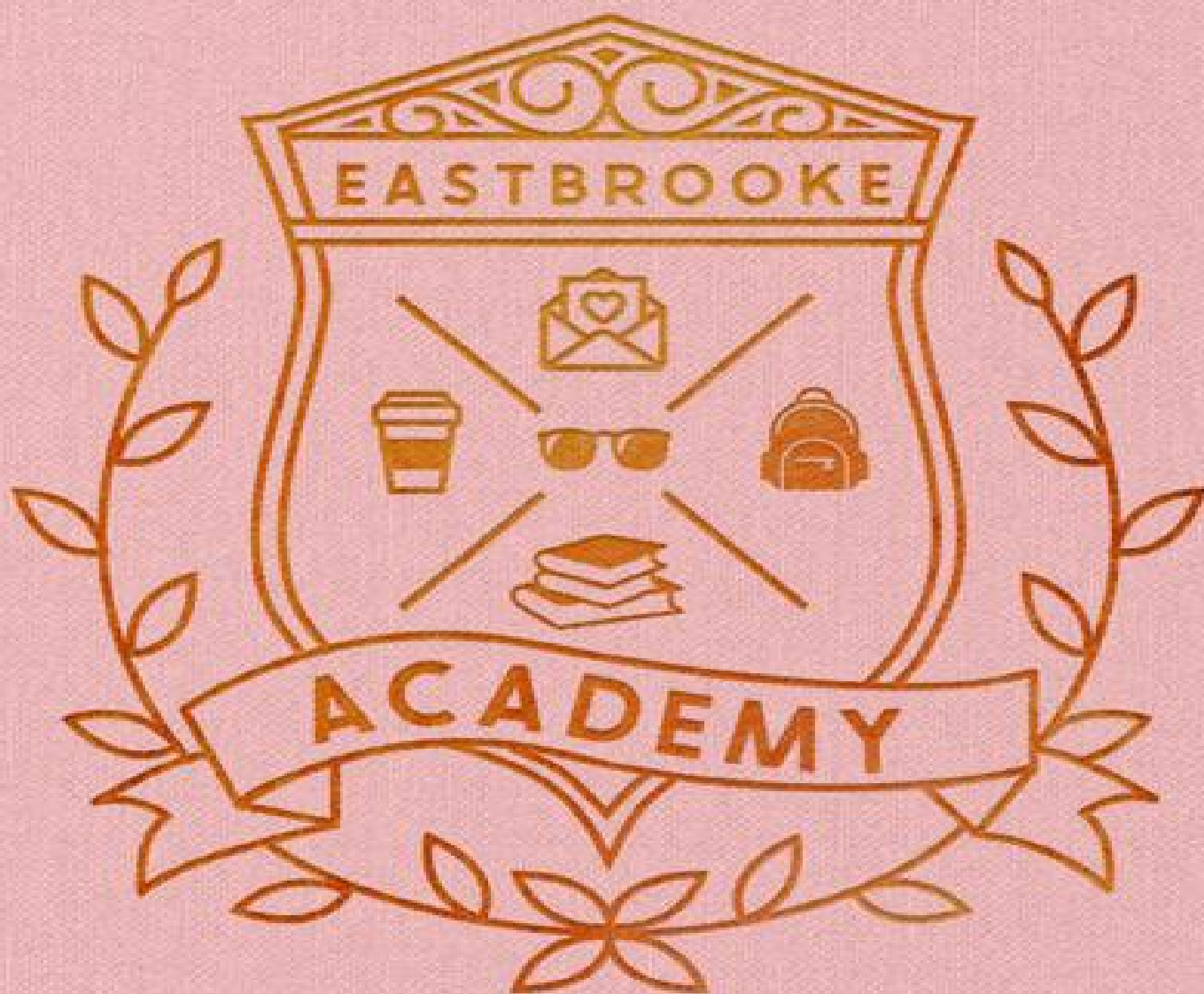


POPULARITY ISN'T EASY



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
JILLIAN DODD

Table Of Contents

[Title](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Newsletter](#)

[Friday, August 26th](#)

[Saturday, August 27th](#)

[Sunday, August 28th](#)

[Monday, August 29th](#)

[Tuesday, August 30th](#)

[Wednesday, August 31st](#)

POPULARITY ISN'T EASY
Eastbrooke Academy: Book 2

JILLIAN DODD

Copyright © 2023 by Jillian Dodd

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, distributed, stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, without express permission of the author.

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real locales are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

The following are registered trademarks of Jillian Dodd Inc.: Jillian Dodd, The Keatyn Chronicles, That Boy, Spy Girl, Kitty Valentine, Flat Hotties, London Prep.

Editor: Jovana Shirley, Unforeseen Editing
Cover Design: Staci Brillhart

Jillian Dodd Inc.
Argyle, TX

ISBN: 978-1-959014-77-5

NEWSLETTER

Want to get free books, exclusive content, early release and sale notifications?

Sign up for my [newsletter](#).

Friday, August 26th

A little offended.

10:45pm

Johnny steps over the puke, avoiding getting any on his velvet shoes, and takes my hand. "I'm surprised you don't puke glitter, Sparkles. Let's get you upstairs and into bed."

I hear Betsy mutter to Danielle, "Probably what got her into trouble in the first place." Then they both giggle.

To this, I laugh.

"The *it's a boy* comment was brilliant," Laurent says, following us. "And Betsy sucks."

"She likes Beckham, thought he liked her back, and now that she knows he doesn't, she's upset. And most girls can relate. But she shouldn't take it out on me. So, while I sympathize with her, I also agree that she sucks."

Johnny leads me into his room, flips his covers back, and motions for me to get in his bed.

I don't argue, just slide between his sheets.

Then I run my fingers across them because they are so soft. "Laurent, come feel these."

He sits on the bed carefully, probably because he thinks I might puke again, then caresses the sheets.

"Why don't my sheets feel this way?" he wonders.

"Well, first of all," Johnny says, "yours are probably just made of cotton. These are custom-crafted from the finest merino wool, backed by my signature silk paisley, then added to a thousand-count Egyptian cotton sateen sheet."

I look at him. "I'm totally in love with the embroidery at the top. It's gorgeous, and it shines in the light like gold."

"That's because it is," Johnny replies. "Twenty-four karat gold from my

family's mine is woven into the fabric."

"Amazing," I say. And I mean it.

"You'll be sleeping on a similar set on my yacht in the near future. We have school this week and then a break for the Labor Day holiday. I think it would be fun to get away. How would you feel about spending a few days at sea?"

"Can we go now?" I tease, suddenly realizing that I'm feeling better. Must have gotten the last of the junk food out of me. I'm also thirsty. "Hey, what are you drinking?" I take in the pale color and little bubbles in Johnny's glass. "Oh my gosh, Johnny, is that champagne?"

He lets out a little huff. "It is."

"But I thought we were going to bond over it." I push my bottom lip out in a pout.

"We've already bonded, Sparkles, but ..." he says, looking toward my stomach.

"Oh, right. My condition."

"You haven't told us one way or another yet," Johnny says.

"We'd support you either way," Laurent quickly adds.

"So, the real question is," Johnny says with a sympathetic grin, "do we need to turn Laurent's mostly unused closet into a nursery?"

I laugh. "You guys, I'm not pregnant."

"I knew it!" Johnny practically yells. "You're still a virgin, right?"

"What do you mean, you knew it?"

"Answer the question," Johnny states.

I scoff, feeling a little irritated. "Do you think that I'm not, like, pretty enough for someone to want to have sex with me?"

"Not at all. It's just the way you handle yourself around men."

"And?"

He sighs. "You don't seem experienced."

"Although I'm a little offended by this conversation, I would like to know what you mean by that."

"You're not very good at flirting even though you try and somehow manage to come off as endearing."

“What? I can flirt. I mean, I must be able to because, hello, Augie asked me to be his girlfriend.” I narrow my eyes at him. “I’d hate to have to puke all over these amazing sheets.”

Johnny is not impressed by my threat. “I think there’s been enough drama tonight. How about some bubbly?”

I turn to Laurent and give him puppy-dog eyes. “I sort of flirted with you, didn’t I?”

He smiles at me and says, “You definitely did,” even though we both know he’s lying. “But now, I’m curious too.”

“I haven’t had sex yet. What about you?”

“My status mimics yours,” he replies.

“Mine doesn’t!” Johnny sings.

“I think we knew that,” I tease him as he opens his armoire, revealing a silver bucket filled with two chilled bottles on a tray with crystal flutes.

He pours Laurent and me each a glass and gives them to us.

“To good *sheet*,” I say, holding my flute up in a toast.

“And good friends,” Laurent adds.

“And fine champagne,” Johnny says. “I was thinking about going downstairs to putter around in the kitchen. There was really nothing worth eating at the carnival. Although I don’t normally cook, our family chef insisted that I learn to make two meals should I ever have to fend for myself—eggs and grilled cheese.” He gives Laurent a raised eyebrow, then grins at me. “Do you have a preference, milady?”

“Grilled cheese, for sure,” I tell him. “What do you think, Laurent?”

“Sounds like the perfect end to an imperfect day,” he replies as Johnny breezes out of the room.

I snuggle down into the sheets a little more, then turn to face Laurent. “That’s an interesting thing to say.”

He puts his arm behind his neck and stares up at the ceiling. “It’s crazy that I’m here. At Eastbrooke. Where she went. I don’t understand how she could keep something like a family from me.” He rolls his eyes. “She used the quote often. Particularly after a bad day. Said you can always turn your day around by having a good moment at the end of it.”

“She sounds smart. And don’t judge her for not telling you. I get that you feel kind of betrayed, but imagine how she must have felt. I was thinking about all that when I was getting ready for the carnival. And I wonder if your father even really knew.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Well, obviously, your mom lied about some stuff.”

“A lot of stuff.”

“But people like your father—”

“If he’s even my father—”

“Are often surrounded by other people. Like, we don’t know what happened.”

“What are you trying to say?”

I let out a sigh. “Okay, so there was this movie I watched not too long ago. Surprisingly similar situation, only the mom and her son happen to run into mom’s former flame and, *gasp*, the father of her son. But the man never knew she was actually pregnant because she told one of his staff, and then the staff person was worried he’d lose his job because he had been covering up the affair, so he told the woman that the father of her child didn’t want anything to do with her. But, he lied. And when they meet, the dad can clearly see the son favors him.”

“And what happened then?” Laurent asks, already totally invested.

“They finally talk to each other, they kiss, and of course, they live happily ever after together—but not before they figure out what transpired and fire the meddling assistant.”

“Was that one of your mother’s movies?” he guesses.

“She directed it. And the crazy thing is, it was based on a real-life story.”

“So, you think my mom sold your mom the story?”

“Ohmigawd! I never thought of that. I was just pointing out that stuff like that does happen. But ... wow. Do you think?”

“Who knows?” Laurent says, rolling over toward me, his face landing so close that our noses almost touch.

I look at him cross-eyed and laugh.

“You seem like you’re feeling a lot better,” he says just as Johnny kicks

the door open and enters the room with a tray of food in his hands.

Laurent pops up to help him.

“I’ve got it,” Johnny says, setting the tray on his bed and revealing six perfectly grilled sandwiches cut into neat triangles.

“Those look too good to eat!” I exclaim. “How did you get them so perfectly browned without smooshing them?”

“I melted the cheese slightly before putting it between the bread and only ever use salted Irish butter.”

“Let me guess. You brought your own butter?” Laurent says with a chuckle.

“I most certainly did. As well as caviar, truffles, and an array of spices. I’m also considering offering our chef a job here at Hawthorne. We would dine like kings every day.”

We each grab a triangle, hold it up, and touch them together in some kind of grilled-cheese toast before taking a bite.

I will admit to being a little tentative at first, but I quickly down it.

“Um, that was freaking delicious,” I comment.

Laurent grins and says to me, “I thought you had ruined me with champagne and cupcakes. But this vintage version with grilled cheese might have topped it.” He raises his glass back in the air. “To *all* the good sheeeeet.”

Not long after we finish our snack, I kiss Johnny’s cheeks, wish both him and Laurent good night, and go to my room. I’m suddenly feeling exhausted.

I want to curl up into a ball in my bed but need to shower off the grime of the carnival.

Of everything that happened tonight.

Actually, what I wish is that I could take a bath. Should have chosen Calder, I think to myself, but then I quickly shake my head, very happy I didn’t end up in the same house as Branson.

Saturday, August 27th

Totally chuffed.

6:45am

Because I forgot to close my curtains when I went to sleep, the light wakes me up early this morning. I lie in bed and think about all that happened last night. And wonder how I'm going to face everyone today.

It's really kind of crazy that girls like Betsy and Danielle, who might not be abstaining from sex, would make fun of a girl who had sex and got pregnant. It's such a double standard, and it makes me feel more sympathy for teen moms. It also makes me wonder if that's how Waverly's mom, my aunt Gracie, felt. Part of me wants to call her. To ask. To see how she handled it. Truth be told, there was a night before I left London when I seriously considered doing it with Augie. But I decided to wait, hoping that once I got back, he'd ask me to be his girlfriend.

Now, I kind of wish I hadn't waited.

Because he probably would have told me he loved me then and not at Eastbrooke, sitting outside the dean's office, after getting in a fight with my former best friend.

Seriously, I feel like Branson has become the Voldemort in my life—He Who Must Not Be Named.

But, on the other hand, Augie could have told me that I wasn't worth the trouble. That I wasn't worth his getting in a fight. Especially when I know his family is going to be upset and have to deal with the social media fallout. Something I'm sure my parents will have to handle as well. I should call them. Tell them the truth.

But I'm mad at them.

Mad at the way they treated me last night. Mad they thought it was okay to discuss something so personal in front of the dean and He Who Must Not Be Named.

I take a fortifying breath and look at my phone for the first time since the carnival.

There are numerous missed calls and texts from my parents, London, and Waverly. I scroll down to check out the texts.

Waverly: Tried to call, but ... I realize that the other night I said some things about my parents getting pregnant with me and regretting it. About how I was afraid to have sex because of it. I left the carnival early because after eating all that junk food and then going on the roller coaster, I felt nauseous and went back to the house. London called me and told me what happened. And I watched the video. I'm so sorry. I'm sitting here in tears, thinking that you could have known you were pregnant when I said all that. And just know, no matter what you decide to do, I will support you fiercely.

I scroll to the next one.

London: OMG! Is that why Augie came to Eastbrooke?

London: Sorry, that was probably rude, but I text the way I think. I tried to call you, and I'm just, well, in shock. I saw the tail end of the fight. Heard what Branson said. Is it true? And if it is, why didn't you tell us?

London: I'm resorting to answering my own questions since you aren't responding. The logical reason is that after hearing Waverly go on about it, you thought maybe we wouldn't support you.

London: But just so you know, we would. Well, I would.

London: I don't know how it is in your house, but here at Calder, everyone is talking about it. The girls seem to range between thinking you are a slut and swooning over the fact that you are carrying a royal heir.

London: Anyway, call me. Text me. Anytime.

I keep scrolling, skipping over texts from my parents, my eyes landing on one from Augie.

HRH: I finally got to leave the dean's office and go see a nurse, who

patched me up. Unfortunately, that required some stitches. And it is quite possible that I threw up during the process. I'm blaming it on the cotton candy and all the other sweets we consumed. But, I will admit, I half-expected her to ask me if I was pregnant too.

To that, I laugh.

HRH: We need to decide what we are going to tell everyone. I haven't discussed it with my parents yet because you were so adamant about not telling yours. I do need to tell them though. Not tonight, of course. I wasn't thrilled with their reaction either. Just to be clear, I'd be totally chuffed if you were having my baby. Ecstatic. Preferably when we're older though. If it were true, I suspect we'd both be flipping out.

That we would be.

HRH: I hope you are feeling better and getting some sleep. Text me when you see this.

What follows is a text from Branson. I don't want to ruin the way I'm feeling by reading it. I should scroll past it.

Delete it.

But I don't.

I do, however, stop and change his name in my Contacts.

Very mature, I know.

Asshole: You know the royal family is going to make you terminate your pregnancy, right? I heard them discussing it on the phone with Augie when I was outside the dean's office. That's how much they all care about you. He doesn't love you. No matter what he says. And are you really going to believe him over me?

I tell myself not to reply.

Not to take the bait.
Because Branson's an idiot.
Clueless.
He was drunk.
And wrong.
And I don't care what he thinks.
Or says.
But apparently, I don't have much willpower.

Me: Actions speak louder than words. And Augie's reaction to all this has been pure perfection because he's the kind of boy I've always dreamed of.

I'm surprised when he immediately texts me back.

Asshole: You used to dream about being with me.

Me: You led me on. But then I discovered that you are not at all my type.

Asshole: Because I'm not a prince.

Me: Exactly, because every girl dreams of finding her own prince—whether they are royal or not. They want someone who loves them fiercely, who treats them well, and who will defend their honor. Sound familiar? Also, please note that I'm blocking your number. I might be stuck at Eastbrooke with you, but I have no desire to talk to you ever again.

I go to block him before I change my mind, but since I've never blocked anyone before, I have to look up how to do it.

Then I do.

I also learn that the number you block doesn't get a notification that you've blocked them. They can still send you texts—you just never have to see them.

And that sounds like the perfect arrangement.

If only I could block him from my life as well.
Then I could go to school with him, but never hear him speak.
Never have to see his face.
And never have to relive his betrayal.

I have a moment of silence for the actual end of our friendship, then put that all behind me and focus on Augie.

Because I want to hear his voice. His dreamy accent.

“Morning, my little lark,” he says sweetly, sounding groggy when he answers my call.

“Did I wake you?”

“No, I’ve been up for a fair bit, just haven’t spoken to anyone yet. Was going through my messages and all that.”

“I was too. My favorite ones are from you.”

“I suppose they weren’t all as pleasant?”

“No, they were not.”

“Hmm,” he says.

“What’s the *hmm* for?”

“I told the wanker he needed to apologize to you properly.”

I let out a laugh. “Did he agree?”

“Yes.”

“Well, he’s a liar.”

“Did he reach out?” Augie asks tentatively.

“He did. But he most definitely did not apologize.”

“What did he say?” And this time, Augie’s voice sounds deeper, like he’s barely holding it together.

“He tried to throw you under the bus. Said that he overheard a discussion with you and your parents. That they are going to make me end my pregnancy. And that you don’t love me.”

Augie lets out a breath of air through his nose, sounding like a bull ready to charge. “My parents said nothing of the sort. What did you say back?”

“It doesn’t matter, really. Do you want to come over?”

“I wish I could, but Monroe talked me into playing lacrosse, and I have to

report to the locker room shortly to get outfitted. Will you be at the game?" He pauses, but before I can answer, he says, "It's understandable if you don't want to go. I can meet you after."

"I'm going, for sure. But should you be playing? You have stitches!"

"Only three, which are covered with a plaster."

"Like a cast?" I ask even though that doesn't make sense.

"No, a, um, a plaster is a small piece of gauze with sides that stick to your skin."

I think about that for a minute, then sigh with relief. "Oh, a Band-Aid. I gotcha. I am surprised I've never heard that one before."

"Well, I never had to fight off anyone for you before," he teases.

"Oh boy, you're never going to let me forget it either, are you?" I say with a laugh.

"No way. I would protect you with my life, fair maiden. But in all seriousness, I was the one who was attacked. For something I said. I suppose, like the word *plaster*, I need to make sure what I say here is not misconstrued. It's my fault he thought what he did."

"Even so, you didn't deserve to be punched for it. He could have just asked for clarification instead of jumping to conclusions. But what you said about being chuffed—which, now that I think about it, here in the States, most people would think that meant you were irritated over the matter, but fortunately, I know it means excited. Happy."

"I believe I also used the word *ecstatic*."

"Yeah, you did. And that made me ... well, pretty chuffed."

"I'll see you after the match then?"

"Yes, you will. Just for a bit though. Johnny is taking me and Laurent shopping for something to wear to the dance. You can come with us if you want."

"I think I'd like to be surprised when I see you tonight. And honestly, I think I'll be ready for a lie-down. Especially once I speak to my parents."

"I'm not calling mine until after the scrimmage. With the three-hour time difference, I know they will be up by then."

"I doubt either of our parents have gotten much sleep."

“Are we being mean by not telling them right away?”

“As my dad often says, sometimes, we need to learn our lessons the hard way,” Augie says diplomatically.

“We’re teaching our parents a lesson?”

“Yes, we are. I have been trying to put myself in their shoes. I realize if you were pregnant, it would be a shock. But at the same time, I expected more from them. I expected their support.”

“Me too.”

“We should call them together then.”

“Agreed,” I say.

“See you soon, my love,” he says before ending our call.

I lie back on my pillow and sigh happily, then get up, pull on my robe, go into the bathroom, and look in the mirror.

My puking self probably wasn’t exactly the most attractive thing ever, but this morning, I am beaming. Happy.

And I plan to look my best for the lacrosse game today.

I think about how my mom puts on makeup when she’s doing interviews. How she calls it her armor.

I think I’m going to need some fortification of that kind for myself today.

Break up the party.

8:30am

I’ve just finished putting on moisturizer; some blush; soft, glimmering eye shadow; and a little mascara when there’s a knock at my door.

I open it to find my brothers. I thought it was odd that they hadn’t texted me, but knowing them, they were probably off with some girls when the fight broke out.

Monroe hands me a cup of tea. Aspen follows with a yummy-looking muffin.

“Let me guess. You’re up this early because Mom and Dad sent you?”

They both nod.

“Neither one of us heard about what happened until this morning. We’re sorry we weren’t there for you,” Monroe says.

And I believe him. Monroe has always been more sensitive than Aspen, who is probably going to blurt out—

“Just tell us already,” Aspen says. “Are you really pregnant?”

“Are you immediately going to tell Mom and Dad?” I fire back.

Aspen sighs, and Monroe takes my hand. “Our parents are freaking out. I’m freaking out.”

“I wish you had been there last night when the fight broke out. I could have used your help,” I state seriously. “Where were you?”

“Um, I was at the lacrosse field,” Aspen admits, hanging his head.

“Having sex?” I ask, crossing my arms in front of my chest and glaring at him.

He just shrugs, but it’s obvious that’s the case.

“And what about you, Roe?”

“I was back at Wyndham.”

“He was hooking up too,” Aspen tattles.

“No comment,” Monroe says.

“I suppose Dad gave you both a bunch of condoms, sent you to school, and told you to have a good time but to be careful?”

“Uh,” Monroe says, immediately squinting his eyes.

And I know that I’m right.

“We’re guys,” Aspen says by way of explanation.

“And you’re having sex with girls. Your sister is a girl. Girls can and sometimes do get pregnant, even when protection is used,” I point out.

“So, you really are pregnant?”

“If you are only here to get information and aren’t here to support what I’m going through, you can just go now.”

The boys sigh, but for different reasons. Monroe knows I’m right, and Aspen is irritated he’s going to have to report back without a definitive answer.

“We *are* here to support you,” Monroe says. “I also feel bad I wasn’t there to help you. I’m sorry you went through it alone. Obviously, we saw the

video this morning.”

“I wasn’t alone. I had Augie. And if you swear to me you won’t say anything to Mom and Dad before I talk to them, I will tell you the truth.”

“We promise,” they say in unison.

“The reason I was sick last night is because I had eaten way too much junk food and then went on a bunch of rides.”

“Probably not the smartest thing,” Aspen says.

“No, it wasn’t.” I can’t help but grin at the thought. “Augie and I had so much fun though. And—”

“And what?”

I touch the necklace Augie gave me. “We had the best time. I’m so happy he is here with me—regardless of what anyone else thinks. And, for your information, I am not pregnant.”

“You need to tell Mom and Dad that,” Aspen says. “They’re freaking out.”

“No, I don’t. Not yet. They made me come here, knowing I didn’t want to. In a way, this is all their fault. And as they like to say to us—”

“*You need to think about what you’ve done,*” Monroe says, and surprisingly, even Aspen nods his head. Maybe he’s not completely perfect.

“Exactly,” I say.

“I guess that makes sense,” Monroe says, pulling me into a hug. “Just for the record, we would have supported you either way. And we like Augie.”

“And fully approve as well,” Aspen says.

“I don’t need your approval, but I’m glad you do.”

“Not to bring up a sore subject,” Aspen says, “but Branson reached out to me this morning. Said to let you know that he’s sorry.”

“Sorry for what exactly?”

“I guess for getting in a fight with Augie,” Aspen offers.

“Not for humiliating me by announcing to the world that I’m pregnant?”

“I’m sure that too,” Aspen says.

“Sounds like you don’t know what he’s sorry for. And if I had to guess, neither does he.”

“You two really need to make up,” Aspen says.

I shake my head. “Until last night, I thought that might be possible. Now, there’s no freaking way I’m ever going to have anything to do with him. And you can tell him that second-hand apologies don’t count.”

“I agree,” Monroe says, siding with me. “And honestly, I’m done with his bullshit too.”

Aspen, who has always been a little closer to Branson than Monroe, just sort of nods.

“Did people give you shit about being pregnant?” Monroe asks.

“Yeah, of course. Girls mostly.”

“Why didn’t you stand up for yourself? Tell them that it isn’t true?”

“I told Johnny and Laurent last night.”

“I mean, at the carnival.”

“Well, I was more worried about Augie being attacked than anything else. And the first time Branson said it, no one was paying attention. But then a crowd gathered, and he kept yelling it, and I was looking around for you guys or a prefect to stop it. And just as I was ready to go break it up myself, the dean showed up and took us away.”

“We also heard it was a boy,” Aspen says.

I can’t help but laugh, and then I tell them about what happened when we got back to the house.

By the time I’m done, we’re laughing together.

“I hate to break up the party,” Beckham says, popping his head into my room, “but, Monroe, you need to get to the locker room.”

“I’d better get going too,” Aspen says. “I have to get my football gear figured out.”

“Um, before you do, I think you should see this.” I pull up my texts with Branson and hand the phone to Monroe.

Monroe, the more passive of our trio, rolls his hand into a fist. Pissed as he shows our brother.

“He’s playing us,” Aspen says.

I just shrug.

Both boys give me kisses on the cheek and leave. I expect Beckham to do the same, but instead, he comes and sits on my bed and pulls me down with

him.

“Quite the night last night, huh?”

“Yeah, it was. I hope you didn’t have to clean up the puke.”

He gives me a sly grin. “I made Danielle and Betsy do it.”

I weigh my head back and forth. “That almost makes up for them being so catty.”

“Lane, I’m here for you.” Beckham takes my hands in his. “No matter what.”

“I know that. And I’m sorry I was rude last night.” I stop speaking and let out a sigh.

“It’s okay,” he says, wrapping his arm around me.

I melt into his chest, feeling like I could cry.

But I can’t do that. I have to be strong.

So, I sit myself back up.

“I’m not very excited about showing my face in public today, but I’m going to the lacrosse game regardless. Because I don’t care what people think.”

I can tell he wants to say something, but is either afraid to or—it’s then that I realize I didn’t tell him last night when he walked me back to the house.

“I’m not pregnant, Beck,” I say softly, meeting his gaze.

He lets out a whoosh of air, like he’s been holding it in. And Beck’s breath always smells like cinnamon. Warm and inviting.

We just stare at each other for a moment, our faces close. Then he leans his forehead against mine with a little thud.

“That’s a relief.”

“Funny thing is, when Branson told everyone I was pregnant, for a hot second, even *I* wondered if I was. Might have been all the sugar clouding my judgment.”

“Every time I saw you, you were eating,” he says, still not moving away from me.

“I totally was. The carnival was really fun up until that point. Augie gave me a beautiful necklace and asked me to be his—”

“Yeah, I heard,” he says, cutting me off. “Lane, I know it’s none of my

business, but about the pregnancy.”

“There was not even a chance that I was pregnant, Beck,” I say softly. “We’ve done stuff, you know, but probably not as much as you might think.”

“Naked stuff?” he asks, keeping his forehead pressed against mine. And for that, I’m thankful. Because I don’t have to look at him.

“*Partially* naked stuff,” I clarify. And although I can’t see his eyes, I do see his lips turn up into a smile. “Beck, can I ask you for a big favor?”

“Of course,” he says.

“Let people know that I’m not pregnant so I don’t have to.”

He nods his head slightly, causing mine to move with his. I don’t know why I don’t break away from him. Probably because he’s older. Because he knows everyone here. And probably because—

I pull back, then place my lips on his cheek. “Thank you for being my friend, Beck. It means a lot to me.”

“You mean a lot to me,” he whispers. “And don’t worry. It will all blow over.”

“I hope so.”

“I’m proud of you for going to the game.”

“I promised Laurent I would. Apparently, you told him that all the girls come to the games. And, well, I *am* a girl.”

He slides his knuckles across my cheek, then moves his hand to my braid, giving it a little tug. “You most definitely are. And you’re wearing makeup.”

“My mom calls makeup her armor.”

“You are beautiful with or without it. Why do you think Betsy is so jealous of you?”

“She saw us kiss, Beckham. That’s why she’s jealous.”

“Oh,” he says with a cocky grin. “You finally admit it, huh?”

I roll my eyes. “I pushed you away.”

“Yeah, *after* you kissed me.”

When he smiles so big that his dimples pop out, I shake my head.

“You’re incorrigible.”

“I know,” he says. “What are you doing after the game? Do you wanna go get some lunch or something?”

“I can’t. Johnny is taking me and Laurent shopping for the dance.”

“Johnny dresses pretty spectacularly. Will you be in something equally as bold tonight?”

“I have no idea.” I can’t help but laugh.

“Augie’s very lucky,” Beckham says softly. “Anyway, we’ll be pre-partying here at the house, so be ready a little early so you can join us.” He gets up off my bed. “I have to get going.”

“I’ll be cheering for you,” I say.

“You’d better,” he tells me.

I go back into the bathroom and look at myself. My makeup is soft and subtle. I consider adding more, as well as taking out my braid, but decide to save that for the dance. But I do carefully consider what I am going to wear. I want to look pretty, but not like I’m trying too hard. I want to be in something cute but sexy.

I laugh at myself because I’m pretty sure I don’t own anything remotely sexy, and I end up pairing a red Cougars midriff tee with a pair of jean shorts and the Burberry tennies my mom packed for me.

I get a text from Johnny, telling me to meet him outside when I’m ready to go to the game.

I think about what I saw in Mom’s movie. How, when she first came to Eastbrooke, the most popular girl was mean to her. Of course, I’m sure it didn’t help matters when she started dating the girl’s ex, but I’m praying that I have half the confidence she did through it all. I have a feeling I’m going to need it today.

And I’m right.

The second I get down the stairs, Betsy starts in on me.

“I’m surprised you’re even showing your face today,” she snarls.

“Of course I am. I promised Beckham that I would go to his game. And Augie and Laurent tried out for the team as well, so it should be a good time.”

“Is that what you’re into? Showing *lots* of guys a good time?”

“I’m not pregnant, Betsy.”

“I don’t believe you. In a few months, when you’re showing, then you *will* be.”

Should I, or shouldn’t I? What the hell? I channel my mother and lean in toward Betsy. “Well, since you are in on my little secret, maybe you can help me figure something out. But you can’t tell anyone. Promise?”

She can’t even hide her greedy grin. I swear, she’s practically salivating.

“Of course,” she says, trying to give me a genuine smile—one that misses the mark. “What do you need help with?”

“Figuring out who the father is.”

Her eyes go wide in shock. “Wait. What?”

“I mean, like mathematically, based off my last period, shouldn’t I be able to figure out when I would have ovulated and which one of the three guys it might be?” I ask, somehow managing to keep a straight face.

“Three?”

“You promised you wouldn’t tell anyone,” I remind her. “Housemates are supposed to support each other, right?”

“Oh, of course. Totally.”

“Well then, it’s either Branson, who stupidly assumes it’s Augie’s because I’ve, um, spent time with both of them recently. But what neither of them knows is that it also could be someone else’s.”

Betsy leans toward me, looking desperate.

And that’s when I say, “Someone whose name might be Beckham.”

Her face goes white, and she walks away.

I instantly feel bad for saying what I did. I suppose there’s a fine line between standing up for yourself and being a bitch. And I’m pretty sure I just crossed it.

Let him score.

9:45am

When I get outside, I find Johnny waiting for me on a golf cart.

“Where did you get this?”

“The question is, why doesn’t everyone have them? It snows here. I will not risk ruining my shoes, schlepping through the muck,” he says, taking off.

“Does the dean know about this?”

“Actually, he does. I’m borrowing it from the school. Had to get it approved. I don’t remember them mentioning it during orientation, but apparently, they offer stand-up electric scooters for students to use once school starts. But today, we need this. It’s going to be too far for us to walk to where we are going after the lacrosse game.”

“You mean, like when we go shopping? We can Uber, or I know Beckham and some other people have cars here.”

“I have a car here,” he says.

“You do?”

“Of course. Actually, I have two.”

“Oh, I love cars. Can I see them?”

He doesn’t reply, just flips around and goes back to the parking lot between the houses and the dorms instead of down the hill toward the playing fields.

“My brothers and I have custom golf carts on our property in Sonoma. I wonder if our parents would let us bring them here.” I’m about to tell him about our different versions, but when he pulls up to a car, it’s so beautiful that it almost takes my breath away.

“What is that?” I ask with my mouth hanging open.

“It’s a Rimac Nevera.”

“Oh, I’ve heard my dad talking about that car before. It’s made in Croatia, right? And it’s fast.”

“The fastest top speed of a production electric car, actually. In tests, it hit 412 kilometers per hour, which is about 258 miles per hour.”

“Wow. It’s gorgeous.” I take in the sleek, aerodynamic design. “And the color—” I stop speaking, tilt my head, grab Johnny’s hand, and hold it up to the car. “It matches your pinkie ring.”

“That it does. No two are made exactly the same, and very few are in production. The exterior color is custom.”

Johnny reaches out and touches the emerald around my neck. “Did he buy this to match your eyes?”

I nod my head. “Yes.”

“It’s a few shades too bright.”

“Shall I return it?” I say with a chuckle.

“Of course not, but—”

“But what?”

“He could have done better.”

“Isn’t that a little rude to say? He’s sixteen. Not all of us are gemologists. I like it. Isn’t that all that matters?”

“Yes, I suppose. At least he got the shape right.”

“The pear?”

“Pear to some, but more commonly known as the teardrop. Supposed to symbolize tears of joy, but with young love, who knows?”

“Johnny!” I say, taking a swipe at him. But he’s quicker than I expected, and in a flash, he’s out of my reach. “Don’t be a prat.”

He just laughs at me. “You sound British.”

I roll my eyes. “Maybe a little. Hanging out with the wrong crowd, I guess.”

“Yes, the prince. Gotta be careful with boys like him.”

“Don’t I know it? Hell, he’s already gotten me pregnant without having sex. That’s quite the feat.”

Johnny shakes his head at me. “You’re funny.”

“And your car is a visual feast. Almost as hot as Augie.”

“Now, you’re just being silly,” Johnny says, waving me off.

“And then there’s your SUV—a Rolls-Royce Cullinan.”

“You know your cars.”

“Just enough to be dangerous. My dad loves cars.”

“This is their Black Badge version,” he clarifies. “Also, technically, they don’t call it an SUV. It’s a high-sided vehicle.”

“Well, whatever you want to call it, it’s a looker too. But I still don’t understand the need for the golf cart.”

“You’ll see soon enough,” he says, glancing at his watch. “Hop in. We

need to get to the game before it starts.”

On our way to the field, we pass the parking lot where the carnival was held last night. All the rides have been packed up and moved away, leaving just some of the midway game and food trailers.

When we arrive at the lacrosse field, the team appears to be finishing their warm-ups, half wearing red jerseys and the other half wearing yellow.

I notice that Augie is dressed in red, along with Beckham, Zander, and Hudson. Monroe and Laurent are on the yellow team.

I’m barely out of the golf cart when Augie sprints up to me, kisses me, then grins, holding out his shirt. “I made varsity.”

I jump into his arms and give him a hug. “That’s great. Congratulations!” Once he sets me down, I lower my voice and ask, “Have you been getting shit about last night?”

He shakes his head. “Nope. Beckham addressed the situation in the locker room. Told everyone that you’re not pregnant and that he didn’t want to hear another word of gossip about it. He’s a team captain, so everyone took it seriously. I’ve got to get back out there. Just wanted to give you the good news.”

He runs back onto the field.

I glance at Beckham, managing to catch his eye, my heart feeling full as I mouth, *Thank you*, to him.

Johnny holds out his elbow. “Red or yellow side?”

“Red.” I wrap my arm through his and add, “Bonus is that Betsy and Danielle are team yellow.”

I wasn’t sure what I expected.

For people to boo me. To say nasty things to my face. To whisper behind my back. But fortunately for me, the teams line up in the middle of the field to shake hands, and the game quickly begins.

The second we sit down on the bleachers, I can’t help but think that my brother was here last night. In the dark. Probably being intimate with someone. And maybe there’s something wrong with me, but that just doesn’t

sound romantic.

But maybe it's not supposed to be. Maybe it's supposed to just be sex. And maybe I haven't really figured that all out yet—the line between romance and desire. And because I haven't had sex myself, I guess I can't judge. Maybe it's totally hot.

Being alone, but not in private.

The risk of getting caught adding to the thrill.

And even though the sun is peeking through the clouds, it's still early, and the metal bleachers are cold on my legs. I can't imagine how they would feel at night.

I do a little shiver.

Johnny rolls his eyes at me, gets up, goes back to the golf cart, and returns with a cashmere throw. He folds it to fit the width of the bleacher, motions for me to stand up, and then spreads it out.

When we sit back down, I sigh. "You seriously think of everything. The backs of my legs were cold."

"So was my bum," he confides.

I lean toward him and whisper, "Can we talk about sex? Like, not here, but when we're shopping maybe?"

"Of course. Can you give me a hint to the specific topic regarding it?"

"I think my brother had sex here, on the lacrosse bleachers, last night, and it just sounds ... uncomfortable, cold, and not at all romantic."

Johnny nods in understanding, but doesn't say anything further on the subject.

I can see why there are a lot of girls in attendance. Most of the lacrosse players are pretty hot.

By the end of the first half, there has been a lot of running, checking, and fouling. And the game is tied, 6-6, which has kept things very exciting.

Waverly makes her way across the field and sits next to us.

"How are you doing?" she asks, concern written all over her face. "I texted you, but you didn't reply. I stopped at your house to check on you before the game, but you were already gone. Look, I know what you're going

through. I know what it feels like to be accused of something you're not."

"You don't think I'm pregnant?"

She grabs my hand and squeezes it. "No, because I realized that you would have told me the second you found out."

I nod and give her a smile.

"What are you doing for lunch?" she asks. "Want to grab a bite or something before the football scrimmage?"

"I'm leaving right after this to go shopping. Of course, my mother gave me a detailed packing list, which I'm sure included a dress for the dance tonight, but I might have thrown the list in the trash when they told me I couldn't go to London."

"Aren't you the rebel?" she teases.

"Apparently. I was going to get kicked out and then go to London, where I already had a full wardrobe."

"I know you and Augie get to choose where you want to go to school. Will what happened last night affect your decision? Does it just make you want to leave?"

"I stopped wanting to leave when Augie showed up. But now, I don't know what we'll do. It's only been a few days, and I've already nearly been expelled, and now, I'm part of what is probably an international scandal. How much worse can it get?"

"Oh, don't challenge the universe like that," Johnny says.

"You're right," I say, looking up at the sky. "I'm sorry, Universe. I didn't mean that. I don't want it to get worse. In fact, I'm going to focus on manifesting a serene environment, going forward."

"Have you read about it?" Waverly asks. "Like, online?"

I laugh. "No. And I'm not going to." I hesitate for a moment. "Is it bad? On a scale of one to ten?"

"I'd say a seven."

"Hmm. Not as bad as I thought. Maybe my parents won't freak out as much as I expect. I need to call them after the match."

"You haven't talked to them?"

"Oh, I did last night, but all they got from me was a *no comment*."

“Arrington! Do they not know the truth?”

“Not yet.”

“Isn’t that kind of mean?”

“Well, I don’t know. That all depends on if you think they deserve to be put on ice for a few hours after demanding to discuss my sex life and possible pregnancy on speaker with the dean, Augie, and Branson present.”

Waverly puts her head down and covers her face. “They didn’t.”

“Oh, they did. I also have a new appreciation for what your mother must have gone through.”

“I called her this morning,” she says softly. “I’ve been mad at her for making me come here, but I also know that it’s my fault. In fact, I thanked her for getting me in. I like it here. And if I get a vote, I hope you stay.”

“Me too,” Johnny says before quickly adding, “In case you two haven’t noticed, the game has started again. And your boy, Augie, is aware of the fact that you aren’t watching.”

I lift my head up and look at Augie, but in my mind, I see Beckham, my first night here, dragging me away from the party, saying, *Your boy, Beck.*

I watch Beckham fly down the field, cradling the lacrosse ball in his stick.

Aside from the fact that most of the guys playing are hot, they also have on gear that makes them look even bulkier. Shoulder pads that make them broader, mouth guards that they pop in and out of their mouths in a slightly seductive way when they take a break. Arm pads and gloves are for protection, but give them a kind of warrior-going-into-battle look.

Beckham gets about three-quarters of the way to the goal when he’s body-checked by an opposing player—specifically my brother—only to make a perfect toss in Augie’s direction.

Augie catches it, takes a few steps, then shoots it into the net, scoring his first goal at Eastbrooke.

I stand up and cheer, “Woohoo!!!”

Augie goes into the net, picks up the ball, then marches down the field with it, stopping in front of the bleachers and dropping it onto my lap. “This is for you,” he says sweetly, then runs to the center of the field.

When I pick it up, Waverly goes, “Aww, that was so romantic.”

But then Beckham saunters over and says, “Sorry, but we need that,” and plucks the ball from my hand.

“Someone’s jealous,” Johnny whispers to me.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I say.

The rest of the game is all about the red team. They are the starters, so they should win, but once Augie and Hudson—who are new—start meshing with Beckham and Zander, they score seven more goals, ending the game 15-6.

Augie is pumped when he comes to the sidelines to give me a kiss. “That was exhilarating,” he says. “And a lot like polo, but without the horse.”

“Unfortunately, we get to have a less-than-exhilarating call now,” I remind him.

“Oh, fuck. Conveniently forgot about that. But I’m on a roll. Why stop now?”

He takes my hand and leads me over to a private spot, and then we call his dad.

“Hmm, he’s not answering,” I say.

“We’ll have to try back in a bit.”

“I’m leaving, remember? The dress?”

He shakes his head. “Of course I remember. Why don’t you go ahead and call yours before you go so you don’t have that hanging over your head? And I’ll catch up with mine later. After I shower.”

“Okay,” I say. “You going to miss me?”

He takes my hands in his and looks at me longingly. “I miss you already.”

I roll my eyes at him.

“I will miss you terribly?” he tries, a grin on his face.

I laugh. “I’m sure you will. Be good. Don’t get into any fights while I’m gone, and I’ll see you tonight.”

“I will be at your doorstep at seven sharp, my fair lady.”

“Oh boy, winning has made you suddenly quite chivalrous.”

“I was chivalrous last night.”

“No, last night, you got sucker-punched. You’re going to the football

scrimmage, right? You know he's playing."

"Yes, I know. I'm going with your brother. He did good out there today."

I look over at Monroe, standing on the edge of the field, talking to a pretty brunette and grinning from ear to ear.

"I guess girls do like lacrosse players," I comment.

"As long as you still like me," he says seriously.

"I don't like you, Augie. I love you."

He gives me a sweet kiss on the cheek. "And I love you. Don't let your parents get you down. You didn't do anything wrong."

"Neither did you."

"I got in a few punches."

"That's called self-defense."

"I'll remember that."

Johnny honks at me from the golf cart, the noise a funny little beep.

I go over there and say, "What? Are we not waiting for Laurent?"

"Merde. I would have left him. We are running a little late, but not much we can do about that. I'll make a couple of calls."

"While you do that, I need to make a call of my own," I tell him.

I go sit down on the curb in a deserted area of the parking lot, not wanting to be overheard.

Then I press the button and call my mom.

"Hi," is all I say.

My mom sighs, but I don't say anything back.

Pretty soon, she goes, "We did not react well to the news."

"No, you didn't. And what else?"

"We didn't respect your privacy," Mom says with a resounding sigh.

"That's correct."

"Have you even been online to see what a mess this is?" she asks me.

"The video has gone viral, and there's going to be a lot of questions from a PR standpoint, as you and Augie were both named."

"Hmm, fortunately for me, I have no public anything. No social media whatsoever. You never let me. I get that it was because of the stalker, and I'm

sure that's something you never get over. But you and Dad took a fight between two boys and made it about me. And it wasn't my fault. Just like a stalker choosing you wasn't *your* fault."

"Well," Mom says, clearly taken aback, "you are straight to the point, aren't you?"

"Yes. I always have been. Is Dad on with you?"

"Um—"

"I know he is, Mom. I can tell you have it on speaker."

"Hey," my dad says.

"Hi, Daddy," I say, my voice faltering. My dad is the person I have always gone to when I'm upset. And it hurts that I couldn't tell him about what happened last night. "I, um, just want you to know I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be disrespectful last night but—"

"We understand. And you were in the right. We shouldn't have asked you such personal questions in a slightly public setting."

"Is this going to be a mess for you guys? For your careers? For the clubs?"

"Well, that all depends on how we spin it," Mom astutely says.

"It was locker-room talk that got blown out of proportion. Someone in the locker room said that I must be good for Augie to come all this way. And Augie did what he was taught when someone asks you a personal question, sort of the equivalent of *no comment*. He smiled politely and shrugged."

"And how did that turn into you being pregnant?" Mom asks.

"Because Augie said something about coming here because I needed him. What he meant was that he knew I was upset about not being able to go to London. But what he said was *in my time of need*. Fast-forward to the carnival. Branson is drinking. I had eaten a whole bunch of incredible junk food before Augie and I went on some rides. The second I got off one of them, I told him I felt sick and ran straight to a trash can and threw up. Branson saw me puke. And when I went back over to Augie, he put his hand on my stomach and asked how my tummy was feeling. Somehow, Branson put that all together as me being pregnant."

"We promise to support you," my mom says.

I let out a little chuckle. “I have to be honest. After your reaction and the way Grandma and Aunt Gracie don’t get along because she got pregnant young, it was like I flashed to what my life would be like. And that you two wouldn’t be in it. And that made me really sad. As if things weren’t already bad enough.”

My mom starts crying. “We’re so sorry. We would never do that to you.”

“Good to know,” I tell them. “So, back to what to say to the press. I think you should tell them that your daughter isn’t and has never been pregnant. And that her ex-best friend is an idiot for thinking it. Just one great example of why we aren’t friends anymore.”

“Wait,” Dad says. “You’re not pregnant?”

“No, I’m not.”

“And you’re sure?”

“Uh, well, I haven’t taken a pregnancy test, but I suppose I could if you believe immaculate conception *is* really possible.”

My dad says, “Are you saying—”

“That I have never had sex? Yes, Dad, that’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“Oh, thank God,” he mutters.

“Dad.”

“Sorry. I just—”

“I know. I’m your little girl. I’m curious though. Have you spoken to my brothers about if they have had sex? If they are being careful with someone else’s daughter?”

“I, uh ...”

“Yeah, it’s bullshit, Dad, and you know it. Going forward, whatever sex life I have from here on out is absolutely none of your business—unless I choose to discuss it with you. And trust me, if I were pregnant right now, you would have been the first call I made because I’d be freaking the eff out. Also, it’s so sexist that you sent the boys off to school with boxes of condoms and well wishes.”

“You did?” Mom screeches.

“Of course I did,” Dad says. “I want them to be responsible.”

“Yeah, and mixing beer at the Cave with drunken sex at the lacrosse field

is super responsible. Oh, and in case you'd like some more unsolicited advice, you should suggest that Branson's parents have a little chat with him. He's—"

"What happened between you two?" Mom asks in a soft, caring tone. One that makes me wish she could give me a hug and make it all better. "We didn't want to pry, but ..."

I tell them exactly what happened.

And when I'm done, I say, "I really didn't want to have to go to school with him."

"It all makes a lot more sense now. Thank you for sharing," my dad says.

"Well, if it's any consolation, I did partially want to go to London because of a boy. You just had the wrong boy. And on that note, I have to go."

By the time I'm off my call, Johnny has ditched me, taken off in the golf cart to who knows where. And lucky for me, who should appear?

Betsy and Danielle.

"It was funny that Augie tried to give you his ball after he scored. Of course, you've already had his balls and let him score, so not sure why you needed it," Betsy says.

"He was being sweet actually. Proud to score his first goal at Eastbrooke. And for making varsity."

"He should enjoy it while it lasts. I've heard his parents are making him come back home. Taking him away from you."

To this, I laugh. "You really don't know anything. And you can make fun of me all you want, but the fact is, if I were pregnant, I'd be carrying the heir to the throne. Augie's the firstborn. A future king or queen. And there's no way in hell that his parents could do anything about that. Soon, you'll be bowing to me when I walk into a room."

Betsy makes a disgusted noise, seemingly shocked I would say such a thing.

Also because she knows I'm right.

Fortunately, Johnny has perfect timing and comes barreling toward her

with his golf cart, barely avoiding her—probably on purpose—before coming to a halt next to me. “We must not dally. Get in.”

I jump in the cart with him and Laurent, then turn around as we drive off and give Betsy and Danielle a little princess wave.

Fast decisions.

11am

“Hang on!” Johnny says, speeding up the hill, then taking a left, going past the chapel and library and into the trees, before a clearing on the corner of the far edge of the school’s property comes into view.

“Are we taking that?” Laurent asks, noting a helicopter waiting on the pad.

“Of course,” Johnny says as he brings the cart to a sudden halt. “It’s the fastest way.”

I notice the name on the building. *McMahon*. As in my godfather, Dallas McMahon, who much prefers heli travel over sitting in traffic. In fact, it’s because of him we have our own pad at the vineyard.

“Are we going into the city?” I ask.

“Not exactly. You’ll see,” Johnny says cryptically.

Fifteen minutes later, we are landing on Johnny’s yacht, which is moored in the Atlantic Ocean just outside Bridgeport Harbor.

I don’t know what I pictured when I imagined his boat. I mean, I’ve been on very nice yachts on vacations with my family. But this is ridiculously extravagant.

Johnny ushers us down a set of stairs, featuring an ornate gold railing, to a beautiful lounge area with dark wood, cognac and cream-colored leather, mixed with crystal and gold. We are quickly greeted by the captain and crew, shown the lunch that is spread out on a buffet, and introduced to representatives from seven luxury brands.

Once we load up our plates and take a seat, Johnny claps his hands, and

models come out, wearing the clothes that we can choose from.

“I thought I was going to go in a dressing room and try some stuff on,” I say, taking a bite of creamy carbonara pasta, then a sip of a lovely Chenin blanc that was paired with it.

“Once we choose your favorites, then you will try them on, and the tailors will take over. Your own private fashion week.”

First up is Valentino.

I realize that the models are not really for me, but rather for Johnny to see the outfits on before deciding what I should try on.

All of it is gorgeous, but I let Johnny take the lead, not that he needs my permission—he’s clearly in charge here—but because I want to see if our tastes match.

We roll through more designer labels, Johnny quickly giving them a yay or nay.

“You make fast decisions,” I observe.

He leans over and whispers in my ear, “I told them you are built like a catwalk model and that we want to show off your assets. But I am a bit disappointed in some of what they chose. We don’t need you dressed in an expensive flour sack.”

To this, Laurent laughs.

“You’ve been awfully quiet,” I say to him.

He holds up a glass of champagne, motioning to the plate in front of him. “I’m savoring it all. Who knows when I’ll ever get to do something like this again?”

Johnny turns to him. “Always appreciate what you have, but you two are stuck with me. So, get used to it.”

Eventually, the fashion show is over, and it’s time for me and Laurent to try on all the outfits Johnny approved of.

We go into separate suites, then meet up in the hall.

“Whoa,” Laurent says, taking in my outfit. “You look nice.”

“So do you,” I tell him, grabbing his hand and leading him back to the

salon.

Johnny starts clapping. “Oh, yes! Arrington, that is sublime. You know that wearing a Valentino jumpsuit is like slipping on a piece of fashion history. I’m digging the mid-century chain-link motif.”

At this point, the designer representatives are now sitting next to Johnny, and the models have been ferried back to shore.

One of them says, “The design is from our label’s archives. It’s cut from pure silk twill, and it has wide palazzo pant legs. Arrington, please turn around.” I do a little twirl, and she continues, “Not to mention the chic tied halter neck and open back.”

“It’s perfect for the yacht,” Johnny tells me.

“But it’s silk. If I sweat in it, won’t it get ruined?”

“Let me be more specific. It’s perfect for a casual dinner on the yacht,” Johnny says. “And, Laurent, look at you. White slacks, pale yellow spread-collar shirt. You two belong on the cover of a magazine.”

The next thing I try on is even more extravagant. And although I think it’s totally cute, I could see my brothers teasing me by making bird noises. But then I think about Augie, how he calls me his little lark, and I decide that birds are pretty cool.

I make my way out to show Johnny. The designer rep is now holding a large glass of champagne—which is not even in a flute, but rather a white wineglass—and staring down at caviar on a homemade potato chip.

“Oh,” she says. “Love it! Cropped, wide-legged, feather-trimmed, sequined pants. The matching cardigan adds even more glamour and boasts feathered cuffs. Just divine.”

“Are you sure I don’t look like a bird?”

Johnny looks aghast I would even suggest such a thing. “Another perfect outfit for the sea.”

Laurent comes out in a white dinner jacket with a regal-looking crest on the front pocket, white slacks, and navy velvet slippers. He whispers to me, “When you’re done with that outfit, it’s shiny enough that we could lure fish with it.”

What he says makes us burst out in laughter, only to get a side-eye from

Johnny.

Laurent and I try on a whole bunch more stuff, and really, there is nothing that Johnny doesn't approve of. I'm not sure how much this little shopping spree is going to cost me, but I realize it's time to ask my parents for a credit card, like Aspen's. Because, clearly, according to Johnny, I am a fashion emergency that only Valentino, Dolce & Gabbana, Versace, Gucci, Fendi, Burberry, and Dior can fix. Once we've gotten through what is deemed casual wear—although the only thing I considered casual was a cropped, checkered racerback Burberry top with matching leggings—it's time for me to try on swimsuits.

Apparently, I must have new ones, if only to wear on Johnny's yacht.

He's already excitedly planning a bunch of events for the upcoming holiday weekend. And as much as I want to join him on the yacht with Augie, I also know that in just four days' time, Augie and I will be asked to make a decision about where we want to go to school—*will we stay at Eastbrooke, or will we go to London?*

Although, I suppose, we can spend time with Johnny here regardless of our decision.

I put on the first swimsuit, feeling a little nervous about coming out in it even though I think I kind of like it. The truth is that I usually am very active when I'm in the water. Doing fun things like parasailing, riding WaveRunners, snorkeling, or scuba diving. The swimsuits I normally wear are more athletic in style, my favorite being boy shorts paired with a bra top. This one skimpily covers my chest and bottom but features a bunch of straps that, while cute, would give me ridiculous tan lines.

"Girl, you got it going on," Laurent teases, causing Johnny to roll his eyes.

"We don't really say things like that anymore."

"Well, what do we say when a girl looks incredibly sexy and slightly dominatrix in a swimsuit?" Laurent asks.

"Well, in Arrington's case, she probably loved what you said."

I throw my arm up into the air in a silly pose, close my eyes for a second, and grin. "I mean, I do want to look like I've got *something* going on."

“I like this, but the straps are too much. We have a lot of toys on the boat. Do you like to scuba dive? Go out on a WaveRunner? Snorkel?”

“All of the above.”

“Something a little more simple maybe,” he says. “Plus, the tan lines would be atrocious.”

“Agreed.”

I come back out a bunch of times, wearing numerous little bikinis.

“I stand by what I said,” Laurent says. “You look good in a swimsuit.”

“Thank you, Laurent. And you look good as a yacht boy.”

“A yacht boy?” Johnny asks, looking offended even though Laurent is grinning.

I think he’s enjoying playing dress-up as much as I am.

“All right,” Johnny says, clapping his hands. “I think I’d like everything so far to be kept here on the boat. We’ll take it all. Now, for the reason we are all here. The dance. Maribella, will you please wheel our final choices out on a rack for both Laurent and Arrington?” He glances at his watch. “We don’t have much time before hair and makeup arrive.”

Maribella looks longingly at what’s left of her caviar before getting up and going back to work. “Of course.”

Johnny pats the seats on both sides of him, indicating that Laurent and I should join him. “On the yacht, it will be all about fantasy. About looking the part. At the school dance, it will be important that you both feel comfortable in what you are wearing.”

“How will you be dressed for the dance?” I ask Johnny.

“I have a green velvet blazer with a sublime silk lining, custom-designed by Versace. I plan to pair it with navy trousers, a shirt that matches the lining, and a highly polished navy shoe. Did either of you have favorites that you saw?”

“I liked the basic black suit,” Laurent says.

Johnny rolls his eyes. “You, Laurent, are anything but basic. I, too, like the black Gucci suit, but I’d love to see it paired with a bold shirt. Something fun. Like you.”

“I’m not fun,” Laurent says, causing me to laugh.

“He’s right,” I tease. “We need to loosen him up a little.”

“You already have.” Laurent waves down the steward by holding up an empty champagne flute. “See, I can have fun,” he says, but I can tell he’s trying to play it cool while freaking out internally about the price of the suit.

Johnny watches us and then finally says, “You both have been harbored from life.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Laurent asks.

“It means that you were both sheltered. And it makes sense. Laurent’s mom had a big secret, and Arrington’s mom has purposely protected her,” he says simply, then goes, “But back to the matter at hand. Dresses?”

“Um, I like the black one with the rhinestones across the top. And the black one with the cutouts at the waist.”

Johnny shakes his head. “While I want you to try on your favorites, you have to try on my two favorites as well. Neither of which is black. You go first, then we’ll end with choosing Laurent’s.”

I just finished trying on all my favorite dresses and have decided—okay, Laurent and Johnny have decided—what I’m wearing to the dance when Augie calls me.

“How is the shopping going?” he asks.

I look down at the champagne glass in my hand, the chocolate soufflé in front of me, and out at the ocean view. “Pretty darn good actually.”

“I’m in trouble with my family, and now, I’m going to be in trouble with you,” he says.

“Why will you be in trouble with me?”

“Because I have to fly to Scotland straightaway. Tomorrow is a celebration for my grandfather’s birthday. Yearly photos will be taken, and I can’t miss it.”

“Royal duties, huh?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so. And with everything going on at school, I completely forgot it was this weekend. I’m in a car on the way to the airport. I was supposed to meet the flight crew over an hour ago. I got a sternly worded call to get my arse there immediately.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

“I wish you could. But until we are officially in a courtship or engaged, it’s family only for formal occasions.” He lets out a sad sigh. “That means I won’t get to dance with you.”

“We can dance when you get back,” I say even though I’m disappointed. If nothing else, I wanted him to see me in my dress.

“It won’t be the same,” he says, sounding upset. “I’m truly sorry.”

“It’s okay. Honestly, I probably won’t even go now. With everything that happened last night, the video and all, I don’t think I could face the dance alone.”

“You mentioned someone else asked you to the dance before I did. Would you consider going with that person? Was it Branson?”

“Pfft, fuck no.”

“I hear water,” Augie says suddenly. “Is there a fountain where you are shopping?”

“It’s actually the Atlantic Ocean.”

I send him a picture of the deck of the yacht and the water beyond.

“And you’re with Johnny and Laurent?” he asks, sounding confused.

“Yes, we’re on Johnny’s yacht. He brought in designers to dress us. Laurent was going to wear his one and only suit, the one he had worn to his mother’s funeral, and I hadn’t packed a dress because I had clothes in London and didn’t think I’d be here this long.”

“Did you find something?” Augie asks, a smile in his voice.

“I did actually. It’s being tailored as we speak.”

Johnny takes my phone and puts it on speaker.

“And I’m going to miss it,” Augie says sadly.

I try to cheer him up. “Might not be a bad thing. Johnny brought in hair and makeup, and who knows what I’ll look like when they are finished with me.”

“You’ll look just as gorgeous as you always do, my little lark.”

I start to reply, but Johnny interrupts me, saying, “HRH, I offer to escort Arrington in your absence.”

“Hey,” I counter, “I think I should have a say in who I go with or if I even

go.”

But Augie goes, “I think it’s a brilliant idea.”

“Two dates,” Laurent says, and I can’t help but giggle at the ascot he’s wearing around his neck. “You know what they say—one’s company, two’s a crowd, and three’s a party!”

“Cheers to that,” Johnny says, holding up his glass and clinking it against ours.

“Are you mates drinking without me?” Augie asks.

“Yes, we had to get Arrington to chill,” Laurent confides.

“The dress she’s going to wear, is it sexy?”

“The most spectacular,” Johnny says.

“Fuck me,” Augie says. “All right, I have to go. I’ve arrived at the airport. And, Arrington?”

“Yes?”

“Please send me pictures. I must see this dress.”

“We will!” Johnny replies.

Just as we end the call, Johnny’s phone rings. He answers it and puts it on speaker as a female voice says, “I hear from the staff that you are prepping for a weekend occasion.”

“It will be an intimate gathering,” Johnny says.

“And you are on your boat now?” the woman asks.

“Yes, Mother. I’m shopping with a few friends. Would you like to meet them?”

“Your father is here with me,” she says. “And we would love to.”

Johnny turns on the video, and we squeeze close together so our faces fit on the screen.

“Mother,” Johnny says, “I present to you Lane Arrington.”

“Oh my stars, you look so much like your father,” she says, causing me to immediately like her. Although I don’t know why. My mother is beautiful.

But when I break out into a wide grin, Johnny’s dad goes, “But with your mother’s famous smile. You’re just lovely. So nice to meet you.”

“Thank you. It’s nice to meet you both as well,” I say.

“And this is Laurent Herrera,” Johnny says.

“Oh, any relation?” his mom asks, referring to the designer brand.

“Not that I’m aware of,” Laurent says.

“The three of us are in the same house and live across the hall from each other,” Johnny explains, then says, “Where are you two?”

Johnny’s dad smiles. “Belgium. Pre-race party for the Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps.”

A guy comes into the screen behind them and goes, “Fabby! You’re throwing a party, and you didn’t invite me to perform? I’m hurt.”

“I was told your calendar was full,” Johnny says to *THE* Harry Styles. And I’m trying not to swoon. I love his music.

“What day is it?” Harry asks.

“The party commences at fourteen hundred on Friday and ends on Monday at seventeen hundred. We are currently moored at Bridgeport Harbor, but will be cruising up to Cape Cod.”

“I’ll figure something out, mate,” Harry says.

We say our goodbyes and hang up, and Laurent goes, “Should I know that guy who is coming to perform?”

“Ohmigawd! Yes, you should! That was freaking Harry!”

Laurent shakes his head, causing Johnny to explain, “He used to be in a boy band.”

“Cool,” is all Laurent says.

“Before you have your hair and makeup done,” Johnny says to me in a slightly hushed tone, “you wanted to talk about sex.” But then he looks over at Laurent, who is pulling the ascot from his neck. “Although I realize we might need more clothes. For the party.”

“But you picked out numerous outfits for each of us—”

“I mean, for *everyone* at the party,” Johnny clarifies. “Does Beckham or Augie have formal yacht attire?”

“Augie probably does at home, but I highly doubt Beckham does.”

Johnny shakes his head. “I’m going to have to carefully plan the guest list as well as provide proper attire. As a matter of fact, I’m going to have to turn one of the storerooms into a large communal closet. That way, we can outfit everyone who comes aboard.”

He snaps at one of the people who works on the boat and tells him exactly what he would like. He also tells him that Laurent and I are to have permanent staterooms and that our closets should be filled with the items we chose—after they are altered.

“Does it really matter what we wear?” I ask as Laurent goes back to finish trying on his clothes. “We’ll be out in the middle of the ocean, just us.”

“Yes, it does. I should probably bring in a professional to take photos of the event. Which brings me to another issue. I need to be able to tag you on social media,” Johnny says to both Laurent and me when Laurent comes out, fidgeting with the hem of a pair of tiny Euro-style swim trunks. “Neither of you offers that ability. May I rectify the situation?”

“What does that even mean?” Laurent asks as I whistle.

Laurent covers his parts. “I’m not sure I can wear this.”

“You prefer to tan in the nude?” Johnny says simply with a grin.

Laurent looks down. “I think I prefer this.”

“As you should,” Johnny says. “You look delectable.”

Laurent narrows his eyes at me.

I shrug. “He’s right. You’re quite the dish.”

He rolls his eyes. “I can’t even with you two.”

“Is it a keeper?” the stylist asks.

“Most definitely,” I say with a giggle.

“You know that as soon as I tag the two of you, everyone will follow you,” Johnny says.

“I don’t know,” I tell him. “I’m not sure I want to be on it. People can be really mean. And after last night—”

“Me neither—” Laurent starts to say.

Johnny simply raises an eyebrow at us in response, like he dares us to say anything further. But then he goes, “I will handle everything. And I’m picturing it now. You, Arrington, in the cropped, wide-legged, marabou-feathered pants, standing behind the boat’s polished wooden steering wheel. Or all of us on the sundeck, vintage champagne in hand, wearing designer swimwear. Another at our lovely dinner soiree.”

I can tell his mind is still going even though he’s stopped talking. In fact,

he barely seems to acknowledge the rest of Laurent's swimsuits.

Finally, he turns to me.

"We need to talk about the guest list. Ten to twelve is a nice number for intimate dinners. We can always ferry others in for the night on the chopper. I'll invite some of my international friends for that."

I nod, agreeing, even though I can't really fathom all of it logistically.

"You, me, Laurent, and HRH is four people. Do you think your brothers would want to come?"

"They'd be silly not to, but they were invited—well, we always have an open invitation to spend the weekend at the Johnsons' place in the Hamptons."

"Hmm. I plan to extend an invitation to the Hawthorne prefects—Beckham, Zander, Melissa, and Jessica. It is the perfect time to allow them to experience my chef's creations in the hope that he could either fully cook for our house or at least help with the menu planning and food sourcing."

"After our culinary experience today, I'm all for that! And it would be fun if Waverly and London could come."

"Yes, of course. As well as Hudson and your brothers. We have twelve staterooms, so if we had more, some would have to bunk up together."

"I could stay with Augie," I offer.

He shakes his head. "No, you will have your own personal, permanent suite. I already have the perfect one in mind for you."

"Either way, I'm thinking the weekend might be the perfect time for Augie and me to ... *you know*."

"I know what?" Johnny says, looking up from his phone, where he's been typing notes to himself. "Oh, you want to have sex with him."

"Maybe."

"Don't," Johnny says.

"Why not? I can't think of a more beautifully perfect setting for my first time."

Laurent, who has finished trying on clothes, joins us mid-conversation and says, "I don't think Augie will care about the setting after seeing you in a swimsuit."

Johnny gives Laurent the side-eye before clapping his hands and sending me off to get glammed up, ending our conversation. I talk to the stylist about how I'd like to look, but she informs me that Johnny has already given her clear instructions.

So, while my hair is washed and blown out straight, I sit there, wondering why Johnny said *don't*. Is it the setting? Augie? Or does he not think I'm ready?

Honestly, I don't know if I'm ready either. Normally, this would be a conversation that I would have had with Branson. We used to talk about life, love, and even sex. We wondered together about what it would be like. How it would feel. How, even though it sounded awkward and kinda gross, his cousins had assured him that it was just the opposite. Of course, that was before he started doing it all with other people.

I let out a heavy sigh and then smile as I think about Augie. I like the way it feels when his hands explore my skin. The way he holds me tight. The way he kisses me.

I've never felt awkward around him. Going further than we have should just feel like the natural progression of our relationship. Of our love.

At least, I hope that's the case.

I really do love him. To be honest, I feel lucky that he's even still interested in me after everything we've gone through lately. But I suppose adversity in your relationship either splits you apart or draws you closer—like it has with us.

I send him a quick text, hoping he isn't sleeping on the plane.

Me: How's the flight going?

HRH: Boring. Would much rather be on a yacht with you.

Me: I miss you already.

HRH: I miss you too, my little lark.

Me: I'm a larky now?

HRH: You're my love now, Arrington.

I hold my phone to my chest and let out a happy sigh, swooning.

Me: Regardless of the decision we make as to where to go to school later this week, we have to go to Johnny's yacht party for the holiday weekend. I'll have my own suite. And I was thinking ...

HRH: Now, you have me thinking about what you might be thinking and hoping we are thinking the same thing.

Me: If you're hoping I'd like the physical side of our relationship to significantly progress, we most definitely are.

HRH: How much progress are we talking about?

Me: I've never asked you this question, but, umm ... have you before?

HRH: I haven't. I want an emotional connection as well as a physical one. I guess I've been waiting for you.

Me: I will admit, that surprises me in the best of ways.

HRH: You don't think of me as romantic and emotional?

I can totally picture him, pretending to look aghast at the thought.

Me: You showed up at my school after I basically ghosted you. Whatever it is that you are, I like it, Augie.

HRH: Now, I'm blushing.

Me: No, I'd be willing to bet you have a big smile on your face.

HRH: That I do.

Me: I have to go, sorry. They are done with my hair and want to finish up my makeup.

HRH: Don't forget to send me a picture of you.

Me: I won't.

That's harsh.

6pm

Once we're all polished and prepped for the dance, minus putting on our outfits so as not to wrinkle them on the way home, it's time to head back to school. We're just getting in the helicopter when our phones all buzz.

Johnny is the first to read the text. "Hmm. Hawthorne is calling a mandatory house meeting for tonight at six thirty." He glances at his watch. "We should just make it."

"Wonder what that's all about," Laurent says.

"Beckham mentioned something about a pre-party. That's probably what it is," I tell them.

We've barely walked in the front door of the house when Laurent says, "I smell pizza," and follows his nose into the kitchen.

"I couldn't eat another thing," I tell Johnny. "The food on your boat was exceptional. The whole day was really. What you did for us was completely over the top. And so incredibly appreciated."

"You, Laurent, and I were destined to meet here. I believe we are soulmates," he says as we make our way up to our rooms.

“I think you might be right.”

“See you down there in a few. But don’t put on your dress yet. Do that after the meeting,” he instructs, going into his room.

I do the same, then go look at myself in the mirror.

I look like me, but different. Apparently, Johnny told them I was to look natural but special.

Which means my makeup is soft, but my face is subtly contoured and highlighted. My eyes look huge. My lips fuller than usual. And my hair is a riot of curls, my bangs held back by a sparkly, thick barrette. And I probably look a little silly, all done up and just wearing regular clothes.

When I get downstairs, I notice most of the girls are in various stages of getting ready. Some with big rollers in their hair. Others look like they just showered and haven’t even started prepping yet. But you can smell the polish, see fancy toes and nails. And the girls particularly seem very excited about whatever it is we’re going to talk about. Or maybe they are just pumped up about the dance.

Laurent plops down next to me, a plate loaded with pizza slices.

“How can you even eat after all we had today?”

“No idea,” he says. “Is it just me, or was that an incredible experience? Although I guess you grew up with that sort of thing.”

“Designers have dressed my mom over the years, yes. And they send her clothes. And when she’s nominated for big awards, they send a designer to meet with her to do something custom, but this was more than that. And it seemed like a regular Saturday afternoon to Johnny.”

Laurent laughs. “It did. Crazy. And while I appreciate everything he did, I feel a little guilty. He made me get so much stuff. I wanted to tell him I didn’t need it. But I also got the feeling that wasn’t an option. I suppose my un-tailored discount-store suit wouldn’t go with his image, would it?”

“Probably not. But I don’t think that’s what it’s about, you know? It’s more about dressing for the part.”

“Do you think he paid for it all or gets it free?”

“I don’t know, but I do think we should talk to him about it. I thought he was going to help me find a dress that I would buy, not give me a ridiculously

expensive new wardrobe.”

“And those pants with the feathers that you’re supposed to wear on the yacht?”

“Right? The only time my mom would ever wear something totally over the top like that would be for a magazine cover.”

“That’s precisely why I made you get it,” Johnny says from behind us. Both Laurent and I stiffen in surprise.

“And to answer your question, some of the items went on my account, but most of them were gifted based on my promise that they would show up on my feed. I have a large following with a younger audience they want to reach. And you are the daughter of someone famous,” he says to me before turning toward Laurent. “And even though no one knows it, so are you. We’re going to be fabulous together. *Capisce?*”

“I think we just want to be clear,” Laurent says sincerely, “that we value you for your friendship, not your lavish gifts.”

“And the food,” I add. “My gosh, literally one of the best meals of my life.”

“They say that the best meals, the ones that we remember, are due to whom we share them with. It was an honor for me as well. You knew nothing about the extent of my wealth when we became friends. That is uncommon for me, and I appreciate it.”

We’re interrupted by Zander coming to the front of the room and speaking.

“With tonight being the dance, we felt it was important to get you all together to talk. I think most of you know about the scuffle that took place at the carnival last night. Because it is recent, we’re going to use it as an example. The person who started the fight had been drinking. Sometimes, alcohol does make its way into our house, and you need to understand what your expected behavior is in regard to that situation. We don’t get drunk at Hawthorne House. Period. You want to have a couple of beers, fine with us. If you want to get messed up, please save that for your weekends away from school.

“If you are so drunk here at the house that you are throwing up or doing

stupid shit, you will get an automatic house demerit. If you are drunk at a school event, it's considered a poor reflection on our house—and both you and our house will get punished.”

“So, how will Branson get punished?” a girl named Pansy asks.

“The answer to that is twofold. One issue is alcohol consumption. The second is fighting. The road to the House Cup, which currently resides here at Hawthorne, is based on points. And Calder is already down twenty-five points for Branson's public intoxication and another ten for the brawl. Considering most infractions—like breaking curfew—are only two points, you can see he's already placed his house in a huge deficit. Not only that, but he will also receive a personal demerit. In football, you can get called for a personal foul, get a team penalty, and move on. But if you get two, you're out of the game. Same goes for the house. If Branson gets another personal demerit, he'll be moved out of Calder and back into one of the dorms.”

Although we heard this was a possibility when we were first told some of the house rules, this example drives the facts home, and most of the juniors—me included—sort of suck in our breaths, knowing that we would much prefer to stay here.

“To drink responsibly,” Zander continues, “you should know the body's limits. It can typically handle a shot an hour, and my personal rule is, only have one drink an hour and lots of water in between to stay hydrated. If I were to decide to take two shots in an hour, I'd not drink any more that night.

“Living in the house means you have a lot more freedom than you had in the dorms. We hope you can handle it. You were all given the rules, along with the list of demerits, points, and consequences. The prefects have decided that all juniors will be tested on this information tomorrow before our house meeting because we fully intend to keep the House Cup here, where it belongs. So, you will not be allowed to participate in *any* of the house mixers until you pass the test with a ninety percent.”

“Guess we'd better study up,” Laurent whispers to me as Zander claps his hands together.

“All right, that's all we have for you. Try to hang out here, have some pizza, and have fun before you go to the dance. And be sure to be back by

curfew tonight.”

“That’s harsh,” I hear the girl who asked about Branson say.

But I’m wondering if harsh might be exactly what he needs. I shake my head, not wanting to think about him. About how our friendship went so wrong. And why he seems to want to do nothing but hurt me.

I go upstairs and look at myself in the mirror one more time. Wondering if it’s really hair and makeup that’s the difference between the regular me and the *totally fabulous* me. While I’ve always appreciated beautiful fabrics and good designs on my mom, I’ve never really cared much about what I wore. I mostly just always want to look appropriate for the situation. The time. The place.

As I slide on the dress I’m wearing tonight, it’s clear that Johnny’s idea of appropriate and mine vary greatly. And it’s interesting because this dress would probably be considered almost demure with its high neckline and long sleeves—if it wasn’t for the bright pink color and the bow-embellished cutouts that run up the sides. I feel like I should be walking a runway, not going to a high school dance.

But, at the same time, I really like the way I look. And I wish Augie were here. To see me. To dance with me. Hold me in his arms. Kiss me. And then ... let’s just say, this dress makes me feel sexy, and after our text conversation earlier, sex is what’s on my mind.

I pick up the phone and call my brother.

“Roe,” I say when he answers. “Have you had sex?”

“Wow, way to cut to the chase.” He laughs. “Why do you ask?”

“Because I feel like I might be ready for that step. I just—never mind. I’m sorry. You don’t have to tell me.”

“I haven’t had sex yet,” he says.

“Aspen?”

“He has.”

“And why haven’t you? It sounds like you’ve had opportunities.”

He lets out a sigh, and I can picture him running his hand back through his hair, messing it up and making him even better-looking in the process. “I

guess maybe I'd like to connect with someone on a deeper level than them telling me I have pretty eyes or that I'm hot. It's not like I'm not doing stuff. Just not that. Not yet anyway. Are you thinking about being with Augie after the dance?"

"Augie had to fly to Scotland today for his grandfather's birthday party. He'd totally forgotten about it."

"Oh shoot. You're still coming to the dance though, right?"

"I don't know," I say, looking at myself in the mirror. "I'm all glammed up and ready to go physically. I'm just not sure I'm ready mentally."

"Ha! That's how I feel about sex! See you soon!"

I look at myself in the mirror again, trying to decide what to do. If I should go.

A knock on my door startles me.

I open it to find Beckham standing there, looking delectable in a black-and-hot-pink brocade jacket, black slacks, white shirt, and black tie.

He looks at me and lets out a whistle. "Lane, you look incredible. And we match," he says, taking in the color of my dress.

I watch as his eyes linger on my body. Sliding down each piece of me that is exposed—from my bare legs to my high heels and then back up again.

"We do. Did Johnny dress you too?"

He looks down. "No. Just a happy coincidence, I guess. Will you save a dance for me tonight?"

"I'm not sure I'm going," I admit, suddenly feeling nervous.

"You can't *not* go in that dress."

"Augie had to go to Scotland for his grandfather's birthday party. It has nothing to do with the video. Obviously, the king's birthday plans were made far in advance, but Augie sort of forgot about it. And regardless of what you told the lacrosse team, people still think I'm pregnant. And I'm not sure I want to deal with it."

"You need to go."

"It will just cause me to get made more fun of. Because Augie isn't here for me. Which is bullshit really. Even if I were pregnant, it wouldn't change

who I am. And I am strong and independent. Or at least, I hope to be. Or have been. There's a lot of drama here."

"Not that much."

I roll my eyes. "What about your and Betsy's drama?"

"Fine. There's some drama. And in Betsy's case, it's due to the fact that I told her something in confidence because we used to be pretty good friends and she misinterpreted it, thought I was talking about her."

"I got that part in the Never Have I Ever game."

"That was a little embarrassing. I felt bad the second I said I wasn't talking about her because I knew then that she had thought I was."

I frown. "Did you talk to her?"

"Tried, but she was hurt. Said I was sorry. She asked who I was talking about if it wasn't her, and I wouldn't tell her. Which then pissed her off. You told me that if we were meant to be, no other girl would ever be enough."

"No, I told you that if we were truly meant to be together, then it wouldn't be enough until you were with me."

"Isn't that the same thing?" he asks.

I shake my head. "No, it's not. You're you, Beck. And I love you. And although I say that I always will, that's how I felt about Branson before everything."

"And you don't still love him?"

"I loved him for a long time. Do I still care about his well-being? Yes. Do I think he's making bad choices right now? Yes. Do I want to be his friend anymore? No. I hope that you and I—" I start to feel really emotional, just thinking about losing Beck too.

He must be able to tell I'm about to start crying because he goes, "Don't mess up your makeup. We'll talk about all this some other time."

I nod. "I don't think—"

"No," he says. "Johnny got you a beautiful new dress. He's going to be disappointed if you don't wear it."

"He offered to be my date. He and Laurent both."

"And are you going to let them be?"

I shrug.

“A strong, independent woman wouldn’t hide out. She wouldn’t care what people think,” he says.

“She already doesn’t care what they think. She is just tired of the nasty comments and doesn’t want to subject herself to them. It’s called being in charge of your personal, emotional well-being.”

“Come to the dance with me, Lane. I stood up for you at the house and at lacrosse. This is the same but at a school level.”

“I can’t see how that will help.”

“Because I’m me,” he states simply.

“Hot and popular and practically a superhero?”

“I was going to say a prefect.”

“That will just add fuel to the drama fire. But you’re right. I need to suck it up and go to the dance with Laurent and Johnny. I owe them.”

“And you’ll dance with me?”

“We’ll all dance together, but we’ll leave early.”

“And go to The Grotto?”

“No, horseback riding with Waverly and Hudson. I promised to teach him.”

“Teach Hudson?”

“Yeah. And he and Waverly aren’t going to the dance. She’s going to teach him rock climbing.”

Beckham starts laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“I know you said rock climbing, but for a second, I thought you said *cock* climbing.”

I break out in laughter. “What do you think that would entail?”

He laughs some more. “I guess ropes and clips and a harness.” Now, he’s giggling. “Can’t you just see it? A little cock, dressed up like that?”

“Don’t forget the *helmet*.”

To this, he starts laughing so hard that he’s crying tears. “Ohmigawd. I’m dying.”

He grabs a piece of paper from my desk and sketches it out.

And I will admit, it’s pretty funny. Mostly because of the crazy grin on

the cock's face.

"He needs a little flag in his hand," I offer. "Like, for when he conquers, um, the mountain."

Beckham laugh-screams. "No, *the mound!*"

I lean over and give him a kiss on the cheek.

"What's that for?"

"For making me laugh."

Smell so good.

7:30pm

Beckham and I meet up with Laurent and Johnny in the house library.

"Gorgeous, right?" Laurent says to Beckham when he sees me.

"Absolutely," Beckham says, grinning, as he wraps his arm around my waist.

"Totally fabulous," Johnny says, giving me a little wink. "Let's take some pictures."

The four of us pose for a bunch of photos, having fun doing a combination of traditional prom-type photos and party-style ones.

"So, how's this going to work?" Beckham says to Johnny and Laurent. "I think the four of us need to walk in arm in arm, totally making an entrance."

"Beck, I don't need three dates," I argue.

To which, Johnny says, "Ah, a ménage à trois."

"Except there's four of us," Laurent points out.

"A ménage à quatre then," Beckham says with a laugh. "But first."

"First what?"

"We shower you with gifts for being our date," Johnny says.

"Johnny, you got me this dress—"

"And what a dress it is," Beckham says, a playful smile on his face.

"Thank you, Johnny."

"You look pretty good yourself," Johnny says to Beckham. "One might think you and Arrington had planned to match."

“Right?” Beckham says. “Crazy how that worked out. I told her she needed to be my date.”

Laurent raises an eyebrow in my direction.

“I told him I already had dates,” I clarify.

“That’s good.” Laurent goes out of the room and comes back, carrying a tray. On it is a bucket of champagne and flowers. He sets it down, then picks up a clear box and opens it. “This wrist corsage is from me,” he says, placing it on my wrist when I hold my arm out for him.

“And the champagne is, of course, from me,” Johnny says. “Beckham, would you like to do the honors?”

Beckham pops the cork, then hands it to me. “Since I didn’t let you keep Augie’s ball, you can have this instead.”

“Gee, thanks. But somehow, I doubt it’s the first bottle of champagne you’ve ever opened.”

“It’s the first one I’ve opened with the three of you,” he counters.

“It’s getting late,” Laurent says. “Everyone has already left the house.”

Johnny shakes his head. “Laurent, we aren’t going to show up with everyone else the second the dance starts. Being fashionably late means everyone notices when you arrive.”

We all hold up our glasses, and Laurent says, “Well then, here’s to making an entrance.”

We chat a little more, drink champagne, and head to the dance. I’m suddenly very nervous, and I start doubting everything. The dress. The shoes. The makeup. Being here without Augie. And wondering what people are going to think about that.

When I pause slightly outside the gym doors, the boys link arms with me, Beckham saying, “We’re going in together. United as one.”

“No one will probably even notice our entrance,” Laurent whispers to me.

But when the doors fly open with a bang and we walk through them, heads turn in our direction, and I hear Betsy gasp.

I don’t bother to look at her. I just keep going, letting the boys lead me out to the dance floor, where we all dance together in a circle.

And pretty soon, I forget about everyone else and just have fun.

The music is loud with a thumping bass, and we're in the middle of the crowd. Me. Laurent. Johnny. Beckham. London. My brothers and their dates. Even though I miss Augie, I am glad I'm here. Glad I came to Eastbrooke. Glad I've made friends.

But then a slow song plays, and Beckham pulls me into his arms.

"You're having fun," he states.

"I am. Thank you for being nice to me."

"I'm always nice to you," he says sexily as he brings his hands up around my neck, pulling me closer and nuzzling his face into my neck. "But it's easy to be nice to someone when they smell so good."

"I smell good?"

"Yeah, you do. Like a garden on a summer day. Warm and sweet."

"Does that line work for most girls?" I tease.

"I don't know. I've never said anything like that before."

"Well, thank you then."

"And that dress. What did Augie think of the photos you sent him?"

"I don't know. He hasn't replied yet. He's probably still on his flight."

"He's missing out." Beckham grins, his hands moving down my backside. "Not that I mind."

"You're being bad. Also, you really should dance with Betsy."

"Fuck that. She's being a bitch. To you and me."

"Which means she still doesn't believe you. Which is why"—I narrow my eyes in understanding—"you're all over me. Making a point?"

"I mean, you do look hot, Lane. I can't help myself. But if it gets the message across, so be it."

I'm about to explain that I don't think it's going to help the situation when the music stops and a girl onstage takes the microphone from the DJ.

"For those of you who don't know me," she says, "I'm Molly Clarkson, captain of your Eastbrooke Cougarettes dance team."

Some guy yells out, "Go, Cougars!"

It doesn't seem to faze her because she continues, "And where better to

announce our team this year than at our welcome-back dance? You might not know this, but only the captain is excluded from tryouts, and each year, a panel of impartial judges chooses who gets to be a part of our exclusive group. So, without further ado—”

Everyone hoots and hollers.

“Is she going to announce here who made the team?” I ask Beckham.

“Yeah, I guess. I thought it was weird they hadn’t done it last night at the carnival, as is their tradition. But this is fun. I like it.”

“I tried out,” I whisper.

“You did? That’s awesome. You’ve been taking dance pretty much your whole life, haven’t you?”

“Yeah. But—”

“But what?”

“I’m going to be sad if I don’t make it, but if I did, I suspect I’m going to have to go up there. And I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

Beck runs his knuckles gently across my cheek, then tightly holds my hand in solidarity. “Either way, I’m here.”

Molly starts reading names off a list, and everyone cheers as each person joins her onstage and is wrapped with a red-and-yellow feather boa, matching the school’s colors.

“And our next team member is Waverly Wright!”

My eyes go wide in shock. “She never told me that she was trying out!” I jump up and down and yell. I’m so happy for her. “Especially when I told her that I was trying out.” But then I realize she isn’t here. That she’s rock climbing with Hudson.

When she doesn’t come up onstage, Molly continues, “Maybe she was afraid she wouldn’t make it and didn’t want to get her hopes up.”

“That’s how I feel,” I tell him as another name is called out. “How many people make the team?”

“There are twelve spots,” Beckham says to me. “That was number nine. Meaning there’re only three more spots left.”

And although I’m fairly competitive when it comes to sports, I find myself surprised to discover that I must secretly really want to make the

dance team. Because I love to dance. And even though I didn't want to be on the team because my mom had been, I did really enjoy the tryouts.

Danielle's name is called out and then a girl named Allison.

My heart drops a little.

"I didn't make it," I whisper just as we hear, "And our last spot goes to Arrington!"

My eyes go wide in surprise. Laurent, Johnny, and Beckham start whooping it up, as do my brothers.

Then Beckham holds out his elbow. "May I escort you up to the stage?"

And although none of the other girls were escorted, I grab on to his arm, feeling nervous. He doesn't say anything, just puts on a wide grin and leads me to the stage, then holds my hand to help me up the stairs.

"And that's your dance team for this year!" Molly yells out. "How about it? Shall we show everyone what we've got?"

Everyone cheers as Molly tosses us all pom-poms, and we do the dance we did for tryouts—although, to be honest, I don't move the way I should because I absolutely don't want to rip this dress.

But as I look out into the crowd, I feel happy. Mostly because no one is screaming anything about me being pregnant. Or wondering why Augie isn't here. Or any of that.

"You were great up there," Laurent says to me.

"A total smokeshow," Johnny agrees. "Your dress is truly perfection."

"Which is all your doing," I say, giving him a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you so much for today. Laurent is looking pretty sexy too."

"That he is," Johnny says with a smirk as Beckham joins us.

He picks me up and twirls me around. "I'm so happy for you." But when he sets me down, he says, "Actually, I'm happy for me."

"Why?" I ask.

"Because the dance team wears outfits that I happen to admire."

"Meaning they are skimpy?" I say with a laugh.

"Maybe." He looks over my shoulder. "Oh boy."

"Oh boy what?"

"Betsy didn't make it. She was on the dance team the last two years and

didn't make it her senior year. Whew. That's rough."

"Maybe you should go talk to her."

He grimaces. "No, she and Danielle are looking at you. Or me. Or both of us."

"So, it's my fault she didn't make it?"

"Absolutely not. And just for the record, you looked hot up there."

"That's exactly what I was going for," I tease. "I'm gonna run to the bathroom, okay?"

"We'll be waiting for you when you get back."

"I'm sure, when I get back, you'll be dancing with someone else. I can feel the wolves circling already."

To this, Beck just laughs.

So much drama.

10:30pm

I've just finished peeing, and I'm ready to come out of the stall when two sets of heels clomp into the bathroom.

"I just don't get it," one voice says.

"Get what?" the other says.

"The pregnant chick."

"Arrington."

"Whatever. A prince leaves his country to be here for her. She shows up tonight with not one, not two, but *three* hot guys. One of whom is *the* Beckham Johnson. I mean, what, does she have a golden pussy?"

"She must because she's not that pretty."

"Actually, she is. Half the time, I don't think she even wears makeup, and tonight, she looks like she walked off the freaking red carpet. I mean, that dress. And her entrance?"

"I know, right? She might as well have been carried in on a throne by her harem, like freaking Cleopatra."

"Or a golden chariot—to match the pussy." Her friend laughs.

“Do you ever wish you could cause so much drama?”

“Absolutely,” the friend says.

I cause drama?

I flush the toilet even though I already did, straighten my dress, walk out of the stall, and quickly wash my hands.

The girls stand there motionless, their red faces showing embarrassment over my hearing what they said.

I give them an eyebrow raise. “It’s not golden, girls. It’s titanium. And scented. Have a good night.”

“Ohmigawd,” they say as I head toward the door.

But drama isn’t on my mind as I walk toward Beckham.

He holds his hands out toward me, then takes me in his arms. “You sick again?”

“No. Just when I was about to come out of the stall, some girls came in and were talking about me.”

“So, you waited till they left?”

“Uh, no. I walked out in the middle of their conversation.”

“Were they saying nasty things?”

“Sort of. I don’t want to talk about it. In fact, let’s go spend time with some gentle creatures who don’t gossip.”

“The stables it is,” he says, holding out his elbow to me again.

“I’m going to grab some waters first,” I tell him. “I’ll meet you out front in a few.”

He heads outside while I quickly type out a group text to Johnny, Laurent, Waverly, and Hudson, letting them know we’re going to the stables, but just as I am about to hit *Send*, Branson grabs me and pulls me around the corner.

“We need to talk,” he says.

“No, we don’t.”

He stares at me for a moment, then kisses me.

Tries to shove his tongue in my mouth.

I attempt to pull back, only to find myself pinned against the wall.

I suddenly feel a little sick. And, honestly, disgusted by him.

And pissed. Pissed he would think it’s okay to kiss me.

I try to tell him to stop, but my words are smothered by his lips.

I act instinctively, bringing my knee up with force, right into his crotch.

“Oof,” he says, backing away, his hands immediately going to his groin.

“That was brilliant,” Johnny Fab says from behind him, “but probably not enough to teach him a lesson.” He forms a fist, pulls his arm back, and then quickly strikes Branson in the face.

Branson crumples to the floor in pain.

Johnny taps him with his custom Gucci shoe and goes, “Don’t you *ever* touch her again.”

Then he escorts me back to the dance.

When we walk by Aspen, he looks at me and says, “Why are you bleeding?”

I touch the corner of my lip, realizing I must have bitten it. Or maybe Branson did.

“Excuse me, please,” Johnny says, leaving me standing there as he gathers both my brothers and gives them an earful.

Monroe is the first to pull me into a hug. “Are you okay?”

“Do you finally believe me?” I almost shout.

“Believe you about what?”

“That Branson isn’t the kind of person you should have as a friend.”

His face sobers, and he nods, but Aspen marches right past him, heading toward where Branson probably still is.

“Go get him, Roe,” I tell my brother. “Seriously, Branson isn’t worth it.”

Monroe takes off.

“Thank you,” I say to Johnny.

“Looks like you handled yourself just fine.”

“My mom made sure we took self-defense classes when we were growing up. After seeing the movies, I understand why, and now, I’m grateful.”

“Should we head back to the house?”

“No. I was just about to text you,” I say, holding up my phone and showing him what I typed but had yet to send. “Unless you want to stay here. Like, if you’re having fun, you don’t have to leave.”

“I think a horseback ride in the moonlight with my friends sounds more

fun than this,” he says, hitting *Send* on my text.
And I have to agree with him.

A natural.
10:45pm

On the way down to the stables, Beckham and Laurent are chatting away, oblivious to what just happened, but Johnny is studying me.

“You okay?” he whispers.

I nod even though I’m not sure I am. I’m shaken, my stomach in knots. And my mind is going a million miles a minute, trying to understand why Branson kissed me.

Why would he force it when he can barely stand to speak to me? Did he think it would be romantic? Some gesture on his part? Was he trying to make things up to me? To be my friend again? Or to be more than friends?

“Why wouldn’t she be okay?” Beckham asks.

“Because Branson pushed her up against the wall and kissed her just before we left,” Johnny replies.

Beckham stops walking. “Why did he do that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did he not say anything?” he questions.

“He said that we needed to talk. Then he kissed me. Tried to shove his tongue in my mouth. It was ... not pleasant.”

“It wasn’t just unpleasant,” Johnny says, getting worked up. “It was assault.”

“He used to be my best friend,” I mutter.

Johnny looks at me seriously. “I get it. Being pushed against a wall and kissed by someone you are sexually attracted to is totally hot. And, yes, there are times when one person thinks the other person is into them, goes in for the kiss, and is rejected. Like at the end of a date. It’s awkward and embarrassing. But kissing someone without their consent is not cool. And *is* a form of assault.”

“He didn’t assault me,” I say, stupidly sticking up for him. But then I wonder. “Did he?”

“Did you consent to be kissed?”

“No, but I have in the past.”

“Then why did you knee him?” Johnny asks.

“You kneed him?” Laurent says.

“And after that, I punched him,” Johnny says. “That boy needs to be taught a lesson.”

“You gave him an unwanted punch. Isn’t that a form of assault too?” I ask.

Johnny shakes his head at me. “Again, why did you knee him?”

“Because I sort of felt trapped. And for a moment, I felt ... a little scared. I just reacted.”

“A kiss you weren’t expecting can be a pleasant surprise when it’s from someone you’re into or something undesirable from someone you’re not. Either way, it’s important that the person who kissed you knows how you feel. And I think you let Branson know how his kiss made you feel. Quite clearly. I just felt the need to emphasize that message. But you’re right, Arrington. I suppose I could get in trouble for punching him,” Johnny says.

“Not in my house,” Beckham says to him. “Not in that situation. Imagine what could have happened if she hadn’t kneed him. If you hadn’t been there.”

I put my hand up to my face, rubbing it across my eyebrows, trying to relieve the stress I feel. There’s a part of me that wants to call Branson. To ask him what the heck that was all about. The motivation behind it. The other part of me never wants to talk to him again.

My thoughts turn toward Augie. Thinking of his handsome face in front of me, leaning in for kisses. And how happy they make me.

I realize that I haven’t checked my phone since we left for the dance. Augie left around two thirty. A seven-hour flight and an hour drive to Balmoral would put him there around now. I reach down and flip the flap open on the little chained bag that was paired with my dress and pull out my phone. I have a text from Waverly that they are on their way and one from Augie from just a few minutes ago.

HRH: Finally arrived and am tucked into bed. I hope you had fun at the dance in my absence, and I'm really sorry I had to miss it. I confess to looking at the photos Johnny sent of you a few million times already. You are incredibly beautiful. And I might have to come up with a new nickname for you. My little lark seems too small for the woman in that dress. I can't wait to have you back in my arms, Arrington.

Me: Something happened at the dance. Just a few minutes ago. Branson tried to kiss me. Actually, he did kiss me. Pushed me up against a wall in the hall when I was about to leave, told me we needed to talk, but then kissed me. I didn't like it, and it felt ... icky. I might have kneed him, and then Johnny might have punched him in the face. It all happened a little fast. And I will admit, I'm a little shook.

HRH: And I'm outraged. How dare he kiss you?! I'm glad you did what you did and that Johnny punched him. When I get back . . .

Me: When you get back, you are going to kiss me properly. I hope.

HRH: Your wish is my command. Do you think ... that you and Branson need to have a sit-down? Talk things out?

Me: After his recent behavior, my answer to that is no freaking way.

HRH: Then he and I are most definitely going to have a chat. What he did was unacceptable. I need to get to sleep, we've got breakfast in a few hours, but call me if you need to talk, alright?

Me: Thank you. Good night, Your Royal Highmess.

I put my phone away with a smile. And my smile gets bigger when we arrive at the stables. Somewhere I've always felt very at home at.

But then I realize that I probably can't really ride a horse in this dress. Let alone these heels.

I pause and turn toward Johnny.

"It can be dry-cleaned," he says, reading my mind. "A dress like that is so striking that it can really only be worn once anyway. I'll take care of getting blankets on the horses. You figure out who has ridden before. Maybe have the people who haven't pair up. You can put Laurent with me."

Waverly and Hudson join us.

I run toward her and yell out, "Ahhh! You made the dance team! With me! We both did!"

"No way!" she says.

"Why didn't you tell me you had tried out?"

She shrugs. "I had no idea of the competition, and even though they said it was judged by an impartial panel and that no one who had previously been on the team was guaranteed a spot, I figured it was still sort of rigged to favor them. Figured I probably wouldn't make it. But now, I'm really happy that we get to do it together."

She gets congrats from Beckham, Laurent, and Johnny.

Hudson goes, "Dance team, huh?" Like he's confused by this.

"Our dance team is smoking hot," Beckham says to him. "Waverly will fit right in. And wait until you see their skimpy little costumes."

Hudson looks from Beckham to Waverly, like he's trying to picture it.

I pull her aside. "Speaking of getting to *do it together*, how did rock climbing go?"

"It was, um, fun."

"What does that mean?"

"I enjoy rock climbing. He took to it easily, although it's probably no surprise. He's very athletic." She can't stop a grin from forming on her face.

"I assume you're referring to his body?"

"Yes, ohmigosh, he had on this tank top. And the muscles. When he was climbing. With his arms. And the legs. And I was supposed to be belaying for him. I mean, I was, but one time, I got slightly distracted by"—she holds out her hand, palm up, and makes circles in the air—"all that, and he fell a little

farther than he should have. I was hoping—”

She stops mid-sentence when Hudson joins us, and I can tell she’s freaking out, worrying that he might have overheard what she just said.

“Hey, Hudson,” I say to him. “Waverly says you’re a natural at rock climbing. Did you have a good time?”

“Yeah, it was a great workout,” he says, studying me. “You look different.”

“I’m dressed up for the dance. You ready to learn to ride?”

“I am!” Beckham yells from behind me, and I roll my eyes, knowing what he’s referring to. Because he totally knows his way around horses.

Johnny calls Hudson over, and we give him the basics.

“Horses are big,” Hudson says, causing Johnny to call him Captain Obvious.

“Bigger is better,” Beck quips.

“They are,” I say to Hudson, ignoring Beck and focusing on the fact that Hudson might be freaking out a little over their size. “Would you prefer to ride with a partner your first time?”

“Partners do make riding so much more fun,” Beckham adds.

I turn and glare at him.

“Will you ride with me?” Hudson asks me seriously.

“Are you nervous?” I ask him.

“A little,” he confides.

I take his arm and lead him over to one of the horses. “Horses pick up on your feelings.”

I reach out and rub my hand down the horse’s face and talk to her. “This is Hudson. He’s going to ride you tonight. It’s his first time, so I need you to be gentle with him. No going too fast. No bucking. Just nice, slow, and easy.”

“Is it just me, or are you getting turned on?” Beckham says from behind us, causing Laurent to start laughing.

“Ignore him,” I say to Hudson. “How did Waverly make you feel while you learned to rock climb?”

“She’s a great teacher. Patient. Competent. Especially since heights bother me a little.”

“All right,” Johnny says, “the horses are ready to go. Pair up, and let’s get started.”

I turn toward Beck and narrow my eyes at him, daring him to make another comment. He just gives me a wide grin.

“If it’s okay with you, I’d like you to ride with Waverly until you get more comfortable around the horse,” I tell Hudson. “But I’ll lead the horse around a bit first.”

Johnny hands me a pair of riding boots. “Put these on. You can wear the dress, but no way you can walk through the arena in those heels.”

“You think of everything.”

Johnny quickly has Laurent up on a horse with him and is trotting around the arena. Beckham is on a gorgeous chocolate palomino. I choose an American Quarter Horse for Hudson and Waverly. She might be tall, but they tend to be a gentle breed, and I can tell she’s a sweetheart. I let Waverly get on first and then help Hudson up behind her.

“You’ll want to hold her around her waist,” I suggest.

Hudson doesn’t even seem to consider the implications of this, just wraps his arms around her, causing Waverly’s entire face to break out in a beaming grin. I lead the horse around a few laps, then stop and ask Hudson how he feels.

“Good,” he says.

I hand Waverly the reins, then let her take over as Beck rides up to me. He grips my arm to help hoist me up, causing my dress to ride high on my thigh, but I know there’s no way I can get my legs around the horse in it. Sidesaddle it is.

“You look like such a girl,” he says with a laugh at my positioning. “Usually, your hair is braided, and you’ve got the horse running fast, leaving me in the dust.”

“Well, I guess there’s a first time for everything.”

Beckham glances back at my legs and shakes his head. “There sure is.”

Didn’t mean to.

11:52pm

When we get back to the house, Laurent and I go into the kitchen to grab a snack, then head upstairs.

“Today was fun,” he says.

I grab his arm and pull him into my room. “I need to get out of this dress and into something more comfortable.”

“Are you trying to seduce me?”

I laugh. “I meant my robe.”

“I know,” he says, laughing too. “It’s just what girls always say in movies, and then they come out in some sexy lingerie.”

“My robe *is* kinda silky,” I tease, running into my closet and quickly changing.

When I come back out, I plop down on my bed while he sits sideways across my chair.

“Can you believe Johnny punched Branson?”

“What I can’t believe is that you were ever friends with him. He’s a jerk.”

“He didn’t used to be,” I say with a sigh. “But it certainly seems like he has become one. So, did you have fun at the dance? And is it just me, or do you and Johnny have some chemistry?”

“We’re friends.”

I nod then drop flat on my back, my head landing on my pillow.

But then I sit back up.

Feel my sheets.

“He didn’t!” I say.

Laurent gets up and runs his hands across my pillowcase. “Oh!” he says. “Do you think he did my bed too?”

“Let’s go see!”

I follow Laurent to his room. Discover he also has amazing new sheets. We grin at each other and then go knock on Johnny’s door.

“I wondered when you’d finally notice.” Johnny is dressed in a silk robe and holding a flute of champagne.

I throw my arms around him. “Seriously, you are the best.”

Laurent joins our hug. “Agreed.”

“I literally can’t wait to go to bed. And now, I’m so excited about it.” I’m feeling totally relaxed for the first time in the last twenty-four hours.

I’m ready to walk out of his room when my phone rings, causing me to plop down on his bed.

They nod their heads at me and take seats across from each other at Johnny’s chess table and start playing.

“It’s London,” I tell them.

I don’t get a chance to say anything to her because as soon as I click to answer, she goes, “You kicked Branson in the balls and punched him? He’s hurt and bleeding again!”

“I didn’t punch him, London. Johnny did.”

“But why would he do that? Branson is so sweet.”

“Did you ask Branson why that happened to him?” I ask her.

“Uh, no.”

“Well, maybe you should have before you called me, using an accusatory tone and insinuating that whatever happened was my fault. And for the record, I kneed him. And I don’t just go around kneeing guys for fun.”

I hang up and let out a sigh. “All right, I think I’m going to call it a night.”

Laurent and Johnny are already into their chess game and seem to have barely noticed me talking.

But when I say I’m leaving, they both look up, and Johnny goes, “She’s being dumb.”

“Yeah, I know. Night.”

The boys get up and give me cheek kisses, and I walk across the hall to my room. The truth is, I want to go to sleep, but I also don’t want to be alone. And when I see Beckham’s door, I decide to knock on it.

He answers, wearing nothing but a pair of boxers.

And what a sight it is. I’ve known him for years, and obviously, I have seen him shirtless a zillion times at the beach, but him standing here now, all tanned muscles and abs, almost makes me wish I *did* have a golden pussy. One that would magically make him want me and no one else.

And even though I know better than that, it doesn't stop my gaze from rolling down his body. But then I realize there is probably a reason why he is dressed like this.

I look toward his bedroom and lower my voice, feeling embarrassed. "Oh my gosh. Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt—"

"Interrupt what?" He follows my eyes toward his door. "Oh. Um, there's no one here but me."

I let out a whoosh of air. "Okay."

"Did you want something?" he asks, his lips curling upward as he gives me a once-over.

And while what I was wearing felt totally appropriate for hanging out with Johnny and Laurent, I suddenly feel exposed. I self-consciously pull my robe shut in the front.

Beck takes hold of my hand and gently removes it. "I've seen you in pajamas before."

"I know, but this is Johnny's upgraded version."

Beck moves, circling around me, like I'm his prey.

"And he has exceptional taste," Beck says, coming to stand in front of me and licking his lips, looking eager for a taste.

I open my mouth to speak but quickly shut it, not even knowing what to say.

Finally, he goes, "You knocked on my door. Did you need something?" *You*, is the first thought that comes to mind.

But I can't exactly tell him that I am looking for comfort. That even though riding was fun, I'm still upset about Branson.

"Yes. Actually, I did. I wanted to thank you for going riding tonight. I appreciate it," I offer instead.

"You already told me that earlier," he counters.

"Oh. Yeah. I forgot. Sorry. Okay then. Good night."

I turn around, but Beckham grabs my hand.

"Sure you didn't come here for a *different* kind of riding?" he says.

His question hangs in the air.

"Beck," I say, feeling hurt he would tease me about something like that

right now, after everything that happened tonight with Branson. “No, I just—sorry I bothered you. Night, Beck.”

I turn toward the hall and shake my head as tears start streaming down my face.

“Tell me,” he says softly. He’s got ahold of my shoulders now, wanting me to turn toward him, but I can’t.

“People think Augie ditched me and isn’t coming back to Eastbrooke. London just called and yelled at me because I kned Branson. She made it sound like it was all my fault. And if that’s not bad enough, apparently I now have a golden pussy.”

Beckham practically chokes. “While I assume that being bionic down there might have some advantages, I’m not really following.”

He circles around me. “And you’re crying again.”

I close my eyes and nod my head.

He shakes his, takes my hand, and leads me toward his bedroom.

But I stop him.

“I was going to ask if you want to come to my room.”

“I thought you’d never ask,” he half-jokes. But then he studies me.

“Why?”

“This robe is soft, but not as soft as my new sheets. Maybe you want to feel them.”

Beck swallows hard, narrows his eyes, trying to understand.

“Feel *the sheets*,” I emphasize.

“Uh, yeah, sure,” he says.

A few steps, and we’re out his door and into my room.

I take a perch on my bed. “Feel them.”

Beckham comes to sit next to me and slides his hand down the sleeve of my robe. “I’d rather feel this.”

I take his hand off my arm, place it on the sheets, and move it in a circular motion.

His eyes go wide. “Those are the softest sheets ever.”

“Laurent and I were obsessing over them in Johnny’s room, and he surprised us tonight by putting a set on our beds.”

“That was really nice of him. You three are getting close, aren’t you?”

“I think so, yes. It was sweet of Johnny to arrange everything he did. It’s not like I’ve never vacationed on a yacht before, but his is over-the-top gorgeous and huge. And he literally flew in designers from luxury brands, had them bring a variety of outfits for us, plus models and tailors. There were stewards and a chef that was constantly bringing us out food and hands down the best champagne I’ve ever had in my life. I heard one of the staff say it cost, like, two hundred K a bottle.”

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah. He’s, like, beyond rich. It’s crazy.”

“Well, he has good taste,” he says, holding my gaze, “because you looked crazy beautiful tonight, Lane.”

“Thank you,” I say softly.

“Almost as good as you look in this skimpy little robe.”

“It’s not skimpy. It totally covers everything.”

“Still,” he says, smirking. “Scoot over, and let’s get under the covers. I want to feel these sheets all over me.”

I do as he asked, both of us snuggled up under the sheets.

He practically has an orgasm over how they make him feel, so I let him go on about them for a bit and tell him what they are made of, including the real gold thread.

Once he’s over it, he rolls onto his side and faces me. “After we got back here and you guys went upstairs, I was told a big secret.”

“What kind of secret?”

“That the baby you’re *not* having might be mine.”

I guess I’m not that good of an actress because I have to bite my lip to keep from busting out in laughter.

“Oh, really?” I try to act nonchalant, but I can’t hold it in. “Bahaha-haha.”

“You’re laughing,” he says, narrowing his eyes and studying me. “Why are you laughing about this?”

“Because I might have, um, suggested to Betsy that I might not know exactly who the father is.”

“Why did you lie?”

“Well, I tried to tell her the truth first—that I wasn’t pregnant—and she snarled and said she didn’t believe me. Was it mean when I know she likes you? Yes, probably. But she’s been horrible to me since the day I got here. It’s one thing not to like someone once you get to know them, but she hates me because of you. And that’s not fair.”

“You realize she’s going to tell everyone you’re sleeping with three guys.”

“Like it matters at this point. I can’t believe those girls live-streamed the video.”

“They shouldn’t have, and I suspect the girl whose account it was on will be expelled.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it’s one thing for a couple of guys to get in a scuffle—happens often. We consider EB like family. One big, dysfunctional family, but there is supposed to be respect. And privacy is a huge issue. I guarantee you, the school won’t stand for it.” He brings his hand up to caress my cheek. “And don’t let girls like Betsy turn you into something that you’re not.”

“A liar?”

He nods.

“Okay then, wise, old prefect, what should I have done instead? Was I just supposed to let her keep being mean to me? Calling me out in front of the house? And not stand up for myself?”

“You have the truth on your side. You should have reiterated it.”

“I just told you that I tried that. For goodness’ sake, if I were pregnant with Augie’s baby like she thought, I’d be carrying a future king or queen of England! Augie and I would marry, and I’d be a fucking princess. And I haven’t even dared to look at what people are saying online.” I shake my head.

“I have,” he says. “Although surprised by the news, most of England is actually excited about just that—an heir to the throne.”

He turns serious. “As your prefect, I’m telling you not to lie. I’m also telling you that I’ll deal with the Betsy situation. Because if she doesn’t shape

up, she'll be removed from this house."

"And as my friend?" I ask.

"As your friend," he says, his face getting closer to mine and his hand gliding through my hair, "I think what you said to Betsy, both about the puke and the fathers, was pretty fucking funny."

I stare into his eyes for a few beats. "Thank you."

He holds his arm out, and I launch myself against him as he wraps me in a hug. A hug that makes me feel like nothing else in the world matters.

But I have to ask, "That night, when you were talking to Betsy around the fire ..."

"When I told her about a friend I might be in love with and she thought I was talking about her?"

"Yeah. I felt bad for her, you know?"

"Want to know what's worse?" he says.

I nod my head.

"I was talking about you."

I swallow hard.

And while my heart wants to sing, my brain focuses on one word—*might*.

"Well, of course you love me. I love you too. You know that. We're friends. And I want to stay that way, Beck. Desperately. If I lost you too, I don't know what I'd do."

"When you say friends, are you saying total friend zone forever? Like, you'd *never* consider dating me?"

"You said, sometimes, Johnsons fall in love. And I know they do. All your uncles are happily married, except for Braxton. But Uncle Riley and Ariela were crazy in love when they were here, and ... it didn't work for ten years. They didn't even talk. I couldn't bear that, Beck. Then there's your uncle Dawson. While he dated his first wife at EB, he didn't marry her until college. Same with your dad. If it wasn't for him needing help to graduate and your mom being told to help him, he never would have—"

"Are you in love with Augie?" he interrupts. "Like, real love?"

"Yes, of course. I mean, I think so. I feel like I am."

"When did you tell him?"

“Outside the dean’s office last night. After I threw up. Not the most romantic setting, but we just had this moment. And it felt right. He said it, and I said it back.”

“Friends it is then,” Beck says, breaking out in a wide grin. “But I’m still flirting with you. That is the hallmark of our friendship. As a matter of fact, so is kissing.”

He leans in to kiss me, but I back away.

“You don’t want to make me a liar, do you, Beck?”

“I guess not.” He sighs, then lies back and snuggles me into his chest. “But we do need to talk more about this golden pussy.”

To this, I laugh. “When I was in the bathroom at the dance, some girls came in, and they were talking about our entrance.”

“It was pretty awesome.”

“They mentioned Augie leaving his country for me, then how I showed up tonight with not one, not two, but *three* hot guys, one of whom was *the* Beckham Johnson. You have a fan club.”

“Were they hot?” is the first thing out of his mouth. He really just can’t help it.

“I honestly couldn’t tell you what they even looked like—I was so embarrassed—but that’s when one of the girls was like, *What, does she have a golden pussy?* I guess one is required to snag four hotties. Anyway, I wasn’t going to just hide in the bathroom stall anymore, so I walked out.”

“And they were probably like, *Oh shit.*”

“They were definitely surprised. And that’s when I told them it wasn’t golden. It was titanium. And scented.”

Beckham starts laughing out loud. “I wish I could have been there for that. I would have been cracking up so hard. It’s a really good comeback.”

“Eh. Really, I should have said carbon fiber. It would be much lighter.”

He laughs some more. “I suppose it would depend on if you were going for speed or strength.”

“They also said that I cause drama. I’ve never caused drama in my life, Beck.”

“Welcome to Eastbrooke, huh?”

“There was no drama in London.”

“There would be if you were there.”

“That’s not true. I was there for two months. Zero drama.”

“Did you hang out with anyone other than Augie?”

“Of course. He introduced me to his best mates. We went dancing a few times, and his friend Harry is a club member, and his girlfriend, Olivia, was really cool. We all got along well.”

“You like Hawthorne though.”

“I probably would if it wasn’t for Betsy and Danielle. But honestly, that’s your drama spilling over onto me.”

“And what about your drama with Branson?”

“Wouldn’t be an issue if I left. Heck, he’d probably be happy about it.”

“I wouldn’t be.”

Sunday, August 28th

Worth the trouble.

8:30am

Not surprisingly, I wake up alone.

Love them and leave them, Beck always says, only I didn't get loved.

Well, that's not true. Beck held me until I went to sleep.

If that's not a form of love, I don't know what is. And I know I'm so lucky to have a friend like him.

I grab my phone as I'm thinking back to yesterday. It seems like so much has happened since Augie scored his first lacrosse goal at Eastbrooke.

I smile when I see a text that is just two emojis. A bird and a phone.

I hit his number and call him.

"Good morning, my sweet," he says in a dreamy voice.

"And good afternoon to you. How is everything there?"

"When I landed, the media was waiting for me at the airport. Shouting out a million questions."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing. Got in the car and went to Balmoral." He pauses. "Where my grandfather was waiting to talk to me about *the mess in America*."

"Oh, that doesn't sound good." I laugh in spite of it all. "But then again, I do call you Your Royal High-mess for a reason."

He laughs along with me. "Grandfather was very supportive. Said it will blow over. That it always does. And that it is up to me—well, you and me—to decide what message is released, but he did suggest that we explain the nature of our relationship. He also ruffled my hair and told me that I had better not best him at skeet on his birthday."

"So, he's not mad?"

"He's not. Which is quite the relief. Especially after the way my parents

reacted. But apparently, everyone was given strict orders not to discuss it at the party.”

“Gotta love grandpas. That sounds like something Doogie would say.”

“What do you think our statement should be? I know that we have only been officially dating since the carnival. And after everything that has happened, well—”

My heart drops, as I instantly know what he’s going to say next. That we’re over. That we’re over before we really got started. I try to steady my breath, waiting for him to say the words. Words I do not want to hear.

After what happened with Branson. With our friendship. And how he broke my trust. I feel like, in a way, he ruined me for future relationships. Because if you can’t trust your lifelong best friend, how do you ever trust a boy you’ve only been hanging out with for a couple of months?

“It’s okay, Augie,” I choke out, trying my best not to start crying as I realize how invested I am in our relationship. How much I’ve come to care for him. “I understand. You don’t have to say it.” Because I don’t want to hear those words. Hear him say that, sometimes, love isn’t enough. That I’m not worth the drama. And to be honest, I would totally understand, but that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t be crushed.

“Don’t have to say what?” he asks.

“That you want to break up,” I reply, trying to hold it together long enough to get off the phone.

“Why would I want to do that, Arrington? I love you.” His voice cracks. “Or am I not worth the trouble? My being in the public eye.”

I let out a laugh when I realize he’s worried about the same thing I am.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Because I’ve been sitting here, practically in tears, waiting for you to break up with me because *I’m* not worth the trouble.”

Immediately, my phone notifies me that he wants to video chat.

“Um, I just woke up. Haven’t even looked in the mirror,” I tell him.

“I love the way you look in the morning, my little lark. Answer, please.”

I sigh and accept, turning on my video. When his face fills the screen, I can’t help but smile. He looks so adorable, dressed in his English countryside

tweeds, his blond curls a riot from being outside and causing him to look rakishly handsome.

“I love you, Arrington.”

I smile. “I love you too, Augie.”

“Good, because I’m going to hand my phone over to the press secretary, who is following me outside, where I’m going to make an official statement to the press. I want you to watch.” He grins at me.

“Augie, why do I get the feeling you didn’t get this approved by anyone?”

“Because I didn’t. Actually, that’s not true. I told my grandfather what I would say if I was allowed to speak freely. And he told me that I should.”

The press secretary is given the phone and is walking a pace or two behind Augie. I can see that he’s flanked by a protection detail as he makes his way to the castle gates, where there are numerous news trucks just outside. They all jump to attention when they notice the procession coming toward them.

The gates part, and Augie steps outside.

“Prince Augie!” is shouted.

“I’d like to make a statement, if you all would be so kind as to listen,” Augie says pleasantly.

Cameras and recording devices are quickly raised into position.

The press secretary gives a signal, and Augie starts speaking. “I understand a video of me, taken at a school in America, has gone viral. One where I was involved in a bit of a scrap.”

The press chuckle, and I do too. I love the way he’s downplaying it.

“My official statement to the press is that the rumors of a royal pregnancy are completely unfounded.”

Short and to the point, I think, knowing my mom says that’s usually the best way to handle these things.

“Does anyone have any questions?” Augie asks.

I expect them to all yell stuff out, but instead, they politely raise their hands before one is signaled by the press secretary to speak.

“Is it true that you are dating the daughter of the American actress Keatyn

Arrington?” the journalist asks.

Augie smiles at her. “The short answer is yes.”

“And the long answer?” she asks hopefully.

“Lane Arrington came to London to intern for the summer at her family’s private club. My father and I had dinner at the club one night, and even though our families have been friends since we were mere babes, it had been a few years since we had seen each other. And I can’t lie. I was literally stunned silent by her. My father, thankfully, must have noticed because he suggested that we should spend some time together.

“And I’m sure you can tell by the smile that resides on my face whenever I speak of her that I am completely smitten. So enamored that I might be going to a school in America to be with her.

“The night of the incident, we were at a carnival, and just before the scuffle broke out, I gave her a token of my love—a necklace to match her gorgeous green eyes—and asked her to officially be my girlfriend.”

“So, how did the pregnancy rumors come about?”

And I love that question. Because it means they believe him.

“That bit was my fault. You see, here in the UK, some of our words mean different things than they do in other places. I expressed to someone that I had come to America in Arrington’s time of need. It was assumed by the accuser that I meant because she was pregnant. But that is not what I was referring to. We had decided she would attend school with me in London this term. When her parents didn’t agree with our plan, we were both upset, and I flew across the pond to be with her. I know it was impetuous of me, but the heart—”

“Makes us do crazy things,” a reporter offers.

“It most certainly does. And I will ask a favor of you. That you will be respectful of our privacy.”

“Could Arrington be our future princess?”

Augie’s face beams with a smile. “See,” he says with a laugh, “I can’t even hide it.”

He waves goodbye to the group and heads back to the castle, taking his phone back and talking to me while he walks.

“We probably need to have your family’s publicist echo what I just said.”

“Maybe have your publicist call my mom’s publicist. Oh, wait. No!”

“Why not?” he asks.

“Well, because my mom’s publicist is Branson’s mom.”

“Oh, that’s a little awkward.”

“I’ll just text my mom, tell her you made a statement and that they don’t really need to even address the situation.”

He walks over to a garden bench and takes a seat. “I’m so sorry that I missed the dance. How was it? Did you have fun?”

“Yes, and no.”

“Tell me about the fun parts,” he encourages.

“Johnny, in true Fab fashion, insisted that we arrive late and make an entrance.”

“To make a point?”

“Yes. That the rumors weren’t going to stop me from being there. I honestly thought no one would even notice, but the door banged open, and everyone turned in our direction. Of course, it didn’t hurt that I had three dates.”

“Three?”

“Well, not actual dates. Escorts, if you will.”

“Who was the third?”

“Beckham.”

“That was nice of him.”

“It was. Anyway, the four of us danced in a group and—oh, I didn’t tell you, but I tried out for the dance team, and they announced who made it. And I did!”

“Congratulations.”

“Things kind of went downhill from there. When I was in the bathroom, some girls were talking about me.”

“About the pregnancy?” he asks, taking a sip of water from a bottle.

“About the fact that they thought I must have a golden pussy in order to snag the likes of you.”

Augie blows the water out of his mouth, then starts cough-laughing.

I roll my eyes at him while he bites his lip. I can tell he wants to say something naughty in reply. I see the smirk on his face, the gleam in his eye. Watch him glance around.

“That sort of sets big expectations.”

“If it were true, maybe. I just want it to be casual, Augie, when we do. Like, it just needs to happen organically, when we feel ready.”

“Plus, I still owe you a date.”

“We already had a date. At the carnival. And it was perfect, Augie.”

“Still, I picture something a little more extravagant. In fact, that gives me an idea,” he says, smiling. “Johnny mentioned that there is a US holiday coming up.”

“Labor Day. Yeah. We have some time off of school.”

“Then that’s it. One long, lavish weekend together. On Johnny’s yacht.”

“Johnny wants to have some party, where keg beer is served.”

“He told me he has a big boat. I bet that we could find plenty of private spaces.”

“I was also granted my very own permanent stateroom.”

“We’ll have the best time,” Augie says.

“I think so too. And when we go, we’ll know.”

“Know what?”

“Whether or not we’ll be staying at Eastbrooke.”

“I can’t believe we have to decide already. But I know which way I’m leaning.”

“You want to stay, don’t you?”

“I do.” I hear a hushed voice in the background, and then he says, “Sorry, I have to go. They’re calling me in. Oh, and I probably won’t be at school on Monday.” He says it in a nonchalant way, but there’s something in his voice.

I suck in a breath. “Augie.”

“What?”

“What if it’s not just Monday? What if they don’t let you come back at all? What if the birthday party was just a ploy to get you home?”

“Because it actually is my grandfather’s birthday,” he states.

“I guess.”

“I promise I’ll be back. My goal is to leave first thing in the morning, which should put me back at school after lunch, but I’m not sure what my parents have already planned.”

“Okay, well, have fun at the birthday party.”

“I will. I miss you,” he says, a little frown forming on his face.

I grin at him. “But you get to see me tomorrow.”

“I get to *kiss* you tomorrow.”

“And I can’t wait. And, Augie, thank you.”

“For what?”

“The things you said to the press.”

His face breaks out in a wide grin. “I simply spoke the truth. Bye, my love.”

No-drama day.

8:45am

I end the call with a dreamy sigh just as there is a knock on my door.

“Yeah?” I call out.

No one answers, but the door cracks open, and I hear Beck say, “You decent?”

“I hope I’m more than decent,” I quip, causing him to come into the room.

“You’re still in bed?” he asks.

“Since when are you Mr. Early Bird?”

“If I am, does that mean you’ll birdcall me?” he fires back with a smirk.

“Shut up. It’s cute.”

He comes to sit on the edge of the bed. “You’re cute.”

“Oh boy. What do you want, Beck?”

He holds his hand against his heart. “I can’t believe you’d suggest I would need to butter up my very bestest friend in the world to get her to help me.”

“Hmm, *butter up* has a slight sexual connotation to it. That what you have

in mind, Beck?”

“Why do you keep calling me Beck?”

“Because it’s your name.”

“It is.”

“You must be in serious need if you ignored the *butter*.”

“I’ve waited three years for this. I am serious.”

“Three years for me to be here with you?”

“No. I’ve only waited two years for that, silly, since you are younger than me.”

“Okay, I give. What have you been waiting for?”

“To paint my parking space.”

“And you’re excited about that?”

“Yes, it’s a permanent home for my car. And because I’m a prefect, I have a highly visible spot. Baby is going to be on full display.”

“I still can’t believe your car is named Baby.”

He rolls his eyes. “You know the tradition.”

“I assume you are referring to the Johnson family tradition that supposedly goes back three or four generations, depending on who you ask, where all the Johnson men come together—cousins, uncles, fathers, grandfathers—not to defend their country or strive for world peace, but for a rite of passage. To choose the perfect car for each offspring’s seventeenth birthday—and to name it.”

“You sound like you’re making fun of that tradition.”

I grin up at him. “Oh, I wouldn’t dare. And I assume you have a plan?”

He pulls a piece of paper out and holds it up to me, showing off a brightly colored rectangle, filled with groovy bubble letters that spell out *Baby* and neon flower-power flowers surrounding it.

“This is very cool,” I tell him. “You’re a really good artist. And it will go well with your car.”

“Thank you. So, will you help me?”

“Of course—”

I no sooner get the words out of my mouth when he pulls a shirt out of his back pocket and hands it to me. “Wear this.”

I hold it up, finding a plain white T-shirt that has the sleeves cut off. I notice he's wearing the same thing with a pair of neon-orange running shorts.

"We have a uniform for this?"

"Yes, we do," he says, grinning. "Now, go get dressed so we can be among the first to get out there!"

"Good thing you didn't invite Johnny to help. He'd have to make a fashionably late entrance."

"*Au contraire*," Johnny says from my door.

I notice he's decked out in a matching sleeveless tee, only instead of neon shorts, he has on what one can only assume are designer cargo pants—in electric blue. Laurent is behind him, wearing khaki shorts with his tee. His sleepy eyes tell me he isn't as excited about this as Beckham and Johnny appear to be.

I go into my closet, deciding to embrace the situation and finding it funny that while I didn't bring anything suitable for a school dance, I do have something that goes with this whole theme. I dig through a pile and pull out my favorite pair of jean shorts, ones that have flower appliqués in neon yellow, pink, and green. I take them into my bathroom, along with a clean pair of undies, and put them on. I get dressed, brush my teeth, pull my hair back into a high pony, and then look at myself in the mirror. The tee is a little big, so I scrunch it up to just under my boobs, grab the ends, and tie a knot, allowing my midriff to show.

Then I go back out and say, "There'd better be some coffee involved—"

"You have shorts that match," Beck says in awe.

"You probably shouldn't wear your shirt like that," Laurent says. "We don't need any more drama."

I give Beck a pointed look.

He holds up his hands. "It will be a no-drama day. I promise!"

"Yeah, right," Laurent counters, only to get shushed by Johnny.

"Coffee first?" I ask.

Johnny doesn't say anything, just leads us to his room, where he has a spread of croissants on Hermès china plates. I pick one up and discover it is still warm.

“Where did you get these—” I start to say, but Beckham has already shoved one into his mouth and is like, “Holy shit, these are the best I’ve ever had.”

“That’s what most people say about me,” Johnny quips.

Beck goes, “Bro.”

I roll my eyes at them, but then Johnny hands me a thermal mug. I smile at him and take a careful sip, not wanting to burn my mouth.

“Better?” he asks me.

“Much,” I say, taking another sip and then a bite of croissant. The one I chose was chocolate, and I agree with Beck—it’s delicious.

“These were made by my personal chef,” Johnny tells Beckham.

“He should make them every day!” Beck says gleefully.

“Actually, I’d like to discuss just that with you and the other prefects when we have some time. What are your plans for the holiday weekend?”

“I’m going to our place in the Hamptons.”

“Any chance I could persuade you to join us on my yacht?”

“*Your* yacht?”

“You should see it,” Laurent gushes. “Huge, luxurious, and the best food I’ve ever had in my entire life.”

“It will be a small group of us,” I add. “But for one night, Johnny’s flying in people for a party—international friends, recording stars, DJs—”

“Models?” Beck asks, his eyes lighting up.

“Of course,” Johnny says.

“I’m in,” Beck says.

“Of course you are,” I mutter.

“I would love your help in getting the other prefects to come,” Johnny says. “I was hoping if they had a weekend of my chef’s cuisine, I might be able to convince them to allow him and his staff to cook for Hawthorne.”

“If we ate like this every day, I’d be all for that!” Beckham, not surprisingly, says. “Just not sure our budget would allow it.”

“I’m sure we could work something out,” Johnny says. “But for now, let’s go paint.”

We stop at Beckham’s room to grab all his supplies, then make our way

out to the parking lot across from Hawthorne.

“Which one is your car?” Laurent asks Beckham.

“It’s that green one.” I point toward it.

“What is it?” Laurent wonders as we walk that way.

“A 1968 Lamborghini Miura,” Beckham says.

“Those are pretty rare,” Johnny says, obviously as well-versed in vintage automobiles as he is in vintage champagnes.

“Yes. Only 750 were made between 1966 and 1973,” Beck tells him. “My family has a tradition where our older brothers, cousins, uncles, grandpas, and dad all shop for the perfect car for each kid’s seventeenth birthday. I guess they found it at an auction. It’s only had a few owners since it was first sold in Italy decades ago, but it needed work and underwent an extensive yearlong restoration, where the aluminum body was painted this awesome green color. Lamborghini calls it Verde Miura.”

“Her name is Baby,” I tell the boys.

“As it should be,” Johnny says, cooing to the car in Italian about her beautiful, curvy body.

Boys and their cars.

“I want to buy a car,” I announce. “You guys wanna help me?”

“I’m surprised you didn’t get a car for your sixteenth birthday,” Laurent says.

I shrug. “I didn’t. Plus, legally, I can’t drive alone until October. But that’s coming up soon!”

“If you’re still here,” Beck says, “we will.”

“That’s a downer,” Laurent says.

Beckham just shrugs, then leads us over to a prime, up-front, empty parking space. I figured a lot of seniors would be here already, but we seem to be the first.

“How come no one else is out here?”

“Guess they aren’t as excited as I am,” Beck says. “Plus, with the dance, a lot of people were up late. But, trust me, they will be out here painting all day. And it’s an Eastbrooke tradition that the freshman class work the food truck that’s brought in.”

“Very cool,” Laurent says.

“Although I doubt they can top those croissants,” I offer.

“I should hope not,” Johnny says, aghast.

“So, the plan is to draw this out,” Beckham says, taking out the paper with his design plan on it, “with white chalk, and then we’ll fill it in with the paint colors, as shown.”

When we’ve finished with the chalk drawing and started the painting process, more seniors are working on the spaces, and the food truck is open.

“You guys want anything?” I ask, wanting to get a bottle of water and a snack for myself.

“Whatever looks good,” Beck says, his head down and his mind focused on his work.

And I will say, it’s fun to see his idea come to fruition.

And it’s fun to see the start of so much art. Some girls have their names, designer logos, their favorite activity or sport. Guys have similar things—abstract designs, cars, sports, designer logos, all trying to give homage either to themselves, their vehicles, or their school in a single rectangle. It makes me wonder what I will do next year.

And then I wonder if I should even be here *this* year.

Infamous.

11am

I get a bunch of food, take it back, snack for a bit, then keep painting the bright pink flowers. Johnny is working on the neon green and Laurent the bright yellow.

“It’s a good thing you suggested working from the inside out,” Laurent says to Beckham when we’re almost finished.

“That’s the tricky part,” Beckham says, “especially with all of us working together. Not to smudge the paint.”

“You’re purposefully smudging your paint,” I tease, watching him finish

the tie-dye swirls inside the letters that make up the car's name.

Once those letters are done, we'll only have the very bottom of the space left.

"Smart-ass." Beck reaches out and swipes paint across my nose.

"Hey!" I grab my brush and run it down his arm, giving him a stripe of neon pink.

He doesn't move. Doesn't say anything. But he, Laurent, and Johnny share a glance.

"Go," Laurent says, and all three of them jump up and start swiping their paintbrushes at me.

I run over to a section of grass so they don't screw up our handiwork, pulling Johnny along with me and attempting to hide behind him.

But then Beck literally tosses paint straight from the can in our direction, covering Johnny's electric-blue cargos and my bare legs with neon-green paint splatters.

"Oh, so that's how it's going to be," Johnny says, lifting up the can of pink paint in his hands.

"Get them," I tell him, but instead, he turns around and takes aim at me, splattering so much of it across the white tee I'm wearing that it starts rolling down the skin on my exposed stomach.

But ...

I run my hand across my stomach, picking up the paint, then rush Beck, catching him off guard and tackling him. I plop down on top of him and cover his face with my hand, turning it bright pink.

I'm smiling, ready to gloat, but in one quick motion, he wraps his arm around my waist and rolls, flipping himself and me over in the process.

Now, I'm flat on my back, looking up at him. And for a second, the moment feels charged. If this were a movie, this is the spot where a playful moment would turn serious as the characters realized the position their bodies were in—his knees straddling her hips, his arm holding his weight over her, their eyes locked. And then he would lean down, and they would share a—

"Ahhh!" we both yell out as cold water is thrown onto us, Zander standing there with a grin on his face.

“Looked like things were getting a little too hot there,” he states.
“Thought you needed some cooling off.”

“You’re dead,” Beck says, laughing. He jumps up and pulls me up with him, ready to go chase after Zander, but then he stops, takes a deep breath, and goes, “Johnny, give me your shirt.”

“Why do you need—” I start to say as Johnny strips off his shirt and tosses it to Beck. Who then hands it to me.

“Put this on,” he orders.

I then look down and realize two things. One, I didn’t put on a bra this morning because I was in a hurry, and two, Beck’s cheap white tee turned practically translucent when it got wet. My arms immediately cover my chest.

I look around in a panic, wondering if everyone saw. That’s just what I need next—a viral video of me looking like I’m in a wet T-shirt contest.

“Just put Johnny’s shirt on,” Beckham says slowly, probably knowing I’m about to freak out.

He puts the shirt over my head, and I slip my arms into the sleeves and pull it down.

Then I look over at Johnny, standing up straight and tall. He has no problem with confidence. He’s also sneaky fit. I don’t know what I expected—maybe for him to be less in shape because of the luxurious life he lives, but he’s not. He’s very lean with nicely shaped arms and a tight torso.

“You look good shirtless,” I tell him.

“And you looked good wet,” he says with a grin. “But we don’t need another international scandal.”

“I look good shirtless too,” Laurent says, taking his shirt off.

“We all do,” Beckham says, following suit.

And he’s right. They all do.

“There’s something very sexist about this situation. That you can stand there shirtless while making me put a shirt over a shirt just because you could see the outline of my boobs.”

“Hey, you want to take your top off? I’m all for it,” Beck says with a smirk. “Although there are nudity rules at school, so Hawthorne would lose some points. Might be worth it though.”

Might. I'm starting to hate that word.

"You're right though. It is sexist," Beck continues. "If you ask me, we shouldn't take points away for nudity. We should be handing them out."

"Topless classes for the win!" Laurent hoots.

"Oh, can you imagine?" Johnny says.

"Actually, I can," Beck says, looking dreamy. "Doubt we'd learn much of anything though."

"What are you talking about?" my brothers ask in unison.

I turn around to see them standing there.

"Topless classes," I tell them.

"Sign me up," Aspen says.

"When's Augie coming back?" Monroe asks me, taking his own shirt off and muttering something about being hot.

"Sometime tomorrow."

"Are you ready for the first day of classes?" Monroe asks.

"Believe it or not, I am actually looking forward to having a bit of a routine," I confide.

"Trust me, Aspen is looking forward to that more than you," he says under his breath, causing me to laugh.

Aspen is by far the most structured of us three. I fall somewhere in the middle, and Monroe could happily fritter his days away, doing nothing.

But then his attention turns to Beck's parking space. "Bro! This is a killer design! Baby's gonna love it."

"Thanks," Beck says. "I'm hoping the voting alumni feel the same way!"

"Half the alumni are related to you, so it shouldn't be too tough," I quip.

It's at this moment that a gaggle of girls shows up, probably drawn over by the sight of a group of hot, shirtless guys.

Two of them slide up to Beck.

"Beckham," one says, running her hand suggestively down his arm, "you're looking good." He grins. "And you haven't texted me. We had some fun last year. Wouldn't mind a repeat."

Beckham nods his head and grins. "Duly noted, Darcy."

The other girl says to him, "You need to introduce us to all these

newbies.”

“Oh, sure.” Beck points out Johnny and Laurent, announces their names, introduces the girls to my brothers, and then wraps his arm around me. “And this is their sister, Arrington. They’re triplets.”

“We know who she is,” Darcy says. “She’s famous.”

“You mean infamous,” her friend says.

My breath falters. I let go of Beckham. “Great meeting you both. I’ve got to, um, get back to the house. Fun painting with you, Beck.”

Then I take off.

Because I’m infamous?

It’s amazing how all it takes is one simple word from someone to destroy what was a really fun day. It’s like a stab to the heart. Shocking, sudden. Something you weren’t expecting. Something that makes you feel completely alone in the world.

I pull my phone out of my back pocket, check the time, and calculate what time it is in the UK.

I can’t call Augie right now. I don’t want to interrupt him at the party. Tears threaten to fall, and I don’t know why exactly. Why should I care what one stupid girl says? She might not even know the difference between *infamous* and *famous*. Although common sense says the *in* at the beginning of the word means not. Famous. Not famous. But infamous is worse than just not being famous. It’s being famous for something bad. Having a reputation of the worst kind.

I think about how I was sort of mean to Betsy. Telling her I thought Beckham could be the father of my child.

And I wonder if Eastbrooke has already changed me.

For the worse.

I hear my mom’s voice telling me that labeling people isn’t good. That it can affect their psyche.

And I get it.

Tell a kid they’re stupid their whole life, and eventually, they will believe it. Tell a kid they’re smart, and they will think they are. Mom told me that people have labeled her over the years. Tried to put her career, her life, her

relationships, her company into a box. But she said that didn't matter. That what matters most is what she thinks.

Normally, when I'm upset, I go to my dad.

But in this case, I call her.

"Hey, Mom," I say when she answers.

"Hi, sweetheart." Tears fill my eyes the second I hear her voice. "What are you up to today?"

I start to cry. I can't stop it.

"Honey, what's wrong?"

"Apparently, I'm infamous."

"Oh," she says, sucking in a breath. "Do you know for what?"

"Um, something bad, right?"

"Okay, do you know what bad thing you did?"

"I suppose it could be because Augie came to school for me or because I was thought to be pregnant."

"You'll never be infamous. Unless you commit a horrific crime or maybe release a sex tape. Although, these days, that would probably make you famous."

"No sex tapes, but I do have social media accounts now. Johnny made them for me and plans to run them. Mostly, he just wants to be able to tag me. Anyway, I'm not sure what the boys will decide, but I'm going to spend the holiday weekend on his yacht. We're going to cruise up the East Coast and just chill."

"Can I be frank with you?" Mom says.

"Yes," I say tentatively.

"I'm not sure if I'm okay with that."

"Why not?"

"His mother—"

"Told Riley that she was pregnant with his baby?"

"You know about that?" Mom sounds shocked.

"Yes, Johnny is an open book. And I video-chatted with his parents as well. They seem very nice."

"And you like Johnny. Feel he's a good person?"

“Yes, I do. He’s amazing. Laurent too. Oh, Mom! Remember the movie about the woman who had the baby and then ran into the dad, and he knew it was his son because they looked alike? You said it was based off a real-life story.”

“That’s correct.”

“And did that woman happen to be an Eastbrooke alum?”

“What? No. Why?”

“Like, do you know that for a fact?” I question.

Mom pauses. “Why are you asking?”

“Laurent is here on a legacy scholarship. He lived alone with his mother, and his whole life, he was told he had no family but her. She passed away this summer, and when he got here, he was given a couple of letters, stating that wasn’t true. Apparently, she had gotten pregnant by a guy whose family was very rich and powerful. That guy paid her off to not have the baby. She couldn’t do that, so she left. Lied and told the man that she ended the pregnancy and then had to tell her family she had a miscarriage, moved away, and raised him on her own.”

“That sounds freakishly like the movie.”

“Can you look into that? She lied to him her whole life, and she wrote the letters when she was dying, but I just wonder if there’s more to the story. She made it sound like telling his father he’s alive could be dangerous for Laurent.”

“Because they are in the mob or criminals? Or political, like the movie?”

“Not just a political family, like in the movie, Mom. We’re talking *the* political family.”

She says a last name.

“Yep.”

“Huh. I’ll get back to you on all that. Is he planning to contact the family? The father?”

“His maternal grandparents live in Cape Cod. Johnny is planning to cruise up the coast. Thought we might stop by. I mean, we’d call first. We have the letters as proof.”

“My advice would be to meet the family but wait on the rest. When

people sell their memoirs, it's from their point of view. Sometimes, it's skewed. Sometimes, it's flat-out made up in places. And the ending of the story was—"

"What she wished had happened in real life?" I suggest.

"That's very possible. The ultimate happy ending for her. But back to you being infamous."

I take in a deep breath and let it out. "I'm okay now, Mom. Thanks for talking to me."

"You usually call your dad."

"Dad hasn't had to deal with mean people the way you have. How did you do it?"

"I only care what the people I love think about me."

"That's smart, Mom."

"I love you, Aubrey Lane."

"I love you too."

Shame on me.

12:30pm

When I look up, I find Beckham standing in front of me. I open my mouth to speak, but don't know what to say. I don't know what all he heard.

"I don't think that girl even knows what the word means," he says.

"You might be right about that."

"Want to go back to the house and shower?"

And the first thing my mind goes to is showering with him.

And it shouldn't. *Shame on me.*

"Yes. I need one." I look at the paint splattered all over his bare chest, the pink he couldn't get all wiped off his face, and the yellow dripping down his abs. "I really like the way your parking space turned out."

"Me too. Thanks for your help."

Of course, the second we get back to the house and open the door,

covered in paint, we find Betsy. She scowls at Beckham and then turns to me with a smirk.

“Betsy, you’re being ridiculous,” he says, waving his hand through the air, then marching up the stairs.

“He ditched you awfully fast,” Betsy says to me. “Just like Augie. I heard he’s not coming back.”

“I know you hate me, but you and I aren’t all that different. I had a best friend tell me he wanted to be with me, but he didn’t really, and it hurt. You not being with Beckham is not my fault. Nor is it yours. Sometimes, things just don’t work out.”

“Like for you and the prince?” she says, grinning at me, like she’s somehow won this little battle. “He ditched you at the dance.”

“He flew home because it’s his grandfather—the king’s—birthday.”

“How convenient.” She crosses her arms in front of her chest.

“Yes, I suppose it is, being that it falls on the same day every year and just happened to coincide with a stupid school dance. Trust me, he’ll be back.”

“What makes you think that?” she asks with a scowl. “Everything I’ve read online says—”

“I take it, you haven’t heard his statement to the press today.” I raise an eyebrow in her direction, and I can tell by her face that she hasn’t.

“No, it’s been a busy day.”

I shrug. “Sure has. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to go get this paint off me.”

I’ve gone up one flight of stairs when my phone buzzes with a text from Dean Johnson, asking—no, telling—me to get myself to his office.

Now.

I look down at my clothes and wonder if I should pretend I was in the shower and didn’t get the message, but based on the way it’s worded, I don’t think I should.

I turn around and head back down the stairs.

Three lovely escorts.

12:50pm

When I get to the dean's office, I see Branson sitting there.

I knock on the door, my heart pounding, wondering what's going on.

"Lane," the dean says, giving me a once-over, "looks like you've been having fun painting everything but the parking lot. Take a seat."

I have to walk in front of Branson to get to the other chair. He doesn't move his legs, like someone polite would do, just makes me squeeze around him.

Once I'm seated, the dean says, "I hear there was an incident at the dance."

Oh boy.

"What kind of incident?" Branson asks, trying to play it cool.

I can't help but roll my eyes.

"One that got you kneed in the nuts, son," the dean says sternly.

"Oh, that," Branson says.

"Can either of you tell me the reason for this altercation?"

Branson gives me a look filled with venom.

Which pisses me off and causes me to turn and look him straight in the eye, basically ignoring the dean. "I'd be happy to. You would think wrongly accusing me of being pregnant with the future king of England's baby in public would be enough. Because not only has his idiotic behavior launched a firestorm of publicity that is very damning to both my and Augie's families, but I would assume that it also hasn't exactly been the best thirty-six hours his mom's ever had either. Since she's in charge of my family's publicity."

Branson does at least wince when I say that.

"But, no, he had to get drunk again and try to prove some stupid point. What he still doesn't get is that I *don't* like him. I have *no* desire to be around someone like him. And I certainly don't want to be kissed by someone who has been nothing short of horrible to me."

I turn now and face the dean.

"So, yes, there was an altercation. He pulled me around a corner outside

the gym, pushed me against a wall, and gave me an extremely *unwanted* and unsolicited kiss. When I tried to break away—well, he’s stronger than me, so I did what I had to do. I kneed him. It caused him to back up long enough for me to get free, and then Johnny, who witnessed the situation, felt compelled to punch him in the face.”

“You wanted me to kiss you,” Branson says, his eyes flaring.

“Um, no, I didn’t. I have a boyfriend, in case you haven’t heard.”

“Who ditched you.”

I swear, he sounds just like stupid Betsy.

“Who attended his freaking grandfather’s birthday. An event that, as part of the royal family, he is required to attend. So he missed a stupid high school dance. Who cares? And I ended up with three lovely escorts ...”

Branson slams his hand down on the chair, pissed.

The dean says, “A few things. Firstly, Branson, you are being moved back into the sophomore dormitory until you can learn to handle yourself appropriately.”

“But I—” Branson starts to say.

“There are no buts about it. Two strikes, and you lose house privileges. And if your behavior in the dorm isn’t exemplary and you get even a single infraction, you’ll be kicked out of school.”

“But you’re my uncle!” Branson argues.

“Who has to abide by the rules, just as you have to. Secondly, so you are both aware, the student who live-streamed the video of the fight is no longer a student here, and her friend is on probation. And thirdly, what the hell is really up with you two?”

I cross my arms across my chest and look straight at the dean.

A glance over at Branson tells me he’s doing the same. And for a second, it makes me want to laugh, remembering how we used to do that to our parents when we were little and in trouble, both of us refusing to tattle on the other.

“Okay, fine. I thought maybe we could talk it out, but if this is your preferred route, you will be required to attend counseling. Together.”

“You’re going to send me to counseling with someone who basically

assaulted me?”

“You’ve been wanting to kiss me for years,” Branson counters.

“Pretty sure I already did that. On New Year’s Eve. And honestly, once was enough. Especially after you chose to kiss someone else in front of me. So, I left. It was obvious you didn’t want me there. The problem started because I moved on, and *you* can’t seem to handle it.”

“Maybe I was thrilled when you left, so I wouldn’t have to deal with you,” Branson says.

I raise an eyebrow at him. “So, why fight with my boyfriend? Why the unwanted kiss at the dance? You’re doing everything you *can* to deal with me, Branson.” I stand up. “And I’m sorry, Dean Johnson, but this counseling bullshit isn’t happening.”

“Ooh, she’s bringing out the curse words,” Branson sasses.

The dean points at Branson. “*You* are dismissed. Your belongings are being moved to the dorm as we speak. Room 417. Go directly there, please. You are not allowed to go back to your house. You are also banned from visiting the houses until further notice.”

“But all my friends—”

“Guess you should have thought of that before,” the dean says. “Now, go.”

Branson gives me a smirk on his way out, like I’m the one in trouble.

I let out a sigh.

“Please tell me what happened in the Hamptons,” the dean says.

“Nothing really. Just more of the new Branson. He was upset with me for wanting to do an internship at The Arrington. Wanted me to be in the Hamptons with him all summer. Made it seem like we’d—I don’t know—be together. Like, date maybe. Or at least see if we should consider being more than friends. I agreed. And then he kissed another girl. Purposely. In front of me. After promising I’d be the one he’d kiss. I was upset. Called my dad. Set the internship back up. Went to London and ended up with Augie. It sucked, losing my best friend, but I really like Augie, and I’m glad it worked out the way it did. What I don’t understand is why Branson is being so mean to me. Why he’s acting the way he is. I’ve thought about calling his mom, but I

don't want to get him in trouble, you know? Have you talked to his parents?"

"Yes. They suggested the counseling."

"And do you think that's fair to me?"

"It's not supposed to be a punishment, Lane. It's supposed to help. And worst case, maybe you both get some closure and can move on. Especially if you are planning to stay here at Eastbrooke. Have you decided yet?"

"I think Augie wants us to stay."

"Just remember that I won't be asking you as a couple. I'm going to ask for your decisions individually."

"I want to be here, Brax. I just wish—you might be right," I say, changing my mind. "I'll do the counseling. Branson and I had a long friendship, and although I don't want to be friends with him anymore, I also don't want to be enemies."

"That's very mature, Arrington. Thank you."

"You called me Arrington." I smile.

"You've earned it," the dean says.

I'm leaving the student center, lost in thought, wondering why the heck I agreed to what I just did, when I see London and Waverly.

I rush up to Waverly to give her a hug, but she holds me at arm's length and says, "You are a mess!"

"Yeah, got into a little paint fight. Where have you been? I texted you. Did you not go see the senior parking spaces?" I ask her.

And I will admit to slightly ignoring London because I'm mad at her.

"We just did. When I got back to the house after the stables last night—" Waverly starts.

"How come I didn't get an invite?" London says, interrupting.

"It was supposed to be just me and Hudson," I tell London, "but I thought that might be awkward since Waverly likes him. So, I invited her. Do you ride?"

"Never in my life, but that's not the point," London says.

"And what is?" I ask politely.

"Oh, come on, you two," Waverly says.

I give London a pointed look.

She sighs and rolls her eyes. “Fine. I called her because Branson came back to the house and was bleeding. And he said that she kneed him!”

“And you never thought to ask why,” I fire back. “Nor have you apologized.”

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I reacted. And, yes, I did ask him after our call why you did it, and he said because he kissed you. I mean, all I know is, if he ever surprise kissed me, that certainly wouldn’t be my reaction.”

I let out a slow yoga breath, keeping my temper in check, and look at Waverly.

“She has a boyfriend,” Waverly states.

“And showed up at the dance with three dates,” London says flippantly.

“Three *friends* who offered to be my escorts in Augie’s place,” I correct. “Who were there to support me after the whole viral video thing.”

“Are you saying I didn’t—” London stops talking and looks at me. Takes a deep breath. Lets it out. “You’re right. I didn’t really support you. I mean, I messaged you, but there was a lot of talk at the house, and I just didn’t know what to do or think. Or who to believe.”

“London, if you don’t want to be my friend, it’s cool. We don’t know each other that well, and now, we’re in different houses. It’s understandable that we’d grow apart.”

“But that’s not what I want!” she sputters out, looking like she could cry. “I miss you. And Laurent. But it’s hard because we have to meet people and make new friends in our houses and I’m trying not to take sides.”

“Look, it’s been great chatting with you, but Branson and I were just called to the dean’s office because of what happened last night, and I’m not in the best of moods right now.”

I turn and walk away. I really can’t deal with this now.

London doesn’t say anything, but Waverly is quickly at my side, walking fast to catch up to me and linking her arm in mine.

“We’re all trying to navigate the newness, you know?”

“I know. Did London tell you what happened?”

“She didn’t.”

I give her a quick rundown.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me last night!” she says.

“It had just happened, and you were kind of on a date. I didn’t want to bring it up. I also didn’t know what to make of it.”

“I can’t believe London called you and said that,” she says. “You know she totally talks before she thinks. And apparently calls before she thinks too.”

“It wasn’t cool. At all.”

“I think that’s sort of hard for her,” Waverly says.

“What is?”

“This is going to sound ... I don’t know. I like London, and I think we will be good friends, but she is struggling a little. She *wants* to be cool, and I think she’s maybe trying too hard. Instead of letting people just get to know her. I also think after going to an all-girls school, she isn’t used to being around so many boys. It’s like she’s in a hot-guy stupor.”

“Give me a break. She has a twin brother. I’m sure there were plenty of boys in her life. Just like there was in mine.”

“I don’t know, but I don’t get that vibe from her. She’s just not as comfortable around them as you would think. I also don’t think she and Hudson hung out much. They aren’t close, like you and your brothers are. To be honest, I think she idolizes you a little. Thinks you lived some glamorous movie-star life. And I don’t think you realize it, Arrington, but you can be intimidating.”

“Me? Hello, Miss Punk Rock Girl, all dressed in black and pretending to be pissed off at the world when you are the most emotional and sweetest person I know.”

She laughs. “Fine. I’m trying to figure out who I am too. That’s the thing that’s intimidating about you. You already are you. You’re confident. You have it all together.”

“Me? Seriously? I’ve been losing it on a daily basis. I have *nothing* figured out.”

“Well, we’re all in the same boat then, right?”

“Speaking of boats, you’re going to be getting an invite to spend the

upcoming holiday weekend on Johnny's yacht. It's amazing. And you need to come."

"Who all will be there?"

"Right now, the guest list is you, me, Johnny, Laurent, the Hawthorne prefects, London, Hudson, and my brothers."

"That sounds fun. Will it be chill?"

"Most of the time, but there's also going to be a big party one night. Like, he's ferrying in people from around the world. He was video-chatting with Harry Styles, who heard about the party and was upset he hadn't gotten an invite."

"Are you freaking kidding me?"

"I am not."

"I'm so there. Now, what happened at the dean's office?"

"I don't want to talk about it, but I do want to know what happened after the horseback ride. Did you and Hudson kiss?"

She sighs. "No."

"Did he act like he wanted to kiss you? Did he look at your lips? Gaze into your eyes? Anything?" I ask.

"There was sort of this moment when we got back to the house and his hand accidentally brushed against mine, and he turned toward me sort of in surprise. But then he was like, *Well, good night*, and hightailed it to his room. Which was awkward because we're on the same floor, so I would have had to, like, follow him up, and I didn't want to do that, so I went in the kitchen and made myself a bag of microwave popcorn.

"Everyone was getting back from the dance, and a lot were outside, smoking. Chilling. And people smelled the popcorn, and then one of the prefects was like, *Great idea*, and went into this closet, where there was a movie-theater popcorn machine! He cranked it up, and everyone was loving it, and then this guy threw a piece at this girl, and pretty soon, we were in a full-on popcorn fight."

"That sounds fun," I tell her.

"It actually was. Your brother and the girl he was with at the dance, Emily, were teaming up against me. Wanted to know where Hudson was. I

muttered something about him being tired, and then everyone kinda started pairing up, so I went to my room.”

“I know you think Hudson is hot, but maybe you should consider other possibilities. Who else is in your house that’s cute?”

“Have you met Stryker yet? He was playing lacrosse for the yellow team. Dark hair. Big, wide smile. He had on the neon-green shoes.”

“Oh, I remember him! He is cute.”

“Not as hot as Hudson, but he’s really funny, and he’s kind of been flirting with me. He calls me Waves. Like the beach. When he sees me, he says, *Hey, Waves at the Beach*, which you would think would be annoying, but he’s funny. Which makes it endearing instead of cringe-worthy. How are things with you and Augie?”

“Good. He told me he loves me.”

“What?! When?! Why didn’t you tell me immediately?”

“Because he said it at the dean’s office after we got hauled there from the carnival.”

She scrunches up her nose. “That doesn’t sound super romantic. And wasn’t Branson there?”

“He was in the dean’s office at the time, and we were outside. Sitting on the floor, like we had done that morning.”

“That was fun,” she says wistfully.

“No, it wasn’t.”

“Being there together. The four of us. Best friends. Was. You know?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Do you think, being in different houses, we will be able to stay that way?”

“The dean asked me today if I thought Augie and I would stay.”

“I hope you said yes.”

“I told him Augie was leaning that way.”

“And what about you? And you’d better say yes.”

“I said yes too. Even with everything, I do like it here.”

She does a little jump. “Yay!”

We stop in front of Wyndham House, and she says, “I’ll see you at the

mixer tonight.”

“What mixer?”

“The one with my house? Wyndham and Hawthorne together,” she says, looking at me like I’m crazy.

“I didn’t realize we had one.”

“We do. And it’s going to be so fun. Although we have to pass some test about the house rules if we want to go. I need to study.”

“And I want to meet Stryker. Promise to introduce us tonight?”

“Of course.” She gives me air kisses, then is off.

Somewhat regularly.

1:30pm

I walk down to my house, stopping along the way to admire all the senior parking spaces that are finished and am surprised at how many are just starting. But Beckham did say it was an all-day affair. And although I’m still a mess of paint, it appears I’m not the only one. Still, I am so ready for a shower.

I go to my room and enjoy a long shower, take my time blowing out my hair, throw on a little makeup. Then I pair wide-legged jeans with red stripes running down the sides with a cropped red tee and platform tennies. I grab my phone and binder from my desk and go downstairs, hoping to find someone to study with.

No one is really around, so I go out onto the patio and find a spot in the shade and start reading the rule book.

“Arrington,” a girl says to me.

I look up and see a tall, pretty blonde with deep brown eyes. I know I’ve met her, but I don’t recall her name.

“I’m Zoey. We met briefly our first night here, but I wanted to say hey since we’re on the dance team together.”

“It’s nice to meet you again,” I tell her. “You’re a junior too, right?”

“I am. I’ve been on the dance team since freshman year. With Danielle,

who is also—”

“Oh, I know who Danielle is.”

She winces. “Yeah, she and Betsy are close, and obviously, with Betsy not making it her senior year, there are probably some hard feelings.” She lowers her voice. “But to be honest, I’m not surprised she didn’t. I’m good friends with Molly, our captain. She was my big sister freshman year, and I don’t know how I would have made it through without her. Anyway, we watched the tryout tapes, and both you and Waverly are really good. We’re looking forward to some new blood on the team.”

“Thank you. Did you know that Waverly is my cousin?”

“I didn’t. That’s cool. And your last name is Arrington, but you go by Arrington?”

“I do.”

“And The Arrington Family Library and The Arrington Chapel—you’re one of those Arringtons?”

“Yeah, my parents went here.”

She nods, but doesn’t say a word about them. About my mom being famous or about the movies.

But then she leans toward me and goes, “My last name is Hawthorne.”

“As in *Hawthorne House* Hawthorne?”

“Yeah,” she says with a nod. “Pretty much all my relatives are alumni, starting with my great-grandfather, who was on the Eastbrooke trust committee for years. He loved this place.”

“Do you love it too?”

“At first, it just felt like a lot of pressure. Freshman year was rough for me.” She grins. “But once I got over myself, I really started to love it. And getting into Hawthorne was something I truly wanted, not something I felt like I had to do.” She drops into the seat next to me.

“My brothers and I are triplets. We were supposed to come freshman year, but our parents changed their minds. We were sort of homeschooled with private tutors, so this is a big change.”

“And you’re dating a prince. And you’ve already been part of a scandal.”

“Yeah. Branson Johnson and I used to be best friends.”

“And now, you hate each other?”

“More like he hates me.”

“Because of Augie?”

“I’m really not sure. I thought he was sort of pissed off at the world, but London—”

“Oh, she’s twins with that new hottie, Hudson, right?” she asks.

“Yeah.”

“I have been drooling over him since he took his shirt off to play soccer the day of orientation. And at the lacrosse game. And you’re friends with that Johnny guy, right?”

“We just met at the start of school, but, yes. I already adore him.”

“He’s totally different than Hudson, but also hot. Seems cultured. And his clothes? Incredible.”

“Sounds like you have a little crush.”

“Oh, girl, I do. But I’m also crushing on someone else, and I think this year might be our year. Well, it would have to be since he’s a senior. Last year, we hooked up somewhat regularly. Totally open relationship—actually, not ever technically a relationship because he doesn’t have them. We haven’t done anything yet this year, but I’m hoping that will change tonight.”

“Is he at Wyndham?”

“No.” She grins. “He’s, uh, one of our prefects—Beckham Johnson. You two are good friends, right? I saw you helping him paint his parking spot.”

“Yeah, I’ve known him my whole life,” I stutter out.

While I’m pretty sure Prefect Jessica and Beck have hooked up, this is the first person I’ve met here who—it doesn’t matter. It’s not like I didn’t know Beck is an F-boy.

“Sweet. Maybe you can put in a good word for me.”

“I try to stay out of his love life. Too complicated for me.”

“You’re a relationship girl, aren’t you? One guy at a time?”

“To be honest, Augie’s my first real boyfriend, so I’m not sure. And although we hung out all summer, we just made it official this weekend.”

“I know! I saw his press conference. How dreamy was what he said? You’re very lucky. I would melt into a little puddle if some guy said those

things about me in public. Like, to the world.”

“Then you shouldn’t settle for anything else,” I offer.

To this, she chuckles. “Except I like hooking up too. And sometimes, it’s easier to not have to deal with relationship drama. So, I guess you could say I’m torn between wanting a boyfriend and not wanting to deal with one. At least until they grow up. Although my mother, who is on her fourth marriage, says that men never do. Anyway, I’ll introduce you to a couple more of the dance team members tonight at Wyndham—Tabitha and Allison—and you can introduce me to Waverly.”

“Sounds good.”

She looks at my binder. “Oh, are you studying for the test?”

“Yeah, I want to be sure I’ll pass.”

She pulls a piece of paper out of her bra and hands it to me. “The answers. Just memorize them.”

And while I don’t want to cheat, I also don’t want to fail. So, I take it from her and unfold the paper. “This is literally just the answers with no questions.”

“You don’t need to know the questions when you know the answers.”

I hand it back to her. “Thanks for the offer, but I’d better study. You’ve been here for awhile, and it’s all new to me, so probably best I learn.”

“You’re right. I learned about all the house rules last year, mostly trying to figure out how to sneak in and out of them.”

“Can you?”

“Sophomores aren’t supposed to be in the houses. But where there’s a will, there’s a way,” she says with a laugh. “But you don’t want to be late for curfew. It’s the one thing they are pretty strict about. That, and the privacy stuff. Oh, I just heard the girl who live-streamed the video of the prince got kicked out.”

“Yeah, I heard that too,” I tell her, although I don’t mention I was in the dean’s office at the time.

“Okay, so good to meet you. Have fun studying, and we’ll hang out tonight!” she says.

And then she’s off, and I start reading page two. *Only thirty more to go!*

Remember this day.

4:05pm

An hour of drudgery later, and I wish I had kept Zoey's answers. I check my phone, see that it's a little after four. Sunday nights are house nights with a house meeting at four thirty, followed by dinner at five thirty, and either a mixer or house activity at seven.

I go to my room, put my binder away, and find Beckham and Johnny talking in the hall when I come back out.

"We've been looking for you," Johnny says.

"Couldn't have been looking too hard," I tease. "I've been on the back patio, studying, *and* I have my phone with me."

Johnny gives me a once-over. "You look cute. Sporty but cute."

"Thanks?"

"The reason we were looking for you," Beckham says, "is because I need all of us to sign my parking spot."

"Oh, I don't think that's necessary—"

"It's tradition," Beckham reiterates.

"Well then, clearly, we must. Where's Laurent?"

"Changing," Johnny says. "He'll be right out."

"Should I just take, like, a pen and go sign it now?"

Beck rolls his eyes. "We go together. Sign one at a time. Video it for posterity. And then the professional photographer that is photographing the spots will take a picture of us together by it. And hopefully, I can convince him to take one of it with Baby."

"We have to get Baby in the picture," I joke, but he nods seriously.

Once Laurent joins us, we are paraded out to the lot, and we do exactly what we were told to do.

When we've been sufficiently recorded and photographed, Beckham gathers us together in front of Baby and hands us each a picture frame with a

copy of his hand-drawn design in it, the brightly colored flowers a contrast to the black metal frame. “Something to remember this day by,” he says, looking a little misty-eyed. “Thank you for helping me. Just think, next year at this time, the three of you will be painting your spots, and I’ll be off to college.”

“We were happy to do so,” Johnny says, “and I think I can say for the three of us that we hope this year goes slowly and we get to savor every moment we have together.”

“Cheers to that,” I say softly, wishing I had some of Johnny’s champagne right about now.

Fashion upgrade.

4:30pm

We get back to the house, and Laurent, Johnny, and I take a seat in the common room while Beckham joins the other prefects, minus Zander, at the front and starts the meeting.

“Just like tonight,” Beckham says, “every Sunday, starting at four thirty, we have a house meeting, enjoy dinner together as a group, then a house mixer or event. As I’m sure you’ve heard, we’ll be joining Wyndham tonight. Normally, the mixers will have some kind of fun theme. The events calendar is available online so you can plan ahead. We always have a lot of fun, dressing up for them.

“But tonight will be different. As you know, the houses were new last year, and the cool part is, the things we do are creating new traditions for future generations. I’m excited to announce that something we have been asking for was finally approved, and starting tomorrow, instead of having house day once a week, every day will be house day. Zander, why don’t you come on out?!”

Zander walks out of the kitchen, wearing a traditional Eastbrooke blazer—navy blue with an embroidered school crest on the pocket—but with one major improvement. The jacket is piped with a thick outline of red on the

lapel, collar, and pockets.

The seniors start whooping and hollering, cheerly loudly.

“As our juniors can probably tell, those of us who have been pushing for this are pretty happy. We’ll be flying our colors every day.”

“But I just bought a bunch of blazers,” a girl raises her hand and says.

“You will be allowed to exchange them for your house blazer,” Beckham replies. “And tonight before dinner, we’ll be presenting each of *you* with your house blazer and lapel pin. Next year, they will be presented to the juniors only, but this year ...” He turns to Jessica and grins. “Shall we get started?”

Seniors are called up, and as each one puts on their blazer and moves their red flame pin to its lapel, Beckham says, “May you wear your jacket with pride and honor. And may the fire on this pin be a reminder to let your passions drive your life choices.”

“Passion, huh, Beckham?” someone heckles, but he quickly receives the side-eye from all four of the prefects, who are taking this quite seriously.

Johnny leans over to me. “Huge fashion upgrade as well. Much more on trend.”

“I take it, you approve?” I ask.

“I actually do.”

Once the seniors have theirs on, the juniors get lined up. And when I’m presented with my jacket and pin, I feel a lot like I did when I got the key to my room. When I didn’t know if I would get to stay.

My parents always tell us that life is about the choices you make. The decisions that forge your path. And even though some people at Hawthorne aren’t exactly my bestest friends—and that’s putting it nicely—I feel at home. Like I belong.

I know I need to follow my heart and stay here with Augie.

I’m half-listening to Melissa speak. She’s saying something about hanging pennants on our doors and some kind of contest.

But then Zander says, “We have also officially declared our house motto. It’s *Live Life in Luxury*. And although one could assume we’re talking about financial luxury, we’re not. We’re talking about living a life of abundance, following your heart, making life-long friends, and taking the time to enjoy

them.”

“Tonight will also be the Great Pairing,” Melissa says, which perks my ears up.

I glance toward Johnny, whose face lights up, but I think maybe his idea of what a pairing entails might be different than Melissa’s, probably having something to do with matching the perfect wine with the perfect meal. My mind, however, goes to kissing. And then sex. And then Augie and this weekend.

“As most of you know, it’s long been a tradition at Eastbrooke to pair a new freshman with a sophomore to help them transition to life at boarding school,” Zander explains. “We felt that tradition needed to extend to the transition into the houses.”

Jessica smiles. “And your prefects spent over three hours together voting on the matches. Like family, we argued over it. We had differences of opinions about who to match with who, but the reason we were so passionate about it is because we wanted to make matches that would push both the big and the little to grow and learn. Ultimately, it was Melissa’s responsibility to use our thoughts and votes to match everyone. Even I don’t know who my little will be.”

Zander and Beckham nod in agreement.

Melissa grins, then turns around, grabbing a stack of envelopes from the table behind her. “I’m going to hand these out. Once everyone has theirs, we’ll open them all at once. See who you got, find them, and plan to sit next to each other at dinner tonight so you can get to know each other better in what we hope will be the start of a wonderful relationship.”

Melissa hands me a golden envelope with my name written on it in beautiful red calligraphy.

Once everyone has an envelope, she tells us to open them. I do mine quickly, and my heart skips a beat when I see the name Beckham Johnson. I find him in the crowd, still standing near the front of the room and looking down at his envelope. He studies it for a moment, flips it over, and closes his eyes. It sounds like the seniors fought hard for changes like this and the house blazers, so I’m sure it feels like an important moment to him. I probably

shouldn't have just ripped mine open the way I did. I should have given it more reverence.

Beckham undoes the flap, pulls out the card, and appears to read the name. He frowns, then looks up toward Zander, who I realize has also been watching him closely. Zander pats Jessica and Melissa, and they all share a glance. Beckham shakes his head at them like they must have outvoted him or something. I'm assuming if they discussed pairings, that had to include their own.

I look back down at my card. *Wait a minute.* If I got Beck, obviously, that means that he got me. So, why did he frown when he saw my name? Had he told the other prefects he didn't want to be my big, and they decided otherwise? And he's not happy about it?

"I got Jessica," Johnny says, hitting me on the arm.

"And I got Zander," Laurent says, grinning.

I don't say anything because, suddenly, I can feel someone's eyes on me. When I look up, I see Beckham walking across the room toward me. Our eyes lock, and for a moment, the noise fades. The crowd disappears.

I'm about to ask him why he looked upset to see my name, but he places his hand across the back of my neck and kisses me. It's a hard, possessive kiss. One that makes me feel weak in the knees. One that causes my heart rate to spike.

I regain my senses and quickly pull away. *Because, hello, I have a boyfriend!*

Beckham seems startled for a second. Then he looks around, noticing that all eyes are on us.

A slow smile spreads across his face. "Seniors, new tradition. A kiss is a good way to break the ice. To add an emotional element to your relationship. Right, Arrington?"

"Uh, yeah, most definitely," I say, my hand going up to touch my lips as I think about our kiss.

"What the hell?" Zander says to Laurent.

Laurent shrugs as Zander gives him a quick peck, but there are plenty of people who choose not to kiss.

Jessica says to Johnny, “You cool with it?”

To which, Johnny replies by giving her a steamy kiss. One that lasts so long that I finally give up and look away.

Beck slings his arm around me in his usual party-boy fashion.

“That was a great kiss,” Beck says.

“And you just turned the whole big-little thing into something incestuous.”

He scoffs. “It’s not meant to be literal. Obviously, we don’t share blood.”

“Meaning we *could* share other bodily fluids,” Jessica teases from behind us, which causes Johnny to say, “Maybe you should join me in my quarters this evening.”

“I don’t think so,” Jessica fires back, but the way she’s grinning at him makes me think she’s considering it.

I’m about to say something to Beck, but a bell rings, and we are called in for dinner. Beck leads me to a spot at one end of the long table, and we take our seats. Zander and Laurent sit across from us, and Laurent kicks me under the table, then gives me a *what was that kiss about* look.

I just shrug. I have no idea. But I definitely need to find out what’s going on.

I lean over to Beck and whisper, “I watched you open your envelope. You weren’t happy to see my name.”

His eyes go wide, but then he says, “I didn’t think we should be paired together.”

“You voted against me?”

“No. I just—we already know each other. I thought you should be with someone you didn’t know well. I wanted you with Jessica.”

“But you’ve slept with Jessica,” I counter.

“How do you know that?” he asks.

“I could tell by the way she looked at you that first night here, during the introductions.”

“We’re good friends.”

“Friends with benefits, clearly.”

“She’s smart about relationships. I thought she’d be a great big for you.”

“But the others wanted us together?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Who knows? Regardless, now, we’re stuck with each other.”

“Try not to sound so excited,” I say with a frown, deciding to stop talking and start eating. And wondering how things suddenly got so awkward between us.

Two fears.

7:30pm

Not surprisingly, the juniors all pass the house test and get to head over to Wyndham House for our first mixer—wearing our blazers. And although it matches with my cropped red top and jeans with red stripes down the sides, even I have enough fashion sense that I wouldn’t have chosen to put this together. But, hey, Betsy is in an awful shade of olive green that’s much worse. Johnny always looks fabulous, but Laurent looks particularly handsome tonight in jeans and a plain white tee with his blazer.

I slide up next to him. “You look cute.”

He scrunches up his nose and looks down at himself. “I do?”

“Yes. I know you’re not into fashion, but you carry yourself well, and clothes look good on you.”

“Including my five-dollar T-shirt?”

“There is an art to high-low fashion,” Johnny says from behind us. “And tonight, you’ve actually mastered it. Bravo.”

“I think he’s being facetious.”

Laurent looks at him. “Are you?”

Johnny can’t help himself from looking down at Laurent’s shoes.

“What? They are a brand name.”

“They are athletic shoes. Sneakers would have been a better choice. Unless, of course, you are a professional athlete.”

“Duly noted,” Laurent teases, using one of Johnny’s typical lines.

But later, Laurent asks me, “Are sneakers and tennis shoes not the same thing?”

“Not exactly,” I tell him with a smile. “My mom says that confidence makes the man—or the woman. Your quiet confidence is one of the things that attracted me to you the most.”

“Oh, so you *were* hitting on me that day in the cafeteria?” His smile is big and I know he’s just teasing me.

“Most definitely,” I say in reply.

We’re barely in the front door when Waverly envelops Laurent in a hug. “I haven’t seen you in forever!”

“Um, horseback riding last night?”

“I know,” she says, rolling her eyes. “But I was too worried about Hudson falling off the horse or something.”

“Or maybe about the way his arms were around your waist?” Laurent fires back.

“Fine. I might have a little crush. Do you want to come see my room? I’m obsessed with it!”

“Of course,” Laurent says as she drags him toward the stairs.

To be honest, I’m a little surprised she didn’t ask me to join her, but just as she gets to the stairs, she turns around and winks at me and nods toward Hudson.

I’m thinking she wants me to ask him about last night without her around. *Sneaky.*

“Hey, Hudson,” I say to him.

Hudson is hot, but I think he’s kind of shy.

“Arrington,” he says, giving me a quick, squeezing hug. “I meant to text you and thank you for last night.”

“You don’t have to thank me. I had fun too.”

“I conquered two fears last night. Heights and horses. It was an amazing experience.”

I consider beating around the bush, but I get the feeling Hudson isn’t at all like London. I don’t think he cares about drama. And I think he’d prefer a

direct question over a nuanced one.

“Do you like Waverly?”

“Of course I like her. We’re becoming friends,” he says.

I purse my lips and stare at him.

“Oh, you mean, like that.”

“Yeah, like that,” I say.

“It’s kind of too soon to tell, don’t you think?” he says, grabbing a glass of lemonade off the table and handing it to me before taking one for himself.

“You spent a whole evening alone together. You were depending on her for your life, not just rock climbing, but on the horse too. I think if you had chemistry, you would have felt it.”

“Do you think she likes me? I can’t tell if she’s being friendly or flirty.”

I cross my arms in front of my chest and sigh.

“Okay, fine. I don’t know if I want it to be friendly or flirty. Yet.”

“Yet?”

“I just got here. We both did. There’re so many people to meet. Classes haven’t even started.”

“And you want to leave your options open?” I surmise.

“Don’t you think we all should?” he asks.

“You and London are so different,” I say with a laugh. “She’s ready to jump at any and all options.”

“That’s more like our little sister, Vienna. She has a huge crush on your brother Aspen. After her crazy roll down the hill, you’d think she’d be embarrassed, but not her. She’s got more confidence than anyone I’ve ever met, but she wears her heart on her sleeve. Falls in and out of love at the drop of a hat.” He leans closer to me and whispers in my ear, “And because of it, she’s sexually active. I worry about her.”

“And what about London?”

“She’s uptight. Views sex as messy.”

“Physically or emotionally?” I wonder.

He weighs his head, moving it side to side. “Probably both.”

“What about you?” I dare to ask.

“Have I had sex?” I nod, and he goes, “Yes. I have—well, *had*—a

girlfriend back home, but she broke up with me when I told her I was switching schools.”

“Do you still like her? Talk to her?” I question because the last thing Waverly needs is to like someone who is pining after their ex.

“I was pretty shocked by her reaction. Thought we might work something out. She started dating one of my lacrosse teammates three days later.”

“I’m sorry.”

“If she dated me for two years and could just ditch me, I’d say her feelings for me weren’t exactly deep, and I’m better off without her.”

“That’s probably true,” I say thoughtfully, thinking about my own life.

Hudson surprises me when he wraps an arm around me in a hug. “Your brother explained the Branson situation to me. I’m sorry for what you’re going through too.” His gesture catches me by surprise.

“Uh, hey,” Waverly says loudly.

Her eyes are huge, like she can’t believe I’d have the audacity to be in the arms of someone she likes. And I get it, but she has no idea.

Hudson removes his arm and says, “Good talking to you, Arrington. I’m going to go mingle.”

“What the heck?” Waverly says. She’s got Laurent and my brother in tow.

“Why were you and Hudson hugging?” Monroe says, wondering the same thing.

“He gave me a big-brother type of hug based on the conversation we were having.” I roll my eyes and walk away because I don’t want to talk about Branson anymore.

Monroe follows me. “You doing okay?” he asks. “Were you and Hudson talking about Branson?”

“Briefly,” I say.

“You know Waverly is crushing on him, right?”

“Yes, and so does he.”

“Why hasn’t he made a move?” Monroe wonders.

“Maybe he wants to check out all his options first. Nothing wrong with that.”

“Speaking of options, wanna meet mine?” he asks.

I start laughing. “Roe, seriously, don’t you dare ever say something like that to her.”

He laughs too. “Trust me, I won’t. And I know it’s only been a few days, but we hit it off right away. I think she’s cool. And pretty. And ... I don’t know. We’ll see how it goes.”

Pretty soon, I’m being introduced to the girl I saw him with at the lacrosse game and the dance.

“This is Emily.”

The girl gives me an immediate hug, like we’re old friends. “Did Monroe tell you that he asked me to go to the Hamptons with him this weekend?” she gushes.

“No, he didn’t,” I reply, glancing at him in surprise. Taking her to the Hamptons indicates a level of seriousness on his part I didn’t expect regardless of his *we’ll see how it goes* comment. “Will you be staying at the Johnsons’?”

“We will be,” Monroe says. “Aspen too.”

“You should come with us!” Emily says, like she is somehow in charge of inviting people.

And I know Monroe won’t like it. I hate to say it, but that’s probably strike one on their relationship.

Monroe actually rolls his eyes at her. “We’re old family friends,” he tells her. “My sister has had a standing invite since birth.”

“Oh, sorry,” she says. “I didn’t realize.”

“It’s okay,” I say, shocked my brother kind of called her out. “You will have a great time. It’s a beautiful place. Just watch out for their special punch. It’s pretty strong, and you could end up doing crazy things.”

She elbows Monroe in the side and gives him a sly grin. “You didn’t tell me about the punch. Clearly, I’ll be needing buckets of it.”

Most guys would be thrilled to hear her say something like that, but not my brother. His face goes blank, and I know he’s rethinking his decision.

Oh, boy. That might be strike two.

“Uh, Lane, can I speak to you for a minute in private? Mom and Dad ...”

he says vaguely as he pulls me away.

“I think I just made a big mistake,” he says.

“Well, if you need an out, you can tell her you were told by *Mom and Dad* that you had to escort me on *my* weekend plans.”

“What are your weekend plans?”

“I’ll be on Johnny’s yacht.”

“With who?”

“Johnny, Laurent, me, and Augie, for sure. I don’t know that he’s actually extended invites yet, but he asked if you and Aspen might like to come. I told him you’d probably be going to the Hamptons. Is Emily who you were hooking up with the night of the carnival?”

“Yeah, we were just making out mostly that night.”

“And after the dance?”

“Things progressed a bit more. Actually, a lot more.”

“That seems fast.”

“It does. And I don’t want my first time to be with some drunken mess.”

“Or with someone you’re not in love with.”

He tosses his arm around my shoulders. “Tell me about this boat.”

And I know the poor girl is already history.

I’m checking out the spread of food. “This is a lot of food for a mixer,” I comment, mostly to myself.

The guy next to me, who is piling food on his plate, goes, “It’s our dinner.”

“Oh, we ate dinner earlier.”

“Ah, yes,” he says. “The Sunday roast. One of Hawthorne’s traditions. Like going to grandma’s house. Wyndham doesn’t do tradition. House meetings are required on Sunday night by the school, but ours are casual. Always served buffet-style. And my name is Drake. Drake Mayer, but most everyone calls me the Virginator.”

“I thought that was a self-imposed title, Drake,” Beckham, who suddenly appears next to me, counters.

“Oh, it was at first,” Drake says with a laugh.

“Do I want to know why you call yourself that?” I ask him.

“I suppose, with no context, it can seem shady, but it was all by happenstance, I assure you.” Drake speaks slow and has a very soothing voice. Almost like a meditation coach might. “I had sex with a girl I was sort of seeing. I knew it was her first time, and I wanted it to be special for her, so I put rose petals on the bed, had flameless candles flickering, and freshly pressed sheets. Although our relationship was short-lived, she appreciated the effort, and I guess she told some of her friends about the experience, and one of them offered me money to deflower her. She explained that she had been waiting for the right guy, but hadn’t met him yet. And she didn’t want her first time to be some drunken escapade. I refused her money since, well, that’s illegal. But we did. And now, more girls in that situation come to me.”

And although the thought sorta makes me cringe, I can imagine what it might feel like to think you might lose your virginity to a certain person and the frustration you could feel when that didn’t happen.

“Sounds almost noble of you,” I say to Drake.

“Thank you,” he says, “and if you or any of your friends are ever in need of my services, you know where to find me.”

He flits away before I can tell him that I have a boyfriend.

Beck says, “You will *not* be in need of his services.”

“I know,” I say happily, “because after this weekend, it won’t be an issue.”

“Look, sleep with Augie if you want, but I think it’s best if you and I don’t discuss it.”

“Why not? I tell you everything. At least, I have been lately. Oh, and speaking of telling all. I had a lovely chat with Zoey Hawthorne today. She said you had fun last year and she’s hoping to snag you officially this year.”

“Interesting,” is all Beck says on the subject.

“I guess it at least goes both ways,” I add.

“Who goes both ways?” Johnny asks from behind us.

“I was referring to Beckham and me not discussing our sex lives with each other.”

“Why wouldn’t you? You’re friends,” Johnny inquires.

I shrug and walk away, saying, “You’ll have to ask him.”

I wander around and try to meet everyone who is in Wyndham. My grandfather taught me the importance of knowing how to work a room. And when our parents took us to The Arrington clubs around the world for events, it was one of my most favorite things. Meeting new people. Hearing about their lives. It’s a big part of what made me fall in love with the clubs and why that passion was fueled when I got to intern in Paris and London.

Zoey finds me and drags me over toward a group of girls, including Waverly. “I found Arrington,” she says. Then she gestures toward a girl with deep auburn hair, pretty freckles across her nose, and a sweet smile. “This is Tabitha. She’s a junior too. And Allison”—who has long, straight jet-black hair and dark skin—“who is a senior. Allison is really good at choreography and works closely with Molly on our routines.”

“Waverly is really good at that too,” I offer, causing her to give me a wry smile.

“That’s awesome to hear,” Allison says. “We’ll start right off with a couple of routines for everyone to learn for our performances at the football games, but basketball is our biggest season.”

“Plus hockey,” Zoey says with a laugh.

“We are the very unofficial ice girls for the hockey team,” Tabitha explains. “Hockey is our best sport here, and it just didn’t seem fair that we dance for the football games that no one really cares that much about, but not the hockey team.”

“And many professional teams have ice girls,” Allison adds.

“And most of us either date or crush on hockey players,” Zoey says with a giggle. She fans her face. “They are so hot.”

“A lot of them play lacrosse too,” Allison says. “You don’t want to miss a game.”

Waverly says, “We both were at the scrimmage yesterday.”

“Do we need to talk about the elephant who is not in the room?” Tabitha blurts out.

I look around, trying to figure out what she’s referring to but only find

expectant faces looking at me.

When I squint my eyes, Waverly goes, “I think they are referring to Augie. Well, you and Augie.”

“Oh, what about us?”

“Well, what’s the real scoop? Are you actually dating? Is he coming back to Eastbrooke? We know he’s in Scotland at the king’s birthday party, and we saw his dreamy profession of love for you, but what we want to know is if it was all for the cameras.”

My face breaks out into a wide smile. “Actually, it was all for me. We talked before he went out there. I had no idea what he was going to say. He made his press secretary hold his phone up so I could watch while he spoke. And it was all true. I’m not pregnant. We are dating.”

“Were you just swooning?” Tabitha asks, clasping her hands in front of her.

“I was.”

“You’re so lucky,” Allison gushes.

“I mean, I know he’s a prince, but he’s also just Augie. He’s funny and charming, kind, and part of what he loves about Eastbrooke is that he can sort of just be a normal guy.”

“He’ll never be normal. He’s royalty!” Tabitha says.

Zoey goes, “I get it. So many expectations when you just want to figure out your life. Make friends. Have some fun.”

“Exactly,” I agree, and I wonder if Zoey and I might someday be good friends.

“You probably both understand that too,” Zoey says to Waverly and me. “Your moms are pretty famous.”

“Oh, and can we talk about Laurent, just for a minute? He’s so cute. I want to meet him,” Tabitha says. “I’ve seen you together a lot.”

“I’m sure I can make an introduction,” I offer.

“It’s fun to have some new guys here. Your brothers are pretty hot too,” Zoey says.

“Speaking of hot guys,” a tall, dark-haired guy with a wide grin says, pointing at himself.

“Stryker.” Allison laughs, but she slides her hand down his arm, appraising him. “You have gotten taller.”

“And packed on more muscle,” he says, flexing a buff bicep. “Actually, I came over here to save Miss Waves at the Beach.”

“Save who?” Tabitha says at the same time Zoey says, “From what?”

“Dance team drivel,” he replies, his grin widening even more with a naughty gleam in his eye.

The girls all boo him. Waverly laughs.

“Fine, I’m supposed to tell you that dessert has been served. I know how you ladies like your sweets. And did I mention that *I* am particularly sweet?”

The girls giggle at that but make a beeline for the table, leaving me, Stryker, and Waverly in their dust.

I stick my hand out. “Hey, I’m Arrington. Waverly’s cousin.”

“I can see the family resemblance. Nice to meet you. Now, if you could only get this one over here,” he says, pointing at Waverly, “to take me seriously.”

“Maybe you’d need to actually be serious for that to happen,” Waverly fires back.

“If I must.” He takes Waverly’s hand and dramatically drops to one knee. “Will you, Waves at the Beach, please accompany me to the dessert table so I can shower you with sweets in the hope that you will think I am sweet enough to go on a date with?”

“He’s asked you on a date, and you said no?” I blurt out.

“Yes,” Waverly says, still holding his hand. “Because he always asks like this.”

He bats his eyes at her.

Her face breaks out into a wide grin. “Oh, okay, fine. If nothing else, so you will stop asking.”

He pops up off the ground and pumps his fist in the air. “She said yes!” Then he turns to both of us, holds out his hands, and says, “Ladies.”

And once we get to the table, I will admit, it is an impressive display of treats. I grab a cake pop, but don’t join Waverly and Stryker, wanting to let them have their own conversation.

Hudson comes to stand next to me. “What was that all about?”

“Stryker asked Waverly out on a date.”

Hudson frowns and goes, “Huh.”

“I’m not sure what that means.”

“Neither do I,” he says, “but Johnny invited me to go on his boat this weekend. You’re going too, right?”

“I am.”

“He said he was going to invite my sister and Waverly. Do you think Waverly will come?”

“Maybe you should ask her that question,” I tell him.

Make it a double.

10:45pm

We’re walking back to our house from the mixer when Johnny asks, “When will Augie be back?”

“Depends on when he gets to leave.”

“I can’t believe he forgot his grandfather’s birthday party,” Laurent says.

“I think he thought he could come here, pick Arrington up, and take her to London with him,” Johnny says. “At least, that’s what he said. But then he got caught up in, well, her.”

“It’s totally sweet,” I say dreamily, clasping my hands together and staring up at the stars dotting the clear night sky.

“Oh boy,” Laurent says to Johnny, “she’s about to start with the swooning.”

“She *should* swoon over the person she loves,” Johnny chides.

Once we’re inside the house, I say, “It’s a nice night. Let’s go sit outside for a bit.”

“Too cold for me,” Johnny says.

“And I’m tired,” Laurent adds. “Rain check?”

“Sure,” I say.

“I’m game,” Beck says to me. “Want something to drink?”

“Should we make hot chocolate?”

Beck grins. “We definitely should.”

We make our cocoa and take it outside, Beck grabbing a cashmere throw along the way.

I sit on a love seat, away from the trees surrounding the property, and look up. “It’s gorgeous.”

“You looked gorgeous at the dance. Everyone was talking about it.”

“I think I’d like everyone to stop talking about me. But why were they?”

“Because you looked different,” he says, blowing on his hot chocolate before taking a sip.

“So, they were surprised I had it in me? Amazing what a little glow-up can do, huh?”

“You’ve always had it in you, Lane. Why do you think I asked you to the dance?”

“Because you wanted to make Betsy think you liked me. I will admit though that when you asked me, it set off all kinds of feelings.”

He leans forward, the space between us evaporating. He swallows hard and says, “I was talking about you, Lane.” When I tilt my head slightly, he continues, “And before you say it, I like you as more than a friend.”

“I like you as more than a friend too. Which is pretty obvious since we’ve kissed and stuff.”

“Maybe I’d like more than that,” he says.

“But that’s the thing, Beck. You really don’t. You say it’s what you want, but the things you do don’t back it up. A good example of that has to do with the dance. You left me flowers. Asked me to go, and a short time later, you told me that if you went stag, you’d have some fun. Which indicated that you’d have more fun going stag than going with me. And it made me feel like shit. And I don’t want to be with someone who is constantly looking around, wondering why I’m their date. Not to mention the pressure to perform.”

“Perform how?” he asks.

“Is he having fun? Am I fun? What exactly do I have to do to make sure he has fun so he considers it a successful date? What is fun to him? In the

context you said it, I assumed it meant sex. That fun to you would mean dancing with everyone you wanted, see who you vibed with, and then go sleep with her. Which means anything less than that probably isn't going to be *fun* for you. And maybe I want to be in actual love. Or at least have someone like me enough to not tell me they'd have more fun going stag."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"I know you didn't mean to hurt my feelings, Beck. But the words were still there. *And trust me, getting laid is easy for me.*" I shrug. "So, I didn't want to stand in the way of you getting laid. Of having Beckham-style fun."

"What if, at the end of the night, you were the girl I wanted to be with?"

I shake my head. "Because that's not me, Beck. Not now. Maybe not ever. And while I have thought many times about asking someone like you to help me get over my virginity if it didn't happen naturally with someone I was in love with, I don't want that. At least until I'm much older. When I'm a thirty-year-old virgin, maybe I'll call the Virginator. Except that regardless of my age, I want to be in love. Maybe as I mature, I'll change my mind, and I'll just want sex. It's just not what I want right now."

"And Augie said he loves you."

"Yes. And honestly, everyone already thinks we've done it, so we might as well, right?" I let out a chuckle.

"You shouldn't do it because of that."

"What should I do it for, oh wise Beckham?"

"Love," he says.

"Uh-huh. Why don't you tell me about your first time then? How in love you were."

He sighs. "It's different for guys."

"It shouldn't be."

"My first time was"—he stops, looks into my eyes—"actually, *all* of my times, I've never been in love. Never told a girl that I love her."

"And you've *never* felt in love with anyone?"

He shakes his head.

I think about that. "Honestly, Beck, that isn't a bad thing because love can hurt. And you've managed to have a lot of love-free sex, so"—I hold my

cup up—“cheers to you for that. It’s actually quite an accomplishment, really. Maybe I should take a page out of the Johnson playbook.”

“Except you’re not single.”

I smile, thinking about Augie. I know, sometimes, I crush a little on Beck, but Augie makes me happy. “I know.”

“And you have a big decision to make.”

“Actually, I already made my decision. I’m going to have sex with Augie when he gets back.”

Beckham’s head flies back, like I punched him or something. *Or is he shocked?*

He opens his mouth.

Then closes it.

Shakes his head and goes, “Um, the decision I was referring to is if you are going to stay at Eastbrooke.”

His words take the wind out of my happy sail.

“You’re right. I do have to decide.”

“Any idea what you’re going to choose?”

“Actually, yes, we want to stay.”

“I know you think my advice is shit or biased, and it is, but make the decision for yourself, not because it’s what Augie wants.”

“I love Augie and have no reason to doubt him, but I also know he came here on a whim. And that scares me a little.”

“Because you think he will change his mind?”

“That, or I just can’t trust anyone after what happened with Branson. I mean, if I can’t trust my best friend for life, how can I believe that what anyone else says is true?”

“You can believe me.”

“No, I can’t really. Everyone tells you what they want the truth to be. Like, I do like Augie, he’s a good kisser, got a great body, and he’s extremely polished. Smart. The kind of guy your parents would be proud of you marrying. Well, most parents. Mine seemed to think I just wanted to be a princess.”

“Do you?”

“If I love Augie enough to want to marry him someday, it’s part of the package. Just like I have goals and family obligations. Like, for you, your family summers in the Hamptons. It’s a long tradition. If I married a Johnson, it would be expected.”

He grins. “Maybe you *should* marry a Johnson.”

“Well, I’m not marrying Branson. I’m still trying to figure out how he went from being so sweet to how he acts today.”

“And what about me?”

“You were a hellion. No wonder you’re a Hawthorne prefect. It’s probably one of their criteria. Since they throw a *helluva* party.”

He ruffles my hair and says, “You’re silly.”

“The dean called me to his office today,” I blurt out.

“What for?”

“What happened at the dance. Anyway, Branson was there, being his usual ugly self. Did you know he got kicked out of Calder? Got moved back to the sophomore dorm?”

“I did. I had to vote on it.”

“How did you vote?”

“I’ve tried talking to him. Tried to figure out what’s going on with him. It’s hard because he’s family, you know?” he says, looking sad.

“I think it’s hard for your uncle Braxton too.”

“I voted with my heart. Even though I hate that it had to happen, the rules are the rules, and I think he needs to learn some kind of lesson.”

“You’re probably right. Anyway, the dean suggested we go to counseling together. Starting this week.”

“Did you agree?”

“Part of me doesn’t want to be in the same room as him. The other part of me knows that if I’m going to stay at Eastbrooke, I need to be able to. I don’t want to be his friend, but I also don’t want to be his enemy.”

“I probably shouldn’t tell you this, but ...”

“But what?”

“I really don’t understand his motivation with you at all. Growing up, you two were always together. But the night of his initiation, he said some things

about you that I didn't like."

"What kind of things? And what initiation?"

"It's another Johnson tradition. The first year you get to stay at the house without parental supervision, all the older guys gather around the fire to chat."

"Chat about what?"

"Upholding the Johnson reputation, basically," he says carefully.

"Like a class on how to get girls?"

"Maybe a little more than that."

"Sexual advice?"

"More like each person who's there tells about their first summer. The highs and the lows. Mostly, it's them reminiscing about when they were young and single," he says with a laugh. "Fun stories though. Tend to be sexual in nature."

"And did you tell stories that night?"

"Of course."

"And can I hear them?"

"Not tonight."

"Okay, so what did Branson say?"

"Some of the cousins were giving him a hard time about you. They called you his little girlfriend. Mentioned that unless you guys were, well, doing things or in a relationship, that it shouldn't interfere with his summer. And he might have said something to the effect that he would offer to take your virginity out of pity."

"He said that?" I say, feeling crushed and betrayed yet again.

"I'm paraphrasing, but, yes, he said something to that effect."

"I hate him."

"He shouldn't be in your life, Lane. You need to let it go."

"That's why I agreed to do counseling even though I think it's bullshit. Maybe I just need closure. Maybe we both do."

"Now, about our kiss earlier tonight. You most definitely kissed me back."

"I was surprised when you kissed me and, if you recall, I pulled away, not

kissed you back. And just so you know, I plan on telling Augie about it the second he gets back.”

“I already covered for you,” he says with a grin.

“You told Augie?”

“No. I turned it into a new tradition. Quick thinking and brilliant on my part, especially since the kiss wasn’t planned.”

“What do you mean?”

“When we locked eyes, it was all I could think about. Getting to you. Kissing you. In case you couldn’t tell by the kiss—by all our kisses—I like you, Lane.”

“Please, stop saying you like me. We’ve been over this. We like each other. We’re friends. And we are staying *strictly* friends. I refuse to let you ruin that.”

“What makes you think I would?”

“Let me see your phone.”

He hands it to me. “Why?”

I enter his passcode and scroll through his texts.

“Hmm, let’s see. Because I’m right that you’re talking to Darcy about hooking up. And, um, Jessica just a bit ago. Apparently, that’s not actually over. And, oh, please. Rachel Tran is flirting with you? Tell me that you haven’t with her.”

“I haven’t. Won’t. She rubs me the wrong way,” he says.

“As opposed to my dance team captain, Molly, who apparently rubs you in all the *right* ways.”

He can’t contain his grin.

“This is why.” I hand him his phone back.

“So, are you telling me that if I become celibate, you’d take me seriously?”

“I’m saying, one Johnson already broke my heart, and I refuse to make it a double. No matter how good of a batter you are.”

“You’re talking baseball to me. That’s sexy.”

“I’m going to my room. Night, Beck.”

Monday, August 29th

Already bonded.

6:30am

I stand, looking at my closet full of uniform pieces. I read wearing uniforms makes it easy for students because they don't have to think about what to wear. But still. It's my first day. Of going to school with people I'm not related to. I want to look nice.

I scroll through my phone at all the rules about what to wear on what days. Ultimately, I decide on a red polo with an oversize school crest above my heart, a signature plaid pleated skirt, white platform tennies, and then pull on the house blazer.

And smile as I look at myself in the mirror.

I know it's early, but I know I have to call my parents anyway.

"Aubrey Lane," my dad says, answering.

"I thought you guys might get a kick out of seeing me in my uniform before my first day of school."

Dad immediately switches to video. I can see he's shirtless, sitting up in bed, his hair a mess, but his green eyes are bright and his smile wide.

"Hang on," he says before calling out, "Boots!" which is the nickname he's called my mom since the first day they met at Eastbrooke.

And I will admit, it's cute. Apparently, he called her that because she was wearing cowboy boots at the time. And it makes me wish I had brought one of the many pairs I own.

A few minutes later, she's hopping onto the bed next to him. "I have an early morning call time," she explains. She's freshly showered, her hair damp and her face makeup-free and glowing.

"Before I do the grand reveal, I have a favor," I say. "I know that you gave me a packing list, but I planned on going to London, so I didn't pack much. Any chance you could have someone pack me up some clothes and

shoes and send them to me here? I was thinking maybe even some of my cowboy boots and a riding outfit. The horses here are so sweet.”

“Of course we can,” Dad says.

“Okay, here we go!” I say, giving them a view of me in my mirror.

“Ohmigosh,” Mom says, her eyes filling with tears. “Honey, how can you be so grown up already?”

Dad is misty-eyed as well. “Tell me about the blazer,” he says. “Is that a new design?”

I tell him about the significance of the red lapel and how they are new this year for each house.

“Well, we hope you have a great first day!” Dad says.

“Can I ask you guys a question?”

“You just did,” Dad teases.

“How come you gave Aspen a credit card, but not me or Monroe?”

“He is the most responsible of the three of you,” Mom says.

“He wants to use it to buy us each a car.”

Mom laughs. “I bought a car when I got to Eastbrooke.”

“Your security advisor suggested it though.”

“Did that hurt your feelings?” Dad asks.

“Kind of. I spent the summer working. The boys spent it partying. I just don’t know if your assessment of our maturity is still correct. Anyway, I have to get going. Just wanted you to see me before I left. Love you!”

I grab my backpack and check today’s schedule on my phone. Breakfast is served in the main dining hall from seven until eight thirty. I plan to get a muffin and a coffee either here at the house or at one of the coffee shops on campus.

But then I remember Johnny’s croissants and wonder if he has any more. His door is wide open, the pennant he made our first night here hanging on the front of it. As I look down the hall, I see all the doors have them, except for mine. Of course, at the time, I didn’t know if I would still be allowed to go to school here. But now, I wish I had made one anyway because I feel left out.

“Morning, Johnny.”

“Morning, Sparkles,” he sings out. “What do you think?”

He steps out from his bathroom, looking his usual dapper self in red trousers with a tapered leg, a crisp white spread-collar shirt, a paisley bow tie, our house blazer, and a pair of designer sneakers with the Eastbrooke crest emblazoned on the side.

“I love your shoes! Were those at the school shop?”

“Ah, no, these are custom. Airlifted from Italy last night. Arrived via courier an hour ago.”

“Any chocolate croissants left?”

“Not in my room, but I did have a few dozen delivered as a special treat for our first day.”

I let out a screech and do a happy clap. “Yay!”

“Let me grab my bag, and I will join you. I also might have had a custom espresso maker flown in, complete with an Italian barista.”

“Do you ever think you’re too rich?” I ask in complete seriousness.

Johnny takes a moment and looks thoughtful. “I don’t think so. No.”

Everyone seems to be in a hurry, rushing through the house and out the door. And it makes me wonder where they are all off to. I suppose meeting friends for breakfast and such. We have our coffees made and each get a croissant.

After we sit down at the table, Johnny turns to me. “Breakfast should be a leisurely event.”

“That’s why I’m up early. I hate to rush in the morning.”

“We need to compare schedules,” Johnny says, taking his phone out of his pocket and setting it on the table.

I set mine next to it.

“Hmm, second-period Latin and sixth-period History of Capitalism. Which, with the block schedule, I’ll see you in one class a day. But we should plan to start our days just like this. It’s nice.”

“It is nice. Laurent probably won’t join us though, will he? He’s not really a fan of mornings.”

Johnny laughs. “No, he is not.”

“Have you looked at his schedule?”

“Yes, he is in History with us.”

I look at Johnny’s phone. “Private lessons in the afternoon instead of a sport?”

“I’ll be playing squash this winter, but I want to keep up with my jujitsu, fencing, and tennis. I might even do some riding and golfing mixed in with it.”

“So, it’s basically free time?”

“With an instructor, yes.”

An alarm goes off on Johnny’s phone. Just a couple of beeps.

“Does that mean we should get going?”

“It does,” he says, draining his cup.

As we’re walking up the hill toward the classroom buildings, Johnny asks, “Is there anything special you would like to do while on the boat this weekend?”

“Besides have sex with Augie? Hmm. I’m really hungry for a big Mexican spread—nachos, tacos, fajitas, guac, chips and salsa. It’s something we made at home a lot, and it sounds so good. And don’t laugh, but I love playing games.”

“I enjoy a good round of chess myself.”

“Card games, board games, cornhole, bocce ball. Something competitive. Of course, water sports. Tanning. More of that pasta. Maybe like a steak fry?” I nudge him in the side. “And we can’t forget dressing up and taking enviable photos for our fancy new social media feeds.”

“Now you’re talking,” he says with a laugh.

Plot of the story.

Physics

I take a seat, and right before the bell rings, Branson walks in and takes

the first empty spot he sees.

The teacher introduces herself, mentions the name of the class, and then says, “We’re going to start off with an icebreaker of sorts. You will get lined up in alphabetical order by your first name, and in doing so, you’ll get to learn your classmates’ names.”

Students start to line up based on whether their name is first, middle, or toward the end of the alphabet. I do the same, going to the front of the classroom.

Of course, that means that Branson is also up there. I start asking people in that vicinity their names. There’s a David, an Ember, a Carlyle, and a Christy with a C. I don’t find any other A’s, so I step into the first spot, which is right next to Branson.

The teacher comes to stand in front of me, then points. “You two, congratulations. You’re partners for the term. Please take the first table.” Then she tells Carlyle and Christy to take the next one.

I stay frozen in my spot. *I’m going to be Branson’s partner?*

Branson sits down in the chair on the right side of the table. I stand behind my chair, wondering what I’m going to do.

The teacher notices me and motions with her hand for me to sit.

I shake my head and whisper, “Um, I can’t sit here.”

“Why not?” she asks.

“He hates me.”

Branson starts to open his mouth, but I keep going. “He used to be my best friend, and I just don’t need the emotional trauma that would go along with sitting next to him. With being his partner.”

The teacher just shrugs. “You don’t always like the people you work with, but that’s how it is in life. Sit down.”

I purse my lips in disappointment at her lack of empathy, flexibility, and compassion, but I take a seat, plopping down into it with a huff.

“I don’t hate you. I actually miss you,” Branson surprises me by saying.

Truth be told, I miss him too. Miss the late-night talks. The emotional connection. He was the first person I told everything to. The shoulder I cried on, my partner in crime. Our friendship meant everything to me.

Then ... poof. It was gone. I want to say it was because of the kiss.

But that was just the start.

It was the fact that I left the party early, left the Hamptons early, and he didn't even care enough about me to find out why.

And the answer is simple. Because he knew exactly why. Because it was what he wanted. Me out of his life.

"Okay then, you don't hate me." I don't say anything else.

The teacher talks about how we are allowed to use laptops, phones, and computers in class.

I take my phone out of my bag and open up the app that allows me to take notes. Thankfully, Eastbrooke understands technology is a big part of our lives and that having all our class notes both easily accessible and easily searchable in our phones or tablets makes sense.

She goes on to tell us that if you are caught scrolling your social media feed, you can get a demerit. And demerits go against your house.

Branson has his phone in his hands and has typed out the word *Physics*.

I take a moment to really look at him. At how much he's changed. His smooth cheeks now have dark stubble on them. The arm that used to wrap around me in a hug went from having one tattoo to numerous ones, scrolling together around his last name. He told me that he wanted a half-sleeve eventually and was going to work up to it, adding a few tats each year.

Nestled between his last name are things that are meaningful to him. There's a wave and a nautical flag for his love of the Hamptons. The face of his dog, Remmy. I'll never forget how we cried together three years ago when Remmy stopped eating, wouldn't get out of bed, and had to be put to sleep. How his parents suggested we not watch, but how we each held one of her paws as she took her last breath, tears streaming down our faces. There's a football, an *E* for Eastbrooke, mixed with a skull and his mom's favorite yellow roses. And on one of the roses is ...

My eyes get big.

I have to blink twice to make sure I'm seeing what I think I am.

And it's true.

On the rose is a ladybug.

Just last Christmas, Branson gave me a ladybug—or *Laneybug*, as he called it—bracelet.

I hold my hand up, feeling the irresistible urge to reach out and touch it. But then a text pops up on his phone.

Cassiebug: I can't wait to see you this weekend, baby.

I stand suddenly and noisily, my chair hitting the table behind me with a thud and interrupting the teacher, who is still babbling through the class syllabus. I don't even look at her. I just rush out of the room, feeling sick to my stomach.

I run around the corner and smack dab into the dean's broad chest.

"Where are you off to?" he asks.

I want to tell him that I have no idea. That my emotions are everywhere. That I don't know if I want to punch Branson in the face for being such a liar or myself for falling for it. At the same time, I want to march back in that classroom and show Branson that I don't care anymore. Don't care about him. Don't care who I have to sit next to. That I'm impervious to the hurt.

But I'm not.

"I'm, um ..."

"Not loving your first class?"

"Uh, exactly," I stutter out.

"Just head back to Hawthorne. Your house's academic advisor will be there all day to help facilitate schedule changes."

And I know that at some point during orientation, we were told that, but I forgot until now.

"That's where I'm headed," I lie, rushing off.

Once I step outside, the warm morning air envelops me, caressing me like a hug and making me miss home. Miss my parents. And I wonder again what I'm even doing here. I can't realistically just drop any class that Branson and I might be in together.

Or can I?

I walk quickly down to the house, scan my palm, and gain entrance.

Beckham is the first person I see. He's sitting in the library, and as I start to rush toward him, I realize he's not alone in the room.

"Oh, sorry to interrupt," I say to our academic advisor. "I'll wait outside."

Tears fill my eyes, which makes me mad. Mad at myself for letting Branson get to me. Mad that I'm not stronger. Mad I'm running away from a problem instead of facing it head-on.

I plop down on a couch in the gathering room and close my eyes.

Take a deep breath.

And then another.

"What's wrong?" Beck asks, sitting down next to me.

I open my eyes and plaster a smile on my face. "Nothing. Just considering changing my first-period class. The dean said to come here and talk to the advisor."

"Is Branson in it?" he astutely asks.

I close my eyes, feeling ashamed of myself, and nod.

"It's going to happen," he says.

"I know, but she made us sit alphabetically by first names, and it meant we also had to be lab partners. I asked the teacher if I could change, and she said no. But ... he—he has a ... ladybug tattoo. It's new. And he got a text from a girl who is in his phone as Cassiebug. Cassie is the name of the girl he kissed in front of me."

"And he's called you *Laneybug* since we were kids."

"It's why I changed my name to Arrington," I whisper.

He shakes his head, wraps his arm around me, and pulls me into a hug.

"I'm sorry I keep calling you Lane," he says, kissing the top of my head.

"I let you because I like the way you say it," I tell him.

"How do I say it?"

"I don't know. You sort of draw it out, and it sounds all buttery and dreamy."

"Dreamy, huh?"

I roll my eyes. "I might have crushed on you a bit when we were kids."

“I kinda crushed on you too.”

“Why are you changing a class?”

“They tell us the class in our schedules, but we don’t find out who the teacher is until we get to class. I’m not a fan of the one I got. Had him last semester, and his way of teaching just didn’t mesh well with my style of learning. And because of it, I struggled. We never compared schedules,” he says.

I pull mine up on my app.

“You’re taking Artistic Cross Performance. That’s cool. We’re in it together. And why don’t you switch Physics to Environmental Science with me? I’ve heard it’s fun. Lots of field trips and stuff outside.”

He keeps reading my schedule. “And Jane Austen Literature? *Boo*. Baseball, on the other hand.”

“You can study baseball as an English class?”

“You can because some former Ivy League president said that the game is ‘the plot of the story of our national life.’ ”

“Huh. You memorized that?”

“I did. And we get to watch baseball movies. Come on. It will be fun. You like sports.”

I nod my head, wondering what kind of class I’m getting myself into when he gets up and leads me back into the library to get the advisor to switch up my schedule.

Once that’s done, he glances at his watch. “After first period, we have forty minutes of community time. You don’t have anything planned, do you?”

“Uh, shit.”

“What?”

“That’s when Branson and I have counseling.”

“Well, regardless, we got you a much better schedule, and you still have a few minutes before you need to leave. Think we can round up a couple more of those chocolate croissants? Actually, we should probably send the new barista out to offer something to our advisor. I still can’t believe Johnny brought him here.”

“Johnny wants Italian coffee, he flies it in from Italy.” I laugh.

Knickerless.
Community Time

I trudge into the room assigned for counseling, which is actually in the emotional well-being center. Which I find sort of ironic since I don't think counseling with Branson is going to do much for my emotional well-being.

I am the first one here and take a seat in one of the two desks opposite a single chair. The counselor who is supposed to fix us comes into the room, introduces herself as Dr. Adams, and sits down.

A few moments later, Branson rolls into the room. His face is slightly flushed, like he ran to get here.

Dr. Adams introduces herself again and then says, “We'll get right to it. I understand the two of you used to be best friends. Can you tell me about that?”

Neither of us offers any response.

She goes, “Branson?”

He says, “Yes.”

“Yes what?” she asks.

“Yes, we used to be best friends,” he replies.

She looks at me. “Arrington?”

“That's correct,” I say.

“Branson,” she asks him, “why aren't you friends anymore?”

He closes his eyes and shakes his head. “I don't want to talk about it.”

“But we're *here* to talk about it,” she says gently.

“No, we were *forced* to come. And I, for one, have nothing to say on the subject.”

She turns to me. “And what about you, Arrington?”

Oh, I have a whole lot to say on the subject, but I'm not sure I should.

I go, “No comment.”

“It's going to be difficult to get anywhere if you are not willing to

communicate with each other. I'm going to leave you to yourselves. Maybe you'll engage if I'm not present." Then she stops and looks at us. "Is the issue sexual in nature?"

"Hell no," Branson says, looking at me like he wouldn't have sex with me even if I were the last person on the planet.

"All right then." She goes out the door.

While we are technically in here alone now, the room is all windows, so I'm sure she's going to be watching us.

I let out a huff of air.

"What's that for?" Branson asks. "And why did you leave class?"

"Because I don't want to go through the semester with a partner who hates me."

"Makes sense," he says, then picks up his phone and starts texting.

I can see just enough to know that there are definitely issues of a sexual nature being discussed there.

And since I don't want to know anything further, I get my phone out and see a text from Augie.

HRH: Had breakfast with my grandfather, and we took the official family photos this morning, which took quite some time and required multiple outfit changes. I miss you desperately.

Me: I miss you too. Send me a pic.

A few moments later, a notification pops up, and I can see Augie's blond curls, but instead of the expected family photo, I get one of a shirtless Augie, his curls tamed, holding up a little note he scribbled on that says, *I heart Larky*.

Which means he literally just did this. If it had said I heart you without my name, I would have wondered if it was maybe something he, like, already had on his phone and sent to any girl who asked. My heart literally swells with joy, but I probably shouldn't say that. So, what do I say? What did Johnny say to Laurent on the boat—that he looked *delectable*? No, I can't say

that. *Can I?* I realize that I don't know how to flirt with Augie. It's funny because I can banter with Beck all day long, but I like Augie, and I don't want to say something stupid or have him think that—*what don't I want him to think?* Because, clearly, I have already stated my intentions for the weekend. I take a deep breath, and before I can reply, Augie texts again.

HRH: It was rubbish that I had to miss the dance, but know that this trip solidified the fact that I belong at Eastbrooke. With you.

I let out a dreamy sigh, causing Branson to glance over at me. I make sure he can't see my phone, then go for it.

Me: Those abs belong in my bed ... and I can't wait to see the bottom half shirtless too.

I hit *Send*, then realize what I just typed. *Ohmigosh. I'm an idiot.* I quickly send another.

Me: Uh, you know what I mean.

HRH: Pantless and knickerless?

Pantless in Britain doesn't mean, like, no jeans. There, they call pants *trousers*. And *pants* are short for *underpants*. Since they would be worn under a pair of pants, but that doesn't make sense because then pants should be called pants, not trousers, but it's what they say. And girl undies are called pants or *knickers*. Short for knickerbockers, which are the traditional short-legged golf pants. Also not super clear on where that slang came from, but whatever.

Me: Technically, that would be naked. And, yes.

Me: Also, be prepared because Johnny is going to make us all dress up and take photos of us looking fabulous.

HRH: You always look fabulous.

Me: I will be looking more so than usual on the yacht. And having you strip me out of designer clothing is my new favorite daydream.

HRH: It's just become mine too. (I feel like champagne needs to be added to the dream though.)

Me: Totally agree. Our friendship has been bonded by it.

HRH: And it should be there when we transition to more.

Me: It most definitely should be. Shoot. The bell just rang. I'm sorry, but I have to go to my next class. Love you. See you tonight!!!!!!

Lame flirting.

Latin

I find Johnny waiting for me outside of our Latin classroom. "You don't look like you've been crying. That's a good sign."

"The counselor tried to get us to talk, but we didn't, and she finally gave up. I texted Augie most of the time."

Johnny takes my phone, scrolls through, and reads our texts.

"Hey, those are private!"

He sighs at me. Closes his eyes and shakes his head slightly. And I know he's thinking that everything I said was dumb.

But then he turns to me and says, "I like the part about the designer clothes."

"I was going to tell him he's delectable."

"Your lame flirting is still endearing," he says, offering me his arm and escorting me into the classroom.

I knew Laurent would be here, but we find him sitting by London, the two of them chatting away. Aspen is behind him, along with Zoey and Rachel Tran. Zoey gives me a little wave as we make our way over toward them and take a seat.

“Are you ready for our first dance practice today?” Zoey asks me excitedly.

“I am. And to meet everyone. We didn’t really get a chance to talk at the dance.”

“Oh, there will be plenty of time for that,” she says.

I lean over to my brother. “Did you send Mom and Dad a picture of you in your uniform?”

“Shoot. No. I should though, huh?”

“Yeah, I video-chatted with them this morning. They were both in tears.”

He narrows his eyes. “Hmm. We should get a picture of the three of us together.”

“Oh, they would love that. What do you think? In front of the chapel or the library?”

“Library steps,” Zoey interjects. “Actually, I suppose I should do that too. If I come take your pictures, would you take a few of me in front of the house?”

“The house?” Aspen asks her.

She reaches out her hand to him, smiling. “I’m Zoey Hawthorne.”

Aspen takes her hand and—*did I just see sparks there?*—says, “Nice to meet you. I’m Aspen Arrington.”

“Yeah, I know,” she says, still shaking his hand. “I’m in Hawthorne with your sister, and I met Monroe last night at our mixer with Wyndham.”

“It’s a date then,” Aspen says, causing Zoey to flush.

Johnny intervenes, saying, “Six sharp. We’ll start at the library. Take individual, family, and group photos.”

Which basically settles it.

The rest of the class is filled with the teacher spending an exorbitant amount of time discussing all the ways we are going to learn Latin and why it’s so important. I could have summed it up in a sentence. In fact, I did on

my phone. *Latin is the source of many languages, and knowing it makes understanding and learning multiple languages easier.*

There. Done. Class dismissed.

Last to know.

Lunch

We all head toward the cafeteria for lunch. I make a beeline for London when I see her in the food line.

“You’re right,” I tell her.

“About what?”

“When more people ended up going, I should have thought to invite you. It was rude of me. I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too,” she says. “I jumped to the wrong conclusion. I just don’t understand why you’re not still friends—”

I put my hand up, gesturing for her to stop. “Let’s agree to disagree. Tell me about your house. Who are you hanging out with? Are you loving it?”

“Mostly Branson, Rachel Tran, Paulina—I don’t know if you have met her yet. And, yes, I love it. Everyone is really chill. Well, it was until—did you hear that Branson got kicked out of the house and sent back to the dorms?”

“I did hear that.” I don’t mention that I heard it straight from the dean’s mouth. I decide to change the subject. “Hey, would you want to take some first-day-of-school photos? Some of us are meeting up at six o’clock at the library.”

“Who’s *some of us*?” she asks, like she’s only going to come if she approves of the guest list.

What is this?

“Uh, my brothers, me, Zoey Hawthorne, and Johnny so far.”

“Is it a house thing?”

“No, my brothers aren’t in my house. You know that.”

“So, how did this come about?”

“What do you mean?”

“Once again, I’m the last to know,” she huffs.

“We were talking about it before class when you were sitting right there. Did you not hear us?”

“No, I was talking to Laurent.”

I shrug. “It’s not a big deal. I asked Aspen if he sent our parents a photo of him in his uniform. I told him I video-chatted with them this morning and they both cried. He thought it would be nice if we sent them one of us three together. That it would mean a lot to them. Then Zoey said she should probably do that for her parents too. I mean, she’s a Hawthorne, living in *Hawthorne House*. I’m sure her family would love it. And Johnny chose a time.”

“Did you invite Waverly?” she asks as we walk over to the table where her brother and Laurent are sitting.

“Not yet. You know what, London? If you don’t want to come, don’t come. Just don’t make a big deal over some stupid pictures,” I say as I sit down next to Hudson.

Fortunately, at this moment, Waverly sits down in the empty seat next to me.

“Photos tonight, six o’clock,” London says, like she’s almost making fun of me.

“Photos for what?” Waverly asks.

“Everyone who’s anyone, apparently,” London replies. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to sit with some of my housemates.” She gets up with a huff, then glances at me like she expects me to say something.

I don’t.

“What’s her problem?” I ask Waverly.

“She’s mad because of the horses. And I think Branson too. You didn’t hear this from me, but I think she has a crush on him,” she replies.

I watch as London sits down next to him and Rachel Tran.

“I just sincerely apologized about the horseback riding,” I counter.

Waverly shakes her head. “She thinks you’re Miss Popular.”

“Well, in this case, popularity isn’t easy.”

“You make it look easy. She’s also freaking out because you and I are in dance together. Afraid we’ll bond.”

“If she is trying to compete with our friendship, she might as well give up. You’re family. I’ll always be closer to you. And besides, aren’t you playing field hockey together?”

Waverly nods. “Yep.”

“I guess that means you and she will get to bond without me,” I say sarcastically and focus on my chicken salad.

Waverly chatters nervously through lunch, probably because Hudson is sitting with us.

She finally must get worn out from it because she says, “I’m going to grab a coffee. I’ll meet you in Art, okay?”

“Sounds good,” I tell her.

The second she leaves, Laurent goes, “What *is* London’s problem?”

“I don’t know. You were talking to her in Latin. Did she give you any indication?”

“Nope,” Laurent says.

I turn toward Hudson. “Any thoughts?”

“To be honest, we’re not that close. Not like you and your brothers. My mom purposely separated us so we’d be seen as individuals. We never dressed alike, were never in the same class, and we went to different schools—her an all-girls one and me all-boys. We made our own friends. Hung out with different people.”

“I thought we were going to be friends, really good ones,” I say with a sigh. “Granted, I didn’t invite her to go horseback riding, but when we planned it, it was just supposed to be you, me, Waverly, and Augie. Then, she called and had the audacity to yell at me about what happened with Branson at the dance.”

“What happened with Branson?” Hudson asks.

I tell him, and he starts shaking his head.

“I told her she shouldn’t be hanging out with him. But she’s all about Branson and Rachel.”

“I thought you said you don’t talk much.”

“All you have to do is see her around, and it’s obvious. I just hope Branson doesn’t see her as some kind of prize.”

“A prize?”

“Yeah, someone he’s taking away from you.”

“I would hope not!” I am aghast at the thought.

“He might be right,” Laurent says. “That’s all she talked about in class. She never once asked about me.”

“And unlike Vienna, who is boy crazy, London has never had a boyfriend,” Hudson states.

“I hadn’t either until Augie,” I admit.

“Arrington, you have an ease around guys. London does not.” He rolls his eyes. “I suppose both she and Vienna have daddy issues.”

“But not you?” I ask, intrigued.

“My dad and I have a good relationship even though my mom hates him. She’s hurt because he cheated on her, which is understandable, but I think life, relationships, and love must be pretty complicated sometimes.”

“Have your relationships been complicated?” Laurent asks him.

“I dated a girl for two years,” he says. “We broke up because I was coming here. She had a new boyfriend a few days later. If that wasn’t bad enough, it’s a guy I used to consider a friend.”

“Oh, that’s rough,” Laurent says.

“I suppose, but I was thinking about how she and I didn’t go to school together. I think being in a relationship here, where you could be together a lot, would be very different. In a good way.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Well, when we went out, it was really just a prelude to hooking up. There’s so much to do here. Like so many activities, being in classes together. I suspect it’s just going to be a different dynamic.” He looks at his sister across the room. “Don’t give up on her,” he says.

“My brothers and I are getting together at six tonight at the library to take pictures to text to our parents, first day of school and all. Maybe you should invite your sisters to come do the same,” I offer.

He smiles. “In our uniforms, right?”

“Of course.”

“That’d be cool. Thanks. We’ll be there.”

“I’m not sure London will come,” I tell him, “but bring Vienna, for sure.”

“I’ll guilt her into it,” Hudson says with a laugh. “And all I have to do is tell Vienna your brothers will be there, and she’ll be there with bells on—actually, it would probably be a really low-cut shirt. Will Augie get to join us?”

“I’m not sure when he’ll be back exactly.”

“How can he not know? Wouldn’t he have to know to catch his flight?”

I chuckle. “He travels by royal jet.”

“Oh, duh,” Hudson says. “Of course he would. I know he’s a prince and all, but he’s just, like, Augie to me.”

“And that’s why he loves it here,” I say with a grin.

“I think *you* are the reason he loves it here,” Hudson counters.

“Maybe that too,” Laurent says, nodding in agreement.

I leave the boys and head toward my next class. It’s in a big building, and I’m not completely sure what room it’s in, so I want to have time to find it.

Waverly is waiting for me outside.

“You and Hudson were having a very serious conversation after I left. Please say you were talking about me?”

I give her a sympathetic smile. “London.”

“Shoot.”

“But he did agree to come take pictures with us. I can make sure we get one of the two of you together. We also need one of just us cousins.”

“I was going to come just for that reason. I’m sure my mom would love a photo, but if Hudson is going to be there, that just ups the ante. Oh shoot,” she says, her eyes going wide. “That’s right after field hockey practice. I’m going to have to try not to sweat.”

“And we have dance right before that. I bet we won’t really have time for practice today. Probably just getting settled, like all the other classes.”

“I sure hope so.”

Trigger feelings.

ACP

“Welcome to Artistic Cross Performance,” our teacher says, greeting us at the door as we walk in. “I’m Professor Nigel. Please, go find somewhere comfortable to sit.”

I look in the large space. There are beanbags, poufs, and pillows tossed on the floor, and slouchy couches, which look like you’d sink right into, form a large circle behind them.

I choose a beanbag and take a seat, my brother Monroe following me in and sitting next to me. Hudson and Waverly choose the couch nearest to us, and when Beckham and Zander wander in right before the bell rings, a lot of the spaces are full, so Beck plops down on top of me and Zander on top of him.

“Boys,” our professor says.

Zander gets up and takes a spot on the floor, crossing his legs. I’m surprised that someone so tall can so easily pull his legs into a pretzel.

“You’re super flexible,” I comment.

“Not everywhere,” he fires back, causing Beck to snicker, and I can only assume he’s talking about the one thing boys love to discuss and that it is better when it’s not flexible.

I shake my head. Monroe and Hudson laugh. Waverly is clueless.

We go around in a circle and introduce ourselves, and then the professor tells us that he’d like the seniors to show the new students around the facility at the end of our class.

“I know that most of your teachers have probably been spending their time talking about what you will do all term. Grades in here are based on you trying. Spreading your wings. Learning new ways to harness and express your creative being. I’m not here to teach you. I’m simply here for guidance. And we’re going to hit the ground running. Dean Johnson sent me an extraordinary piece of work.”

I hear one of the students muttering about the dean, saying something about how, in the movie portrayal of him, he said the F-bomb like it was the only word in the English language.

“While that might be true,” our professor says, embarrassing the guy by calling him out, “his five years here have been very progressive. He’s made many changes based on student needs because although he has matured, he’s never forgotten what it’s like to be a student. And it’s because of him that this class even exists. If you don’t think this class is the right fit for you, you’re welcome to leave at any time.”

The guy puts his head down and doesn’t move.

“Back to the work. It evokes a lot of emotion, and your first collaborative project will be based on it.”

He starts reading. *“Dark and dreary, the rain comes down, despair washing over me.”*

I turn toward Waverly. She looks at me, closes her eyes, and shakes her head like she can’t believe this is happening.

In a sea of sorrow, I might drown. Somebody, please rescue me.

Save me from the demons, save me from my fears.

Save me from what haunts me, save me from my tears.

Save me from the pain that floats inside of me.

Bobbing below the depths, when I just want to be.

Threatening to swallow, expected to back down.

Wanting to rise up against those who want me to drown.

“Sounds like someone wanted to kill themselves,” a guy blurts out.

“Fuck you,” Waverly says. Hudson looks at her with compassionate eyes and puts his hand solidly on her leg. “I’m so sick of people saying that.”

“Miss Wright, while I appreciate your frustration, understand that once you put your art out into the world, it’s open for interpretation. And those interpretations are not based on your life or feelings. They are born out of theirs. Someone who has had suicidal thoughts or knows someone who did might relate to your words in that way. Honestly, at this point, what inspired

you to write it—whether a bad relationship, a bad thought, something you went through, a decision you had to make, or simply a bad dream—doesn't matter. What matters is how it touches someone else. This is a good topic for all of us. We need to understand that the interpretation is part of the process. We want to trigger feelings in people. What feelings those are we can't control.

“So, I'm going around the room, and I'd like you to each give me the first project that pops into your head. And remember, this class is about collaboration, so don't be afraid to do so. Let's say you want to write a musical based off this poem. You can, but you'll need actors, costumes, and lighting. You might want to paint a picture or make a work from textiles, paper, or clay.”

“I can imagine a really gorgeous, dark piece of pottery with a spiral pattern,” a girl says.

“I think I'd like to expand the lyrics,” Monroe says, “and set it to music.”

“Those are both great ideas. Maybe the pottery piece gets painted by someone else. Maybe someone could create a costume for Monroe to perform the song in. Maybe someone else comes up with the lighting.”

We all nod, then talk among ourselves.

About halfway through class, Johnny walks in. He catches my eye and winks at me, then speaks briefly to the professor and is told to take a seat. He does so, squeezing onto the couch behind Zander, who fills him in on what we are doing.

“What about you, Beckham?” Zander asks.

He looks at my brother. “I could sing your song,” he offers.

“Maybe it could be a duet,” Monroe says, turning to Waverly. “Would you be willing to sing it with him? You have a beautiful voice.”

“Yeah, that would be cool,” she says.

I think about the poem. After everything that happened this past weekend, one line speaks to me. *Wanting to rise up against those who want me to drown.* My mind goes to two things simultaneously, both completely different. The first is being on a soccer pitch, the winning goal up to me. One

team is cheering for me to fail. The other team wants me to rise to the occasion. I also picture a dance, starting out happy, joyful, carefree, but then being tugged down in a more dramatic style of dance. I can see a costume that unravels throughout the performance, starting in sweet pastels, becoming darker until it is all black. A sunny day turning into a thunderstorm.

Of course, I also see the parallels of this line to my life. Rising up against all that is Branson and refusing to drown.

When there are about ten minutes left of class, Beckham and Zander show us each wing of the building. One is all about artistic expression, featuring easels, weaving mills, drawing tables, and pottery wheels. There is a section for jewelry, candle making, and paper crafts. The next wing is musical. It has a stage with a small space for an audience. Zander says they have open mic nights for everything—from music to slam poetry to political and environmental debates. Of course, the main performance auditorium is also located in this building—for choirs, plays, and other theatrical performances. And there is pretty much any instrument you can imagine. Also attached to the end of this wing are the band's space and classrooms for musical and instrumental endeavors.

There's also a high-tech area with computers for architectural design and a photography center for filmmaking and photography. And collaboration space.

All in all, I'd say this should be an interesting class.

A strong vision.

Dance

Beckham and I are walking down to the field house.

"I love this part of the day," he says. "Classes are over, and now, we get to go play."

"A more grown-up version of recess, I suppose," I tease.

"It's the best. You have dance now, right?"

“I do, but I’ll be free after that.”

“If you’re bored, come down and watch our practice.” He grins at me.

“And don’t change out of your practice outfit.”

“Beck,” I say with a chuckle.

“It wouldn’t just be for me.”

“I don’t think anyone would even notice,” I scoff.

“You might be surprised. A lot of guys wish Augie weren’t here. It sucks when a hot new girl comes complete with a boyfriend.”

“He wasn’t my boyfriend when I got here, and no one really paid me any attention, so there.”

“Trust me, they were looking,” he says when my phone buzzes with a text.

I read it.

HRH: Looks like I won’t make it to school until after curfew. Meet me in the morning for breakfast?

“What’s that look for?” Beck asks me.

I let out a frustrated sigh. “Augie won’t be back until after curfew, so I won’t get to see him until tomorrow.”

“I know something that could make it better,” he says. “Come to dinner with me tonight.”

“I don’t know.”

“I’m your big, so we do have to spend time together. Getting to know each other.”

“I think we know each other pretty well. Where would we go?” I ask tentatively.

“Somewhere that’s actually pretty cool,” he replies cryptically.

“Is the food good?” I ask, pretending like I still need to make up my mind.

“Of course it is.”

“Hmm. Tell you what. I’ll go to dinner with you if you’ll come take some photos with me.”

“What kind of photos are we talking about?” He gives me a naughty grin, the kind that makes his dimples pop out.

“First-day-of-school photos in our uniforms to send to our parents. It’s the first day of your last year. You need to memorialize that.”

“Time and place?”

“Six o’clock on the library steps.”

“I suppose my parents would love that,” he says.

“Yeah, they would,” I tell him.

“So, dinner after then?”

“Sure, maybe we could all go—”

“I can’t take everyone, Lane. It has to be just you and me.”

We go our separate ways once in the field house—me to the dance room and him to change for lacrosse practice.

I step into the room and find it’s a lot different than what I expected—probably because in Mom’s movie, it was just a little locker room. This room features a glass wall, showcasing a large dance studio. The other three sides are filled with stations for each dancer, complete with a wardrobe for their dance outfits and a halo-lit makeup vanity for getting ready. The walls above each photo feature an empty frame, all except for one, which has a photo of our team captain, Molly, all decked out in gold sequins.

“Hey, Arrington,” Molly says, greeting me.

“Hi!”

“Did you bring something to wear for practice today?”

“I did.”

“Perfect. Since you are the first one here, go ahead and get changed, then get measured for your Cougarettes gear.”

She opens the door to her wardrobe, and I can see that it’s filled with a whole lot of sparkle. My eyes go wide.

“It looks like a lot,” she says, “but it’s our whole wardrobe for the year—from practicing to game days to competitions. What’s your favorite number?” she asks.

“Three,” I tell her.

She looks at a sheet and says, “People who like the number three are often the life of the party. Energetic, funny, and social. Have a strong vision of their future life goals.”

“I’m a triplet,” I tell her. “My brothers and I always fought over the number when we were on the same team. It is also a number of good fortune in many cultures. Holy trinity kind of thing.”

She takes me to the locker and instructs me to put my finger on the pad. “No key needed. Just your fingerprint, and the door will open.”

“Cool,” I say as other girls start arriving and lining up behind me.

I get dressed, then go get measured.

By the time everyone does that, there isn’t much practice time left.

Waverly takes a seat next to me on the floor. “What number locker are you?”

“Three,” I tell her.

“I guessed right,” she says. “I got number four.”

“Did Molly tell you what the number says about you?”

“Yeah, something about being brave and honest. I didn’t have the heart to tell her I only picked it so I could be next to you.”

“That’s funny. I would have waited for you after class, but you looked to be deep in conversation with Hudson, and I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“He asked me if I was doing the whole picture thing tonight.”

“And?”

“Of course, I said yes.”

“Why did he ask you?”

She throws her hands up in the air. “No freaking idea. I don’t understand him. Does he like me or not?”

I think about what he said at the mixer. “Have you had any kind of in-depth conversations?”

“Like about how hot he is? No.”

I roll my eyes at her in response.

“Um, not really,” she says. “Tell me what you know. What you were talking about at the mixer. And why did he hug you?”

“He thanked me for the horse thing. Said he conquered two of his fears

that night. Heights and horses.”

“Why didn’t he thank me?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you should ask him. Waverly, I know you have a crush, but are you just constantly swooning over him and making it awkward, or are you truly getting to know him? He’s getting over a two-year relationship, and he hugged me because Monroe had told him something about my Branson situation.”

“Two-year relationship?! Why hasn’t he told me that?”

“You’re complex, deep, and emotional, Waverly. I would be willing to bet that him listening to your poem today might have been eye-opening for him.”

“He did tell me the poem was beautiful,” she says hopefully.

“Let him get to know that Waverly because I think he could fall for a girl like her.”

She lets out a little squeal just as Molly says, “Can I have your attention? We have about ten minutes left. As you see on your schedule, we only have about an hour for practice each day. So, get in here, get dressed quickly, and be ready to start right away. Our practices will be spent on three major routines to start, and we’ll add more as the year goes on. If you have a sport after this, obviously, you need to go, but if you don’t, you are welcome to stay here and work on routines. Let’s line up quickly, so I can show you some new moves I’ve been thinking about.”

Tradition and all.

3:45pm

Waverly and most of the girls rush out as soon as our time is up, off to their next sport. I go to my locker and check my phone, finding a text from Johnny.

Johnny: When you’re done with dance, text me.

Me: I'm done.

Johnny: We need to discuss the final guest list.

Me: Want to do that while we watch lacrosse practice?

Johnny: Swing by the house and pick me up on your way.

We get set up on the bleachers. I figured there would be others watching, but it's just us.

The practice is intense, the boys scrimmaging, but stopping to work on certain plays over and over. We watch for a bit, then start discussing the subject at hand.

“Okay, so you, me, Laurent, and Augie. You already invited the prefects—Beckham, Zander, Melissa, and Jessica—my brothers, London, Hudson, and Waverly, right?” I ask him.

“Yes, everyone but Aspen confirmed, including Monroe, which surprised me since Aspen declined. So, that is twelve.”

“That's how many you wanted, right?” I ask.

“It is, but I was considering Zoey Hawthorne. She intrigues me.”

My eyes light up. “Like, you like her?”

“Possibly,” he states without giving away anything.

“Well, you must if you are considering an odd number. Won't that mess up your plans?”

“I don't think you should assume that I expect people to pair off and hook up,” he says, getting a little riled up.

“Um, I was referring to setting the dinner table.”

“Oh, I did mention that, didn't I?” he says.

“But your mind went straight to sex,” I tease.

“Well, I do own the boat. Favors will be required,” he says with a grin.

“Johnny!”

“I'm just joking. I do want to talk to you about sex though. The night of the party will probably be a little wild. Sexually. Many of my friends don't

have ... inhibitions.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning you might find someone or someones getting together in the hot tub. Kissing without regard of sex. Multiple partners as well.”

“Okay.”

“I’m assuming this is something you have not experienced.”

“I have not.”

“Have you ever kissed a girl? Like, even at a party?”

“I have not.”

“All right then.”

“Is that bad?”

“Not at all, Arrington. I’m just trying to gauge things so that all my guests will be comfortable.”

“I appreciate that,” I tell him as a whistle blows, possibly ending practice.

Monroe comes running up to us and says to Johnny, “I’m sorry, but Aspen is mad at me for canceling on the Hamptons, so I’m going to have to go with him.”

“Is Emily still going?” I wonder.

“Uh, she might have gotten disinvited. Branson gave her some excuse about his parents restricting how many could come. That he didn’t expect everyone to say yes, so he had to rescind a few invites.”

“Did he really?”

“Only hers.”

“Roe!”

“I know. I know. But they wanted me to be there. Tradition and all.”

“If it were truly a tradition thing, Branson would be making sure that Beckham and I would be there too.”

“Beck’s not coming?”

“No, he’ll be with us on the boat.”

“Huh. That surprises me. Anyway, thanks for the invite, Johnny. I really appreciate it, and I hope I didn’t mess anything up.”

“That’s okay,” Johnny says. “I’ve been considering inviting someone else. Now, I have that opportunity.”

“I’m glad it will all work out,” Monroe says.

“You know, Roe,” I tell him, “we’re not a matched set anymore. Your options are wide open. You can go to the Hamptons, come with us on the yacht, or choose to go somewhere completely different.”

“I know,” he says, stopping for a moment to consider the possibilities. “I’d like to go to the Hamptons this weekend, but I hope that doesn’t get me on the naughty list with you, Johnny.”

“Oh, most definitely not,” Johnny says. “That’s the list where I prefer to find my guests.”

Monroe laughs and walks away.

“Zoey Hawthorne it is,” I say.

“I will invite her during our photo session,” Johnny says with a smile.

“Perfect.”

Saved by the bell.

5:45pm

After changing back into my uniform and doing a quick hair and makeup touch-up, I join Johnny in front of the library. He already has a tripod set up with a camera on it, facing the steps.

“Go stand up there for me so I can get my settings right,” he instructs.

I do as I was told.

He pops his face up from behind the camera. “My, you are literal. I’m taking some photos of you. Do something. Move around a little. Pose.”

“Oh, sorry,” I say.

I’ve gotten to be on set when my mom has done photo shoots before and always thought it was an interesting process. The time it takes to get just one perfect cover shot.

So, I mimic what I’ve learned along the way. I lean toward the camera and angle my body slightly (to make me look thinner), tilt my chin forward and down (as opposed to stretching out my neck and my photo becoming all about my nostrils), and smile naturally. I don’t hold my smile, as that tends to

make you smile too big and squints your eyes, rather smiling, then relaxing my face, then smiling again. And then I move a bit, allowing for different angles and poses, the whole time looking at the camera like it's my lover—which, hopefully, I actually have soon.

I notice Beckham join Johnny behind the camera and can't help but give him a goofy wave and grin at him.

Johnny goes, "Beckham, go up with her and pose. I'm working on getting the right settings."

"Guess I have to join you," Beck says. "Also, when did you learn to pose? You look like you're a freaking supermodel up here."

"I have no clue what I'm doing, just trying to mimic what I've seen my mom do at photo shoots."

He wraps his arm around my waist. "And what am I supposed to do?"

"Spin me around like we're dancing."

He does. Then I spin him, which has us both cracking up. I jump up onto his back, making him give me a piggyback ride, wrap my arms around his neck, and lean forward enough to give him a big smooch on the side of his cheek.

We goof around for a few more minutes before Johnny announces that he is ready, which is good because everyone else has arrived.

And once that happens, Johnny starts flirting with Zoey, who is swooning over Aspen. Waverly is chatting with Hudson about art and poetry.

London stares at me like she hates me, and when Beckham gives me an exaggerated cheek kiss on camera and goes, "Oh, little sis!" she practically shoots daggers at me with her eyes.

My brothers and I are up first. Then Hudson, London, and Vienna.

When Vienna comes down, she walks straight up to me and starts talking to me about how exciting this is. I will admit that her enthusiasm is catching. She's bubbly, and we hit it off right away.

"Just so you know," I whisper to her, "I thought your run down the hill the first day was brilliant."

"Because your mom did it?" she asks.

"No, because I know I wouldn't have had the guts to do it myself."

“You should have said my *fall* down the hill,” she replies with a laugh. “I should have been mortified, but then these two boys came to help me get up. And they were like being touched by gods. I totally had a moment.”

“You did. With my brother and Branson.”

“You know them both?” She giggles again. “I mean, of course you know your brother.”

“I do. And Branson was my best friend when we were kids,” I tell her.

“You are a lucky girl.”

“What about you? Hudson is a hottie. I’m sure he brought home some cute friends.”

She rolls her eyes. “Not nearly enough. I mean, I saw them at his sporting events, but usually, it was just his girlfriend he brought back to the house, and she was—I don’t know. They just didn’t go together.”

“They were together for two years.”

“Pretty sure it was just for the sex,” she says seriously. “They had nothing in common. Weren’t all lovey-dovey. I mean, sex can be fun, and you don’t have to be in love, but usually, I am. Even if it’s only for the night.”

“You and London are really different, aren’t you?”

“Night and day. She doesn’t approve, but if you ask me, she’s got a big crush on Branson, the guy who helped me up. Did you hear he got kicked out of his house and moved to the sophomore dorms? There’s only a building separating us! I’m definitely going to be making a move. Do you know if he’s good?? He has to be good, right?”

I open my mouth, not sure what to say.

“I don’t,” I finally tell her.

She points to Beckham. “That’s his cousin, right? Another hottie. That’s why I wanted to come to school here. No way was I going to the all-girls school, like my sister. Like, kill me now. Thank God Mom came to her senses. I really wasn’t thrilled that she sent my siblings, but so far, Hudson has been busy enough to stay out of my life for the most part. He just pops in every so often to lecture me about safe sex and my emotional well-being.”

“I’m just getting to know him. He seems—”

“Quiet, right? Like he’s shy.”

“Yeah, kinda.”

“He’s just cautious. It takes him a bit to warm up, make friends, but once he does, he’s as loyal as they come. At least he cares about me, which is more than I can say about my dad.”

“I bet that’s hard—when your parents divorce.”

“Mom was either pissed off or crying. I was only nine, but I remember that. Other than that, I just missed my daddy. But as I’ve gotten older, I’ve started to wonder if maybe it’s Mom keeping him away from me, not that he doesn’t want to see me. Now that I’m here on my own, I plan to reach out to him and find out.”

“That’s very mature of you,” I tell her.

“Well, don’t tell my sister. She’s pretty judgmental, and she hates our dad for cheating on our mom. And I get it—it’s awful—but I have no idea if they had a good marriage or a bad one. And my friend from home told me that the divorce wasn’t about me—it was about them—and I should be able to decide for myself if my dad’s a dickhead or not.” She pauses for a minute, then goes, “And don’t look now, but my sister’s doing the angry march over here. I wonder what I did now.”

“She’s probably mad at me for talking to you. She’s been mad at me a lot lately, which sucks because I thought we’d be friends.”

“What did you do?”

“I’m not really sure, but I think it has to do with Branson. He and I aren’t friends anymore.”

“Well, I would hope not after what he did at the carnival. Saying you were pregnant and punching the prince’s totally handsome—not to mention royal—face.”

“It happened before then, but—”

“She has a crush on Branson. She’s going to be pissed when I sleep with him, but I won’t tell if you won’t.”

“Won’t tell what?” London says, a pissed-off look on her face.

I freeze. Not sure what to say, but Vienna simply goes, “That I’m in hottie heaven and I might crush on her brothers. Which is why I’m so thankful that you and Hudson asked me to come take photos.”

London rolls her eyes. “I didn’t know you two knew each other,” she says to me.

“We didn’t, until just now,” Vienna says. “You’d think, knowing how much I love her mom’s movies, you would have introduced me to your friend already, but I decided to take matters into my own hands and do it myself.”

Johnny yells out, “Group photo. Everyone, get up here.”

“Saved by the bell,” Vienna whispers to me.

When we walk over to the steps, she says, “I just adore the house jackets. You instantly know where you can stalk all the hotties.”

I laugh but stay back for a moment to watch everyone getting lined up, their bold jacket trims definitely standing out—white for Wyndham, yellow for Bartlett, black for Calder, and red for Hawthorne.

And I can’t help but smile.

Got it going on.

7:48pm

We’ve taken pics in front of each house, and the last stop on our photo shoot tour is Hawthorne. Everyone is talking about going to get food. Beck doesn’t say anything about it, just asks me if I want to change or not. I tell him yes, so we just go into our house.

“I’ll be quick,” I tell him.

“Just meet me down in the library when you’re ready. Our reservations are for eight, but it’s okay if we’re a little late.”

“This is a reservation place?”

“Yes. There is a dress code, so nothing too casual, but you can totally wear your uniform if you want.”

“You’re being very vague,” I say.

He grins. “Because the place is a surprise.”

I run upstairs. He doesn’t follow me, so I wonder if he’s changing or not. Either way, I go into my room and look in my closet for something that might be appropriate.

I grab a simple flared wool skirt in black, an emerald-green silk blouse, and a square-heeled pump that I planned to wear at our club when I got to London.

That seems like so long ago.

Hard to believe I've only been at Eastbrooke for a week.

I brush my hair, then glance at my phone, seeing that it's almost eight and not knowing how far away the place is.

When I get to the library, I see that Beck has changed, switching out his school polo and blazer for a cream cashmere sweater.

He says, "Let's go," leads me to his parking space, and opens Baby's passenger door, allowing me to get in. Then he shuts the door and goes around to his side.

We take off, Baby's motor purring, but I notice we don't go down the hill and out the school gates, as expected. We wind up toward the student center, pass it and the church, then make a turn at the library, meandering down a road I don't remember seeing.

"This wasn't on our tour," I mention.

"Many of our teachers live on-site. This is their housing area. There's a restaurant up here that's reserved for faculty and prefects only. But I am allowed to bring a guest with me."

He parks in a spot in front of a modern brick-and-wood building that looks like it belongs on the slopes rather than at an East Coast boarding school.

When we get inside, I see why it was designed the way it was. It sits at the top of a hill and has a view of the river that winds down through the property.

Beckham greets the host, and we are shown to a seat by the window, but he asks if it would be okay if we sat outside on the deck.

We're escorted out there by a waiter, and we take our seats. We are handed menus, and the waiter tells us he'll be back with waters and to take our order.

Beck stands up as soon as he leaves, takes my hand, and leads me over to a lookout spot.

“When our parents went here, Eastbrooke didn’t own this area. It was only acquired recently as part of their expansion. This was important because one of our distinguished alumni was a college and Olympic rower and felt our school should have a crew team. Can’t have a crew team without water to practice in, and the school wasn’t willing to have students bussed off campus daily to practice, so they acquired this parcel of land, then diverted the water down by the athletic facilities to create the area where the crew team practices and competes. And it’s fun in the spring because the school hosts a couple of big tournaments.”

“It’s really pretty too,” I tell him, noting the water quickly flowing over the rocks.

“One of the perks of being a prefect,” Beckham says proudly.

“When my mom was here, there were only seven prefects. Now, there’s sixteen.”

“The school has grown. They want to keep the student-staff ratio low, but also want to provide us with diversity by allowing more international students as well as offering a wide variety of curriculum and activities. I think the addition of the Houses was brilliant. Gives the older classes some separation from the younger ones. Bonds us.”

“You seniors seemed pretty excited when you got to put on your house blazers.”

“It was an honor, really,” he says.

When our waters are brought to our table, we go sit back down and look at the menu.

“The offering changes nightly. The food is all good, but I love the Wagyu brisket nachos they have on Monday nights. Want me to order a few of my favorites, and we can share?”

“Depends on if you are ordering the charcuterie board.”

“I am now,” he says with a grin.

“Reminds me of home,” I tell him.

Beckham nods then says, “They have some organic flavored sparkling water that is really good.” He points out the list on the menu.

“Hmm, hibiscus and mint sounds yummy. I’ll get that.”

After we place our order, he says, “What did you think of your first day of classes? Are you used to so much structure?”

“We had a lot of extracurricular activities—dance, soccer, golf, ice skating, music lessons, art classes, equestrian training—so we had to have structure and discipline in our studies if we wanted to get all our work done.”

“How did that go?”

“Aspen, perfectionist and parent pleaser that he is, worked hard to learn everything. Monroe is lucky his memory allows him to skate by without much effort. I like to learn new stuff, so I just did the work. Although Branson usually tried to distract me and Paisley Daniels.” I stop speaking, realizing I just so casually spoke of him.

“I’m sorry he upset you again today.”

“I probably overreacted, and I need to stop that if I’m going to stay.”

“You *are* going to stay, right?”

“I told you we are.”

“And I told you that you need to make your own decision.”

“Even if that means I go to school somewhere else?”

He lets out a sigh. Takes a long drink of the cider he ordered. Sets the bottle down. And looks at me just as the server drops the charcuterie board off at our table.

“Yes. Regardless of what I want, what Augie wants, or what your parents want, you’ve been given a unique opportunity.”

“Because I get to choose between Eastbrooke and Kensington?”

“I have a feeling, at this point, you could choose whatever you wanted, and your parents would let you.”

“I suggested that Augie and I run away and go live in a beach hut somewhere.”

“Except that.”

I give him a questioning look.

“I mean schools. Paris, Dubai, Shanghai. New York. Switzerland. So many options.”

I shrug.

“You seem hesitant.”

“Fine,” I say with a grin. “I love it here. I love the house, love my room, love—”

“Me?”

I roll my eyes. “I was going to say, love the friends I’ve made.”

“What about the friends you already had?”

“Branson makes that answer a bit more complicated. But the answer still remains regardless. I love the friends I already had.”

“Are you telling me after all he’s put you through, you still love him? Are you a glutton for punishment?”

I take a piece of aged gouda off the board, pulling it through some cayenne honey before adding an apple slice and popping it into my mouth. “Maybe,” I reply, then not-so-deftly change the subject. “Oh, and I heard that the hockey games are an even hotter ticket than lacrosse.”

“You going to be an ice girl?”

“I’d rather be on the ice, playing, but the girls don’t have a team. I guess dressing in a skater skirt and dancing on the ice is one way to get out there.”

“Did you know that the rink is open most nights during the offseason for open skating?”

“I didn’t know that.”

“We should go sometime.”

“That would be fun, although I don’t think Augie knows how to skate.”

“We can give him one of those skating aids to push around until he figures it out.” Beck chuckles.

“Those big plastic things that are like the walker my great-grandma uses? The ones that are embarrassingly brightly colored? Why couldn’t they be white so it wasn’t so obvious you were learning?”

“If nothing else, when those are on the ice, you know to avoid the area around that person. Plus, it makes them less erratic. And less prone to getting hurt if they fall.”

“Have you been teaching lessons?”

“Our hockey team works with an after-school program in town. And, yes, I have been known to teach people to skate. If I recall, I taught *you* to skate

backward.”

“Or how *not* to skate backward. I ended up with a broken wrist!”

Beckham laughs. “What were we, like eight, nine?”

“I was eight. It was the first time I had been to your house and not the Hamptons. Thought it was so cool you had your own rink outside. I begged my dad to make us one, but obviously, it doesn’t get that cold in California.”

“You got an indoor rink instead.”

“Mom had a fit. He started building it before my wrist was even healed. And the funny thing is, he really isn’t a very good skater to this day. Says it’s weak ankles.”

The waiter brings out the nachos and sets them on the table next to the board. I realize that although Beck has been chowing down on it, I’ve only had a few pieces of cheese. Charcuterie boards remind me of my mom. She’d come home from a long day of filming, put on her robe, pour a glass of wine, and want it as a late dinner. Dad would whip one up, and we’d all sit in the family room, chatting about our day.

Beckham points at the nachos. “You’d better take a few, or I’ll demolish this on my own.”

I take a bite. “These are yummy!” I say, enjoying the combination of savory smoked beef, sharp cheddar cheese sauce, chili, candied jalapeños, green onions, sour cream, and guacamole. “You might have to get another order for yourself.”

He takes me seriously, motioning to the waiter to bring us another.

“So, question of the day,” he says. “Why aren’t you modeling?”

“Me? Seriously?”

“You looked like one at the library today.”

I roll my eyes. “Only because I was trying to mimic what I’d seen my mom do. I used to get to go to photo shoots with her sometimes. And when she was done, they’d send me up there with her. Let us pose together. It was fun. One of her favorite photographers spoke the whole time he was shooting her, going, *chin down, chest out, lean forward, give me that smile, think about your husband, give me a pout, a twirl*. The whole time he was telling her what to do, I was following his instructions from the sidelines. I guess I

sort of learned by osmosis.”

“You looked great up there. Johnny thought so too.”

“It was fun.”

“Yeah, when it was just the two of us,” he teases. At least, I think he’s teasing.

“It was fun when it was all of us too.”

“Yeah, it was. I’m glad I talked the prefects into coming. Especially since we’ll all be on the boat together this weekend.”

I tilt my head at him. “Do you have formal yachting attire?”

“I’m not sure I know what that is.”

“Me neither, but you’re going to be—well, we’re *all* going to be—playing dress-up. Johnny has procured clothing for all the events he has planned, and we’d better get used to having our photos taken because he intends to bring in a professional photographer just for that.”

“Like, for the memories?”

“Like, for social media. I guess he has a lot of followers.”

Beck pops out his phone and looks him up. “Holy crap, he does. Like, eight million.”

“That’s a lot.”

“I’ll say. Your mom has twenty million. And she’s really famous.”

“Apparently, I have social media now.”

“You do? What’s your profile name?”

“Uh, I don’t know.”

“How can you not know?”

“Because Johnny set it up. He wants to be able to tag everyone.”

Beck is typing on his phone. “Oh, here you are. And you already have a blue check and everything. How is that even possible?”

“Knowing Johnny, he called a guy.”

“Which is crazy since you have just one photo.” He lets out a little whistle. “But what a nice one it is.”

My eyes go wide when he turns his phone toward me. In the photo, I’m on Johnny’s yacht, my arm up in the air, fingers making a peace sign, head turned down slightly, and eyes closed, but I’m grinning because Laurent told

me I had it going on.

“I’m so embarrassed!”

Beck laughs. “Trust me, you have nothing to be embarrassed of. And you already have half a million followers. What the heck? I have, like, fifteen hundred.”

“Well, if Johnny’s right, you’d better be prepared to have a lot more after this weekend. He says we’ll all look fabulous.”

Beck stares at the photo, then blows it up to look closer.

I grab his phone. “Stop that!”

“I’m curious, what made you do that? Pose like that?”

“Johnny made us try on a lot of clothes. It was like playing dress-up, only with designer clothes. And this was the first swimsuit I tried. It was super-cool-looking, and I liked it, but the tan lines would have been atrocious. And when I went out to the salon to show Johnny and Laurent, Laurent told me I had it going on. Johnny told Laurent people don’t say that anymore, and I said that I hoped to have something going on. And I just laughed and struck a pose.”

“Laurent was right,” Beck says.

I roll my eyes at him, but can’t help but grin. “Thank you.”

Our phones buzz with texts.

“Oh, Johnny is sending us all the pictures from earlier!”

We take some time to scroll through them, hearting our favorites. Then I do a group text with my brothers and our parents, sending them a few I think they will like. One of the three of us together. One of us with Waverly. Each of us in front of our houses. A fun group photo with everyone.

Mom replies immediately with three hearts and a crying-face emoji.

Dad gives us a thumbs-up, meaning he’s in the middle of something but wants to let us know he saw them.

“Did you send your parents any?” I ask Beckham.

“I just did. Mom loved them. Dad hearted the one of you and me.”

“Which one did you send?” I ask.

He shows me his phone—a photo of him spinning me around in a dance move. My mouth is wide open, caught mid-laugh, my smile wide. My eyes

are scrunched up more than is usually desirable in a photo, but I look like I'm having a ball. And I was. Beck looks exceptionally hot, his hair still damp from a shower, and I remember pushing it up in the front the way I like it. His smile is beaming and punctuated by his dimples. But it's his eyes that catch my attention. And the way he's looking at me.

"I like this one too," I tell him, pulling up the photo where I jumped on his back and kissed his cheek. "I feel like it sums up our relationship."

He studies it for a moment. "We always have fun together."

"Yeah, we do."

Ready to strike.

10:40pm

"I feel like I gained about ten pounds," I say, patting my full belly.

"Better be careful. We don't want the rumors to start up again," Beckham teases.

"Thanks for dinner," I say as we walk toward the house from the parking lot. "It was fun to get away from everything for a minute. That's a big perk for prefects."

We stop in front of the front door.

"Anytime you want to get away from it all, let me know. I enjoyed spending time with you. And I know you're going to say it's a very Beckham thing to say, but your blouse made your eyes look crazy green tonight."

"Actually, the Beckham thing to say would be that my eyes made my blouse look so green tonight that he couldn't take his eyes off *it*."

To this, he starts laughing.

"And I was thinking, since I'm your big and all, maybe we make it a regular—"

"Arrington!" I hear my name called out, then turn to see Augie coming up the sidewalk.

"Ah!" I yell, running toward him. "You got home early!"

I jump onto him like I'm some kind of spider monkey, wrapping my legs

tightly around his waist and giving him a kiss.

It starts out tenderly as his warm lips brush against mine, but when he deepens our kiss, our tongues intertwine, and our bodies meld together.

The air suddenly feels charged with energy.

Like lightning is ready to strike.

Like *I'm* ready to strike.

My hand goes to the nape of his neck, tangling in his tousled curls as his hands press into the backs of my legs, causing my hips to shift tightly against his.

We're kissing like we haven't seen each other in months rather than a few days, and I'm caught up in the intoxicating taste of him.

"Curfew in five minutes!" is yelled from behind us.

And it takes a moment for what was said to register in my brain.

Augie is the first to react, but although he pulls away, he doesn't stop kissing me. His lips slide across my cheek and then down my neck, peppering it with not-so-sweet kisses. The kind of kisses that make me instantly heat up. That make me want him.

Who cares about curfew? It's only a couple of freaking points. And where are those lacrosse bleachers when you need them?

"I love you," Augie says. "That was a really good kiss."

"Yes, it was. In fact, I was just considering breaking curfew and dragging you down to the lacrosse field."

"I've heard that's where people ... *you know.*"

I nod my head at him.

"For our first time? When I was sitting on the bleachers, tying my shoe before the scrimmage, they were cold. And hard."

I rock my hips toward him.

He sets me down. "You need to get in your house before curfew."

"What about you?"

"I landed early. I'm not expected until after curfew."

"I heard that *where there's a will, there's a way* in regard to sneaking someone in the house. Haven't figured it out yet, but—"

"I want you, Arrington. Obviously. But don't you want it to be—"

“I probably would prefer somewhere more private,” I admit.

“Me too, my sweet.” He kisses my nose. “I’ll text you when I get back to the house.”

“No, you’re going to video-chat with me,” I say, feeling bold and sexy.

“I am?”

“You’d better,” I say, giving him one last kiss before running to the door, slamming my palm into the reader, and getting into the house with thirty seconds to spare.

When I close the door, I lean my back against it and close my eyes with a smile.

“What’s with the dreamy look?” Johnny says from the library.

I walk in there and slide down in a chair next to him, my body feeling like rubber. “Augie is home.”

“I thought Augie’s home was a castle in London?” he counters.

I sigh, still feeling all lovey. “I think his home is wherever I am.”

“Gag me,” Betsy says from the doorway.

“Jealous much?” Johnny scoffs.

“No, but then Augie didn’t witness your kissing Beckham last night. I’m sure he’ll be hearing about it though.”

“I already told him about the new house tradition, Betsy,” I lie. I didn’t get a chance to, but I am going to tell him when I talk to him in a few minutes. “Talk to you later!”

I rush up to my room, eager to put my robe on and call him, but when I get to my door, I stop in my tracks.

It’s not empty.

I look up and down the hall, like I did this morning, seeing all the pennants. How I felt sad that I hadn’t made one.

But yet here one is, hanging on my door, making me feel like I belong.

I turn around, wondering who made it, only to find Zoey lurking near Beckham’s door.

“Hey, Zoey,” I say to her. “Excited for school tomorrow?”

“Yeah, I am. You?”

“Sure. You looking for Beckham?” I ask.

“Yes, I was hoping to get his advice.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you were on this floor. Which room are you in?”

“I’m actually down on three.”

“Shouldn’t you talk to Zander then?”

She smiles at me. “Who do you think is hotter, Beckham or Zander?”

“I think they are both hot. I don’t know Zander well yet, but he seems like a nice guy.”

She nods her head. “A nice guy would be *nice*,” she says, seemingly to herself. “I think you’re right, Arrington. I’ll go talk to him.”

I knock on Beckham’s door.

He doesn’t answer, so I turn toward my room, but then I hear a girl giggling, and Beck goes, “Jess. Shh!”

I shake my head, knowing that he’s hooking up with Jessica. And after me ditching him the second Augie showed up, he should.

I knock on Johnny’s door.

“Enter,” he says, and I find him and Laurent back at the chess table.

Only this time, they seem to be playing checkers. And Laurent is winning.

“He’s never played before,” Laurent says with a laugh.

“Did you guys put that pennant on my door?” I ask them.

They both give me blank faces, like they don’t know what I’m talking about.

“All right! Have a good night and don’t stay up too late! Laurent, you really should start joining us for breakfast. Oh, and Augie is back. I’m going to have him come over in the morning. That’s allowed, isn’t it?”

“He just has to sign in,” Laurent says.

“Okay, night!”

I go and stand in front of my door again, looking at the details of the pennant. It’s got an Eastbrooke E in the middle with a cougar face on top of it, my name across the bottom, pom-poms, a soccer ball, a horse, a fire and a phoenix for our house, and long, pretty ribbon streamers hanging down from the sides. I also realize it says Lane, not Arrington, which means Beckham definitely made it.

I look toward his door, feeling bad that I just ditched him after he was so sweet to take me to dinner.

But then I hear another giggle and go into my room.

Right guy.

11:20pm

Once I get to my room, I realize that I don't know what I'm supposed to do in this video chat I promised to have with Augie. I made a bold move because he had gotten me hot, but I've never actually done anything like this before.

So, I do what anyone would do in this situation.

I google it.

I find numerous articles about not videoing yourself and sending it to a potential lover, how they could then share it with anyone, and how that would not be good—*obviously*.

But then I finally find one about having sexy times on a video chat. How it can be a great way to surprise someone you like or keep the spice in a long-distance relationship.

Technically, we are only two blocks away, so we'll call ours a curfew situation.

Anyway, the steps seem to be:

Let them know the call will be steamy, so they are alone when they answer.

Wear something sexy or plan to strip for them. Tell them you are all hot and bothered over them.

Show some skin. Then tell them what you want them to do to you.

Which is the part that I would assume is tricky since they aren't there to actually do anything.

Ah. Okay. So, I'm supposed to tell him what I would have him do if he were here and then sort of do that to myself.

And I'm supposed to talk dirty.

It also recommends knowing my best camera angles. And while I might enjoy taking a selfie, I've never considered shooting my parts. It also mentions that I should look in the mirror while I'm having this conversation so that I feel more confident. (Pretty sure it would do the opposite, honestly.)

And then the big ending...

I put on my silky robe with nothing underneath. But then I feel a little too naked and throw my undies back on. If he's going to see that, I think it should be in person, preferably with all the lights off.

I text him and ask him if he's in bed and if he has locked his door.

He responds with the heart-eyes emoji, which I think means it's a go. So, I hit the button to video-chat with him.

And I can't help but smile as his handsome face fills the screen.

"We were rudely interrupted by curfew," he says.

I also notice he's wearing earbuds, so I grab mine and put them in.

"We were," I say.

Right now, we can only see each other's faces, but I can see the edge of his shoulder and that he has a shirt on.

"Oh, before we get started, I need to tell you about last night so it doesn't get shared out of context."

Augie nods, so I keep going. "With the houses being new last year, the seniors this year are excited to help create traditions that they hope will last for future generations. And last night, at our house meeting, we were presented with house jackets, which we can wear every day at school."

"That's cool," he says.

"After that, we had what they called the Great Pairing, where we were paired with a big."

"What's a big?"

"An upperclassman in the house, who is supposed to act as your big brother or sister. Like a sibling. Someone who will be there for you. Guide you. Counsel you. Help you feel at home in the house. And I guess the prefects thought hard about it, trying to pair students that would be a good match. We all got envelopes and opened them, and then you had to go find your big and get to know them.

“Beckham is my big. He walked across the room and kissed me. Then he told everyone it’s going to be a new house tradition that bigs and littles should start their relationship with a kiss. Not everyone was comfortable with that, but Johnny kissed Jessica. Actually, they sort of made out.”

“Sounds wildly inappropriate.”

“It was. But it was definitely an icebreaker. And Betsy—”

“She’s the one who has been mean to you, right?”

“Yes, and she told me she was going to tell you that I kissed Beckham, and I know she would have left out the circumstances. And I didn’t want you to be upset or not understand the situation.”

“I’m not jealous of your and Beckham’s relationship,” he says sweetly. “I know you’ve been friends since you were kids, and I assume if you wanted to be with him, you would be. But you’re with me.”

“I most certainly am,” I say with a grin, sliding the phone down and revealing my robe.

“That’s pretty,” he says.

“Well, you should know that our kiss got me all worked up.” I let my robe slide off one shoulder to reveal a little bare skin.

“Arrington,” he says with a goofy grin.

“What are you wearing?” I ask him.

He lowers the camera, showing me that he’s still fully dressed.

“Oh, we can’t have that,” I tell him. “Take off your jacket.”

He stands up, setting his phone on his nightstand so I can watch.

When his jacket is off, I say, “Now, close your eyes and unbutton your shirt, but imagine it’s me unbuttoning it because I can’t wait to get my hands on your chest.”

He does as he was told, and I get to see the shirt slowly come undone, revealing slivers of creamy skin, then nicely formed pecs and abs.

“I like what I’m seeing,” I tell him. “I love running my hands down your chest, across your abs.” When he pulls his arms out of his sleeves, I add, “I love your arms. Love having them wrap around me. I love being tangled up in them.”

“I’m thinking about the nights we spent in your bed, all tangled up,”

Augie says.

“I am too, and they were lovely, but I want to be closer. And although I’ve felt *it*, from the outside, I’ve never had it in my hands, wrapped my lips around it.”

Augie does a sort of sputter-cough when I mention my lips.

“I’m amenable to that,” he says, gazing at me.

And we have this moment, where I instantly know that taking the next step with him is going to be perfect. Actually, I shouldn’t say perfect because it’s stupid to put that kind of expectation on it. But I do know it’s right.

The right feelings.

The right time.

The right guy.

“Good.” I bite my lip and play with my hair a little, like the article suggested, and say, “I made you get shirtless. What would you like me to do?”

He sits down on his bed and puts the camera so it’s on his face mostly, but it’s angled in a way that I can still see his chest.

“I think I’d like to see more than your shoulder,” he says, his voice sounding deeper than usual.

I slide my hand across my collarbone and under my robe, pushing it slowly off my shoulder, then letting it slide down my arm, revealing bare skin and one side of my bare chest.

And although he’s seen it before, he sighs happily. And says, “This is fun.”

But then there’s a loud knock on his door.

“Fuck,” he says, dropping the phone. “Let me get that.”

I hear the door open, followed by a guy’s voice in a booming Southern, probably Texan, accent. The guy’s accent reminds me of Doogie’s, who is from East Texas. But then I look down at my chest and realize thinking about my great-grandfather in the middle of a sexy video chat is not the smart thing to do. I pull my robe back on.

The guy is telling Augie that his name is Tucker, that he’s his big, that he missed him last night but hopes he had fun at his pop’s birthday party. And

that he needs to get his ass downstairs. I hear the door shut, and then Augie gets back on the phone with me.

“Sorry,” he says, “just when things were getting good. And I am very thankful that Bartlett has not embraced the Hawthorne kissing tradition, for I fear, at this point, I might have accidentally, properly snogged him. And you put your robe back on.”

I let out a laugh. “I didn’t want him to accidentally see me.”

“And I hate to end our call, but as you probably heard, it was requested that I come downstairs for whatever tradition they do have.”

“As long as you put your shirt back on so none of the Bartlett girls get all turned on.”

“I only want you that way, my little lark. I’ll see you for breakfast?”

“It’s a date.”

Tuesday, August 30th

Had connections.

Breakfast

Johnny and I have just gotten down the stairs when Augie texts me and tells me that he's outside.

I go outside to meet him.

"Last night was ... so much fun," he says, grinning.

"I think it will be a lot more fun in person."

"True, but I've been anticipating this kiss since then." He wraps his arms around my waist and presses his lips against mine, giving me a single dreamy kiss.

When we pull apart, I can't hide my smile. "You ready for breakfast?"

"In bed?" he asks.

"I wish."

"I don't know how it is in your house, but I can tell you there is some shagging going on at mine."

"It goes on here too. I just meant that I wish we could have breakfast in bed. *Not have to go to school* kind of thing."

"Thankfully, in just a few days, we will be able to do that on Johnny's boat," he says, unwrapping his arms.

I sign him in, using my fingerprint, and then he has to scan his. His picture pops up, along with his student ID number.

"That's pretty slick," he says. "What's for breakfast?"

"Most everyone seems to just grab something quick and run, or they go to the cafeteria to meet their friends, but Johnny and I like to enjoy a leisurely breakfast and have decided to make it a routine."

"You know us English love that," Augie says.

I nod in agreement. "And what we have depends on what his chef, who seems to be low-key bringing in food, decides to make."

I take his hand and lead him into the dining room. Johnny is sitting at the head of the table in front of the Palladian window, morning light streaming in from behind him. His legs are crossed, and he's reading a printed newspaper. There's a cup of espresso in front of him.

He stands up when he sees Augie, giving him a little bow and going, "HRH, good to have you back."

He and Augie shake hands, like men, instead of fist-bumping, like my brothers would do. Then Johnny kisses both my cheeks.

We all sit down, and Johnny hands us a little printed menu.

"Eggs Benedict today, but you can choose whichever version you would like, and I will text my chef."

"Oh, the one with the toasted French bread, spinach, and crab meat sounds wonderful," I tell him.

Augie ponders for a moment longer. "Traditional for me with a side of streaky bacon."

Johnny enters our orders into his phone and then says aloud as he's typing, "And I shall have the spicy chorizo with sun-dried tomatoes and spinach."

Johnny asks Augie about his grandfather's birthday and wellness and commends him for his statement to the press.

A few moments later, our plates are brought out by the same chef I met on the boat.

"This looks fantastic, mate," Augie says to Johnny.

I'm about ready to dig in when I notice Beckham and Zander up at the coffee station, whispering to each other.

"What are you two gossiping about?" I ask them.

Zander rolls his eyes and says, "I'm out."

Beck comes over, looks at my food, is like, "Yum," then starts eating off my plate.

"What's going on with Zander?" Johnny inquires.

"He and Zoey hooked up last night. Apparently, she came to his room, *looking for advice.*"

"Isn't that why the prefects are on each floor? To help students seeking

advice?” Johnny asks with a smirk.

“She was at your door first,” I blurt out.

“What do you mean?” Beck asks.

“She was looking for you. Said she had a problem and wanted to talk. Guess her problem was that she was horny.”

“Zoey’s not really my type,” Beck says.

I take the moment his mouth is occupied to shove a few bites of *my* breakfast into my mouth.

“This is delicious,” I say.

Augie holds up his fork and feeds me a bite of his. “As is mine.”

I nod in agreement.

“Zoey’s gorgeous,” Johnny says to Beckham. “But I am curious. *Why* isn’t she your type?”

I’m eating fast now, shoveling it in, trying to get my fair share before Beck eats it all.

Beck shrugs. “I don’t know. We just didn’t have ...” He waves his hands back and forth between him and Augie.

“A connection?” Johnny asks.

“Oh, they’ve had connections,” I tease, which causes Augie to chuckle.

“But they didn’t mesh well,” Johnny says, somehow knowing what Beck meant.

“Yeah, exactly,” Beck says, stabbing the last bite of food onto his fork.

But then he stops, looks at me, rolls his eyes, and holds it up to my mouth. I don’t think twice. I just eat it. It’s so good.

“But luckily, you meshed well with Jessica last night instead,” I tease, raising an eyebrow in his direction.

“Well, you ditched me the second *he*”—he points at Augie—“showed up.”

Augie laughs, but slides his hand under the table and squeezes my knee.

Johnny glances at his watch. “We’d better get to class.”

“Me especially,” Beck agrees, grabbing his backpack and heading toward the door. “I’m in the farthest classroom building this morning.”

“I am too,” Johnny says, picking up a pristine, perfectly pressed white

napkin from his lap, wiping his mouth with it, then standing up and rushing off to catch up to Beckham.

Kissy faces.

Economics

“It’s fun to have breakfast together and then walk to class,” I tell Augie as we head up the hill, hand in hand.

“Especially when it’s a breakfast like that,” Augie says. “What did Beckham mean when he said that you ditched him?”

“We went to dinner together. Had just gotten back to the house when you called out my name, and I didn’t even say goodnight. I ran straight to you—”

Augie stops me mid-sentence with his lips.

“And gave me an amazing kiss. I was dying to talk about last night at breakfast, but didn’t think it would be appropriate table conversation.”

“Probably not. It’s not like we did anything. *And* we got interrupted.”

“Still, I liked it.”

“I’d like it better if we were together,” I say as we reach our class.

“Agree wholeheartedly,” he says.

When we go inside, I immediately notice Zander. He waves us over, so we take seats by him.

“So, about last night?” I say to him.

“Oh shit,” he says.

I follow his eyes to the door, where Zoey is walking in. I smile at her, and she beelines toward us.

Augie is sitting next to Zander, and I’m just behind Augie, so she takes the empty seat next to me, behind Zander.

And I know it’s bad, but I lean over and whisper, “Did you get the advice you were looking for?”

She looks at Zander’s back and grins. “Oh, I did, girl.”

The bell rings, and our teacher tells us that the seats we just chose are our

seats for the term.

Zander puts his hand up to the bridge of his nose, and it makes me wonder what happened. If Beck and Zoey didn't *mesh*, what does that mean? That they aren't sexually compatible?

The teacher announces that this is Business Economics, starts talking about why the class will be so riveting and its value in life, and then drones on, so we don't get to gossip further.

I spend my time staring at the back of Augie's head, wanting nothing more than to run my hands through his adorable curls.

And kiss him.

And ...

Halfway through class, Zoey passes me a note.

Zander and I hooked up last night. It was amazing. I'm possibly in love.

I write back, Don't be in love yet. I think Johnny is interested in you.

Her eyes get big when she reads it and she mouths, Really?

I nod in confirmation and then grab the note from her and write, Plus, when you shook hands with my brother, Aspen, even I felt the sparks.

Good point. I'm just looking for sex though. But your brother is handsome. He's got that classic, never goes out of style kind of handsome. I bet your dad is still really good looking.

I laugh.

Zoey reminds me of a girl version of Beckham. Probably why they didn't mesh. She might be as big of a player as he is.

After class, Augie has to go meet with his school advisor about his schedule, and I have to go to counseling, so I can't stay to chat with Zoey, but she says we will at dance, when there're no boys around.

So, I make my way to my favorite part of my day.

Not.

Take the risk.

Community Time

I might have waited until right before the bell rang to walk into counseling. And lucky me, the counselor and Branson are already here. I was standing outside, hoping they had called in sick today. And I wonder about that. *Could I magically get sick this time every day?*

I take my seat, noticing the counselor has a smug look on her face.

Did she and Branson talk about something before I got here?

And if they did, about what?

“I noticed after I left yesterday that you two spoke,” she says. “I’d like to know what you discussed.”

I glance at Branson. He just rolls his eyes.

“It was no big deal,” I tell her. “He just asked why I left the class we had together.”

“And why did you leave?” she inquires, looking excited, like she’s about to break this counseling session wide open.

“Because the teacher teamed us up to be partners and I didn’t want to go through the semester with one who hates me.”

“And, Branson, how did you reply to that?”

Branson just itches the side of his head with his index finger like he’s bored to death, then leans his head on his hand and closes his eyes.

“He told me it made sense.”

“And that was it?” she asks.

“Yep.”

“I see.” She lets out a sigh, then sets a pack of crayons and a drawing pad in front of us. “You have an assignment. And if you don’t fulfill it, you will be back in the dean’s office. And, Branson, since you’ve already been removed from Calder, I would assume the next thing he’d take away is football. Are you prepared for that?”

I notice a little tic movement in his jaw. *He’s not prepared for that*, is what I want to tell her.

“Now, you are each to draw a scene or an item that reminds you of the

other. A moment you spent together. A special time when you were friends. We need to remember those moments if we're going to fix this."

I grab my pack of crayons, stare at the empty paper, and think.

About a time when we were younger.

When Branson did something sweet.

I draw a version of the scene and set my crayons aside.

The counselor looks at it with interest, but says nothing.

Branson hands her his, and she holds it up in front of us both.

"It's a ladybug," she says. "And it looks like a couple kissing. At the beach perhaps?"

Branson nods.

"And how does this remind you of an important moment?"

"I used to call her Laneybug," Branson says, gesturing toward me, "when we were kids."

She looks at me for confirmation, so I nod my head.

"I even got a tattoo of a ladybug because she used to be special."

"Used to be," the therapist says, honing in on that comment. "What happened to change things?"

"I grew up," he says simply.

And I know he's referring to sex. That he's had it and I haven't. Although technically, he wouldn't know my status anymore, and he must assume that Augie and I have since he thought I was pregnant. I want to say something in response but manage to hold my tongue and not say that *just because you can bang any girl with a pulse doesn't mean you're more mature than me. In fact, I could probably argue that it makes you less so.* Because after growing up with two brothers who are opposites, I have learned to successfully argue—and win—over just about anything.

The counselor goes on. "And is this the two of you kissing at the beach?"

Branson goes, "Uh, no." Like the idea of kissing me is appalling to him. "That's a girl I kissed at the beach. In front of Lane. To show her that I didn't like her anymore."

I swallow hard and wonder how much more of this bullshit counseling I have to take.

“I see,” the woman says, looking slightly distressed before holding up my picture.

Now, I wish that I had drawn something else.

Like a donkey’s ass.

Or me in a carriage, making out with Beckham.

And it pisses me off that I actually worked on my drawing.

Actually thought about it.

Spent time on it.

While his was just a dumb outline with a little red colored in and stick people with their lips stuck together and a few waves to indicate a beach setting.

“Tell us about this, Arrington,” she says.

“Do you remember the turtle, Branson?” I ask him.

“Of course,” he says.

I look at the counselor. “When we were twelve, Branson saved a turtle from a busy road. I was freaking out about both him and the turtle getting run over, but he was kindhearted and willing to take the risk. That’s the boy I *was* friends with.” I let out a sigh. “But right now, I’m the turtle. Only instead of helping me, every time I manage to get myself safely across the road, he keeps throwing me back out into traffic.” I snatch my drawing from her hands, crumple it into a ball, and stand up to leave.

“Before you go, Arrington,” she says, “I’d like you to both ponder something. If you could go back and change things, what would you do differently?”

Make it happen.

English

Beckham meets me outside of our next class. “How did counseling go?”

“Fine.”

“It’s never good when a girl says *fine*. Especially in that tone.”

“It is what it is with Branson. But I meant to ask you something.”

“What?” he asks with a smirk, like I’m going to ask him for some sexual favor. And it makes me wonder if that’s the standard hookup line.

“There was a pennant on my door. Did you happen to—”

“Make it? Yeah, I did. For you.”

I stare up into his eyes. “That was really nice of you.”

“I’m always nice to you,” he says with another cocky grin as the bell rings, and he leads me into the classroom.

I take a seat, noticing that I am the only girl in the class.

“All right,” the teacher says, “as you all know, I’m Coach K, and this is Baseball—The American Narrative.”

He calls out people’s names, and as they raise their hands, he marks them on his paper.

“Aubrey Lane Arrington.”

I raise my hand. “I go by Arrington.”

“So, Arrington Arrington?” he asks.

“No, just Arrington.”

“Like Beyoncé?”

“I think that’s her first name, so not exactly,” I correct.

“I had your brother Monroe in class earlier today,” Coach K says. “He doesn’t go by his last name.”

“No, but Monroe isn’t his first name either. It’s Asher. But if it helps, our youngest brother does. His name is Aspen Stevens, and he’s never gone by Stevens.”

“Good to hear. So, Arrington?”

“Yes, please.”

“How did you end up in this class?” he asks, tilting his head and looking at me curiously.

I point a thumb in Beckham’s direction.

Coach shakes his head. “I should have known. Tell me that you aren’t dating.”

“We aren’t dating. Just friends.”

“Well ...” Beck says, tilting his head and holding his palms up.

“Fine, mostly always been just friends,” I say.

“I saved her from Jane Austen,” Beck explains.

The guys all groan.

I just shrug.

“Arrington,” Coach says, “are you interested in the game of baseball?”

The guys literally all turn toward me in anticipation of my answer, and I so want to kill Beck right now. Because baseball has so many sexual connotations. And Beck is always cracking jokes about it.

“Enough to know that Beckham has never struck out. Hoping he can keep that streak going for you this season.”

The coach looks impressed.

“Hey, Coach,” Beck says. “Arrington is on the dance team and going to be an ice girl. I think the baseball team needs equal representation.”

“Oh, yeah, for sure,” Zander says. He punches me in the shoulder a little harder than he should have and goes, “Make it happen, A.”

“Uh, I’ll see what I can do.”

“And we’ll need to help design the costumes,” some guy named Finnick says. “I’m thinking tall baseball socks, teeny little white pin-striped shorts—”

“Let’s add some sports bras, pigtails, and dance with a bat between our legs while we’re at it,” I tease.

“Oh, yes. I can picture it now,” Finnick says seriously.

“All right, gentlemen,” Coach says. “Uh, and ladies—er, lady. Let’s talk about what this class is about. It is about baseball, but it’s not an easy class. You’ll have to write papers about—”

“Let me guess, baseball?” I quip.

“Well, yes.”

“And I heard there will be field trips to a couple of iconic stadiums,” Zander says.

“That’s true,” Coach says.

“And that we’ll watch baseball movies,” another guy says.

“Yes, but then we will dissect them. Write about them. Things like what it’s like to be an underdog and how that affects the main character’s psyche. His game. And more importantly, his life.” He looks outside. “It’s a gorgeous, sunny day out. Let’s conduct the rest of class on the field, shall

we?”

To which, everyone but me cheers.

As we parade down to the baseball diamond, I turn to Beck. “What the heck kind of class did you get me into?”

“A fun one,” he says with a grin. “Plus, you played softball. And you used to bat when Aspen practiced pitching. I’ve seen you hit. Still trying to figure out how he can play soccer *and* pitch for our team.”

“He likes soccer more. Probably be a hard sell.”

“We should have gotten him in this class. Stoked the love of the game.”

“It’s still the first week,” I offer. “He can change his schedule.”

“Eh, I don’t know. I like having just you and me in the class.”

“I’m not the only one in class with you.”

“You know what I mean,” he says, giving me a naughty wink.

Poor form.

Lunch

I walk to lunch with the boys from my class, but go claim a seat next to Johnny after getting my food.

Just as I sit down with it, I get a text from the counselor, who lets me know that even though tomorrow is an early release day, Branson and I will not be allowed to leave for the holiday until after our session.

I show Johnny the text so he knows to push back our departure time just a bit.

I’m about to talk about the upcoming weekend when London strolls up to our table and says to Johnny, “I’d like to ask Branson and Rachel to come with us.”

My eyes go wide, but I know I can’t engage, so I just put my head down and study my food. *Is she effing crazy? And what kind of friend would want to bring my nemesis?*

“I’m afraid that’s not possible, London,” Johnny says.

“But I thought it was going to be some *big party*,” she counters.

“First of all,” Johnny says, “if you would prefer their company over those who were properly invited to my soiree, by all means, let me know if you would like to rescind your RSVP. Secondly, where I come from, it’s considered poor form to suggest a host alter their guest list, and thirdly, although I don’t owe you an explanation, I will tell you that although my boat is quite large, it only has twelve staterooms, which means we are at capacity. Not to mention that menus have been made, the food has been ordered, and all sorts of other behind-the-scenes preparations that have been done to make the time spent on my yacht memorable.”

Beckham, who must have been listening from behind me, goes, “No way Branson would even come, London. His hot hookup will be meeting him in the Hamptons. But if you are looking for a *get shit-faced on punch, party on the beach* weekend, you could always ask him for an invite. I heard he lied and told another girl that they were full, but since it’s my family’s compound too, I know that’s not the case.”

“I will need your decision within the hour,” Johnny says. “If you are not attending, I must backfill your spot ASAP.”

She marches off.

“The nerve,” Johnny says. “I should have disinvited her on principle alone.”

Augie points at Johnny’s phone. “Still time, mate. Just text her. We don’t need the drama.”

But Hudson goes, “She was really looking forward to it. I wonder what changed.”

“She wants to hang out with Branson and Rachel,” Waverly says knowingly, which I thought was pretty obvious.

“She must not know Branson as good as she thinks,” I offer, “because even I know that he’s been sexting his Cassiebug nonstop, and I’m hardly around him.”

Horny pants.

History

We're barely through the door of our History class when Rachel Tran slides up to Johnny. She's got her hands wrapped around a long strand of pearls, which she's gently stroking. I wonder if she's being suggestive or if she really likes the way they feel.

"I heard you are having an amazing party this weekend, Johnny Fab," she coos. "And I would welcome an invite."

And I can tell Johnny is pissed, especially after he already told London no, but he hides it well. "I'm sorry. Invitations have already been sent out."

She moves closer to him, smiles, removes her hand from her pearls, and places it squarely on his chest, then slides it down. "Surely, you could make room for little old me."

Suggestive, for sure.

He takes a step back, causing her hand to fall through thin air.

I go sit next to Laurent, who's just a few seats away. "Where were you at lunch today?" I ask him.

He rolls his eyes. "I needed to switch up my schedule a bit."

"Not any of our classes, I hope?"

"No, just changing to Marine Biology for my science credit, and I'd somehow managed to sign up for an English class about Jane Austen, so I had to switch that too. It was full of girls wanting to swoon over Mr. Darcy."

"What did you switch to?"

"One that studies science fiction and fantasy novels. It's what I prefer to read, so I think it will be much better."

"Meanwhile, Johnny's up there, trying to fend off Rachel Tran."

"I'm not a big fan of hers. She gives off a gold-digger vibe."

I laugh at that.

Johnny takes a spot next to me. "What's so funny?"

I notice Rachel giving me a stare-down. "Just that Laurent ended up in an English class filled with girls."

"And what would be so bad about that?"

"They were studying Jane Austen."

“Ohhh,” Johnny says in understanding.

After class and after Rachel has already scurried out of the room, I grab Johnny’s arm. “So?”

“I told her the same *exact* thing I told London, almost word for word. You know they discussed it at lunch, which makes me even more irritated that she even asked.”

“Laurent thinks she’s a gold digger.”

Johnny looks around and then whispers to us both, “I did some digging of my own. While her father does work in PR with some designer brands, he’s certainly not uber-wealthy. He just showers his daughter with all the freebies he can get his hands on.”

“Ha! I was right!” Laurent teases. “You’d better watch out, Johnny, or she might have her hooks into you before you know it.”

“Actually,” Johnny says, turning to me as we walk out of the building and head down toward the athletic facilities, “I don’t believe it’s *me* that she wants.”

“It’s Augie,” I say knowingly.

“What makes you think that?” Laurent asks, looking surprised.

“Because she flirts with him—right in front of me.”

Johnny puts his arm around me. “Remember when I told you not to sleep with Augie?”

“Oh, I sure do.”

“I shouldn’t have said that when I didn’t have a feel for your relationship. I found his public affirmation of love quite endearing. And at breakfast today, it was clear how much he adores you. I also like his confidence around Beckham. Even though Beckham flirts without thought, Augie doesn’t flinch. He seems secure in your relationship. That tells me there’s more to the two of you than I first realized. And you practically have little hearts floating above your head when he’s around.”

I smile dreamily. “Last night, we video-chatted. I made him take his shirt off. It was starting to get a little steamy, but we got interrupted.”

“Were you sextiming?” Johnny smiles widely, like he’s proud of me.

“There’s a little sex goddess in there somewhere, I think.”

“I mean, I maybe had to google how to have sexy times over video to know what to do.”

Laurent starts laughing out loud.

I smack his arm. “Hey, you don’t have that much experience either.”

“No, but I’m pretty sure I could figure *that* out.”

“Okay, Mr. Horny Pants, would you be naked when the girl answered?”

“Of course,” he says.

“Bzzz,” I say, making the sound of a buzzer. “Wrong. I’ll send you the list.”

Johnny waves his hand at both of us. “I can’t even with you two.” His phone buzzes with a text. “Apparently, London will still be joining us.”

“Should be interesting,” is all Laurent says.

As we get to the field house, Johnny says to me, “I have fencing practice while you have dance. Would you care to join me at the stables afterward for a ride?”

“I would absolutely love to.”

Hookup etiquette.

Dance

Zoey and I don’t get to chat before dance because we’re told to hurry up, change into our practice gear, and get out onto the floor. I am excited, however, when I open my locker to find it full. There’s a spread of sparkly costumes and a glittering sign above my mirror with my name on it.

“Isn’t it so cute?” Waverly says, sitting down beside me and pulling her hair back into a ponytail.

I smile and nod in agreement.

Today’s practice is intense, Molly wanting us to be perfect in our routine for our first pep rally next week.

Waverly grabs me the second we are done. “I gotta get to field hockey

practice, but I can't freaking wait until tomorrow!"

"I'm excited that Johnny asked me to go with you all," Zoey says, sitting down in front of her mirror. She removes her bun and brushes her hair back out. "Are you doing anything after this?"

"Meeting Johnny down at the stables. Yesterday, we watched the boys' lacrosse practice."

"While I'd like to do that, Zander plays, and that feels a little stalkerish. I actually think I like him. I hope he texts me. Do you think he will?" Zoey asks.

"I'm not sure what the post-hookup etiquette is here."

"Typically, you don't text unless you want to do it again. He hasn't texted."

"I suppose that's the risk of a random hook up."

She sighs. "Yeah. So you think Johnny might like me?"

"I think he's definitely intrigued."

"Hmm. That could make things interesting." And I can see the wheels spinning in her head.

Rough and tumble.

3:45pm

I walk from the field house up to Hawthorne so I can change for riding.

When I get to my room, I find a box by my door. I look at the address, seeing that it was shipped overnight from my parents. I unlock my door, carry it inside, set it on my desk, and use a pair of scissors to open it.

The first thing I find is an envelope. I figure it's a card or a note, telling me they miss me, but instead, I find a Post-it Note that says, *This is tied to your trust. Spend wisely.*

I peel it off, find a black credit card underneath, and start jumping with joy.

Ohmigosh! They trust me!

I sign the back of it, carefully place it in my wallet, and then put my

wallet back into my backpack.

Next I find some clothes, one of my riding outfits, two of my favorite pairs of cowboy boots, and a wrapped package. I undo the red ribbon and remove the kraft paper from a box. The box is sort of old-looking, and as I study it further, I see the name of the boot shop in East Texas where Doogie always has his custom cowboy boots made.

I take off the lid and find a pair of boots that are black, navy, and brown with cutout designs in red and golden-yellow leather. On top of them is a note.

These boots were a gift to me from Doogie when I was at Eastbrooke, custom-designed by his favorite boot maker to match my uniforms. The first time I wore them was when I had to give a campaign speech to the entire school as part of running for Student Council. I was very into fashion and how I looked. The boots made me realize that it shouldn't be a popularity contest or based on how I was dressed. I should run to make a difference. I know you watched the movies, and you might remember the scene, but it's also when your dad gave me the glass four-leaf clover I keep on my vanity. Anyway, I thought you might enjoy having them at school with you whether you ever wear them or not. Below is the note that Doogie sent to me with the boots.

*Love you!
Mom*

I set her note aside and read the one underneath.

Can't let my hotshot get all uppity out there or turn into some damn Yankee. Had Javier make these for you. Don't be afraid to kick some ass and raise a little hell.

*Love you,
Papa*

Seeing Doogie's handwriting brings tears to my eyes. I love that he sent

my mom these boots, and I love that he told her to kick ass and raise hell—something my parents have never told me to do.

I quickly put on my riding outfit and head toward the stables, but on the way, I have to call him.

When he answers, I say, “Mom sent me the boots that you’d sent her when she was at Eastbrooke.”

“You know that was my idea, Laney,” Doogie says.

“I didn’t know that.”

“Your parents have sheltered you,” he states.

“That I do know.”

“Did she send you my note too?”

“About kicking ass and raising hell? Yes.”

“Now, I’m not about to contradict your parents, but sometimes, in life—”

“You gotta take a stand,” I say, repeating what he once told me when my brothers were teaming up and picking on me.

“That’s my girl,” Doogie says with a laugh. “I heard you asked for your riding gear. You getting time to ride, or are you too busy with that Augie fella?”

“I’m walking down to the stables to meet my friend Johnny as we speak. His dad played polo, and Johnny loves riding about as much as I do. And this will be the second time I’ve ridden since I got here.”

“Riding is good for your soul, and that’s important since I hear you’ve been having some trouble with that Johnson boy.”

“You’re the best judge of character of anyone I’ve ever known. Do you think Branson is a good person, Doogie?”

“Lately, he seems to think the sun comes up just to hear him crow.”

“I don’t get it.”

“You know how a rooster crows at sunrise?” he asks me.

“Yeah.”

“A cocky rooster just might think that the sun rises *because* he crows.”

“Do cocky roosters ever learn they are wrong?” I ask.

“Yes, but they usually learn the hard way. Why, I remember when his uncle Riley was so mad over a girl, I got him to punch a tree so hard that he

broke his own hand.”

“Why did you do that?” I ask, my eyes going wide.

“He needed to learn the hard way,” Doogie states. “Ponder that while you’re riding.”

“Uh, I will. Thanks.”

“And wear them boots when you need them.”

He ends the call, and I keep walking, still thinking about his rooster story.

“Look at you,” Johnny says, grinning at me. “A little different from Saturday night.”

“Well, I’m certainly dressed more appropriately!”

“I’ve got our horses ready. Let’s go.”

We leave the arena and go out on a path.

“Did you know there is a network of riding trails?” Johnny asks me.

“I remember reading it online,” I say. “But I haven’t studied them or anything.”

“Luckily for you, I have. We’re going to go through this treed area first, but once we’re out of it, there’s a big pasture. I heard Beckham mention that you usually run a horse fast.”

“My horse at home loved to run, so I obliged.”

Johnny laughs. “You sure you just don’t like the rush?”

“Maybe that too.”

And the second we’re out into the open, I can tell this horse is raring to go. I spur her on a little and let her know she can run.

The pasture is large, and she knows exactly where she wants to go.

My horse at home always ran from one end to the other in almost perfectly straight lines. This horse likes to run in a big circle, and I wonder if she was originally trained as a racer.

I stand up a little bit in my stirrups so I don’t interfere with her movement.

And there’s something so exhilarating about the way her powerful muscles flex with each stride as she roars across the field. The way I sort of float above her, the wind rushing across my face.

We're coming back into the stables when I see Augie heading up the hill from lacrosse practice. I call out his name, so he comes back to see me.

I think Augie is extremely handsome—and maybe it's because he usually looks so proper, poised, and polished—but, *damn*, sweaty Augie looks incredibly hot.

His face is flushed. His curls damp. His uniform clings to his chest in all the right places. He's got grass stains on his knees and a smudge of dirt across his cheek.

I jump off my horse and straight into his arms.

"I'm dirty," Augie says.

"And it looks *really* good on you," I tell him as Johnny comes back to get my horse, taking the reins from me and trotting her into the stables.

The second the horse is away from us, I give Augie a long, steamy kiss.

"What's that for?" he says when we finally finish.

"You look really hot."

He looks down at himself. "I guess I should get scruffed up a bit more often."

I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him back to my lips. I love when our lips come together. When our tongues touch. When our mouths move together in a choreographed dance. I love how, sometimes, he kisses my bottom lip a little more, and I really love it when his lips trail across my cheek and move down to my neck.

I let out a contented sigh.

"Remember the date we were supposed to have, but haven't yet?" he asks me.

"I told you, we already had a date."

"Well, we are about to have another."

"On the boat?"

"No, tonight. I'm going to shower—"

I give him an eye raise, like maybe he shouldn't, as I use my thumb to clean off his cheek.

"Should I shower?"

I laugh. “Yes, you can shower.”

“Very well. Then I will meet you in your room.”

“Ooh, what kind of date are we having in my room?” I practically purr.

“Your sexy voice is killing me,” he says with a grin. “Especially after last night. However, we are not having a date in your room. I’m meeting you there—one, to see it, and two, to give you a few prezzies.”

“You got me presents?”

“I did.” He kisses my nose. “I’ll see you soon.”

I practically skip into the stables when he leaves.

“Oh boy,” Johnny says. “You look all dreamy.”

“Why do boys look hotter when they are all sweaty and dirty?”

“It’s the rough-and-tumble thing. They look like they are ready for anything. Including hot sex.”

“The other night, when Augie came back, I literally leaped into his arms and wrapped my legs around his waist. And when we were kissing, I could feel him. And let’s just say, I wished the lacrosse bleachers were closer.”

Johnny’s face breaks out in a wide smile. “Ooh la la. My little protégé is feeling frisky.”

“I am. And tonight, he’s taking me on a date. So, who knows what will happen?!”

Lose myself.

5:40pm

I go back to my house, take a quick shower, and touch up my makeup. I undo my braid and curl my hair. I’m standing in my closet, trying to figure out what to wear when there’s a knock on my door.

I open it without thought, assuming it’s Laurent or Johnny, and find Augie.

His arms are loaded down with shopping bags and a large wicker hamper, but what I notice is how he’s dressed.

“You’re in jeans! For a date!”

“I *am* in America,” he teases.

I walk in a circle around him, admiring his backside.

“Are you checking me out?”

“Yes, I am. The jeans might highlight some of your best assets.”

“*Arse-ets?*” he jokes.

“Definitely. And you’re early!”

“I was hoping to catch you before you got dressed. I might have a few new options for you.”

“You bought me clothes?”

He shrugs and gives me a little smile.

But when he sets the packages on my bed, he notices my robe.

He reaches out and runs his hand down my sleeve. “This is a little different from the matching Arrington robes we used to wear.”

“Those were terry cloth.”

“And this is silk. It feels very nice.” He plays with the tie at my waist.

“Anything under there?”

I bite my lip. “No.”

He groans. “Maybe we should picnic in bed?”

“I think I’d like to know what you had planned before you saw my robe.”

“Oh, yes, that.” His eyes linger, looking at my robe longingly. And it makes me blush.

“Presents first,” he finally says, “then we will discuss dinner. Go ahead.”

I pick up the first bag. Notice it’s from one of my favorite brands.

“Did you go shopping in Edinburgh?”

“I flew to London with my parents, and I might have delayed my flight here so I could pick up a few things for you. That’s why I was late, getting back.”

“Did you go on my favorite street in South Kensington!?”

He grins. “I did.”

I throw my arms around him. “We had so much fun, wandering down the street, popping in and out of all my favorite shops, stopping for sweets and tea.”

“And I know you said you didn’t pack enough, and since we’re staying

here—”

“Are you sure you want to stay?” I ask him.

“I want to be with you.”

“And your parents are still okay with you choosing to be here? At Eastbrooke?”

“They are. What about you? Will you be happy staying here, after everything?”

“Yes, I will be stupid happy.”

He gives me a kiss, then says, “Open your presents.”

In the first bag, I find three cute blazers—one a pink-and-black tweed with gold buttons and black trim, which pairs with a matching skirt. There’s a fitted burgundy dress with dark stripes, a gold-and-cream tweed bomber with matching shorts, and a soft, flowy dress in fall colors. In the next bag, I find cashmere sweaters, including a hot-pink one, embroidered on the front with the word *love*. And two pairs of wide-legged jeans.

The next bag has the mint tea I adore, along with a beautiful teapot and two matching cups.

“Thank you, Augie. This is incredible.”

“You’re welcome. I thought you could choose one to wear on our date tonight.”

“Where are we going?”

He points to the wicker hamper he left by the door. “Picnic.”

“Like we used to in the park?”

“Yes, my little lark.”

“Hmm.” I grab all the clothes, take them in my closet, and put on the shorts, tee, and matching bomber jacket with a pair of white sneakers.

“The perfect choice,” he says when I come out in it.

“The perfect fit,” I tell him. “How did you know what size to get?”

“They had your sizes on your customer card. I managed to get them to share it with me.”

I give him another kiss, and then he takes my hand and leads me down the stairs and out of the house, where I find Johnny sitting in the driver’s seat of a golf cart.

“Your chariot awaits, lovebirds,” he says.

Then he takes us up the hill, past the helipad, and to a pretty park-like area with a river flowing through it, which goes by the faculty restaurant.

Augie grabs the hamper in one hand and takes mine in the other, leading me out to a flat green space with beautiful views of the campus below.

He sets the hamper on the ground, opens it up, gets out a large plaid blanket, and spreads it across the perfectly cut grass. We sit down on the blanket, and he gets out a large wooden board, on which he places our plates, cutlery, and glasses. Then he starts taking out containers of food.

I watch in amazement.

There’s hummus and crudités and Scotch eggs—which are hard-boiled eggs, wrapped in sausage and deep-fried—from our favorite market. Sandwiches—mine a crusty toastie, filled with three kinds of cheese, ham, mushrooms, garlic mayonnaise, and his a rare roast beef with chimichurri, fried onions, and garlic mayo—from a restaurant that had an outdoor space that reminded me of a secret garden. Truffle pizza from another favorite, which is somehow warm.

“You went to all of our places!”

“I did,” he says, holding a piece of pizza up to my mouth.

I take a bite and let out a little moan.

“It’s so good.”

“Oh, I almost forgot,” he says, grabbing a thermos and pouring us each a drink.

“You didn’t,” I screech.

“I did,” he says, holding his glass up to mine. “To all the special moments we shared over food in London and to the new memories I know we’ll make here.”

“And to the Arrington Collins,” I add.

“Which is pretty much the only mixed drink you like,” he teases. “And it is exactly as your bartender makes it—since he made it—minus the ice and the Bombay Sapphire Premier, of course.”

“So sarsaparilla soda water, fresh-squeezed citrus juice, and our made-in-house eucalyptus-infused simple syrup.” I take a sip, remembering the

warmth of the club. The fun I had working there. The time I spent hanging out with Augie and his friends.

“Are you going to miss your friends in London?” I ask him.

“Yeah, of course, but they will understand.”

We eat our dinner and chat, enjoying the view and food while discussing our classes, our houses, and the upcoming weekend.

“I’m so full. This was amazing,” I say, polishing off the last bit of my toastie.

“You’re amazing,” Augie says, his hand moving to cup my face. He strokes the side of my cheek with his thumb, then runs it across my lips. “But surely, you don’t think I forgot dessert.”

“If it’s crème caramel, you might not have to wait until this weekend,” I tell him as he pulls my favorite London Arrington dessert out of the hamper.

It’s similar to crème brûlée, but it’s made with caramel sauce on the bottom so that when it’s flipped over, the sauce runs down the sides of the custard.

He feeds me a bite of it, then leans toward me, our lips meeting in a tender and delicate kiss. And as we deepen our kiss, I feel like I lose myself in him. In the way he smells, the way he tastes, the way he feels.

His hand slides up my bare leg, moving high on my thigh and daring to dip under my shorts. But I realize they are too tight for what I think he wants to do. I’m considering taking them off when he leans me back on the blanket and moves on top of me, our lips never breaking apart.

Although he is supporting his weight, his hips press against mine, making subtle movements as we kiss the kind of kiss that you never want to end. I can picture us like this, naked, joined together, his hips moving with mine.

And as the sun sets and the sky darkens, I find myself reaching for the button on his jeans, wanting to experience more with him. He rolls off me, allowing me to slide my hand down into his pants and feel his hardness. The soft skin. And I admit to feeling like some kind of badass when what I hoped would happen does.

“I want to make you feel good too,” he says, kissing me deeply as he

undoes my shorts and slides his hand downward.

Completely smitten.

9:40pm

We hear the sad little horn on the golf cart and know that Johnny is headed up the hill to pick us up.

“I don’t want to stop kissing you,” Augie says, “but we also don’t want to miss curfew.”

Curfew isn’t until eleven, I think, but don’t say. Meaning we still have well over an hour. But we get our clothing back into place, use our phone flashlights to get everything back in the picnic basket, and meet Johnny by the street.

“Home, James,” I tease.

Johnny laughs and hits the gas, practically knocking me out of the cart, then races down the hill to our house.

Augie puts his hand out to help me out of the cart, then pulls me into his arms and rests his forehead against mine. A smile resides on both our faces as we share a wordless moment, knowing that what transpired tonight has deepened our connection.

He gives me a kiss goodbye.

“Thank you for the clothes. The picnic.” I give him a grin. “And for having the foresight to bring a really big blanket.”

He slides his hand through my hair, tucking a piece behind my ear to expose it, then leans forward and whispers, “Tonight was just a prelude of what’s to come this weekend.”

“If that’s the case, our time will be incredible.”

“And sexy,” he says, sliding his hand up my shirt.

“You probably should let me go inside and pack then.”

He sighs. “I don’t want this night to end, but I also can’t wait for tomorrow to start.”

“Me too.”

I give him one more kiss, and then he tells me good night, but he doesn't let go of my hand, just backs slowly away from me, a smile on his face.

"Till then, my love."

I blow him a kiss.

Then realize what I just did.

I've never blown a kiss to anyone in my life. And in the movies, I always laugh when someone does. Always think it's so lame.

But now, I'm that girl.

The kind of girl who understands why musicals are made because, right now, I could break out in a happy song and dance.

I'm googly-eyed.

Completely smitten.

I even stand at the door and watch him walk away until he turns toward his house and I can't see him through the trees.

Yes, I have it bad.

I go in the house and head up to my room.

When I stand at my door, the first thing I notice is the ladybug on the pennant.

I think about the picture Branson drew in counseling today. Us in the Hamptons and how much it hurt that it's his new favorite memory.

The moment where he purposely ended our relationship.

I know that my reply about the turtle during counseling wasn't the most mature thing I've ever said. I turned one of my favorite moments into something that hurts.

But what the counselor said at the end. *If you could go back and change things, what would you do differently?*

And I wonder, *What do I wish?*

The truth is, I haven't really stopped to think about that. Knowing that we can't go back and change anything that has already happened, what do I want for the future?

I know in my heart that no matter how shitty Branson has been, I still care for him deeply. I don't want him to hate me. I don't want him to be mad at

me. I want to figure it out. Figure out what happened to cause this change.

I think about what London said. That if Branson kissed her at the dance, she would have been thrilled.

A few months ago, I would have been thrilled too.

And for the first time since he kissed the girl in the Hamptons, I wonder if I did something wrong. Did I say something wrong? Did I hurt *him* somehow? Could I be to blame?

I think back to that night. How Beckham had given me a key to a closet in the pool house, where he had hidden a bottle of champagne just for me. And how Branson seemed irritated by it, like, somehow, the Johnsons' famous punch wasn't good enough for me. Or that I was too good for it. Which wasn't the case. Beckham had warned me earlier about how strong the punch was. When I told him that I wished I could just have a glass of champagne or a nice glass of rosé, he made it happen.

Beckham has always goofily flirted with me. But the truth is, I never told Branson about making out with Beckham on New Year's Eve.

I wasn't really trying to hide it. It's more that I knew it wasn't a serious thing. But mostly, I didn't want to upset Branson when I knew our midnight kiss was supposed to be both of our first kisses.

And, yes, I felt guilty.

But then I thought about how Branson had used the words *your first kiss*, and *our first kiss*, but he never said it would be his first kiss.

And although it hurt a little, thinking that he had kissed someone besides me, I figured if he didn't tell me about it, I didn't need to tell him about Beck.

Is that why he kissed that girl the way he did at the party?

To get back at me?

I race out of my room and knock hard on Beck's door, needing to know.

He answers, wearing nothing but a pair of boxers, looking like he might have been asleep.

He scratches his head and blinks sleepy eyes at me.

"Did you ever tell Branson that we made out on New Year's Eve?"

"Did you not?"

I shake my head.

“Lane, aren’t you the little secret keeper? I thought you and *Brannie* told each other everything.”

“Just answer the question.”

“Of course I told him. The very next day. Told him how stupid it was of him to march away like a spoiled toddler instead of staying and discussing your internship with you like a man. And I told him what happened. How it could have been him.”

“Was he mad?”

“No.”

“Are you sure? I was thinking that might be the reason why he did what he did in the Hamptons. That maybe it was all *my* fault.”

“Six months later? Pfft. After he kissed plenty of girls here both before and after your kiss with him. You know he was lying to you, Lane. About all that. Making it seem like he wanted only you while hooking up with other girls.”

“I do know that, Beck, but, hey, thanks for the reminder.”

I turn on my heel, go back to my room, flop on my bed, and try to go to sleep.

Except my phone keeps buzzing with texts.

Everyone is very excited about our trip. I take a moment to scroll back and read the detailed group text Johnny sent when Augie and I were on our date. Check out the texts that follow. Don’t see any new information.

But I do need to pack, because Augie and I are in the first group on the chopper, which means I’ll be going to my two morning classes, followed by counseling, then Augie and I will report to the dean’s office to tell him that we’re staying, then go grab our bags and meet Johnny in one of the golf carts that will take us to the helipad.

Fortunately, I don’t have to pack much, just my toiletries, makeup, and undergarments, knowing that Johnny has a full wardrobe for me on the boat.

Except for ...

I run across the hall and knock on Johnny’s door.

“I wondered when I was going to get the play-by-play,” he says.

“I have a question for you first. Is there a way to, like, get deliveries on

your boat?”

“Uh, yes. What kind of deliveries?”

“Lingerie.”

He grins.

“I just want to order something special, you know, online and have it shipped.”

“You’re in luck.”

“Let me guess. You have a trunkful of new lingerie somewhere?”

“Actually, yes.”

“I was just joking.”

“I know you were, but I decided the theme for our party is *Anything Goes* and that all attendees must dress in lingerie.”

“And you bought lingerie for everyone and put it in your new closet?”

“I did. But I might have placed a few special items in your room as well.”

“You’re literally the best.”

“Yes, I know,” he says. “Oh, and there’s an update on tomorrow.”

“What’s that?”

“The royal family requires a security detail to be nearby, so while they will not be staying on the boat with us, they will be ferrying out with you and Augie. So, I’ve got to update our travel groups and times.”

“Cool,” is all I say, quickly rushing out of there before he can ask me what happened tonight. It’s not that I’m embarrassed about it or that I want to keep it a secret, more that I just want to savor it privately until I am ready to share.

Wednesday, August 31st

Bro moves.

6:30am

I wake up to a bunch of noise in the hall. A glance at my phone tells me it's six thirty. I throw on my robe, peek out, and see that the house prefects are cheering outside Johnny's door because he has won the best house pennant.

Laurent opens his door with a bang, looking pissed off, but when he sees what's going on, he rolls his eyes and just shuts his door. And I know he's going to try to go back to sleep for a few precious minutes.

I figure I should go celebrate. After all, it was me who told him to pretend to be a fashion designer.

Johnny finally opens his door. His hair is wet and slicked back, and I can tell he must have just gotten out of the shower. He's got on his Versace robe and matching slippers, and he still looks like a million bucks. I swear, he's like the poster child for the outrageously rich.

I stick two fingers in my mouth and whistle loudly.

Johnny glances over at me and shakes his head like he can't believe I just did that. But, hey, you live on a big vineyard and you need to tell someone something, you learn quick. Plus, it's fun.

"Your design will be entered in a competition between the other houses, and if it wins, it will be awarded points toward the House Cup," Zander tells him.

He tries to give him a high five, but Johnny leaves him hanging.

"Brilliant," Johnny says.

I can tell he's trying to pretend like he doesn't care, but a smile is plastered on his face.

"We need to work on your bro moves, dude," I tell him as we walk down

to breakfast.

“Bro moves?”

“Yeah, you’ve got the handshake down as well as the two-handed handshake and European cheek kisses, but, like, you need to know how to do a high five, when to fist bump, or the proper form for a bro hug.”

“And you are going to teach me those things?”

“If you will allow me, Fabby,” I tease.

“Most of my international friends call me that, so get used to it,” he says.

“Hey, Harry wants to call you that, more power to him. As long as I get to sit and listen to him say it.”

“You’re not going to go all fangirl on my friends, are you?”

“Who do you think I am? Hmm, maybe the daughter of a very famous movie star with lots of famous friends, including royalty from numerous countries.”

“You have a point.”

“I promise not to embarrass you,” I say sincerely.

He tosses me today’s menu.

“Biscuits and spicy sausage gravy for me, please.”

“You do realize, you’re going to be putting on one of those skimpy bikinis this afternoon.”

“So?” I say, but then understand. “Like, so I don’t look fat?”

He shrugs. “I would have used the word *bloated*.”

“If you think I’m going to skimp on the food on your yacht so I look like I starve myself, you’ve literally learned nothing about me since we met.”

I go over to the espresso machine, tell the Italian barista what we want, then go over to the dining room table.

Beckham walks into the room. “What’s on the menu today?” he asks, rubbing his stomach.

“Grapefruit and cigarettes, so you won’t look fat in your swimsuit.”

He looks down at his ridiculously fit stomach and then looks at me like I’m nuts.

I roll my eyes and say, “Fine. There might be some biscuits and gravy.”

And I know what he’s about to say next.

“My favorite thing!”

“Hey, while you wait, will you help me show Johnny a couple of things?” I ask.

“Uh, sure,” he says even though he sounds anything but.

I move Beck over so he’s standing directly in front of me, then turn to Johnny. “Okay, let’s talk about the handshake-hug.”

Beckham doesn’t wait for me. He just grabs my hand with a claw-like grip and then pulls his body into mine with his free hand.

“Okay, there you go. And how about a fist bump?”

“Does anyone do that anymore?” Johnny asks. “Like anyone under fifty?”

“Yes, we still do.” I put my hand on my hip. “What do you have to offer, Beck?” I say with sass.

“Well, there’s the quick nod.”

“Like this?” I say, doing it. “That’s for the friend who you aren’t close to. They don’t warrant a shake—or a fist bump—just a quick nod in acknowledgment.”

Johnny looks at me and does a nod. “That’s the nod you give to your staff when they are dismissed.”

“Well, you’ve got that one down,” I quip.

“What about the hug?” Beckham asks.

“I know the hug,” Johnny says.

“He does. He gives good hugs.”

“To people who want them, but what about those who don’t?”

“Who wouldn’t want a hug from me?” Johnny asks, legitimately looking puzzled.

“Some people just aren’t huggers,” Beck explains. “So, like a handshake, where you lead by sticking your hand out, if you don’t know if you should hug someone or not, put your arms out. Prepare them.”

“Got it,” Johnny says.

“Wait,” I say, holding my arm up in the air and looking at him with intent.

“Did you have a question?” Johnny asks.

Beckham chuckles. “She wants you to give her a high five. If you don’t,

you'll leave her hanging and that will be really awkward for her."

"Oh, well, we don't want that," Johnny says, hopping up and tapping my hand with his palm.

"Like this," Beck says, hitting my hand hard.

"Not like that," I say, rubbing my hand just as our food is brought out.

We're about done eating when Johnny asks, "Where's Augie this morning?"

"Oh, he's having breakfast with his big. He missed the ceremony, so they are just getting to know each other."

"Cool," Beck says before eyeing what's left of my food.

I roll my eyes and slide the plate in front of him. "At least you asked," I say.

"I didn't ask," he counters.

"You kinda did."

Experience it.

Science

As Beckham and I take our seats, I glance around the room, thinking it looks funny seeing everyone dressed casually for our early release day.

But it works out well, because when the bell rings, our teacher is like, "Let's go get some fresh air."

Interestingly enough, he leads us up the hill and to the area Augie brought me to last night.

"Isn't this unspoiled land just beautiful?" our teacher says. "It's for future expansion, but I, for one, would like to see it stay like this. Go explore the area. Get to know it. See if you can see any sign of wildlife. Check out the wildflowers, the different types of grasses, and the trees. Walk down to the stream, stick your feet in it, feel the cool water. Just experience it."

"Was your prerequisite for your classes that the teachers prefer to be outdoors?" I tease Beck.

“Nothing wrong with making informed decisions,” he says with a chuckle.

He points out the road that goes to the restaurant he took me to the other night. “This is just a little farther up the hill,” he says.

“Believe it or not, I was actually up here last night, doing a little exploring myself,” I say with a laugh, cracking myself up as I think of the exploration that took place under Augie’s pants.

“What did you do?” he asks.

“Augie brought me up here for a picnic. He’d stopped in London and picked up a bunch of our favorite foods.”

“He’s thoughtful, isn’t he?”

I grin. “He is. Even went and shopped for me at a couple of my favorite shops. Brought me back a few cute outfits.”

Beck looks over to the actual spot where we were. You can see that the grass is still crumpled from the blanket being on top of it.

Beck points toward it. “Scene of the crime. Just what were you doing up here that you needed that big of a blanket?”

“I told you, we had a picnic. And he did have a big hamper.”

“His hamper is *big*, huh?”

“Uh, yeah,” I say, playing dumb. “It had the blanket, all the food and drinks, plus dishes and glasses and napkins and stuff.”

Beck rolls his eyes at me. “You didn’t even catch my joke.”

“Actually, I did. I was just avoiding the conversation. I thought we weren’t talking about that.”

“I didn’t want to talk about it. You were literally supposed to just play along and go, *It sure is.*”

“Ah, I see. Thanks for clearing that up.”

“Were there bugs up here, like, bothering you?”

“I didn’t really notice any.”

“So, it was romantic?” he says with a grin.

“It was.”

Beckham nods. “Good to know.”

And I don’t even ask.

No text or talk.

Latin

One more class, followed by a stupid counseling sesh, and then I'm out of here, I think as I make my way into Latin.

In this class, we can sit anywhere we want. So, I take an open spot behind Laurent and across from London.

She leans over and whispers to me, "I'd prefer we not discuss this weekend in front of Rachel. She already has hurt feelings about it."

"Why would she? She's not even friends with Johnny. Or me."

"I thought you weren't in charge of the guest list."

"I wasn't in charge of it, but I was consulted," I say.

Zoey plops down behind me and goes, "Still no text or talk."

"No text or talk what?" London butts in.

But Zoey just smiles at her and goes, "My phone. It's fucked."

"Oh, that's too bad," London replies.

Fortunately, the teacher starts class, and I don't have to worry about what I can and cannot say.

After class is over, Rachel Tran starts going on and on about what she's doing for break. How she's meeting her father in London and how they plan to wipe out most of Harrods' stock.

She looks at me and speaks loudly, like she's trying to make me jealous or something. But then she gets in my face. "I bet you wish you were going to London," she says to me.

"Not really," I tell her. "I already have everything I want from London here at Eastbrooke with me. Have a great break."

I'm already irritated when I leave class, but I'm not sure if it's because of Rachel or the person I have to deal with next.

Champagne trail.
Community Time

It's really ridiculous that I have to stay for a counseling session, but I decide that I'm not going to let it, Rachel, or Branson ruin my mood.

Because I'm going away for the weekend with my friends and my boyfriend!

And when I come back to school, my virginity will be a distant memory.
And that makes me smile.

Because I'm so happy with Augie. I have so much to look forward to, and I'm not going to let this blip of a meeting take that away from me.

Besides, I'm sure Branson wants to get out of here just as fast as I do, so he can get up to the Hamptons and on top of his Cassiebug.

Branson struts into the room like he owns the place.

I just roll my eyes.

A few minutes later, the counselor finally shows up, sits across from us, and starts asking us some pretty pertinent questions.

And I will admit, I'd love to hear Branson's answers to some of them.

But he refuses to engage.

And if he isn't going to, then neither am I.

But she keeps trying—bless her heart.

The most she's tried so far.

I watch the time tick away, counting the seconds until I get to head to Johnny's yacht.

Well, after a stop at the dean's office to officially tell him that Augie and I are coming back after break and will be staying at Eastbrooke.

"Fine," the counselor says in a loud, frustrated tone, clearly giving up on trying to get us to say anything.

Actually, I had her so tuned out that I have no idea what she even said.

"If you want to waste my time, then I'm going to waste yours. You will both stay here an extra fifteen minutes in complete silence."

Then she gathers her things and marches out of the room.

The second she does, I blurt out what was on my mind last night. “Did all this start because I kissed Beckham on New Year’s Eve?”

“No. I know that was my fault, and although we didn’t specifically talk about the kiss, Beckham had already told me, and he was right about what he said,” Branson says, looking and sounding like my former best friend. His voice is soft, his manner sweet. “I was stupid for getting mad at you and acting like a brat. I never should have left you that night. It’s all on me. I should have gone and looked for you. And eventually, I did. But either way, when we kissed at midnight, the moment was—”

“Magical,” I finish.

“Yeah, it was,” he says, looking sad.

“Then why are you so mad at me? Why do you hate me now? What did I do wrong, Brannie?” I cry out because I’m desperate to know. To understand.

His countenance immediately changes, and back is the pissed off asshole I’ve come to know and *not* love.

“You came here,” he says, venom in his voice. “And I really wish you hadn’t. Why do you think I didn’t call after you left? Because I was *happy* you were gone.” He doesn’t yell, but the force in his voice feels like a punch to the gut. “If only it could be that easy to get you out of my school and out of my life.”

“Thanks for telling me, Branson,” I say, quickly gathering up my things and tossing them into my backpack. “Goodbye.”

“It’s not a *goodbye* if you’re coming back,” he spits out.

I stand up tall, trying to hold myself together as I walk straight out of the room, feeling like I could throw up.

It’s at this moment that Augie texts me.

HRH: I’m in the dean’s office. Are you done yet? We need to get this over with so we can head out to sea. Get this party started!

All I can type in return is: *I’m done.*

I power-march to the dean's office and find his cheerful face annoying when I arrive.

Augie kisses my cheek and takes my hand in his.

Also annoying.

So annoying that I can barely look at him.

Barely stand to be touched.

"I'm going to ask you each separately," the dean starts to say.

"No need," Augie tells him, smiling. "Arrington and I have made our decision together."

"Regardless," the dean continues while I stand still, my body frozen while my brain replays everything that just happened.

"Augie, what's your decision? Will you stay, or will you go?" the dean asks him.

"I will *stay* at Eastbrooke," Augie states happily.

He smiles at the dean, then turns toward me expectantly.

"And how about you, Arrington?" the dean asks as the sound of Branson's words fill my head.

The strength in which he said them.

The sureness.

If only it could be that easy to get you out of my school and out of my life.

"Lane?" the dean asks again.

"I choose to go," I state.

Both the dean and Augie stare at me in disbelief.

"As in you *aren't* staying at Eastbrooke?" the dean asks.

Augie goes, "We decided. Together. But if you want to go to Kensington instead ..."

I drop his hand. "I'm sorry, Augie, but I can't do either."

I burst into tears and hightail it out the door.

The tears blur my vision, causing me to run straight into Beckham as I barrel out through the student center entrance, almost knocking us both over.

"Moving awfully fast for someone officially on break. Are you and Augie packed? Ready to head to the chopper?" he asks excitedly.

When I lift my head up, he sees my tears, causing his eyes to go wide in

surprise.

“Did Augie decide to leave?” he asks.

I know there is no way I can form a reply, but I do get out, “I have to go.”

I don’t stop anywhere.

Not at the house.

Not to get anything or to say goodbye to anyone.

All I’m focused on is one singular goal—that I have to get out of here before I fully and completely lose it.

I run straight down the hill to the Eastbrooke gates, grab one of the black cars waiting to take students to wherever they are going for the holiday weekend, and tell the driver to head straight to the airport.

Once in the car, I take my phone out of my backpack, call the local FBO, or fixed-base operator, and ask about a charter flight for today.

“Well, normally, on a holiday weekend like this, the answer would be a resounding no, but we just had something unusual happen here.”

“What?” I ask.

“Pissed off wife,” the guy says. “I guess she found out that her husband was flying in a bunch of beautiful young women to the location where he was having a *guys’* weekend. So, I’ll get the crew started on their preflight check. When do you plan to arrive?”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes,” I say, then quickly turn off my phone. I just can’t deal with talking to anyone about anything right now.

When I arrive at the FBO, I give them my shiny new black card.

“Make yourself at home,” an attendant says. “Can I offer you a preflight glass of champagne?”

I take the flute from her and walk over to the window, my mind not seeing the airport in front of me, but rather a champagne montage.

My family around the fire pit, roasting marshmallows. Dad raising a glass to my brothers and me the night before we left for our summer in the Hamptons.

Beckham holding out a key, giving me a mischievous grin, then showing me how he set up my own secret stash of champagne so I wouldn’t get drunk

on punch.

Augie leaning in to kiss me, champagne on his breath as we spent long nights in my bed, talking and watching old movies.

Chugging it straight from the bottle with my brothers on the night we stayed up to watch the movies about our mom's life, trying to get through the emotional trauma of seeing what she had gone through because of a stalker and discovering she'd had numerous relationships before she ended up with our dad.

Sneaking Laurent out to the chapel and the look on his face when he saw his little birthday celebration. The toast that solidified our friendship. The taste of the cake.

Being tucked into Johnny's soft sheets after everything that happened the night of the carnival. Toasting to all the good sheet and eating Johnny's amazing grilled cheese sandwiches. His and Laurent's support and friendship touching me deeply.

Being handed a flute upon arriving via helicopter on Johnny's amazing yacht and the vintage champagne that followed during our private fashion show.

Laurent on the yacht, telling us he was savoring it all. The food. The fashion. The boat. And the beautiful day.

Before the dance, Laurent giving me a wrist corsage, Beckham opening the champagne Johnny had for all of us.

I'm still thinking of it as I'm boarding the plane and taking my seat.

And as the plane races down the runway to take off, I realize it's come full circle. I'm going back to where the champagne trail started.

I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and imagine the view.

The house on the hill. The rows of grapes. The ocean in the distance.

In just a few hours, this will all be over.

Ready to find out what happens next?

[Read the next book in the series.](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jillian Dodd is a *USA Today*, #1 Apple, and Amazon Top 5 bestselling author. Her *That Boy* series has been optioned for TV/Film.

She writes fun binge-able romance series with characters her readers fall in love with—from the boy next door in the *That Boy* series to the daughter of a famous actress in *The Keatyn Chronicles* to a spy who might save the world in the *Spy Girl* series. Her newest series include *London Prep*, a prep-school series about a drama filled three-week exchange, and *Eastbrooke Academy*, a boarding school romance series.

Jillian is married to her college sweetheart, adores writing big fat happily ever afters, wears a lot of pink, buys way too many shoes, loves to travel, and is distracted by anything covered in glitter.

Get signed books and swag at jilliandodd.net