I snort. "And what does the winner get?"

"Hopefully the dead snake currently decaying on my back porch. Crew dug it up this morning when I made the horrible mistake of going to the bathroom alone."

"How dare you relieve yourself in peace!" I joke. I can just picture Lyndi discovering a dead snake in her child's hands. I'd pay good money to see that show.

"So what happened with Connor?" she says. "Did you make him do all those awful things in the gym that I hate?"

I pull a salad from the fridge. She hates every exercise at the gym, so the odds are on her side.

"I might have given him a few week-twelve exercises," I admit, smiling even now. It was one of the best moments of my life, seeing that six-three man crumpled in half and wheezing.

“And was he as stubborn as you and made the whole thing a competition?”

I scoff. “I didn’t make it a competition.” *I did win on the treadmill, though.*

“You make *everything* a competition,” Lyndi says. “Remember the cupcake contest with Ward’s family?”

I purse my lips. “Vaguely.” I also vaguely remember making Ward’s niece cry when my masterpiece was chosen over hers. *So?* “What’s wrong with a little competition?”

“Besides making kids cry? Hmm, what else? Oh yeah, it makes everyone else feel insecure, insignificant, inadequate, in —”

“All right, I get it.” I cut her off. “But Connor has done that enough to me. He deserved it.”

“Maybe he deserved it,” she says, “but how long are you going to make him pay?”

“That’s a good question.” I drizzle some vinaigrette over my salad. “Is forever too soon?”

“You said he wanted to talk, right? Wouldn’t it be so much easier on you if you listened to what he had to say and sent him on his merry way?”

I’ve thought of that. But it would be far too easy to let him win in that scenario. I don’t want to hear his excuses. I want my job back. Case closed.

“Someday you’re going to have to let a man catch up to you,” Lyndi says, and I freeze with a bite of spinach halfway to my mouth.

“I go out all the time.” Well, I haven’t in a couple of months, but... “It’s not like I’m out of reach.”

“No, you don’t have a problem attracting men, but you scare them all away. You’re too good at everything, too perfect.”

“I do not scare men away.”

“Then what happened with Matt?”

I knew she was going to bring him up. “We weren’t right for each other.”

“Agreed, but he was still a good guy. A sweet man who was so intimidated by you that when you broke up with him, he practically rolled over like a puppy so you could rub his tummy.”

I cringe. “You made that sound worse than it was.”

“He fixed your faucet. And put a new lock on your door. *After* you broke up with him.”

Yeah, that was awkward. “I didn’t want him to. I told him I’d hire someone.”

“But he was so lovestruck, you could probably call him up right now and he’d drop everything to help you.”

“That seems like a personal problem.” She’s right, Matt was very sweet. But this had been during the almost kidnapping situation. Had I pushed him away too easily?

“Well, yeah, he was a little clingy. But he was a decent guy. I’m just saying, someday you’ll have to let a man see the imperfect side of you too. And that’s what you’re afraid of.”

That doesn’t even make sense.

So why is my skin crawling?

“Why are we talking about my dating history? I was complaining about my nemesis.”

“Oh, right.” Lyndi chuckles. “Go ahead and get back to that.”

I scrunch up my nose as I poke through my salad. “Eh. I’ve lost my fire. What are you up to?”

“Reorganizing the kitchen.”

“I thought you weren’t allowed in the kitchen after the mini fire?”

“I’m not, but Ward’s working overtime tonight, and I thought I’d rearrange everything. Just for fun.” There’s so much mischief in her voice I can feel it through the phone.

Ward will not appreciate the kitchen being reorganized. But a bit of organization is exactly what I need right now.

“I’ll be right over.” I can’t control my life, might as well focus on someone else’s.

Chapter 6

Connor

I slide away from my computer and rub my forehead. My vision is blurry, and the evidence in front of me needs fresh eyes. I need a break. And caffeine.

I stand and stretch then trudge to the break room.

Bri is there. Not surprising at all. If I didn't know better, I'd think her office was the breakroom, and she got paid to gossip.

Her eyes light up when she sees me. "I was just talking about you."

I'm sure she was.

Bri twirls one of her short blonde curls around her finger and bites her bottom lip.

She's a perpetual flirt though I've never encouraged her. The night of the trial, she'd tried to kiss me, but I turned her down. She doesn't seem hung up on it. But it's hard to tell since she flirts with every male in the office. "Who will you be bringing to the company party?"

“No one.” I reach around her for the pot she’s blocking.

She giggles and touches my arm. “Don’t be silly. You have to bring someone. It’s practically law.”

I’m sure she’s making this up, like she does everything else, but she has been with the company longer than I have.

“I guess I’ll bring my sister.” I shrug and finally manage to free the kettle and locate my cup.

Her eyes run up and down my body like I’m a piece of meat, and she taps a manicured finger against my chest. “Well, if you change your mind”—she leans closer to me—“I can make myself available.”

And then she leaves the breakroom.

Hmm. Must be her break.

I yawn and drop onto the comfiest chair. I lean back and take a deep breath, hoping it will take some of the weight off my shoulders.

It doesn’t.

My debts right now are taller than this office building, and it’s suffocating.

When my parents passed four years ago, my sister and I inherited their home as well as the resulting mortgage and debt associated with it. My parents weren’t planners—the one and only negative thing I could ever say about them. I knew they weren’t wealthy, but their lifestyle was. I never stopped to wonder where the money came from.

After they passed, we found out they had taken out a second mortgage on their home to pay for their trip to Europe. That trip had been their last. As they'd crashed on one of Italy's most dangerous roads.

If I could have talked them out of their last lavish trip, they'd still be here. Millie and I wouldn't be stuck with a house we will be paying off for the next thirty years. And I wouldn't have used Maddie as a distraction from my stress.

Everything would be better.

When the credit card bills started coming, I nearly had a heart attack, and the gloom of missing my parents was overshadowed by the hurt I felt toward them. How could they leave us in such a mess?

I wish they would have told me. I could have helped them diversify their assets and invest. But they also weren't the kind of people to sit around working for fifty years, waiting to take that vacation when they retired. They lived for the now. And in a way, I admire them for doing so.

I used to be more like them, but then the accident happened. After that, I sobered up real quick. It was right around the same time my occasional teasing of Maddie turned into an everyday necessity. An addiction.

Millie says it's common for children to act out after they've been through trauma. But it's hard to take her outlandish opinions on my mental health seriously when she once spent a whole month sleeping upside-down in her bed with her feet in the air. She claimed it helped her mental clarity.

I tried it once. It didn't do anything except give me two lead legs thirty minutes after I fell asleep and made me dream I got swallowed up by quicksand.

My body shudders remembering the sensation.

Trying to relax is having the opposite effect. Restless energy pulses through me. I need something else. Only a few people are still left in the office, and though Bri will spread rumors that I'm not taking my job seriously, I simply can't be here anymore.

I wrench off my tie on the way to my truck and let my subconscious autopilot take me where it always does.

The cemetery is empty tonight, and I welcome the quiet. I don't have to watch where I'm going to find my way to my parent's graves. My feet know the way down this path after having traveled it for the last four years.

I was in my first weeks of law school when they died.

Overnight I went from a man with a family to a man with a sister. I'm grateful to have her, I know many don't have such a luxury, but at times I just feel lonely. Like I can't get back what I've been missing no matter how hard I try. The house is too big, too empty, too daunting. I can't find the peace that used to exist within its walls.

I stop at my parent's shared headstone.

"I'm stressed, Mom." My mom always understood me. She said I was like one of those little wind-up cars, always in motion, too afraid to stop until I crashed into something.

I think that's what I've been doing since they've been gone—just moving with no real purpose.

“And I don't think my plan with Maddie is working. I told myself I'd make it right, but I can't seem to fix it. I can't fix anything. Not the debt, not my own life.”

I know what my mom would say if she were here, what she always used to say.

“Stop worrying about what you can't control. Things are going to work out the way they were always meant to. Live your life, darling.”

My mom was a big believer in fate. That everything happened for a reason.

I think I've been giving fate a run for its money lately.

“Do you think they can hear you?”

I jump at the small voice to my left. A boy, about ten, has joined me. Well, not me. He's standing in front of a freshly placed temporary plaque. I can't make out much except the word *mother*. The air is knocked from my lungs like someone socked me in the gut. My chest aches for him.

“I'd like to think so,” I say thoughtfully. “It makes me happy imagining them stuck there listening to me talk about whatever I want.”

He thinks about it, then a hint of a smile makes its way to his lips before it disappears. “My mom used to talk a lot.”

I nod. “Mine too.”

“It’s so quiet now,” he says. He plops on the ground and pushes the unruly blond curls out of his eyes, but they jump right back. I study the child, his dirty face and bruised knees. Does he have someone at home to clean him up and give him a hug at the end of a long day?

He’s much younger than I was when I lost my parents and no doubt he’s felt it in ways I didn’t experience. But no one can fill the void left by a loss that great.

“My dad doesn’t talk much anymore.” He drags his knees into his chest and hugs them. “I think he forgot about me.”

I don’t know his situation or his father, but I can imagine his father is as overcome with grief as he is. He could have forgotten about his son for a moment, but hopefully not for long. They need each other.

I sit down by the tree in between the two plots and lean against the trunk. “Tell me about your mom.”

The little boy’s mother gave the gift of talking to her son. He talks until the sun sets, and I listen to every word. He doesn’t need someone to tell him it’s going to be okay. He wouldn’t believe it, anyway. He needs to be heard, to know he isn’t alone, and if I can help him feel better for only a minute, that’s all that matters.

While he talks, he delicately trims the grass around his mother’s placard with more care than I knew a child could possess.

“She made the best pancakes. Every Friday,” the boy says then yawns. One yawn turns into two. He probably has school in the morning and should be getting home. “I miss her pancakes.”

He stands and yawns again. I stand as well, dusting off my pants.

“Can I drive you home?” I ask the boy, eyeing his beaten-down bike. “It’s dark now, and I bet your dad will be worried about you.”

“No, he won’t.” The boy frowns, picking up his bike. “But you can drive me. My mom always told me not to go with strangers, but you don’t seem very strange.”

I chuckle. While that logic works in this situation, it won’t always hold true, and I’d feel better knowing he was home safe.

I help him load his bike into the truck bed, and then he directs me through town. He traveled pretty far on that bike.

After ten minutes, we pull up to a tiny home. The yard is overrun with cacti and weeds, and the siding is falling off in more places than it’s holding.

“Thanks,” the boy says as I retrieve his bike from the truck.

The front door of the house flies open, and a harried-looking man comes running out with a toddler bouncing on his hip.

“Max! Where have you been? I’ve been worried sick!”

“I was talking to Mom,” the boy grumbles and pushes his bike around his dad. He drops it in the middle of the walkway and slams the front door of the house behind him.

The man watches him go. Hurt, fear, and pain all etched into his features. “Thank you for bringing him home. I’m so sorry.” The man runs a hand through his graying hair and presses the tips of his fingers against his forehead.

I can feel his fatigue in my bones. Or maybe that’s my own.

“I was on the phone with the life insurance agency, and I didn’t realize he’d left.”

“Not a problem.” I hesitate momentarily. If I knew what kind of help they needed, I’d offer it, but I don’t want to overstep.

As I leave, I can’t help worrying about them. Having money doesn’t take away the grief, but not having it can add to the pain.

After my parents passed, I’d considered going into family law, or wills. I didn’t want anyone to be left in the same situation I’m in. But then I found I loved the courtroom. And I loved fighting with Maddie in our school court.

I miss fighting with her.

Chapter 7

Maddie

“Spin,” Lyndi directs me.

I glance at the skin suit she’s zipped me into. It’s purple and hideous and...

I love my best friend.

I wiggle my feet, but my thighs are so plastered together I’m barely able to pivot on the podium. “I can’t.”

Lyndi purses her lips. “It’s a little tight.”

“A little?” It’s all I can do to hold my tongue on this one. This is the first completed dress Lyndi has made, and I have to support her. This is her dream.

However nightmarish the result is.

“I don’t know what I did wrong.” She sinks on her heels with a sigh.

I tilt my head toward the full-length mirror and study the dress that’s now permanently glued to my body. It’s not bad.

The purple is not ideal, but if it had been black and less sheeny, it would be more sophisticated and even sexy.

“It makes my butt look good,” I offer.

Lyndi checks out my backside. “Your butt always looks good.”

“It’s a perfect first dress.” I face my best friend. “You’ll be making masterpieces like that one in no time.” I point to the beautiful gown in front of me.

“I wish. I think I’ll be sticking to pillowcases.” Lyndi picks up a pin cushion that’s nearly empty. *That’s concerning.* I hope she didn’t leave some pins in this dress.

“You know, all I need is a suit coat, and I’ll be ready for that job in Vegas.” I try to comfort her.

Lyndi snorts. “I think I might be a one-hit wonder.”

I consider the flamboyant, reflective material again and can’t help it. I laugh. But because this dress wasn’t made for living, breathing people, the second my chest expands, so does the dress. A loud rip allows my lungs to fully inflate, and then I’m exposed.

I shriek, but the dress keeps tearing. I grip the material around my chest, covering my most important bits, and fall to the floor in a fit of giggles, which conveniently causes the dress to rip along my left hip.

Lyndi isn’t any help. She crosses her legs as she hunches over, her breath escaping in short bursts.

“Oh my gosh. I really could work in Vegas.” Lyndi half-laughs, half-cries.

“You have nowhere to go but up.”

Truly. Every breath I take causes the dress to tear more, and now I’m basically holding a much too small towel over my lady parts. It’s only as I’m rolling to a seated position that I remember I’m in a very fancy, dignified dress boutique in the middle of a popular mall. And other people exist. Thankfully, only a handful of women are currently in the store, and I’m mostly out of view of the main hallway.

I shoot the few onlookers a wave and grapple with the pieces of the dress, but it comes apart as easily as tin foil.

How is this even happening? This dress is essentially a tube. A pillowcase actually has more stitching.

Lyndi wraps me in the blanket they keep on the back of the couch. I thought it was there for aesthetics, or to keep somebody’s grandmother warm while they try on dresses, but clearly its purpose is much more significant.

“I’m so sorry,” Lyndi says with a hiccup.

“You better be.” I tease, pinning her with a glare that says she’s going to get it, but she never will, because we are best friends. I’d do anything for her.

Her expression sobers. “I’m so sorry Maddie. I didn’t mean to use you as a Kim Kardashian to get people into the store.”

Poor, sweet, naive Lyndi. “Kim did a bit more.”

Lyndi pulls Crew out of the back playroom so I can change. I finally allow myself a full breath when the door shuts behind me, letting the blanket and two pieces of pointless material fall in a heap at my feet. Lyndi and my mother might be working on the same team to get me back into the workforce.

I retrieve my clothes and am happy to be covered once more. When I return to the front desk, Crew gives me a bear hug. I don't think he will ever understand how much I need these. I lean my cheek against his curls and hold him while he lets me. He's my little boost of serotonin when I need it, and lately, I really need it. He doesn't judge me for my failures or question my life choices.

Am I ever going to get back into law? The longer I'm out of it, the more I worry I might never make it back. And then what will my mom say when I come home for dinners? How smart I *was*? How I *used* to be a daughter she was proud of?

"Uh oh." Crew pushes away from me.

I know that voice, and it does not bode well. "What did you do now, little monkey?"

"I got a boogie on you."

"Ugh!" I jump back, practically shoving him to his mom while searching my outfit. There it is. A giant green blob of nastiness. "What in the devil just came out of that child?"

I gag, my protein shake from earlier churning in my stomach. I need to find a new man to hug. Preferably one who keeps all his boogies inside.

With the expertness of a mother, Lyndi grabs a wipe from under the counter and cleans me off. It's a nice gesture, but I may have to burn this shirt when I get home.

"Hey, could you watch Crew on the sixteenth?" Lyndi asks.

"Let me check." I pull out my phone, though I hardly need to. I'm pretty much free until the end of time. I locate my calendar and, as suspected, "Yeah, I can, when?"

She rattles off the time, and I put it in my phone while she gushes about how excited she is to attend her first wedding expo as a vendor. I click the lock button as it buzzes with a notification. I tap on the screen to find a new email. At first glance, I assume it's spam and am about to turn it off again, but... it's not?

I frown at the screen. "That's weird."

"What?" Lyndi asks.

"I got an email for a job opening as a temporary volleyball coach for a high school downtown. The same job I found a flier for the other day." Why would this job offer be sent to my email? I never listed volleyball on any job sites as a hobby or potential profession, and the email address is questionable. *Workplacecorrections? What is that?*

"Hmm. They must be desperate," Lyndi says absently, then her eyes widen. "Wait, you should totally do it!"

"What?" My forehead scrunches. "How many lawyers do you know who moonlight as a high school volleyball coach?"

“Well, considering you’re the only lawyer I know, none. But I *do* know of one lawyer who loves volleyball and is currently seeking additional forms of employment.”

She’s got me there. “I don’t know. That’s not really where I see my life going.” At all. Coaching high school kids was not laid out in my ten-year plan. The plan was to kick butt in the courtroom and make partner by year seven.

Oh how the tides turn.

“It’s only temporary, right?” Lyndi says. “You could try it out until you get your job back.”

I guess it wouldn’t hurt. “I’ll think about it,” I say, scanning the rest of the job description. All they need right now is for someone to run a few off-season practices each week. What else am I doing with my life?

Nothing. The answer is a loud and depressing nothing.

Working with youth could counteract the anger issues that got me fired from my last job in the eyes of prospective employers.

How hard could it be to coach teenagers?

Chapter 8

Connor

I'm ready to collapse by the time I make it home from work the next day. But I have another session with Maddie tonight, so I drag my butt to my room to change.

I can hear Millie downstairs. She didn't get home until two last night. And then I heard her trip over everything in her room for a solid minute before I imagined her falling face-first onto her bed and zonking out instantly.

I slip on my shoes and meet her in the kitchen. "Hey, how was work?"

"So great. I saved a woman from looking like a skunk," she says sarcastically. Millie originally went to school to become a therapist, but quickly changed her mind—and her major six times before she ended up dropping out altogether. She spent the next two years bouncing between the oddest assortment of jobs, from a flight attendant to an actual gravedigger. That one only lasted a few days. She finally settled down with

cosmetology school two years ago and has been a hairstylist ever since, but I know it's not her passion.

“That sounds like an interesting story.”

She shakes her head. “It's not. It's really not. But if you have three hours, I can surely bore you with it.”

I check the watch I don't own. “Shoot, I've got another training session soon.”

Her eyes light up. “Oh, right. I forgot. How is that going? Are you sure you don't need your big sister to take over?”

She may be older, but she's barely bigger than an average twelve-year-old. I got all the height in the family. But she is exactly sixteen months older than me, which she never fails to claim. Our parents decided having kids that close together was like having twins and never wanted to do it again.

“No.” I can afford the sessions for exactly three more weeks, which is hopefully how long it takes me to apologize and make it up to Maddie.

“Really?” Millie pulls down a cereal bowl and fills it with Froot Loops.

Cereal for dinner is a normal occurrence around here.

I ignore her question and bypass the Froot Loops, grabbing a banana for myself instead. I'm going to need whatever nutrients this thing can give me to survive the night.

She raises her brows. “So I'll pretend I didn't hear you cry while walking down the stairs after your first session last

week.”

I didn't cry. Whimper and groan, maybe. “It's always worse until the lactic acids get flowing,” I mutter.

She purses her lips, and the expression is so mom.

An ache fills my chest.

“Didn't you say Maddie tried to kill you last Friday?” she asks again.

I grunt. Maddie has tried to kill me multiple times now, but I'm still standing.

“I'd be happy to intervene where I'm needed.”

“No, thank you.” I know she's trying to be helpful, but I don't need my big sister fixing my problems. At least not anymore.

“Will you be at the school tomorrow?” she asks, fishing another bite of Froot Loops out of her bowl. I hungrily eye the multicolored circles.

Screw it. I finish off the banana and grab a bowl. I've heard sugar is basically pre-workout. And it's probably less likely to make me throw up.

“Yup. You?” I ask, pouring a generous helping of cereal. This should help with the lactic crap, I'm sure.

“Yeah. I'm giving a discussion about babies. Want to come? I could teach you a few things.”

“Funny.” I pick up a wet dishrag and toss it at her, but she ducks just in time.

“You should send your whole class over. I’ve got a five-minute video of a baby screaming.” She gets a wicked gleam in her eyes. “Killer birth control.”

“Now we know why everyone prefers my class.” I tease. Millie and I have been volunteering at an underfunded high school downtown ever since our parents died. My dad used to do it; every week he wasn’t off traveling with Mom, he could be found at the high school, teaching everything from tap dance to space travel. The kids loved him. Everyone loved him. Millie and I are lesser instructors, teaching only what we know. Me, law, mock trials, and debate. And Millie, a general collection of life studies.

I never understood my dad’s obsession with the school before, but now, every time a student walks through the door after school, I’m grateful. It means a little less time spent at risk of getting in trouble, or in extreme cases, being in danger. So I do my best to keep them coming back each week.

“Yeah yeah, you’re the favorite. I won’t fight you for it.”

How disappointing. Maddie would have fought me.

Millie drops her bowl in the sink without bothering to rinse it and put it in the dishwasher. I thought brothers were supposed to be the messy ones, but it’s been like this all my life.

Not that Millie makes a habit of getting into messes, but she sure doesn’t know what to do with them once she’s there.

I polish off the last Froot Loops and load both mine and Millie’s bowls into the dishwasher.

Millie pulls her hand out of the cupboard, three Oreos in her palm.

She can't keep doing this to me. I steal one and race for the door.

Extra energy.

My hands shake as I wait for Maddie. I never get nervous in the courtroom. Granted, I'm still only a first-year and have only successfully run one case by myself—a ridiculous neighbor dispute—but I wasn't nervous at all.

Maddie, on the other hand, makes me nervous.

She has since the first day I saw her in class. She was so unbelievably smart, confident, beautiful, and downright stubborn.

And I was...me.

Maybe that's why I resorted to teasing her. I didn't know how else to reach her level. But slowly, the teasing turned into hatred...on her end, anyway. But I couldn't stop, because her hating me at least meant she acknowledged me.

Maddie comes around the corner, engaged in a conversation with a man who has way too many shoulder muscles. He must be in the habit of skipping eye day though, because he can't seem to keep them off of her.

He touches her back and leans closer to whisper something in her ear.

I grab the nearest thing at my disposal, a can of protein, and squeeze.

Maddie says something while simultaneously pulling away from him. I can tell she's rejecting him from ten feet away, but Mr. Neckmuscles doesn't seem to have a clue.

"You sure you don't want to come over later?" I catch the man's next words.

That's it. It's my turn to strangle someone.

"I'll see you next week." Maddie's tone is clipped. End of discussion. She spins on her heel and heads in my direction. Her frown turns even frostier when it finds me.

"Great, you came back." Her tone is as flat and dry as the Arizona desert. About as prickly, too.

"Never could get enough of you."

The faintest blush kisses her cheeks and it matches the pink top she's wearing. "The feeling isn't mutual."

Didn't think it was.

Her eyes dart to my hands. "Were you going to pay for that?"

What? Oh, I rotate the bottle in my hands to see what kind of damage I've done. *Eighty dollars?*

I put it back on the shelf, angling the dent in the canister away from me. "If you're good at your job, I won't need it."

"Health is a *personal* choice." She spits at me. If looks could kill, I'd be seriously wounded right now. "Let's go."

“Yes, ma’am,” I respond, running to catch up with her. I have to give the woman credit; she never does anything halfway. Not even walking.

“What torture devices do you have planned for today?” I ask when she doesn’t say anything before stepping on a treadmill. My goal today is to get her to talk to me about something besides training. Even if all she offers me is one word, and a mean one.

She’s good at those.

“Same warmup.” She puts in her earphones and starts the treadmill at seven-five.

I can’t play that game today. I slowly work up my pace, sticking below her speed for the entire warmup. If I butter her up and let her take the win, will she be more inclined to talk to me?

“So, what’s your main area of focus?” she asks, the second she hits stop on the treadmill.

How is she not breathing hard?

I blink and draw in a slow, deep breath. “What?”

“What’s your goal for personal training?” She heads for an open bench.

Well, besides apologizing to her, there isn’t a goal. “Um...” What do most people come to the gym for? “Weight loss?”

Her eyes narrow, and she scans my body. Not like the hundred other times, she’s tried to kill me with her eyes

before. This time, she's looking at me, seeing me. Whether or not she likes what she sees is another story.

“Do you mean increasing muscle?”

I scratch my jaw. “Yeah. That.”

Her brows narrow like she doesn't believe me.

I have no clue why not. I was so persuasive.

“Fine. That's simple enough. If you want to bulk up, just let me be in charge.”

My lips part.

“Of your workouts.” She clarifies quickly. There's the slightest tinge of pink on her cheeks, and I love it.

“Tell me what to do, boss,” I smirk, which is the wrong thing to do.

She picks up a dumbbell and shoves it at my chest. “We will start with arms today.”

And that's the last time I'm able to take a full breath for the next forty-five minutes.

My arms are nothing but Jell-O clinging to my sides as Maddie lifts the forty-five pound weights off the barbell and back onto the racks like they weigh nothing. I don't even have the energy to pry my eyes off of her. She's impressive. And beautiful. And...glaring at me again.

I sit up on the bench and chug half my water bottle. Sweat drips into my eyes, and I pull up the bottom of my shirt to wipe it away.

Maddie has gone silent for the first time in the last forty-five minutes, and I glance up to catch her eyes trained on my abdomen. The corner of my lips curl up. I clear my throat and drop my shirt.

She blinks and looks anywhere but my face. “I uh, forgot to get your BMI before we started training,” she says before abruptly walking away. I’m too tired to follow. With my body, anyway. My eyes are glued to her, tracking her in the mirror as she winds through the gym and disappears at the front desk. She comes back a moment later and motions for me to follow her. I don’t have the energy to question it.

Halfway down the main hall, she unlocks a door to a room, and we step inside. A light flicks on, illuminating a blinding white room and a single machine that has all the makings of a 1900s electrocution device.

I fold my arms. “Is this where you kill me?”

She turns from the machine and stands up straighter. “If I wanted to kill you, I could.” She narrows her eyes until they turn into adorable dark slits. She looks as friendly as a Siamese cat. A wild and rabid Siamese cat. “And I’d get away with it, too.”

That was the opposite of seductive, but my heart rate shoots through the roof anyway. I lift a brow. “Seems you’ve thought this through. Do you want to run it by me first, so we can work out the kinks in the plan? I’d hate for you to drop my body in the desert only to run out of gas on the way back.”

“Of course not.” She rolls her eyes. “That’s basic murder 101. Always have enough gas to get to Mexico.”

“Mexico, huh? Is that where they find my naked corpse?”

“Why on earth would you be naked?” She scowls.

“Because you killed me in the shower.” I snicker, the fun of the game lighting a fire in my soul.

“I would not—” She cuts herself off then closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. “I’m done with this.”

“Giving up so soon?” That’s not like her.

She ignores me and pushes a button on the machine. Nothing happens, so she kicks the base a few times and the machine sputters to life like an ancient space heater.

“How old is that thing?”

She shrugs. “It could be newer.”

“I feel like I should sign a waiver to get on this?”

Her lips twitch, and there goes my heart rate again.

I freeze, satisfaction creeping up my spine. “I’m sorry,” I say. “What was that?”

“What was what?” She turns and studies the machine like it’s going to self-destruct. It wouldn’t surprise me.

“Did you just smile?”

“Nope.” She shakes her head adamantly. “Take off your socks and shoes.”

“Why? Do you have some sort of foot fetish?”

There's that crease in her cheek again. Or she's grimacing. It's hard to tell from the side.

"I don't want to see your gross man toes any more than you do," she mutters.

"Gross man toes? I'm offended." I slip off my shoes and socks, anyway. "How do you know *I* don't have a foot fetish?"

"You probably do."

I step onto the machine. "I'll show you mine, you show me yours."

Her thick eyelashes fan over her cheeks, and I'm brought back to a memory of my mom holding an eyelash on her fingertip and telling me to make a wish. I wonder what Maddie would wish for.

"I'll show you my foot right before I kick you out of my gym."

That. She'd wish for that.

"*Your* gym?" I rub my beard. "I didn't realize you'd been promoted."

She glares, her eyes like twin black lasers.

I'm doing it again. That thing where I become a jerk around her.

"Sorry." I step onto the machine, crucially aware of how close that brings us while she pushes the correct buttons.

"Try to hold still," she says.

I suck in a breath and hold it.

“You can breathe.”

“Now you tell me.” An abnormal gust of wind rushes from my lungs.

“Not like that.”

It’s impossible to regulate my breathing with her inches away from me and smelling like a tropical beach. And her skin, it looks so smooth and warm, I want to run my fingers down her arms, and then tangle them up in her silky black hair. From this angle, I have a perfect view of the cupid’s bow in her upper lip. I wonder what those lips taste like if they are sweet and soft, or—

The machine beeps and I blink, tearing my eyes off her lips. A piece of paper pops out and Maddie takes it, scanning it over while she stands only inches to my right, unaware of what her presence is doing to me.

“What does it say?” I ask, my voice coming out breathy and crackly.

She frowns like she forgot I was here. “That you’re very average.”

“Ouch.” I grasp my chest and step off the machine, right next to her. “You have a real way with words, you know that?”

She bites her bottom lip, her cheeks turning that delicious shade of pink yet again. That’s three times today I’ve made her blush.

“Some people find the truth hard to swallow.”

My face splits into a grin, and she steps away, turning off the machine.

“You know who would enjoy your sense of humor?” I muse, slipping my socks and shoes back on.

She cocks her head and pulls open the door. “Everyone but you?”

“Teenage girls.” I bolt upright. “I mean...” Why did I say that? “The younger generation, since they speak your dialect.”

“Which is...?”

“Snark.”

“Ha.”

Maddie doesn't say anything else. She simply hands me the paper and walks out.

Way to screw that one up.

Chapter 9

Maddie

What am I doing here?

I don't even recognize the school I pulled up to, and it's evident why. It's got all the makings of a prison, without the watch tower. No wait, there is one.

Am I in the right place?

This can't possibly be a place children come to be inspired.

I guess maybe that's why they aren't. This feels like a place where dreams come to die. My dreams are already dead, so I should feel right at home.

You can do this.

The second my foot hits the pavement, a loud bang rattles the earth, and I dive into my car for cover.

That's it. No job opportunity is worth getting shot at. Lyndi's husband Ward, the ex-military hero, might disagree, but I have things in life I kind of like. I can't think of any right now, but they are... important.

There's a knock on my window, and I scream. The shooter has come for me. And I'm powerless to do anything but cover behind my steering wheel and shake.

"Maddie?"

The killer knows my name.

"Maddie," he says again, and the recognition dawns on me. It's not a killer, but I can't tell if it's worse.

I jerk upright and throw my door open, right into Connor's stomach.

In my head, I exude confidence, not a malicious intent to harm.

In Connor's defense, he did try to jump back. I was just quicker. Like always.

"What the heck was that for?" Connor gasps, holding his stomach.

So dramatic. I didn't hurt him.

"You startled me." I grab my purse and stand up straight in my four-inch heels.

"Only because I thought you were having a heart attack," he fires back, still rubbing that imaginary spot on his stomach.

I get it. He bruises like a peach.

"Clearly, I'm fine." I glance around, attempting to place the sound that startled me, but the lot is lifeless. It was probably a car backfiring. Most likely.

“Thanks for so kindly telling me that now,” he grumbles. “So what are you doing here if you’re not having a heart attack?”

Better question, what is he doing here?

“I’m here for a job.” I slam my door harder than necessary—the poor thing has been abused today—and stomp toward the building. I have no idea where I’m going, but I suspect it will be obvious soon enough.

“Really? Me too.” He trails after me.

I halt. “You’re here to coach high school volleyball?”

He scoffs. “No, of course not. I’m teaching the youth something much more important.”

“How to be an insufferable jerk?” Each of my words are punctuated with a sharp click of my heels. This cannot be happening. How does he always show up where I don’t want him?

He stops in front of me. “I run mock trials. We discuss law.”

“Liar.”

He shrugs. “I volunteer here every Tuesday.”

I fake a gasp. Or maybe it was real. Surely the man I spent the better part of the last four years hating wouldn’t donate his free time to an underprivileged school for nothing in return.

“There’s no way they would let you lead innocent children astray.” Then again it’s a volunteer position. They didn’t have

a choice but to let the devil inside their gates. “I’m a better lawyer than you. I should take over your job.”

He taps his chin. “Ah yes, but the kids prefer humility to brains.”

“No one has ever accused you of having either.”

My foot accidentally ends up in front of him, but he dodges it. Dang it.

Two days ago, I’d all but dismissed this whole idea. I love volleyball, but why should I waste any time on it if it’s not going to get me back to where I need to be?

But at the end of the day—and after two more out-of-state law firms turned me down—I agreed to check it out. It’s for the kids, after all. So I replied to the email and was told to come in tonight to meet with the principal.

A short blonde woman rushes up, and I stop before she rams right into us.

“Hey, Connor!” She says before turning to me with a smile the size of China. “Hi, I’m Amelia, but you can call me Millie. Everybody does.”

I blink. “Uh, hi. Maddie.”

Millie’s jaw drops open, and she glances back and forth between Connor and me. “Like *the* Maddie?”

What does she mean by that?

“Millie…” Connor’s voice carries a warning.

Was that a confirmation or a denial?

I'd be alarmed that she seems to know who I am if she wasn't so unassuming. She's five foot nothing and has a blonde pixie cut with a streak of pink down the right side.

"I'm this idiot's big sister." Millie elbows Connor in the stomach.

Sister? I try to spot any similarity between the two of them, but come up blank. She's like a tiny bundle of light and joy. And he's, well, tall, dark, and doom. Millie grabs my arm and walks with me like she's my escort. "Connor used to talk about you all the time. Don't worry, I didn't believe a word. You can't possibly be as bad as he says. And he never once mentioned how beautiful you are."

Should I be offended?

"Millie." Connor attempts to stop her, but she's like a golden retriever, bouncing and happy.

I'm still hung up on the sibling thing. I didn't know Connor had a sister who could be so...human.

"What did you call her again? Cruella?"

"Millie!" Connor growls.

"But seriously, girl, how do you get your hair to shine like that?" Millie continues, completely undeterred by her brother's attempts to shush her.

My hand unconsciously goes to my ponytail. "Good genes?"

She sighs. "I'd kill to have dark hair." She's quiet for all of two seconds before she speaks again. "You're here for the

volleyball position, right?”

My steps falter. How does she know that? “Yes?”

“Thank goodness. The girls need a good coach this time. I’ll introduce you to the principal. You are going to love coaching; the students are all so wonderful.”

Millie continues to fill the silence with her exuberance for life as we walk through the school, and I purposely avoid everything about Connor’s existence. Especially the delicious scent I’m one hundred percent sure cannot possibly belong to him. He must have changed his cologne since we worked together. He never used to smell *that* good or that...manly. Not like I made a habit of smelling my nemesis or anything.

Halfway down the next hall, Connor ducks into a classroom on the left, while Millie pulls me into the one on the right. She tells me to take a seat while she gets her lesson set up. I still have twenty minutes until I am supposed to meet with the principal, so I do as I’m told while I wait for the shock to wear off. Why would Connor and his sister volunteer here? This has to be a bad omen, right? Nothing good happens when the devil shows up. Pressure builds at the base of my skull, and I focus on rubbing small circles there. It’s fine. Everything is fine.

Kids start trickling into the classroom, one by one, until there are eight students in all.

It seems like a small amount to me, but Millie is excited to see each one, addressing them by name and asking about their moms, dads, the cheer team, and even one’s pet scorpion—I could have heard that one wrong.

I glance at the clock. Millie said she would introduce me to the principal soon.

When is soon?

My knee bounces. This is ridiculous, it's not like she's my teacher and I need her permission to leave. I'll just go find him myself. I scoot out of my chair, and Millie must sense the movement because she shoots me a look that says "stay right there or else." I slouch back into my seat and she returns her focus to the kids with a winning smile. She's kind of scary.

Are these kids here of their own free will?

Millie starts her lesson, and I stay silent in the back, listening to her lecture on children. It's good. Intriguing even. And the picture of that tiny chubby baby, adorable. Now I want one.

Laughter echoes through the hall. I ignore it the first time, but each time it happens, the kids in the class perk up like a pack of puppies ready to go play.

That sound of joy and glee cannot be coming from Connor's room.

"Miss Millie, can we go to Connor's now?" one kid asks.

Millie doesn't seem bothered by the request like I would be. "Are you sure you don't want to wait until after this video?" She flicks to the next slide where an infant's face is twisted and contorted in a scream so intense the child's face is nearly purple.

I cringe, remembering Crew like that a time or two, and the PTSD hits me full force.

“No way.” A kid in the front row bolts from his seat and straight out the door. I slide to the edge of my chair. Perhaps I’ll follow him—

“Fine.” Millie shuts down the presentation. “I guess little things like kids can wait.”

The sarcasm is lost on them, and they trail after each other out the door.

I can’t help my curiosity about the strange sounds coming from Connor’s room.

What on earth is he doing in there?

I follow the kids but stop outside the door where Connor won’t spot me. He has the class set up in a mock trial, with more than enough kids on the jury to fill an actual courtroom.

“And what’s your rebuttal, Ms. Tate?” Connor asks from the makeshift judge’s stand.

I thought he was going for realistic. No sane person would ever let him take the judge’s stand.

“It wasn’t French fries that killed the ship captain,” the girl says, strutting around the room with as much confidence as a seasoned lawyer. “It was...the duster.”

The room erupts.

I cross my arms. Connor is making a joke of the judicial system. But the kids are loving it. Kids who don’t have to be here after school. Kids who could no doubt be in worse places. He’s keeping them here. Keeping them safe.

My heart lingers on that thought for far longer than it should.

“This is the woman here for the coaching position,” Millie says to my left, and I whirl around, meeting the kind eyes of an aging gentleman.

He thrusts out his hand. “Principal Thompson.”

“Maddison Cardozo.” I shake his hand.

“You were an athlete yourself?”

Does the interview start now? I roll my shoulders and straighten my blazer. “Uh... yes, I played volleyball throughout high school and college.” I certainly wasn’t the best, though.

“Wonderful.” His grin grows. “I think you’d be perfect for the job if you want it.”

My gaze flicks between him and Millie. It can’t be that simple. “Just like that?” Doesn’t he want to run a background check on me before he lets me work with children? Never mind, he probably shouldn’t do that. My attempt to strangle Connor was an isolated event that will never happen again.

“We don’t have many options,” he says, wasting no time. “We are already understaffed. We have an open gym starting next week but no one to coach. You don’t have to agree right away, of course.”

I clear my throat and run a hand down my pantsuit. Why did I break my lucky suit out of the closet for this?

“This will only be until a permanent coach is found, right?”
Or until I get back into law. Where I should be.

“Of course. We can keep the position available if that’s better for you.”

“I...” *What do I say?* I was under the impression this was a short-term thing.

“Great!” He takes my nonanswer as confirmation and is already turning away. “See you next Tuesday.”

And...interview over?

The second he’s gone, I turn to Millie. “What just happened?”

“He’s a little much.” She shrugs. “But he’s right; the school doesn’t have many options. No options, actually. These girls need a coach and a team, or they aren’t going to be able to qualify for scholarships.” She frowns. “None of them will make it to college without scholarships.”

My shoulders droop. I paid my way through my undergrad with scholarships.

“Are you going to do it?”

I shouldn’t. My mom will be livid and it will waste time I could be training or interviewing for prospective jobs. But I won’t leave these kids in a bad position if I can help. I sigh, giving in to the inevitable. “Of course, I will.”

She claps her hands. “Yay! I knew you would. I have a good feeling about you.”

I hold up a hand, warding off her excitement before it can get too out of control. “But only until I can get back into law.”

“Of course.” Millie nods eagerly. But there’s a hint of something mischievous in her eyes.

I’m not sure how to feel about Millie. Her bubbly and contagious perkiness is impossible to dislike. I can tell she isn’t pretending to be genuine, but she truly is. She’s one of those rare souls who makes me feel seen from the moment I meet them, and I can’t help but want to be like her.

But then there’s the undeniable fact that she’s related to Satan.

It ruins things a bit.

Chapter 10

Maddie

I take a deep breath before I step out of the car, preparing myself for the evening with my parents. They require my presence for dinner at least once a month to ensure proof of life. I was supposed to train Connor tonight but rescheduled to be here. If I didn't attend, my mother would most likely send a police officer to my apartment. And who knows if I'd get an actual officer.

I grab my tray of fresh cut mango and walk up the front steps of the house my parents moved into after I graduated. For whatever reason, it has never felt like home, so instead of letting myself in, I ring the doorbell.

I can hear my mom yelling for my dad to get the door then saying something like, "Never mind I'll get it."

There's rustling behind the door as I imagine my mom standing on her tippy toes to look through the peephole. The door flings open. "Maddie! You are early. What a surprise."

I shrug and step into her outstretched arms. “I missed you.” Never hurts to have a few brownie points in my back pocket.

“Ah, Filha.” My mother embraces me, wrapping me in the scent of roses and whatever goodness she has cooking. It smells like her famous barbecued pork and rice. I never allow myself to indulge like I do here. But I never take home any leftovers.

Mom lifts my arm off her shoulder and peeks around my side. “No man?”

I drop my arm. “No, Mom.”

Surprisingly, she simply nods and steps into the house instead of berating me.

I walk straight to the living room where my dad is watching a Suns’ game. “Hey, Dad.” I pat his shoulder and sit on the side of the couch closest to his recliner. He’s the one who got me into sports. He signed me up for every sport my little heart wanted to try, from golf to flag football. Until I decided volleyball was my one true love. I know he was disappointed when I didn’t continue with basketball, but he took me to every volleyball practice and stayed late with me for hours, hitting balls over the net for me to return. When he got tired, he’d resort to kicking the volleyball over the net. His consistent presence and support meant the world to me.

“Hi, sweetie. Did you see the game last week?”

“The three-pointer at the buzzer was insane.” I settle into the couch, enjoying the familiarity of this moment—sitting here

with my dad, worrying about nothing except who is going to win the game. An hour later, I'm completely sucked in and swearing like a sailor—the way my dad taught me—at the refs and their stupid calls.

“You two calm down!” my mother shouts, tapping my dad's shoulder with a spatula.

“They're losing, and it's all the ref's fault,” Dad says.

The doorbell rings, and Mom shakes her head before scurrying over to open it.

The Suns are in foul trouble, with three of their starters warming the bench. And they are down seven with only fifty-five seconds left.

The Suns hit a three-pointer, bringing them only four points away.

“That's the way, boys!” Dad yells at the TV.

I'm on the edge of the couch as the Cavaliers take the ball down the court. The point guard charges in, right through a Suns' player, and they both end up crashing to the court.

The ref calls a block.

“Are you kidding?” It's my turn to yell at the refs. “He practically tackled him. People go to jail for less than that!”

“Maddison!” My mother chides from somewhere over my shoulder.

My dad slips his hand over the couch for a high-five. “Good one.”

The TV goes black.

“Hey!” My dad hollers, and I leap to my feet to check the TV.

“We have a guest,” my mother says.

A guest? I don’t like the sound of that.

“Introductions can wait, dear. Put the game back on,” Dad says without facing Mom and her *guest*.

I turn, looking at my mother and the person she let in. She has a habit of taking in strays of the human and feline sort, but she rarely realizes how dangerous either can be.

My breath catches at the sight of a man my age. He’s not much taller than me, but he’s got rich dark skin and the smile of someone very entertained. “I usually stick with ‘hey ref, get your eyes checked,’ but I like yours better.”

Mom beams at me.

You’ve got to be kidding me. My mom got me a date. That’s why she wasn’t upset when I didn’t bring a man. That sneaky little woman.

“Maddie, this is Xavier,” Mom practically coos as she grabs his arm and rubs his bicep. “He’s from Puerto Rico. He makes good grandchildren.”

The color drains from Xavier’s face, and he gapes at me.

“Mom!”

Dad snorts. “Glad we’ve got that out of the way. Can we get the game back on now?”

Mom curses him in Portuguese then flicks on the TV again. Dad waves to Xavier to join us. As much as I'd love to sit on the couch with the future father of my children, I follow my mother into the kitchen instead.

"What are you doing?" I hiss. The TV is back on, but for all I know, Xavier might have super hearing along with his other desirable genes.

"His mom lives next door, and I meet him a few times. When you didn't bring a boyfriend, I called to see if he was there. I knew you'd love him. Do you love him?" Her earnestness is so innocent I can't bear to break her heart with the truth of how insane this is.

"He seems fine, but Mom, I'm not looking to date right now."

She frowns. "Why not?"

I sigh and toss my hair out of my way as I help her finish up. "My primary focus is getting my job back."

"You do both!" my mom says cheerfully. "Get your job and romance life back. Xavier works at the courthouse!"

Knowing how little research my mother does on careers, I hesitate to take her word for it. "Doing what?"

She waves a hand in front of my face. "Don't ask me, ask him."

I peek into the living room right as the final score is shown. Dang it. They lost. If I had been sitting by Dad, our luck would have been enough to carry them through.

“Dinner is ready,” Mom announces, somehow knowing the game is over without ever paying attention.

Xavier trails behind my dad, his footsteps significantly more hesitant entering the kitchen than when he first walked into the house. I certainly can’t blame him. My mother’s remarks were uncalled for. Yet somehow, I feel as though I should have predicted them.

My best course of action is to play nice, assure him he will not need to make any grandbabies then send him on his way.

Dad’s already in his usual chair, but Xavier hangs back in the doorway.

“You can sit there,” I tell him.

He ducks his chin and shuffles his feet. “Thanks. Sorry, I have to admit, I was taken a little off guard.” He swallows, glancing behind me to ensure my mom is still out of hearing range. “You know, earlier.”

You and me both, buddy. “I’m sorry about my mom, but she really is harmless, I promise.”

He takes a breath and seems to relax into a half smile. “So you—”

“Say cheese.”

A camera light flashes in my peripheral and I whirl around to search for the culprit. Mom. Who else would it be? She snaps another picture then taps on her phone screen. “I show this at the wedding.”

The audacity of this woman.

Xavier coughs and scoots away from me. My cheeks burn and I scurry to the other side of the table and plop down, praying this night ends soon.

Ten minutes later, I've run out of food to stuff into my mouth—so has Xavier—and my mom has thankfully, run out of embarrassing childhood stories to share with the table.

“Maddie,” Mom says, giving me a pointed look, “didn't you want to ask Xavier something?”

I take a drink of water then clear my throat. “So, Xavier, what do you do?”

He glances back and forth between my mom and me before answering. “I'm a court bailiff.” He gulps.

Bless my mother's heart, she doesn't know a thing about law. Xavier can't help me get back into the courtroom any more than she can.

Mom leans across the table toward me. “He wears a uniform.” She winks like it's the best kept secret the courtroom has to offer. He probably is quite dashing in a uniform.

Xavier avoids my eyes and chugs the rest of his water. Poor guy had no clue what he was in for tonight.

“I will get more water.” Mom takes the cup from his hand and walks back into the kitchen. Only when she's gone does he seem to relax.

“Um, what do you do?” he asks.

Do I tell him the whole truth, or everything but the truth? It's not like I need the information to scare him away. He's practically shaking like a tortured kitty already. Why not let the info fly and see what happens? Then I know what not to share the next time I'm on a real date.

“I used to be a lawyer. But now—”

“She is still lawyer,” Mom interrupts, plopping a fresh glass of water in front of Xavier. It's a little too hard, and the liquid sloshes over the edge. Xavier scoots from the table and starts patting himself with a napkin, but mom doesn't even notice.

“No, Mom. I'm not.” I fold my arms tightly against my chest. She would do well to move on. So would I. “I was fired, remember?”

“You didn't strangle that man. He is fine.” My mom waves her hand in the air like my actions were nothing. “Right?”

I catch Xavier's worried eyes from across the table. He probably thinks we are a bunch of loons. I'm inclined to agree.

“Yes of course he's fine.” I mutter. “I'm actually coaching a high school volleyball team right now,” I say to make myself seem less like a sociopath. But the fact that I tried to strangle someone, and now I'm working with children, probably pleads the opposite. I want to smack myself.

His eyes widen slightly, but all he says is “Oh.”

“What?” Mom gasps. “But volleyball is so dangerous.”

Oops. I forgot I never told her about my new side gig. No time like the present with a stranger on site as a witness.

“I’m only coaching, Mom.”

“With all due respect, I think a courtroom is more dangerous,” Xavier interrupts. That was brave of him. “You should see some of the people I’ve had to drag out—”

Mom shoots him a glare that shuts him right up.

“But what about your...other job?” She’s physically incapable of saying the words *personal trainer*. I think to her it means something more nefarious than it really is. Coming from the woman who found me a job as a stripper in Vegas, it’s kind of a double standard.

“I’m still doing that, too.”

“But you should be in the courtroom, fighting for our rights as country.”

Not really how it works.

I smack my lips together. “Yup. Working on it.” And loving all the reminders of how I’m failing.

“Your dad asked around, and he may find you a job out here.”

I wrinkle my nose. I love my parents, but I need at least forty-five miles of desert between us to stay sane.

“I like Phoenix,” I say.

Mom shakes her head. “But how will I meet my grandbabies?”

“It’s almost like transportation was invented for that purpose.” My pulse hammers in my head. Here comes the headache, right on cue.

“It’s so far away. They never know me.” Tears glimmer in her dark brown eyes.

Oh, for the love.

I drop my fork to my glass plate, and Xavier jumps.

“You’re right, Mom, *that’s* the most important conversation of the night. And I think I’ll leave now to work on it. Come on, Xavier.”

His jaw drops. So does my mom’s.

My dad chokes. “Treat my daughter right,” he wheezes, offering up his two cents—literally, that is all it’s worth—as a father.

Xavier still hasn’t moved, so I round the table and grab his hand. He’s too stunned to fight. My mother must be as well because her lips clamp shut and stay that way until we are out the front door. I’m going to need to remember that one for later.

The second the door closes behind us, Xavier rips his hand out of my grasp and takes a giant step away from me. “I don’t know what your family wants from me, but I am not about to start a family with a murderer.”

I guess my “I promise I’m not a sociopath smile“ didn’t really sell it.

“Whoa. Dude.” I hold up a hand before he calls the cops. “I didn’t hurt anyone, and I’m sorry. I don’t want your babies. I was just trying to get us both out of there in one piece.”

A mixture of emotions flit through his dark eyes. “Thanks.” He scrubs a hand down his face. “Is it okay if I don’t call you?”

“Perfectly.”

He spins and walks toward what I’m assuming is his mom’s home. The poor guy is pretty rattled. I hope he makes it home okay. I’d offer to walk him, but I’ve already done enough.

Lyndi’s words unwillingly float into my mind. I scare men away. My mom helps, but I do a pretty good job of it on my own.

I’m too tired to process that information and drive home to the melancholy tales of Taylor Swift. She can’t keep a man either. I guess we’re kindred spirits. Though I probably won’t be writing any songs about them.

Chapter 11

Maddie

When I pull up to the high school the next Tuesday, I don't freak out and hide under my steering wheel, even when the loud bang comes again. And I certainly don't wait in the parking lot long enough for Connor to catch up to me.

I bypass the classrooms, which are all empty, and head for the gym.

Well, in the direction I assume the gym should be. After five wrong turns and two very "helpful" teen boys, I finally locate the court.

There is already a group of girls gathered in the corner, talking and stretching. Their mouths are getting a good stretch, at least.

I've missed the buzz of the overhead lights, the squeak of tennis shoes on the wood floors, the anticipation in the air. I take a deep breath and immediately gag on the ripe BO. Nope. Don't miss the smell.

The door slams shut behind me with a startling thud and the conversations stop. All eyes snap to me.

I gulp. Why am I nervous? Because teenagers are terrifying. That's why. If I face plant right now, I have no doubt I'll end up as an embarrassing gif by tomorrow.

The girl in the middle stands, her posture and attitude pronouncing her the ringleader.

"You the new coach?" Her eyebrows arch as she inspects me.

I discreetly peer over my shoulder to make sure someone more authoritative didn't enter without me knowing.

"Yes?"

No wonder I couldn't make it as a lawyer. I can't even stand my ground with teen girls.

She studies me, and I do my best not to cower under her intimidating glare. Geez, where did she learn that?

"I suppose you'll do. For now," she says. Then, like she's in charge, "Kay ladies, get those nets up. We don't have much time."

The girls scatter like diligent little foot soldiers, and I let out a breath.

I hope when I say something they will listen to me that well.

The gym door slams again, and the principal strides across the court in his New Balance sneakers and overworked grin.

“Maddison, I’m so glad you made it!” He seems to breathe a sigh of relief as he says this. “Let me show you around, then I’ll let you get to it.”

The man doesn’t waste any time.

He leads me to a room off the court. “Everything you will need is in here, but be careful not to shut the door. It gets jammed, and kids have been locked inside. It’s a real nuisance. The custodian keeps forgetting to fix it.”

“Good to know.” I’ve noticed a few other things in need of fixing. No doubt the custodian is as overwhelmed as everyone else in this place is.

I gather the things I’ll need while the principal holds open the door, and I scoot the wobbly ball cart onto the gym floor.

“The lights are on a thirty minute timer. Annoying I know, but budget cuts. I can get the scoreboard working for you. But it’s a pain, so try to do without it if you can.”

“We can’t do without ball pumps,” the self-proclaimed leader of the girls says.

The principal’s expression grows taut. “I’m well aware. I’ll be getting some shortly.”

The girl turns away, and the principal lowers his voice. “That’s Diedre. A senior next year. She’s smart as a whip and knows it. She’s got a gift for the sport.”

Is she one of the girls Millie claimed could use a scholarship?

Anticipation buzzes through me. They need me, and I can help them. “I’m excited to get started.”

The principal’s smile turns genuine again. “Someone with a real zeal for life. You’re going to get on well here.”

He leaves, and then I’m alone with a bunch of girls all refusing to acknowledge me.

I clear my throat, cough, then say excuse me, but not a single girl glances my way until Diedre tells them to shut up.

I would have said it nicer if they would have listened.

Fourteen pairs of eyes settle on me, and immediately a bead of sweat breaks out along my forehead.

Keep eye contact. Teenagers can smell fear.

I gulp. “Hi, I’m Maddie.”

One girl offers me a smile in response and I aim my attention on her, holding her gaze like it’s an anchor in a storm.

“Why don’t we all introduce ourselves, and then we can get started with some warmups?”

Diedre speaks first, and the rest of the girls follow suit. By the fifth girl, I’ve already forgotten two. *What is wrong with me?*

Then we begin with warmup drills. I watched the girls run the first few alone then decided to jump in with them. I believe the most effective coaches are the ones who share the hard stuff.

The girls seem surprised at first but quickly adapt to include me.

Things shift as we move into practice. My coaching doesn't feel as forced, and I'm able to relax into it as I focus on my love for the game. And it's...fun.

"That was a great hit, Lacey!" I cheer them on as they practice serving, and already I'm enjoying this more than I thought I would.

Until Diedre speaks up again.

"It's time for Mr. Connor's class," she announces.

Each girl unanimously drops what they're doing and retrieves their stuff before filing off the court. One girl, I think her name is Megan, turns around at the door and for a split second I think she's going to come back. But then she must change her mind because she spins and leaves with the rest of them. The wind beneath my sails drops like a lead weight.

What just happened?

A few balls roll lazily around the abandoned court, and then the lights click off. The darkness leaves me with one overwhelming and irritating thought. They chose Connor over me. And it feels painfully familiar.

I can't get upset about this. I won't. What do I have to do to win them over? Bring them candy? That works on Crew.

No. There are probably rules against that nowadays.

I flip the lights back on and start cleaning up the court, a job so much easier with help.

It takes me three times as long to get everything put away. And when there's nothing left, I gather my things and head in the direction I came. The right way this time—the way that takes me past the classrooms where the kidnapper is.

Okay, not really a kidnapper. They willingly went to him. Which is even more terrifying.

Once again, the laughter can be heard from yards down the darkened hallway.

I scoff at the merriment. The law is not fun. Volleyball is fun. Why would they choose to sit at a hard desk when they could be smacking balls at each other's faces?

Despite my desire to ignore Connor altogether, I stop a foot from his classroom door listening to him discuss the acquittal process in a much more entertaining way than I learned it. The kids eat it up, and it only makes me madder. How can he be good at so many things?

“Do witnesses ever lie on the stand?” I hear a girl call.

“Ah, good question. If they are already under oath, you can't outright assume they are lying. But you can study their speech patterns, their responses, and body language, and if something doesn't add up, then it's time to get creative to figure out what they are hiding.”

“Like what?” another student asks.

It's quiet for a moment, and I decide to continue down the hall. He might have a general clue what he's talking about.

"Miss Cardozo."

My lungs seize. I've been caught.

Nope. *Do not listen to the devil.*

My pulse kicks into high gear and I plant one foot in front of the other, praying I make it to the door before he catc—

"Miss Cardozo." The voice is much closer this time.

I freeze then slowly swivel on my heel, pretending to have barely heard him.

"Huh? Oh, did you call me?"

His wry smile leads me to believe my act was not persuasive. "Yes, I did and I'm sure you heard me quite well considering we are the only two people in the hall."

I prop a hand on my hip. "I don't make it a habit to converse with the devil."

"Maybe you should. I bet he's got some things he'd like to say to you." Connor stops in front of me, blocking the light from the classroom with his large body.

"Does he have some more lies to spread?" I scowl at his chest, noticing that the top three buttons of his dress shirt are undone.

Three! He's in a high school with very impressionable children showcasing that hideous triangle of tanned skin. He should be suspended.

He saunters forward, bringing that triangle closer to my eyes. “Are you enjoying the view, or should I undo another button?”

Warmth floods my cheeks and my eyes snap to his face.

“Go ahead. Then I can get you fired for indecent exposure.”

“You would like that, wouldn’t you?” His eyes glow with mischief. I’ve never found hazel eyes very trustworthy. Especially his. They are brown, then they’re green. They should have the decency to choose a color and stay that way.

I raise my chin and take a step closer. It’s my turn to get in his face. “I’d love to see you fired.”

“I meant the indecent exposure.”

I roll my eyes and step away. I hate him. “Go back to where you came from.”

He snatches my wrist. “Come with me, please?”

I shake his hand off. “Did you need something?”

He pulls back and straightens. “As a matter of fact, yes. I couldn’t help but notice you eavesdropping on my lesson, and I could use your assistance.”

I make a clicking sound. “Ah, do the kids need someone with actual knowledge?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, in that case. I’m all about higher education.” I straighten my ponytail.

He turns and saunters into the class, and I try to appear half as confident trailing behind him.

I shouldn't have. There are more kids here than I could see from the hall. They are leaning against walls, sitting on top of desks and on the floor, and each one scrutinizes me with bored expressions.

Except one kid. I refuse to decipher what his extremely interested eyes are trying to tell me.

“Miss Cardozo has kindly offered to help us with this issue.” Connor stops at the front of the room and sits down. “Will you please take a seat at the defense?”

I turn, facing fifty pairs of eyes, and my breath escapes in short, ineffective bursts. The eyes and faces all swim in my vision, there might as well be a thousand.

I back up and fall into a seat.

On...Connor's lap!

Mayday! Mayday!

The snickers wake me from this nightmare, and I jump up, taking the only other seat in the front of the room.

I refuse to look at Connor; I refuse to acknowledge his existence. Or the fact that I sat on his freaking lap.

“You're off to a great start already,” Connor whispers. “But I'm not sure the children need that form of higher education.”

My face burns hotter than a ball of fire.

Why didn't I leave sooner? I should have listened to my mother. Never ever let the devil drag you down to hell. There can't be any other definition of this place.

A teen boy approaches Connor with a copy of *The Scarlet Letter* and directs him to put his hand on it.

He vows to tell the truth.

Liar.

Then the boy asks him a question. I don't hear the question. I don't hear Connor's answer, either. I can't focus on anything except the frightening eyes, the whispers flying around the room, th—

“Hey Maddie, over here,” Connor says.

My head whips in his direction, and I blink. “What?”

He doesn't tease me about being aloof, instead, he lowers his voice so only I can hear. “You get to ask me anything you want, and if you don't like the answer, prove I'm lying.”

My brain slowly registers his words. Prove he's lying. That should be simple enough. So why can't I think of a single thing to provoke him?

He grabs the corner of my seat, angling me toward him. “Come on, Mads, let me have it.” His eyes nearly beg me. To what? Catch him in a lie? This is ridiculous.

I'm not about to air our dirty laundry in front of these kids, but I do have a list of grievances against him. Perhaps we can start at the beginning. “Okay.” I swallow and sit up straight. “Why did you start teasing me?”

The humor in his expression dims and he rubs his neck. He almost seems upset by my question, but he recovers quickly

and relaxes in his seat with a forced smile. “Don’t most boys tease their school crush?”

There are a collection of sounds around us, some oohing, some whispering, but I don’t take my eyes off of Conner.

“He’s lying.” I tell the class without looking at them. “His answer was delayed and he replied with a question of his own.” That and he’s sporting his classic good-for-nothing smirk.

“Am I?” Connor says, trying to infuse doubt.

Time to stroke his ego a bit, and get him to drop his guard. “You aren’t like most boys, Mr. Quinn.” I tilt my head in his direction.

His lips twitch, but he shakes his head. “Oh, I’ve been told I’m very...average.”

Next tactic. I take a moment to study him then promptly dismiss him. “You’re right. You are very average. I’d be impressed if any girl ever fell for you.”

A girl in the back chimes in with an “I’d fall for him!” and several kids snicker.

“In fact, I see why you *have* to employ other tactics to get attention. Were you often ignored as a child and had to set about finding other ways to gain your parents’ attention?”

The smile slips from his face and his jaw goes slack.

Oops. That was a bit brash. The last thing I want these kids to do is speak to others with that kind of disrespect. I’m about

to open my mouth to switch gears one last time when he speaks up.

“You’re right; they haven’t spoken to me in five years.” Pain fills his eyes as he leans closer to me. “Though, that’s hard to do from the grave.”

I rear back with a gasp. His parents are...gone? And I acted like a jerk about it in front of all these kids?

The class is still. Who knew teenagers were capable of silence this thick?

“That might not be the only reason I teased you, but that’s how it started,” he says. “You were always a good distraction.” There’s a heat coming from his eyes and words I refuse to feel.

I *can’t* feel. I won’t feel anything less than hatred for him.

But...he lost his parents.

I jump out of my seat, nearly hitting his face with my stomach on the way up. “Well, I think we are done here.”

He recovers much better than me and stands with an easy grin. “Sometimes the witness is lying, other times they aren’t. But they are on that stand for a reason. Each one has valuable information. It’s your job to uncover it.”

His eyes flick to mine like he’s trying to portray exactly why that information was valuable. But my brain is a mess.

I don’t stick around for any of his parting thoughts; I run from the room as the class erupts in applause.

I have too much to process, and the anger I've harbored for Connor turns into a lump in my throat. He might have started our war years ago, but I took shots at him when he was already wounded.

I speed-walk around the corner and run right into Diedre coming out of the bathroom. She jerks back, dropping a plastic baggy to the floor. The bag sits there, its powder-white contents creating a divide between us.

We both reach for it at the same time. Only her hand is much quicker, and she snatches the baggy up and stuffs it into her waistband.

"What's that?" I ask, my voice sounding very lawyer-y right now.

The glare she gives me in return could make a queen tremble in her heels. "None of your business." She shoves past me, hitting me with her elbow on her way.

My shoulders sag, and I walk out of the building. I'm creating a mess here. I never should have accepted this job.

Chapter 12

Connor

As embarrassing as it was for a classroom of teenagers to find out my parents passed away, and that's why I teased Maddie through school, it also felt like a win.

I was a little disappointed when she didn't ask me why I started the rumor. I was ready to tell her everything. I *wanted* to tell her everything. But I should have known she wouldn't have gone that deep with all the kids there.

I stretch back on the couch, staring at the bright yellow ceiling of the home I grew up in. I remember when Mom painted it. She ended up destroying the carpet and half the furniture in the process, but she loved it. She said, "now we can always live in the sunshine."

It doesn't feel like sunshine anymore.

I drop my hand to the couch, and that's when I remember the pile of bills I put there.

I'm so sick of worrying about money.

Millie doesn't seem to have the same worries. She lives by the motto that life is meant to be enjoyed. Like our parents. Which apparently means it's okay to go on a shopping spree every other month.

The front door bursts open, and Millie waltzes in with colorful shopping bags adorning her arms.

Case in point.

"I found the most amazing sales. Also, I think I'm going to start making my own resin jewelry. It's super popular right now and seems like a lot of fun."

She drops an armful of bags onto the kitchen counter that was clean two seconds ago. Right before Hurricane Millie blew in.

I stand and take my cup to the dishwasher, leaving the bills where they are. They will still be unpaid tomorrow.

"Do you really think it's wise to start another hobby right now?" I ask, picking up the remains of her last hobby from the windowsill. She attempted to start an indoor garden, but the ceramic pot with nothing but a sprig of a basil leaf hasn't seen a drop of water in weeks.

Millie swoops it out of my hand and places it back on the windowsill. "It's always a good time to start a new hobby. If I'm not learning, I'm not living. And I don't want my brain to die before my body does."

I admire her life's philosophy, but some of her hobbies are absurd.

The month she took over learning Japanese traditions, she woke me up with a gong every morning. I had headaches for weeks, and now there's a pointless gong hogging up the office. Before that, she dedicated an entire month to finding me a wife. One woman even hid in my car after work, and I nearly killed both of us when she popped out at a stoplight and kissed me on the cheek. It was the longest thirty-one days of my life.

I shouldn't goad her about her hobbies. I know she's only trying to find something she's passionate about rather than doing hair. She's a lot like our dad that way. So many ambitions and the desire to pursue them all.

Millie dumps the contents of her bags onto the counter, quickly filling the large countertop with her "amazing finds."

My hands clench around my cup. She has a room, a perfectly messy room she can take this to.

"Did you really need all this stuff?" I eye the bags. A few are from high-end stores. She can't afford this. *I* can't afford this. And I'm the one who ends up paying for it when she can't cover her half of the monthly mortgage. Which happens all too often.

"Of course I do." She pulls a package of Skittles out of one of the bags and opens it. "And it was all on sale, so it was actually like saving money."

I rub my temples. How many times do I have to have this conversation with her? "You didn't save any money; you still *spent* money."

“You’ve got to spend money to make money,” she quips.

“That only counts if you’re investing in your business, the one where you actually make money.” How has she made it this far in life?

I pick up one of the odd items. “A banana slicer, really? Were you having trouble working the butter knife?”

She plucks it out of my hands. “Think about how much time we’ll save.”

“As a matter of fact, I was just considering that dilemma this morning. If only there was a way to get back all those wasted seconds.”

She rolls her eyes. “You’re infuriating.”

Where have I heard that before?

I trace a vein in the marble countertop. “Millie, I think it’s time we have a talk.”

Her eyes widen and her jaw goes slack, revealing a colorful display of candy on her tongue.

“Ugh.” I turn away and grab a rag to clean off the counter. “Close your mouth, woman.”

“I’m sorry. I just, I didn’t know it was time. I mean, I knew this had been coming for a while, but I wasn’t sure who was going to bring it up first.”

I face her again. “What?”

She sighs and runs a hand through her short blonde hair as she takes a seat on a barstool. “I know Mom and Dad passed

away before they had a chance to see us get married, but there's really no reason you shouldn't know now."

"What on earth are you talking about?" She's starting to worry me. Is there another debt I'll inherit when I get married? Like a Hallmark movie in reverse?

She places her hands flat on the counter. "You see, when a man and a woman really love each other, things start to happen and—"

"Millie," I growl.

She leans back from the bar and cackles.

I glare at her. "I need you to be serious for a minute if that's even possible."

She dumps another bunch of Skittles into her mouth.

That's as good of an opening as I'm going to get.

"We might need to sell the house." I blurt. *I probably could have eased into it better.*

Her mouth falls open again, this time in true shock, and a couple of Skittles tumble onto the countertop. "What? No! We can't. This is where we grew up."

I pick up the Skittles and toss them in the trash before washing my hands. "I know, I don't want to do it, but we don't have anything left in Mom and Dad's savings account. Actually, we haven't for about two years now." I turn off the water and dry my hands then scratch the back of my neck.

“Two years!” Her eyes widen. “Then how...” her voice trails off as she studies me. “You’ve been covering...everything?”

I grimace. Not everything. We are so far behind.

“We can fix this.” She stands, bracing her hands on the counter. “We can figure it out, but we are *not* selling.”

“We don’t have a choice. We don’t have the money.”

“Then we will save money.” She says it as if it’s as simple as setting up a lemonade stand outside.

If only.

“How are you going to do that?” I nod toward the dozen bags on the counter.

“I’ll take half back.” She says then scans the house. “And I’ll be better about shutting off the lights. An-and I won’t touch the thermostat ever again.”

“It’s going to take a lot more than that.”

“I’ll take cold showers. They are supposed to be good for your health.”

Well, I certainly won’t stop her from trying that if her heart is set on it. “That’s not going to help.”

“We can’t sell the house!” Her voice comes out high and hysterical.

I’ve done it now.

She turns, ready to run from this conversation.

“Millie.” I hold out a hand to her.

“Hey, aren’t you late for basketball with all your little buddies?” She deflects.

Little buddies who are now grown men. I haven’t been in months, and I’m not about to leave this conversation when I finally got the courage to bring it up. “No, I want to talk about this.”

“Sorry, can’t.” Her voice cracks. “I’m going out with Justin.”

I can do nothing to prevent the scowl I know will forever reside there when she talks about her *fiancé*. I use the term fiancé very loosely because they’ve been engaged for a year, and the only thing they’ve done together was make an Amazon registry.

He got her a cheap ring, which I have no problem with. It’s not like I’d be able to drop a couple of thousand dollars on a wedding ring. But the thing he gave her turned her finger green the first month, so she’s been wearing our mom’s engagement ring. I want the man who gives it to her to be worthy of her. That’s not Justin.

He has no motivation for life or for his fiancée, only rolling around when it’s convenient for him. Millie claims they are waiting a while and saving up so they can start their life together on the right foot. But Justin is like two left feet. He will never be right for her.

For the life of me, I can’t figure out her attachment to him. But I love her. And if Justin makes her happy, well, then I won’t strangle him the next time he lets her down or screws

something up. But nothing will stop me from watching Millie kill him. I'd even help her dispose of the body.

“Don't wait up!” she calls over her shoulder.

Losing my parents made me overprotective, but what if I lost her, too? She's all I got left.

Chapter 13

Connor

“If I die right now, donate my body to science, so they can figure out why I let you talk me into this.” I glare at my sister perched happily in her large chair. Of course she’s happy, because I’m miserable.

The lady at my feet chuckles then raises something akin to a blade. Is she planning to cut off my toes?

Millie pins me with a look. “You know exactly why you’re here.”

Yes. After the whole “we need to sell the house thing,” Millie practically disappeared for two days. She came home yesterday and told me I could make it up to her by doing something fun with her. She did not specify that the activity would be a freaking pedicure, and I very much regret not asking.

“I said I was sorry,” I mutter.

“Which clearly wasn’t enough. You’re lucky I’m not making you get a wax.”

I narrow my eyes. “Over my dead body.”

“Care to add that to your will?”

I grunt and lean back in the massage chair, hoping it will relax me. It doesn’t. Not in the slightest. I’ve never been so uncomfortable in my life, and Millie knows it. I’d prefer waterboarding to this kind of torture.

Okay, I wouldn’t go that far.

“Get this, Patrice.” Millie puts her phone down and addresses the women scrubbing our feet. I grimace with every touch. That crap Patrice put on my foot feels like sandpaper.

“The other day, Connor was a grump, as usual,” she adds, and the women nod like they know me and my mannerisms. “When I got home from the store Connor said, out of nowhere, we need to sell the house.”

It did not come out of nowhere. There was clearly a conversation leading up to it. But she must embellish.

“Our *parents*’ house.” She emphasizes.

Patrice gasps, and I jerk. What? *Where’s the blood?*

“Can you imagine?” Millie continues. “The only piece we have left of them, and he wants to sell to the highest bidder.”

“I never said that.” I interject.

Millie sighs. “I know.” She turns and studies me with her bright blue eyes, the ones she got from my dad, while I got my

mom's hazel. "But that's what it feels like."

I hate that I can't fix everything. For her, for Maddie. But I have to keep trying.

"So anyway..." Millie shrugs and leans back in her chair. "This is his punishment."

Patrice and the woman at Millie's feet nod their approval of my current chastising.

I bite the inside of my cheek. I'm outnumbered here. Quite literally. I'm the only male in this entire salon. There's no point in fighting. The only thing I did wrong was lead Millie to believe we could afford the house in the first place. But did I truly deserve to suffer so deeply for my errors?

The reason we are in our current state of misery is because one of Millie's coworkers gifted her this pedicure appointment to do with her fiancé. Lucky me, Justin couldn't make it, and I dug myself a hole with only one way out.

"Also, don't think I'm letting you off the hook for what you did to Maddie on Tuesday."

I blink. "I didn't do anything to her."

She turns so she can face me better. "You told me she's afraid of crowds. Why would you drag her into your class when she's still getting used to the volleyball team?"

"I did not drag her in." She came mostly willingly. "And I made her mad, so she wouldn't focus on everyone else." Like I did in law school. I was the only one she could ever look in the eye, so I made sure she always did.

“You embarrassed her.”

I frown at my feet. Are they supposed to be all wrinkly and crumby like that? “I didn’t mean to embarrass her.”

“That’s your problem,” Millie says. “You don’t think. You just act. Like a jerk.”

Ouch. This from the one person on earth who’s supposed to love me. I guess she’s right, though. I tried to satisfy my guilt by getting a rise out of Maddie by whatever means necessary. But I know her fear of crowds, and simply being in the room made her uncomfortable.

I scratch my chin. Every time I promise myself I’m going to stop acting like a jerk with Maddie, I end up being the same self-absorbed idiot I’ve always been. I can’t force her to talk to me. I’ll have to wait until she’s ready. Which means I’ll have to give her a reason to *want* to talk to me.

I lean back in my seat, more uncomfortable by the moment. “Well, thanks for the free therapy session, but I give you zero stars.”

“Oh, come on.” Millie shoves my shoulder. “Don’t be a baby and take criticism like a man.”

“Would you like a color?” Patrice asks.

“He wants pink,” Millie says.

“No.” My jaw clenches. I want this torture to end. “I’m here. That’s all you’re getting from me.”

Millie smirks and buries her face in her phone. Thank goodness. Her astute observations were getting out of control. I may have fallen into my old habits with Maddie without even realizing it. I can't help it, I crave her little digs and glares.

Patrice rubs lotions on my feet, and I twitch. I never knew I was ticklish on my feet, but it's a new sensation that is extremely uncomfortable. I've been fighting it well for the last thirty minutes, but this stuff is smooth and—

I jerk. My foot pops up and hits Patrice in the nose. Patrice makes a sort of strangled sound and loses balance on her stool.

“Connor!”

I barely register Millie's shout as I vault over the basin of water below me and attempt to catch Patrice before she falls to the ground. But my well-intentioned efforts are ineffective as my foot gets trapped under the tub, and instead of saving Patrice from a bad fall, I fall on top of her.

Thankfully, I'm able to keep most of my weight off her, but she still hits the ground with a thud. And so do I. A sharp pain slices through my side.

“What is wrong with you?” Millie's yell cuts through the eerie silence of the salon.

I wish I *had* died here.

Millie hops out of her chair—very gracefully, I might add—and straight to Patrice's side. “If you didn't like the pedicure, you could have told me instead of kicking a woman!”

“It obviously wasn’t intentional,” I growl. I haul myself up and reach for Patrice. “I’m so sorry. Are you hurt?”

She shakes her head and grips my hand with surprising strength. “Hazards of the job,” she says. But as she shifts her weight, she grimaces.

“I think we should get you to a hospital,” I say.

She pulls her hand away from me. “No no. I’m fine. It’s only a bruise. I’ll live.”

“Luckily.” Millie rescues her from my side. “I can’t believe he did that.”

“It wasn’t on purpose,” I grumble. Well, lesson learned. I’ll never cross Millie again. Which means we will be roommates until the day we die. Until the day *I* die. Since the stress will surely take me first.

I reach into my wallet and pull out my business card and the only bill I have, which happens to be a hundred. “Here,” I hold both out to her. “If you’re still in pain tomorrow, I want you to go to the hospital, and you can call me. I will pay for any fees.”

Even as the words come out of my mouth, they fill me with a new sense of dread. I’ve listened to cases where seemingly simple injuries such as this took years to recover from, costing hundreds of thousands of dollars. What else will I end up paying for before I’m in my grave?

“I’ll be fine,” Patrice insists, rejecting my card and my money. “It’s not my first time falling off that chair.”

Who knew being a nail technician was such a dangerous occupation?

“Probably the first time getting kicked in the face by an idiot,” Millie mutters.

I narrow my eyes. “Thanks, sis.”

She blinks, acting like the queen of innocence. Sisters. Sometimes I feel like this was all some big cosmic joke our parents cooked up to get the two of us under the same roof. What if they never passed but are out there somewhere watching us through hidden cameras, laughing at the situations we find ourselves in?

“Really, it’s fine,” Patrice says again.

“Please, I’ll feel better if you take it.”

Millie takes it for her and sticks it in her apron as she helps her to a chair.

Thankfully, most of the attention is no longer on me. It was awkward enough being the only male in here. Now I’m the only male who kicked and tackled a woman. No wonder there’s a big feminist movement.

Chapter 14

Maddie

The girls ditched me in the middle of volleyball again. For Connor, no less.

But despite what Lyndi says, I still don't understand why. I mean, he's attractive to some people, I'm sure. Not that his well-kept beard or broad shoulders do anything for me. And I'm not all that into muscly guys. Especially not the ones who barely work out but still have ridges on ridges; it's so overrated.

I gather the balls into the bin, using the pump as I go to inflate the flat ones. I take a black Sharpie out of my pocket and put a dot next to the holes of the ones I blow up to see if the same ones are flat Thursday.

At this rate, the girls will be lucky if they have any balls left by the time the season rolls around.

I traverse every corner of the gym and under the bleachers in search of balls. Did the girls leave them everywhere on

purpose? Too bad I left my smartwatch on the charger this morning. Now all these extra steps are for nothing.

I can't figure out why the girls don't like me. At times it seems like they are having fun, but the second I try to initiate any real conversation, they say two words then effectively kill the discussion.

I asked Callie her favorite subject in school, and she responded with, "None. Duh."

So...not English.

The gymnasium door slams, and the ball I'm marking ends up with a little lightning bolt instead.

A man struts onto the court. Connor.

He doesn't say anything as he starts taking down the nets, looking out of place in his white shirt and slacks. The top two buttons are undone, and he's got the sleeves rolled up, like always.

Even though I appreciate the assistance, I can't stop the question from blurting out of my mouth. "What are you doing?"

He lifts a single brow. "I finished class early so I figured I'd come help."

I eye him but finish gathering the balls while he works on the net. I have barely been alone with him since that time I tried to kill him. There's always someone else around, or close, preventing us from putting our hands on—I mean, harming one another. I'm overly aware of the silence and

solitude tonight. Of each soft squeak of his shoes against the floor and the way he keeps clearing his throat like he wants to say something but stops himself each time.

“I didn’t need help,” I say after the tension has become heavier than the permanent smell of BO and rotting cheese.

He gathers up the net, clenching it in his fists. “Of course you didn’t, but I feel partially responsible for your entire team leaving.” He winks. “I’m irresistible.”

I roll my eyes. “Right. That’s why all the teen girls flock to you. I’m pretty sure that’s how cults start.”

He laughs, and I shake my head. I’m not trying to be funny.

“Where do you want this?” he asks, holding up the perfectly folded net. I can’t even get it that good. Another thing he excels at. Go him.

“In here.” I push the ball rack toward the closet, and he follows behind. I wiggle and jiggle the door handle before it finally cracks open then heave the rattling ball cart over the threshold. “Don’t let the door shut.”

Someday I’m buying these girls new equipment. Perhaps a ball cart that moves willingly, and a net that’s not tied together with old shoelaces. I shove the rack into the back corner then take the net from him, safely tucking it into its allotted space.

And then I hear a click.

No. I whirl around.

“The door!” I yell. I barge past Connor and reach for the handle, hoping the custodian fixed it.

Nope.

“I told you to hold the door!” I turn on Connor.

His brows furrow. “When?”

“When I was pushing the cart inside!”

“You mean when you were creating an earthquake with that thing? I didn’t hear you.”

“Ugh!” I’ve never been so frustrated with him, and that’s saying something. “Now we’re locked in here.”

“No, we aren’t.” He scoots past me and jiggles the door handle. The jiggling lasts a solid sixty seconds before he stops, takes a step back, and places his hands in his pockets. “Huh. We are.”

“Thanks for nothing, Captain Obvious.” I throw my hands in the air. “I’ll call the principal or something.” I reach for my phone but find nothing but an empty pocket.

You’ve got to be kidding me.

“I left my phone in my bag.”

“That’s very responsible,” he says while he pulls out his phone. His smile droops. “It’s dead.”

“Now who’s the responsible one?” I’m stuck in a closet with the man I hate. We are going to die here.

He leans against the opposite wall, completely at ease in spite of our situation. “Don’t panic. Millie will realize I’m not

home soon and look for me.”

“Soon as in?”

He lifts a shoulder, but I notice he’s avoiding eye contact. “A couple of hours?”

“A couple of *hours*?” I fall against the shelves and hit my head against them. “No, no, no, I can’t do this. I have to get out of here.” Connor might be the devil, but right now, he may be my only hope for getting out of here. “You have to do something. Take the handle off or pop the hinges.”

He stares at me. “What makes you think I know how to do either of those things?”

He’s got a point. Just because he’s a guy doesn’t mean he naturally knows how to fix things. I’m a woman, but that doesn’t mean I can burst into tears at a moment’s notice. Even though that’s all I feel like doing.

“I don’t know,” I say, studying the door. I guess it’s on me to get us out of here. Unfortunately, the door hinges are on the outside of the door, so I’ll have to go for the handle, or the door itself. I scan the room. There’s got to be something in here. A crowbar, or an ax?

I come up empty in my search. It’s strictly a sports closet. It’s almost as if they didn’t want kids to hurt each other.

I pick up a metal bat. This is the best I can find. I turn to the door.

“Whoa, what are you doing with that?” He tries to step around me, but I charge forward.

“I’m going to break the door down.”

He shakes his head. “That’s a solid metal door. You’ll be banging on it for hours. You might damage it, but you’ll never break it down.”

“So?” I lift the bat over my head. I’m not going to sit here and do nothing for the next three hours.

“Okay.” He grabs the bat with two hands and pries it from my fingers. “Let’s think about this before we start smashing things. We might be able to find a phone charger in here.”

A phone charger. Right. I can see how that might be the next logical solution. “Okay,” I say, and for the next...I have no idea how long because I’m stuck in a closet without a clue to the time, I go through every box and shelf in the room.

The closet needed to be reorganized, anyway.

“I found half,” Connor says.

I spin around. It’s only the block, though. No cord.

“Ugh.” I sink against the mountain of boxes I’ve made on the floor. My back hurts, my feet hurt, and I’m hungry. So hungry I considered eating a granola bar I found in a box half an hour ago. But it was so old I didn’t even recognize the brand on it.

“We are never getting out of here,” I grumble.

He drops to the floor on the opposite wall, stretching his legs in front of him until his giant shoes nearly touch my right hip.

“Sure we will.”

“When did you become an optimist?”

“I’m not really. That’s more of my sister’s thing. But there’s not a better option right now.”

My stomach growls, and I place a hand on it, attempting to stamp out the hunger pangs.

I lean my head against the boxes and take a deep breath. When I was little, I developed an irrational fear of public bathrooms, and with the concrete floor and cinder block walls in here, it feels eerily similar. It was fine when I was searching for a way out, but now reality sinks in. I’m trapped. My breathing speeds up. So does my heart rate.

One of those exposed pipes in the roof connects to the sewer, I’m sure of it. At any moment, it could burst. And now I’m hyperventilating.

“Hey, are you okay?”

I nod, but it feels jerky and probably looks like I’m having a seizure.

I’m vaguely aware of him joining me on my side of the closet. Telling him to move takes too much effort when I’m struggling to breathe.

“Are you claustrophobic?”

“Not necessarily.” My breath escapes in short rasps.

I’m not sure where he finds a bag, but suddenly there is one in front of my face.

I press it to my mouth, filling the bag and releasing it. Fill and release. Poop isn't going to rain down on me from the huge pipe up there.

Not a helpful thought.

Drain pipes run underground, I think. I close my eyes and focus on my breaths. A few minutes later, my lungs stop fighting me, and I relax.

"I don't like public bathrooms, and uh, for a moment," I point at the pipes running along the ceiling, "this almost felt like one." I surprise myself by telling him this, by giving him valuable ammunition.

But he doesn't laugh or joke about my fear. Instead, he studies me. "I'm terrified of bounce houses," he says, his expression deathly serious.

And now I'm the jerk laughing. "What?" I splutter.

"They're scary." His shoulders shake and amusement flickers across his eyes. "Have you ever wondered why they make the doors in those things tiny?"

"For the kids?"

"No. It's to trap anyone stupid enough to enter inside."

"Or to prevent children from falling out and getting hurt." I lift a brow, my lips twitching. "Have you been trapped inside a bounce house?"

He scratches his beard, and I catch a faint blush working up his neck. "Once. It was only for a few minutes, but it was long

enough to create lifelong trauma.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. I want to ask more about it, but before I can, my stomach growls so loud it might actually alert someone to come to our rescue.

Connor smiles, and perhaps I’ve been downplaying his looks a bit. He has a nice smile. A nice face, really.

He’s attractive, okay?

“Hungry?”

“A little.” I shrug.

He digs in his pocket and pulls out a Snickers, holding it in front of me. “Here.”

My denial is immediate. “I’m fine.” But my stupid stomach has other plans and growls again.

He raises his brows. “Really? So I should eat it?”

He wouldn’t really eat that in front of me, would he?

Of course he would. This is Connor. My self-proclaimed nemesis. The one I despise. “Go ahead.”

He sighs, his teasing grin melting into concern. “Come on, Maddie. Eat the candy bar.”

“I don’t eat chocolate.” He knows this. Or he did when we worked together. He tried to get me to eat all sorts of unhealthy things.

Who tempts someone like that? Satan.

Connor, very cruelly, waves the temptation in front of my face. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

“I’ll get slow,” I say immediately.

“Nope. Not from one Snickers. Maybe seven a day, every day for a month, but not one. Try again.”

“I’ll lose my hard-earned muscle.”

His eyes rove over my legs and I can feel the heat of his gaze branding every inch of skin.

“Trust me, that is”—he shakes his head—“not going to happen. Neither of those things are going to happen from eating one Snickers.”

He doesn’t get it. He’s not a woman. He could eat seven Snickers a day and still have a six-pack years from now, but that’s not the way my body works. I have to work for the body I want.

“You don’t have to diet,” he says.

I rub my legs to fight off the sudden chill. “I know.”

He studies me with hazel eyes that appear to see right through me. “So why?”

I pinch my lips together. I refuse to tell him about the eating disorder I had in middle school. How I worked my way through it after my aunt taught me how to be healthy without worrying about being skinny. And I refuse to let him judge my life choices. I know eating one Snickers won’t change me. But

at this point, I can't very well side with the devil after all I've done to oppose him.

He turns so he's fully facing me. "Why can't you eat one Snickers?"

Why? Because I believe in health and fitness. Because I want to do the best for my body. Because I can control this one aspect of my life when everything else is so unpredictable. I was terrified I wouldn't make it through law school, pleased when I did, only to graduate and be fired all in less than two months. This is all I have left.

After what must be a full five minutes—seriously, how do people keep time without phones?—Connor speaks up.

"So we are going to sit in silence, huh?"

When I don't respond, he keeps muttering words like "cool" and "awesome." "We're just stuck in a room together and might die here. Why waste our breath communicating? It's not like you and I talk anyway, so this is completely normal."

Anger seeps into my veins and fills my chest. I stand, putting as much distance as I can between us in this prison cell. "You want to talk, Connor? Let's talk."

At my fighting words, he jumps to his feet, opening his arms like he's ready for it. "Finally!"

I jut out my chin and pin him with a glare. "I have so many things I want to say to you."

"Great." He steps closer. I can feel the heat coming off him in waves. "Let's do it. Get it off your chest!"

I stomp my foot. “I hate you!”

He doesn't so much as flinch, which only makes me angrier.
“Why?”

“Why do you think? You got me fired, remember? Or does that not ring any bells in that big empty head of yours?”

“I didn't get you fired. You're the one who tried to strangle me.”

“Because you accused me of sleeping with the boss!” I scream. I've been holding that in too long and boy, does it feel good to let it out. And I'm not ready to stop yet. “I've applied for jobs all over the county, but I never even make it to the interview, thanks to you.”

“You mean thanks to your anger issues?”

“I didn't have anger issues until I met you!”

His left brow raises. “Some might mistake that kind of passion for love.”

I jerk back, making a noise somewhere between a gasp and a crazed monkey call. How dare he insinuate such a thing.

“The only place I got an offer from was in the middle of nowhere, Oklahoma. And there was no way I was going to get sucked up by a tornado because of you.” I continue on with my reason for hating him, the reasons that don't seem to be angled at him so much anymore.

He has the audacity to smirk. “With everyone getting sucked up by tornados, I'm surprised they'd need any lawyers.”

I duck my head, clenching my fists until my fingernails create indents in my palm. My will to prove him wrong about my anger issues is the only thing preventing me from trying to strangle him. Again.

“You’ve made my life miserable. You started a fight with me before every mock trial to ensure I’d lose.”

“That’s not why I—”

“You turned me into a joke. But you just couldn’t stop until you ruined my future.”

His frown matches my own. “It was all my fault, huh? You didn’t make my life miserable at all? You didn’t show me up every chance you got?”

He’s putting this on me? I stomp forward until my chest brushes his. “I wouldn’t have had to prove myself if you hadn’t made me feel like I didn’t belong.”

My chest heaves, and his eyes lock with mine. His eyebrows furrow, and he lets out a breath. “Maybe you didn’t.”

I stumble back. “Excuse me?”

He takes the step I gave away. “Can you honestly tell me you enjoyed being a lawyer?”

I sputter on air. “Of course I did. I graduated from college to do exactly that.”

“But you hate talking in front of people. I saw how anxious you got before each case.”

“I—” I freeze, the fire in my chest stamped out to smoke. I want to yell *objection* like I was never able to do in court. But my tongue feels like it weighs a million pounds because he’s not wrong.

“I saw you.” His voice is a whisper now. “I saw how stressed you were. How much you pushed yourself toward perfection, down to every last calorie you consumed.”

My head whips back and forth. I wasn’t stressed. No more than anyone else. Sure, I couldn’t eat for an entire day before a trial and often almost passed out while presenting my opening argument, but that’s what I’d gone to school to do. That’s what I promised my parents I’d do, and I did it. I just have to figure out how to get back to it. But I will, I’ll show him.

“You don’t know anything about me.”

He takes another step forward, and I back up until my back hits the wall. “Dang it, Maddie, that’s all I’ve been trying to do.”

I reel back. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He grabs the back of his neck in frustration. “What do you think it means?” He plants a hand on the wall behind my head, and his voice drops. “Put the evidence together. Tell me why I can’t escape you.”

Tension crackles through the air between us.

My heart pounds in my ears, matching my energy with each pulse. My eyes dart to that triangle of skin, to his hazel-green eyes, searching his face for the lie.

Because it is a lie. It has to be. He doesn't care about me. He's messing with my head to get a rise out of me. But I won't give in.

"Do me a favor and give up," I say.

I turn away from him, wanting nothing more than to stomp away, then I remember I have nowhere to stomp to.

I take the last remaining foot of space in this closet and drop to the floor, pull my knees up to my chest, and lean against the shelves.

Chapter 15

Connor

Maddie has been huddled in the corner for the last twenty minutes. She hasn't moved, except to shiver now and then.

I haven't stopped watching her, waiting for her to look up and give me a chance to apologize. I wanted to let her get her frustration out first before I begged for her forgiveness, but the conversation took a different turn. One where I pretty much admitted I had feelings for her. And she told me to give up. As if it's that simple. She's been my focus for years. Four months without fighting with her nearly killed me.

Is this why Millie called me a jerk?

By the way, where is she? She claims to be such a wonderful big sister but can't pick up on my "help me, I'm stuck in a freaking closet" vibes from across town? This is why we should drive together—to save money and prevent one another from ending up in situations like this. But she usually heads out with Justin after her class, and I'd rather scrub the urinals in the boys' locker room.

I stare at the Snickers sitting beside me on the cement. It was probably melting in my pocket before, but this concrete room has cooled off enough. It should be ready to eat by now. If only I could get Maddie to eat it.

Her eyes are closed, but her body jerks, and then she relaxes against the shelf again. A soft snore escapes her lips.

She's asleep. She can't be comfortable against those uneven shelves.

Would she kill me if I scooted close enough that she could lean her head on my shoulder? She seemed pretty determined to smash something with that bat earlier.

After a few more minutes of watching her shiver and jostle in her sleep, I take my life in my hands and scoot toward her. I slip off my button-up and drape it over her body before sliding up next to her.

I hold my breath, but she doesn't move. I wait a few more moments then gently drop my arm over her shoulders.

I expect her to go stiff, push away, kill me, the usual, but instead, she cuddles into my chest. My heart pounds so loud and fast there's no way she'll be able to sleep through it's all out drum solo. But after a few minutes, she's still there, clutching my shirt around her and softly snoring.

So this is what it's like to hold a woman I have feelings for. Albeit some of those feelings are annoyance and frustration.

I know it's the fatigue and the hopelessness of the moment. We really might not make it out of here until morning, but I

can't help but wonder what it would be like to hold her for real. When she's awake, holding me back.

Who am I kidding? She will never care for me the way I've cared for her all these years. I've known this and have tried to fight it. But after the last thirty minutes, it's clear I haven't made any headway.

I don't blame her for hating me. Everything she said is true. I've been a pain in her side. I ruined school and work for her. If I really cared about her, I would accept that the only way to truly make her happy is to leave her alone.

I jerk. My head hits a shelf, and my back groans in pain.

I blink against the unfamiliar light. Shoot. We are still in the closet.

Maddie is no longer sleeping beside me but sitting against the opposite wall, her wide eyes aimed at me.

I rub my chin. Did I drool or something? I may still be at risk. She's wearing my shirt, and my brain is refusing to function the way it should. The white material hits her mid-thigh, completely covering her biker shorts, and I'm assaulted with fantasies I shouldn't indulge in our desperate conditions.

"Um..." Maddie swallows then tucks something behind her back, a guilty expression on her face.

I'm the one who should feel guilty for holding her while she slept, but I don't.

“I’m sorry—”

“I’m sorry—”

A blush colors her cheeks, and I look away.

“You first.” She swallows.

I scrub a hand over my beard. “This has been kind of a weird situation, and I’m not sure we should hold each other accountable for the things we might have said or...done.” Like while the other was sleeping.

“I agree.”

What now? She *agrees* with me? The end may be near. *Is that light up there getting brighter?*

I take a deep breath. “I need to apologize for that rumor. For everything.”

She holds up a hand to stop me. “I can’t. Not right now.”

My brows furrow. “But Maddie—”

She shakes her head again. “It’s easier to hate you, and if I’m going to die here, I’d like to say I held out until the end.”

A smile finds me despite the somber setting. I relax into the shelves; that talk can wait, for now. We have time. “Out of curiosity, who dies first?”

“You, of course. You have a terrible diet, and sugar will only last so long in your system.”

“How do you know I eat junk food?” Did she pay some attention to me in the last five years?

“Besides the fact that you hoard Snickers in your pocket, all...”—she motions to my exposed torso—“that, obviously. You’re practically skin and bones.”

“Oh?” I sit up straighter and examine my arms, flexing one at a time. Her eyes bounce between them. “You’re right. If I make it out of this, I’m going to take this issue up with my trainer.”

She shrugs and plays with the cuff of the shirt sleeve around her palm. “I’m not sure you can be helped. Some people lack the ability to gain muscle.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. This is similar to our fights, but there’s something else here. Could she possibly be flirting with me?

“You clearly don’t.” I let my eyes trail over her long legs, the only part of her that’s visible.

She shrugs. “Yeah well, I’m exceptional.”

Yeah, you are. I lean my head against the shelves and spin my useless phone on the cement floor. “Hey, Maddie?”

“Hmm?”

“If I die first, please don’t eat me.” I tease. “That would just be barbaric.”

“I think even cannibals would find you distasteful.”

A laugh rumbles up from my stomach and explodes. The air must be waning in here because Maddie laughs, too.

“I’m sorry that’s—” she tries but can’t finish. She falls against the wall, clutching her stomach.

She’s gorgeous. I’ve seen Maddie smile; I’ve heard her laugh. But never before has she done both in my presence, for me. Can this night get any better?

Oh yeah, the closet thing.

“Harsh? Yes, I’ll forgive you this once,” I say. “But I’m still putting it on the record that you want my body.”

“What? No!” She tosses a baseball mitt at me, and I catch it. “I hate you, remember?”

My smile falters. “Right.” I almost forgot.

We sit in silence for a long moment. How long has it been? Two hours? Longer? I’m not sure we are going to make it out of here tonight. I clench my fists, aware that I have no power to change our predicament.

“I’m sorry about your parents.”

The air whooshes from my lungs, and I release my fingers one by one. “Thanks.” I want to say more. I want to tell her about them, but if all goes wrong, I’ll be able to introduce them soon.

I’ve heard people who face horrific experiences together naturally create bonds. Not that being trapped in a closet is horrific unless one of us dies or worse, has to relieve themselves in that empty water bottle over there. Is it wishful thinking the same could happen for us?

“My dad used to volunteer here,” I say abruptly. So much for waiting. “He actually started the program and came religiously every Tuesday for nearly two decades. That’s why Millie and I are here.”

Her eyes used to carry so much annoyance and anger, but right now, there’s not a trace of it. “You’re carrying on his tradition. I’m sure he’d be proud.”

“Thanks.” I swallow, the air in here suddenly thicker than normal. *I hope so.*

“Hey, what happened to your side?”

“Huh?” I glance down, noticing the purple bruise for the first time. What was that from? A water basin and an unfortunate nail technician come to my mind. “I was, uh, playing football.”

“Did you w—”

The door jiggles.

Our eyes connect and we both jump up. It’s a race to see who can get to the door first. It swings open and I jump out to catch it before it can close on us again.

“Ahh!” an older man yells. He staggers back while clutching his chest.

I’m about to apologize when I realize he might actually be having a heart attack. I lunge for him, barely catching him before he hits the ground.

“Call 911!” I tell Maddie.

I gently lower the man to the floor. Is the back the safest place for a heart attack victim?

I look at Maddie, who hasn't moved.

"Maddie!" I say, loud enough it startles her into action.

She shakes her head. "Right. Oh my gosh. I'm sorry." She sprints for her phone and is quickly on the line with dispatch and returning to my side as they walk us through what to do.

But thankfully, we don't have to do anything because the man wakes up, using his first full breath to cuss us out.

"What the heck were you two doing in there?" Spit sprays against my bare chest, and I try not to cringe. "No, I know what you were doing. You aren't children. Do that crap at your own home."

His rant is amusing, but Maddie doesn't seem to think so.

"Excuse me! You thought *we* were doing *that*? For your information, sir, we were locked in there due to your negligence to fix the doorknob."

Talk about kicking a man while he's down.

"Maddie," I try to shush her, but she glares at me.

The man attempts to push himself off the floor. I brace an arm under him to help him sit. "It's always my fault. A kid gets stuck in a locker, my fault. Two grown adults can't remember to prop the door open before getting freaky in the closet, my fault."

Maddie mutters something under her breath before standing up and walking to the bleachers.

“Ain’t she a grumpy one.” the man grumbles after her.

Two EMT’s rush into the gymnasium. They don’t hesitate to check on the man, even when he yells at them, repeatedly and profanely, that he doesn’t need their help.

They manage to get him loaded up on the stretcher, anyway, insisting that because he lost consciousness he needs to be checked out.

“Is one of you coming?” asks the nearest EMT.

I glance at Maddie, who seems equally confused about what to do.

“No!” the man barks. “Those two are the reason I’m strapped to this stupid bed. You can charge them for my hospital bill.”

Well, I guess that settles that.

How many more people can I injure? I might as well leave my card on file at the hospital for all future accidents.

“Grumpy old man,” Maddie grumbles as they leave.

The confusion and chaos of the last few hours hits, and I snort. “He said the same thing about you.”

She glares at the retreating gurney. “He called me an old man?”

I can’t stop laughing.

“I think you’re delirious. We should go.” She checks her phone. “It’s almost ten.”

I nod, sobering up enough to retrieve my stuff. I slip my arms into my shirt but forgo buttoning it. We were in there for four hours, and somehow, I’m more exhausted than after a full training session.

I follow Maddie out of the school and to her car. I tell myself I want to make sure she makes it safely, but I’m wondering if she will bring up the closet situation. She must have known I had been holding her for a while. I’m surprised she hasn’t said anything about it yet.

And then there’s the fact that I should apologize for trying to force chocolate down her throat.

Wait. My steps slow momentarily. Where did the Snickers go?

“Well, that was not fun. So let’s not do it again,” Maddie says as we reach her car.

“It could have been worse.”

“Yeah, we could have died.”

I grin. “See? Worse.”

She tosses her stuff in the back of her car. I’ve never seen her be so careless. Maddie is the picture of precision, organization, and perfection. Sometimes I made it a game to move something on her desk to see how long it took her to put it back in its place. But tonight I caught a glimpse of the

unrestrained girl hiding behind those walls, and it only makes me want her more.

Maddie turns to me, and I take her in under the dim lighting of a streetlight in the outdated parking lot. She's beautiful, even after being locked in a room that resembles her worst nightmare.

"I'm sorry I got us locked in there." I scuff my toe along one of the many cracks in the asphalt.

She sighs. "It would have happened, eventually. It's a hazard. At least I wasn't stuck in there by myself." Her eyes widen as she realizes what she said.

"I've spent Tuesday nights in worse places." I dare a glance at her lips, and that's when I notice it.

A tiny smudge of chocolate in the corner.

My smile is so big it nearly jumps off my face. But I know she must have been really hungry to give in and eat the Snickers, so I won't tease her about it. I want to wipe it away with my thumb, but then she'd know I know. So I stick my hands in my pockets, my loose shirt fluttering in the stiff breeze.

"Have a good night, Maddie," I whisper.

She lets out a long sigh and tightens her ponytail. "You too."

Then I force myself to turn and walk away. But that doesn't stop me from thinking about her the whole drive home. There might be hope for something yet.

Chapter 16

Maddie

I'm not risking it today. I leave the closet door propped open and consider screwing it to the wall behind it as an extra precaution.

It's the end of practice, and I can see the girls gearing up to leave, but after Tuesday's fiasco, I will not be left alone again.

"Hey, girls." My tone is firm, commanding, possibly a touch too loud.

They freeze.

"Help me clean up. Please."

They all look at Diedre, who rolls her eyes. "We did the setup."

"Yes. And I appreciate it. But I got stuck in that closet Tuesday night for four hours and decided as a team we shouldn't leave until a job is done and *every* team member is safely on this side of that door."

Their expressions are indiscernible...until they start laughing. “You got stuck in there?”

“Hey! It wasn’t funny,” I say, but my defense slips, because for once I feel like we might be getting along. I wish it hadn’t taken such an unfortunate event, but here we are.

“How long were you in there?” Callie, one of the other juniors, asks.

I sigh and give in to them. “Until the custodian found us and nearly had a heart attack.”

“You’re the one that almost killed Uncle Al?” Megan cackles, and I can’t help but join in.

“We didn’t kill him.”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute...” Diedre cuts in and raises a very intimidating eyebrow. “You said, *we*.” She pauses for emphasis. “Who did you sneak into that closet with, Miss M?”

Yikes. I forgot what it’s like to get caught red-handed in high school. Not that I ever did anything nefarious in my youth.

“Yeah, who?” all the girls echo.

“No one.” I frown and pick up a ball. One with a little lightning bolt and my mind goes back to Connor. If I’m being honest, it’s been on little else the past two days. “Did I say we? I meant me.” I toss the ball haphazardly into the ball cart. “Just me, myself, and I.”

Really believable, Maddie.

Diedre crosses her arms over her chest. “We aren’t helping you pick up until you tell us.”

Two can play that game.

“Fine.” I shrug. “If I die in that closet, I guess you’re out another coach.” Was that too harsh? I’ve heard through the grapevine the last two coaches ditched them for better positions.

I start scooping up balls and check my back pocket to ensure my phone is where it’s supposed to be. No way I’m going into that closet without it. I told Lyndi if she doesn’t hear from me by five-thirty on Tuesday and Thursday to break down the school, with or without a sexy firefighter, until she finds me.

“We’ll find out, eventually.” Callie mutters.

I hope not. Who knows what stories their teenage minds will concoct if they knew?

Twenty minutes later, the court is cleared off, and no one has been locked in the closet. I count it as a huge win.

“Hey, coach?” Sadie says as I shut the door to the closet behind me.

I let out a relieved breath to be on *this* side of it. “Yeah?”

“Do you think I could stay after practice next week and volley with you?”

“Of course.”

“Thanks.” She beams and grabs her backpack. It’s so simple, such a little thing she’s asking of me, but it feels huge. Maybe

I'm doing something right here.

Usually, Diedre is the first to leave, but as I gather my stuff, I'm surprised to find she's the only one left.

She pulls out a plastic baggy. I can't see the contents this time, but gingerly, she places something on her tongue.

Is she doing drugs?

I'm not equipped to deal with that kind of stuff. I can't even keep up with what's legal anymore.

She puts a little more of the substance in her mouth and swallows. She studies the baggy, like she wants more, but decides against it and zips it.

I'm overtly staring, but I can't stop at this point. Something feels off about Diedre, and I can't help worrying about her. Which leads me to wonder if there *is* anyone at home to worry about her. Many of the girls talk about their parents or siblings, but I haven't heard Diedre mention a single family member, or really anything about her home life.

I shake my head. I'm reading too much into nothing. Diedre is a gifted athlete and a smart student. I can tell by the number of textbooks she totes around. She reminds me of myself at that age. And if I'm remembering correctly, I was also under a lot of stress, trying to stay on top of everything. That's all it is. Stress.

I grab my bag and head out at the same time she does. Despite telling the principal this would only be a short-term thing, I can't help but want to get to know these girls. I know

they don't all come from great situations, but I want them to know I'm in their corner for as long as I can be. But I can't stay. I have to get back to law. It's where I need to be...I think.

"Got any fun plans for the weekend?" I ask as we exit the gym.

Diedre pops a piece of gum in her mouth. "Well, I don't plan on being locked in a closet, if that's what you mean."

I smile. "Very funny."

"Unless..." She smacks her gum. "It's with a super hot guy. Someone like Mr. Connor."

I trip over my own feet, and it takes me three more unsteady steps to remain upright.

"Oh my gosh, you were in there with Mr. Connor?" She squeals. "I totally called it. I knew you guys were together."

I hold up two hands. "No, no, no, there's no relationship between Mr. Connor and me. We are acquaintances and nothing more. Actually, not even that. We hate each other." Why did I have to remind myself of that?

She raises a brow. "Sure. And I eat processed sugars and carbs for every meal."

My brows furrow. *Huh?*

"Anyway. Gotta run. See you next week." She sprints straight to an idling truck. The truck is close enough I can see the boy in the driver's seat, probably close to her age.

She straightens the waistband of her shorts and fluffs her ponytail before hopping in.

The music in the truck gets louder and then the tires squeal all the way out of the parking lot.

Oh, to be a teenager again.

“I have another dress for you,” Lyndi says the second I walk in the front door of her house after practice.

Lyndi and Crew have only been living here for two months, but I can see their influence everywhere. The colorful throw pillows, the toys strewn about, and the dozens of family photos littering the walls.

It makes me happy to see her in this place. Safe. Her old apartment was not fit for human inhabitants. The roaches loved it, though.

“Oh. Yay.” I feign all the enthusiasm I can muster, imagining a repeat of the last time. At least we aren’t in a public mall today. When did my life become a series of unfortunate events?

“Don’t worry, Lisa gave me some pointers. This one is the real deal,” she says and runs off, I’m assuming to retrieve the dress.

I kick off my shoes and find the spacious living room. There are Legos scattered everywhere, and I tiptoe around them. I used to feel anxious to help Lyndi clean up after Crew, but not

so much anymore. Maybe it was because I got fired and lost motivation, or maybe I kind of entrusted the two of them to Ward. I don't know.

But this is the reason I don't look before falling onto the lovely leather couch.

Squish.

I leap off the couch. Moisture seeps into the back of my leggings and I wipe at the spot, shrieking when my fingers connect with something gooey.

Crew.

“What happened?” Lyndi rushes from one of the back rooms. “Oh, yuck. What did you do?”

My hand is covered in what I'm hoping is peanut butter, though it's more brown than it should be. “Well, I didn't poop my pants, if that's what you're wondering.” That kid is lucky I love him so much.

The little troublemaker himself comes into the house at that moment with Ward, and I growl at him.

He knows our game and takes off running. He's getting faster, and it's getting harder to keep up with him. I round the kitchen island and reach for him, but as I do, I slip on what is probably another one of his messes and slide across the floor on my backside.

Crew lands on top of me, his giggling so contagious the fall and pain in my lower back were worth it.

“You okay?” Ward peers over the island, and then his eyes widen in horror.

A brown streak is smeared behind me on the tan wood flooring.

“It was him.” I point at Crew.

Ward shakes his head. “I was going to make mashed potatoes and gravy, but I just changed my mind.”

“Good choice for your health.”

But, as I stand, I can’t help but wonder, is it really? I can’t remember the last time I had potatoes and gravy. Even longer since I indulged in something like pizza.

A potato isn’t the worst thing. I mean, I ate a Snickers this week, and Connor was right. I didn’t gain any weight. Not that I was concerned I would. In high school, I would have run an extra two miles to prevent that chocolate from lingering on my hips. Now it’s simply habit. I’m not going to eat things that aren’t good for me.

But I could be a little more relaxed when it comes to my diet. Mental health is just as important as physical health, and sometimes I forget it’s okay to enjoy food too.

“All right, dude. You’ve got a mess to clean up.” I tickle Crew’s armpits until he jumps from my lap.

“The peanut butter wasn’t me. It was the dog,” Crew says.

I lift an eyebrow. “Are you hiding a dog in here without your mom knowing?”

He zips his lips, something I may have taught him a few months ago when he wouldn't stop talking. He's pretty good at using my logic against me.

I eye the little man. "Lyndi, we've got a problem."

Lyndi waves her hand. "Oh, I know about the dog."

"What dog?" Ward pokes his head around the fridge door.

"Hot dogs for dinner?" Lyndi asks her husband sweetly before kissing him on the cheek.

His worried expression melts away like chocolate on a hot day. "Sure."

Lyndi turns to me with a whisper. "We are still working him into the idea. Anyway, come here."

"Girl, you're playing with fire," I mutter as I stand up.

She grins and smacks her husband's butt on our way out of the kitchen. "Good thing I know a sexy fireman."

I'm going to have to stop visiting.

She leads me down the hall to the spare room. There's a simple, light pink dress hung up on the back of the door and on first impression, it's beautiful.

Lyndi hands it to me. "Let's see if it holds up."

I gingerly lift the straps off the hanger. It comes free without snagging. We are already off to a good start.

"You can change in the closet."

I scowl, aiming the empty hangar at her. “You have no idea how traumatizing that was.”

She props a hand on her hip. “I still think you wasted a perfectly good opportunity by not making out with him for four hours.”

Only she would think that.

I snort. “You think I would kiss *him*? My lips wouldn’t touch his if he was the last man on earth.”

“I think you’re lying to yourself.”

“I would not. I can’t even... that’s not even possible.” I sputter.

“Oh. My. Gosh.” Lyndi’s eyes go wide. “You’re flustered. He’s got you flustered.”

“Pfft. He does not.”

She’s always had such a flair for the dramatic.

“I can see it.” She points to my forehead, and I frown at the finger in my face. “You’re changing your mind about him.”

“Nope. He’s still the devil.”

But even as I say it, I can’t help but wonder if I’ve overlooked a few things. Like the fact that he teaches underprivileged youth.

Surely even the devil had some redeeming qualities before he was cast out? He gave me the shirt off his back to keep warm. Though it might have been a ploy to make me stare at his muscled torso and the light brown dusting of hair across

his chest, the perfect length to slide my fingers through. I only know because that was how I woke up, with my hand splayed across his warm chest. It was simply cold in the closet, and he was warm. I would never touch him like that while lucid.

Lyndi studies me with narrowed eyes like she can read my mind. I turn away, carrying the dress to the bathroom to change. I will not encourage her wild ideas. Nor will I allow myself to think back to the closet and the moments I *didn't* want to kill Connor. Or the way his laughter bounced around the room, making the tiny closet feel bigger and warmer, safer.

I've tried so hard not to focus on the things that happened in that closet, but no matter how far I push him from my mind, Connor's words jump right back. *Put the evidence together... tell me why I can't escape you.* It's the guilt. That's all it can be.

I slip out of my clothes and into the dress. It fits me like a glove—a breathable one this time—and I study it in the mirror. There are no gaping holes threatening to expose me and no seams bulging around my backside. It's not super fancy, but casual and beautiful at the same time. It's perfect.

I step out of the room, and Lyndi screams so loud I'm afraid an ax murderer must be standing behind me.

“What?” I jump behind the door to save myself from Lyndi's imagination.

She shakes her head and covers her mouth. “It's gorgeous.”

Ward comes flying into the room, a pair of tongs in one hand and an empty hot dog bun in the other. “What happened? Who’s hurt?”

“I’m curious...” I say, stepping out from behind the door. “If one of us were hurt, what were you planning on doing with the bun?”

Ward rolls his eyes and is about to leave when Lyndi stops him. “I made that.”

She motions to me.

I lift a shoulder. “Well, technically my parents did—”

“Shut up, know-it-all.” She grabs my hand and spins me around. “I made this dress. And it’s still in one piece.”

Ward beams at his wife, his pride in her evident. “You’re incredible, sweetheart.” He steals her for a kiss, and I look away, catching sight of myself in the standing mirror.

Lyndi didn’t start sewing until she met her long-lost aunt last year. But she stuck with it. Put her heart and soul into it, and she is succeeding.

I’ve been so focused on trying to reclaim the life I was supposed to have, on getting back what I threw away.

But there’s more than one path to happiness. Have I been on the wrong one all along? Connor asked me if I enjoyed law. I always thought I did, but the more I think about it, I’m not sure that was ever the case.

Chapter 17

Connor

My mind isn't on my work today. It's on Maddie and that closet. Her guilty expression when I woke up, her smile, her—in my shirt. That image will live in my brain rent free until my dying day.

I haven't been able to stop thinking about her since Tuesday. Her genuine smile and the way we talked, still teasing, but with more flirtation and less frustration. At least, I think that's what was happening. Minus the almost dying part, I would have been content to stay there with her longer. But what plagues me twenty-four hours a day are all the things I didn't get to say. I can handle her not falling for me the way I have for her—well, I'll try—but I can't handle her hating me for the biggest regret of my life. I have to get this weight off my chest before it kills me.

I have another training session with her tonight. Can I bring it up? Or will she add more burpees if I do?

I really hate burpees.

On the bright side, Millie was sympathetic after I recounted the horrific night in the closet to her and even cleaned the kitchen and living room. She put everything in the wrong place, but it was a nice effort.

Now to face Maddie again.

My pen bounces on my desk. How is it only one o'clock?

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I pull it out, needing whatever distraction it can give me.

Millie: How much do you love me?

Me: Enough.

Millie: That was almost sweet.

Millie: Look who got new roomies!

A picture follows of her with not one, but two Boxer puppies sitting on *my* spot on the couch. So help me if they pee on it.

Me: You better be joking.

Millie: Say hello to Sean and Gus.

Me: Millie!

Then I'm greeted with a video of both puppies chewing on my sneakers. She's joking, right? She has to be joking. Taking in two dogs is not a monthly hobby.

Millie: Aren't they so cute?

Me: Amelia Quinn, I am allergic to dogs!

Millie: It's only a mild allergy. I already bought you some pills. You're welcome.

I'm going to kill her.

She wants me to take pills every day so I can live in my own house? I don't think so.

Me: We can't even afford food for ourselves. Why would you get dogs?

I wait for her reply. And wait.

I'm about to call her when Mr. Lawrence approaches my desk. "Connor, Miller needs an extra set of eyes on his case."

I refrain from groaning. Miller needs an extra set of eyes, period. He wouldn't be able to find a single needle in a needle stack. I don't know how he made it through law school, or why *he* was chosen to replace Maddie. There was no comparison there.

"On it." I stand up to show the boss I can follow directions the first time, unlike Miller, and half of the other conceited attorneys in the office.

"Hey, Miller." I approach the guy who now fills Maddie's spot. She was a much better fit for that seat. She made this entire side of the office brighter. "Boss said you need some help."

Miller pushes the round-rimmed glasses up his nose and scowls at me. He looks like a boy, not a grown man who could actually be a lawyer.

"No. I'm good."

“Uh...” *What?* “You sure?” Every square inch of his desk is crowded with files, documents, and spreadsheets. What on earth is he working on?

“I said I’m fine,” he snaps.

“Okay, whatever.” I turn and walk away. What was that?

Half the time I’m here, I feel like I’m running around blind, and there’s a puppeteer pulling my strings in this direction or that for his own entertainment.

I went into law to make a difference. But besides a few small cases, I haven’t done anything.

This was not how it was supposed to be.

“Hey, Connor,” Bri catches me in the breakroom. Good to see she hasn’t abandoned her place of residence so early in the day.

I mumble a half-hearted greeting in response.

She sidles up next to me, reaching for the creamer at the same time I do. Our fingers brush and she giggles. Her hand lingers on mine, and I let her take the creamer so I can move away.

She adds a tiny drop to her coffee before passing it to me.

“So...” She jumps right in. “My dad is letting me use the penthouse this weekend, and I’m throwing a little soiree. Something intimate.” Her eyes rove down my chest.

“Shoot, I’m busy this weekend.” I lie. Unless my sister really got dogs, then I will be busy killing her, but I shouldn’t admit

that here.

She trails a hand down my arm. “Let me know if those plans change. There’s a pool.” She adds as if I’m Aquaman and that’s all I need for a good party. She leans closer. “I’d *love* to see you in a swimsuit.”

I grimace. This is why I enjoy Maddie. She doesn’t make it easy. In fact, if she ever admits to caring for me, I have a feeling I’d have to drag those words out of her kicking and screaming. But they’d be so genuine they’d bring me to my knees. “Why’d you do it, Bri?”

She tosses her hair. “Do what?”

“Why did you spread that rumor about Maddie?” I’ve never approached her about it, mostly because I blamed myself, but it wasn’t all me. I said things I regret, but she knew I wasn’t in a good spot to think objectively.

She rears back with a scoff. “You’re the one who said it.”

I fold my arms. “It was late, I was tired and overwhelmed. Clearly I didn’t mean for my stupid words to be spread around the office.”

Her eyes narrow. “You’re not new to this world, Connor. And you aren’t any better than me. Anything you say can and *will* be used against you.”

She pushes past me, leaving me alone in the breakroom with my guilt.

As it should be.

Chapter 18

Maddie

Who needs a gym pass? All anyone needs is a hyperactive five-year-old and an hour at a park that should never have been built.

Seriously, did they make that place for parents to lose their children and their minds at the same time? And don't they believe in shade? Longest, hottest, and most miserable two hours of my life. No wonder Lyndi has never taken him there.

I had to turn on the TV for the last forty-five minutes so I could catch my breath.

I don't know how Lyndi does it, and it makes me appreciate my best friend more. How she works, parents, and has time to listen to me whine about my life is a miracle.

My alarm rings to get ready for the gym. Hopefully Ward is here to pick him up soon.

I slip on my shoes and check my phone to find a text from Lyndi.

Lyndi: I'm still at the expo and Ward is running late. Can he pick him up from you at the gym?

That's not ideal, but I can make it work.

Me: It's fine. It's just Connor tonight. If Ward is late, I'll have Crew teach him a few things.

I place my phone in my bag and heft it over my shoulder. "All right Crew, time to go to the gym."

Crew stops the tumbling routine he's doing off my couch into the pile of pillows on the floor. "Do I get to play in the play center again?"

"Only if Mary Jane is working." It's technically against the rules, but Mary Jane loves me, and I love her.

"I hope she's working." He crosses his fingers and closes his eyes. He really is the cutest thing.

I cross my fingers as well.

I walk around the room, gathering the socks, shoes, and toys he scattered around the second we returned from the park.

"Ready!" he says, holding something suspiciously behind his back.

"What do you have there?" I lean around him to get a peek, but he turns, preventing me.

"A surprise for Mommy."

"All right." I'm too exhausted to worry about it, and I'm going to be late if I don't hurry.

Mary Jane isn't working, which is a problem because now Crew is upset, and Ward still isn't here.

My boss will kill me if he finds out I brought a kid I'm babysitting to work.

I guess I could say Crew is Connor's child. That's one way to get out of training him. I have no time to prepare another lie.

"Hey, Maddie."

I jump at Connor's voice a foot from me. Speaking of the man who doesn't know he just became a father.

"Oh, hey, um hi." I tuck my hair behind my ear and step in front of Crew to hide him. Introducing my best friend's son to the devil is something I probably shouldn't do.

"Hey," he says again, rocking on his heels. He's wearing a fitted green shirt today, and it's making his eyes decidedly green, like the leaves of a palm tree. I suddenly have the desire to be somewhere tropical. He rubs a hand through his dirty blond hair, but a thick lock bounces back onto his forehead, reminding me of a child.

A child. Right. That's what he is. Not a man I'm checking out. If I am checking him out, it's only because we were stuck together for four hours, and the shock of the unfortunate ordeal is still wearing off.

"Hi," I repeat.

Gah, this is awkward.

His eyes flash, and my heart picks up tempo. Why the heck is it doing that?

He shoves his hands in his pockets. “Do you think we could skip the training tonight and talk?”

My mouth goes dry. Talk? About the things that may or may not have happened in the closet? I thought we agreed we wouldn’t discuss it, a sort of “what happens in the closet stays in the closet kind of thing,” so that means he wants to talk about the *other* thing. The worst day of my life. And I’m not sure I’m ready to open up that wound.

“Talking’s boring,” Crew pipes up from behind me.

The kid has impeccable timing. “Agreed. No time to talk.”

Connor peers around me. “Who’s this?”

Too late. The time has come. I can’t protect Crew forever. I sigh and step to the side. “This is Crew. I’m babysitting him today.” I ruffle Crew’s hair. “Crew, meet the devil.”

Connor snorts and Crew studies him. “Do you have horns?”

Connor rubs his head, searching. His brows furrow. “Huh, I must have grown out of them.”

Now it’s my turn to snort.

“Pleased to meet you, sir.” Crew sticks out one hand, and I eye him like he’s a little circus monkey. Ward, or rather, Ward’s very proper and regal mother, must have taught him that.

Connor shakes his hand with an amused expression. “You as well.”

“Do you have another name?” Crew asks before using the same hand to pick his nose. He should have done that first.

“Most people call me Connor.” He shoots me a wink.

Crew’s eyes go wide. “I have a Connor in my school! He lost two teeth when he crashed on his bike. But I haven’t lost any.”

“Your time will come.” Connor pats his head.

Psh. What does he know?

Crew ditches my side in favor of Connor. “I’m five. But my birthday is in twenty-four, or is it twenty-three days? Then I’ll be six.”

“That’s awesome,” Connor says.

“You can come to my party,” Crew says.

“Okay, come on. No more talking.” I grab Crew’s hand and pull him away from Connor. I don’t need him inviting Connor places he isn’t wanted. Especially not around Lyndi. She’d try to lock us in a closet again.

I lead them to the farthest corner of the gym. There’s absolutely nothing back here, which also means there isn’t anyone else around.

I text Ward and tell him where we are then turn to my client. Clients. One I enjoy teaching, the other unteachable.

“Okay Crew, can you show Connor how to do a jumping jack?” In a moment I’ll give him my phone, but what’s the

point of having a kid at work if I can't have fun?

“Sure!” Crew takes off his shoes and lays his toys by them. Then he jumps up and down, his arms and legs in complete opposition, and to my surprise, Connor copies what he's doing.

It's not cute. But it is quite endearing.

Next, I have Crew show us some push-ups, squats, then sit-ups. Each is more entertaining than the last, and Connor follows his lead with a grin, pretending to huff and puff when Crew speeds up. It makes my heart beat a little faster. How dare he be so good with kids.

“All right, good job, little buddy,” I say, and find Crew a folded mat to sit on. “Here, you can watch a show while I finish.”

“Can I take pictures?” he asks eagerly.

“No.” We learned that lesson the hard way when he took a very entertaining video of Lyndi and Ward and posted it online.

I find a quality, educational show and leave him to his thing.

“He's cute,” Connor says, hefting himself off the floor. I left him doing push-ups, but he's not out of breath. I should have put a twenty-five-pound weight on his back. Or Crew.

I would agree with him, but conspiring with the devil is against my moral code. “He's all right,” I say. It's far from the truth. That little boy has everyone wrapped around his finger. He is the only constant man in my life, after all. I wish my

mom would be satisfied with that. She's called me twice since our last dinner, asking how things "worked out" with Xavier. I cringed each time and ended both conversations disappointing her.

Thinking of my mother and her impossible standards makes my head throb. I slip the ponytail from my hair and shake out the strands, letting my nails scrape against my scalp. *That's better.*

"Wow."

My eyes fly open to find Connor watching me. "What?"

He steps forward until his chest nearly touches mine. He brushes a strand of hair off my cheek and tucks it behind my ear. His fingers trail down my neck and over my shoulder. Tingles explode along my skin with his touch.

"I've never seen your hair down. It's so long." His voice is rough and low, and I can feel the vibrations coming off his chest.

My breath lodges in my throat, and a shiver comes out of nowhere. I swallow, lacking the ability and desire to push him away.

"It's so beautiful," he whispers, as he slides his fingers through my hair again. He's barely touching me, but every nerve ending in my body lights up with the feel of him. What is he doing to me? And why am I letting him? My mind races, reminding me of his words from the closet. He wants to know me. Has he really been attracted to me all these years?

A weight slams down somewhere in the gym, yanking me from the moment. I blink and step back, out of his reach. I twist the ponytail holder around my hair, locking it away from him.

He watches me with an expression I can't afford to decipher right now. Time to get back to torturing him...I mean training.

I spin around to look at the wall. Anywhere but at him. "Why don't we try some handstand push-ups today?"

"What's that?"

I drop my hands to the floor and kick my legs up against the wall. Then I dive into a push-up. I can only do about six of these on account of the blood flooding my head, but I do them with confidence then drop my feet and pop back up.

Connor studies me, his expression almost frightened. "Do I have to?"

"If you don't, you're wasting your money by being here."

His eyes lock on mine and his jaw flexes. "I'm not wasting my money."

I purse my lips and dust my hands off on my yoga pants then motion to the wall. "All right, well, give it a shot."

"Okay." He runs his hands together and steps from the wall. Then takes a few steps closer. Then back again.

His eyes narrow. "How do I get up there?"

I shrug. "Throw yourself up and let the wall catch you."

"Very helpful, coach."

I'm not sure how to explain it. I took gymnastics when I was younger. I assumed it was common knowledge how to throw a handstand.

“Um, here...” I move next to the wall. “Try kicking your legs up, and I'll steady you on the wall.”

He rubs his chin. “What if I kick you?”

“Then I can officially drop you as a client.” I smirk. “There's a clause in my contract about assault, which relieves me of all coaching duties.”

“So, would you like me to kick you? Is that what you're getting at?”

“You caught me. Now stop being a baby and try it.”

“Fine.” He rubs his hands together again. Where does he think they are going? He's not about to attempt the uneven bars or something.

He huffs out a breath then drops his hands to the floor and chucks his feet in the air.

His feet hit the wall so hard and fast I barely catch his shins.

“K, now push up.” I try to focus on his face and not his exposed abdomen.

He really should have tucked his shirt in. All those muscles? Bleh. Seen one, seen them all. It's just getting old at this point. Like who even cares about six-packs these days?

His first push-up is shaky, but the second is much better. So is the third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and yep, he's going for another

one to beat me.

So annoying.

He makes it to ten.

“How do I get down?” he wheezes.

I pull my eyes away from his abs again. The little traitors keep jumping the fence to steal another peek.

“Just drop,” I say.

His left arm caves, and then he’s falling. On me.

I can’t react fast enough. My shoe catches on a seam in the mat, causing my knees to buckle, and I’m attacked by his hairy legs. My head hits the floor, and a giant shoe slams into my cheek.

He must have taken my advice literally.

“Ow.”

“I’m so sorry, Maddie.” Now Connor’s face is hovering over mine instead of his giant shoes. It’s definitely an upgrade.

Oh no, did I get a concussion?

“My arm gave out. Are you okay? Did I hurt you?” One hand gently cradles the back of my head while he brushes the hair out of my face with the other. His eyes rake over me, slowly, deliberately.

I blink back the stars in my vision. “Just enough to set me free.” And then willingly, and unbidden, a smile escapes me like I’ve never known.

I erase it the second I realize what happened, but he saw it. I can tell by the twinkle in his eyes and by his grin.

I press a hand to my forehead. “I think I need to get checked for a head injury.”

“Is it that bad?” His smile morphs into concern. “Should I take you to the hospital? Why does this keep happening to me?”

“What are you talking about?”

He ignores my question. “How many fingers am I holding up?” He holds a peace sign in front of my face.

“One less and you’d be flipping me off.”

His face relaxes. “You’re okay.”

“Don’t tell me I’m okay.” My words are meant to be snarky, like usual, but they lack their customary bite.

He leans closer until his face hovers mere inches above my own. My fingers itch to run through his messy hair and see if it’s as thick as it looks.

“What would you like me to tell you?” His deep voice sends signals of awareness through my body.

All guards on high alert, Connor is in dangerous territory. Retreat. Retreat.

My lips part. They are not retreating. They seem to be waiting. His gaze drops to my mouth, and my eyes follow suit. He has nice lips. It’s a shame they are nearly covered by his

beard. I wonder what that scruff would feel like against my lips, against my neck.

“That was awesome! Do it again, Aunt Maddie!” A pair of Spider-Man shoes charge straight for my head. Connor pulls back, and I jerk upright before I get another shoe to the face.

“No!” I say to Crew while accepting Connor’s hand.

“It was so funny! My egg thought so, too.” He says, bouncing on the mat.

I freeze, sure that I must have heard him wrong. How much damage did Connor’s big feet do to my brain? “Egg?”

“Yeah,” Crew says, proudly holding the egg out in front of him. “He’s my new little buddy.”

It’s not big enough to be a chicken egg. But it’s bigger than any bird egg I’ve ever seen. Is that what he found in the park during one of the three hundred times he ran away from me? That must be the surprise for his mom.

“Crew, can I see the egg?” I say, slowly taking a step toward him. I move with the steadiness of a bomb squad. One wrong move and everything goes up in yolk.

“No.” Crew yanks his hand out of my reach. “I named him my little spidey guy.”

“That’s so cool, buddy. Where’d you get it?” Connor asks, and out of the corner of my eye I notice he, too, is trying to get closer to the egg from the opposite direction. We are both less than two feet from him and closing in.

“At the park.” Crew shakes it, and my heart stops momentarily. “I’m going to take it home for my mommy, and then we can have a pet bird.”

Oh please don’t let there be a baby bird in there. I don’t have the stomach for that.

“I love birds. Could I take a look? I might know what kind of bird it will be,” Connor tries.

“I know what kind of bird it will be,” Crew says confidently, pulling the egg close to his body. “A spidey bird.”

It was worth a shot.

“Crew, let Connor see it. It might be a snake egg. Your mom wouldn’t like a baby snake.”

His eyes widen. “I would!”

Right, I forgot who I was talking to here.

Connor takes a giant step closer. “What if I—”

“Crew?” a deep voice pierces through the gym.

The sound startles Crew, and he squeezes the hand wrapped around the egg.

Bright yellow yolk shoots out in every direction. A glob of goo slaps my neck and drips down the front of my tank top. I’m too afraid to move as the yolk slowly slides into uncomfortable places.

Conner’s entire front is plastered while Crew seems to have remained mostly unscathed.

At least there wasn't a baby bird in there. But I almost wish there was.

"What happened?" Ward joins our party of three, all covered in egg.

And then Crew screams, and when this kid cries, it doesn't matter if I've hidden us in the corner of the gym or if we were alone on top of a mountain.

Everyone can hear him.

"The devil killed my spidey guy!" he wails.

I'm so getting fired. Again.

Chapter 19

Connor

First puke, now egg yolk. I'm starting to think I'm a glutton for punishment at that gym. Maddie would probably say it serves me right. I'm ready to call it quits on the whole thing, anyway. My trial is almost up and Maddie won't talk while working. I should have predicted that. She's serious and focused when she's supposed to be. I need to switch tactics.

I push through the front door of the house, careful not to get egg yolk on anything. But it's pretty much dry now.

"What happened to you?"

I freeze. That's not a voice I enjoy hearing.

I lift my head slowly to confirm my sister's fiancé is here. "Justin?" I glance around the empty house. "Where's Millie?"

Justin opens the fridge and takes out one of *my* Cokes. "She's getting her suit on. We're gonna go for a dip."

"I think there might be a dead bird in the pool," I say. If not, I'll gladly go find one.

“We only need the hot tub.” He pumps his eyebrows.

I clench my jaw. “Why don’t you guys go out instead?” He knows I hate him. I’ve made it more than clear for the last two years. But as annoying as he is, he isn’t stupid. “Millie has always wanted to go swing dancing. Or bird watching.” Okay, the second one was a lie. But anything to get him to leave, preferably without my sister.

“Ah, man. You know we are homebodies.” He pats my shoulder, and I bristle.

Millie is far from a homebody. She lives for parties and thrives in social situations. Another reason she shouldn’t marry this idiot. He doesn’t appreciate the simplest things about her.

Justin shoos the puppies off the couch before plopping down on the spot they just vacated. I hope they left him a present. But he kicks his feet up on the coffee table and cracks the Coke.

“Sure, make yourself at home then,” I mutter. I grab a ball off the ground and toss it to the pups who stumble over each other in their excitement to get to it.

“That’s the plan,” Justin says. “After Millie and I get married, this will be my home. We will have to kick you out, bro. No offense, but I sleep in the nude.”

I scoff at his confidence. He doesn’t live in the real world if he thinks he can afford a house like this working the same job he has since he was a freshman in high school.

“What is it you do for a living again, Justin? Sunbathe?”

“I’m a lifeguard. I save *lives*.”

“Really?” I scratch my chin. “Saved anyone in the last, I don’t know, decade?”

“Yes, actually. Mrs. Morrison fell off her walker last week, and I saved her. She had a broken hip after hitting the cement.” He smiles, practically tooting his own horn.

My lips curl into a grin. “So...she fell *outside* the pool?”

His pout reminds me of a child’s tantrum. “I still saved her.”

“If you’d actually saved her, she wouldn’t have fallen and broken her hip.”

“Well, I can’t predict the future now, can I?”

I chuckle. “You’d be worth keeping around if you could.”

“Oh, and you’re Mr. Perfect?”

I shrug. “I go by many titles.”

He glares at me and calls me another choice “title.” I don’t want to spoil it, but it’s not near as sweet as Mr. Perfect.

“I hope Mrs. Morrison paid you a million dollars to “save her” because that’s the only way you’re going to afford the loan on this house, plus the interest rate. Actually, make it two million. I’m forgetting the mortgage and utilities.”

He frowns, and I can almost see his slow thoughts trying to piece themselves together. “I thought this was your parent’s house.”

I lift a shoulder. “It was. But it was mortgaged to the hilt, so technically, the bank owns it now. I wish you all the luck, though. If anyone can pay it off, it’s you, big guy.”

“We’ll find a way after we are married.” He says, unconcerned. “Millie’s got a good job.”

“Do you even know what your fiancée does?”

He actually has to think about it. “She does girl stuff.”

I plant my arms across my chest, immediately regretting it when the dried egg yolk scratches my arm.

“She’s a cosmetologist. Her *job* is to help people feel better about themselves, not marry losers.”

Justin tosses back the rest of the drink and stands up. “Well gee, tell me how you really feel.”

“You’re not marrying my sister.”

“I don’t recall asking your permission.” He puffs out his chest. I’m pretty sure he’s five seconds from beating on it like Tarzan.

“Another mistake you made.” My glare is a Maddie level ten. But it doesn’t seem to affect Justin. I wish she was here to deliver it.

“It’s only a matter of time before Millie sees who you really are,” I say.

His eyes twinkle and he steps forward, right on Sean’s tail. The poor puppy squeals and darts away but Justin doesn’t even notice. “Oh, and what’s that, Connie?”

I want more than anything to kill him right here, right now just for the nickname.

“That you’re a piece of—”

“Hey bro, how was the gym?” Millie dances into the room and laces her arm around Justin’s back.

Justin shoots me a smug smile like he’s won. And I’m terrified because he might.

“Ew, Connor, what’s on your shirt?” Millie wrinkles her nose.

Ugh, I forgot about that. “A dead spidey guy.”

“Huh?”

I rub the back of my neck. “Don’t ask.”

“Okay... Ready babe?” She grabs Justin’s hand and heads for the door.

“Always ready for you.” Justin smirks, before they disappear outside. What Millie sees in him is a mystery. But she’s smart. She’ll figure out who he really is. Hopefully before the wedding.

I rip off my shirt and head upstairs. My mom and dad were so much better at this kind of stuff. My parents would have supported Millie’s relationship because they wanted her to be happy. I do, too. But I won’t sit around and let her marry that tool.

I can’t let my parents down like that.

Parenting an adult sucks.

Chapter 20

Maddie

“Hey coach,” Diedre hollers from across the court after practice Tuesday afternoon. “I bet I could beat you one on one.”

My eyebrows rise. Is this a competition or a kind of truce? “You’re on.” I’ll take either one. “What do I get when I win?”

She purses her lips and glances at the other girls. She picks up a loose ball, twirling it in her hands. “*If* you win, we’ll let you be our coach.”

Her comment rocks me. My jaw goes slack. Is she saying she *wants* me to be the coach? Like, for good? I glance at Callie and Megan, who are nodding. Something shifts in my chest with their offer.

Do I want to be their coach? Permanently? Coaching was never part of the plan, but that doesn’t mean I haven’t been thinking about it more than ever lately. After the time I’ve

spent getting to know these girls, how can I walk away? But how will I ever live with myself if I don't?

“And if you win?” I ask, not quite ready to dive into the minefield of my inner turmoil.

“Then you have to go to prom.”

I rear back. “Why would I go to prom?”

Diedre grins.

I don't like that gleam in her eyes.

“Oh, did I forget to tell you? Principal Thompson needs more chaperones, and I volunteered you.”

“Gee, thanks.” One moment I think I'm connecting with them, and the next, they throw me under the bus.

“You're welcome.” She beams and steps back to the line. “My serve.”

I turn, trudging to my position. Do I throw the game so the girls won't be surprised when I slip away and never come back? Or do I play my hardest to show these girls I'm here for them when no one else shows up?

What do *I* want? I haven't even looked for a new job in weeks, ever since I met these girls.

I spin and face Diedre. The determination on her face is a reflection of my own. She's gifted, and all she and the other girls need is someone to hold the spotlight while they shine.

Can I do that?

At some point when I was lost in my thoughts, Diedre served the ball, and it dropped on my side.

“That’s one!” she hoots.

“That’s the only point I’m going to give you for free.” I tighten my ponytail and get in my stance.

“Sure.” She rolls her eyes. “Ready now?”

“Ready.”

Diedre serves again, and I return it. She hits it, and we volley back and forth. She sends the ball sailing over the net in the opposite direction I predicted, and I lurch to the right. My ankle continues to the left. My foot slips and my knee hits the ground hard, but I can only register the pain in my ankle. An inappropriate curse for the environment slips off my tongue.

“Miss Maddie?” The girls crowd around me, concern in each of their eyes.

It’s... uncomfortable. I’m *clearly* fine.

“Are you okay?” Diedre asks. Even she seems worried.

“Yeah, I’m good.” I wince. “Just checking the lines on the court.” I pat the wood floor with my hand. “They’re still there.”

Not one of them appears to believe me. In fact, they are all looking at me like I just passed the border into crazy town. Teenagers these days.

“We should get you up,” Callie says.

Why are they talking like that? It's not like I'm an eighty-year-old who has fallen and can't get up.

"Girls, I'm fine." I grab Callie's outstretched hand and attempt to stand. The pain in my ankle intensifies, and I screech, collapsing back to the floor.

"I'm going to go find someone," Megan says.

"No, no." I stop her. "It's just a sprain. I'll be fine."

Diedre peeks at my ankle, and a horrified expression fills her face. I glance down. Yup. There's the swelling. "It looks awful, but it's fine, really. I used to sprain my ankle all the time. I'll bring my ankle braces next time."

"You need to elevate it," Callie says, and within moments, the girls have gotten their textbooks out of their bags. I forgot how bad a swollen ankle hurts, and I grimace with each inch of math they add under my foot. Numbers are hard.

"Thank you." I swallow the pain and lie down on the floor to find a comfortable position. "I'm going to rest for a second." Or forever.

"We'll clean up," one of the girls says from somewhere near my foot.

"I should have done this weeks ago," I chuckle. Way better than getting locked in a closet and only slightly more painful.

Shoes squeak around me, and I close my eyes, focusing on my breath and not the agony seizing my ankle. I need to get ice on it ASAP if I want to wear normal shoes again this week, but this is all I can do for now.

A door slams shut, and I peel my upper half off the floor.

“Sleeping on the job, huh? Was the closet taken?” The voice is unmistakably deep and unmistakably Connor’s.

I close my eyes and groan. “It’s called horizontal coaching.”

“Ah.” I turn my head as his giant shoes stop in front of me. “And how is it working for you?”

I ignore him and face the bleachers where the girls are busy changing their shoes.

“Girls, who did this? Who let *him* in here?”

Riley, a freshman, slowly raises her hand. They sent the innocent one. Smart. “You needed help,” she says.

I shake my head. “This man cannot help me. In fact, let this be a lesson for you girls. You don’t need a man. Ever.”

Callie snickers. “That’s not what our health teacher said.”

Connor chuckles behind me.

I turn my glare on him. “Thank you for coming to my rescue, but I don’t need a knight in dingy armor.”

His grin grows, the left side of his lips creeping slightly higher than the right. It’s asymmetrical, which should be a turnoff, but it’s annoyingly adorable instead.

“Dingy?” He pretends to dust off his white shirt, which of course is rolled to his elbows to showcase his weirdly veiny forearms. A triangle of tan skin peeks out from where he’s unbuttoned his shirt. He might as well be naked in a room full of teenage hormones with the way they are all staring...scratch

that. *I'm* the only one staring. I need help. Of the mental variety.

“So, you don’t require assistance?” Connor asks.

“You’re still here?”

He sticks his hands in his pockets and walks over to the bleachers. He sits and cocks his head toward me.

“Well, go ahead, princess. Save yourself.”

The girls look between the two of us, probably unsure of what side they should take here.

I grit my teeth. I work out six days a week. I have the strength to stand on one leg while the other swells like a balloon. I lean against the hip on my good side then roll onto my knee. My ankle throbs, but I push on. I place my hands on the floor in front of me to stabilize myself then send my bad leg out behind me. After an awkward moment with my butt straight in the air, I use my core to pull myself up.

Applause congratulates me. I raise a hand in the air and give the girls a little bow.

Even Connor is smiling. Or smirking. They are so similar. “Now walk.”

Dang it. I gingerly rest my foot on the floor then put only a minimal amount of weight on my toes. The pain rears up, and I bite my lip. I’ve hurt my ankles a hundred times before; it’s a surprise I can wear strappy sandals. But it’s been a couple of years since I twisted it this bad, and my age is sneaking up on me. Age and competition are enemies. And we are all losers.

I can do this. I can pretend until I'm safely hidden in my car. I hold my breath and put more weight on my foot, but it's too much. My ankle screams in and my leg gives out. My body collapses.

Before I can hit the floor, two strong arms wrap around my waist and haul me back up.

"I can do it," I grumble.

"Maddie." His voice is rough, and his earnestness claws at me. "Please, let me help you."

I really have no other choice. I lift my arm and wrap it around his shoulder. "Don't make me regret this."

I expect him to step to the side so he can help me walk, but he scoops me into his arms.

"Regretting," I mutter, but my desire to fight him is outweighed by my need to get home and ice my ankle.

And his arms are...nice. Really nice. I can't even think of a retort with the pressure in my ankle and my body pressed against his like this. His right hand covers nearly half of my ribcage, and all my blood seems to rush to that spot.

We are much too close for comfort, yet somehow, I've never been more comfortable. He smells good, like Old Spice ran off to the woods, killed a bear, and came back even stronger.

Clearly, I've never been carried by a man before because this is messing with my brain.

“Do you want me to put you down, then?” Connor’s eyes dart across my face as if he can see exactly what he’s doing to me.

“No.” My answer comes too quickly, and I hurry to cover it up. “You’d probably hurt me even worse.”

A muscle in his jaw ticks. “No. I won’t. Not again.”

I swallow. I don’t think he’s talking about my ankle anymore.

“Here’s your stuff, coach,” Diedre, thankfully, interrupts and places my keys and bag on my stomach.

“Thanks, Diedre.” I turn my attention to her. “I want a rematch next week.”

“Rematch?” She chuckles. “Coach, I won. You have to go to prom.”

Connor throws his head back and laughs, the annoying movement jostling where I sit in his arms. “You’re going to prom? Who asked you? You know that’s probably not legal.”

I cover his mouth with my hand to shut him up. His beard is prickly against my palm, but his cheeks are warm and soft.

“Fine,” I say to Diedre. “A deal’s a deal.” But I haven’t forgotten about what else I could have won, and I’m hit with disappointment. I don’t need their approval to be their coach, but I sure would like it.

The girls follow us to the doors, and I drop my hand from Connor’s mouth to give him the key to lock up.

“Hey, ladies.” Connor stops them before they can all walk away. “Let this be a lesson to you. You don’t need a man. Ever.”

I cover his mouth again, but it does nothing to prevent him from laughing beneath my palm. His warm breath tickles my skin, sending tingles up my arm.

My heart rattles and shakes like it’s trying to break free. I’m going to have to find a more permanent solution for shutting him up.

Chapter 21

Connor

“You can put me down now. The girls are gone,” Maddie says once we’ve rounded the side of the building.

I keep walking, pretending I can’t hear her even though her lips are less than ten inches from mine. I’m really trying not to focus on *that*. Or on how well she fits in my arms. Or the softness of her waist against me. And what is she doing with her fingers at the base of my hair? She is *killing* me.

“You’ve proven your manhood. Please put me down.”

I stumble on the uneven blacktop then quickly right myself. “I didn’t realize it was at risk. Perhaps you’d prefer another demonstration of my masculinity?”

She purses her lips and studies the lot in front of us. “No, I don’t think that will be necessary.”

“Scared?” I tempt her, knowing she can’t resist playing this game.

“Psh. I could take you in a fight.”

My grip on her tightens. “Are you suggesting we wrestle?”

“Wha—? No! That’s not what I said.” She pushes against my chest, but she’s stuck right next to me.

I rather like having this advantage.

“Put me down, you arrogant brute.”

It’s hardly the insult she intends it to be, and it’s a step up from *devil*. She’s warming to me.

“Brute?” I mull over the word. “Is that because I’m so strong and wildly handsome?”

“It’s because you’re dreadful... and hairy.” Her eyes flit to my chest and she sucks in her bottom lip between her teeth. If she’s trying to act disgusted by me, she didn’t sell it.

I stop at her car and open the passenger side door.

“What are you doing?”

“Putting you down.” I gently put her on her feet—foot. “There’s no way I’m letting you drive home like that. You can’t even push the gas pedal.”

“But...” She frowns at her swollen ankle but can’t seem to come up with a good excuse. “Thank you.”

I smile at her discomfort. “Did that hurt?”

She sighs and sinks into the seat. “Worse than a root canal.”

I laugh and round the car, letting myself into the driver’s seat.

Maddie is quiet as she directs me through town to her apartment. Usually she doesn't pass up a chance to boss me around. Either the pain in her ankle is turning her mute, or she doesn't hate me as much as she used to. A man can dream.

I turn left into her apartment complex. It's not what I expected. I don't know what I expected. But the white, modern building is very her.

She must have gotten tired of fighting because she doesn't protest when I come to her side to help her out.

This time, though, I plan to make her work for it. I could scoop her up like I did at the school, or I can take my life in my hands and make her ask for it.

I pause outside her open door, hands in my pockets.

Her dark brown eyes flick up, waiting. "Are you just going to stand there?"

"Why? Did you need help?"

She glowers. "You know I do."

"As it so happens, there's something I need as well." I shove my hands in my pockets. "Might I suggest a trade?"

"What do you need?" Her tone is skeptical, as expected. I'm acting like a jerk again by not helping her out. But this time there's a reason for it.

I lean over the car "To apologize."

She purses her lips in indecision, her eyes darting across my face, probably attempting to determine my sincerity. She's

going to turn me down, and I wouldn't blame her. I'd still help her home, of course. I'm not that big of a jerk.

My voice drops, pleading now. "I know you don't owe me anything, but Maddie please, will you let me tell you what I've been trying to say for months?"

Her eyelashes flutter, and she looks away. My body melts under the Arizona sun while I wait for what feels like an eternity before she answers. "I'll give you five minutes."

That's all I need.

In one swift movement, I scoop her out of the car. She's quiet in my arms, shrinking into me like she's trying to disappear. I don't want that. All I want to do in life is protect her.

Ironic, since I'm the one she needs protection from.

"Which floor?" I ask.

"The fifth. And the elevator is broken." Her loose fingers tickle my neck, and I barely register what she said.

"The top floor?" Did my voice sound worried? Because I'm definitely not worried about carrying an injured woman up five flights of stairs.

Her eyes dance, and dang it if she isn't cute enough to make me head for the stairs. "Sorry." Her shrug pleads the opposite.

I grunt and start up the stairs. "No problem." Except I feel like my masculinity really is at risk now.

The first two flights are easy enough, but after the third, I'm panting and have to set her on a step to take a breather. I bend over to ease the strain on my back and thighs. This is embarrassing.

"I think I'll have to add these to your workout routine." Maddie laughs at my bent body. "You clearly need more practice."

I pop up and wiggle my eyebrows at her. "Do you think there's room for two of us on the StairMaster?" It sounds dangerous, but I'd give it a try if it meant I got another chance to hold her.

She rolls her eyes and holds out her hands to me. "Come on, you big baby, I need ice."

If only she needed *me*.

"Big baby," I mutter, picking her up again. "I'd like to see you carry me up five flights of stairs." I practically sprint the next two levels to prove my strength, and gently lower her to the ground next to her door, keeping an arm around her back to steady her. But the lack of oxygen catches up to me, and I try my hardest not to wheeze in her face. I'm not sure who is holding who up at this point.

I fish the keys out of my pocket, fumbling with them while Maddie remains silent beside me. I'd pay a hundred dollars to know what she's thinking.

I wouldn't risk paying more than that because it's probably something unpleasant.

I get the door open and help her to the couch, propping her ankle on two throw pillows. She tells me where to find the ice and medicine, and I follow her directions. I don't snoop—too much—while I walk around her apartment. It's tidy, as expected. But it's also warmer, painted in bright cheery tones and oversized, inviting furniture. She even has a sign in her kitchen that says "Happiness is homemade." Six months ago, I would have teased her about it all, but now, I want to stay here and find that happiness with her.

"Here." I hand her the pills and a glass of water then put the ice pack around her ankle. I use a dish towel I found to tie it around and keep it snug, moving as gently as I can to not cause her any more pain.

"Smart," she says.

"I've had my fair share of sprained ankles."

"Same." She yawns then pulls out her phone.

I turn away, studying the décor, not quite ready to face what I came here for.

"Just a second. I need to text my best friend and let her know I'm not stuck in a closet again."

My eyes linger on a photo of what must be her parents. "It's almost like you've had some experience getting trapped in closets."

To my surprise, she chuckles. "Okay. I'm ready."

I spin around. "Oh, uh." I thought I had at least two more minutes of snooping.

She holds up her phone, showing me the timer that's already running down. "Your time is ticking."

She's not playing.

Okay. I debate between the chair and the coffee table. I want to be close but not too close if she decides to punch me. I guess I could *let* her punch me if it will make her feel better.

I sit on the coffee table in front of her. She scowls but doesn't tell me to move.

"Four minutes," she says absently.

I scratch my beard. It's probably time to shave it, but it makes me feel more confident since my sister claims I have a baby face without it. Right now, I need all the confidence I can get. "Um," I swallow. Where do I start? "It was an accident."

Not like that.

Her frown deepens. "Rumors don't start themselves by accident, Connor."

"I know. Let me start over." I flex my hands and then rub them against my slacks. "It's my fault. I was jealous. I've always been jealous of you." Her expression is still stony, annoyed, and angry. "You were fun to tease, but I admit, I often took it too far."

"It started out as a bit of fun," I say. "I enjoyed seeing you get riled up, and you *were* a good distraction when my parents died. But at some point, it morphed into a competition."

She looks past me, refusing to meet my eyes. And that kills me more than just about anything else.

“I stupidly believed if you were succeeding, I was failing.” I continue. “I was shocked when we were both hired at Harrison and Branch. I thought I’d finally managed to be as good as you at something. But then you got to work with the partners on that case the first week on the job, and I kind of spiraled. I realized I’d never be as good as you.” I scratch the back of my neck, ducking my head. I’m not a vulnerable person. I’ve never told Millie half this much. But Maddie deserves the truth. All of it.

I study the fibers in the carpet as I explain the next part. “The day the case went to trial was awful. Two of the cases I’d been researching fell apart, and everyone blamed me. The office was tense, and the frustration kept growing. I was tired of feeling like a failure and tried to find fault with you instead. When Bri asked why you got the job over me, I might have implied...” My voice trails off. She knows what was implied. Saying it now only reinforces how blind and stupid I was. And I hate that version of me.

I drag my gaze to hers and catch sight of the storm raging in her eyes. She squeezes the life out of a throw pillow, her expression severe.

“You said it once. Why are you afraid to say it now?”

A sharp pain lodges in my chest. I deserve that.

She shakes her head, her expression resigned. “How do you plead, counselor?”

“Guilty.” My voice cracks and my chest constricts. “On all accounts.”

She opens her mouth, probably to dismiss me, but I don’t want to leave with her closed up like this.

“I was an idiot.” But I never spread it around. I swear.”

“That part I do believe.” She sighs. “Bri’s the worst.”

“No. I’m the worst. I didn’t think about the consequences of a few words.”

She doesn’t say anything. I wish she would. I wish she would let out all the words *she’s* holding inside. I know I ruined things for her in the past, but I meant what I said. I don’t want to hurt her anymore.

The timer beeps, the sound cutting through the strained silence like a deafening blade.

That’s my time. I risk one more glance at her, but she avoids my gaze. She silences the timer but continues to play with the fringe on her throw pillow. I guess it’s time to leave.

I take a deep breath, preparing for my final plea. “I’m so sorry Maddie, if I could give you my job, I would. I hate that I’ve ruined your life, your future. I’ll never forgive myself for it, and it’s okay if you don’t forgive me either.” A clock ticks somewhere, but time seems to be standing still, the whole universe waiting for her to speak.

I stand and bury my hands in my pockets. “Thanks for letting me talk. You didn’t have to.” I take a step toward the door. Her eyes remain glued to her pillow. I swallow back the

lump in my throat. Time to do what I should have done five years ago. "I'll stop bugging you."

I walk to the door, each footfall echoing through the emptiness. She hates me. I hate myself for what I did to her.

I scratch the back of my neck and stop in front of the door. I don't want to pull it open and walk away. I don't want this to be the last thing I say to her. I want more, so much more. But I won't take it from her.

"That case..."

My body stills. I turn slowly.

She's still playing with that dang pillow, but her eyes slowly rise to mine. "That case," she repeats, her voice stronger and her eyes fixed on mine. "I only got it because the victim was my best friend."

My breath lodges in my throat as I try to remember the details. "Your best friend was almost kidnapped?"

Chapter 22

Maddie

Why did I just tell Connor that? I have no clue. Maybe because for the first time in the last four years I feel like I understand him. And it's terrifying because I think I finally understand myself as well. I wasn't innocent in our game. I took my stress out on him like he was my personal punching bag. His achievements taunted my failures, and I became blinded to everything else besides winning. Had he gotten Lyndi's case over me, I would have been upset with myself for not working hard enough. I wouldn't have accused him of sleeping with the boss, but maybe, I'm starting to understand him.

"Your best friend was almost kidnapped?" Connor asks again as he returns to the coffee table.

My chest heaves with unbalanced oxygen. I'm not hyperventilating. Not again.

"Yeah." I held it together that night. I hold it together every night. But that night, when Ward told me to call 911, and then

the line went dead, I have never felt so helpless and afraid in my entire life. That was the night I had my first panic attack.

The only reason I made it through was because Ward's best friend, Caleb, had come barging through the door at the right time.

I had my second panic attack the night before that case, my very first and last case, went to trial. I haven't had anything close to one since Connor and I were trapped in that closet together.

Connor's stare softens, and he covers my hand with his. "What happened?"

There's no reason to tell him anything. I don't have to. But... I can't stop myself. Moisture gathers at the corner of my eyes. "I was watching her son while she went to a gala. Her ex-convict boyfriend found her outside and tried to take her." I shudder. Things could have gone so differently that night. "Her new boyfriend, Ward, called and asked if I knew where she'd disappeared to. Then he heard her cry for help, and he found her being dragged away." I tug on the seams of the pillow. It will be lucky to survive this conversation.

He mutters a curse under his breath, but I still hear it. "I'm sorry Maddie."

I wave it away. It's all too much. I didn't sign up for this today, and I'm suddenly exhausted. "It's fine."

"No, it's not. Your best friend was almost taken while you had her son. He could have come for the child, and you, as

well.”

I sniff, pushing back the tears. I take a long steadying breath, but the memories come flooding back.

He could have. I remember being terrified he would. But I shoved that fear as deep as I could so I could keep Crew safe. It worked to some extent, but while he lay snuggled in his bed, I'd ended up in the fetal position by the front door.

I shake my head, my vision blurring as I try to focus on the flowers embroidered into the pillow. “He didn’t. I was fine.”

Connor squeezes my fingers then releases them to grab my face. My chin quivers against his hand. “You don’t have to pretend with me.”

His words reach inside me, curving around my heart and convincing it to let go. One tear escapes down my cheek, and he catches it with his finger. He doesn’t have time to catch the next, or the next, as they come at a rapid pace. I’m barely aware of him moving, but somehow he ends up on the couch with me, his hand cradling the back of my head, my face pressed into his clean white shirt.

I don’t have to admit how scared I was; he knows. And that’s all I need. After the incident, I insisted Lyndi go to counseling. I never told her or my parents, but I found a therapist for a time as well. She helped me deal with the trauma, but it feels good to have someone hold me like this while I cry, while I let the last of it out.

A completely unwarranted thought afflicts me as I rest my head against his chest.

I like this. And gosh, I hate myself for liking it. This is Connor. My mortal enemy, the pain in my side, the guy who played a part in ruining my career. How can I feel anything for him after he admitted to all he'd done?

The answer is a murky gray between a black-and-white option.

My mind is a confusing place, and it only makes me more upset.

I'm vaguely aware of his hand stroking my back, soothing away the worries both past and present.

I don't know how long I remain pressed against his chest. Time doesn't seem to matter in moments like this. The circles he rubs on my back slow, and so does his breathing. I count his heartbeats until I get to one hundred, then I lift myself off him, shame filling my cheeks. I *cried* on Connor. Connor, who is... asleep?

I confessed all of that to him, and he fell asleep? I sit up straighter. He doesn't budge. Seriously? I'm about to shake him awake for being stupid enough to fall asleep at a time like this when a better thought occurs.

Connor Quinn is overdue for a little revenge.

I lower my feet to the ground then remember my sprained ankle. The pain is bearable but I don't have the energy to go

far. I glance around the room and spot a tube of lipstick on the side table. I gently scoot over to it and pick it up.

I maneuver around him until I'm crouching over his face, lipstick tube in hand. I slip off the lipstick cap. My hand is jittery, and my pulse thrums in my ears with anticipation. I bring the lipstick toward his face, letting my hand hover an inch above his mouth. Sweet, sweet vengeance.

His eyes pop open, and he snatches my wrist. "The only way you're getting that on my lips is if it comes off yours."

His eyes are brown right now. A deep, warm brown more tempting than chocolate.

The thrumming in my ears becomes a pounding.

"What do you have here?" He twists the lipstick in my hand and reads the label. "Red passion?"

My mouth goes dry. Why is it so hot in here?

"My favorite." He tugs my arm and I fall onto his lap, my hands splayed across his chest.

His heart races beneath my palm. His eyes dart to my mouth. My lips part, and I'm not sure why. I'm not really going to kiss the man I've spent five years hating. I can't.

So why am I moving closer?

His eyes travel over my face, searching for the answer to his unspoken question. I should hate him. I should push him away for what he did to me, for what he's always done to me, but right now I can't make those reasons pull me back.

“Maddie?” he whispers, the desire in his voice pulling me achingly closer. I need to feel his lips on mine and the scratch of his beard against my cheeks. I need to see what kissing Connor feels like. Just once. Then never again.

I close my eyes, leaning into him. My lips brush his, soft and warm, but with caution, warning me that if I go further, I’ll never be the same.

But I *need* more. More than a touch.

I grip the loose buttons of his shirt and—

“Maddie! Is this baby daddy?” A heavily accented female voice breaks into my bliss.

My brain rears back, yanking my body with it from the realization that my mother is here.

I fling myself off Connor so fast I fall onto the coffee table. But my momentum doesn’t stop there, and I flip over backward, landing in a heap on the floor.

“Maddie!”

I don’t know who yells my name. It really doesn’t matter. The next item on my agenda is to crawl under the table and die.

It’s Mom who pulls me up. “Maddie, what are you doing? You’re going to hurt yourself.”

Too late. I avoid Connor’s heated gaze and focus instead on my mom’s interested one. “What are you doing here?”

Mom frowns and straightens the collar of my shirt. “I had an appointment, remember? You say you take me to dinner at that seafood place.”

“Right.” I want to smack myself for agreeing to that... and for giving her a key to my apartment—serious oversight.

“So,” Mom beams from ear to ear. “Who’s the boy?” As if the *boy* isn’t sitting on the couch still smiling. Can nothing erase that thing?

“No one,” I say quickly.

“Don’t be rude, Filha.”

I peek at Connor. He doesn’t seem upset. Quite the opposite, actually.

I gulp.

“Yeah, don’t be rude, darling.” He stands next to me. If I had two good feet, I’d move away, but I’m too slow, and he wraps his arm around my waist, trapping me against him. “Now what is this I heard about babies?”

“Kill me now,” I mutter under my breath.

“Maddie needs job, then baby,” Mom says, as if that explains everything.

“Mom!” I rub my forehead.

“What?” She shrugs. “He is a nice boy. Very handsome. He make cute babies.”

Is that her only criteria for future grandchildren? “He’s also the *devil*.” I put extra emphasis on the last word, hoping she’ll

cross herself and promptly cast him out.

“Who you kissed.” Connor squeezes my hip.

“Momentary lapse in judgment.” I push his hand off. “You can leave now.”

He quirks an eyebrow. “I see how it is. You use me for my body, then when you’re done, you shove me out the door.”

I limp to the couch and fall onto it. “Don’t forget to shut it behind you.”

But instead of leaving, he turns to my mother. “It was lovely to meet you, Ms. Cardozo.”

“Call me Maria.” My mom blushes.

I have to put a stop to this insanity.

“Mom, he’s the one who got me fired.”

“You get yourself fired.” Mom waves my comment away.

My jaw drops. Arrow to the soul.

Mom grabs his arm. “You come to dinner next week.”

“I’d love to,” Connor says, now entirely beaming.

“Mom, no!” I chuck a throw pillow at Connor, but he easily catches it and shoots me a wink. “You can’t come, I’m uninviting you.”

Connor glances back at my mom. “She plays hard to get; it’s so fun. I’ll be there.”

Mom says something I can’t hear, and he says something equally quiet back. What is going on right now?

“Out!” I yell. I need him—and the weird feelings he created—to go away. It was trickery, a hallucination, mind control. Yes. That one. He’s a mind controlling psychopath who preys on innocent, broken women. And smells really good.

“I’m going,” he says. “But I’ll be back to discuss those babies.”

I glare at him. “Hey Connor, be sure to take the elevator on the way down.”

A crease forms between his brows. “I thought it was broken.”

I rub my lips together, gearing up for my best trick of the evening. “I lied.” I expect him to get upset, but instead, he laughs.

No. That’s not how we play our game.

“I knew you wanted me,” he says before striding out the door.

I drop my head into my hands. What is happening?

“So, you marry him?” Mom asks.

“No!” I will not marry Connor Quinn.

Chapter 23

Connor

I grinned like an idiot for the whole fifteen-minute ride back to the high school. The Uber driver asked if I was okay. I assured him I had never been better and gave him a generous tip.

I held Maddie in my arms. I fell asleep with her on my chest. For the second time. Something about her relaxes me faster than any anti-stress exercise.

And that kiss... it was nothing but the softest brush of her lips, but it somehow flipped the universe inside out. Because now there's hope. Hope for much more.

I should be frustrated that her mom walked in when she did, but I can't help but adore the little woman who came barreling in announcing she needs grandbabies. Her bluntness reminded me of my own mother, and I haven't felt that kind of presence in a while.

I twirl my keys in my hand as I walk to my car in the darkened parking lot. My phone buzzes. It's been doing that for a while. It's probably Maddie, reminding me she hates me and she definitely didn't mean to kiss me. But I'm not going to respond. Not yet.

When I hop in my car, it's not Maddie's number on the screen, it's Millie's. And all the texts are from her as well. The call drops off, and I skim through the texts before I start the car.

Millie: I think something is wrong with Justin.

Millie: I'm getting worried.

Millie: Can you call me?

That one was followed by three unanswered calls from me then another text from her.

Millie: Justin cheated on me.

I see red. I slam the car into drive and punch the call button. She answers, her voice a blubbering, crying mess as she recounts everything she learned about her "fiancé" in the last hour. I can hear him in the background, pleading with her to give him another chance. I can barely focus on her words, not because they are hard to understand, but because all I can think about is what I'm going to do when I get there.

"I need to go," Millie says.

"No Millie, don't listen to h—"

The line goes dead. I pound the steering wheel as every light in the distance turns red at the same time. She better not give him another chance. He doesn't deserve her.

The twenty minute drive turns into a forty-five minute journey due to an accident, road closures, and construction. I spend every second dreaming of what I'll do to that scumbag when I find him.

I turn into the driveway, barely shutting the truck off before leaping from it.

"Where is he?" I slam the front door open, not bothering to shut it behind me.

Millie is perched on the couch, her eyes red and swollen, but I don't see Justin. "He left."

"I'm going to kill him." I unbutton the rest of my shirt. This is my favorite one, and I'm not about to get blood on it.

"No. Stop." Millie leaps off the couch and runs over to me. "What are you doing?"

"Don't you want to kill him? I'm here to help. Let's go."

Millie shakes her head. "I don't want to kill him."

"Good for you, but I still do."

"Connor!" she shouts, her voice sounding very much like our mother's.

I stop, my head swiveling in her direction.

"I've already made my decision."

“What do you mean?” Was I too late? Is she still going to marry the idiot?

“I mean, it’s over. I called it off.” She bites her fingernail as a fresh wave of tears cascades down her red cheeks.

“Oh.” The news hits me as a relief, but I still feel keyed up. He hurt my sister. “But he cheated on you. You can’t let him get away with that.”

“I’m not.” She picks up Sean and Gus and cuddles them into her chest. “Which is why I ended things.”

As happy as I am that my sister won’t be married to a piece of trash, I’m not sure how she can so quickly accept this. She was in love with him.

I step toward her. “Millie, I know I don’t do the whole feelings thing with you but, are you okay?”

“No.” She sinks into the couch. “But looking back now, I can see the signs.”

I’ve seen my sister go through a couple of breakups, but never has she taken it this well. I still feel fired up, ready to seek revenge on her behalf, but she only seems...tired.

She sniffs, and I notice her absently rubbing her ring finger. “I’ll be okay.”

That’s all I need to hear. For now.

“Well, what do you need?” I kick my shoes off by the couch. “Cookie dough therapy?”

“We’re out.” She says, picking up an empty tub beside her.

“Okay, um, ice cream, Oreos, a chick flick?”

She purses her lips. “All of the above.”

“Done.”

I gather the supplies and join her on the couch as the opening scenes of a particular chick flick plays. One I very much hate. But I can suffer through it for her. Heck, I’ll watch ten more if it means Justin is out of her life forever.

We sit in silence for the next thirty minutes. Every time she sniffs or makes a noise, I peek at her from the corner of my eye to make sure she’s really okay.

“Hey, Connor?” Millie says after she’s inhaled a bowl of ice cream and three Oreos.

“Yeah?”

“How many more years do we have left on the mortgage?”

“Um.” That wasn’t a question I was expecting from her. “Twenty-five.” That is, *if* we can even make the payments.

She’s quiet for a moment. “I think we should sell the house.”

My head swings in her direction so fast I almost get whiplash. “You do?” The last time I brought this up, she burst into tears and made me get a pedicure. Why now? Especially after tonight? “Millie, it’s been a long day. We can talk about this later.” I’m still trying to process everything that happened with Maddie. I won’t hold Millie accountable for the things she says while upset.

“No.” She shakes her head slowly, her eyes following the scene on the screen. “I think I’ve held onto the house so long because it felt like the only way to hold on to Mom and Dad. But I think it’s time to move on. They’d want us to.”

“Millie, this is not something we need to talk about tonight.”

She continues like she doesn’t hear me. “There should be a family in this house, with kids to enjoy the swimming pool and make memories like we did.”

A sudden daydream of Maddie afflicts my thoughts. What would it be like to share this house with Maddie and fill it with those babies her mom was talking about?

“But you’ve been so against selling it. Why now?”

She pauses the show and studies me. “You’ve been stressed ever since mom and dad died. I thought that was just the new you trying to cope. But I didn’t realize you were carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders.” She’s crying again.

If she doesn’t stop soon, I’m going to start.

“I’m so sorry it took me so long to realize. You deserve to start fresh, in your own course, without the worries from the past holding you down.”

“But you love the house.” I can’t believe she would do this for me. Perhaps she isn’t as obnoxious as I thought. The back of my eyes sting. Dang it, I’m even going to miss her stupid dogs.

“I do.” She nods and scoots closer to me, laying her head on my shoulder. Sean and Gus jump to the floor. “But I’m also

tired of hearing the garage open and expecting to see Mom or Dad walk through the door. Without them, this house will always be empty, no matter how many hobbies I've tried to fill my life with."

I get it now. The hobbies were her distraction, mine was Maddie. "You know, I've realized this house is just a building." I squeeze her shoulder. "But home is a feeling."

She's quiet. Then she snorts. "Okay, you did not just come up with that."

I poke her in the ribs. She's so annoying. "Fine. I saw it online."

She laughs and settles back into my side. "Maybe we can get someone we know to buy it so we can always come back. But I think I'm ready for a new adventure."

I don't know how she came to this conclusion, hours after ending a yearlong engagement, but I'm grateful. As hard as it will be to let it go, I know it's what we need to do, and already, the weight off my shoulders is tangible.

"Okay..." Millie hits my arm. "Distract me from this awful night. Talk to me."

It feels wrong to think about Maddie after all Millie has been through tonight, but I feel like I've just been given permission.

"I finally apologized to Maddie," I say, choosing to keep the kiss a secret. I might as well be flying right now with how weightless I feel.

"Did she try to kill you?"

“Yes, and no.” The guilt I felt when she told me about her friend nearly killed me. But then I held her as she cried, and comfort found me once more. While I stroked her back and held her close, I promised myself I would never do anything to hurt her again. As of this moment, I’m still succeeding.

That kiss, though, as brief as it was, will keep me awake for weeks.

“Oh hey, if we are going to sell the house, we need to have one final party.”

I squeeze my eyes shut and fake a yawn. “It’s been a long day. Let’s talk about this some other time.” Like next year.

She gives me puppy dog eyes. “Come on, one last hurrah. It will be the party Mom and Dad never let us throw.”

I roll my eyes. But I’m in a good mood for the first time in a long time. So for whatever reason, I agree.

“Should we do a themed party? We should do a themed party.”

I already regret agreeing.

Chapter 24

Maddie

My brain is broken.

I haven't been able to focus on anything for the past couple of days thanks to Connor. Every time I close my eyes, I'm back in my apartment, situated in his arms, not wanting to kill him.

It's confusing, to say the least. And it's screwing up everything else in my life. I ate a donut from the employee break room yesterday. Why they had donuts in the breakroom of a gym is beside the point. I ate a stale, bad-for-my-body donut and didn't freak out about it. Also currently, my apartment is a mess because I'm still limping on my bad ankle and I don't have the energy to clean. My life is literally upside-down.

I've come to only one conclusion. That tension between Connor and me? It's all the unresolved anger mimicking passion. He only apologized so he can feel better about himself.

So if I accept his apology, he can stop being my client, and stop showing up where I am trying to make things right. That's what I'll do. At our next training session, I'll forgive him and set him, and all these feelings, free.

Easy. I take a determined breath and finish setting up the volleyball net. Diedre is the first to stumble into practice after the bell rings. She's got her earphones in but pulls them out when she sees me.

"How was your ride home Tuesday?" She waggles her eyebrows.

"It was... uneventful." I avoid her gaze as I hobble into the closet for the ball cart.

"Is uneventful code for—"

"Nothing." I holler from the closet. "It's code for nothing." I shove the cart onto the court and wheel it to the sidelines. "Now, about prom."

She drops her bag to the bleachers and pulls out a protein drink. "I already told the principal you'd do it. You can't back out now." She takes a tiny sip then puts the drink in her bag.

"I wasn't backing out. I was only wondering if you had a dress yet?"

Her eyes drop to her tennis shoes—the ones that are being held together with a piece of duct tape. None of the girls seem rich by any means, but if my observations over the last month are correct, Diedre is lacking the most. I came up with a plan

last night—during the ten minutes when I *wasn't* thinking about Connor—but I don't know if Diedre will go for it.

“I might just wear jeans. The whole dress thing is so old school.” She grabs the drink out of her bag and takes another small sip like she's scared to take too much, or is she rationing it? Is she getting enough to eat at home?

I shrug. “You can if you want. Or, since you were the one who roped me into the whole prom thing, I was thinking of returning the favor.” I let my words hang in the open, waiting for her to take the bait.

“What do you mean?”

I grab a ball and toss it nonchalantly between my hands. “My best friend works at Lisa's in the mall. She's kind of new to the fashion world, but she's been begging me to find more models for the dresses she's designing. Now, I can't promise it won't fall apart, but it would be unique,” I finish quickly, hoping she buys it. Also hoping Lyndi really does have some magic in her and can make a dress in only two weeks. She told me last night when I talked to her about my plan that she would figure it out.

Diedre bites her bottom lip, considering. “I'll have to think about it.”

“Well, if it helps, it would be free, so you wouldn't be out any money. And you'd be helping my friend get better at what she loves.” What else can I say to sweeten the deal?

She nods slowly. “Okay. I guess so. I can always buy a new one if I hate it,” she says more confidently now.

“Of course.” I smile. The hard part is over. “Are you free tonight? We can run down, so she can get some measurements.”

“I could make some time.”

“Would your mom like to come?” I ask then immediately regret it when her face scrunches.

“No. She has better things to do,” Diedre says and pulls out her phone, effectively putting an end to our conversation.

It’s working. I want to clap my hands and jump up and down, but for obvious reasons, I refrain. I turn away and text Lyndi, confirming the plan.

Lyndi: I’ll have everything ready at 5:30.

The rest of the girls filter in and practice gets started. And for the next blessed hour and a half, I’m able to push Connor fully out of my mind. Okay, mostly out of my mind. But it’s easier to do with these girls. I feel more comfortable here than I ever did in a courtroom. Why did I ever think being a lawyer would make me happy?

Two hours later, Diedre and I arrive at Lisa’s. It’s nearly empty and Lyndi has already pulled about seventeen dresses, claiming she wants to get a visual for style and color. I know

what she's really doing is giving Diedre a moment to remember, a chance to feel beautiful, and I love her for it.

Lyndi calls the food court for a pizza delivery then starts putting Diedre into dresses.

I prop my sore ankle on the edge of the couch and settle into the soft cushions.

Diedre steps out in the first dress, a classic pink, princess ball gown. Her long black hair falls around her shoulders and she is absolutely gorgeous. But the moment she sees herself in the mirror she frowns.

"I don't think this is really my style." She returns to the room almost as quickly as she emerged.

The next dress is a beautiful baby blue with a mermaid fit. Diedre doesn't even bother looking at her reflection.

"It makes me look fat," she says, already retreating to the dressing room.

Lyndi blocks her exit. "Sorry. That word doesn't exist in this store," Lyndi says, shaking her head. "You are stunning in that dress. Turn."

Diedre doesn't move. Lyndi grabs her hand and pulls her around until she's standing in the middle of the full length mirrors. Diedre folds her arms with a huff and glares at her reflection.

I grip the edge of the couch. Was this a bad idea? I still barely know Diedre, she might hate me for overstepping.

“My butt is too big,” Diedre mutters.

“Those are called curves, darling, and they are to die for,” Lyndi says with her comforting mom voice.

Diedre shakes her head. “Only if I lose fifteen pounds.” She slips around Lyndi and goes to the dressing room. Lyndi gapes at me.

“What?” I mouth.

“Did you hear what she said?” she whispers.

Of course I did. I’ve heard the same exact thing from nearly every girl on the volleyball team multiple times this week.

The pizza arrives, and Lyndi pays for it, setting it on the small table in the viewing area as Diedre emerges for a third time.

This one is tighter around the waist but isn’t as dramatic as a mermaid style. Each dress looks like it was made with her as the inspiration. She looks stunning in everything.

“That’s beautiful,” I say.

Diedre turns toward the mirror, scrutinizing the dress with a frown. “The dress is pretty, but not on me.” She smacks her hips like she can flatten them.

How could she think that? Doesn’t she realize how beautiful she is?

I stand and walk toward Diedre. “You look stunning in that dress. And the lavender color is perfect for you.”

Diedre plays with the rhinestones along the bodice of the dress. "It makes me look like a hippo."

My whole body tenses. Her self-deprecation is brutal. I thought she would enjoy dressing up, but this isn't going at all like I expected.

"Pizza anyone?" Lyndi pops the pizza box between us.

I decline, and Diedre does the same. I frown. What teenager turns down pizza? Especially one I assumed might not have enough to eat at home. That could have been an error on my part, but I haven't seen her eat anything. Nothing actually. Tons of the girls bring snacks from lunch, granola bars, chips, or fruit to practice. But the only thing I've ever seen Diedre consume are off-brand protein shakes and possibly—but I'm refusing to let my mind go there—drugs. She could be concerned with her health like I was at that age...right after I'd gained control of my eating disorder.

I study Diedre, noticing the dark circles under her eyes, no doubt from whatever stress she faces at home. I want to help her. But she slammed me down pretty hard the first week on the job. Who's to say she won't now?

Lyndi returns the pizza box to the table. "Okay, let's get you into the next option. And Maddie, I put a dress for you in the other room. You can try it on whenever you want."

I should wait until Diedre is done, and let her have a moment in the spotlight, but I'm not sure how much longer Diedre will want to be here and I'm curious to see what Lyndi found for me.

I wander into the opposite changing room and gasp at the sight of the deep red, satin gown.

“Did you make this?”

“Of course not.” Lyndi laughs from the other side of the wall. “A customer returned it because of a tear, but we can’t find it. So you can wear it until we do.”

I take a giant step away. “Nope. I already did the splitting dress thing. This time I’ll be at a high school. I could go to jail.”

“I’ve combed over the dress a million times and can’t find it. But if you wear it, we might find it. If not, we will know she was lying. At least try it on.”

“Fine.” There’s no harm in *that*.

Besides, I really want to try it on. The bodice is fitted but flares out in a wide skirt at the hips with a slit up one side. It’s got spaghetti straps, the kind I often worry will hold up as well as the flimsy noodle, but it’s gorgeous. A simple, sophisticated gown for a chaperone, but sexy enough to wear on a date afterward. My mind unwillingly flicks to Connor. It’s been doing that a lot lately. Thinking about him used to be forbidden; now it’s become a minor obsession. To wonder what he might think of me in this dress, or what he might say next to make me question everything I thought I knew about him. He’s dangerous. It’s safer to keep myself away from him, thoughts and all.

I step out of the room, and Diedre's jaw drops. "You're a babe, Ms. M."

"I'm a little offended it took you so long to realize that." I joke, examining the dress she's wearing. It's off-white, a beautiful contrast with her dark skin. She's gorgeous.

"Wow, I think we found your color," I say.

"No, I don't think this is it either. White isn't slimming." She turns to Lyndi. "Do you have something in black?"

Lyndi gives me a pointed look and slowly, it sinks in.

Diedre is me. The girl I used to be. Before someone helped me love myself again.

"Diedre," I whisper, "do you feel beautiful?"

Diedre shrugs, picking up the skirt of the dress, and dropping it again. "Kind of."

I grab her shoulders and turn her so she's facing the mirror full on. "Look at that girl. What do you see?"

Diedre stares at herself, and I hope she's seeing what everyone else can. "All I see are my love handles. And my wiggly arms." She waves her arms which are completely wiggle free above her head.

I grab her hand. "Beauty has little to do with what you can see in a mirror, and everything to do with how you feel inside."

"Easy for you to say." Diedre sniffs and pulls her hand out of my grasp. "You could be a swimsuit model."

She has no clue. Which is why I should tell her. That's how my aunt helped me. By sharing her own experience.

"I haven't always been this confident." I take a breath. "One day in fifth grade, I was standing at the front of the class giving my first presentation ever when a boy in the back row called me fat. Everyone heard, and they all started laughing at me." I clear the sudden lump in my throat. It was so long ago, it shouldn't hurt. But that memory is a part of me and still, every time I'm in front of a crowd, I tense up and get nervous, terrified something bad will happen again.

"The rest of the week I was teased incessantly," I continue, "so I... stopped eating at school. I started passing out due to anemia." I pause and study her, trying to portray with my eyes and my heart, that she's not alone.

"But then my aunt taught me about portion control, about health and fitness, how they go hand in hand. It wasn't easy, and every now and then I find myself living in fear of food again. I still don't have the best relationship with food," I admit, finding Lyndi's eyes in the mirror. She gives me a soft, ever knowing smile. "But I'm trying. Because I've learned what I put into my body does not change who I am." There's Connor in my head again, sitting across from me in the closet, holding out a Snickers. My heart clenches.

I lower my voice and squeeze Diedre's arms. "It won't change you either."

Diedre's bottom lip quivers and tears pool in her eyes, and for the first time, I feel like I'm truly seeing her.

“All I see is beauty.”

A tear slips down Diedre’s cheek, and she swipes it off. I’m worried she’s going to yell at me for overstepping, but then her arms are around me. My arms are stiff at my side for only a moment before I hold her back.

It’s quiet for a moment before Diedre speaks up. “My mom hates me. She said I’m the reason my dad left. And she”—Diedre sniffs—“she always controls what I eat. That stuff you saw me with in the hall, was a diet powder my mom said would work wonders for my body. But it actually just made me puke. Which might have been the point.”

I want to track down Diedre’s mother and give her a piece of my mind.

”She constantly tells me how hideous I am and how no one will ever love me. And I believed her.” She sniffs again. “I don’t want to believe it anymore.”

My heart aches for her. No girl should ever feel unloved because of their body shape. Their value is so much greater than a number on a scale. I want—no, *need*—these girls to know they are perfect as they are.

I want to be their coach.

“Here.” Lyndi picks up the abandoned pizza box and brings it closer. “It’s time to heal.”

I laugh and rub my nose. “I think it’s going to take a little more than some pizza.”

“I know.” Lyndi grins. “But what better way to start?”

I take a slice, and for the first time in years, enjoy it without worrying about all the carbs that are going to turn to sugar in my bloodstream. Okay, I'm a bit of a control freak, so I still worry about it a little. But sometimes a slice of pizza is good for the soul.

Diedre does the same, and for the rest of the night, she no longer criticizes herself in each new dress, but flaunts it while Lyndi and I cheer. I know it's going to take a while for her to love herself, but I'm so proud of her for trying.

"I have the perfect idea for your dress. And I'll get Lisa to help me pull it together in time," Lyndi says once Diedre is back in her normal clothes. She takes some measurements, and then Diedre and I leave.

"Miss M?" Diedre asks on our way out.

"Yeah?"

"Thank you."

"For what?" I'm pretty sure Lyndi did everything tonight.

"For caring," she says. We are both quiet as I drive her home, but my mind is spinning.

When I went into law, my greatest desire was to be an advocate for those without a voice, those in need of help. Maybe I don't have to be a lawyer to be that advocate.

Chapter 25

Maddie

Tonight, I'll tell Connor I forgive him. I can't handle his pitying niceties anymore... or the weird feeling he's set off in my chest. And I really can't handle my mother calling every day to discuss him. I've tried explaining everything, but she won't listen. She's worse than Crew.

"Help!" the man on the bench groans, and I jump out of my thoughts to save my client from the barbell hovering two inches above his neck.

I almost let a client kill himself because I couldn't stop thinking about Connor. I have to get this over with. Time to set him free of the guilt that brought him here.

For the next twenty minutes, I'm able to block out all thoughts of Connor until my client leaves.

"Oh, hey Maddie," Gunnar gives me one of his classic flirtatious smiles. "I haven't seen you for a while."

"I've been busy," I say, logging into the computer.

“Do you think your schedule will clear up on Saturday? I got tickets to see this epic band. Wanna come?”

My fingers freeze on the keyboard. This whole time I thought Gunnar was being a flirt. I turn, watching him shift his weight while he awaits my answer. He’s a nice guy, but I don’t think of him like that. Like the way I keep thinking of Connor.

I frown and step away from the desk. “I’m sorry, Gunnar, I don’t date coworkers.”

“She just tries to kill them.”

My breath catches at Connor’s voice, and a swarm of butterflies takes off in my stomach.

I whip around and let my eyes wander over him. His muscled arms peek out beneath his t-shirt. My eyes rove up those arms and across his broad shoulders and get stuck on his face. Possibly forever. He shaved.

“You look fine to me.” The words trip and stumble off my lips because he is more than fine. He’s been hiding that beautiful jawline all this time? I’m not a lawyer anymore, but that should be considered a crime. Apparently, a clean-shaven Connor is all it takes to turn me into Dr. Suess.

I clench my fingers into fists at my sides before they try to explore Connor’s jaw like I’m Indiana Jones and he’s the last crusade.

He rubs his chin and I snap out of my weird daydream.

“I know. It’s weird,” Connor says, still rubbing his face. “I feel naked.”

Well, that is...not something I need to think about. "It's not weird." My voice squeaks. How pathetic do I sound right now?

The corner of his lips curl up, and there's that slightly asymmetrical smile of his again. My heart sputters like it's about to give out then it jolts back to life and takes off at lightning speed.

I clear my throat. "All right, let's get training." My heart is racing, and I need a better reason for it. "My ankle is still stiff so I thought we could warm up with some yoga today if that's okay?"

"Actually, I need to talk to you about that," Connor says, stopping me in my tracks.

"My ankle?"

"No. I mean yes. How are you?"

"I'm fine."

"Good. Good." He runs a hand over his face again. "I can't keep training."

I jerk back. "What?" I'd already planned on telling him I forgive him and letting him go, but... he beat me to it. Is that all this was to him? An item to check off his to-do list?

I spin away and march down the hall. I push open the door to the empty hot yoga room and lose myself in the dimness. I reach for the bar at the front of the room and brace myself on it.

“Maddie, let me explain.”

I turn, steeling my emotions. “I forgive you, okay? I get it, you felt bad I got fired, so you came here to try to make it up to me. So I’ll grant you the words you’ve been waiting for.” I try to meet his gaze, but it’s too hard, so I settle on his chin. “I forgive you.” I swallow. “Now you can leave.”

His eyebrows narrow. “I can leave?”

“Yes. You don’t need to stick around anymore, begging for forgiveness. I hereby set you free.”

His hazel eyes register something akin to hurt, and he crosses his arms in front of his chest. “You think that’s the only reason I keep coming back?”

“Isn’t it?”

He purses his lips, shaking his head as slow steps bring him closer. “The evidence...what did you conclude?”

My jaw clenches. Is this another jab about me not being cut out for law? “I get it, Connor. I sucked at my job. You’ve told me.”

He stops an inch away. “No. You killed it at your job. You were the most intimidating, the most persuasive. No one worked harder than you.” He reaches behind me and grabs the bar, locking me in place. “No one deserved it more than you.”

Hearing those words from him creates a fissure in my heart, one intent on growing and spreading until there’s enough room to let him in.

I straighten my shoulders. “So what do you want? A trophy to sit on your desk saying you won?” Even as the words fall off my lips, I know it’s not true.

His jaw flexes and his eyes bore into mine. “Stop telling me what I want.”

Pushing air in and out of my lungs is more difficult than it was mere seconds ago. There’s an intensity in his eyes I used to associate with the devil, but that’s not what it is anymore. It’s something much stronger.

“Then what do you want, Connor?” My voice escapes like a breath, and the second the words are out of my mouth, his lips descend on mine.

I hesitate, only momentarily, before crushing his lips in return. He’s so annoying, so obnoxious, and I take out every ounce of frustration on him. Kiss for aggravating kiss, he lets me get it all out. It’s fire on fire, and it’s world-ending.

I pull back, my breathing labored.

“All done?” he whispers.

I can only offer a shaky nod in response.

“Good. My turn.”

His lips capture mine again, and he backs us up, pressing me into the bar. He grabs onto my waist and lifts me up, setting me gently on the bar. I wrap my legs around his waist, clinging to him like he can save me. I was prepared to let him go, but all I wanted was for him to stay. I didn’t know I needed this, needed him.

“I don’t know how many more ways to say it,” he murmurs against my lips. “I’ve only ever wanted you.”

And then he proceeds to torture me with the softest, most tender kisses I’ve ever experienced, each one thoroughly taking my breath away. I expected the same frustration and anger I infused into my kiss, but his kiss tells a different story. One that’s breaking my heart and putting it back together simultaneously.

Kissing him doesn’t make sense; I shouldn’t be doing this. But I can’t stop. I pull at him, tugging him as close as I possibly can and tracing his smooth jawline beneath my palm. My fingers find their way to the base of his head and play with the curls there.

He groans.

His lips move to my jaw, and he slips the hair tie out of my hair. A rush of tingles escapes with it.

“So beautiful,” he whispers into my neck. He slides both of his hands into my hair and drags my mouth back to his.

After several long moments, I pull back, tearing my lips from his. It’s heaven and hell at the same time.

My brain is loud and overwhelmingly quiet all at once. What did I just do?

My life is too complicated to get involved with Connor. But that kiss was the most deliciously uncomplicated thing I’ve ever done. It was easy, like using a muscle I’ve used dozens of

times before, but I've never used it like that. Because that one felt like it connected to my heart, and it's terrifying.

"Where do we go from here?" he asks, his fingers still tangled in my hair.

My heart claws and kicks in my chest, wanting me to say what he needs to hear. But I can't get my mouth to do anything.

I tip my head back, peering up at him. I may have forgiven him, but I'm still working on the forgetting part. "I don't know, Connor."

He nods like he can understand the thoughts going through my head better than I can.

"I know I haven't earned your trust, but I would like a chance with you, Maddie." His hold on my waist tightens. "I promise I'll never hurt you again."

"Okay." I can give him a chance. What's the worst that could happen?

Chapter 26

Connor

Fighting with Maddie: enjoyable, fun, entertaining.

Kissing Maddie: life-altering, addicting, pure euphoria.

I'm so out of sorts driving home I accidentally stop for tacos. Alright, so it wasn't an accident. I was really hungry.

After all, Maddie is a very good trainer.

Uh oh, did I pay to make out with her? That's a legal issue waiting to happen.

This is it, the chance I've been waiting for since law school. A shot with Maddie.

I push through the door to my house, humming whatever ridiculous song was on the radio while I unload the tacos.

"Tacos and singing. Someone's happy." Millie scoots up next to me, peeking into the bags, Sean and Gus barking at her heels.

"Go ahead. I got enough to share."

“Thanks!” She grabs two. “You really are happy. Care to fill me in?”

I study her eyes. They aren't swollen like they have been the last two days, but she's still fragile. I don't want to parade my happiness around her, and she seems to sense that.

“Come on, spit it out.”

I take a bite of my taco, savoring the cilantro and lime perfection. I chew slowly, to her annoyance then swallow. “I kissed Maddie.”

She lifts an unimpressed brow. “Against her will?”

“Of course not.”

Her face morphs into a giant grin. “It's happening!” She screeches so loud both puppies start whining. She drops a chunk of carne asada for each of them and they instantly calm down.

“Geez, woman, what was that for?” I don't know why she's surprised. She was the one who told me all those years ago the reason I tormented Maddie was because I liked her.

“Well I...” She shakes her head. “I mean, of course I wanted this for you, but I never, *never* thought a woman like her would go for you.”

I stop chewing. “Wow, thanks.”

She laughs. “No really, I'm happy for you.” She polishes off her first taco before unwrapping for her second. “So how official is it?”

That's the one problem. "Well, it's not. She's giving me a chance, though."

She aims a taco at my chest. "Don't screw it up."

"Thanks for the pep talk, coach."

"So, what are you going to do?"

I raise a single brow. "Eat?"

"Ugh, you're such a man. I meant about winning over Maddie."

If there was a perfect solution, I would explain it to her now. But I don't have one. Not yet. "I'm working on it." Not screwing it up sounds like a decent game plan.

"Ooh, I have an idea. I could use you and Maddie during my lesson, and we could have like a fake wedding and—"

"Nope. Stop right there. You may take your nose out of my business now." I wad up a taco wrapper and drop it in the takeout bag.

"Fine." She sighs and tosses her own wrapper at my face. "I guess I'll go shopping for things I don't need because my little brother doesn't want to spend time with me."

For once, that statement doesn't fill me with dread. In fact, if she asks me for a twenty, I might give it to her.

"Have fun!" I wave her off.

She sticks her tongue out at me before snatching another taco. So mature. She's going to annoy her next roommate. And that makes me incredibly happy. We've both been researching

apartments, far enough away I won't have to trip over her messes again, but close enough I'll always be able to keep an eye on her.

She stands from the table. "Don't forget, we're throwing a party this Friday."

"Aren't other people supposed to throw *us* a going away party instead of throwing one for ourselves?"

"They'd just do it wrong." She grabs her keys off the table, then leads the pups to their kennel.

I'm in such a good mood, I don't even care if she makes me dress up for her themed going away party. I'll wear a flipping tutu if it means I get to feel this way forever.

She leaves, and I polish off the tacos, clearing the kitchen completely before I head out to my truck with the flowers I picked up earlier.

The drive to the cemetery passes in a haze of happiness instead of the usual somberness. I pluck the fresh daisies off the front seat. Mom loved daisies. She loved all things beautiful. She would have loved Maddie. Not because she's beautiful, but because she's feisty and stubborn, too—what my mom always said would be good for me. Someone strong enough to push me when I needed it, but gentle enough to ground me when I get overwhelmed.

My feet take me to my parent's headstone, and I gently lay the flowers in the middle. "I think it's working, Mom. After all

I've screwed up, I think I'm finally making things right again."

I settle onto the grass, enjoying the sun on my skin in a way I haven't for years. "With Maddie at least. That's why I'm here tonight. To apologize." I take a deep breath. I don't know if they can hear me, and I don't know if that makes my guilt better or worse. "I'm sorry I couldn't figure out how to keep the house. We tried everything." I stop talking and listen, pretending if I'm quiet enough, I'll hear her tell me it's okay.

The sprinklers click on somewhere in the distance, and the calming "chh chh chh" of the water relaxes me.

"I think if you were here, you'd be glad to see us happy. But if not, please haunt Millie and not me. She'd probably love it."

I lean back, smiling at the cloudless sky. "The realtor came over yesterday. He says it's the perfect time to sell, and we might actually make some money. I'm not going to get my hopes up yet." I pluck a dandelion and pop off the head with my thumb like a child. "And Millie is free of that loser. I swear, worrying over her choices nearly gave me an ulcer. Is that what parenting is like? I don't know if I can handle kids."

Unless I have someone else to worry with me. Someone smart and sassy enough to keep us all in line.

"My mom said her kids were all she did right." A young voice breaks through my thoughts.

I turn to find the boy. The same one as last time. Max. There's no bike this time. I glance around for his dad, but he's

here alone again.

“You had a good mom,” I say thoughtfully.

He nods, running his fingers over the engraved letters of his mother’s new headstone. Tears slip down his cheeks.

I stand and retrieve a few daisies from my mom’s bouquet then offer them to him.

“Thanks.” He eagerly takes them and spends the next two minutes painfully deciding where they should go. He moves them back and forth all over the headstone, gently placing them with love. When he’s content, he plops onto the grass.

“We don’t have money for flowers.” He sighs. “We don’t have money for anything.”

Poor kid. If it’s bad enough that he’s picking up on it, then the situation must be dire.

“Does your dad know you’re here?” I ask.

He avoids my eyes before shaking his head.

We sit in silence for a few more minutes. He talks to his mom, and I pretend not to listen.

Then he stands and pats the top of the headstone before walking away.

“Hey, bud,” I say, catching up to him. “Can I drive you home? It will be dark soon. I’m sure your dad would appreciate it.”

He shrugs, indifferent about it. This time, I can’t fight the urge to worry about him. Where does his dad think he is? Is he

safe at home?

When I pull up to his house, an almost identical scene to the last one greets me. The house feels even more run down like the whole thing is sagging with grief. His dad bursts through the front door with a toddler attached to his hip.

“Max, what did I tell you about leaving without me? I’ve been calling everywhere.”

“I wanted to see Mom.” Max bursts into instant tears.

The frustration disappears from his dad’s eyes, replaced with something more akin to heartbreak. “I promise I’ll take you whenever you want to go, but please, don’t leave without me again.” He buries his face in the boy’s head and plants a kiss on his hair. “I thought I lost you.”

I step back, worried about intruding on their moment.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” Max says. He takes his little brother from his father’s arms and carries him inside.

The dad turns to me. “You probably think I’m an awful parent.”

“Not at all,” I say quickly. I wouldn’t assume I understand his situation.

He sighs. “Thanks. I didn’t even get your name.”

“Connor Quinn,” I reach out to shake his hand.

“Tim Howard.” He responds. “Thanks for watching out for my son. I can’t promise it won’t happen again. He sure has his mother’s determination.” His chin trembles and he drags a

hand over his face. “She’d kill me for letting him run off like that.”

“I’m sure you’re doing your best,” I reassure him.

“Trying,” he mutters. “Everything’s a nightmare right now, so it’s nice to know there are still good people like you in the world.”

He prepares to leave, but I stop him. “I don’t want to overstep, but I’m a lawyer. Is there something I can help with?”

A spark of hope flashes through his eyes.

“Really?” He stands up straighter. “I mean, I can’t pay you, and I won’t make you work for free, but could you give me some advice?”

“Of course.” Even if the man offered to pay me, I wouldn’t take it.

Two hours later, I’m knee-deep in a pile of life insurance policies and legal documents. When Tim and his wife set up their life insurance, the agent, who has conveniently been fired, named a cousin as the beneficiary in the case that Tim preceded his wife in death. If both parents had passed, the kids and the life insurance would have gone to the cousin, but that part conveniently got left out of the paperwork. That cousin now wants the money, regardless of what kind of financial situation that leaves Tim and his two kids in.

When I rise from his table, I’m fired up. I want to help them. No, I *need* to help them. I can’t rest until I do.

“I’m going to fix this,” I promise him before taking the necessary documents with me. I have a friend at work who will be a great help.

Tears glisten in his eyes, and he pushes the hair off his forehead. He probably hasn’t cut it in months. I’m sure lots of things have been neglected for the last few months. If I can ease a small burden on his shoulders, I’ll feel successful. “Thank you.”

I leave his house feeling more resolute than I have in a long time. People who have been wronged, like him, were the exact reason I went into law. And I’m going to fix it.

Chapter 27

Maddie

I'm not dreading dinner with my parents tonight. Someone get that printed and notarized because it's never going to happen again.

Before I left, I spent two hours in front of the mirror trying to get my hair, makeup and outfit perfect. I almost put on the dress Lyndi made but changed my mind at the last minute. I'm already in uncharted territory tonight, the last thing I need is a wardrobe malfunction. So, I settled on a pair of jeans I know accentuate my assets, and a black top that's casual enough for a family dinner but nice enough for a date.

Is this a date?

I haven't talked to Connor since we kissed two days ago, but he told my mom he'd be here. His coming tonight means a lot of things. Good and bad. At the very least, he will take all the attention off of me, and I will thoroughly enjoy watching him squirm under my mother's questioning. But I fear I'm in

danger of far worse. My mom is already half in love with him, and if I'm not careful, I could be the next one to fall.

I park in front of the house and shut off the car, but I don't move to get out. His truck isn't here. I should have asked him if he wanted to carpool. I bang the steering wheel. Why didn't I do that? It's an hour away, of course he'd want to carpool. Why haven't I talked to him at all? Now it's going to be awkward in there when my mom asks where he is, and I don't know. I could text him now, but why does that feel like something a needy girlfriend would do? I'm currently neither.

A knock on my window causes me to jump into my car ceiling.

"Mom?" I rub my head, and address the culprit.

She beams on the other side of the glass. "Where's Connor?"

Here we go.

I step out of the car and shut the door. "I don't know. You're the one who invited him."

"I thought you drive together?" She frowns and peeks in the backseat then knocks on the trunk.

"I didn't stick him in the trunk!"

She shrugs. "Just checking. You need to be nicer to men, or they won't like you."

Wow. "If only you would have told me this ten years ago. I could have been married with five kids already."

“You want five?” she asks, suddenly incredulous for the woman begging me to have babies. “I only had one. One was enough.”

“Well, that makes me feel all kinds of special.”

“You know what I mean.” She squeezes my arm as we walk into the house. “You have two babies, okay? One boy, one girl.”

Now she’s telling me how many grandchildren to give her? It almost makes me want to have five to spite her.

“I think I’ll decide that for myself.” I sigh, but like always, when I mention something I want, she doesn’t hear me as she walks straight to the kitchen.

I sit on the sofa by Dad and prop my feet on the coffee table. Then I take them down and cross them, like a lady. I try to focus on the rerun of the Suns game, but not even the tight score can hold my attention.

What if Connor shows up? What if he doesn’t? Right now, I’m not sure what I want. All I know is that I promised him a chance. I didn’t promise him any more. I’m not sure if I’m ready for that. So why is my leg bouncing in tune with the applause from the crowd on screen?

“You okay there, honey?” Dad asks, barely casting a glance my way.

“Yup. Just dandy.”

He nods and his attention returns to the game. It’s five minutes till six. We always have dinner at six. Did my mom

mention that part to Connor?

I text Lyndi.

Me: I don't think he's coming. Phew. Dodged that bullet.

Three whole baskets are made on screen before she responds.

Lyndi: Is that really how you feel about it?

Me: We'd be a disaster together.

Lyndi: A beautiful disaster.

She's no help. She pretty much broke my eardrums with her deafening scream when I told her Connor and I kissed. She said she knew it all along. I highly doubt that.

I check the time. 6:10. He's not coming. My mom has *casually* peeked out the front windows for him more than I have. And I've looked no less than a dozen times already. Time to break her heart.

I wander into the kitchen studying my phone like I received a text. "Oh shoot, Connor got held up at work. He says he can't make it."

The salad she's tossing gets an extra flick into the sky, and a few baby tomatoes roll across the table.

"He did not text me," she says.

"Why would he—?" Of course, they exchanged numbers when I wasn't listening. That sounds like the work of two meddlers. "Never mind. Should we eat? It smells so good; you outdid yourself, Mom."

She waves away my compliment. She doesn't care how good her food is if a stranger isn't here to praise her. But she calls my dad in and we say grace anyway.

“Are you still coaching?” my mom asks, while scooping an enchilada onto her plate.

“Yep.” It certainly didn't take long to get to the career questions tonight.

She takes a bite and chews slowly, deliberating her next words. “You should let someone else take over so you can focus on your career.” Her words have all the makings of a generous notion, but what they lack is the knowledge of her daughter.

Heck, for the last four years, I lacked that same knowledge.

I put my fork down and rest my hands on my lap. “I don't want to be a lawyer.”

“What?” Her fork clatters to the table. “But who will fight for our rights? Who will fight for our country?”

“I believe that job still belongs to the soldiers.”

She shakes her head, her disapproval evident in the years of wrinkles around her eyes. The wrinkles that were put there while she worked laborious jobs for twenty years to ensure I had a good future. The future she wanted for me.

“I don't want to be a lawyer,” I try again, softer this time. “I want to be a volleyball coach. I love working with the kids. They are so incredi—”

“But you went to law school!” Mom shoves her plate away and takes a long drink.

I look to my dad for support, but he is studying his plate like it might disappear if he doesn't keep an eye on it.

“And you helped Lyndi,” Mom says.

I nod. If the only reason I went to law school was so I could protect Lyndi like that, I'd do it all over again. I'm so glad I was able to get a good lawyer for Lyndi and help put her ex away for a long time, but right now, I feel like I could do more good in a different kind of court altogether.

“I did.” I sigh. “But Mom, I hated being a lawyer.”

Her expression softens, and she's quiet for nearly a whole minute. A record time for her. “What?”

“I threw up before every mock trial. I hate public speaking. And I had a panic attack before Lyndi's case went to trial.” The words fall out of me in a rush. And man, do they feel good.

Her mouth opens then closes again.

“Maddie.” Dad finally speaks up. “Why didn't you tell us?”

I slump against my chair. “I think I didn't realize it myself until recently. I was too stubborn to give up during school. You guys were so proud of me, and I wanted to show you I could do anything.” My eyes sting, and I rub my nose. I've never spoken to my parents so openly. But it's been necessary for a long time now.

“Filha...” Mom places her hand on the table. “I pushed you because I knew you could do it, but I didn’t know I pushed you up the wrong street.”

“You mean the wrong direction?”

She waves my comment away. “I want you to be happy.”

“Coaching makes me happy.”

“Then we will support you.” She says with a quick bob of her head. I can tell she wants to say more, but she doesn’t.

Their support is all I ever needed. Might as well get one more thing out in the open now. “As for the whole marriage and baby thing, I’m going to need more time. Like a lot more.”

“Ah.” She pulls her hand back like I burned her. “Don’t be hasty.”

I roll my eyes. So we still have some work cut out for us. But I like where this is headed.

As I pack up an extra plate to take home, I can’t help but think I only wanted one thing to be different. I wanted Connor to be here. I wanted to see him talking sports to my dad, and I wanted my mom to pepper him with inappropriate questions that might have scared him away.

But he didn’t show up when he said he would. He wanted a chance, and he blew it.

And I hate that I’m mad about it.

The drive back to Phoenix did not calm me down. It did the opposite. Especially when a very rude driver gave me the finger when I forgot to go at the green light. Sometimes people need time to process things before they can move. And the last forty-five minutes have been a lot of *processing*. Like what I'm going to do to Connor when I see him.

I almost drive home, but then change my mind. I'm going to find him and then I'll let him know plainly that it's never going to work between us.

I pull off the road and scroll through my contacts until I find Millie's number. She gave it to me when I started coaching in case I ever needed help.

I click on her name and wait. It rings four times.

"Hello?" There's so much noise in the background I can't be sure if it's her or not.

"Hi, Millie? It's me, Maddie."

"Oh, hey girl. Where are you?"

I frown at the steering wheel. "What do you mean?"

"You're supposed to be here. At our party?"

"What party?" She's not making any sense.

I hear her yell at someone before returning to the phone.

"I'm sorry, it's so loud. What did you say?"

I rub my forehead. "Where's Connor?"

"He's here, too."

He's there? At a party, when he should have been at my parent's eating dinner and getting grilled about his future children. The nerve.

"What's the address?"

She rattles it off, and I quickly type the location in my phone and tell her goodbye.

"Your destination is eighteen minutes away," my phone tells me.

No Siri, you're wrong. Connor is not my destination.

He's my target.

Chapter 28

Connor

“Hey, bro, we need more burgers!” Millie hollers from across the pool.

“Feel free to take a turn whenever you want.” I hold up the tongs.

“I can’t handle the smoke.” She fakes a cough then immediately turns a grin on the guy next to her. As happy as I am to see her moving on, I’d like to see a little more action over here. I don’t even know half of these people, but I’m burning alive by the grill... in a hundred-degree weather... to feed them food I can’t afford... so they can flirt with Millie.

And her theme? Pretty sure it’s males. There are *a few* women here who are having the time of their lives with all the single men.

Speaking of one of the women—a girl in a skimpy pink bikini leans over the half wall the grill is fastened to.

“Can I get another bun?” she asks, her wandering eyes cluing me into the kind of bun she’s in search of.

I wave the tongs behind me. “Over there.” I realize my mistake when she takes a step around the wall. I hold the tongs up between us.

She bites her bottom lip and inches closer. “You look hot.”

Original. I fold my arms across my chest, warding her off. I don’t know her name, nor do I care to ask. “Well, I *am* playing with fire.”

She tosses her hair over her shoulder. “I like a man who’s dangerous,” she says, running the tip of her finger along my forearm.

“Connor?”

That sounded like... “Maddie?” I glance over the blonde’s shoulder to find the most beautiful woman in the world. She’s got on fitted denim jeans and a black tank. My eyes drink her in like they’ll never get their fill. I think Arizona just got ten degrees hotter.

“You’re not dressed for a party.” She’s dressed to steal my breath away.

She doesn’t smile. In fact, she’s glaring at me. Shoot, what did I do now? “Maybe because I wasn’t invited,” she says through tight lips.

Wasn’t invited...? Uh oh. For the last two days I’ve been meeting with Max’s dad and a few other lawyers to figure out

the life insurance debacle. I only got home an hour ago, and Millie stuck me in front of the barbecue.

“I forgot to text you.” I smack my forehead.

“There was something else you forgot.” Her eyes narrow until there are twin lasers shooting straight into my soul.

I gulp. “What?”

She stomps toward me and snatches the tongs out of my hands. Only then do I realize the flirtatious blonde has disappeared. Darn. I could use a shield.

“Does dinner with my parents ring any bells?” Maddie aims the tongs at my face like she’ll take out my eye.

Dinner. Her mom. It’s all coming back now. And it doesn’t paint me in an excellent light. “Shoot, Maddie. I’m so sorry. I’ve been busy with this important case, and then Millie threw this party last minute. It slipped my mind.”

Judging by her scrunched brows, this isn’t the answer she wanted to hear. But if she’s upset, that means she cares. I hope.

“Well, you blew your chance. I won’t be someone’s afterthought.” She shoves the tongs at my chest, and I grab them before they impale me. I toss them onto the wall and grab her arm before she can leave.

“You’re never an afterthought,” I whisper. “You’re in every thought. You’re the first thing I think about when I wake up and the last thing on my mind before I fall asleep.”

“Liar.” She pulls away and backs up a few steps toward the pool.

I raise an amused brow and stalk toward her, but she continues to retreat. “I see we’re back to name-calling.”

“You don’t think about me any more than you think about your arrogant self.”

I purse my lips. “Really?” I know what she’s doing. She’s trying to start a fight, to get me to say something that will make it easier for her to pull away. I’m not about to let that happen. “What else?”

“You’re a cheater.”

Those old, familiar words make my jaw clench. *Don’t give in. Let her get it out.*

She frowns when I don’t respond. “And...you smell horrible!”

We are at the edge of the pool now, and if she isn’t careful, she’s going to drop herself in.

I smirk. “That one was a stretch, but Millie would probably agree on occasion, so I’ll give it to you.”

She shoves my chest. “I don’t want you to give me anything!”

I grab her hands and keep them close. “That’s not what you were saying at the gym the other day.”

Her scowl could sear my eyebrows off.

Oops. Too far.

“Ugh!” She shoves my chest.

But she must have forgotten I still held her other hand, and by trying to overcorrect us, I unintentionally throw us off balance. I stumble over the edge of the pool, pulling her with me, and she falls into my chest as we splash into the pool. We are a tangle of limbs as we crash through the water.

I manage to keep an arm around her and pull her to the surface, scooting us a couple of feet toward the edge, away from all the people, where I can stand and hold her the way I need to.

She sputters on water and shoves her hair out of her face. She blinks to clear her eyes, but the water continues spilling out of them. No, she’s crying.

“Maddie.” I cup her cheek. “I’m so sorry.”

She tries to push me away, but I only hold her tighter. People have made room for us in the pool, but there are still too many bodies, too many people where there should only be the two of us.

“You threw a party instead of coming to dinner. My mom was devastated.”

I brush a wet strand of hair out of her eyes. “Was your mom the only one?”

“I don’t care what you do.”

Now who’s the liar?

She shoves me again, and I put both hands around her waist to keep her in place, despite the immature idiots playing chicken during our moment.

“We’re selling the house. That’s why I can’t train anymore. My parents left us with a lot of debt, and I’m trying to get out of it. This was Millie’s going away party. Even though we are staying in town.”

She frowns at me, her rich brown eyes more beautiful than an Arizona sunset.

“You have to sell your parents’ home?”

“We can’t afford it.” I swallow the emotion that thought invokes. I know it’s for the best, but that knowledge doesn’t make it any easier. “And three days ago I met a little boy who just lost his mother. The life insurance agent has screwed over his family, and I’m trying to help. I should have told you all of this and I’m sorry.”

“Why? It’s not like we are dating.” She ducks her chin to hide the emotion on her face, but I saw it.

“Not yet.” I say, “But I’d like to date you.” My hands slide to her hips.

Her eyes dart to my lips. Then back up to my eyes. I’m about to kiss her when she speaks up.

“It’s too late.”

I pull my head back. “What do you mean?”

“It means you still blew your chance. And I only promised you one.”

“But Maddie, I—”

“I know.” She holds up a hand to stop me. “I know I’m being selfish. But I need to think for a minute.”

“Okay?” Now I’m really confused. Does she mean right now? What is she thinking?

She pushes out of my grasp, and I let her go. “I mean, I need to think on my own. Away from you. You keep screwing everything up.”

Are we back to that? To my many mistakes?

“Thanks?”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that, I’m just...” She shakes her head. “I’m so confused.”

You and me both.

She breaks eye contact. “I can’t go from hating you to kissing you within a couple of days.”

Is *that* what’s worrying her? She wants this. I’m sure of it. But it takes more than *want* to move Maddie. It takes proof.

I purse my lips and rub my beard, attempting to keep my expression serious. “I suppose those things take at least a week.”

She nods, considering it seriously, and crosses her arms over her body.

“I made the wrong choice going into law in the first place, and I’m afraid I’m going to make another mistake.”

She’s wrong. “Just because it didn’t pan out doesn’t mean it was a mistake.” Everything I feel for her, every beat of my heart proves that.

She chews on her bottom lip, and I can tell she’s fighting with herself more than she is with me. She needs time. I can give her that. I’ve already waited a couple years. What’s a bit longer?

“What do you need?” I whisper.

She shrugs and shivers despite the heat. “Give me a week?”

“I’ll give you anything.” I inch a little closer slipping an arm around her waist and lightly pressing my palm to the small of her back. “But before you go, can I offer some evidence to consider?”

Her mouth parts and her eyes drop to my lips again. I swiftly move in, stealing her lips and pretending we aren’t standing in the middle of a pool, fully clothed, surrounded by people I don’t know. I kiss her how a man should kiss a woman he’s fallen for. With respect, with hope, and with passion.

She pulls away much too soon, her eyes hazy and lips swollen. “Goodbye.”

She thinks this is the end, that I’ll let her go after a week. She’s never been more wrong. “See you soon.”

Chapter 29

Maddie

“All right girls, again,” I shout.

They shoot me murderous looks, but I’m immune. I realize my coaching style has been on the rougher edge this week, but this is my therapy. I may be taking my annoyance at Connor out on them. Did I say Connor? I meant myself. Why can’t I trust myself to choose him? To jump in with both feet and stop worrying about what I can’t control?

True to his word, Connor quit his training session, and I haven’t seen him at the school either. He’s giving me time to think.

His silence only makes my brain speak louder, and I’ve learned something very important. My inner voice sounds a lot like my mother.

“Why you let him go?” “Silly girl, you see he’s perfect for you.” “Those who fight more, love longer.” It’s getting ridiculous.

The voice irritates me even now while I make the girls run sprints.

I don't make them do it alone. Well, right now they are because I'm tired, and my ankle is still a bit sore, but I'll hop in on the next round.

"The team is looking good."

I turn toward the principal's voice. He walks up to me and hands me the smallest ball pump I've ever seen. I brought my own about eight practices ago.

"Thanks." I take it and stuff it in my shorts pocket. It's that small.

"So, have you thought more about taking the full-time position?" he asks, turning so he can watch the girls run and dive onto the floor. It's not as bad as it sounds.

"Um, actually I have." I've had a lot of free time as of late to think. About this job, about Connor.

"And? Do we get to keep you?"

I bite the inside of my cheek. "Don't I have to be a teacher or something to coach?"

"Not at all." He says. "But if you want to teach, there's a history class with your name on it."

I laugh awkwardly. Knowing him, he might sign me up no matter what I say. "History isn't really my thing."

"But I hear law is, right?"

I freeze. "Um, yeah, I went to law school."

“So if a government or debate class opened up, you’d like to be considered?”

“I didn’t say that.” I’ve only considered it because I love these girls and have grown comfortable with them. I might not like any other teenagers in the world besides them.

“Once you discover the magic of working with kids, it’s hard to leave. They suck you in. But I promise there’s nothing more fulfilling.” He watches the girls, and I catch a hint of pride in his eyes.

I agree. Which is why I want the coaching job. Volleyball was one of my outlets growing up. On the court I didn’t feel like a failure. I didn’t focus on what I couldn’t control; I just played the game. It’s time to get that freedom back.

I straighten my shoulders and fix my attention on him, confident with my decision. “I’d like to take the coaching job if the position is still available.”

“It’s yours.” He turns to the girls and cups his hands around his mouth. “Ladies, meet your new coach!”

I’m not expecting applause. I’m not expecting anything. But when they run forward and wrap me in the middle of a group hug, I realize that was all I wanted.

These girls might need me, but I need them more.

I notice Diedre hanging back, and I raise my brows at her. I don’t need her approval to be her coach. But it sure wouldn’t hurt.

She purses her lips. “You still have to play me for it.”

Adrenaline courses through my veins. “Bring it on.”

This time I play to prove myself to these girls, that I’ll stick around for them, that I’ll fight for them. And only when I’ve beaten Diedre by twelve points do I realize I probably could have dialed it back a bit.

I walk to her side. “Good game.”

She shrugs and tosses me the ball. “I let you win.”

Oh, I won alright. “Of course you did.”

“You look incredible,” Lyndi says as I walk out of her master bathroom in the satin red dress. She insisted I get ready at her house so she could check the dress one last time for the hole, which we’ve now determined doesn’t exist. Thank goodness.

Once upon a time, I helped her get ready for a fancy event, and now it’s her turn to dote over me. Funny how we’ve come full circle.

I run my hands over the bodice of the dress. “I can’t believe I’m going to prom.”

“I can’t believe you’re going solo.” She raises a brow that really says “when are you going to talk to Connor again?” I can hear it from here. Or is it the voice in my head? It’s getting really hard to tell.

It’s been eight days, and I haven’t stopped thinking about him once. I’m used to thinking about ways to kill him, but those haven’t been the thoughts going through my head lately.

“A confident woman doesn’t need a date,” I say, smoothing out the silky material at my waist.

A woman who is only pretending to be confident, though, would like one. I should have asked Connor. I thought I couldn’t trust him, that he’d let me down or hurt me again, but that’s a load of crap. I can always trust he’ll tease me, and I’ll tease him back. I can count on him to push me and encourage me. It’s me who I can’t trust. What if I change my mind? I fear I’m only going to let him down.

“Agreed.” Lyndi joins me by the mirror. “Here, I swiped these from the shop.” She hands me a gaudy, diamond encrusted necklace.

“Lyndi!” I gape.

“Oh, don’t worry, it’s fake. But it looks real, doesn’t it?” She beams.

“Extremely. You realize I’m going to a dance with teenagers. They might mug me.” I put it on anyway so I don’t offend her, but I might have to leave it in the car. Teenagers still scare me.

“Eh, let them take it.”

“*Not* the part of the mugging I’m worried about.” I deadpan.

“You’ll be fine.” She turns around and grabs something off the nightstand. “But don’t let them steal these.” She hands me a box with some dainty teardrop earrings. “These *are* real.”

My head flies up. “What?”

“This is my gift to you. For everything you have done and continue to do for me and Crew.” Tears flood her eyes like an on-call waterfall.

“Lyndi...” I grab her hands. “You know I’d do anything for you. You don’t owe me a thing.”

She swipes away a tear, but they keep coming. “Let me spoil you for a change.”

Tears slip from my own eyes, and I embrace her. But only for a minute. I’ve already done my makeup.

“Okay, put those on, I’ll be right back.” Lyndi sniffs and runs from the room. I put the earrings in, admiring their shimmer in the mirror. They are perfect.

I slip on my shoes and spray one more spritz of perfume. I’m going to be in a high school cafeteria; it can’t hurt.

I step out of the bathroom as Lyndi comes in clutching a package of gummy rings. And she’s devouring them like there’s no tomorrow.

“Are you all right?”

She blinks but the tears still stream down her face. “Of course. I’m just really hungry.”

I narrow my eyes, studying my best friend. It’s all so very familiar, right there on the tip of my memory. The emotional rollercoaster, the gummy candy obsession...

“You’re pregnant!” I screech.

Lyndi's eyes dart up from the package of gummies, and her brows furrow. "No I'm not."

"Really?" I snatch the bag and dangle it in front of her face. "This gummy fetish can only mean one thing."

Her eyes slowly widen, and she blinks rapidly. I can see her piecing it together.

It's taking her forever.

"But we've only been married two months, and I am..."

"Very fertile?" I supply with a grin.

She sprints into the bathroom and starts rummaging through the cupboard, chucking things out left and right.

"Whoa, calm down. What are you doing?"

"Ward's sister gifted me a pregnancy test as a gag gift for my bridal shower, remember? I'm trying to find it. Aha!" She snatches a pink box out of the cabinet and rips into it like a wild woman. "What if Ward isn't ready? I haven't even had time to tell him about the dog! This is all happening so fast. What if he leaves me like Rodney did?"

"Whoa." I grab her arm. "You know Ward is nothing like Rodney, so don't say that ever again. This time is going to be so different."

She swallows. "You're right. Just freaking out a bit here."

"Obviously."

She takes the test and walks over to the toilet, and I leave the bathroom before I see a side of my friend I can't unsee.

“Okay, I’m done,” she says not a minute later. I rush back in and find her hovering over the stick.

“Should I go get Ward?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “I’m probably not even pregnant. But if I am, I want to surprise him in a big way. Ohh! I should rent a hot-air balloon! I saw the cutest thing online the other day.”

My eyes widen, and I grab her arm hard enough to rein her in. “Maybe we should wait to see what the test says first.”

“Okay.” She chews on a fingernail.

The blinking stops and a single word pops up on the screen.

Lyndi screams.

I scream.

“I’m pregnant.” She cries.

“Are you okay?” I rub her back.

“I don’t know,” she says. The elation seems to dry up and fear replaces it. “Babies change everything. What if I’m not ready for that?”

I grab her shoulders and turn her until I’m staring into her blue eyes. “But what if you are?”

My words feel like an answer to my own questions. What if I am ready for a relationship with Connor? What if I’m ready to let go of what I can’t control and accept that sometimes I’ll make mistakes?

Not all mistakes are actually mistakes.

Lyndi nods and sniffs. “I’ve already done this once. This time I have more family, and it will be even better.” Her eyes shimmer, but under the tears is hope. Security. Excitement. “I have everything I need. Now you.” She turns on me. “You need to get going. And then you need to go rescue your prince from the tower you locked him in.”

Psh. “That was a bit dramatic,” I mutter. She raises her brows, waiting. “Fine, also a tad accurate.”

“Go get him, girl.” She slaps my butt and practically pushes me out the bedroom door.

“Is abuse a pregnancy thing?” I mutter.

“Shh! Don’t say anything. I want to surprise Ward.”

I turn back before stepping farther into the hall. “Please don’t rent a hot-air balloon.”

She wiggles her eyebrows and glee practically drips off of her glowing features.

Too late. I’ve lost her to her wild, pregnancy fantasies. Time to leave before she ropes me into whatever crazy idea she’s got cooking up there.

I find Crew in the playroom and sneak in to give him a hug.

“Wow, you look like a princess.” Crew says.

“Ah, thank you, my little prince.” I kiss the top of his head.

“I’m not a prince.” He wipes the kiss off his hair with a pout. “I’m Spidey.”

“How could I forget?” I grin and pull away from him before he adds a boogie to my dress.

“The devil likes red,” he says. “He can be your prince.”

I freeze, my heart hammering. Lyndi’s right. I should go after my prince.

Or in Crew’s words, the devil.

I let myself out of the house.

The dance is over at midnight. I could swing by his house and toss a few rocks at his window.

Gah. Lyndi got into my head with her fairytale talk.

I’ll ring the doorbell like a normal person.

Chapter 30

Connor

It's been eight days. Maddie told me to give her seven, and she took eight. Which is so Maddie. I expected nothing less.

But a man can only be patient for so long, and I used every tactic I could think of to distract myself. I deep-cleaned the house so the realtor could take pictures, and it's officially listed. We already have seven showings set up for tomorrow. And I put together a killer case against Tim's life insurance advisor. Not to toot my own horn, but that corrupt agent is going to need a very good lawyer to get out of his own mess. I even joined some old friends from high school for a night of basketball. I haven't done so in forever, and I remembered why after I made a dumb bet with one of the Bentleys. Millie will kill me when she finds out I gave her number to the most obnoxious one.

Now all that's left to do is wait.

Something I'm not good at.

I drop onto the couch beside Millie. She's watching a Psych rerun. She has to have them memorized at this point.

"Why so glum, chum?" She knows why. She made me tell her everything that happened with Maddie and me in the pool, and she's been asking me every day since if Maddie has reached out.

Sean hops up onto the couch by me and cuddles on my lap. Gus is only a few seconds behind as they can't seem to be apart for too long. Much like the characters. I begrudgingly pet them. Okay, so it's not begrudgingly. The little monsters have wormed their way into my heart... and my bed some nights. I kicked them out the first night it happened, but they came right back. I might miss them more than Millie when we move out.

I let myself zone out as I watch the main characters act like idiots on a talent show. "How's your resin hobby going?" I ask Millie.

"This is worse than I thought if you want to know how my hobby is going."

"I'm trying to be a nice brother."

She purses her lips. "Then you probably don't want to know I got a bunch of resin stuck in the carpet upstairs, and I can't get it out."

Her admission barely fazes me. "I'm sure we can Google it."

"Seriously? Where's the freakout? The 'I told you so'?"

Psh. That doesn't sound like me. I ignore her and pointlessly study the screen.

“Oh my gosh, beautiful,” Millie mutters.

Maddie’s face flits through my mind at Millie’s use of the word beautiful. Maddie is gorgeous, stubborn and so many other things.

“Ah, I love that dress.”

I frown. No one on the screen is wearing a dress. Though I wouldn’t put it past Sean or Gus.

“What are you talking about?” I grunt.

“It’s prom tonight, and I’m friends with a few of the girls online. Look at Megan.” She shoves the phone in front of my face, but I can’t focus on the tiny square picture.

Prom. The one Maddie got roped into chaperoning by the volleyball girls. The same girls who are just mischievous enough they might help me with something. My mind races with tempting thoughts.

“What time does it end?” I jump off the couch and yank my shirt over my head on the way to the stairs.

“What?”

“Prom.”

“Midnight, I think. Wait, what are you doing?”

I take the stairs two at a time. “Maddie’s chaperoning.”

“Wear your green tie!” She yells. “It brings out your eyes.”

“Will do.” I need all the help I can get.

Chapter 31

Maddie

The dance is being held in the school cafeteria. While the décor is halfway decent, they could have sprung for a few—thousand—air fresheners. It still smells like pizza from Friday’s lunch, but it’s an upgrade from the BO the gym has to offer. So I guess that’s as good as it gets.

One thing is for sure. The ambiance does not scream romance, so hopefully all these teenage hormones are kept at bay.

When I got here, Principal Thompson was at the door, and after thanking me profusely for stepping up, instructed me to pick a spot near an exit but ”feel free to move about. The kids will sneak away right under your nose.”

So I’ve done as I was told, but it’s so awkward. None of the kids are dancing. I thought with the whole TikTok dance trend, they’d have choreographed pieces to do all night. But I’ve seen more teachers getting down than kids.

It's only a little after nine. Hopefully more kids will come and bring the party with them.

I pass a few of the teachers, and they eye me like they can't decide if I'm a kid or not. That or I have toilet paper hanging out the bottom of my dress. I don't—I've checked a dozen times already.

I've counted five other chaperones, and four of them are standing in a group gossiping. I could introduce myself, but the way they are staring at me makes me anxious. Why am I so afraid of a group of strangers? It's stupid.

I wiggle my toes in my heels. *Just keep moving.*

After three laps around the cafeteria, I make myself stay by an exit for the next two songs. I glance at my phone. It's only nine-thirty? This is the longest night of my life. I thought Diedre was starting to like me, but apparently not, because she signed me up for actual torture.

“Hey, Miss M!”

I turn toward the voice of one of the volleyball girls.

“Callie!” I've never been so glad to see someone I know. “Oh my goodness! That dress is amazing! You're absolutely stunning.” She's wearing a poofy black mini-dress with platform heels. I've only seen the girls in workout clothes for practice, but I'm loving a glimpse into her style.

“Thank you!” She twirls a bit. “This is my boyfriend, Dupe.”

Dupe? I guess anything can be a name these days.

After Callie leaves, a few more girls find me to show off their dresses. By ten, it resembles more of a party than an awkward wake. But I still haven't seen Diedre. I never did see her completed dress, but Lyndi assured me it was perfect for her.

I walk around a few more times, giving the teenagers around me as much breadth as possible.

"Excuse me."

A boy stops in front of me. He has a curly blond mop of hair on top of his head, and the sides are shaved. I will never be able to keep up with the trends these kids come up with.

"Oh, sorry." I step back.

He steps forward.

"Here I am." He flashes me a grin. "What are your other two wishes?"

It's all I can do to not laugh. I arch a brow. "Sorry, buddy." Yep, I "buddied" him. It's a necessary evil. "I'm a coach, not a student."

His smile droops, but only for a moment. "Can I be on your team?" He waggles his eyebrows in the most awkwardly teen way.

"Not at this time." I give him a placating smile and step around him.

"Someday, beautiful," he says behind me.

This is going to be a long night.

I finish my circle of the room and lean against a wall. My bare back lands in something sticky, and I lurch away. Ugh. Diedre owes me for this.

Speaking of the beautiful, conniving girl.

“Look!” Diedre squeals as she reaches me. “Isn’t it gorgeous? Lyndi did such a good job.” She spins, and the elegant ivory-colored gown floats around her, like she’s a goddess.

I love my best friend, but I know for a fact she didn’t make that dress.

“She did.” She made Diedre feel like a million dollars. And I love her for it. “But don’t be mistaken, it’s not the dress, it’s always been you.”

Tears brim in the corner of her eyes, and then she thrusts herself at me. I’m shocked by her second sudden display of affection, but I return the embrace. A month ago I would have thought she’d rather kill me than hug me. Heck, a month ago I still wanted to kill Connor. There really is no time limit for how quickly things can change.

“Thanks for sticking around, Miss M,” she says against my shoulder.

I grin. “Wait until the season starts.”

She pulls back, determination lighting up her face. “Oh, I’ll be ready.”

“You better. Now get out there and have some fun.”

“Bye!” She drags her date to the dancefloor, and I watch them for the next song. Then I take a break and check out the girls’ bathroom.

On my next trip around the cafeteria, I get the strange sense that someone is watching me. But I don’t see anyone I know besides the girls.

I shake off the paranoia and return to my self-appointed station to wait. I mean watch. What is it I’m supposed to be doing again? My eyes are heavy, and they drift closed. The second they do, it’s like I’ve given my brain free reign to run back to Connor. Our past runs on a loop through my mind, every competition, every fight. There’s always been more to it though, hasn’t there? Some of our worst fights and arguments happened right before I participated in my mock trials. And instead of being afraid, I focused on that anger toward him and it fueled me with enough energy to make it through the case. Like when he brought me into his class to prove a point. I was so nervous until he angled me toward him. I thought he was doing it to annoy me. But he was protecting me.

The back of my eyes sting. Why did I never notice? He let me channel my frustration at him so I wouldn’t freak out, because *he knew*. I’ve been so stupid. He realized I hated being a lawyer before I did. He said I’d get along with high school girls when I didn’t even know...

I gasp. That dirty little devil. He’s the one who left the listing for the job on my car and probably emailed it to me as well.

Who else would have done that?

I should have realized it sooner. Maybe I did but refused to believe it because I wanted so badly to stay mad at him. But I think...I started falling for him before I realized I no longer hated him.

I need to talk to him. This time, I'll ask *him* for a chance.

“Miss M!”

My eyes fly open, and I forget where I am for a moment. “What?” I take in Diedre’s frantic eyes and Callie and Megan next to her. “What happened?”

“Some kids are stuck in the closet in the gym, and we can’t get them out.”

“What are they doing... never mind.” I don’t want to know what they’re doing. “Let’s get the principal.”

“We can’t find anyone else but you. Hurry. I think one of them got hurt with the bat in there.” Diedre grabs my arm and yanks me toward the door.

“How did they get hurt?” I don’t know why I keep asking stupid questions. This is a high school, after all. It’s a proven fact that teenagers’ brains are not fully developed. They are allowed to make stupid decisions every once in a while.

What’s my excuse?

I shake my head. “Let’s go.”

Diedre releases me as I charge ahead of her. The music from the cafeteria fades, and it’s eerily quiet the closer we get to the gym. How hurt are they?

“Who’s in the closet?” I ask Diedre.

“I don’t know, they didn’t say. They were just yelling for help.”

I pull open the door to the gym and step onto the dark court. I grab my phone out of my bag and hand it to Callie. “I have the principal’s number in there. Call him while I figure out what to do.”

She takes it as we reach the door. It’s quiet. I expected there to be some crying. “Is everyone okay?” I ask as I grab the handle and pull hard. The door swings open with hardly any effort and... there’s no one in the closet.

“Diedre, what—?” I’m shoved from behind into the darkness. “What is going o—?”

Then I hear the click.

I turn back for the door and freeze.

Did I just get locked in the closet? Without my phone? Again?

You have got to be kidding me. When will I learn?

“Girls!” I bang on the door. “Let me out.”

“We’re trying, but the knob is jammed. Hold tight, we’ll go get someone,” Diedre calls.

“The knob was fine two seconds ago.” I snap. “Whatever you’re doing, it’s not funny.” I yank on the door handle but it doesn’t give. What is going on?

“We’ll go find someone.”

“You mean there is an adult other than me out there?” I fumble around in the closet until I locate the light and glare at the back of the door. I’m met with silence. “You better get me out of here, or we are running ladders for the entire practice next week!”

“We’ll get you out, Miss M,” Megan responds.

“Hurry!” I holler back. It’s much worse in here without Connor.

Something that sounds like water rushes through the pipes above my head, and I shudder.

Worst. Prom night. Ever.

Chapter 32

Connor

The girls left with Maddie a couple minutes ago, and I've been watching the door for Diedre to return ever since.

I straighten my tie and pretend I'm here to chaperone. I'm not. These kids could be setting off fireworks in the middle of the dancefloor, and I wouldn't notice or care. My mind has been on nothing but the beautiful brunette stealing the show in that sexy red dress. I've been watching her for the last twenty minutes while I got my plan together, and it was all I could do not to walk up to her and steal her away to a dark corner for a kiss.

Well, that is *part* of my plan.

"Hey, Mr. Connor," Diedre says to my left. "It's done." She delivers the news like a contract killer.

Warmth floods my chest. They came through.

"Is she mad?"

Diedre nods. "Screaming."

Good. That's my favorite.

"Thank you for your service." I hold out my hand, and she shakes it.

"Pleasure doing business with you." She grins and starts to turn then spins back around. "And if you happen to see a car being covered in saran wrap later, you know nothing."

I can appreciate a harmless prank. I salute her and head down the hall, away from the noisy cafeteria.

The second I step through the door to the court I hear a banging loud enough to wake the dead. There's a good chance Maddie will kill me after this little stunt.

"Help!"

Callie and Megan are standing guard in front of the door, and I shoot the girls a wink. They disappear out of the gym.

"Callie? Megan?" Maddie calls. "Where are you going? I swear I'll talk to each of your teachers and make them assign you more homework."

Her threats are the cutest.

I grip the handle and swing the door open, stepping inside before Maddie has a chance to break free.

Maddie jumps back to avoid a collision with me. "*You.*"

The door shuts behind me and her eyes widen in horror.

"Seriously? You locked us in here again?"

I grin. "No. The door handle is perfectly fine. The janitor fixed it yesterday."

She frowns. “What’s going on?”

“I may have offered the girls some pizza to get you in here.”

“Excuse me?” She tries to shove me away from the door, but I hold her back. “Let me out of here.”

“Not until you kiss me and makeup.” I smile at her.

She halts her fight, dropping back a step. “Why do *I* have to kiss *you*?”

“Because you’re the one who wanted space. I gave it to you.” I motion to the closet. “Now I’ve taken it away.”

“You do remember I’m afraid of public restrooms, right?” She glares at me.

Oof. I might have skipped over that part.

“I have to admit. I won’t remember everything. I’ll forget stuff, probably things that are important. But I’ll never forget about you. Not even if you tell me to leave this room and never come back.”

“I can’t believe you,” Maddie growls. It shouldn’t make her even more sexy, but it does.

“I need to talk to you.”

“And locking me in a closet was the only way to do so? You know they invented all sorts of devices for people to communicate.” Her voice rises, and I’m pretty sure she’s itching to pick up the bat to her left.

I scoot in front of her before she gets any ideas.

I rock back on my heels. “Yeah, but this was more fun.”

For a moment, I'm sure she's fighting a smile. But then I know she's not when her hands fly at me. She shoves me back into the door fisting the collar of my shirt.

Would now be a terrible time to tell her how hot that was?

I take her hands and tuck her safely against me.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

Her eyes carry an unforgiving glare, but I'm not scared of her. Not anymore.

"For locking you in the closet. The first time, not this time, and for being a jerk in the past. But please, give me another chance."

She looks down. Her body goes limp against mine, and I can feel the fight leaving her. "It's already yours."

"Well, that was easy."

Her head slowly rises, and I'm met with the most beautiful brown eyes. "I would have preferred to not be locked in a closet, but I was already planning on finding you tonight after the dance."

My heart soars. "Why?" I need to hear her say it.

"Because..." She bites her bottom lip. "I'm falling for you."

I grin like an idiot and move in for that lip. Well, both of them, but she pushes me back. It's no less sexy than it was last time.

"I'm not finished." She says.

She better hurry this thing up because I can't hold myself back much longer.

She plays with the edge of my tie. "I'm terrified to forfeit control of my life, and make mistakes. That's why I'm so dedicated to my health. But some mistakes are worth making."

My eyebrows furrow. "For the record, can you please tell the jury why you refer to me as a mistake?"

She searches my face. Whatever she's looking for, it's hers. "Because some mistakes are blessings in disguise."

That's it. I'm going in. "I still like fighting with you," she says before I get too excited.

I slip my arms around her waist. Her dress is every bit as soft as I imagined it would be. "As I mentioned before..." I kiss her neck. "It's one of my favorite activities to engage in with you."

Her pulse jumps beneath my lips, and I kiss my way up to her jaw.

"Don't you want to talk about—"

"I'd really rather not talk at all."

And then I lean in to kiss her beautiful, witty mouth. But she retreats.

"I'm sorry, too."

I crack open my eyes. She's killing me here. "For what?"

"For fighting you every step of the way. You were right; you annoyed me."

I quirk a brow. “This feels like less of an apology and more like a jab.”

She rolls her eyes. “I’m getting to the good part.”

I skim my fingers along her exposed back. “Well, don’t let me stop you. Tell me how much I annoy you, darling.”

Her eyes flame with a bit of that fire I love so much, and a bit of that excitement that I love even more.

“You’re terribly annoying.”

I nod as I move in.

“The worst.”

I pump my eyebrows and inch even closer.

“But you made me better,” she says finally. “I know what you did for me.”

“Huh?”

“You made me upset so it would be easier for me to focus during my cases. And you...” Her voice catches. “You brought me back my passion for volleyball.”

It takes me a moment to understand what she’s referring to. The coaching.

“I don’t know how you knew I could coach when I didn’t know myself.”

“I didn’t. Not really.” I admit. “I was just trying to make it up to you the only way I could.”

“I’ve been striving for perfection, but never found happiness in that pursuit. I’ve never been happier than I have been the last two months, and I have you to thank for that.” Her fingers tiptoe up my chest, coming to rest on my shoulder. “Thank you.”

“I like you, Maddie,” I whisper, bringing her lips within an inch of my own, giving her plenty of time to back away, or to decide she wants this. “A lot.”

She doesn’t move. “I’m growing fond of you as well.”

I pull her closer. “Kiss me, Maddie, I’m not letting you out of here until you do.”

Her hands rest on my chest and she gazes up at me. “Is that a threat or a promise?”

It’s all I can do to wait for her to close the distance between our lips. I let her have all the control she wants. No matter her fears, this will never be a mistake. When she draws in a breath, we switch roles and I take control of her mouth and attention, the way I’ve wanted to for years. And she responds. The way I’ve wanted her to for years.

I run my hands down her sides and across her back, trailing my fingers up her spine. Memorizing the feel of her body against mine. I back her up against the shelves and she gasps. I take advantage, deepening the kiss and stealing her breath as she’s stolen mine. I move my kisses to her cheek, her jaw, her neck, until her fingers on my scalp angle my lips back to hers.

Best. Prom night. Ever.

The door cracks open.

“You two again? Don’t you own a home?”

We pull apart, facing the owner of the gravelly old voice.

“Get out of here, Al. We haven’t gotten to the good part yet.”

Maddie grabs the door and pulls it closed.

“And what is the good part?” I ask, scooping her into my arms where she belongs. My fingers drift over the silky material, tracing her curves.

“I was lying. We actually need to get out of here. My dress ripped on those shelves, and I didn’t want him to see my backside.”

My hands freeze on her hips, and I force them to stay there.

“Your dress ripped?”

She purses her lips. “These things tend to happen around me.”

I slip out of my suit coat and drape it around her, dropping a kiss on her cheek. “I can’t wait to see what else happens.”

Chapter 33

Maddie

27 days later

My fingers twitch around the lunch container in my hands. Why am I doing this? Taking my boyfriend lunch isn't what scares me. I'm more worried about seeing my former colleagues.

I know. I don't have to visit him at work. But I wanted to. I want to prove I'm past this, that I'm a supportive girlfriend, and I love—yes love even though neither of us has said it—my boyfriend enough to do this.

I'm also planning to stake my claim since Bri won't stop hitting on him in the break room.

I step into the elevator and push the button for the top floor. The last time I was in this building, I was carrying my meager belongings away with me, unsure of where to go next. Now, I'm running summer camps for a high school volleyball team and loving every minute of it. I still train a few clients at the

gym because, unfortunately, coaching does not cover the bills. Not even the gas one. But I'm happy. And most of that has to do with the man who looks divine in a navy suit. Yes I know, I called him divine instead of the devil, the irony is not lost on me.

Connor's eyes are on his computer. He hasn't seen me yet.

I skirt around the edge of the office, getting more than a few curious stares from my former coworkers.

My ankles buckle, but I trudge on. I'm not here for them; I'm here for him.

The conference room is clear, and I slip inside then open my phone.

I watch Connor's back as he pulls out his phone to answer my call. I imagine him smiling as he relaxes in his seat and stretches his arm behind his head.

"Hey, beautiful. I was just thinking about you."

"Hey." I bite the edge of my cheek to keep from giving myself away too soon. "I, uh, need to talk to you about something."

He sits straighter in his seat. "Okay... what's up?"

I hesitate, letting the pause speak for itself. "This isn't working."

"What?"

"Our relationship," I clarify.

“Maddie.” He springs out of his seat and yanks on his tie until he frees it from his neck. “No, don’t say that.”

I cover my mouth to control my laughter. I know, I’m awful. But last week he convinced Gunnar that I had a tapeworm so he’d stop asking me out. I didn’t find out until yesterday why all my coworkers have been treating me like a pariah.

When I tried to get mad at Connor, he kissed me until I forgot. For the moment. Needless to say, I’ve been planning my revenge. This is what Connor and I do. Loving him is fun.

“I don’t think I can do this anymore.” I bite my lip at the outright lie. Being with him is all I want to do. And I hope what I have to say at the end of this prank will be enough for him to forgive me.

“What? Why?” His voice is strained.

“You let the volleyball girls saran wrap my car.”

“I told you, it was an accident.”

“And you told my mom we would name our first child after her.”

“That was supposed to be a joke.” He tries.

“Good luck telling her that now. She’s already bought me three baby outfits because she thinks I’m pregnant.”

“Seriously?”

No, she only bought one, but a little fib here and there never hurt.

“Then you wrote on my mirror with my lipstick.” Which was actually adorable, and I took a million pictures of it.

“I wrote a love note.”

“It won’t come off.” I pretend to cry. “And that was my favorite lipstick.”

“I’m sorry. I was trying to be sweet.” He shoves a hand through his hair. “Where are you? I’m coming to you. I’ll fix this, I promise.” He fumbles around in his desk and comes up with his keys.

Tears gather at the corner of my eyes with the love I feel for him.

“Maddie?”

“What?” My voice comes out choked with emotion.

“Please, don’t—” He turns to leave his desk, and his eyes catch mine through the glass. He drops his phone and rushes into the room.

My pulse speeds up. This is it. Time to be brave.

“What are you doing here?” He asks.

“I needed to talk to you.” Tears rain down my cheeks and he rushes forward, gathering me into his arms.

“Maddie, whatever I did wrong I’ll change. I’ll be better.”

“It’s too late. I don’t want you to change because...” I shake my head. “I love you.”

He stills. “What?”

Before now, lots of things scared me—being locked in closets, letting Connor win at anything, getting my job back. But now there’s only one thing that keeps me up at night. “The only thing you could do wrong is leave me.”

The corner of his lips curl in the most delicious smile. “You know that leaves a wide margin of error, right?”

I laugh and nod. “I have a feeling you’re going to need it.”

“And that’s okay with you?” he asks.

“You annoy me and complete me all at the same time.” I slip my arms around his neck. “Half the time I want to strangle you, but I’ll settle for loving you instead.”

He cups my cheek and pulls me closer. “I love you, Maddie.” He captures my lips with as much passion as we used to put into fighting.

Forget about lunch. Who needs food when they can kiss their former enemy like this?

He pulls back, his eyes shining. “I can’t believe you beat me at saying I love you.”

“I can’t help it if I knew before you.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” He traces my bottom lip with the pad of his thumb and I shiver. “I’ve loved you since the first time you called me the devil.”

“Liar.” I tickle the base of his hair.

“You know love isn’t a competition, right?” he whispers.

“Then why do I feel like I’ve won?”

He kisses me, and we compete in a different kind of competition entirely. One where we both win.

I pull at his hair with one hand then tug on those pesky done up buttons with my other as his hands glide up my back. This kiss is fast and slow, strong and soft, a promise that no matter what we face, good or bad, we can handle it. Together. I've never been more confident.

I used to get a thrill out of beating him, but it had nothing on this. This I could do forever.

A throat clears.

I startle at the sound. We really need to stop kissing in public places.

I pull away from Connor to find Mr. Lawrence in the doorway with half of the office standing behind the glass wall. Including Bri, whose jaw is hanging wide open, her breath fogging up the glass. "We need the room," he says sheepishly.

"Yes, sir." I pull back and smooth my hair. Why did I call him sir? He isn't my boss anymore. "I, uh, had to prove a point to Mr. Quinn here."

Mr Lawrence nods, his lips twitching. "Seems your message was well received."

My cheeks burn, but Connor grins, his eyes never leaving my face. "Yes, sir."

"But perhaps there's a better place you two can... reconvene?"

Connor grabs my waist and pulls me with him. “I know of a closet,” he whispers, his breath sending shivers down my neck.

It’s tempting. “You should get back to work.” I gently push him away. “But let the record show, I won this round.”

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear and brushes his lips against my cheek. “The defense rests.”

Epilogue

Connor

“You know, Maddie,” Maddie’s mom, Maria, starts, and I catch an eye roll from the woman I love. “Many women propose to their men these days.”

I grin as Maddie chokes on a piece of her food. This is the third time we’ve had this discussion at her parents’ dinner table. We’ve been dating for three months. I fully intend on marrying her, but it took me long enough to get on Maddie’s good side. I’m not going to screw it up by moving too fast.

“Yes, women everywhere are grateful for the opportunity to take over a man’s responsibility, Mom,” Maddie retorts, and I snort. She shoots me a glare.

“You know-it-all,” Maria scolds.

Maddie hmphs and takes a bite of her food. A few moments later Maria catches my eye and motions to her ring finger.

I lift a brow, feigning ignorance.

She mimics putting a ring on her finger then points to me then Maddie.

Subtle.

I pretend to think about it then mouth the word “nah.” I only do this because I know it will get a rise out of her and, well, like mother like daughter.

Except Maddie’s glare has nothing on her mother’s. I can actually feel my skin melting.

Maria stands from the table. “Connor. Come.”

Uh. I look at Maddie for help.

She doesn’t even pretend to feign worry on my behalf. She raises her cup to me, beaming as she takes a sip of water. She knows I’m getting in trouble, and she’s enjoying it. She’s going to get it later.

I push back my chair and follow Maria down a short hall and into a room I’ve never been in before.

Maria slams the door behind me. “You love Maddie?”

Okay, so she can’t take a joke. “Of course.”

“You marry Maddie.”

I shift my weight under her intimidating glare. I don’t think it’s a question, therefore it isn’t up for argument.

“You marry Maddie?” she says again. This time I know it’s a question.

“Yes,” I say. “But I don’t think Maddie is ready.”

“She is ready.”

“I think I should ask her.”

“Yes,” Maria agrees. “Ask her to marry you.”

That’s not what I meant. “I don’t even have a ring. Those take some time.”

“I have a ring.” Maria walks into the closet.

“No, I can’t take you—” my words are cut off with another deadly glare from Maria.

My palms start to sweat. Okay, I guess this is happening.

No big deal. I’ll just ask Maddie to satisfy her mother, then we can talk about it later.

Shoot. Millie is going to kill me. She already warned me not to go ring shopping without her, but I assured her an engagement was a long way off.

“Ah!” Maria pops back out of the closet and ambles toward me. “Here.” She thrusts something at my chest.

I gather up the box before it tumbles to the ground and try to peek inside, but Maria shuts it before I can. “You go.”

“Now?” She has the audacity to stare at me like *I’m* the crazy person here.

“This is all a bit soon, don’t you think?” I try, but Maria only shakes her head. “I want to plan it out, do something romantic. How about next weekend.” I try again.

“Without me?” She gasps and clutches her chest like she’s afraid her heart might stop.

Well, yes, preferably. I'd like to propose to Maddie without her mother or an audience of any sort.

I swallow, seeing no way out of this. Should I ask Maria how she would like me to propose? It might be easier and less painful for all of us at this point.

"I haven't asked her dad—"

"He approves." She turns me around and pushes me toward the door because I am no longer in control of my own actions.

"Um, can I take her on a walk?" I ask because apparently I need her permission, but I can't think of anything less romantic than asking Maddie to marry me while her mother stands as sentinel.

"We have a beautiful path behind the house. Come, I show you."

She leads me through the house and right to the table where Maddie and her dad are discussing the Suns' horrific loss. I've never been more jealous of a dull conversation.

"Maddie, Connor is taking you for a walk," Maria says. She snatches up mine and Maddie's plate of food. They were still half full, and I watch in despair as she carries the glorious food away.

Maddie studies me with narrowed eyes. "You alright there?"

Not really. "Yup. Wanna go?"

She frowns like she doesn't quite believe me but grabs my outstretched hand, anyway. I barely know where we are going,

and I'm grateful when Maddie pulls me along the path behind the house. All I can focus on is the box in my pocket. The ring inside that box changes things between me and Maddie.

Everything right now is perfect. We fight, we tease, and boy, do we make up. I can't imagine life without her. I want to marry her. More than anything in the world.

Her thumb on the back of my hand pulls me out of my thoughts, and I peer over at her.

“What would you have said if I told you two years ago you'd be dating me, happily?”

She grins, and the sight is even more beautiful than the fading sun. “I would have said not on your freaking life.”

I chuckle and squeeze her hand. “I think I would have said, all my wishes have finally come true.”

Maddie stops walking and pulls me to a halt beside her. “Okay, what's up? What did my mom do to you?”

“What do you mean?” I pull at the collar of my shirt.

“She freaked you out. I can see it in your eyes. Did she mention our future children again? Or is she trying to push you to propose to me?”

“What?” How in the world did she know?

Her gaze darts back and forth between my eyes. “It's the proposal one, huh? Let me guess, she even gave you a ring.”

Was she listening at the door?

I slip the box from my pocket and hold it up.

“My mother!” She growls and smacks her forehead. “I’m going to kill her.” She turns toward the house, but I stop her.

“No, she only lit a fire under me.”

She frowns. “You mean she’s forcing your hand? I can’t believe she would do this. This is supposed to be between us. Not you, me, and Mommy.”

I smile at her adorable ramblings. I didn’t have a plan to ask Maddie to marry me tonight. But now I feel like I won’t be able to survive another moment until I do.

“Maddie,” I whisper.

She senses the shift in my voice, and her eyes soften.

I kiss her. Her lips cave under mine, and I’m fully aware I’m going to be wearing more of her lipstick than she is. Good thing I’ve already learned this color looks good on me.

I kiss her long and hard. I taunt, she teases. I kiss her harder, she pulls me tighter. The nerves and fears break away until there’s nothing but love for her left in my heart. There’s only her. She fills the emptiness inside me to overflowing. She’s my strength and my courage, she’s my home.

I’m going to do it. I’m going to ask her.

I pull back, promising myself I’ll return to her lips soon, and grab both of her hands.

“Maddie?”

“Huh?” She blinks hazy eyes and focuses on me, pursing her swollen lips.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.” She arches up to kiss me again, but I step back and get down onto one knee. “Wait, what are you doing?” Her eyes are clear now.

“I thought it was kind of obvious.” I chuckle.

“No. You can’t do it because my mom said so.”

I hold her hand tighter. “If you haven’t figured it out by now, I only do things because I want to. And Maddie, I want you. I want to laugh with you, fight with you, have a family with you. I want it all with you for the rest of my life.”

Maddie clamps her lips together, but her shaking only gives her away. “Are you sure?”

I hold up the ring box again. “More than anything,” I whisper. “Maddie—”

“Maddie, you marry him?”

I whirl around to face Maria. Her husband is trying and failing to hold her back, but she’s not having it. Why does that not surprise me?

“Mom!” Maddie whines. “He’s supposed to ask me, not you.”

“Okay, you ask.” Maria relents, hiding a giant grin behind her hands and bouncing on her toes.

I shake my head and focus on the woman I love. “Will you marry me?”

Tears spring to Maddie’s eyes, and she nods. “Yes.”

I jump up to give her the kiss that yes deserves.

The ring. I forgot to give her the ring.

“Wait.” I pull back and open the box. I’m wholly unprepared for the monstrosity that’s nestled inside. The ring is bigger than a quarter and boasts several different colors and rhinestones. “Is that a...”

“A peacock,” Maddie says. “A gift from my grandmother she’s been trying to get rid of forever.” Maddie picks up the ring but instead of putting it on her finger, tosses it into a clump of weeds off the path. “There. It’s gone.”

I’m speechless. The Cardozo women have that effect on men.

“You can get me a new one, right?”

“Yes.” I sigh with relief then regain my composure. Maddie is going to marry me. “How about a nice pink flamingo this time?” I wrap her up in my arms.

“How about you just marry me?”

“If you insist.”

THE END

BONUS CONTENT

Didn't get enough of Connor and Maddie? Click the link to sign up for my newsletter and receive a BONUS CHAPTER.

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Chasing Him

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if it's you

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About the Author



Jenessa Fayeth doesn't remember the last time she got a full night's sleep. But she does know how late she can stay up reading to survive the next day. In college she majored in Family Life and Human Development, and she now uses that knowledge to convince herself she isn't crazy while raising her wild children. Her hobbies include reading, writing, sleeping, eating, and running. She writes all night and is a mom and wife all day. She is constantly exhausted, but she wouldn't

change it for the world. In her opinion, peanut butter is the most important food group.