



CAMPUS
Wallflowers

Tempting

THE

PLAYER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

REBECCA JENSHAK

TEMPTING THE PLAYER

REBECCA JENSHAK

CONTENTS

Content Notes

1. Jane
2. Jane
3. Jane
4. Hendrick
5. Hendrick
6. Jane
7. Hendrick
8. Jane
9. Hendrick
10. Jane
11. Jane
12. Hendrick
13. Jane
14. Hendrick
15. Jane
16. Jane
17. Hendrick
18. Jane
19. Hendrick
20. Jane
21. Jane
22. Hendrick
23. Jane
24. Hendrick
25. Jane
26. Hendrick
27. Jane
28. Jane
29. Hendrick
30. Jane
31. Hendrick
32. Jane
33. Jane
34. Hendrick
35. Jane
36. Jane
37. Jane
38. Jane

39. [Hendrick](#)
 40. [Jane](#)
 41. [Hendrick](#)
 42. [Jane](#)
 43. [Jane](#)
 44. [Hendrick](#)
 45. [Jane](#)
 46. [Hendrick](#)
 47. [Jane](#)
- [Epilogue](#)

[Playlist](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Also By Rebecca Jenshak](#)

[About the Author](#)

© 2023 by Rebecca Jenshak

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this book may be reproduced, distributed, transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without written permission from the author.

Rebecca Jenshak

www.rebeccajenshak.com

Cover Design by Lori Jackson Designs

Editing by Becca Mysoor at Fairy Plot-Mother, Margo Lipschultz, and Nancy Smay at Evident Ink

Proofreading by Sarah at All Encompassing Books

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Names, characters, places, and plots are a product of the author's imagination. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

BLURB

He's the last guy I should fall for.

Valley U was supposed to be my fresh start after I escaped the glitz and glam of Hollywood.

I didn't want to be the former child star that graced TV screens across the world.

I wanted to feel normal.

When the same hot guy runs past my off-campus house every day, I assume he's another college student.

When he protects me from boys who still think of me as the character from their teenage dreams, I think he is being kind.

When my past comes back to haunt me, he makes me feel safe.

I'm falling hard and fast for a guy I barely know.

Until I realize my mysterious new crush has a secret.

He was hired to be my undercover bodyguard.

CONTENT NOTES

Abandonment (historical, off-page), alcohol consumption, death of a parent (historical, off-page), drugging, explicit sex, profanity, stalking and harassment.

For anyone out there who wishes they had a friend group like the wallflowers. Find those people who love and support you in every season of your life and hold on tight.

JANE

“I WOULD FEEL BETTER IF YOU HAD A SECURITY TEAM OR EVEN JUST ONE person.” My mom’s voice is soft, and concern is etched into her features.

“We both would,” my dad adds from somewhere out of view.

We’ve had this same conversation so many times that I fight off the defensive feelings at their protectiveness. I know they mean well.

“Please do not ask me to reconsider hiring Grady again.” My old bodyguard is like an uncle to me, but I don’t want someone tailing me around campus. For the first time since I started acting and singing at age five, I’ve been able to live a normal life. Being at Valley U has given me that.

“Okay, but at the very least, let me arrange for the house to be wired with an alarm system and cameras.” Dad steps in next to Mom. His gray hair is windblown, and his shirt is missing a button. He’s the carefree, slightly scatterbrained artist (mostly sculpture) yin to my mom’s organized and always prepared yang. She spent years managing his art career and my acting and singing career. They are opposites in everything, but in total agreement on this.

To be honest, I’m surprised they aren’t digging in their heels on hiring personal security, but all of it feels like too much. Even an alarm. No one else here has an alarm system. Valley is a safe town in southern Arizona, and the college has a below-average crime rate. I know all this because it was part of the very argument I made to my parents when I applied to Valley U.

“I’m fine. Really. I’ve already told you I don’t want any of that. You don’t need to worry. Things are great here.”

My mom’s soft tone sharpens. “There are hundreds of new photos from

last week alone, Jane. You can't tell me that there aren't paparazzi staked outside waiting every time you step out the front door. Your every move is being documented for the world to see."

Since I'm sitting in the living room in front of the large window looking out to the street of my off-campus house I say, "I can tell you with one hundred percent honesty that there are currently no photographers outside my house. It's lunchtime and even paparazzi have to eat."

Mom lets out an exasperated sigh.

"I'm kidding, Mom. The paparazzi are harmless, and it's calmed down since Christmas break. I promise I am being careful. We always lock the doors and I live with three other people. I'm perfectly safe."

"I know you want to be like everyone else, honey, but you're not. Your circumstances are different. You know better than most how easy it is for creeps to get access to your location and schedule when you're in the public eye." Dad gives me one of those smiles that doesn't quite meet his eyes and my stomach starts to knot.

When I'm silent for too long, my mom adds, "We just want to keep you safe. If something happened to you . . ."

Her words trail off, but she doesn't need to finish the sentence for my mind to run with a hundred different terrible scenarios. I know that I need to be careful and I am.

And yes, admittedly it did get a little out of hand last semester when I came out of hiding and revealed my past life to my friends and classmates. I dressed as my most famous character for a big Halloween party and then performed the theme song. I didn't expect so many people to care that I'm not just Jane Greenfield, a regular girl attending Valley U, but also Ivy Greene, former child actress and singer.

I guess part of me hoped that people would care, but I never dreamed there'd be paparazzi staked out in front of the house for a glimpse of the childhood star in hiding—their words, not mine. So, there have been a lot of adjustments.

I went from a nobody on campus to someone that people want to know. If I were the kind of person that derived my self-worth from how others see me, this might be a total head game. But I learned at a young age that fame and popularity come and go on a whim. No one stays on top all the time, so the only way to survive that kind of rollercoaster is to always love yourself more than anyone else. But I'd be lying if I said I'm not enjoying it a little too. It

feels good to be admired.

My roommate, Dahlia, comes downstairs with her golf bag looped over one shoulder. Her steps slow when she sees me on the phone.

“I gotta go,” I say. “I’ll call later this week.”

“Think about what we said,” my mom says pointedly. She and Dad share a look. “We would take care of everything.”

“I will,” I promise.

After we say our goodbyes, I hang up and drop my phone in my lap.

“Parents still worried about all the attention?” Dahlia asks, setting her bag down and then gathering her blonde hair back into a low ponytail.

“Yes. That article that dragged up all the shit with my stalker five years ago has them reliving it like it was yesterday.”

“I’m sorry,” my friend says with a sympathetic smile. “And I’m sorry you went through that. Tell Momma Greenfield that I’m on red alert. I’ve got your back.”

The sincerity of her words means more than she’ll ever know. Dahlia is the best friend I’ve ever had. It’s crazy to think that I’ve known her less than two years.

I’m still soaking up her kindness when a familiar dark head catches my attention outside.

“Oh, there he is,” I say, sitting a little taller so I’ll have a better view of the cute guy who runs by our house every day. Always during my lunch break at precisely noon, and always looking too good to be true.

His hair is a dark brown, a little longer on top with a hint of curl. Today he’s in black athletic shorts and a gray T-shirt that stretches over his broad chest and muscular arms. His body speaks to hours spent in the gym. It’s hard to tell how tall he is, but I’m guessing he’s at least six foot three.

“Did you figure out if he goes to Valley or not?” Dahlia asks once my hottie mystery guy disappears out of sight.

“Not definitively, but I did see him in the parking lot behind University Hall one night as I was leaving a study group late.” Or I think it was him. It was dark and I was hurrying to my car since I was alone. “And he’s not at work at noon on a Monday, so I think it’s likely. Unless he’s unemployed. Or maybe he’s a model.” He looks like he could be a model.

“He could work nights. The campus health building is nearby.”

I nod thoughtfully. “Maybe he’s a doctor.”

“Kind of young to be a doctor.”

“A prodigy in the body of a god. Seriously, have you ever seen a hotter guy?”

She hums and gets this dreamy look on her face that she only gets when talking about her boyfriend. “I have, actually.”

“You know, they say love is blind but now I think I’m finally seeing it in action.”

Dahlia narrows her gaze at me. She’s sweet as can be until you talk smack about someone she loves, and she is madly in love with her boyfriend Felix.

“I’m kidding,” I say with a small laugh. “Felix is gorg, of course, but this guy . . . he just runs by, and I feel a little breathless. I might need to take up a lunchtime jogging hobby. Do you think I can still catch him?”

“You hate running.” She arches one brow at me while wearing an amused expression.

“Hated. Past tense. It’s me and my new boyfriend’s favorite hobby.”

“You’re too much.” My best friend’s smile widens. “I gotta go to practice. Do not chase after him.”

Dahlia grabs her golf clubs and heads out the front door.

“How else am I going to find out my boyfriend’s name?” I call after her.



By the time I head back to campus, the sun has gone behind the clouds, and it’s started to rain. As annoyed as I am about being caught without an umbrella or hat to keep my hair from getting drenched, I am so thankful to be here at college that I don’t speed up my pace.

I love being here. The buildings, the people, the freedom, all of it. The conversation with my parents just reminded me why I am fighting so hard to keep my life as normal as possible. This is my second chance to have some of the experiences I missed out on by not attending regular schools as a kid.

The library doors open as I approach. I run my fingers through my wet hair as I head upstairs to the second floor. It seems lots of people had the same idea to get inside and out of the rain and most of the tables are already taken.

While I continue across the floor searching for somewhere to sit, I hear my name being shouted over the hushed voices of the quiet library.

“Jane!”

I slow my steps and turn, but only because it's polite. I could pick out Valley U's Panhellenic Council President Paris Shultz's voice anywhere. Her skin is flawless, and the smile that she flashes at me is so bubbly and happy that I feel bad for wishing I could figure out how to blow her off without being rude.

“Jane,” she says a touch more softly as she falls into step beside me. “Is it Jane or should I be calling you Ivy now?”

“Jane is fine.” I drop my backpack onto a free table. I don't sit because I'm afraid she'll take that as an invitation to do the same. “What's up?”

She levels me with a no-nonsense expression, somehow still maintaining that wide smile. “I got the council to extend my deadline to find a performer. What do I have to do to get you to say yes to being my headliner at the Spring Fling?”

It isn't the first time, or even the tenth, that she's asked. She is as relentless as she is beautiful.

The Spring Fling is a student-run carnival that happens in April each year. The different organizations and groups across campus have booths to raise money. Everyone goes to it. Everyone. It's one of the few events that somehow manages to appeal to all. And on the last night, there's a concert.

“I'm so sorry. Like I said before, I'm not doing any shows right now, so I can focus on school. I'd love to participate in one of the booths or setup, whatever you need.”

“What I *need* is an amazing main act for the concert. You would be perfect.” She backs up a step as I open my mouth to tell her no (again). “Please don't answer now. Just think about it. *Really* think about it.”

Why does everyone think I need time to mull over my every decision? I know that I don't want extra security and I know that I don't want to perform at the annual Valley U Spring Fling.

I sigh as she disappears without taking no for an answer. My mom and Paris are far more exhausting than the photographers that sometimes camp outside my house waiting to take my picture.

I slip in my ear buds and pull out my laptop to work on an assignment for French class. I started college a year later than I could have because I was still floundering trying to figure out what I was going to do with my life. I should be a junior but I'm a sophomore. It sucks being behind. I'm taking eighteen credit hours this semester in an attempt to catch up, and a few weeks

in, I'm already questioning that decision. There's so much homework and studying, and those have never been my favorite things.

I'm deep in concentration mode when a shadow falls over my table. I glance up, smiling when I see Cam in front of me. I recognize a few of his teammates standing back watching our interaction.

Cameron Payton is a baseball player that I've had a crush on since I arrived at Valley U. I have a type and he fits it. Tall, dark hair, built, and deliciously cocky. Cam didn't pay a lot of attention to me until he found out I was Ivy, but neither did half the campus so I'm trying not to hold it against him.

"Hey, beautiful," he says as I remove one ear bud.

My insides light up at the compliment. "Hey, Cam."

He pulls out the chair across from me and then nods to his friends and lets them know he'll catch up. When he's seated, he leans forward on his elbows. "What are you working on?"

"An assignment for next week."

"You're working on an assignment that's not due until next week?" Both brows rise toward the backward hat on his head.

"I'm trying to stay on top of assignments this semester," I say and close my laptop. "How are you? How was your break?"

"It was chill. Good to see the family and all that, but I'm glad to be back." He sits back in his chair. He has this confidence and ease in his every movement. "I thought about you while I was gone."

"You did?" A surprised smile curls my lips.

He nods. "Yeah, I was kicking myself for that time we were supposed to hang out and I didn't make it."

What he means is the night he told me he'd see me at a Theta party and then didn't show. It was days later when I ran into him on campus that he finally apologized and said he'd gotten roped into going out with some of his teammates and then couldn't find a sober ride to get to the party later. As excuses go, it was pretty average for guys my age, but I appreciated that he owned up to it.

And I'm even more pleased now that he's still regretting that decision. "Serves you right. I'm a great time."

"I bet you are." His blue eyes take on a mischievous glint. "What are you doing tonight?"

"I don't have any plans," I say before I remember I should probably play

it cool. I've never been good at that. When I like someone, they know it.

"Great. I'll pick you up at eight."

Umm . . . excuse me? "You'll pick me up for what?"

"To hang out, of course." He smirks.

"Like a date?" I ask, slowly dragging out each word.

He gives his head a small shake like he doesn't think he needs to explain his intentions.

"Sorry. I just assumed I'd know if someone was asking me out."

"You're funny," he says. "Go out with me tonight."

It's still not really a question, but I'm not going to keep berating him until he changes his mind. "Okay. Yeah, that sounds amazing."

"Perfect." He stands and hits me with a wink. "See you tonight, beautiful."

Once he's out of sight, I finally let out a quiet little squeal of excitement. I know there won't be any studying happening now, so I pack up my stuff and hurry down the steps of the library. My friends are all busy, but I fire off a text anyway because I *need* to tell someone.

My nose is buried in my phone as I push through the doors and step back out into the rain. I glance up seconds before I collide with a girl carrying a large umbrella and coming straight at me. I move to the side at the same time she brings the umbrella down, swatting me with it unintentionally.

The bump throws me off balance and then I slip on the wet sidewalk. I feel my feet go out from underneath me and squeeze my eyes shut as I brace for impact on the ground.

Instead, strong arms catch my fall. My eyelids flutter open slowly as I float above the ground. The most beautiful hazel eyes I've ever seen stare down at me through thick lashes. Only the scowl on his face detracts from his handsome features.

The back of my head rests against his shoulder and I realize he's holding most of my weight, but I'm not in any hurry to stand upright.

"It's you," I say, still locked onto his stunning eyes. His dark brows pull together, and his mouth is set in a straight line. His jawline is a work of art. He's even hotter up close. Broodier, but hotter. "I mean, I recognize you. You run by my house every day. I'm Jane."

He moves us so I'm standing on my own two feet instead of swooning in his arms, steadies me and then steps away. "Careful where you're walking, Jane."

The girl with the umbrella starts apologizing profusely. I give her my attention long enough to assure her I'm fine, and when I turn back to him, he's already disappeared into the rain.

JANE

“YOU HAVE TO SAY YES,” MY FRIEND ERIC SAYS AS HE IDLY STRUMS HIS guitar.

After my classes, I decided to swing by Eric’s house. He lives here with another guy, Lennon. The two of them, plus their friend Ted and Ted’s girlfriend, Mackenzie, have a band, The Letterman Jackets, that I sometimes jam with. I’ve even filled in for Mackenzie at a few shows when she was sick or had a conflict.

“Headlining the Spring Fling could open up more paying gigs for us,” Lennon says. He’s a senior computer science major who plays bass in the band and is the level-headed one of the group.

“They didn’t ask for the band.” Mackenzie takes a seat on the couch between Eric and Lennon. “They asked for Jane.”

Mackenzie has an amazing voice. It’s raspy and unique. She has a limited range, but more than enough style to make up for it.

I knew telling them could stir up some unease, but they already know that Paris has been hounding me since we got back from the holiday break. “I would never do it without you guys, but it doesn’t matter because I’m not doing it at all.”

Eric stops playing and looks up. “Why not?”

I squirm in my seat across from him. “We’ve been through this. I don’t have time to prepare for a show like that. We’d need twice as many songs as we usually do. Plus, some new material. We’ve been using the same setlist for the past year. And anyway, I’m taking a heavy course load this semester and trying to focus on that.”

Eric ignores my concerns. “Spring Fling is almost three months away. We have plenty of time.”

“We do?” Lennon asks.

The thing I don’t say, the thing I can’t say to these guys, is that I don’t want my first performance after revealing my identity to be singing the same cover songs we’ve been doing all over town. I want it to be bigger and better. I don’t have time to make sure every detail is perfect.

“You guys might, but I don’t. I’m taking French 2 this semester.” I stand and grab my backpack. “Speaking of, I need to get home.”

As I head to the door, Eric drops his guitar to the couch and follows me.

“We have a show this weekend. Will you sing with us?” he asks.

“What about Mackenzie? Did you run this by her?”

“She’s cool,” he says. “You can switch off songs or sing together.”

I laugh lightly. “I’ll take that as a no, you haven’t talked to her.”

His expression says it all. Mackenzie has always been really nice about me filling in for her, but joining them as another singer isn’t cool unless they’ve all talked about it and agreed.

“I appreciate the offer, but I’m not going to take songs from her or steal her spotlight.”

I open the front door and Eric grabs the side to hold it for me as I step outside. “Fine, but tell me you’ll at least think about the Spring Fling. You belong on stage, and we won’t let you down. French isn’t that hard. Get a tutor or something.”

I reach forward and hug him with one arm. “Thank you. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

His next response comes when I’m halfway down the sidewalk. “That wasn’t an answer, Greenfield.”

I lift one hand over my head without turning around.

As soon as I get home, I tell the girls about my run-in with mystery guy and Cam asking me out. Dahlia and I live with two other roommates, Daisy and Violet.

The three of them sit on my bed while I try on six different dresses for my date.

“That one is stunning,” Violet says as I come out of the closet in a slinky silver dress.

Dahlia nods. “But maybe a little too much for a Monday night.”

“I’m never afraid to be overdressed.” I turn side to side as I stand in front of the full-length mirror on the back of the closet door. “But I’m not loving silver with my new hair.”

As Ivy Greene I had been known for my seafoam green hair. When I moved to Valley, I went platinum. But this new turn in my life where I’m Jane but no longer hiding Ivy, I decided on blonde with green on just the ends. It’s a mix of both worlds. A little Jane and a little Ivy. It’s fitting as I figure out who I am, but I need to reconsider my wardrobe.

“Only you could get asked out by one guy and then literally fall into your mystery crush’s arms five minutes later.” Daisy looks at me with her big, blue eyes full of admiration and playful jealousy.

“It was a little embarrassing. He ran off so fast, like he was annoyed he’d needed to save me or something.” My insides heat as I remember the way his intense hazel eyes stared down at me. I adjust the straps of the dress. “What do you think?”

“I still like the black one best,” Violet says as she sits forward and grabs the first dress I put on. “It’s simple, but sexy, and it looks killer on you.”

I take the dress from her and head back into the closet to change. “I’m running out of time, so I guess it’ll have to do.”

“I can’t believe you’re finally going out on a date with Cam.” Daisy stands as I come out of the closet and zips up the back of my dress.

“Me either. He’s so cute.”

Dahlia doesn’t say anything. She isn’t team Cam, but that’s just because she doesn’t really know him and what she does know of him is that he didn’t show the one time we were supposed to hang out.

“I have to go. I’m staying at Jordan’s tonight, but I want to hear all about it tomorrow when I get back.” Daisy hugs me. “Have fun and be careful.”

Vi is the next to stand and hug me. When she pulls back, she tips her head down, sending her black hair falling over her shoulders as she regards me seriously. “Have so much fun. And I want more details on mystery guy tomorrow. We need to figure out who this guy is.”

“Already working on it. I scoured all the athletic team rosters. Next up, professor bios.”

She laughs. I’m serious. I can still feel his strong arms cradling me

against him. I push that memory away for later. I need to focus. Cam is going to be here any minute.

When it's just me and Dahlia, I hold my hands out to my sides. "Still your favorite? I probably have time for one more wardrobe change."

No sooner do I say the words than my phone pings with a text notification. My stomach flips. "He's here."

"You look so hot. Cam is going to choke on his saliva. I hope he knows how lucky he is." She stands and waits for me to grab my purse and cell phone, and then we head downstairs together.

Before I head out, Dahlia gives me basically the same pep talk that Daisy did. "Have so much fun and be careful. Text me if you need anything or if Cam is a total bore."

"I'm not going to need an out. Cam is anything but boring and tonight is going to be amazing." I slide my phone into my purse and flash my biggest smile at my best friend before heading out the door.



The Hideout isn't very busy tonight. The restaurant and bar near campus is often packed with students or locals, but the rain and cold seems to have kept people home.

I didn't bother with a jacket and that was a mistake. My bare arms and legs are frozen, and then Cam picks a table on the bar side that's near the door. Every time it opens, a cold draft whips through. I've barely touched the Sprite in front of me and am wishing I'd ordered a coffee or something else warm.

"Tell me more about the singing and acting thing," Cam says. He's wearing a long-sleeved black button-up over a gray T-shirt. Leaning back in his chair, he rests one arm on the empty chair next to him and his long middle finger taps the wood absently. He has a nervous energy about him, always moving somehow, but his gaze doesn't leave me.

"What do you want to know?" I ask, soaking up his attention. He's so cute and unexpectedly more interested in me than I would have guessed from his cocky demeanor.

"All of it. Why'd you stop? What was it like? Who's the biggest celeb you've met?"

I laugh softly. “It was fun, mostly, but it was still a job. Lots of long hours and hard work.”

He bobs his head like he’s waiting for me to say more. I hate name dropping.

“Penelope Hart. She was on the show before her career blew up.”

Sing Your Heart Out ran for four seasons and almost six years of my life. The premise was a bit cheesy. It followed three sisters who were in a pop group together, traveling the world during the summers to perform, but maintaining “normal” lives the rest of the year. It was fun pretending to go to middle school and deal with teenage drama while in real life I had tutors and barely enough time to hang out with my friends.

But for whatever reason, the show resonated with people, and for a while I couldn’t go anywhere without being recognized.

“She’s so hot,” he says automatically, then smiles sheepishly. “Sorry.”

“No. She is. And she’s nice too. Or she was. I haven’t talked to her in years.”

He stops fidgeting and leans forward, elbows on the table. “Why’d you stop?”

“I wanted to enjoy my teenage years and then go to college.” That isn’t the complete truth, but I don’t like to think of my career as over, even if it’s been years since I did anything noteworthy.

“I’m glad you’re here, but I can’t imagine giving all that up for this. If I hadn’t injured my arm last year, I would have dropped out to go pro.”

“Really? You had a chance to play baseball professionally?” Valley U has a lot of athletes across different sports that have gone on to play in the MLB, NBA, NFL, and more, but I’ve never heard anyone talk about Cam as being one of the guys on that track.

He dodges my question. “Eh, this isn’t so bad though. College is cool.”

I smile and take another icy sip of my drink. The door opens again, and a full-body shiver wracks my body.

“Ah, there they are.” Cam stands and brings my attention to the group of guys that just walked in.

I recognize some of his teammates from parties, but I haven’t spent a lot of time around the baseball guys. Puzzled, I smile as Cam introduces me around. It’s only when they pull up chairs to sit with us that I fully understand what’s happening. The flicker of annoyance I feel at our date turning into something else completely is short-lived when Cam sits beside

me and drapes an arm around my shoulders. I lean into him and revel in the warmth.

“You’re the famous chick,” one of the guys says. I’ve already forgotten his name.

I offer a weak smile.

“Ivy Greene,” Cam says. “Look her up. She knows Penelope Hart.”

The guy grabs his phone from the table and, much to my horror, looks me up on the spot. The guys hover around his phone as they swipe through my Instagram account and then do a Google search.

“Why don’t you go by Ivy now?” Cam asks. “It’s a great name.”

“It’s not my real name,” I say with a shrug. The truth is my agent at the time came up with Ivy Greene based on some test cases of names that had star potential. I liked it well enough, but it’d never felt like my name. It was a job, a character. Maybe I’d feel differently if I were still acting or singing professionally.

Cam just laughs along, keeping a tight hold on me as his friends continue to perform a deep dive on my life according to the internet. It’s the weirdest experience I’ve had at Valley. Sure, lots of people have been curious, but they’re acting like I’m not here while gawking at old pictures of me. It’s giving me major ick, but I try to brush it off and keep a smile on my face. I don’t want this to ruin my date with Cam. We’re finally out together and things were going great. Well, maybe not great, but I was having fun.

I’m relieved when the conversation eventually veers off onto something else. I’m not usually so quiet, but I find myself fading into the background as they talk about practice, parties, and people I don’t know.

Cam squeezes my shoulder and I glance up into his eyes. He really is so handsome.

His gaze drops to my mouth, and he leans closer. I stop breathing while I wait to see if he’s going to kiss me. It seems like a bold move an hour into our first date, but I can’t say I’m not interested in finding out if he’s as good a kisser as the Valley U female population has made him out to be.

“Let’s take a pic,” he says.

“A picture?”

“Yeah.” He holds up his phone in front of us and then leans his face closer to mine.

After we’ve smiled through a few photos, he removes his arm from around me. “My buddies back home are never going to believe I’m out with

Ivy Greene.”

My face flushes and I tense.

“Oh, I want a pic with her.” The guy who was looking me up on his phone earlier glances between me and Cam, silently asking for approval.

“Let’s do a group one,” someone else says.

“You don’t mind, do you, beautiful?” Cam asks.

Even if I did, saying so is going to make me seem like a total bitch. I’m not sure if my irritation is warranted. Maybe I’m being extra sensitive because I thought Cam and I would be hanging out alone tonight. “No. Let’s do it.”

For several minutes, the guys take turns getting their photo taken with me individually and then as a group. It draws the attention of other people in the bar and I’m really thankful it’s such a quiet night.

The guys are all having a good time and I’m desperately trying to see the fun in being their plaything. I’m not sure whose genius idea it is for them to lift me up and hold me across them for a final picture. One guy has his arms around my shoulders, another at my middle, Cam holds me around my hips, and two others are holding my legs.

“I don’t really think this dress was made for this pose,” I say as I clench my legs together. The fabric is tight enough I don’t think I’m giving anyone a free show, but one slip and they’re all going to see the lacy underwear I picked out for tonight.

The bartender snaps the pic for them, but instead of putting me down, Cam says, “Oh, I have an idea. Put her on the bar.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” I say as they somehow navigate me upright and stand me on top of the bar.

I glance at the bartender apologetically. “I’m so sorry.”

“My manager will kill me if he sees this,” he says through a smile, but he doesn’t tell me to get off his bar.

“Not funny,” I say to Cam. “Help me down before I fall or get us kicked out.”

“You look so good up there. Sing for us.”

“What?” My voice quavers. “No way. Help me down.” I’ve had a fantasy or two about dancing and singing on top of a bar, living my best life with lots of people watching and singing along, but this is so not it.

Cam still doesn’t come forward to help me. He sticks out his bottom lip in a pout and stares up at me. “Come on, babe. You have an amazing voice and

you look so hot.”

More and more people are watching. A few of the guys even have their phones aimed in my direction. The way the bar is situated, people on the restaurant side can see me too.

My legs wobble and it feels like an elephant just took a seat on my chest. I have never wanted to disappear in front of a crowd more than I do right now. My vision goes hazy, and I bite down on my bottom lip to stop it from trembling.

It's only when Cam's blurry body in front of me is pushed out of the way that I notice the dark head approaching me. I blink back what I now realize are tears in time to see my mystery guy reach up and grab me around the waist.

I freeze under his touch, but then his voice is reassuring me as his big hands span out around my middle. “You're okay. I've got you.”

JANE

“THANK YOU,” I MUMBLE AS MY FEET HIT THE GROUND.

My white knight continues to hold on to me as I get my bearings. He smells good. I focus on that instead of all the people watching and the heat flooding my face.

“Hey, I’m sorry.” Cam tries to get to me, but he’s blocked as my mystery guy turns and stands between us.

“What the hell were you thinking?” His rough tone sends a shiver down my spine.

Cam’s face pales, but then his brow furrows and his words are spoken with a little bite. “We were just having fun.”

“Does she look like she’s having fun?”

Cam has the good sense to stop talking. Mystery guy is intense and looking at him compared to Cam and his friends, he’s also way bigger. He’s wearing a cream-colored sweater that strains across his back and biceps. I was right about his height. He has to be at least six foot three because I’m wearing heels, adding to my five-foot-eight frame, and he still has me by a few inches. Plus, he’s so broad. I feel small and safe next to him in a way that I don’t normally feel because of my height.

I touch his arm, and he flinches at the contact then softens. “I’m okay. Thank you for helping me down.”

His jaw tics as he nods. He glances at Cam and his friends and then me one last time before he pulls out a chair at the bar and takes a seat.

During the chaos Cam’s friends moved toward the table where we were all seated, but he comes to me. “I’m really sorry. I thought . . .” He trails off.

“I didn’t realize it’d be a big deal. Forgive me for being an idiot?”

He looks genuinely remorseful and my irritation wanes. I nod. “Yeah. You’re forgiven, but no more pictures or manhandling me onto bartops.”

“I promise.” The smile that takes over his face returns his normally playful and cocky demeanor. “You want to get out of here? There’s a small party at Lambda Chi.”

“Oh. Umm . . .” I glance at my mystery guy’s back. He has a bottle of beer in front of him and he stares at one of the TVs above the bar. “I’m not sure I’m really feeling it, but go ahead. I can Uber home.”

“Nah, don’t go home. It’s early.” He places his arm around my neck and guides me toward the table. “Stay for one more drink at least.”

Once we’re seated, he grabs the pitcher and fills his glass, then offers it to me. I shake my head. “I don’t really like beer and I’m not twenty-one yet.”

“I think I remember reading your birthday is in March?” He narrows his gaze as he waits for confirmation.

“March twenty-eighth.”

“Not too much longer, then.” He leans back in his chair and kicks one leg out. He’s back to his cool, calm self, but I’m still anxious and confused.

We talk a little while he drinks his beer. This time he asks questions about me and not Ivy, and he doesn’t get distracted by his friends, but I can’t seem to get past everything that happened. And I can’t stop stealing glances at the guy at the bar. Who is he?

When the pitcher is empty and the guys are ready to go, Cam asks me again to go with him to the party.

“I really should get home,” I say. “I have an early class in the morning.”

“All right. Can I drop you on the way?”

“No. Go ahead. I’m going to see if I can grab some spinach dip to take home.”

He grins at me and then steps forward to hug me. “Thanks for being so cool tonight. Maybe we can hang out again this weekend?”

“Maybe.” I squeeze him back to see how it feels to be wrapped up in his arms.

As he pulls back, Cam hits me with his signature cocky smirk. He continues to smile at me as he follows his friends toward the door. “Later, beautiful.”

The endearment still does something funny to my insides, but as soon as he’s gone, I turn on my heel and glance toward the bar.

My knight is still by himself and still on beer number one. I'm not easily intimidated, but I hesitate to walk up to the guy that's saved me now twice in one day.

My breaths come quicker, and my pulse kicks up a notch with every step closer. He doesn't so much as give me a sideways glance as I take the spot next to him.

The bartender nods his head to me, silently asking if he can get me anything.

"Can I get an order of spinach dip to go? And a Sprite?"

"You got it." The bartender drums his hands on the bar before stepping away.

I swivel in my chair to look directly at mystery man. He still hasn't looked at me, but I get the sense he's far more aware than he seems.

"Twice in one day. Are you some sort of guardian angel?"

A beat of silence hangs between us before he answers.

"Just in the right place at the right time." His voice is deep and smooth with a hint of indifference.

"I'd buy you a drink to thank you but I'm not old enough."

Still staring ahead, he lifts the bottle in front of him with three, long fingers. "It's not necessary."

I tap my pinky finger on my thigh as I consider what to say next. He isn't giving me a lot to work with here.

"Are you new at Valley? I don't remember seeing you last semester."

He finally, *freaking finally*, looks at me. The beer still dangles from his fingertips, and his hazel eyes and sharp features take my breath away. "Sort of."

"Sort of. What does that mean?"

A few seconds pass with us locked in a stare-off before he answers. "Yes, technically I am new, but I grew up here."

"You left to go to college and then transferred back?"

"Do you always ask strangers in bars so many questions?" There's the tiniest hint of a smile to tell me that he isn't completely annoyed by me.

"Sometimes," I answer honestly. "What college did you go to before?"

"University of Washington." He brings the bottle to his lips and takes a long drink. I'm fascinated with the way his throat works as he swallows.

"That's cool. What's your major? What year are you?" I'm aware I'm coming on strong, but I cannot seem to stop.

“I’m undecided.” With a quick head tilt toward the door, he says, “Those guys were idiots. Are you okay?”

“Oh. Yeah. They were just messing around.” The memory of his strong hands pulling me down off the bar makes my skin tingle, but I’m horrified that he saw me like that.

He nods slowly. Neither of us says anything, but we continue to stare. He glances away first, giving his head a shake like he didn’t realize what he was doing.

“So, Washington. Why’d you decide to come back?”

“It was time.”

“That’s not an answer.”

He huffs out a soft laugh that turns his serious expression into a small smile. “My family is still here, and they needed me. Any more questions?” he asks, the smile growing a little larger.

I thought he was handsome all broody and tough, but when his features soften, he’s downright gorgeous. “So many. What are you leaning toward as a major? No wait, let me guess. I’m good at guessing majors. I’m a music major. You seem like a sports medicine guy. Maybe business or finance.”

Tilting my head to the side, I try to picture him behind a desk in a crisp suit. My mind quickly takes off in that direction, fantasizing a dozen different sexy scenarios that I’m pretty sure only happen in movies.

“I’ll keep those in mind.” He tosses me another small smile in response, then stands and pulls his wallet out from his back jean pocket. He fishes for some cash and sets it on the bar. “See you around, Jane.”

“Wait.” I hop off the chair and take two steps after him. “You know my name, but I still don’t know yours.”

He hesitates, but finally says, “Hendrick.”

As I close another foot of distance between us, I extend my hand and try his name out in my head. *Hendrick*.

That whisper of a smile is back as he reaches out and his much larger hand engulfs mine. Goosebumps climb up my arm and my pulse races.

“It’s nice to meet you, Hendrick.”

HENDRICK

“HAS ANYONE SEEN MY BASKETBALL SHOES?” FLYNN’S REDDISH-BROWN HAIR is still damp and sticks up all over his head. With his backpack slung over one shoulder and Pop-Tart in hand, he walks around searching for them.

Knox sighs impatiently at the open front door. “We gotta go. I’m gonna be late.”

“I think I have an old pair you can borrow for today. Bottom of my closet on the right side,” Archer says from the kitchen where he and Brogan are dumping scoops of protein into big plastic cups.

Flynn disappears into Arch’s bedroom and returns a few seconds later with the borrowed shoes in hand. Knox is already heading toward his car parked in the driveway.

“Do you need a ride home after practice?” I ask before my youngest brother can jet out the door.

He pauses and glances back at me. Sometimes he looks so much like our mom, with the same color hair and eyes, that it momentarily takes my breath.

“Nah, Knox picks me up on Fridays,” he says.

“Right. I forgot.”

He gives me a one-handed wave and rushes out to catch a ride to school. When the door shuts behind him, I turn and take in the house.

“This place is a mess.” I set my mug down on the coffee table so I can pick up a blanket off the floor. Once it’s folded, I toss it onto the back of the couch, then collect the empty beer cans and trash scattered around.

“Sunday is cleaning day,” Arch says before he chugs his protein drink and sets the empty cup in the sink next to a half-dozen just like it.

“By Sunday we won’t have any clean cups and the living room will be a danger zone.” I trip on something as if emphasizing my point. Glancing down, I add, “Found Flynn’s shoes.”

My jaw clenches as I dump the trash into the overflowing garbage and the cans into the recycling. I don’t have time to do much more than that. I need to be on campus in twelve minutes.

“I’m gonna run the dishwasher before I leave.” *Chill*. He signs the last part to Brogan instead of saying it, probably hoping I won’t catch it.

I let it go, not really having the time to fight or educate my brother on why I can’t *chill*. Moving back into a house with my brothers has me tense and grumpy. I’m used to having my own space—a clean space. The state of this place has me feeling annoyed and guilty for feeling annoyed.

I come to stand at the counter in front of Archer and Brogan. “Knox is picking up Flynn on his way home, and you two have practice until six. Dinner at seven? I thought I’d grill some steaks.”

Arch shakes his head, and the movement sends his shaggy hair flying and gives a rare peek at the hearing aids it usually covers. “On Wednesdays we’re done at four, but some buddies are having people over tonight so Brogan and I won’t be back until late.”

“I thought Wednesdays were a late practice day.”

“No. Knox works late on Wednesdays. We’re out early.”

“If he’s working late, how is he going to pick up Flynn?” I ask, my irritation quickly ramping back as I try to mentally organize four calendars of sports and work.

“Flynn stays after practice and lifts weights until Knox gets there. His coach is cool with it, don’t worry. We’ve got it covered,” Arch says, a hint of amusement dancing over his features.

“Don’t sweat it,” Brogan says, sensing my frustration. “Keeping track of schedules around here is harder than finding Arch a date.”

That comment earns Brogan an elbow to the stomach.

“We better go,” Archer says. He walks backward toward the door, Brogan a step in front of him. “Steaks tomorrow night instead?”

“Yeah.” I nod, mouth pulled into a tight line.

When I’m alone, I let out a long breath. I forgot what this was like. Growing up in a house with three younger brothers, really four, since Brogan’s been a part of the family since he and Archer met in middle school, I’m no stranger to the chaos and mess, but I’d forgotten how much I crave a

little peace and quiet. And how guilty that makes me feel.

A lot has changed in the four years I've been gone. Flynn was only twelve when I left, Knox and Archer were in high school, Brogan was already like a brother to us, but he still spent the majority of his time living at his parents' house, and Dad, as unhelpful as he was at managing us, was still coming around.

I'm crashing here temporarily. The location is great, and it gives me a chance to keep an eye on my brothers while I'm here. I've been taking care of them the best I can from afar, sending money and checking in via text and calls, but it's obvious in the short amount of time I've been back, that things are much more chaotic than I realized.

For starters, the place looks more like a frat house than the home it once was. We didn't have a lot of money, and what little we did have Dad took with him, but nearly all traces of Mom and Dad are gone—something I'm sure I can thank Knox for. He tenses up at just the mention of our parents. That's Knox—angry at the world.

Then there's Flynn. He's grown so much. He was this sweet, short and skinny kid that followed me around before I left, and now he's nearly as tall as Archer and doesn't say more than two words at a time if he can help it.

And Arch and Brogan are the knuckleheads they've always been. At least I can count on them to bring a little normalcy to the otherwise weird experience of being back.

I grab my mug and take it to the sink, then curse when I see it still piled high with dirty dishes. So much for Arch taking care of it before he left. I can't worry about it now, so I add my mug to the heap and then grab my keys to head out.



The Valley U campus is nicer than I remember it. I grew up here in Valley attending football games with my brothers, even crashed a few college parties in high school. Sticking around after I graduated and going to a local college was never something I considered. I wanted out. I needed out.

The memories from the two years I spent at college in Washington are blurry, but pleasantly filled with long days of classes, hard afternoons busting my ass on the football field, and drunken nights out. God, it had felt good to

be far away from this place. After I quit school to play in the NFL, I never thought I'd step onto another college campus. But here I am, and in the last place I ever imagined.

I pull my hat down low over my eyes as I take a seat across from the music building to wait until the next class. My brothers don't know this is where I spend my days. They think I'm in Valley crashing for a few months after a long, disappointing football season. They're only partly right.

I'm emptying the dishwasher when Knox and Flynn get home.

"Hey," I say as they walk through the living room. "Have a good day?"

Knox grunts and Flynn mutters, "It was fine."

The latter immediately disappears into his room, slamming the door behind him, and Knox plops down onto the couch.

"Want a beer?" I call as I close the dishwasher.

"Nah. I'm going to shower and then take the bike out." He untucks his work shirt, then removes his ball cap and tosses it onto the coffee table. He lets his head drop back for a few seconds and then groans as he quickly hops to his feet.

"I keep meaning to ask how that's going. Are you doing any local races?"

I had my suspicions that the long days working and being the primary caretaker of our brothers had taken a toll on him and the professional racing career he'd dreamt of, but he never says much via text.

"Not really." He runs a hand through his hair. "Are you staying in tonight?"

I hesitate, wondering if he's going to invite me out. Since coming back, I haven't spent a lot of time with any of them one-on-one and maybe that's exactly what we need.

"Flynn needs a ride to a buddy's house later," he says when I don't answer.

Ah, he doesn't want to hang out, he wants to make sure I can chauffeur our little brother. Once upon a time we were close, but now he has this wall up and it's hard to get any straight answers from him. If he won't talk to me about motorcycles, then I'm officially out of ideas to connect with him.

"If you're busy, I can—"

I cut him off. “No, it’s fine. I’m not going anywhere.”

HENDRICK

“CALL FROM ARCHER,” THE ROBOTIC VOICE ANNOUNCES, INTERRUPTING THE loud music playing in my ears.

I tap my ear bud to accept and place my free hand on the bag in front of me to steady it. “Arch?”

“No, it’s Brogan.” His voice is barely audible over the background noise. “Arch is currently unavailable.”

“I’m available. I’m so fucking available,” I hear my brother shout.

“Is he wasted?” I ask.

“He might have had a little too much to drink. Are you busy? Our sober ride is taking forever and I’m not sure how much longer before he passes out cold.”

I push the bag away with a sigh. “Where are you?”

Five minutes later I pull up in front of the address Brogan recited. Cars line the street in both directions. Instead of looking for a parking space, I flip on my hazards and get out. I pass a guy in a red Jeep doing the same thing. He gets out of the driver’s seat, takes a sip from a silver flask, and then slides it into his front jeans pocket. He gives me a head nod as he leans against the front of his vehicle and pulls out his phone.

I can hear the party going on in the back of the house and a few more people are coming and going, but my brother and his best friend are easy to spot. Brogan is holding up a smiling Archer as he sings an old Nirvana song, loud and perfectly on key. He has a pretty good voice considering his hearing loss.

“Dear god, you reek,” I say as I get close enough to get a big whiff of the

alcohol and beer clinging to them like a second skin.

“Henny!” Arch throws both arms up in the air and then stumbles forward. I catch his fall and hold him up. “Hey, Arch.”

“What are you doing here?” His brow knits in confusion and then his eyes widen with excitement. “Do you want to party?”

“I think you partied enough for the both of us. I’m your sober ride.”

“Somebody looking for a sober ride?” The guy leaning on his Jeep asks, looking up from his phone.

“I’ve got them,” I call over my shoulder, sending him a glare. Fucking sober driver taking pulls from a flask? Real nice.

“Ah, you’re no fun anymore.” Arch reaches over and rubs his hand over my hair, attempting to mess it up like I’m a kid. “You used to be way cooler.”

“I’m sure I did.” I tilt my head toward my truck. “Let’s go. I’m blocking the street.”

“Ah shit.” Brogan pats his front jeans pockets, then his back. “My phone is inside. Two minutes. I know right where I left it.”

“Hurry,” I say. “I’ll get Arch in the truck.”

He takes off and I focus on getting my very drunk, very heavy brother into the passenger seat of my truck.

“How did you get this plastered?” I ask as he attempts to pull off his sweatshirt and gets himself all tangled up.

“Alcohol. Lots and lots of it.”

I free him from the sweatshirt, and he leans back in the seat and closes his eyes.

“Buckle up,” I say as I pull the belt and nudge him with it. Reluctantly, he takes it and buckles before I shut the door. As I’m rounding the back of my truck, I come up short when I see her. She walks in a way it’s hard not to notice her. Long legs and that confident, bouncy stride.

Jane’s steps slow when she sees me. Her long blonde hair is pulled up into a ponytail, the green ends swaying around her shoulders. Bright pink lips pull into a wide smile. “I’m starting to think you’re following me.”

“Hey,” I say, trying out a smile.

“Are you just getting here?”

“Kind of.”

She waits for me to elaborate. I’ve never been a real talkative guy, but with her I struggle to keep my answers short and precise. No more information than absolutely necessary.

“I’m playing designated driver for my brother and his friend.”

The corners of her lips pull higher. “You have a brother at Valley U too?”

I nod at the same time Brogan jogs up to the truck holding his phone. “Sorry. Got it.”

Jane glances at him and then back to me. Brogan does the same thing, looking between us.

“Brogan is your brother?” she asks.

He grins and tosses an arm around my neck. “I’m his *favorite* brother.”

“He’s not my brother,” I say, then feel like shit when Brogan’s smile slips. He might not be a brother by blood, but he has been a part of our family for a long time.

Brogan regains his cocky smile. “How do you know Henny?”

“We keep bumping into each other.” Her green eyes flash with amusement under the streetlights.

The three of us continue to stand there as a car squeezes past my truck going the opposite way.

“Are you heading out?” I ask her, realizing she’s going to be alone out here when we get in the truck. Where are her friends? Or those idiots from last night?

“Yes. I have a French test in the morning, so I’m going to catch a sober ride.” She points to the red Jeep.

“You—”

My truck horn blares, cutting off my answer, and Archer sticks his head out the driver’s side window. “Can we stop and get food? I’m starving.”

“Ooooh. Let’s hit the In-N-Out drive-thru.” Brogan opens the back door of my truck and pulls himself in.

I’m starting to wish I’d told them to grab an Uber home. I run a hand over my jaw. I shaved my beard two weeks ago and my smooth face still catches me off guard. “Can I give you a ride?”

“Oh, that’s okay. It looks like you have your hands full.”

I steal another glance at the guy with the Jeep. “It’s no problem.”

I hold open the door that Brogan just jumped in and motion for her to get in.

After a beat of hesitation, she finally relents. “Okay. If you’re sure it’s not a bother.”

“Not at all.”

She climbs in with me averting my gaze and wondering what the hell I’m

doing. I shut her in, then through the open window say, "Give me one sec."

As I get close, the guy pushes off the front of his red Jeep. He has his flask out again and this time I can smell the liquor.

"You're the sober driver?"

He nods then hurriedly shoves his flask back into his pocket. "Yep. Someone need a ride?"

"Doesn't a sober driver need to be, you know, sober?"

He tries to play it off. "I'm not drunk. Just a few sips between drop-offs."

"That's how people get hurt, thinking they're invincible. I'd say you're done for the night."

He smiles, then realizes I'm not smiling back. His expression morphs into panic. "I- I- I can't. I'm on sober driver duty until two. If my frat brothers find out, they'll be pissed."

"Pissed but not dead." I step closer to him.

He looks up at me and for a few seconds I think he's going to tell me to fuck off, but then he nods. "Yeah. Okay."

"What's your name?"

"Pete." He shuffles his feet uncomfortably. "Pete Richmond."

"Pete Richmond," I repeat his name, then pull out my phone and snap a pic of his license plate. "I have an old buddy that's a local cop, I'll let him know to look out for you."

He grumbles something that I can't quite make out.

I smile a little as I turn away from him. "Get home safe, Pete."

Archer has the music blasting when I get behind the wheel of my truck. I look to the rearview mirror to find Jane's gaze, then slide my attention over to Brogan. He's sitting in the middle, an arm around the back of the seat behind her.

Ignoring the way that annoys me, I put the truck in drive and pull away from the party. No one talks until the song ends.

Brogan leans forward over the console. "Are we swinging by In-N-Out?"

"I'm not your taxi."

"Booo," Arch draws out the word. "You're no fun anymore, Hen. No fun at all."

I bite my tongue. No, I'm not fun anymore. He's right about that, but I don't expect him to understand. The past two years of my life have been all about making sure he, Knox, and Flynn don't need to worry about anything. That kind of responsibility tends to put a damper on fun.

At the end of the street, I go right at the stop sign, heading toward Jane's house, and drive a bit before I turn down the music.

"Am I dropping you at home?" I ask her, meeting her gaze in the mirror again.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry, I spaced. You can stop anywhere on this street. I'm on the left a block or two up."

Her house is four blocks up and I'm not dropping her just anywhere. Walking the street late at night would be a bad idea for anyone, let alone Jane. She can't even go out in the daylight hours without being harassed. I don't know how she does it. From everything I've seen, she handles it all with such ease. She's unguarded and carefree despite the way people treat her like she's not a real person.

There's just something about her. She radiates this joy that makes simple interactions feel bigger. Even when I shouldn't, I find myself watching her with an intrigue that throws me off balance.

"When'd you get here?" Arch asks, swiveling around to look in the back seat.

Jane's laugh is soft and warm. "Around the same time you did, I think."

"That's cool." He continues to stare, then points between her and Brogan. "Are you going home with him?"

"Arch." My tone is a little harder than I intended.

"What? I'm just trying to figure out if I'm sleeping on the couch tonight," my brother says and then keeps waiting for an answer.

"No," she says, not sounding the least bit upset about his question. "Your brother is just giving me a ride home."

"Why not?" Arch pushes. "Brogan is a pretty great guy. And girls seem to think he's hot."

She giggles and gives Brogan a quick once-over. "He's not bad, but it sounds like you two have cuddling plans I wouldn't want to get in the way of."

"We share a room now that Henny is back," Brogan says. "It's not so bad. Like dorm rooms. As long as you and I stay under the covers, he won't see anything."

I tighten my grip on the steering wheel.

"Or we could make it a party and push the beds together," Archer jokes. God, I hope he's joking. That is not an image I want in my head.

"That's enough," I say as I lightly punch Arch's leg and mouth the words

again, so he understands.

“Lighten up, Hen.” Arch turns all the way back around.

Jane laughs, taking it all in stride. Fuck, maybe she’s into it. My grip tightens a little more.

She catches my eye again in the mirror right before I pull a U-turn in the road and park in front of her house. “Oh, this is my house here.”

I get out and open her door without thinking.

“Thanks for the ride.” She smiles as she pulls her skirt down and steps out of the truck. She smells like vanilla and coconut, the same way she did in front of the library and when I helped her off the bar at The Hideout. “You’re always coming to my rescue.”

I don’t know what to say to that, so I don’t say anything.

“Well, I should get inside.” The music inside my truck increases in volume again. “Sounds like you’ve got a fun ride home in store.”

I wait while she walks around the back of the truck, and she stops on the sidewalk. “You should swing by and get them food.”

“Oh, I should, huh?” I arch one brow. I don’t like her being on their side for reasons I can’t quite put my finger on at the moment. Maybe I’m just tired of being the voice of reason and responsibility.

“Yeah. Drunk people are way less annoying when they’re fed. Plus, they’ll pass out as soon as their stomachs are full, and hopefully it’ll soak up some of the alcohol and they’ll be less hungover.”

I smile for real as she hits me with a big mega-watt grin like she’s just solved all my problems. I freaking wish.

JANE

“YOU LOOK LIKE YOU STEPPED OUT OF A FITNESS FASHION ADVERTISEMENT.” Violet sits at the chair in front of my desk as she eats a cup of noodles during our lunch break.

Dahlia is standing in the doorway of my room with a putter in hand. She has a golf mat in the hallway and has been practicing nonstop. The next two months she has a bunch of really important tournaments, and she is ultra-focused.

We’re only missing Daisy. She and her boyfriend Jordan are in her room studying. *Studying. Loudly.*

I smile at my reflection in the mirror, turning side to side to check every angle. “But does it say, ‘I’m a serious runner but also interested in other physical pursuits with our clothes off?’”

My friends exchange a look and then burst out laughing. I wasn’t kidding, but okay, it’s a little funny.

“Please tell me that’s your opening line,” Vi says, laughing so hard she has tears in her dark brown eyes.

Dahlia shakes her head and lets out a small laugh. “I have to go. You look hot. Try not to pull a muscle.”

“Bye,” Vi and I call after her.

Moving to the bed, I flip open the shoebox and pull out the new sneakers.

“Those are cute,” my friend says.

“Thanks,” I say as I drop them to the floor and step into them. Companies have been sending me free stuff in hopes I’ll post about it on my newly exploding social media. Well not mine, Ivy’s.

I tie the shoelaces and then stand in front of the mirror again. I look like a runner. Maybe I should take it up for real. The outfits are cute.

“So, what is the plan exactly?” Vi asks.

“Wait for him to run by and then invite him to the party tomorrow night.”

“A party you invented this morning because you want an excuse to invite him over?”

“Not just for that reason. We’re overdue for a party anyway.”

“Fair enough.” She smirks, then does a slow sweep of my complete outfit. “And are you planning on actually running in that?”

“Why? Is something wrong with it?” I glance down at the gray running pants and matching sports bra.

“You look amazing, but one wrong bounce and your boobs are gonna fall out of that top.”

I jump in place. She’s not wrong. The fit is a little snug and the girls are fighting for freedom, but this shouldn’t take long.

“Well, then maybe this will go even faster than planned. He’ll be so distracted that he’ll immediately say yes.”

Vi laughs good-naturedly.

I glance at the time on my phone. “I better get out there. I don’t want to miss him.”

“Good luck,” she calls after me.

I force myself to walk slowly down the stairs, so I don’t mess up my hair. I pulled it back in a low ponytail, but I curled the ends.

The wind whips around me as I step out the front door. So much for my hair. I march in place to warm up my muscles and keep an eye out for Hendrick.

My teeth are chattering by the time he comes into sight, but a rush of adrenaline floods me with warmth. I begin to jog like I just stepped outside for a run, then I stop in the middle of the sidewalk where he won’t be able to avoid me. Looking straight ahead across the street, I pull one leg behind me to stretch my quad. I drop the stretch and stand tall when his footsteps on the pavement grow closer.

I smile, but say nothing as he slows down and then comes to a stop in front of me. I had a whole speech prepared but I can’t remember a single word as I take him in. Dark stubble along his jaw, red cheeks from the cold, T-shirt stretched along his muscular chest and arms. He pulls out one ear bud.

“Hey,” he says in a rush of air as he catches his breath.

“What are you doing?” I ask, then want to punch myself in the face. He’s running. Duh.

“Just getting in a quick run. You?”

“Same,” I say cheerily.

His gaze drops from my eyes and lowers, but he catches himself quickly.

“Cool.” He puts his ear bud back in and starts to step around me.

I take off after him and fall into step on his right. “We’re having a party tomorrow night.”

He says nothing, but gives a brief nod to acknowledge he heard me.

“You should come.” Man, he’s fast. My legs are long enough to keep up with his, but he’s quick.

“To a party at your house?” He keeps moving, but glances over at me. He pauses and I run ahead of him. I stop, but then realize he’s just coming up on the other side of me.

“Yep. Tomorrow night.”

He finds that quick pace again. We’ve already run farther than I planned.

“So, will you come?”

“My brother has a basketball game.”

Oh, well, crap. I hadn’t accounted for him having plans. Also, I’m starting to get a cramp.

“How many brothers do you have?”

“Three,” he says. “No, four. Brogan isn’t related by blood, but he’s like a brother.”

“He and Archer do seem like they’re attached at the hip. My roommate Dahlia is dating one of their teammates, Felix Walters, so I’ve run into them quite a bit at parties. Such a crazy coincidence that you’re their brother.”

He grunts his agreement. This is not going great. He hasn’t even chanced another look at my chest.

“Well, what about after the game? The party probably won’t really get going until ten or so.”

We’re approaching an intersection and I’m looking forward to a short reprieve to catch my breath, except the light changes just as we get there, and Hendrick starts across. Why do people do this for fun? Every breath feels like fire.

“Do you run often?” he asks as I pant for air.

“Oh yeah, totally.” I move behind him while we pass a group of people walking in the opposite direction.

“Right,” he says, and then slows his pace a little.

“So will you come after your brother’s game?” I ask again.

“Sorry. Parties aren’t really my scene anymore.”

“Oh, come on.” I push at his very hard shoulder. “It’s going to be so much fun. We’re getting a ton of beer and liquor, even some champagne. And we’ve basically invited the entire campus. All the hockey, basketball, and football players will be there thanks to my roommates, and my buddy Eric and his band are going to play. It’s going to be the best party of the year.”

“Your house can’t hold the entire campus.”

“I know.” I smile broadly. “It’s going to be crammed full of drunk people. Drinking and dancing, pushing and shoving, people making out in the corners. God, I love college.”

His brows tug together. “You should be careful.”

I snort a laugh that’s not very attractive, thinking he’s kidding. He’s not. “Your brother is right. You’re not very fun.”

“No, I’m not.” His jaw tightens and a little muscle flexes in his cheek.

“Then it’s a good thing you ran into me because I am the epitome of fun, and I’m going to make it my mission to make sure you have fun tomorrow night.”

He opens his mouth, looking like he’s about to say no, but I speak first. “I’m not taking no for an answer.”

We run a few seconds in silence before he sighs and then says, “I will try to stop by.”

“Really?!” I squeal, and because I have absolutely no chill, I lunge for him and hug him around the neck. I pull back just as fast. “You won’t regret it. You are going to have the best time. I promise.”

“I said I would *try*.” He emphasizes the last word, pinning me with a stern look. We’re stopped many blocks from my house now, but I have a fresh burst of energy. Energy I’m going to use to get my out-of-shape ass back home. I take a step toward the opposite direction we’ve been running. “I usually run the other way.”

One side of his mouth twitches with a tiny smile. “See you later, Jane.”

“See you *tomorrow night*,” I call over my shoulder.

Eric and the guys are warming up downstairs. The drums thump a quick rhythm that matches my heartbeat. I could barely focus all day. It's a good thing I didn't have any tests or major assignments due because my thoughts have revolved around the party and Hendrick since I talked to him yesterday.

He did his usual run-by at lunch, but I chose to observe instead of participate. The running outfits are cute, but I think I'll stick to yoga. The wardrobe is just as cute, but less cardio.

The party starts in an hour, but I don't expect Hendrick to show for a while since he said he's going to his brother's basketball game. If he shows at all, I need to keep reminding myself that he might not come. My expectations are already too high.

Three brothers. I can't imagine what that had to have been like growing up. I'm an only child. Sometimes it felt like I had siblings; being on sets, a lot of us shared tutors and agents, but between seasons and shows, we didn't really keep in touch. Hollywood is fast-paced and dog-eat-dog. Not a lot of time for friendship and fun. Which is one of the reasons I'm so determined to make sure Hendrick has a little of the latter. I know what it's like to lose sight of fun. I've found it here in Valley, and I think he can too.

Dahlia knocks on my open door and then steps into my room. "Hey, Felix and I are doing a run to the liquor store. Need anything?"

I shake my head. "No. I think I'm all set."

"Have you heard from him?" An excited smile tips up the corners of her mouth.

"No. I don't have his number or anything. I just have to wait and see if he'll show." I hold up both hands, crossing my pointer and middle fingers.

"He will. I know it. Archer and Brogan are coming. I asked them at breakfast this morning. And the brother does have a basketball game, so he wasn't lying about that."

"I didn't think he was lying. I'm just not sure he's interested. I can't get a good read on him. Most of the time he acts like he isn't, but then there are these moments . . ." I trail off, thinking of the way he looked at me in the rearview mirror last night as he drove me home or the way he stood up for me with Cam. "I don't know. Maybe I'm so desperate for a spark, I'm imagining it."

"Not interested?" she asks, raising her voice and faking outrage. "How could that be?"

My laugh is tight and stilted.

“Hey.” Her brows tug together in concern. “Are you okay? You seem nervous or down or something. Is this about Cam? Did he make you question your awesomeness? I knew I didn’t like that guy.” She refocuses. “Hendrick would have to be an idiot not to be interested in you. And you’re too good for idiots. Like Cam.” She mutters the last part.

“Thanks, babe. And I’m fine. He apologized and I forgave him. I might even go out with him again sometime.”

Her expression still clearly shows her hostility toward him. “But tonight, I’m not thinking about Cam. He’s fun, but Hendrick . . .” My stomach flips as I say his name. “I just really want him to show. There is something about him. I can’t explain it.”

“You don’t need to,” she says as Felix steps into the open doorway. She looks at him in a way that tells the world just how crazy she is about him. “I get it.”

“Are you ready?” Felix asks her, then he slides his gaze to me. “Hey, Hannah Montana.”

Chuckling, I wave.

“Yep.” Dahlia closes the distance between them, and he takes her hand. They’re so cute together. So happy and so into each other. I want that. Or even a night of it.



By the time ten o’clock rolls around, the house is packed. Hendrick was right, there’s no way that the entire Valley campus can fit in our house, which is why we moved the party outside.

It’s been cold all week, but no one seems to care as they huddle around with drinks in hand.

I nod at Eric as I walk by the band. Live music was a nice touch, and everyone seems to be enjoying it. I pull out my phone as I enter the kitchen. No new texts. He doesn’t even have my number, so I’m not sure why I am disappointed, but there it is. I am pathetic. I want him to show. I want him to show so badly.

I grab a hard seltzer from the fridge and then linger in the kitchen to chill for a minute. I have danced hard for the past two hours, but I need a breather. Out of habit, I open Instagram. I scroll for a bit before opening my messages

and notifications. I switch over to the Ivy profile. It has way more notifications and messages, most of which I ignore, but one name stands out and steals the breath from my lungs.

Not wanting to believe my eyes, I click on the last photo I shared (or rather my manager shared). It's a shot paparazzi snapped of me on campus shortly after news broke that I was at Valley U. I'm smiling right at the camera, looking like a quintessential college kid. Backpack on, coffee in one hand, phone in the other.

Most of the photographers have left by now, or at least aren't following my every move like they were. Those first couple of weeks they were everywhere.

I read through the comments on the photo. They're generally nice. Most people are just happy to have an update on my life, and the few snarky assholes I easily ignore. But it isn't any of the comments that have my stomach churning with unease and fear stretching through my limbs. It's a simple like from a guy I haven't seen or talked to in years.

Just to be sure it's really him, I click on his name with trembling fingers. Heat prickles at the back of my neck as my screen fills with images of his smug handsome face. A face that still makes me want to hurl something at him.

"Jane!"

My thoughts are interrupted, and I quickly swipe out of the app and lock my phone. Looking up, I see Brogan and Archer making their way from the living room to the kitchen.

I shove my phone in my pocket and smile. I can't help but chance a quick glance past them. I try not to let my disappointment show when Hendrick isn't anywhere in sight.

"Hey. I'm so glad you guys could make it," I say, cheerily.

Brogan comes in for a hug, and Archer lifts a hand in a wave, wearing his usual half-smile.

I squeeze Brogan back and then we step apart.

"I heard we might owe you an apology for the other night," Archer says. "Sorry if we made you uncomfortable."

I almost laugh. It sounds so much like Hendrick, it makes me wonder what he said to them to have Archer apologizing.

"You were fine. Nice pipes by the way. You can really belt out some classic rock."

His cheeks take on a light pinkish hue.

“I invited Hendrick. Is he coming?” I ask, my heart rate picking up even as I prepare myself for the answer to be no. He wasn’t exactly jumping at the invite.

“I’m not sure.” Archer looks apologetic as he delivers the news, but his face says it all. He doesn’t expect his brother to show up either.

“But we left before him,” Brogan adds. “He was driving Flynn home after the game, so maybe he’ll stop by later.”

“It doesn’t matter.” I flash them a bright smile. “Want something to drink?”

Hopes dashed that Hendrick is coming, I rededicate myself to having fun tonight. Maybe he really is busy or maybe he’s just not interested. Whatever it is, I can’t mope around waiting for him to realize how awesome I am.

I’m dancing at the front of the crowd. My friends are nearby with their boyfriends, being adorable. The band is amazing. They play a lot of nineties and early two-thousands cover songs. Mackenzie brings the energy with her vocals, Ted and Lennon are living their best lives, and Eric is eating up the attention. He has on a button-down shirt and every few songs another button seems to come undone. Between songs, Eric beckons me forward.

I sashay toward him, still grooving to the last song. “You guys sound amazing.”

He grabs the seltzer from my hand and takes a drink before answering. “Thanks.” He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “You should sing one with us.”

“Tonight? No way. I’ve already had a few drinks. The bubbles mess with my voice.” I take the empty can back from him.

“Bullshit. You always sound great. Sing with us.”

“You have a singer.” I motion toward Mackenzie. Ted has his arms around her possessively.

She pulls away from him to step over to us and shoots me a friendly smile. “I don’t mind.”

“See?” Eric grins. “One song. The crowd will go nuts. Everyone wants to hear you sing.”

“Not tonight,” I say again as I step away from them. “I’m having too

much fun dancing the night away.”

I leave them before they can keep trying to convince me. I head inside where it's quieter. Only a few people are inside, mostly couples making out in our living room. Yuck. Gonna need to have the furniture cleaned.

I toss the can in the recycling and grab another from the fridge. Then I wait until the music starts back up before I slip outside. Cold air nips at my skin. I had to abandon my usual wardrobe of dresses and skirts for jeans tonight, but still, I'm chilled. There's a good chance it's going to drop below freezing. Too cold for Arizona and my thin blood.

Our backyard has never been this full of people. The guys that live next door in The White House brought over a few of their outdoor tables, and I find my friends at one playing beer pong. Brogan and Archer are with them, as well as some other football players. And Hendrick. *Hendrick is here!*

He's surrounded by a group of football players and they're all grinning at him like he's their hero. I don't get it. I mean he's gorgeous, but something tells me that isn't why they are also excited to see him.

As I approach, he glances up and directly at me. My pulse spikes and my heart flutters when I meet his dark hazel eyes. “You came? I mean, hey.”

And then he does the craziest thing. He smiles at me.

HENDRICK

I SIDESTEP TO GET CLOSER TO JANE AND AWAY FROM ARCHER'S TEAMMATES. I shouldn't be here. There are things she doesn't know, things no one knows, and my being here could fuck all that up.

But I couldn't not come. Not after she said she invited the entire campus.

She looks so excited, eyes lit up, lips pulled into a huge smile. She wears her emotions on her face and her heart on her sleeve. I dig that about her. Most girls her age want to play it cool, but not Jane. But it also makes me feel like a complete asshole. I should just go. I stopped by and scoped things out, and now I can leave with a free conscience.

"When did you get here? How was the game? Did your brother's team win?" She glances at my empty hands. "Do you want something to drink?"

One of her friends chuckles softly. "Maybe let him actually answer a question before you ask him three more."

"Sorry. I'm just so happy you came."

As she comes to stand beside me, that familiar mix of vanilla and coconut hits me, and I have to resist leaning in to get a better whiff.

Jane is gorgeous. Tall, sexy long legs, a pouty mouth, and bright green eyes. If things were different, I'd be into her.

"Thanks for inviting me," I say. "I can't—"

Before I can make my excuses, some guy who has crowded around with the football guys yells, "Somebody get the Champ a drink."

I wince at his use of my old nickname. The last time anyone called me that is about the last time I was at a college party.

"The Champ?" Jane shoots me a questioning gaze.

The beer pong game in front of us starts back up and her friends pretend to stop staring at us.

Because I don't want to answer that question, I answer her others. "Not long. The game was good. They won. And I'm not drinking tonight," I tell her.

She continues to eye me carefully, then purses her lips. "Hmmm. Well, that makes my job as your fun tour guide a little more difficult, but not impossible."

Brogan, standing nearby, makes a deep noise of humor in his throat. "Don't let this serious and broody thing he has going on fool you. Henny knows how to have fun. Remember that time you threw that epic party at the house during senior week?"

I, in fact, don't remember much about it, but I also don't want him to tell that story in front of Jane, so I give him a pained smile and return my attention to the girl at my side. She's still staring at me like she can't quite figure me out.

"I can't stay long, but I wanted to stop by."

"You're leaving already?!" She shakes her head adamantly. "Oh no. Now that you're here, there is no way I'm letting you go."

With that, Jane takes me by the hand and pulls me over to the table. "Can we get in on this?"

I start to remind her I'm not drinking, but, for some reason I don't. I see her around, but I don't know that much about her that isn't a Google string. And the more she talks to me, the more I want to know. Fuck it, it's better than standing around feeling out of place.

"Hell yeah!" Felix moves over to make room. "You can have mine and Dahlia's spots. Need to talk to my girl."

"And by talk, you mean make out where everyone can see?" Jane asks.

"You know it, Hannah." Felix winks at her.

She rolls her eyes as we take over their side of the table.

"Hannah?" I ask. How many names does this girl have?

"It's nothing," she says. "Are you any good at beer pong?"

"Once upon a time, but probably not anymore."

She picks up the ball from the table and holds it between her fingers. "I hope you're being modest because I'm terrible and I really don't like beer. You're going to need to carry us to victory, *Champ*."

The nickname doesn't annoy me so much when she says it.

My brother grins at me from the opposite end of the table. “How long has it been?”

A long fucking time. “Not so long I can’t kick your ass.”

Brogan snorts and elbows Arch. “Think we can pull a shut out?”

“Ooooh.” Arch sucks in air through pursed lips. “I don’t know. I might be too sober to throw a perfect game.”

“Are we going to do this or what?” I ask, breaking up their banter.

“So eager to lose,” Brogan says under his breath with a chuckle. He lifts a hand toward us in a sign to go ahead. “Age before beauty.”

Jane laughs along lightly. “I guess that means we’re up.”

“I guess so,” I grumble.

Both Jane’s and my first throws miss, and then the beating begins. Arch and Brogan sink five balls before missing. Apparently while I was gone, these two learned a few more skills in the art of partying. The cups on the table are filled with cheap, lukewarm beer. Jane manages to empty one and I take the other four. Being here is a bad idea and drinking is an even worse one. At least it’s watered-down shit. I could drink all the cups and probably not have a buzz.

She shoots me an apologetic grimace. “I told you I was terrible.”

“One bad throw doesn’t make you terrible.”

She cocks her head to the side. “We need a way to distract them. Any ideas?”

“The only things that distract those two from winning are women and booze.”

“Well, I don’t think booze is going to do it in this case.” Her eyes twinkle with mischief. “Women it is.”

She starts to take off the baggy black sweater she’s wearing. “I knew I should have worn a dress.”

I feel my brows lift. “What are you doing?”

Once the sweater is over her head, she pushes it toward me. “Hold this.”

I do, and watch as she adjusts the thin tank top that was underneath. It’s white with tiny little straps and so short it leaves several inches of bare skin above the top of her jeans. It’s too cold outside to wear so little clothing, made obvious by her hard nipples poking through the thin material, but the air around me suddenly feels hot.

“How’s this?” she asks.

“Distracting,” I answer honestly as I try to pull my gaze away.

“Good.” She flashes a satisfied smile. “I’ll distract on defense, and you play offense.”

I’m still staring at her when she steps up to the table, attention focused on the game. Though you wouldn’t know it. She moves her hips, dancing and quietly singing along with the music. If I didn’t know she was performing with a purpose, I’d never guess it. She’s electric.

My brother is putty in her hands when she goes around the table and pulls him into dancing with her.

“No distracting my teammate,” Brogan says, but she wins him over just as easily.

Then it’s just me playing. “I’m gonna take your turn,” I say to Jane.

“Sure, that’s fine,” she calls, and Archer and Brogan are too busy to understand what’s happening.

I sink both balls. All they do is pick up the cups and drink while they continue to dance. They don’t have a care in the world. I miss that feeling.

They sandwich her, Brogan behind her and Archer in front. My brother looks happy. I’m glad for that. Arch didn’t always have the easiest time fitting in after his hearing loss. Kids were assholes about it, and I know he felt self-conscious, no matter how much he tried not to show it. When I went off to college, he’d mostly adjusted. The hearing aids help, he learned to lip read and navigate social situations, and stopped worrying so much about what other people thought.

I think Brogan is to thank for a lot of that, too. He has this way of making life easier for him while never making Arch feel like he’s being coddled. Anyway, it’s nice to see this side of my brother. He’s out partying and having fun like any other guy his age. And his friends and teammates seem to have his back. It’s one small stress off my shoulders.

Jane is part of that. I’ve only seen her interact with him a little, but I know she’s another person that has made his life better, and I could never tell her how thankful I am.

She catches my gaze for a quick second, sending me a sultry smile before she resumes her distraction tactics.

The three of them are all smiles, flirting and having fun. I’m not even convinced she remembers the purpose of the plan anymore. The way she looks at my brother, and the way *he* looks back at her, has my pulse ticking faster.

I toss another ball at their remaining full cups. This one bounces off the

rim and toward Archer's back. He doesn't even notice as the ball keeps on going past him.

"Are we still playing or are we dancing?" I grit out loud enough Jane and Brogan can hear me, trying (and failing) not to sound like a grumpy fuck.

"Chiiiiill." Brogan is the first to pull away. He nudges Archer and motions with his head toward the table to pull him back to the game.

Reluctantly, my brother returns his focus to playing beer pong. He assesses the table like he's remembering where we were, then looks up. "You should see your face. You're awfully worked up over a game, Henny."

His lips pull into a smug grin, and I hate the way he can see through me right now. Family is like that, always reading past the bullshit the rest of the world brushes off. He knows why I'm anxious to get back to playing the game. I'm surprised he doesn't go back to dancing with Jane to make his point.

"The other ball bounced behind you," I say instead of acknowledging his last comment.

He nods and turns to find the ball.

Jane takes her place by my side. She's still wearing that flirty smile except now it's aimed at me. "How'd I do?"

Cheeks pink, hair a little messy, body relaxed, voice breathy. Fuck me, I cannot be digging this girl. Not now. Not ever. And not because she and Archer might be into each other. At least not just for that reason.

"Great," I say in a tone that is far too tight and clipped to sound like I mean it. Her smile dims slightly.

I glance away from her and get my shit together, then force myself to look back at her. She's staring straight ahead and not at the asshole next to her (me). Reaching out, I circle her delicate wrist with my fingers. Her warm skin sends heat coursing through me. "Sorry. You did great. But I only sunk two out of three. They're still ahead."

"Two more than I would have gotten." She still moves slightly to the beat. "Want me to go back over there?"

Definitely not. I shake my head slowly. "Nah. I have a better idea."

Her eyes light up. "You do?"

I lean over and whisper the plan in her ear, all the while trying not to think too hard about the way my body reacts to having her so close or the way I've started to associate that coconut and vanilla scent with her.

"Really?" she asks as she pulls back. "That'll work?"

“Oh yeah. Trust me.”

“I do.” Her voice softens on the two words, and I add ignoring the way her trust makes my stomach twist to the list of things I’m stopping myself from feeling.

JANE

I AM SO GIDDY, I CAN'T TELL IF IT'S FROM THE ALCOHOL OR HIM. SOMETHING shifted between us. I wouldn't say I've won him over, but he seems to be having fun now. I'm going to go ahead and call that a win.

"So not cool, Henny," Archer says after he misses a cup. Again.

Every time they're about to throw the ball, I repeat some tidbit that Hendrick has told me about them. Archer sent Selena Gomez DMs every day for an entire year when he was twelve. She never replied.

Brogan cried watching *The Hunger Games*. And plenty of other little tidbits that have made me laugh. I have a feeling Hendrick's holding back and not revealing anything too embarrassing, but he's still successfully thrown them off their game and we're now down to two cups and it's our turn.

The corner of his lips twitch like Hendrick's fighting a smile. His focus is intense as he aims and fires, dunking his ball in one of the two remaining cups of beer in front of Archer and Brogan.

Brogan grimaces as he picks up the cup and swallows the warm liquid in one long gulp. When he finishes, he sets the cup down with some force. "Don't forget we know shit about you too."

"That's right." Archer nods along.

"Well, it's her turn, so I'm not sure that's going to help." He tilts his head toward me.

My nerves ramp up as I roll the ball around in my hand. "They don't need to razz me because I'm already missing."

"You can do this." Hendrick steps closer, sending my heart rate into

overdrive. “Take your time. Aim for the middle of the cup.”

“That’s where I’ve been aiming,” I say, then adjust my gaze across the table. “I think. I don’t know. Maybe it’d just be better if I close my eyes.”

My body lights up as he lets out one of those deep chuckles that he holds in so protectively most of the time.

“Don’t do that.” He comes to stand behind me, close enough that I could lean back and rest my back against his chest. One hand gently caresses the bicep of my throwing arm. He brings his face closer to mine. “Nice and easy, Jane.”

I look up and over my shoulder, locking eyes with him. “What if I don’t like nice and easy?”

His brows lift higher and then he barks out a laugh. A full, hearty laugh that makes him look a lot more like Archer.

“I think I’d prefer rough and hard,” I add in case he wasn’t fully appreciating my comment.

He shakes his head like he can’t believe I said it, and his face takes on a bit of a blush like he’s fully imagining how hot we’d be together. It’s a real good image, so I don’t blame him. Me in his lap, straddling him while he kisses me until my lips hurt, and then him stripping me down and commanding my body with all that gruff sexiness.

“Why don’t we just focus on nice and easy right now.” His voice is deeper than it was before.

“I can be easy for the right guy.”

“You’re killing me,” he mutters in an amused tone with another shake of his head. He tears his gaze from mine and steps back.

It’s hard to focus when all I want is for him to come closer and put his hands on me again, but I take a breath, use every ounce of my self-control (very little) and I do as he says: Take my time and aim for the middle of the cup.

When the ball plunks into the beer, Brogan and Archer wear matching shocked expressions.

“Oh my gosh!” I whirl around to a smiling Hendrick. “I did it. We won!”

I jump into his arms. Hugging him around the neck, I bounce in front of him all while continuing to squeal my excitement.

It takes a beat, but eventually his arms circle around my waist and he hugs me back. I stop and look up at him. “We won!”

“I know. You crushed it.”

I'm fully aware that he did ninety percent of the work, but I accept the compliment just the same.

"I demand a rematch," Brogan says, breaking us apart with his words. "This time, no talking allowed."

"Oh no," I say. "I could never stay quiet that long."

"You did us dirty." Archer points at his brother.

"It's just a game, bro. Don't take it so seriously." Hendrick isn't even trying to hide his smug smile.

"I will so get you back for this."

I link my arm through Hendrick's. "Tell it to Selena the next time you write."

Everyone around us laughs as I pull Hendrick away from the beer pong table. I stop when we get into the middle of the yard and drop his arm. It's louder this close to the speakers. The band is taking a break, but they turned on music to keep the vibe going. I stand on my toes and shout near his ear. "I hope I didn't just create a mess of trouble for you at home."

"They're harmless," he shouts back. "Or I think so. Been awhile since I messed with them."

"I feel like there are probably some good stories there."

"Yeah." He smiles, and then it falls and is replaced with some expression I can't quite read.

"Will you tell me some of them?"

He considers it and then nods. "Sure."

I tip my head toward the house. He follows me inside where I grab a seltzer for myself. "What do you want? We have beer, seltzer, champagne—"

"I'm all set. Thanks."

With my drink in hand, I walk through the living room and out to the front porch. He lingers in the doorway as I sit on the top step.

"It's quieter out here," I say by way of explaining my choice of location.

His long legs erase the space between us, and he lowers himself to the step beside me. We both stare out into the night. Cars are lined up down the street and the music and voices drift out here in a pleasant, inviting way. Or it would be inviting if I didn't want to be alone with Hendrick.

I angle my body toward him, and my knees rest against his thigh. "What was it like growing up with a big family?"

"Loud and chaotic," he says.

"Sounds fun."

“Sometimes it was.”

“And other times?”

“I wanted to kick their asses.” He shoots me a sheepish half-smile. “Knox and I were the worst. We were always butting heads over dumb shit. Both of us were too competitive to back down. We got into a lot of brawls. Mostly harmless.”

He pauses then, like he’s surprised himself by how much he’s said.

“Mostly?” I laugh lightly. “Your poor parents. Did you get in trouble a lot?”

He doesn’t answer right away. Hendrick stretches one leg out in front of him. He gets this look on his face when he’s thinking, like he’s far away in the memories or deciding how much to share.

“Not really.”

“Were they not around much or . . .”

“Our mom died when Archer was twelve.”

“Oh my gosh.” I place a hand on his leg. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know. I shouldn’t have pried.”

“It’s okay. We fought before that, but after it was worse, with all of us dealing with it in our own ways.”

“That makes sense. I’m really sorry.”

“Thanks.”

“Is your dad still . . . around?” I realize I don’t know how to phrase these personal questions. I don’t usually interrogate people like this, but he makes getting to know him very difficult.

Thankfully, he doesn’t wait for me to finish. “Nah, he wasn’t around much to begin with, but he took off for good a few years ago.”

My heart breaks for him. And for his brothers.

“How old were you?”

His brows pinch together like he doesn’t understand the question.

“You said your mom died when Archer was twelve. You couldn’t have been more than what, sixteen?” I know he’s older than Archer, but he hasn’t given me enough information to know exactly how much older.

“Seventeen.” He nods. “I’m the oldest.”

I do some quick math in my head and figure out that Hendrick is twenty-five.

“I can see that. You have that whole oldest sibling vibe about you.”

A short snort is his only response.

“Who looked after you and your brothers once she passed away?”

“No one.” He shrugs. “Dad popped in enough that we avoided too many people realizing that we were mostly on our own. We made sure we did what we needed not to draw any attention to us. None of us wanted to be sent away or separated.” He shrugs again like it’s no big deal.

“Why do I get the feeling that most of that burden came down on you?”

“It wasn’t a burden,” he says simply.

“I just mean it must have been hard.”

He smiles stiffly, and I’m sure I’ve just led us down the worst party-conversation path ever, but Hendrick surprises me by asking me a question.

“What was it like growing up as an only child?”

“How’d you know I was an only child?”

He hesitates and then asks, “You are, aren’t you?”

“That obvious?” I laugh. “It was fine. I was always good at playing make believe and entertaining myself. Plus, once I started acting, that was a little like having another family.”

“Do you miss it?”

“I don’t know if anyone’s really asked me that,” I say as I stare down at my lap.

He doesn’t push me, just waits for me to decide to answer. I think I like that about him.

“Yes and no, I guess. I miss performing in front of people, but I don’t know if I really miss that life.”

“I get that.”

“Right. I almost forgot. You lied to me.” I bump his shoulder with mine.

He freezes and his mouth falls open like he’s about to offer an apology.

“Why didn’t you just tell me you were a big shot professional football player when I was peppering you with questions at the bar, Hendrick Holland?” I like saying his full name out loud. I’ve never heard of him, but his incredibly muscular body makes total sense now.

Relief washes over his features. “How did you figure it out?”

“I heard some guys talking about it while we were playing beer pong. I get it. Trying to stay under the radar. Trust me, I get it.”

A muscle in his cheek flexes. “I was a professional football player, but I was never a big shot. I played a couple of games my first year, got injured and then cut. I worked my way back onto the practice squad last season, so Brogan likes to tell people I’m on the team, but that’s not exactly the truth.”

“I don’t know what the practice squad is, but it sounds pretty important. Not a lot of people make it that far.”

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right.”

“So the thing about college and majors . . . total crap or are you going to Valley U now?” I try to think back to that day outside of the library. Was he carrying a backpack?

“I did go to the University of Washington for a couple of years before I quit to enter the draft, that was true.”

“And now?”

“I haven’t decided. I’ve thought about it, but I’m not sure if I can really see myself finishing my degree,” he says as he brings one hand up to my face and pushes back a strand of hair that the wind has blown across my cheek.

My breath hitches as his fingers drag along my skin, and he drops his hand quickly.

“Sorry,” he murmurs.

“It’s fine.” I wrap my arms around my waist, ignoring the tingles racing through my body, and lean forward. “Maybe this is a dumb question, but why did you decide to quit college early to go into the NFL?” I don’t know a lot about football or the NFL, but Felix is entering the draft this year, and he waited so he could finish college first.

“It’s a long story.”

“I have all kinds of time.”

He grins. “Talking about myself is not nearly as exciting as hearing about you.”

“So, you do think I’m exciting?”

I don’t get a response back, but it doesn’t matter. I can read it on his face right now. He’s feeling me too. But I don’t get why he’s so hesitant.

“Do you want to head back to the party?” I motion with my head toward the house.

“Honestly? Not really.”

“I have an idea.” I stand and walk back to the door while he stares after me. “Are you coming?”

He gets to his feet, and I hold the door open for us.

“Where are we going?” he asks.

“Trust me,” I say. “I’m your fun tour guide, remember?”

I head upstairs with him still following behind me, then lead him down the hall to my room.

“I have cards, board games, or we could watch a movie.” I turn to stand in front of my bedroom door facing him. I twist the handle behind my back and open it, still watching his reaction.

“You want to play a game?” His playful smirk has my heart beating wildly. “I don’t know if I can trust you. I saw your distraction technique.”

He has no idea just how much I want to distract him. Or maybe he does. His gaze drops to my mouth and the air feels charged between us. I take a step forward and his hazel eyes darken as his body tenses.

“Jane,” he whispers my name. The sound is somewhere between a plea and a warning.

I lean closer, bringing my lips to his. I stop at the last second and stare up at him. “Yeah?”

“I . . .” He starts and his throat works as he swallows. He tears his gaze away from my mouth and looks behind me.

Before I know what’s happening, Hendrick pushes past me and stands inside my room. “What the hell happened in here?”

I’m confused until I step into the room beside him. Gasping, I bring both hands to my face.

“Was this here earlier?” he asks, tone brisk as he holds an arm out to stop me from moving any farther into the room.

The walls are covered in red spray paint and some of my things have been tossed from the desk and nightstand onto the floor. But it’s the big, red letters above my bed that steal the air from my lungs. *Go back to Cali, bitch.*

There are dirty footprints on my white comforter from whoever stood there while they wrote the awful message.

“Jane,” he says my name roughly. “When was the last time you were in here?”

“I went downstairs for the party around eight-thirty.” I take a step closer to my bed and my stomach lurches. Who would write that? And why?

“And you haven’t been back up here?”

I shake my head. The thought of someone being in my room without me knowing it makes me feel sick all over.

“What about your roommates, were they all already downstairs?”

“They didn’t do this.”

“No shit,” he mumbles as he pulls his phone out of his jeans pocket. He taps the screen a couple of times and then puts it to his ear. “Don’t go anywhere.”

He steps out into the hallway. Is he calling the police? I guess maybe I should file a report, but I can't have a bunch of cops show up with the party out back. And I don't want this to get out. Paparazzi aren't currently staking out the house, but one call and I'm sure they'd be swarming my front yard.

I start to go after him to tell him not to call the police, but he's already down the hall and talking into the phone. I can just make out his words as I approach. "Hey, it's Hendrick. We have a situation at the house. She's not harmed, but someone was in her room. They trashed it and left a nasty message on the wall in red paint."

A knot starts to form in my chest and my mind spins to make sense of the one-sided conversation. He must hear me approaching because he swivels around. His expression shifts, softening a little as he continues to hold the phone up to his ear, listening to whomever is on the other end of the phone.

He nods. "I'll take care of it."

Take care of what? And who is he talking to?

"Yeah, she's right here." His face twists, somehow looking tortured and still completely confident and controlled.

Before I can think too hard about the answers to those questions, he holds out the phone to me. I don't reach for it, still having no idea who is on the other line. "Who is it?"

He sighs quietly. "It's your dad. He wants to talk to you and make sure you're okay."

HENDRICK

I WATCH JANE'S EXPRESSION MORPH FROM TERROR TO CONFUSION TO SHOCK to anger to betrayal in the span of a few minutes. I had two orders: keep Jane safe and be discreet. I've failed at both.

She turns her back to me as she talks to her parents, and I'm thankful I no longer have to see all that hatred and mistrust glaring back at me. I follow her back to her room. While she talks, I case the room, looking for any clues as to who was here and why. Red graffiti covers all the walls, but the only words are the ones above the bed. *Go back to Cali, bitch*. It could have been some asshole at the party or someone that slipped in while everyone was too busy to notice.

Neither possibility sits well with me. They were here in her house. Her fucking room.

Spinning on her heel, she faces me and flings out an arm to give me my phone back. As soon as I have it in hand, she crosses both of her arms across her chest.

I open my mouth to say I'm sorry, but she doesn't let me get the words out.

"Save it. Whatever you're going to say, just don't." She squeezes her eyes shut for a moment. When she opens them again, those sparkling green eyes pierce through me. "You're my *bodyguard*?"

Was. I doubt her parents are thrilled about tonight's turn of events. "Your parents hired me to make sure you were safe. They were worried," is my weak response. I know they tried to get her to hire someone on her own, but when she wouldn't, they took matters into their own hands. "And rightfully

so, by the looks of it.”

“No, you don’t get to use this to make yourself feel better like you swooped in here and saved me. You lied to me. You made me think you were hanging around because you . . . I don’t know, liked me or something. Does everyone else know?”

“No one knows. Not even my brothers.”

“I almost kissed you!”

“I wouldn’t have let it get that far.” But I don’t know if that’s true. I almost did.

That seems to deflate her anger a little bit, but her body language is still closed off.

“I’m sorry about the way you found out, but we need to get you out of here until we can figure out who did this.”

I start for the door, but she doesn’t budge. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Jane,” I plead. “It isn’t safe. Your house is filled with people, and we have no idea if one of them did this or if someone else walked in while you were occupied.”

She pales a little, as if the idea that whoever did this could be downstairs is finally sinking in. But her spine straightens again, and she shakes her head. “I’m not going anywhere with you. And I’d like you to leave.”

It shouldn’t sting. It’s just a job. She was just supposed to be a job. But it still does. It stings like a motherfucker. I royally fucked this up.

“Go,” she says, raising her chin in defiance.

“Will you at least call one of your roommates? You have no idea who did this or why. Someone should be with you at all times, and you shouldn’t stay here. Not until we know more.”

She looks scared and fragile through the tough demeanor she’s projecting. I hope her parents will at least let me track down whoever did this because I want nothing more than to break every bone in their face. It’s the least I can do.

Her phone rings and she pulls it out and glances at the screen. “Please just go. I’ll be fine without you.”

I walk home because I don't know where else to go. Flynn is in his room and the rest of my brothers are still out for the night, so I pace the living room and hold my phone waiting for updates.

Jane's dad calls when I'm on the verge of walking back to her house and checking on her myself.

"She's upset, but I guess we all expected that would be the case if she found out. It's lucky you were there." I hear the question in his statement.

I don't have a good excuse, so I don't bother providing him one. I shouldn't have been there. I was kidding myself that I was there to keep an eye on her. I was there because I wanted to see her.

He sighs. "She's on the phone with her mother now. She's staying at a friend's tonight."

"Good." My pulse thrums quickly and I'm still pacing. "Should I keep an eye on her friend's place while she's there?"

There's an awkward silence before Mr. Greenfield says solemnly, "She's agreed to a security detail, but she wants someone else. 'Anyone else' were her exact words."

The piercing pain in my stomach tightens. "I see."

"I'm sorry. I guess keeping it from her backfired on all of us."

Yeah, no shit.

"For what it's worth, her mom and I are appreciative of all you've done. We'll be happy to provide you with a recommendation."

"Thank you," I get the words out, then grind down on my back molars.

We say our final goodbyes and then I scream into the quiet living room, "Fuck!"

Logan, my boss from the security agency, calls a little while later, reiterating that I'm no longer needed on the Greenfield detail. It's no big deal to him. Jobs come and go. Sometimes they last longer than we plan, sometimes shorter. He has a dozen other clients waiting in line.

"When are you coming back to California?" he asks.

"I'm not sure yet."

"Tomorrow? Monday? Give me some idea so I know when I can get you back out there. That supermodel you worked for last month is requesting you again and old man Waverly has gone through three other security details in the past month. You're the only one he doesn't hate. Supermodel or the cranky bastard, your pick. Just get back here asap."

A vision of my life back in California flashes through my mind. I came

here for two reasons and going home so soon feels like failing on both counts.

“Hen? You there?” Logan asks.

“Yeah. I’m here.” Archer and Brogan come through the front door, and I can hear Knox’s bike pulling up outside. Everyone’s home. “Give me a few days to figure things out here.”

“Yeah. All right. Let me know.”

Brogan slumps down on the couch, eyeing me carefully. “What’s up with you? You look grumpier than usual.”

As Knox comes through the door, I let out a sigh. “I need to talk to you. All of you.”

I knock loudly on Flynn’s door three times before calling, “Flynn, can you come out here?”

Arch, Brogan, and Knox are all seated and looking at me with obvious concern by the time Flynn saunters out and takes a seat.

“What’s up? Why are we having a family heart-to-heart at two in the morning?” Knox asks. “Can’t this wait until tomorrow?”

“No. It can’t wait.” I rub my palms together and gather my thoughts. “Something happened tonight, and it might make certain things come out about me. I want you to hear it from me before it’s going around campus.”

The surprise and interest that plays out over their faces is almost identical.

“What the hell did you do, Henny?” Arch asks.

“Nothing.” I ball my hands into fists and then stretch out my fingers. “I mean, something.”

“Spit it out already,” Knox says.

I meet his gaze as I deliver the next sentence. “I didn’t come back here just to visit you guys.”

Knox is quiet as he considers me, then crosses his arms over his chest. Always the first ready to attack. “Then why did you?”

“After I got injured during my first season, I took a few security jobs. Doors at night clubs, concerts, small jobs mostly. It was good money and kept me busy while I was rehabbing. Once it became apparent I wasn’t going to bounce right back to playing condition, I decided to take on more.”

“We know all this already, but what does that have to do with why you’re here?” Brogan glances between my brothers and then back to me.

“I got a job doing security for a student at Valley U.” I don’t know how much of the NDA I signed is still valid, so I don’t say her name, but it takes

Archer and Brogan only a few seconds to piece it together.

“You were working for Jane? You’re Ivy Greene’s bodyguard?” Brogan’s brows disappear under the hair hanging on to his forehead.

“Her parents hired me, but yes. After she revealed who and where she was last semester, they wanted someone to keep an eye on her. But they didn’t want to draw any extra attention to her while she’s at Valley, so I agreed to do it under the guise that I was returning home to be with my family. I hung out on campus during the day, and sometimes at night I’d check in on her.”

“That explains why you finally came back to visit,” Knox says.

“It wasn’t the only reason,” I bite back. It wasn’t, but admittedly I don’t know if I would have come back so soon if it weren’t for the job.

Arch shifts on the couch, sitting straighter. “Wait. Say that again because I don’t think I caught that right. You’re Jane’s bodyguard?”

I run a hand over my jaw. “Was. They released me about an hour ago after Jane found out who I am.”

I don’t tell them about what happened to her room tonight. The fewer people who know, the better.

“Fuck,” Brogan says quietly. “I thought you were checking purses and shuffling people through metal detectors.”

My youngest brother finally speaks. “So you’re leaving now?”

Knox stands. “Of course he is. The job is over. Nothing for him here now.”

“That’s not—” I start, but he’s already halfway to his room. The door slams behind him. The other three are still sitting and staring at me. “I’m not sure what I’m going to do yet, but I thought you should all know the truth about why I’m here. I should have told you sooner, but I couldn’t reveal details about the job to anyone. Now that Jane knows, I’m sure you all would have found out eventually.”

Silence hangs over the room for a few minutes. Brogan is the first to speak again.

“Jane is still here, right? I saw her at the party right before we left.”

I don’t like the way that detail annoys me. She went back down to the party? Was she at least with her friends? Where is she now?

“Yeah. She’s staying. They’ve hired someone else to take my place.”

“She fired you?” Arch wears a thoughtful expression as he waits for my answer.

I nod. No sense in denying it.

“Why?” Brogan asks.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Arch nudges him, and his lips pull into a small, knowing smile. “She thought he was into her and when she found out who he was, she realized she was just a job.”

“She wasn’t just a job.” The words are out before I can pull them back.

Arch’s smile just gets bigger. Fuck.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s done. I asked my boss to give me a few days to figure things out.”

“You could stay anyway.” Brogan shrugs. “It’s kind of nice having your grumpy ass back.”

“I’m too tired to keep my eyes open, so I’m going to bed.” Archer stands and walks over to me. “You should talk to Knox. He was already pissed you waited this long to visit. Now that he knows you were just here for a job, he’s way beyond pissed.”

“It wasn’t like that, and you know it.”

“I do.” He claps a hand on my shoulder. “But Knox doesn’t. He always thinks the worst of everyone. Don’t take it personally.”

With a heavy sigh, I nod. “I’ll talk to him in the morning.”

Brogan follows Archer into their room, and Flynn gets to his feet.

“It isn’t that I didn’t want to visit all this time,” I tell my youngest brother honestly. “But I needed to work to take care of you guys.”

“Yeah. I guess I get that, but it would have been nice to have seen you occasionally. We missed you. Even Knox. Especially Knox.”

“I missed you too.” I pull him into a quick hug, then ruffle his hair. “Get to sleep, kiddo.”

“I’m not a kid,” he says, back to his sullen self.

JANE

I'M SITTING ON THE FLOOR MONDAY MORNING, PUTTING ON MY MAKEUP IN front of a floor-length mirror. I pick up my eyeliner, sweep it over both lids, then set it on the ground. I do the same with the mascara, then powder.

Dahlia grabs the powder compact before I set it down. "Don't slam that one, it'll break into a million pieces."

"Was I slamming them down?"

She nods, a soft smile on her face.

"Sorry." I inhale through my nose and blow out a breath. "I'm still so angry. I can't believe him."

"Yeah," my friend says in a voice that isn't all that convincing.

"You don't think I should be pissed?"

"No, you should. But maybe not at him. He was doing a job. And yeah, I get how that put you both in a really unfortunate situation, but what was he supposed to do?"

I know she's probably being reasonable, but I can't see past the betrayal to consider any scenario in which Hendrick Holland isn't a complete asshole. "Believe me, I'm equally angry at my parents. They went against my wishes and kept me in the dark."

"They were worried. Not that I'm giving them a pass, but if there is some creep following you around, then I'm glad Hendrick has been keeping an eye on you."

"I'm so humiliated. I practically threw myself at him. I thought he liked me, and he was just pretending so he could keep an eye on me." I groan.

"Nothing that a good breakfast won't fix." She holds her hands out to

help me up.

Once I'm on my feet, I squeeze her fingers. "Thank Felix for letting me crash with you guys."

I came home with them Saturday night and haven't left. They made up the couch for me and have been so sweet, but I miss my bed. The bed that's now ruined.

"You're not coming with us to breakfast?" Her voice climbs with panic. She hasn't let me out of her sight since the second I told her what happened.

"My new security detail is waiting for me at the house."

"Do you want me to go with you?"

"No. I'll be fine driving the few blocks alone." I hug her quickly. "Love you. I'm sorry I've been so unbearable the past couple of days."

"You weren't," she says quickly, then smiles. "Not too unbearable anyway."

I grab my backpack off the floor and then head through the house. Felix and his roommates, Teddy and Lucas, are all off at some football thing—practice or weightlifting or something—so it's quiet as I head out the front door.

The guys live in a residential neighborhood filled with lots of rental houses for college students. Not many people are out yet, but I still feel a prick of unease as I check my surroundings and hurry to my car parked along the street. I don't breathe until I'm inside with the doors locked and the engine started.

I tell myself I'm being silly, but I can't help it. Am I really in danger or was the thing at my house just some drunk asshole trying to freak me out?

As soon as I see my old bodyguard, I relax.

I throw open the car door and run to him. Grady opens his arms and catches me with a grunt as I slam into his chest. "Hey, kid."

I don't realize I'm crying until he pats my back. "It's all right. Everything is going to be fine."

"I know." I wipe my eyes and look up at him. His beard is fully gray now and his once salt and pepper hair is more salt than pepper. "You got older."

"So did you." He smirks.

I pull back and get myself together. "I thought you had some sort of deal with Dracula or something where you'd keep kicking ass forever."

He laughs and shakes his head. "I'm old, but I can still kick ass if needed."

“I hope you don’t need to,” I admit.

“Me too.” He tilts his head toward the house. “Got any coffee in there?”

“No, but I have champagne and orange juice. Mimosa?”

He laughs again. “I’ve missed you, kid.”

“Well, don’t get too comfortable because as soon as we figure out who trashed my room, you’re going back to retirement.”

“Still as stubborn and sassy as you were at thirteen.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” I unlock the door and let us in. “How’s Andrea?”

His expression softens at the mention of his wife. “Gorgeous as ever. She’s aged far more gracefully.”

“I believe it. Tell her I said hi.”

After Grady and I catch up, we go over my schedule, then it’s time to head to campus. I really hate the idea of having someone follow me around all day. Some anonymous creep broke into my room and now I can’t even go to classes without worrying I’m in some sort of danger. It pisses me off, but I hate the idea of being alone even more.

As soon as we park, I second-guess having him here. He opens my door and tries to take my backpack.

“I got it. Just try to blend in. Could you?”

“Probably can’t manage that. Been a few years since I was your age.”

“A few?” I ask sweetly.

I feel the stares as we walk through the middle of campus. All those people who were so excited to see me a week ago keep their distance. I can’t really blame them. Grady is intimidating and I’m sure it looks weird that I now have a bodyguard tailing me around. An obvious bodyguard.

I wonder how Hendrick did it. Did he wait outside my house every morning? Did he follow me everywhere I went? The more I think about it, the more the humiliation of throwing myself at him burns like acid in my stomach. No freaking wonder he was there outside the library to catch me and at the bar . . . *groan*.

I keep my head low, avoid eye contact, and walk as quickly as I can from class to class. By the end of my third morning class, I finally start to relax. Grady is here. He sits in the back of every class. No one says anything, but it’s still awkward having him shadow me.

At least I know that he won’t let anything happen to me. He was a SEAL, I know for sure, but the rest of his background he’s pretty tight-lipped about.

If I had to guess his age, I'd say he's in his fifties now, but I have no doubt he could still take someone down if it came to that. I really hope it doesn't come to that.

"Back to the house?" Grady asks.

"I think I want to have lunch in University Hall today."

Without another word, he lets me lead the way. I bypass the café and head to the sandwich shop. "Want anything?"

"No."

"You can't just sit and watch me eat. It's too weird," I tell him.

"Tuna on wheat."

I order our food and then we head to a little table in the back.

"So, what have you been up to?" I ask, trying to ease the awkwardness of having him play lookout while I eat.

He scans the area over my head as he answers, "Working. Same old, same old."

"You got the old part right."

He stops looking around long enough to glare at me. Or maybe not at me, but he's definitely glaring. "Want me to tell him to get lost?"

I don't have time to ask who before Hendrick steps up beside the table.

Even pissed at him, his presence does funny things to my insides.

"Jane?" Grady asks, standing to place himself between me and Hendrick.

I sort of like the idea of watching Grady toss him out, but I shake my head. "It's fine. Grady, can you give us a minute?"

"I won't be far." He stares down Hendrick as he leaves.

I keep my gaze on my food. "What can I do for you, Mr. Holland?"

"Mr. Holland is my dad." He slides into the seat across from me. "And I hate him."

"Good to know you were telling the truth about something," I grumble, then sit straighter. "What do you want? Shouldn't you be out for your daily run by my house?" I scoff. "Oh wait, you were only doing that to keep tabs on me."

"I'm sorry."

"For following me around without my knowledge?"

"No." He shakes his head, the dark brown strands bouncing around with the movement. "I'm sorry about how you found out. I should have stayed in the background. I shouldn't have gone to the party or spent so much time hanging around when you didn't realize who I was. But I'm not really sorry

about that either, because it meant I was there that night, and my presence might have kept you safe.”

“So, you’re sorry, but not really? Wow, what a great apology.” I lean closer, elbows on the table. “I liked you. I thought that you . . .” I trail off. It’s too humiliating to say out loud.

“If things were different . . .” His expression is pained, and his tone suggests that he’s saying it more to ease my embarrassment than really meaning it.

“Well, they aren’t,” I snap.

“No, they’re not.” He sighs, shifts his weight in the chair so he can pull a piece of folded paper from his pocket, then slides it across the table. “I’m leaving town soon, but if you need anything, anything at all, call me.”

The pang of sadness that hits me at the thought of him leaving just makes me angrier. “Thanks, but I’m just fine with Grady.”

He nods once, then stands. Hesitating, he raps his knuckles against the table. “Be safe, Jane.”

Over the next week, Grady and I fall into a rhythm. As the days pass, so does my anxiety. Everyone seems to think the incident at the party was an isolated event since there hasn’t been anything else. My friends, my parents, even Grady. I hope they’re right. The not knowing who or why messes with my head. But I’m not going to let it stop me from living my life.

My parents finally came clean about a few other random threats they’d received for me at home. I guess not everyone is happy that Ivy decided to reappear. It’s mostly angry letters from moms who think I should be ashamed that I’m not being a good role model for young women (I guess the photos of me at a fraternity party didn’t scream sweet innocence—major eye roll), but also a few death threats that really freaked out my dad. It explains why they were so adamant about security. I’m still mad, but I know they hired Hendrick with good intentions.

Hendrick. Thinking about him still makes my chest hurt.

“You don’t need to stay,” I tell Grady as he drops me off at Eric’s house. “I’ll call you when we’re done.”

“I won’t be far,” he says. He’s never far.

Inside, I head toward the sound of music in the back of the house. Eric stops strumming his guitar when he sees me. “You actually came!” “I told you I would.”

“You said that on Sunday and again on Tuesday,” Lennon says.

“Sorry. Things have been hectic.”

“Heard you have a tail.” Ted stops drumming just long enough to speak.

“Just a precaution. He’s leaving this weekend. Was that a new song you were just playing?”

“Mac wrote it,” Ted says, and shoots his girlfriend an adoring smile.

“They helped,” she adds quickly. “And it’s still really rough.”

“I liked it. Can I hear it again?”

I sit on the lumpy couch that sits along one wall in the small room while they start the song from the top. The lyrics are catchy, a little melancholy but the tempo is upbeat. Parts of it are still rough, but when they’re finished, I’m smiling bigger than I have in days.

“That was really good. Your voice is perfection on that chorus.” I sing part of it back. “You should belt it out even louder the second time. Pour all that pain into it. It’s going to be amazing. Are you singing it at your next gig? When is the next gig?”

They all share a look that I can’t make out.

“What?” I ask finally. “What’d I miss?”

“We were hoping we could do it for the first time at the Spring Fling.”

“Paris asked you guys to do Spring Fling?” My voice rises with excitement. “That’s amazing.”

“No.” Eric shakes his head. “Not exactly.”

“I’m not following.”

“She asked you,” Mackenzie says. “We want to do it with you, so we wrote this song to show you that we’re serious. We won’t let you down if you let us perform with you. It’s a big deal now that you’re Ivy Greene.”

“She was always Ivy Greene,” Lennon says.

“You know what I mean,” Mackenzie says. “Now that everyone knows who you are, the expectations are different. We get that.”

“Basically, we’re saying we won’t fuck it up for you,” Eric says.

I’m hit with unexpected emotion that they did this for me, but it’s quickly overshadowed by nerves and anxiety about performing. “The song is amazing. The band is amazing. You don’t need me. I’ll talk to Paris.”

“Nobody cares about seeing us. They want you,” Lennon says, pushing a

lock of his blond hair off his forehead.

“That’s not true. Everyone loved you at the party.”

“It’s not the same and you know it,” Eric says.

“At least sing the song with us right now.” Mackenzie smiles so sweetly at me. “Please?”

“With you?” We’ve never really sung together, except messing around with duets or belting out a song just for fun.

“Yes. Your range is better, so I’ll do harmony.”

I start to open my mouth to protest, but they’re all looking at me with such high hopes. Maybe a little jam session is exactly what I need right now.

“Let’s do it.”

JANE

“HOW ARE YOU FEELING NOW THAT GRADY IS GONE?” VIOLET ASKS AS SHE brings the bottle of wine into the living room. Daisy and Dahlia are sitting on either side of me, forming a circle when Vi sits. The three of them stayed home tonight and their boyfriends are nowhere in sight. They’re definitely worried about me.

“Good. He needed to get back to his wife and it’ll be nice to walk around campus without it looking like my dad is following me around.” He stayed longer than he should have. Three weeks because he’s stubborn. I told him to go after one.

“But you’re not nervous about . . . everything?” Daisy asks, voice quiet.

Vi fills our half-empty glasses and sets the empty bottle in the middle of us. “They said your room was most likely a random drunk asshole, right?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

“So, there’s nothing to worry about?” Vi’s face wears a hopeful smile that I try to mirror.

“Exactly.” Which is what I told my parents. Besides, I can’t live my life afraid that something bad is going to happen at every turn.

“We’ve got your back.” Dahlia takes my hand and squeezes it. “One of us can stay with you at all times for a little longer, just to make sure.”

“Thanks.” I tilt my head to the side and rest it on her shoulder. “Not necessary, but thanks anyway.”

The four of us finish another bottle of wine while catching up. I don’t have much news that they don’t already know, but Dahlia tells us about her upcoming golf tournaments, then she and Violet talk about some of their

design projects—they're taking a production class this semester and get to put together an entire collection. It sounds both exciting and challenging. Daisy is drowning in homework and regretting being a double major. She got a second tattoo last month, another matching one with Jordan. They have his and her stick figures on their pinky fingers and now matching daisies on their ankles.

After that, the conversation turns to their boyfriends. And even though it's been weeks since I've seen him, I can't help but think of Hendrick.

It's silly, considering I didn't really know him that well, but I felt a spark with him. I haven't felt that in a really long time. Maybe ever.

"I have a surprise." Violet stands quickly and then sways. "Whoa. That last glass of wine hit me hard."

She regains her balance and crosses the room to the front closet where she stores the beautiful gowns she creates. Throwing open the door, she turns back and smiles. "I made new dresses."

The three of us get up and go over to the closet. One by one, she pulls out new dresses for all of us. For Daisy, a white dress with a tie in the front; she hands Dahlia a black strapless gown; for herself she keeps a cherry red dress with a deep V-cut; and for me a pale green dress with tiny straps and a square neckline.

"When did you have time to make these?" Dahlia asks, holding the dress up in front of her. She glances around at all of our dresses. "They're all so beautiful."

"Gavin's been busy with basketball, and I thought we could all use a little pick me up."

I hug her, taking her by surprise. It's exactly what I needed. A night with my girls and an amazing new dress. "Thank you."

She laughs it off. "You're welcome. And it was fun. I want to make you a whole closet full of green dresses. All different shades. It's your color."

"I've never had friends like you three," I tell them honestly. All the drama of the past month has me extra emotional and my eyes well with tears. "God, look at me. I'm a mess."

"We love you, too." Dahlia hugs me, then Daisy and Vi join in.

After trying on our dresses and another hour of girl talk, we head to bed. In my room, I stare at my bed. I replaced all the bedding, and the walls were painted to cover the graffiti, but it still doesn't feel the same. My happy college bubble has officially burst.

I turn off the light and walk to Dahlia's room. She smiles when she sees me, then tosses me a pillow.

"You're the best," I say as I take my spot on her floor. She built a pillow fort for me last semester because I kept crashing in her room. Then, it was because I wanted to stay up all night talking. Now I just don't want to be alone.

"Are you kidding? I love a slumber party."

I yawn as I settle into the blankets and pillows laid out for me. "I might be the first asleep tonight."

She flips off the light and then climbs into bed. We're quiet for a bit as we each get comfortable.

"Are you really okay with Grady being gone?" she asks.

"Yeah," I say, letting some of my unease come out with the single word. "Nothing else has happened."

"What about the stalker guy? You said your parents had a few weird packages and some threats. Do you think he's behind any of it?"

"Outside of liking one of Ivy's posts, no."

"Oh right, I forgot about that. That's really creepy that he's still following you."

"Super creepy," I admit. "But I don't think he'd come all the way to Valley to write bitch on my bedroom wall. That doesn't fit with any of the other stuff that happened with him."

"What did happen? You haven't really said, other than he got clingy." She lays on her side at the end of the bed so I can see her.

"We met at an audition. He was fun and part of the whole L.A. acting scene, which was nice. And he was older, so he knew a bunch more people."

"How old?"

"He was twenty-two at the time. I was seventeen."

"Did you date or hook up?"

"No. We kissed once, but mostly we just went to parties together. After a couple months I wasn't really feeling it. To be honest, I didn't really think he liked me that much either. He seemed totally cool with it when I told him I thought we should stop seeing each other, but then he kept popping up everywhere I went. It got creepy. He'd even drive by my parents' house at odd hours like he was checking to see if I was there."

"That's super creepy," my friend says.

"Yeah. Then I started getting random texts and DMs from weird spammy

accounts. I couldn't prove it was him, but I think it had to be."

"Super, super creepy," she reiterates. "How'd you get him to stop?"

"I filed a restraining order."

"No shit?"

I nod. "I ended up withdrawing it before we went to court. All I really wanted was for him to leave me alone."

"Wow. I had no idea it got that bad." She yawns. "Is he still big in the L.A. scene?"

"Yeah. His career took off a couple years ago."

"Would I have heard of him?"

My teeth sink into my lower lip. The articles about it never named him or gave enough details for people to piece together what had really happened. The only reason anyone had any information is because I cancelled some appearances and my agent thought if my fans knew why, they'd be more forgiving. "Yeah."

"Who is it?" Dahlia's eyes widen in the dark room.

"Clint Abrams."

"No way!" She sits up in bed. "He's dating Penelope Hart now and he's in that new Marvel movie coming out."

"What?" I sit up so fast I get lightheaded. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. They were spotted making out at some after-party last week." She pulls out her phone and finds the pictures before handing it to me.

My stomach clenches at the sight, and I quickly hand it back. "I can't believe it."

Penelope has always seemed so smart. I'm surprised she didn't see right through him. Then again, I hadn't.

"Maybe he's changed." Dahlia yawns again. "I can't imagine Penelope dating him if he's all creepy stalker."

I lay back down, head spinning with this new information. "Maybe so."

My head is pounding when I wake up.

"Morning," Dahlia says, voice groggy as she shuts off her alarm.

"Uhhh. I was overserved."

She laughs. "Violet doesn't let anyone's glass get empty, that's for sure."

She gets up and flips on the light. “What’s your schedule like today?”

“You don’t have to check up on me all day, really. I’m going to be fine.”

A sheepish look crosses her face as she finger combs her blonde hair into a low ponytail. “I know, but I still want to keep tabs on my bestie.”

I sigh and get up from my cozy pillow fort. “I have two classes this morning, and then a break until my two o’clock class this afternoon.”

“We can walk to campus together this morning. Do you want to come to breakfast with me and Felix?”

“And half the football team?”

She grins wide. “Not half the team, just like a handful of them.”

“Sure. What better way to recover from a hangover than being around a bunch of loud, cocky guys?”

She snorts.

“Do I have time to shower?”

“If you’re quick. We need to leave in thirty minutes. Hustle, hustle.”

I leave her to shower and get ready, and then we make the short walk to campus. The skies are gray today and the wind makes me wish I’d worn something more than a sweatshirt.

By the time we get to the dining hall, my fingers are red and frozen. I sit down at the table across from Felix while Dahlia sits beside him.

He kisses his girlfriend, then smiles at me. “Hey, Hannah Montana.”

“I’m too hungover to deal with you today, Walters.”

He laughs as he tosses a hunk of muffin into his mouth. “I heard you four got into some fun last night. And my bed was real lonely.” He kisses Dahlia again. They make out long enough that people all around are looking at them. My friend is blushing when they break apart.

“You two are gross and adorable.” I shove a big spoonful of cereal into my mouth.

“Weird combination,” he says back, not at all fazed by me.

Lucas and Teddy, plus Felix’s sister, Holly, are all already at the table. A few minutes later we’re joined by Brogan and Archer. As soon as I see the latter, my heart squeezes.

“Hey, Jane,” he says and offers me a smile that’s both apologetic and pitying.

“Hey,” I parrot back and smile in a way I hope communicates that there’s no need for his apology or his pity. I’m fine. Better than fine. I’m also a liar.

I stay mostly quiet during breakfast. The guys are talking football and

parties, and probably other things I tune out. My head still feels like a marching band has taken up residence inside it.

As the time inches closer to eight o'clock, the dining hall starts to empty. Teddy and Holly are the first to leave, followed by Lucas. Dahlia and Felix are in their own little world.

"How've you been?" Brogan asks. "Haven't seen you around lately."

"I'm good. Busy with school and stuff."

"That's cool." He bobs his head. His phone vibrates on the table in front of him and he picks it up and concentrates hard on whatever text or notification came in.

I glance up and meet Archer's eyes for the first time since he sat down. I smile again at him, then quickly look down and pretend like all the food on my plate is extra interesting.

I'm thankful when it's time to go. I like Archer but it's still too weird being around him. He catches up to me as I'm dropping off my tray.

"I'll see you around," I say brightly.

"Yeah. I'll see you around." He hesitates, then says, "He's still here. In case you were wondering."

"Who?" I ask, and I'm genuinely confused at first because I never even considered that Hendrick was still in Valley.

"My brother. Hendrick hasn't left town yet."

"Why not?" A little bite works its way into my tone.

Archer shrugs one shoulder. "He keeps saying he's going soon, but . . ."

For some stupid reason I feel like crying again. Stupid wine that gave me this stupid hangover. Stupid drama that has me all emotional and hypersensitive. Stupid, stupid, stupid. "I wasn't wondering. I mean, he can be wherever he wants. It doesn't matter to me."

HENDRICK

“HEY,” I SAY AS I STEP OUT INTO THE GARAGE WHERE KNOX IS WORKING ON his motorcycle during his lunch break. “Can we talk?”

He glances up, takes in my serious expression, and automatically glowers. But he nods. “Sure. What’s up?”

“I’m heading out tomorrow.”

He stares at me a beat as he wipes his dirty hands on a rag. “You said that two weeks ago.”

“I took a job.”

“Protecting another Hollywood actress or supermodel?” The way he says it makes it sound like my job is a total joke to him, but the mention of Jane feels like a punch to the gut. I’ve stayed away, even though I know her schedule so well I could run into her anytime I choose. She made it clear that she wasn’t going to forgive me, and I guess I can’t blame her. I fucked up. Sometimes when you fuck up, there’s no righting the wrong.

“Nah. An old musician. He’s like eighty and doesn’t really need security anymore, but I think he just likes the company.”

Knox actually smiles at this.

“Anyway, he’s paying double to get me there sooner, which is why I’m leaving so quickly. I transferred a few thousand into your account this morning and when I get paid again, I’ll send more. Maybe you can get a dishwasher that actually works or get someone out here to repaint the house. I fixed the leaky sink in the hall bathroom, but I’m not a plumber so you might want to have someone check that too.”

“Sure. I’ll get right on that.” His jaw hardens. Always so fucking

defensive. It's impossible to have a conversation with Knox.

"What is your problem?" I ask, feeling beyond tired.

He laughs, then mutters, "Where do I start?"

"I'm serious." I get up in his space. "You're not happy when I'm gone, you're not happy when I'm here. What the hell is your problem?"

"You. You are my fucking problem. You show up here and think you have a right to judge us. Not all of us can be big shot professional athletes and live in fancy apartments."

While accurate, I guess, it isn't a true depiction of my life. My apartment is small, and I *was* a professional athlete. Now I don't know what the fuck I'm doing.

"You walked out on us years ago and lost the right to have an opinion about how we do things here."

I'm taken back by his words and the anger with which he spits them at me, but they find their mark, making me feel like shit.

He shakes his head, still wearing that pissed-off glare. "At least when Dad left, he had the decency to be honest that he didn't give a shit about us. Do me a favor and don't worry about us. We're doing just fine without him and without you."

"Just fine?" I laugh. "The milk is bad, the house smells like dirty feet, and the place looks like shit."

"I'm gonna pick up groceries tonight." His jaw tightens. "And we clean on Sundays. And why do you fucking care? You're leaving, right?"

"Right." I grit out. "You've got it all covered. My bad."

"That's right. Go back to L.A. See you again in another couple of years."

He turns his back to me and returns to working on his bike, so I head inside more agitated and unsettled than I was before. I pack my stuff, so I have something to do with the adrenaline still racing through my bloodstream courtesy of Knox's shitty attitude.

I made the best decisions I could at the time. He doesn't get to make me feel bad for that. They would have lost the house and who knows what would have happened to Flynn. He might have been sent to live with some distant relative or put into foster care. No. Knox doesn't get to act like I had a choice because I didn't. I did what I had to do.

I'm still amped up an hour later when I hear Knox's bike start and drive off. I'm so fucking tempted to get in my truck and go, but I can't leave without saying goodbye to my brothers.

Instead, I change and head into the garage to work out. I lift the garage door and turn on some music. By the time I've wrapped my hands, I'm starting to settle down. I roll my shoulders back and stretch my neck, then beat the shit out of the bag until my arms are tired and my thoughts are empty.

JANE

THIS HANGOVER WON'T QUIT. IT'S LESSENERED TO A DULL ACHE, BUT I'M STILL feeling crappy as I get out of my last class of the day. As I step out of the building, I check my phone. Dahlia sent a group text a few minutes ago saying she's heading to practice, and Violet and Daisy replied that they were at the library. All day they've been updating me on their whereabouts and making sure I'm okay. I love them, but I hate that they feel like they need to do that.

And I hate that I'm looking over my shoulder every few minutes. I'm blaming the gloomy weather. And the wine. Definitely blaming the wine.

I shoot a quick text back to let them know I'm fine and that I'm going to grab coffee at University Hall and then maybe head home to take a nap and ward off this headache once and for all.

Shuffling in the long line at the café, I scroll through my phone while I wait. I go to Penelope's social media account. I've known her for what feels like forever. We met at an audition when I was nine but weren't really friends. Then when I was fourteen, she had a recurring guest appearance on the show I starred in. Spending so much time together on set, we became close. In fact, there was a time that she was the closest friend I had.

Then her career took off, the show ended, and we didn't do a very good job of keeping up with each other. There's nothing on her official account about Clint, but that doesn't surprise me. If they are dating, they'd want to keep it secret for as long as possible. I have a hard time imagining he's changed so much, but I don't really know her anymore, either.

With my coffee in hand, I decide to wander around campus all by myself.

It feels like it's been forever since I've been really, truly alone. And as uneasy as it still makes me, I know that I need to deal with it. I stop and sit on a bench in front of the engineering building and listen to music for a bit, then I go over to the fountain and toss in a penny for luck.

I'm starting to feel more like myself when I notice a guy wearing a black hat low, covering his eyes and a red hoodie pulled on top. It's the third or fourth time I've seen him in the past hour, and with tens of thousands of students at Valley U that seems like an awfully big coincidence.

Goosebumps dot my arms, and my throat constricts. I walk slowly in the opposite direction, trying not to seem panicked even though my heart is racing. I glance over my shoulder as I round the corner and find him twenty feet or so back walking the same way.

I pull out my phone, but don't text the girls just yet. He can't really be following me, right? Campus is quieter than normal right now because classes are going on, but I'm not totally alone and that gives me some sense of safety. If I scream, surely someone would come to my rescue.

That thought has more panic taking hold of my body. The red words spray-painted across my bedroom wall flash in my mind. *Go back to Cali, bitch.* My steps quicken and I make a last-minute decision to go into one of the buildings. He follows me, a little less space between us now. As I continue walking on the first floor, I can hear him still behind me. Every heavy step sounds closer and closer until I feel like he's so close he could touch me.

I take off running without looking back. I can no longer hear his steps over my own and it's terrifying to think he might be gaining, but I don't stop. I keep going down the hall, and then frantically search for somewhere to hide. I pass classes filled with people, but I can't just burst into one of them. I try a utility closet and find it, thankfully, unlocked. It smells like dirt and cleaning solution, but I don't care. I hold the door handle and stand there in the dark, listening to my quick, shallow breaths.

When his steps come around the corner, I stop breathing and squeeze my eyes shut. He walks past the tiny room and then back again. It goes quiet, but I don't move. I have no idea how long I stand there in the dark, clutching the door handle and too afraid to move when there's another noise outside. Classes are letting out, I realize with a sort of sickly calm washing over me.

I'm too scared to leave even knowing I could slip into the hallway and disappear into the crowd. Someone was following me. My eyes sting with the

threat of tears and I pull out my phone. Everything is blurry as I punch in the number. I let my eyelids fall closed and one tear slides down my cheek.

“Jane?” His deep voice and the authoritative way he answers makes my throat close up.

“Jane?” Hendrick’s tone takes on a hard, but somehow comforting, edge. What sounds like a truck starting up in the background interrupts the silence, and then he says, “I’m on my way. Where are you?”

HENDRICK

THE FACT THAT SHE COULDN'T REMEMBER EXACTLY WHAT BUILDING SHE'S IN tells me everything I need to know about how scared she is right now. That's to say nothing of her strained voice as she told me she was hiding in a closet because she thought someone was following her.

She dropped a pin, but that only gets me as far as the Emerson building.

Brogan and Archer follow behind me as I throw open the front doors. "You two check the floors above and below. Text me the second you find her." I bark out the orders and then take off down the first-floor hall.

They were getting home when I got the call from Jane. I don't know what I must have looked like for them to jump into the truck and come with me, but I'm glad they're here. We can cover more ground, faster.

It's late afternoon and the halls are quiet. I glance side to side as I walk, looking for closed doors. Most of them have windows I can glance in to see classes in session, but my pulse jumps when I spot a wooden door just past the bathrooms.

I rest my hand on the door handle. "Jane?"

Silence greets me, but I pull open the door anyway to double-check. The sight that greets me nearly takes me to my knees.

Jane sits on the floor in a ball, arms wrapped around her legs and head buried in her thighs.

She glances up at me, eyes wide with terror, and it freezes me. I've protected a lot of people, but I have never felt this insane pull with a client. Keep them safe, avoid danger. See it before it happens and redirect. If you have to act, you've already failed. And I feel like such a fucking failure.

She scrambles to her feet and launches herself at me before I have time to prepare. My body knows exactly what to do where she's concerned. My arms circle her waist and one hand cups the back of her head as she buries her face in my chest. Her entire body shakes as she sobs. She's dead weight in my arms, and I suddenly feel a little jelly-legged too.

I guide us down to the floor with her sitting on my lap and shut the door so that it's only open a crack to give us some privacy. My chest burns as I feel her completely fall apart.

We sit there in mostly silence, only her ragged breathing and sobs and the sound of my heart cracking wide open, until Archer and Brogan jog by. I flag them down without moving Jane off me.

"Is she okay?" Archer asks, taking in the situation.

Fuck. I hadn't even thought to ask if she was okay physically.

At his voice, she lifts her head slightly.

"Hey," I say, voice hoarse. "You're all right. I'm here. Are you hurt?"

When I don't get an answer, I guide her chin up with my thumb to get a better look at her.

Streaks of black are smudged around her bright green eyes, still pooling with tears, and her face is red and splotchy.

"Did he hurt you?"

Her head shakes slightly side to side.

A little tension eases from my body. I watch a tear trek from her left eye and down to the corner of her lip. My thumb wipes it away and then lingers there at her mouth.

"Can you tell me what happened?"

"I was walking around campus after class," she starts, voice soft and cracking on every other word. "I kept seeing this guy. Black hat, red zip-up hoodie. I panicked and ran in here. I don't know what happened to him after that."

"You did good." I continue to drag my thumb along her soft cheek. Black hat, red hoodie. Black hat, red hoodie. I repeat it over and over as I imagine what I'll do to the asshole when I find him. "Will you stay with Arch and Brogan while I go—"

She tenses and lodges herself back against my chest, arms wrapped around my waist.

"We'll look for him," Brogan says when it's clear she isn't going to let me go.

I nod. "Can you catch a ride back to the house? I want to get her out of here."

"Here you go." I hand Jane a glass of water.

"Thanks." She sits on the edge of my bed, eyes downcast.

Leaning against the dresser in front of her, I fight the overwhelming need to hold her again. She still hasn't said much, but she won't let me call her parents until Archer and Brogan get back.

"I'm sorry for calling. After everything that happened, I didn't know if you'd answer. Thank you for that and for coming. I don't know what I would have done if . . ." She trails off as her voice breaks.

"I'm glad you called, but where's the old guy?"

A hint of a smile dances on her lips for the briefest of moments. "I sent Grady back yesterday. Since nothing else had happened, it felt silly having security follow me around from class to class."

My fingers dig into the wood dresser. I can't believe he listened to her or that her parents went along with it. She blows out a shaky breath.

"Drink some water. It'll help." I motion toward the glass in her hands.

"I doubt that." She takes a sip anyway, then glances around the room. "Getting ready to leave?"

"Yeah." My gaze drops to my duffel bag on the floor by the door. "Maybe. I don't know. I haven't decided yet."

"Sounds complicated."

"Yeah." I run a hand over my hair as a knock comes from the other side of my door. Brogan cracks open the door slowly, smiles at Jane, and then tips his head to me.

"I'll be right back."

Archer and Flynn are sitting in the living room, Knox is making dinner in the kitchen.

"That's her, right? That's Ivy Greene?" Flynn asks with more excitement than I've seen out of him since I've been back.

"Yeah." I look to Archer and Brogan as the latter sits down on the couch. "Did you find him?"

God, I hope they did. I want to destroy the creep who did this in a way

that should probably scare me.

“Yeah.” They share a look I can’t decipher.

“And? Where is he? At the fucking police station with a couple black eyes, I hope.”

Brogan shakes his head. “We let him go.”

“You did what?” My voice climbs and bounces off the walls.

Archer stands and pulls a card from his pocket, then holds it out to me. “He’s paparazzi. He was trying to get some photos of her.”

I snatch the card and read it three times before my brain catches up. “Did he get any?”

They share another look that has my blood pressure shooting through the roof. “Did he get pictures of her today while she was running from him?”

The last fucking thing she needs after she finds out who was following her is to see pictures of it splashed across tomorrow’s news.

“I don’t know,” Brogan says finally. “We didn’t think to ask.”

“We can go back.” Archer stands, but I hold up a hand.

“I’ll deal with it later.” I close my fist around the card, then shove it into my pocket. A million thoughts race through my brain. I walk into the kitchen and then brace myself on the counter.

Archer and Brogan start up video games, and Flynn goes to his room.

“Still leaving tomorrow?” Knox asks quietly as he sets a plate with pasta and chicken in front of me. The fucker smiles all cocky and deliberate. “It’s cool. I could watch her while you’re gone.”

He’s purposely goading me, and I don’t have the energy to fight, so I flip him off and take the plate of food to my room.

I hesitate, wondering if I should knock, but ultimately open the door slowly and peer in before stepping inside. Jane’s laying on my bed, head resting on my pillow, curled up on her side asleep. I pad in quietly and set the plate on the nightstand, then stare down at her. She’s going to be upset when she finds out the guy following her was paparazzi. Maybe it’s better that she sleeps first.

Archer and Brogan leave after dinner and Flynn does his usual disappearing act back to his room. I don’t know where Knox went, but I find myself

needing some sort of release and end up back out in the garage to hit the bag.

That's where I find Knox. He's hitting the bag, hands unwrapped, in quick, short jabs. Beads of sweat dot his forehead and he stares like a lethal machine straight ahead at the target.

When the garage door shuts behind me, he pauses and glances back in my direction.

"Guess we had the same idea," I say, and toss my wraps onto the workbench that runs along the far wall of the garage. "I'm gonna go for a run. If she wakes up, text me. I won't go far."

"Or you could stay." He stands tall and a wicked grin curls his lips. "When's the last time you hit something besides a fucking bag?"

It's been ages since I sparred, and nobody's ever been as good a competitor as Knox. Not that I'd ever tell him that.

"You're fucking on."

I pick up the wraps and quickly get my hands ready to go. Knox doesn't bother. I eye his hands with a smirk. "I have a pretty fucking hard head. Might want to reconsider."

"I welcome the pain." He shuffles in front of me, eyeing me up like he's really taking in the differences in my body since I left for the first time.

I'm taller, broader, and stronger than I was the last time we did this, but then again, so is he.

Knox's body is leaner and more sculpted than mine. I've got him by a few inches in the way of height, but not enough for a real advantage. Besides, he's always been deceptively strong and he's not afraid to get hit, which makes him either stupid or scary, depending on your perspective.

"Not too late to back out," I goad him as I puff out my chest. "I wouldn't blame you."

I barely get the last word out before he strikes. A pleased chuckle rumbles in my chest. And we're off.

My smile is gone quick as I concentrate on dodging his punches and trying to land a few of my own. Knox lands a liver hook, then steps and adds a right low kick.

"You're rusty, Henny."

Don't I know it. Sweat drips into my eyes and burns, but I don't have a second to wipe it before he aims a left hook to the head. He's fucking with me. Landing his punches and kicks but not putting anything behind them. He wants me to know he can increase the intensity any time he wants. We never

go full out, but seventy-five percent of Knox's wrath is fucking plenty.

I attempt a foot sweep, not really trying to take him down but distract him, which I pull off, then surprise him with a darting cross.

"Fuck. I can't believe I fell for that," he mumbles as he steps back, putting some distance between us.

When he comes at me the next time, he's no longer holding back. I don't either. Damn, it feels good. Slick with sweat and pulse racing, some of the weight of everything fucked up in my life lifts. Not all of it, but enough that it pushes me to keep going until minutes turn into fuck knows how long.

We're in a zone, exchanging punches and kicks in quick succession, when the door leading into the house opens. I look up to see Jane in the doorway.

"Hey," I say in a half-pant because I'm out of breath.

Knox takes the opportunity to sweep my foot out from under me and I land with a thud on the rubber flooring.

Motherfucker.

JANE

AS I STEP OUT INTO THE GARAGE, A SERIOUSLY CUT GUY WITH TATTOOS covering his chest and right arm steps toward me. “You must be Jane.”

I nod and lift a hand to wave at him because he’s kind of got me speechless. Wow. That’s a lot of muscle and a lot of ink. And is that a nipple piercing?

He plucks my hand out of the air and brings it to his lips, dropping a kiss onto the top of my knuckles. His smile is cocky and playful as he continues to hold my hand but stands straighter.

“You must be one of the brothers,” I say, finally finding my voice.

“The best Holland brother, or so I’ve been told.” Then he freaking winks. I’m ninety-percent sure he’s fucking around to piss off Hendrick, but I don’t get the dynamic here at all or what role I’m playing in it.

Hendrick gets to his feet. “Ignore Knox. The rest of us do.”

Knox drops my hand and steps back. He leans down, showing me more ink on his back, to grab a T-shirt off the floor. Pulling it over his head, he covers himself and then runs a hand through his hair. It’s lighter than Hendrick’s and Archer’s, a sort of dark blond, almost. It’s cut short on the sides and back, but thick and wavy on top. He looks like trouble. I think he is trouble. In fact, I think he thrives on it.

“Thanks for the workout, Henny.” He winks at me again. “Later, Hollywood.”

He disappears inside, leaving me and Hendrick alone, but the air is still thick with sweat and testosterone.

“Sorry about him,” he says, and suddenly I’m all too aware that more

than one of the two brothers was out here shirtless.

Where Knox was lean and cut, Hendrick is broader. He still has a whole lot of defined muscle, but he's bigger, more filled out. I watch a trickle of sweat disappear down his pecs along the faint line of light brown hair that continues down and soaks into the band of his shorts.

I snap my gaze up before I do something really stupid like lick him.

"It's okay." My voice is too high and too strained. I clear my throat and try again. "I'm sorry I passed out in your bed. I think I drooled on your pillow."

One side of his mouth lifts in a smile. "It's fine. I imagine rest is the best thing after something traumatic like that."

At his words, all the fear and anxiety from today resurfaces. "Did Archer and Brogan find out anything about the guy that was following me?"

"Let's talk inside."

I follow him back into the house. The main living area is vacant, but music from opposite sides of the house competes, indicating at least two of his brothers are home.

He opens the door to his room and lets me go ahead of him. "Give me just a minute."

He closes me in alone. While I wait, I pull out my phone. I texted the girls when we got here earlier to let them know I wouldn't be home for a while. I wasn't ready to tell them what happened because I knew they'd want to rush over, and they'd have lots of questions. They have sent a series of texts back since then. Dahlia says Felix is staying over at the house, but my pillow fort is available, Jordan and Daisy are having a movie night, and Vi is sleeping over at Gavin's.

Hendrick returns wearing jeans and a black T-shirt, hair wet, and smelling like soap.

"So . . ." I start. "What'd you find out?"

His expression is guarded, but he clearly has something to tell me, and I can't figure out why he'd possibly be holding back now. How much worse could it get?

"Your silence is freaking me out. Just tell me."

With a sigh, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a card before handing it to me.

I take it and smooth out the crumpled paper.

"Roger Brayson, Independent Photographer." My stomach drops as I read

it aloud. I read it three more times unnecessarily.

“He was . . .” I trail off, feeling sick.

“Paparazzi. Yeah. Archer and Brogan talked to him. He was trying to get some new photographs without you realizing who he was.”

I huff a short laugh. “Mission accomplished. I thought . . . I thought he was chasing me.”

“He was fucking chasing you.” Hendrick’s jaw tightens.

“I’m so stupid.” I stand, still holding the card. I ran and I freaking hid like a serial killer was after me, and he just wanted some photos. Embarrassed tears threaten, but I will them back. “I can’t believe this. I have myself so worked up that something is going to happen that I’m inventing bad guys. I’m officially losing my mind.”

I aimlessly walk around the room as I let the full reality of it all settle in. For weeks I’ve been on edge, letting some random incident freak me out, but I am done with it. I want to go home, sleep in my own room, and wake up tomorrow ready to put this all behind me.

“I am so embarrassed. I made you come save me from a guy with a camera. And I know this guy.” I hold up the card. “He’s been here since last semester. I was just so panicked when I thought someone was following me.”

Hendrick steps in front of me and places both hands on my face. I look up and into his intense hazel eyes. “Listen to me. Some guy you didn’t recognize was tailing you around campus when you were alone. You did the right thing by calling me. There’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

I try to pull away, but he won’t let me.

“Say it,” he says, eyes darting to my mouth. “Say it, Jane.”

“I did the right thing.”

“You did,” he says, like he doesn’t think I believe my own words. I’m not sure I do either. “I don’t care if the guy is harmless or if it’s a little girl selling cookies, someone makes you feel uncomfortable, then you call me.”

I don’t understand him. Even if what he’s saying is true, why does he feel some sort of duty to make sure I’m okay after I got him fired?

“Why haven’t you left town yet?”

“I don’t know.” His gaze drops to my lips again.

Understanding seeps in slowly. I didn’t read him wrong. Some part of him wanted me that night at the party. Some part of him still wants me.

So tired of feeling scared and anxious and like my world is in chaos, I do the thing I wanted to do weeks ago—I lean in to kiss him. Stopping

millimeters from his lips, I glance up, giving him time to stop me. My heart beats rapidly in the seconds I wait for any reaction from him. And just when I think we're going to be locked in a stare-off until I make a move, he cups the back of my head and guides my lips to his in a crushing kiss.

My hands loop around his neck, and he scoops my legs out from under me, encouraging me to wrap them around his waist. He carries me to the bed and lays me down, kissing me the entire time.

He holds most of his weight off me, but I pull him down tighter against me. Our bodies align so well, like we were both made for this exact position.

As his tongue sweeps into my mouth, one hand slides under my sweatshirt and rests on my stomach. Calloused and rough fingers caress me softly and cause a shiver to roll through me. He kisses exactly like I thought he would: dominating and powerful.

I lift my hips, searching for him to ease the throbbing between my legs. With a low grunt, he presses into me, giving me the friction I crave. I'm all passion and need, clawing to get him closer and grinding against him unapologetically.

When he pulls away, I could cry with frustration. His brow is creased but his eyes are filled with so much want it makes my pulse quicken.

"Don't stop," I plead.

After another beat of hesitation, he moves his free hand down to cup me through my jeans. His thumb strokes up and down the seam, digging in with the perfect pressure to send my body soaring toward release.

He keeps a steady, slow pace that matches the rhythm his tongue sweeps over mine. No matter how hard I try to go faster, to pull him past the line of control, he doesn't let me. It's maddening. And pure bliss.

And longer, and sooner, than I want, the ache in my body turns into a tingling sensation that I feel everywhere. I moan and scream into his mouth as I come, and he swallows my cries as he keeps kissing me like he's not even close to done with me.

I reach for the button of his jeans at the same time a heavy thud followed by voices breaks the bubble we're in.

Hendrick sits back, lips wet and eyes dark. "Archer and Brogan are home," he says as he stands and runs a thumb over his mouth.

"I can be quiet." That's a lie. I don't even want to try to be quiet with him.

"We should talk."

“O-kay. Talk first.”

“Not here.” He grabs his keys from the top of the dresser. “Let’s go for a drive.”

Once we’re buckled in Hendrick’s truck, he pulls away from the house. One orgasm did nothing but amplify my feelings for him. And right now, those feelings are all about sex.

“Where are we going?” I ask, my fingers crossed that it’s to buy condoms. A whole bunch of them.

“I’m taking you home.”

“Home?” Maybe he wants more privacy to continue what we started. God, I hope so.

His gaze leaves the road to look at me briefly. “What happened back there? That can’t happen again.”

Well, that pours icy cold disappointment over my excitement.

“Are you serious right now?” Just when a girl thinks she can’t be any more humiliated. I don’t understand him and I’m too angry to ask. It doesn’t matter. Today has been too long to put up with this shit. “Stop the truck. I can walk home from here.”

His hard stare remains forward on the road. “You’re not walking, and we need to talk.”

“I have nothing else to say to you.”

I try the door handle, but it’s locked.

“What, are you going to jump out?” he asks, one brow cocked all smug-like.

“Stop the damn truck, Hendrick!” I yell.

He slows and pulls along the curb. I find the unlock button and have my door open and I’m jumping out before he’s come to a complete stop. I storm onto the sidewalk and start walking.

He climbs out and comes around the front of the truck. “You’re going the wrong direction.”

Crap, he’s right. Without commenting, I turn and start toward home. He moves to stand in my path. “Will you stop and listen to me?”

I brush past him with my middle finger raised. Petulant? Probably. But

god, it feels good. I want to rage on someone for all the madness happening lately. Why can't I just find a nice guy and be a regular college girl like all my friends? Why did I have to announce to the world that I was Ivy Greene? Why, why, why?! Oh yeah, because I thought I could merge my two worlds without any consequences. Stupid me.

"Dammit, Jane." His fingers wrap around my upper arm. "I can't make sure you're safe if I'm distracted all the time. Which is what I'll be if we start sleeping together."

Well, that's not what I expected. I spin on him. "What are you talking about? You're not even my bodyguard anymore."

"But I should be."

Wait, what?

"You and I both know you need someone looking after you."

"Why? The thing at my house and today, they weren't anything."

"I'm not even sure you believe that. If you did, you wouldn't have been so scared today."

My stomach dips with the same anxiety I've been feeling all month. "It's been a lot lately. That's all. I've been anxious and emotional, and I let it impact my judgment."

I hate admitting that. I feel like an idiot for letting myself get so caught up in things that I couldn't discern what was happening.

"Your judgment is just fine. You trusted your gut, like you should."

"I wasn't in danger." I throw my hands up in the air.

"Maybe not, but something was off, and you felt it." He blows out a breath. "You're dealing with a lot, that's true. Way more than any of your friends, and yet you're still trying to pretend that your life should look the same as theirs. You're not like everyone else. For better or worse, you need someone looking out for you. Let me be that person."

A small part of me wants to immediately say yes, but it feels so unnecessary.

His gaze pleads with me as much as his words. "I'll be invisible, just like before."

"It's an illusion of normalcy," I reply quietly. "I never should have told everyone that I'm Ivy. Things were going just fine before then."

He stays quiet, letting me deal with the consequences of my actions.

It's either let him follow me around or spend my days looking over my shoulder. Or I guess I could call Grady. All three options make me want to

stomp my feet in frustration.

“Fine. You can have your job back, but only so that I can get back to some semblance of a typical college existence.” I look him over. He’s devastating in his simple jeans and T-shirt. “You fit in a whole hell of a lot better than Grady.”

He smiles, looking like I just took a weight off his shoulders instead of handing him the job of keeping me safe. “You won’t even know I’m there.”

That seems highly unlikely.

JANE

TUESDAY MORNING I WALK TO CAMPUS WITH DAISY AND JORDAN.

“Where’s your first class?” Daisy asks as Jordan swings their joined hands together between them. They’ve been dating since last year and seem to get more adorable each semester.

“Diction in the Billings building.” I point to the brick building ahead of us.

“We’re going to Moreno Hall, so we can walk you.”

I nod, and the three of us continue walking down the busy sidewalk with the rest of the students heading to early morning classes.

I look past all of them, searching for Hendrick. My skin pricks with awareness and I know he’s watching me from somewhere. Daisy and Jordan chat happily, including me by asking questions occasionally, but I’m too busy scanning every dark head in front of me to find him.

My phone vibrates in my hand.

HENDRICK

Relax. I’m here. Two o’clock. Gray sweatshirt.

I smile as I look to the right. It takes a few seconds, but then there he is. He’s dressed in torn jeans and a gray Valley U sweatshirt with a white hat, carrying a black backpack and staring down at his phone. He fits in a little too well.

ME

Did you borrow Archer’s clothes?

HENDRICK

I was in college once, remember?

ME

That's assuming I believe any of what you told me before was actually the truth.

HENDRICK

That was.

ME

You mean like a million years ago. Did they have cell phones then?

HENDRICK

Have a nice time in Diction class.

It doesn't even surprise me he knows my schedule or that he avoided my dig. He's only five years older, but I like teasing him any way I can. I might still be a little salty about the whole make out turned "we can't do this anymore" situation.

"Who are you talking to?" Daisy asks.

"What?" I look up to find her and Jordan both looking at me, Daisy wearing a curious smile. We've stopped in front of my building, and I was grinning at my phone like an idiot. "Sorry. I was making sure Hendrick was here."

"Is he?" She looks around for him.

"Over by the bike rack in front of the registration office building." I tip my head in that direction.

"I don't see him," she says after a few moments of continuing to search for him.

I look over to where I last saw him, but he's not there. "Well, he was there. He's a little too good at staying out of view."

"Isn't that a good thing?" Jordan asks, dropping Daisy's hand and then wrapping his arm around her shoulder. She leans into him so naturally, and that pang of longing for what they have hits me.

"Yes, but it's unnerving."

"I know you didn't want someone looking after you, but I'm really glad he's here." Daisy gives me a small smile filled with sympathy and worry. She steps forward to hug me. "Text if you need anything or want to walk back

home together.”

“I will,” I say as I hug her back.

Once I’m inside my class, I find a seat and pull out my phone again.

ME

Where are you now?

HENDRICK

Close.

ME

How close?

HENDRICK

Close enough to know you need to put your phone away and get ready for class.

I roll my eyes and then tap out another reply.

ME

Class hasn’t started yet. What do you do while I’m in class, anyway?

HENDRICK

Things.

God, he’s so annoying. But I’m smiling so hard.

ME

You should go get coffee, maybe a muffin. Caffeine and food might improve your mood.

HENDRICK

I’m in a fine mood.

ME

Sorry, did I say mood? I meant personality.

Between and through my classes, I text Hendrick constantly. I never see him again, but I know he’s there, and by the end of the day, I feel lighter and less stressed than I have in so long.

When I get home, I find myself wanting to text him again. I’m addicted to the thrill of his replies popping up on my screen. Even if they are grumpy and

succinct. I distract myself with homework and studying. I've let myself get behind with everything else going on, so it's after ten when I close my laptop.

Dahlia and Violet are working in the living room on some big project for a design class, and Daisy is at Jordan's, so I head upstairs to my room. I stare at the bed, then swipe my pillow and blanket and lay them on the floor in front of the door.

I scroll back through my texts with Hendrick. There are so many it makes me smile.

ME

You don't stand outside staring into my window with binoculars all night, do you?

His reply is quick.

HENDRICK

Definitely no.

ME

What are you doing now?

HENDRICK

I'm in bed.

His bed. A slideshow of images from the time *I* was in his bed flash through my mind. Reluctantly, I push them away and ignore the heat spreading over my skin.

ME

Because you're old and need your sleep?

HENDRICK

Night, Jane. Call me if you need anything.

The next couple of days go by in a similar fashion. I barely see Hendrick, but we text constantly while I'm on campus. By Friday morning, I feel like myself again.

My roommates were all busy this morning, so I drove to campus. I park

behind the library, grab my backpack and phone, and start for my first class.

I'm surprised when Hendrick texts me before I've sent my usual good morning message once I'm here.

HENDRICK

Meet me in front of the library.

He's sitting on a bench off to the side with his backpack on the ground in front of him and his cell in his hands. He doesn't look up as I take a seat beside him.

I glance down at his phone to see some sports news on the screen. "So that's what you do all day?"

"Sometimes." He locks the screen and puts it in his pocket. Today he's wearing another sweatshirt, a faded Valley U football one with a tear along the cuff at his wrist. He looks so messy and so not like anything I've seen him wear when he isn't pretending to be a college student. I cock a brow at it, and he grins. "Today I did have to borrow some of Archer's clothes."

His arm comes up around the bench behind me and he fingers the end of my hair where the blonde has been dyed green. It's faded and needs a touch-up. I haven't felt like messing with it, and kind of wish I'd just left it blond if I'm honest. One less thing linking me to my past life—the one that keeps messing with my current one.

His voice drops lower. "If I keep staring at my phone to read your texts all day, I might not see something I should."

I feel a bit like a kid being scolded by the principal until his fingers at my hair brush higher, sweeping along my neck and then to the side of my face. His light touch catches me by surprise, and I tense remembering how good it felt to have his hands other places.

His rough fingers stroke my face once more and then he pushes something into my ear. It startles me at first until he points with his free hand to the small device in his right ear. "This way we can talk while I keep my eyes off my phone."

Of course, I should have known his touch was all business. Regardless, I can't help but smile. It's such a practical thing but the idea of this intimate connection to him makes me really excited. I reach up and touch it. It's small and fits snugly in my ear. "What if I have to pee?"

His fingers drop to my shoulder. "Press the side once to turn it on and off. If yours is off, I can't hear you, but you can still hear me if mine is on."

“I feel very CIA, very covert.”

He chuckles. “You’re about as discreet as a neon sign.”

Don’t I know it. I let my hand fall down onto my lap. “Now what?”

“Now, you go to class.” Hendrick stands and picks up his backpack. “Have a good day.”

I wait until he’s a few feet away and test out my new earpiece. “Can you hear me?”

“Yep,” he replies as I watch him disappear into a crowd of students.

After I press the button, I ask, “What about now?” I press it again. “And now?”

“Still here. The range is good, so you don’t need to worry about me losing you. I won’t be that far away.”

“I’m not worried,” I say honestly as I get up and walk in the direction of my first class. “This is fun. Will you sing me a song or read me a book?”

“I’m not your personal Spotify.”

“Okay, fine. Then answer some questions for me.”

I take his silence as approval.

“What’s your favorite song?”

“I don’t have one.”

“What? Everyone has a favorite song.”

“I don’t.”

I walk into my French class and take a seat. “Favorite movie?”

The guy that sits in front of me turns around. “What’s that?”

“Sorry,” I say and smile. “Just talking to myself.”

Hendrick laughs in my ear. “I don’t have a favorite movie either. Gotta go. Good luck on your French test.”

“Wait,” I whisper as my professor begins to hand out the test in the front of the room. “Favorite color?”

He doesn’t answer right away, and I assume he’s not going to. He’s such a stickler. But just as a test paper is handed back to me, his voice is back in my ear. “Green.”

“Well, I don’t feel great about how that went,” I say as I leave my French class.

“You probably did better than you think,” Hendrick says. I look for him, but of course I don’t see him anywhere.

“Je ne pense pas,” I say in a wobbly French accent then translate it for him in English. “I don’t think so.”

“Je suis désolé,” he replies in an equally terrible accent. *I’m sorry.*

“You know French?”

“Not really. A few phrases. I took it in high school.”

I scroll through my school email. I have two new ones. One from the professor of my next class announcing it’s canceled because he’s home sick.

“Change of plans,” I tell Hendrick. “Piano is canceled today, so I’m gonna head to University Hall for a pick-me-up. Want to join me?”

“I’ll be around,” he says.

“You could just sit with me. Not really that big of a deal.”

He goes quiet again and I click on the next email from an E. Rex Sean. I have no idea who the hell that is, but I rarely get spam in my school email.

Go back to Cali if you know what’s good for you.

I suck in a breath.

One line, no signature. I read it again and again.

Go back to Cali if you know what’s good for you.

The email was sent from a Gmail address, same as his name. E. Rex Sean. Who the hell is that and why does he want me to leave?

“Jane?” Hendrick’s voice breaks through the anxious white noise blaring in my ears. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I lock my phone and look up.

“You stopped walking.”

“Just reading some emails.” I don’t know if the shakiness in my voice is audible to him, but he doesn’t press and I don’t tell him. Not yet. I need a second to digest this. Who is E. Rex Sean? I walk into University Hall. “Did you decide to have coffee with me?”

“Already had coffee this morning.”

“So?”

“I only drink one cup a day. I try not to have a lot of caffeine or sugar.”

“Because?”

“I don’t know.”

I roll my eyes, of course he doesn’t. “Do you do anything in excess?”

“Sometimes.”

“It’s not talking,” I mutter as I step up to the counter. I turn off my

earpiece as I order.

When the barista tries to hand me both drinks, I only take one. “The other one is for a friend. He’ll be swinging by to get it in just a minute. Tall, dark hair, has this angry, broody look about him. You’ll know him when you see him.”

She chews rapidly on the gum in her mouth and nods, then sets it down on the to-go counter.

I press on the earpiece. “Bought you something and left it at the pick-up counter.”

“You didn’t need to do that.”

“I know.” I take my coffee to a table in the back. I look around for Hendrick, but as usual, I don’t see him. It’s not very busy right now, so if he’s in here, he’s doing a damn good job of hiding. On cue, the door from outside opens, and he steps through. I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to how devastatingly hot he is. Even trying to hide, he draws attention.

The barista flashes him a much bigger smile than she did me as he takes the drink. He tips his head to me before heading back outside, probably to watch more sports news.

“Thank you,” he says a few seconds later.

“Did you try it yet?”

“No. Why?”

“Don’t thank me until you try it.”

It goes quiet and then he curses lightly while coughing. “What in the hell is that?”

“You’re welcome,” I sing-song.

He grunts, which makes me want to roll my eyes. I guess he probably had to keep a strict diet while he was in the NFL. I wonder if he misses it. Then I remember I can just ask.

“Do you miss playing football?”

“Not yet, but it hasn’t been that long.”

“So you practice with the team, but you don’t play in the games?” I did a little bit of research, but the sports lingo went right over my head. Also, it’s possible I was too distracted by the photos that came up of him in his uniform. Hendrick Holland in football pants . . . wow.

“The practice squad is where they move guys off the active roster to keep developing them or serve as backup in case someone gets hurt, or in my case, it’s a place to let washed-up players teach the rookies a thing or two. The

schedule is the same as the guys on the active roster, except we don't travel with the team."

"And you'll do the same thing next season?"

There's a pause before he answers. "I don't know yet. My contract ended in December after their regular season was over. My agent thinks they'll offer me a new contract for the practice squad, but I don't know."

"I'm surprised more people don't recognize you. Your disguises are a little too good."

He chuckles. "It's not Archer's clothes. I didn't play enough for that type of attention."

"You should. Your face deserves *all* the attention."

"I went pro too early. I should have stayed and developed more in college. Maybe then I wouldn't have gotten hurt. I don't know."

"I'm sorry."

"It is what it is," he says. "I don't know why I said that. I hate that phrase."

"Me too." I laugh lightly. I want to ask him more, but a shadow falls over the table and I look up to see Paris beaming down at me with her beautiful smile.

"Oh no," I mutter so softly I'm surprised when he asks, "What's wrong?"

The seriousness in his tone has me certain he's about to bust in here ready for fight mode.

I'd kind of like to see that, but I turn my head and cover my mouth as I say, "Nothing. I'm fine."

Then I glance back at the Panhellenic Council president. "Hey, Paris."

Her teeth are so white and perfect she could do toothpaste commercials. "I just happened to see you on my way out and wanted to pop over and say hello."

I wave. "Hello."

"Have you given any more thought to performing at the Spring Fling?" Her eyes sparkle and plead. She's gorgeous even when she's being annoying, which is even more annoying.

"No, actually I haven't."

She looks crestfallen but doesn't let it deter her. "I ran into one of the guys in your band and he said they've been working on some new material."

"You talked to Eric?"

"No. The one with the long hair and septum piercing."

“Ted,” I say. “And I’m not part of their band. I just fill in sometimes for their singer.”

“Mackenzie, I know. She’s great.”

“You know the band?”

“Duh. I’m not an idiot. I did my research. They’re good.”

“So, why not let them do the show without me?”

“You know why.”

I groan inwardly.

“They won’t get the same draw unless you perform with them. It doesn’t even have to be every song. You could pop in for one or five.” She looks so hopeful.

“I’m sorry. My answer is still no.” I wrap both hands around my coffee cup. “But you should ask them. You’re right, they’re really, really good.”

“All right.” She sighs. “I guess I don’t have any other choice. If I don’t get something finalized, the committee is going to have a meltdown.”

“It’ll be great,” I reassure her, trying to ignore the weird disappointment I feel settling in at passing up the opportunity. I just can’t. Not yet. And this will be great for Eric and the rest of the group.

After she’s gone, I drop my head and stare down at my chipped white nail polish. I’d almost forgotten about Hendrick when I remember the earpiece. “Sorry. I forgot to press the button.”

“It’s fine,” he says in that smooth, even tone.

“Feel like a walk?”

“Sure. Where are we going?”

I stand and grab my things. “My favorite place on campus.”

HENDRICK

“*THIS IS YOUR FAVORITE PLACE ON CAMPUS?*” I ASK AS JANE WALKS INTO THE campus bookstore. I keep my distance but decide to walk in and get a closer look at what she’s up to.

“I like shopping and this place is so festive. And they have lots of fun stuff. Books, magazines, clothes, computers . . .” She trails off as she stops in front of an end cap with Valley U hats. She grabs one and puts it on. “What do you think?”

“Looks good.”

She snorts like she knows my response is bullshit. It is. I mean, she does look good, but that’s like saying a Lamborghini looks good. Good doesn’t scratch the surface.

“How’s that iced blond vanilla latte treating you?” she asks, setting the hat back on the shelf.

“Sweet,” I say as I take another sip of the awful drink. “Really sweet.”

Her light laughter has a smile pulling at my lips.

“What made you think I was a vanilla latte kind of guy?”

“Just testing a theory,” she quips.

“And what kind of theory is that?”

“That if you drink something sweet, you’ll be less grumpy.”

I shake my head but take another drink.

“Oooh, they got new hoodies. That pink one is cute!” She holds it up in front of her. I take the chance to look around. I don’t expect someone to follow her into the bookstore and jump her, but I’m constantly on the watch for paparazzi. That bastard Roger Brayson is lucky I haven’t seen him lurking

around. I'd still like to kick his ass for scaring Jane the way he did.

"Oh, hi," Jane says, snapping my attention back to where she's looking at hoodies.

Cameron Payton approaches her wearing a cocky smile. His gaze roams over her body in a way that makes me want to move in and make my presence known.

"Hey, beautiful." He goes right in for a hug. "Must be my lucky day running into you."

I must make some noise that shows my displeasure because she quickly moves a hand to her ear. Except she hits it one too many times and it only goes quiet for a second. I miss whatever she said back to him, but catch his next words.

"I was just thinking about you."

"You were?" she asks, surprise in her tone.

"Yeah, I haven't seen you out lately and you didn't reply to my text. What's up with that?"

"Oh, uh, I've just been busy. I'm sorry."

I fight a smile that she's been ignoring his text, but it's gone at his next words.

"You're forgiven. What are you doing tonight?"

"I'm not sure yet." She sets the pink sweatshirt down and shifts uncomfortably in front of him. I catch her glancing around, looking for me, but she doesn't see me.

I'm probably an asshole for being glad that she doesn't sound excited to hang out with this idiot, but then again, he did have her up on a bar like she was some sort of show pony the last time she went out with him.

He leans in closer to her. "We're having a party at the house. You should stop by."

"Yeah, maybe." She smiles at him a little too much, even if she still isn't exactly falling all over him. She's way too fucking good for this dude.

"Cool, cool. I'll see you tonight then." He backs away from her and then turns to walk out of the store with his buddies.

She hits the earpiece a couple times. "You there?"

"Yep." I tap my thumb against the side of my drink. "Only about fifteen minutes until your next class. We should get going."

"Thanks, *Dad*. I can keep track of the time." She sighs and folds the pink sweatshirt she'd been looking at before Cameron showed up. "Okay. I'm

ready.”

I wait for her outside, then step in next to her. She smiles hesitantly until she’s sure I’m going to stay at her side.

“Any plans for tonight?” she asks me.

“Flynn has a basketball game.”

Her smile widens, but she doesn’t say anything. That’s a first for her.

“What?”

“I’m just picturing you and all your brothers sitting on high school bleachers together.”

“Because?”

“I don’t know. You’re all so hot.”

I take another sip, then grimace. “You think my brothers are hot?”

“They look like you.”

I wish I could let the compliment land like she wants, but I promised myself I would not fuck this up again. She needs me. Even if she doesn’t realize how badly. Besides, I turned down the job Logan booked me with the old man Waverly and told him not to schedule anything for at least the next month. Protecting Jane and figuring out how to fix things with my brothers is all I have going on right now. And looking out for her seems like the far easier task if I’m honest.

“Is Flynn any good?” she asks, casting me a sideways glance. “At basketball.”

“Yeah, he is actually, but his first love is baseball.” I take another sip and then grimace.

“You don’t have to keep drinking it if it’s that terrible.”

“It’s growing on me.” It’s definitely not.

“Cam plays baseball.” She jabs a thumb over her shoulder. “The guy I ran into at the bookstore.”

“I remember him.” Unfortunately. “Are you going to the party tonight?”

Her jaw drops slowly. “You heard?”

“You pressed twice instead of once.”

She lifts a hand to her ear, then shakes her head. “I’m gonna have to take the thing out before I pee.”

I chuckle softly.

“So, are you?” I ask a few seconds later.

“No, I don’t think so. I haven’t really felt like partying lately.”

That seems so contradictory I can’t help but ask, “Why not?”

“I don’t know.” Her tone is soft and conflicted. “The thing at our party happened.”

“Your room being vandalized?”

She nods. “Then Grady was with me so that felt weird. It would have been like going to a party with my dad.” She makes a face that has me chuckling again. “So, I’ve just been keeping it low-key.”

As her bodyguard, I’m glad to hear that she’s keeping a low profile, but the more I get to know her, the more I see just how much the drama of the past month has changed her and stopped her from doing the things she loves.

I walk her all the way to the door of her sociology class. “Have fun.”

“Fun?” She quirks a brow, but still smiles up at me in a way that has me reciprocating.

“Learn something, I don’t know. See you after.”

Her gaze drops to my mouth and then she looks up at me with those gorgeous green eyes. “See you after.”

Knox stands and raises both hands over his head. “’Atta boy, Flynn.” He caps it off by putting his fingers in his mouth and whistling.

When he sits back down next to me on the bleacher, he nudges my arm. “Did you see that or were you watching your phone?”

“I saw it. He scored a three from the right wing.”

“He’s on fire tonight,” Brogan says, turning around from where he and Archer sit in front of us. “And did you see that hair flip while he held the follow through?”

Brogan does his best impression of my youngest brother shooting the ball, holding the pose and flicking his head to the left. It’s a pretty damn good impression.

“I wonder where he got that cocky shit from?” I mutter.

“Don’t look at me.” He nudges Archer. “Arch is the king of hair flips. He does that shit all the time.”

“What? I do not,” Archer insists.

“Oh, you definitely do.” Brogan shakes his head adamantly. “During weightlifting, playing beer pong, and sometimes just walking around campus.”

Brogan gives a more dramatic re-enactment this time that has me and Knox chuckling.

“I’m just getting my hair out of my eyes!” Archer’s voice climbs in defense, which just makes us all laugh harder.

He finally smiles. “Don’t get me started on all your guys’ cocky bullshit. Have you seen Knox on his motorcycle? The way he pulls his helmet off when a girl is around, all slow and sensual for a dramatic reveal? Or Brogan’s touchdown dance?”

“That dance is awesome,” Brogan says.

Archer looks at me like he’s about to call me out on something but hesitates. I cock a brow, silently giving him the go-ahead.

A slow smile spreads across his face. “You do this look.”

“A look?”

“Yeah, it’s . . .” His face morphs into a serious, scrutinizing gaze as he tilts his head and purses his lips.

My brothers crack up.

“I don’t look like that . . . ever.”

“You totally do, Hen.” Brogan covers his mouth with a laugh.

“It’s more like this,” Knox says and then offers his best impression of me.

“That’s just my face!” Now I’m the one getting defensive. I laugh, something easing in my chest. I missed this. Sitting around, giving each other shit.

My phone vibrates in my hand, and I quickly look down to the screen. I frown at the text from Logan. I asked him to look into Roger Brayson, but it looks like he’s clean. He’s fairly new to the paparazzi scene. He worked for a small online magazine for a few years before it closed. His parents live in Phoenix, which explains why he’s been covering Jane for so long. There’s nothing on him except a couple parking tickets.

I still want to pummel the guy, but I’m relieved that he doesn’t have a violent history if he’s following Jane around.

The buzzer sounds indicating halftime and Brogan stands. “I’m starving. Anyone wanna hit the concessions?”

Arch and I shake our heads, but Knox gets to his feet. “I’ll go with you.”

Once they leave us, Archer moves up to sit next to me. He glances at the phone still clutched in my hands. “Everything okay with Jane?”

“Yeah,” I answer automatically. “Why?”

“Maybe because you’ve been checking your phone every two seconds.”

“I have not.”

“You have. I’m deaf, not blind. And normally it’d be forgivable to be glued to your phone at a high school basketball game, but Flynn is having the game of his life, and I know you wouldn’t want to miss that unless something else is going on.”

He’s right, dammit. And now I feel like an ass to boot.

“Nothing is going on. I mean, she’s fine. I guess I’m just on edge after this week.”

He nods slowly. “How’s she handling everything?”

“She plays it off like she’s good, but I can tell she’s still freaked out.”

“I saw her in passing today on campus. She seemed all right to me. She was smiling and friendly, as usual.”

“It’s not anything like that.” I hesitate for a moment, remembering her interaction with Cameron. “She got invited to a party tonight and when I asked her about it, she said she wasn’t going.”

“Maybe she’s not in the mood to party tonight.” He shrugs it off, then smiles. “Even Brogan and I take a Friday night off from partying every once in a while.”

“Not that I’ve seen,” I say, and he laughs. “When I pressed her on it, though, she said she hasn’t been out in a month.”

Understanding dawns in my brother’s eyes and his brows scrunch together. “Now that you say that I can’t remember the last time I saw her out. Actually, that’s a lie. I do remember. It was the night of her party.”

We fall quiet for a beat, then Archer adds, “What are you going to do?”

“Nothing.”

“By nothing you mean continue obsessively checking your phone.” He catches me doing just that. “Just text her and check in. That seems perfectly logical for a bodyguard.”

“Yeah,” I say, but I slide my phone into my pocket.

Flynn continues having an epic game in the second half and I enjoy it instead of staring at my phone waiting for something bad to happen. She’s home with her friends for the night. She’s safe. That’s the job, not meddling in her social life.

Archer and Brogan head out right after, but Knox and I wait for Flynn. He comes out of the locker room, hair wet and clothes wrinkly, wearing a shy smile. He might be confident and cocky on the court, but he's back to his usual timid and quiet self now.

"What a fucking game." Knox hugs him and pats his back. "Thirty-three points and if coach hadn't subbed you out in the fourth period, I think you would have hit fifty."

When Knox steps back, I move forward. "Congrats. That was impressive."

"Thanks, Hen." He shuffles uncomfortably and his cheeks, still ruddy from the game, take on a brighter pink hue.

"Do you guys want to grab something to eat?" I ask.

"Ooooh, pizza sounds good," Knox says. "Or Mexican."

Some of Flynn's friends and teammates come out behind him. One guy yells, "Flynn, are you coming to Pete's?"

A girl with long brown hair pulled up into a high ponytail plays with the ends as she smiles at my brother and hangs back slightly from the group waiting for his answer. He looks from his friends to her, then quickly away. "Uhh, maybe."

"Go," Knox tells him.

Flynn looks at me. I hold back a laugh at how hopeful his gaze is, silently asking me not to ruin his night by making him have dinner with us. "It's cool. Have fun with your friends. Text me if you need a ride later."

"I'll get a ride home with Glenn," he says, already heading after his friends.

I'm about to ask Knox if he wants to go out to dinner anyway, but my phone vibrates in my jeans pocket, and I eagerly slide my hand in to retrieve it as my heart beats faster.

JANE

Are you still at the game?

Before I can reply, she sends another.

JANE

If you don't have plans after, can we talk?

"I gotta go too," I tell Knox. "Jane texted."

"I get it. The Hollywood star beckons," he teases. "I'd be running off too."

Tell her I said hey.”

“I definitely will not.”

I can hear him chuckling as I rush toward my truck. Once I get in and start it up, I text her back.

ME

Just leaving the game now. What's up?

I give it a few minutes, but when she doesn't reply, my impatient ass decides to call her. It goes straight to voicemail, so I hang up and try again. After the fourth try, my pulse is racing and fear laces through me. I read her texts again. Was that supposed to be some sort of cryptic message to let me know she was in danger? *Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

I start the engine and peel out of the high school parking lot.

JANE

“JANE!” DAHLIA YELLS FROM DOWNSTAIRS.

“Yeah?” I call back at the same time it sounds like a herd of elephants is racing up the wooden steps from the first floor. *What the hell?*

I put the lid back on the nail polish and stand carefully so I don't smudge the wet color.

A frantic-looking Hendrick bursts into the open doorway. He scans me from head to toe, then searches the room. I would be less surprised if an actual elephant stood in front of me.

“What are you doing here?” I ask as Dahlia and Felix join us to see what's going on.

“You texted and then didn't answer when I called. What happened? Are you okay?” He steps closer. Those intense hazel eyes are filled with so much worry it takes my breath away.

“Jane?” He asks again. “Did something happen?”

“I thought you were still at the game. My phone is in do not disturb mode.”

“You're fine?”

“Y-yes,” I say slowly. I'm still confused why he is here. “Just painting my toes.”

His gaze sweeps down to my lime green toenails, and he nods. “You're fine. Good.”

A frenzied, anxious energy still radiates off him.

“I'm sorry,” I say as I realize he's thoroughly freaked out. He thought something happened to me. That should make me more apologetic, but seeing

him in action like this is so hot that I'm glad I'm getting to witness it when there isn't a real problem. "I didn't mean to make you worry. You didn't reply right away so I figured it'd be a while before I heard back from you."

He visibly relaxes in front of me. Running a hand over his hair, he messes up the perfect brown locks as he lets out a breath.

"We're gonna go back downstairs," Dahlia says, pulling Felix with her.

I give her a thankful smile.

"Good to see you again, man," Felix calls out as he leaves.

The air is heavy with tension once we're alone. I sit on the edge of the bed and grab my phone off the nightstand. Hendrick is still sort of gazing about like he can't believe he's in my room or he's considering murdering me for being such a terrible client.

I read his texts and clear the missed calls—all six of them, then I tap out a reply.

ME

I'm so sorry.

He glances down at the screen to read my text, then looks up at me. "It's all right. Guess I overreacted. I'll get out of your way."

"Wait." I jump up and reach for his arm. "Don't go. I'm sorry I made you worry, but I'm glad you're here. I wanted to talk to you."

He looks down at where my fingers still rest on his forearm. I let my hand fall away.

"Okay. About what?" His rough voice makes goosebumps dot my arms.

"Sit," I say as I do just that. I bring my feet up in front of me to inspect my polish.

He lowers himself to the top of the mattress like he's ready to bolt at any second.

"I messed up my nails." I press a thumb to the smudge to fix it, but only manage to make it worse.

When I look up, his stare is on my bare legs instead of my feet.

"How was Flynn's game? Did they win?" I ask as I inch closer to him.

"Yeah." The mention of his brother finally seems to soften his expression. "He scored thirty-three points, and they won by a landslide."

"Wow. That's a lot of points for high school, right?"

"It's a lot for any level," he says.

"Violet's boyfriend, Gavin, plays basketball at Valley, so I've seen a few

college games. What grade is Flynn?”

“He’s a sophomore this year.” Hendrick’s body relaxes further.

“Is he going to play basketball or baseball in college?”

“I don’t know. He hasn’t said much about it since I’ve been home. He hasn’t said much of anything, really. He’s the quiet one.”

“There’s always one,” I say and cross my legs so I can move even closer.

Hendrick’s body tenses slightly as my knees brush against his thigh. “What’d you want to talk about?”

I lay my hands in my lap. “I was really pissed when I found out you were my bodyguard. Not just because you’d lied, but because I thought we had a connection and then it felt like it’d all been in my head.”

“It wasn’t in your head,” he says hoarsely.

“I know.”

His head lifts like he’s surprised by my answer.

“I felt it again this week. The texting and then talking today. Every time you touch me or look at me like you’re doing now. I’ve had other security details and it’s never been like this. There’s something about you. Something about us.”

“Jane,” he starts. The apologetic and tortured swirl of emotion in his eyes pushes me to interrupt before he can let me down easy again. Being rejected, even when it’s polite, still hurts like a bitch.

“I know. I know. You can’t protect me if you’re distracted, and sleeping with me would be distracting. You were absolutely right about that.” I give him a flirty smile. “I didn’t ask you here for that.”

He studies me intently as he waits for me to continue.

“I don’t know that much about you. All the conversations we had before were clouded with this big secret you were keeping from me.”

“I never lied to you.”

“Maybe not, but you weren’t completely honest either.” I shake my head. “If we’re going to spend so much time together, if I’m going to trust you, then I want to get to know you. The real you. And I figure it’ll be a slow process if I ask you while on campus because you’re doing your job and all that.”

“That’s it? You wanted to talk tonight to get to know me?” One corner of his mouth lifts lightly and he stares at me in disbelief. “I’m not that interesting.”

“You are to me.” I push back until I can lean back against the headboard.

I also need to tell him about the email I got today, which is the other reason I texted, but right now I just want to have a conversation with him that isn't all about me. I'm so sick of my drama.

"All right. What do you want to know?" he asks, still looking like he thinks the whole concept of me wanting to get to know him better is ludicrous.

"For starters, how'd you get into private security?" I ask, giddy that he seems to be going along with it, and pick up the abandoned nail polish.

"A teammate felt bad for me when I got cut from the team. He knew someone who hired security for concerts at The Hollywood Bowl."

"Who was performing at your first job?"

"Paramore."

"Are you a fan?"

"I know a couple songs."

"Did you get to meet them?" I can't fire the questions out fast enough.

"No." He chuckles as he leans and props himself up with one arm. "I never even saw them. I was parked out front the entire time, checking people as they came in and then keeping an eye on the parking lot."

"Too bad. I love them." I start singing "Misery Business." I forgot how much I loved that song.

Hendrick watches me with a smile that suddenly makes me feel self-conscious.

I stop and twist off the cap of the nail polish to fix my smudged pedicure. "So, you worked a few concerts . . ."

"Yeah, concerts and other events. I wasn't picky about the jobs I took. I was trying to make as much as I could to send money back to my brothers . . ." He hesitates. "Working security paid pretty well and I enjoyed it. Especially after I met Logan."

"Logan?" I bend my leg so I can paint my toes.

"He owns the private security company I work for now."

"The one my parents hired."

Hendrick nods. "Yeah. Logan took me on, made sure I got all the training I'd need for higher profile jobs, and the bonus was it was flexible enough I could continue working out and rehabbing my knee to get back to football."

"Does Logan find you jobs or do you get a say?"

His smile widens. "Are you trying to ask if I took the job knowing who you were?"

Had I been? “Well, did you?”

“I knew about you only in the broadest sense—that you were a famous actress who was attending college in Valley.”

“And you took the job because your brothers are here?”

“Yeah. It was perfect timing with the season and my contract ending. When I was practicing with the team, I only had availability on nights and weekends. Logan was good about working around my schedule. I got a few clients that I’d help out regularly, but I mostly took jobs that were for a single day or maybe a weekend. Until you.”

“Until me,” I repeat softly.

He shifts closer and regards me seriously. Those hazel eyes meet mine with such sincerity that it makes my pulse race. “If you’re waiting for me to say I’m sorry that I took the job or that I deceived you, then you should know right now that I’m not. I’m sorry that you were hurt in the process, but the more time I’ve spent with you, the happier I am I took the job. And yeah, we have a connection. I’m not denying that. You’re beautiful and kind. You’re fun and charismatic. Following you around doesn’t feel like a job at all. But it *is* my job, Jane.” He reaches forward and lets his knuckles graze my cheek, then his thumb drags along my bottom lip.

I think I stop breathing until his hand falls away.

I reach for it and bring it onto my knee. His fingers splay out over my skin with those rough edges. I explore, running the pads of my fingers over the veins in his hands and then turn it over to check out the coarse palm I’m so fascinated with. His hands are strong and worn, and I love how they feel against my skin.

He lets me take my time like this is a perfectly normal encounter between two people who have already agreed that nothing can happen between them. Though to be fair, nothing about my life or any of my interactions with Hendrick feels normal anymore.

I set his hand back on my knee and bring the nail polish brush down over his middle finger, painting it lime green to match my toes.

“So now what?” I ask as I blow on it lightly. When I look up, his expression makes me shiver.

“Well, for tonight, I should go home and let you go to sleep,” he says gruffly.

“You just got here.”

“We have lots of time to get to know each other. I’m not going

anywhere.”

“Okay.” My heart climbs up into my throat as his hand slips off my knee and he stands. It’s on the tip of my tongue to beg him to stay, ask him to reconsider our whole situation. I could get Grady back here to keep me safe, and then Hendrick wouldn’t have any reason not to act on this thing between us.

But without this job, would he even stay in Valley or would it be on to the next job? Suddenly keeping him here feels more important than kissing him. Even though I really, *really* want to kiss him.

“Text me if you need anything.” He smiles. “And answer your phone when I call.”

“Yes, sir.” I salute him with a playful smirk, then get up to walk him out.

I follow him down the stairs. He waves to Dahlia and Felix, who are still in the living room watching a movie, then crosses to the front door. He opens it and steps out before looking back at me. “Night, Jane.”

I watch him walk to his truck before shutting the door, then I press my back against it, let my head fall back with a thump, close my eyes, and groan.

“Everything okay?” Dahlia asks.

When I open my eyes, they’re both smiling at me, and the TV is paused. “Why does he have to be so damn hot?”

They laugh and I go over to the couch and take a seat next to Dahlia. She scoots away from Felix to wrap her arms around me.

“What am I gonna do?” I never did tell him about the email, but I feel like we came to an understanding tonight and it was nice to talk and get to know each other a little better.

“I don’t know, babe.”

“I’m so glad I have you.” I tilt my head and rest it on her shoulder.

“Always. You always have me.”

HENDRICK

“I’M REALLY OVER THE RAIN,” JANE SAYS AS SHE STEPS OUT OF THE MUSIC building. She pauses to open her umbrella before continuing toward her next class.

I’m about fifty yards away, standing under an overhang of a building across from her. “It’s supposed to clear up before your afternoon class.”

When she gets within about ten feet of me, I step out to meet her. She holds the umbrella out so it blocks some of the rain from landing on my hat and shoulders.

“Heading home now?” I ask.

“Actually, I was hoping we could grab lunch at University Hall.”

I glance over to catch her biting the corner of her lip with an almost nervous smile. “Sure.”

“I mean, together. I have something I need to tell you.”

I stop in the rain and face her. She is nervous, but why? “Okay.”

“Not here,” she says.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I’m prepared to ignore anyone except Logan, but I didn’t expect Knox to be calling.

I take Jane’s hand and lead her into the nearest building as I answer, so she’s out of the rain while I take the call.

“Hey, what’s up? Everything all right?” I ask him.

“Everyone is fine, but Flynn needs to be picked up from school and I’m an hour away at a job site. Any chance you can get him?”

“What about Archer?”

“I tried him first, but he didn’t answer. I think they’ve got a team meeting

or something today. The fuck knows with their schedule. Can you pick up Flynn or not?"

"Yeah. I can get him."

"Thank you."

"You don't need to thank me. He's my brother too." I glance over at Jane to find her watching with concern. "Is he sick or something?"

"No." Knox's tone slips deeper. "But I bet he wishes he was. I don't know all the details, the principal wouldn't say much, but I'm so sorry I won't be there to see your face when he tells you what happened. Gotta go. See you in a bit."

He ends the call, leaving me with no idea what the hell is going on.

"Is everything okay?" Jane asks. Her voice echoes in the empty entryway of the old building. Her cheeks are red from the cold and that makes her green eyes more prominent.

"I don't know. I gotta go pick up Flynn from school." I take the umbrella from her and then hold the door open for her to step out.

She tries to take it from me. "Go. I can get home on my own. I'll even text you when I'm there, so you know I made it."

It's a reasonable request, but she had something to tell me, and I got the feeling it was important.

"Come with me. We can pick up Flynn and drop him off at the house, and then I'll take you to lunch so we can talk about whatever it is you wanted to talk about."

"Are you sure?"

I'm already ushering her toward my truck. "Positive."

Like everything else in my life, things don't go as planned. Jane graciously hangs in the living room while I follow Flynn into his room and shut the door.

He tosses his backpack onto the floor and then throws himself onto the bed. "Can you just yell at me already, so we can get it over with?"

I resist the urge to do just that. Our dad yelled when he got pissed, or when he drank too much. He got off on being loud and having the last word. I can remember wishing he'd just hit me and shut up.

But I doubt Flynn remembers too much of that. We always did a good job of shielding him from the worst of our father.

“I’m not going to yell at you,” I say finally. It’s the first thing I’ve said since we left the school. I sit on the edge of the bed. “You should put some ice on that eye, so it doesn’t swell shut.”

He shrugs. “I don’t care.”

I let out a long sigh. “Do you want to tell me about the fight?”

“There’s nothing else to tell. I got into a fight.”

I wonder if Knox is better at getting Flynn to open up, or Archer or Brogan. Is this about me not knowing the right questions to ask or is this just Flynn? I should know something like that, right? I should be able to have a conversation with my baby brother without him completely shutting down at every turn.

“Did he provoke you by saying or doing something to you?” The idea of Flynn being bullied hadn’t occurred to me until now, but it makes icy-hot rage trickle down my spine.

“No.” He scoffs.

“All right. Did you say something to piss him off?”

This gets an eye roll, but it’s not quite as effective as it might be if his right eye wasn’t half-closed. “No. It wasn’t even about me.” His tone reaches an exasperation that finally breaks the truth free. “Randy was telling everyone that would listen about how he and Mariah hooked up last weekend.”

“O-kay.” I process this information and look for the next logical jump. “He hooked up with a girl you like?”

“No. I don’t even know Mariah that well. She’s a freshman.”

“Then what does that have to do with you?”

“Nothing. It doesn’t have anything to do with me.” With every word his shoulders creep up until he’s hunched, and his body is tense.

“Look, Flynn, I want to understand, but you might have to spell it out for me.”

“Randy is dating Hannah, okay? They’ve been together since last summer, but every weekend he’s hooking up with some other girl behind her back and then bragging about it to all his buddies. An hour later when it starts to get around school and Hannah finds out and confronts him, he plays it off like people are just talking shit and he’d never do that to her. I couldn’t take it anymore.”

“You like Hannah?”

He shoots me a look that I'm sure is meant to say, 'don't be stupid, of course I don't like Hannah' but pretty much says the opposite. "So, Randy's a prick and a liar and you hit him because he's cheating on his girlfriend and then gaslighting her. That sum it up?"

"Pretty much." His shoulders fall back to their relaxed position.

His bed is pushed back so the entire length is butted up to the far wall. I sit crossways so my back rests against the wall and my legs stretch out over the plaid comforter. "I got in a fight like that once."

"You did?" Both of his brows rise in surprise.

"Yeah. I had this friend in high school whose boyfriend was just the worst. He was always talking down to her and stuff. I never understood what she saw in him. Then one day I caught him making out with some other girl in the stairway between periods. I don't even remember throwing the first punch. Probably because I only got off one before he kicked my ass."

"You got into a fight *and* you lost?"

"Oh yeah, he was way bigger than me. It was freshman year, and I was still scrawny and short. He was a junior and captain of the wrestling team."

Flynn laughs, really laughs, and the sound mixed with his smile makes me feel like Mom is here right now. He looks so much like her when he smiles.

"No way. How did I not know about this?"

"I begged Mom not to say anything." I smile as I think back to it. "I knew Knox and Archer would give me so much shit, so I told them I got elbowed during practice."

"And they never found out?"

"No. Mom kept her word. They were still in middle school and by the time Knox got to high school it was old news. And even if anyone had said anything, it was my word against a guy that'd already graduated."

"They would have given you so much shit," he says. "What happened with the girl after the fight? Did she break up with him?"

"Eventually, yeah, and we dated for a little while."

Flynn laughs again, this time a little quieter. "I can't believe you got your ass kicked."

Noise outside in the living room grabs my attention. "Sounds like everyone else is home."

"Do they all already know?" he asks with a whine.

"Knox has a big mouth," I say with a smile. "But no, all they know is that

something happened at school and the principal called. We were all worried.”

“I don’t want to deal with telling this story again. I just want to sleep.” He throws an arm over his face.

“I’ll cover with Archer and Brogan, but at least talk to Knox. He was stressed that he couldn’t get to you faster.” I realize as I say it that it’s true. Knox has taken the brunt of the parenting when it comes to Flynn, and with that comes responsibility and pressure that I didn’t consider.

“Yeah, all right,” he agrees.

I scoot to the edge of the bed and stand. “Oh, and the other thing Mom did when I got into that fight was ground me for a week.”

He groans, then mutters, “Knew that was coming.”

By the time I cross his room, open the door and am closing it behind me, he already has the music blasting.

Knox stands from where he’s sitting on the arm of the couch. A protective fierceness in his eyes flashes as he walks toward me.

“He’s fine,” I say.

“What the hell happened? Jane said he got into a fight with some kid in the cafeteria.”

“I’ll let him tell you, but yeah, that’s basically it. He was defending a girl.”

Knox’s serious expression finally morphs back into the playfulness he shows the rest of the world. “I should have known it was over a girl.” He lets out a short chuckle. “Did he get suspended?”

“Yeah, three days.”

“Fuck, that sucks.”

“Yeah. The principal also mentioned his grades aren’t the best. He’s barely passing all his core classes.”

“Barely passing is passing,” Knox says. “Is he benched for the game this weekend?”

“No,” I say. “And they’re letting him attend practices after school.”

“Good. It’s the last regular game of the season before the conference tournament,” he adds, then crooks one arm behind his back to squeeze his neck. “How the hell are we going to get him to practice every day?”

“Shit. I didn’t think of that.”

“I’m working all week and I don’t think I can get anyone to cover. This attic job is hot and dirty, and nobody wants it.”

Now that he mentions it, he is covered in dirt pretty much from head to

toe.

“I’ll figure it out.”

Knox doesn’t look convinced.

“I’ll figure something out. All right?”

He nods, takes a step toward Flynn’s room, and then looks back to glance at Jane and then me. “Did you take Ivy Greene to pick him up?”

“I didn’t have much of a choice.”

“I would have killed to see that. Pro football player Hendrick Holland and Hollywood star Ivy Greene walk into Valley High School . . .” He stops and grins. “It’s probably already hit TMZ.”

He succeeds in making me laugh. “Shut the fuck up. No one but the woman at the front desk and the principal saw either of us. And stop saying my name like that.”

“What? That is your name, isn’t it?” With that he knocks on Flynn’s door and then disappears inside.

I continue into the living room where Jane is hanging out with Archer and Brogan. The latter are playing video games while Jane sits at the end of the same couch with her laptop open in front of her. She looks up when I take a seat across from them.

“Hey.” She aims a small smile at me.

Brogan pauses the video game. “How’s our little Rocky?”

“They dragged the highlights out of me,” Jane confesses.

“It’s fine,” I assure her. “He’s all right. Gonna have a hell of a black eye and he’s suspended for three days.”

Archer whistles. “Damn. I can’t believe it. Flynn punched someone?”

“I’ll let him tell you the details if he wants, but maybe give him a few hours before you start hounding him?”

“We gotta head back to campus anyway.” Brogan drops the controller onto the coffee table and looks to Jane. “You need a ride?”

“Oh.” She shakes her head. “No. I’m good.”

“I can take her,” I say, standing.

Brogan and Archer get up and start for the door, but not before they both send me a knowing smirk.

Once they’re gone, I wait for Jane to pack up her things.

“I’m sorry about dragging you along,” I say, then remember we were supposed to get lunch. “Dammit. You must be starving.”

“I could eat,” she says. She lifts her backpack to her shoulder.

“I’ll swing by and get you something on our way.” I glance at the clock. “Or I’ll drop you first and then go to University Hall and grab food. If you sit in the back of that giant lecture hall, I can sneak it in.”

“Or we could go sit down somewhere together and have lunch? You haven’t eaten either and you look like you could use an hour or two of downtime.”

“I’ll be fine. Come on, I don’t want you to be late.”

She does move to the door, but not all that quickly. “I already emailed my sociology professor and let him know I had something urgent come up. We’re just reviewing for a test next week.” She shrugs. “It shouldn’t be an issue.”

“You didn’t need to do that.”

“I know. I wasn’t a hostage here.” She smiles. “It’s no big deal. Seriously. But feeding me is a big deal because I’m on the verge of getting hangry.”

We go to In-N-Out. The lunch rush is gone, and the place is quiet as we sit together at a little booth by the window, eating burgers and fries and watching traffic.

“It’s sweet,” Jane says after I tell her the full story about Flynn. “This is the kind of stuff I missed out on in high school. No guy ever punched someone in my honor.”

I find that incredibly hard to believe.

“That you know about,” I say as I swirl a fry in a ketchup and mayo mixture before tossing it in my mouth.

“Trust me. I would have known.”

“Listen,” I say, holding back a sigh. “I know Flynn doesn’t need someone watching over him while he’s home during his suspension, but I’d like to be there for him anyway.”

“Right. Of course.” She nods, and she looks so understanding that it makes me feel worse.

“I’ll find someone to cover for me. That part shouldn’t be a problem.” I spent all of lunch trying to come up with a solution and this is the best I can do. I hate it.

“What if I just hang at the house with you guys?”

“With me and Flynn?”

“Yeah. I mean, I guess that’s presumptuous, but I could just chill there during the day. I won’t get in the way or anything. You won’t even know I’m

there.”

Yeah, right. There’s no room we could be in together that I wouldn’t be aware of her.

“Or I can stay at my place, of course. My roommates all have different schedules, so someone is there most of the time during the day.”

“I don’t love you being there by yourself when I can’t get there quickly, but you also can’t miss three days of classes.”

“I’ll email my professors and just do whatever I can outside of class. It won’t be a problem.”

It feels like such an easy solution, and maybe it’s asking too much of her but I’m just so happy to have a solution that doesn’t require me to navigate twelve different hoops that I agree. “Thank you. I really appreciate it. I want to be there with him, even if he doesn’t really want or need me to be.”

“I think he wants it more than he’d ever let on.”

“Maybe.”

Jane eyes my fries. “That looks disgusting.”

“Ketchup and mayo?”

She nods.

“Try it.” I push my tray toward her and watch as she carefully dips the very end of a french fry into the sauce before tasting it.

She immediately makes a face. “Oh, no. No, no, no.” She takes a long drink of her lemonade before she speaks again. “Looks disgusting because it is.”

We smile at each other over our food and it’s the first time in an hour that I feel like I can take a full breath.

JANE

“ARE YOU READY?” HENDRICK ASKS WHEN WE’RE BOTH FINISHED EATING. HE smiles at me, but it’s a tired, stressed-out smile that makes me wish I could fix all of it instead of pile on. But I have to pile on. It’s been three days since I got the weird email, and I still haven’t told him. Nothing else has happened, but if I know Hendrick, and I think I’m starting to, he’s going to be pissed I didn’t confide in him immediately.

I wish I had done it, oh, about three hours ago. Now I feel like a giant jerk for adding more things for him to worry about.

He scoots to the end of the bench and starts to stand, but I force myself to stay sitting. If I get up, I’ll wait another day (or three) to tell him.

“Everything okay?” he asks in a hesitant tone.

“Wait. Before we go . . .”

He moves over in the booth so he’s back directly in front of me. His voice is gruff and tense as he says, “Fuck, I’m sorry. You wanted to talk to me.”

“It’s probably easier if I just show you.”

I hold my phone in my hands with the email pulled up so all I have to do is hand it to him, but I still don’t just yet. “First though, I’m so sorry for the timing. The thing with your brother is top priority. Family comes first and if it’s all too much right now then I will call Grady tonight and—”

“Show me, Jane.”

The command in his voice leaves no room for argument. I hand over my phone and wait while he reads it. It doesn’t take long.

When he looks up at me those hazel eyes are so dark, I’d swear they’re brown. “You got this on Friday and didn’t say anything until now?”

I guess it was too much to hope that he'd not notice the time stamp. "I wanted to. It's why I texted that night. I knew I needed to, but then you showed up and, well, I didn't."

"Why? Why would you keep something like this from me? Dammit, Jane, I can't keep you safe if I don't know what's happening."

"I know. I know. I'm sorry, okay? I'm just tired of it."

"Of what?"

"All of it. Feeling scared and hopeless and dealing with drama after drama. And I used to like drama."

We sit there in silence, me feeling guilty, and him probably pissed and more stressed.

I feel awful, and I guess I should. "I know that it's your job to protect me, but sometimes I just want you to see me as a girl and not your client."

"I see you. All of you. But it doesn't help anything if you keep things like this to yourself." He hands my phone back. "Are there any more?"

"No. Just the one."

"Any other things that have happened at home or on campus?"

I shake my head.

"Nothing that's given you pause?" He presses. "Anything at all? Even if you think it's not related."

I start to say no but then think of Clint. "Maybe, actually. It could be nothing."

"Let me be the judge of that."

"About a month ago my ex liked one of my photos on Instagram." It sounds dumb when I say it out loud, but Hendrick doesn't brush it off. "The night of the party, actually."

"The same night someone was in your room?"

"Yes." I swallow around a lump in my throat. It hadn't occurred to me until now that both of those things happened on the same day.

"This is the guy who stalked you after you broke up, right?"

"How do you . . ." I trail off. "My parents."

He has enough sympathy to look apologetic. "Before I started the job, they gave me some background on the situation with Clint and a few other threats you received while in L.A."

"None of it ever amounted to anything. Bullies behind a keyboard, mostly. Same as whoever sent the email, probably."

"You might be right, but I'm still going to have Logan look into it."

Forward me the email and then block and delete. E. Rex Sean,” he mutters. “Clever.”

Hearing the name out loud finally makes it click.

“Oh my god. Erection!” I shout a little too loudly for In-N-Out.

“Just now piecing that together?”

“I feel like such an idiot. Again. I was so worried about not telling you and then equally worried about telling you and dropping more shit on your lap when you already have so much else going on. For a stupid prank email.”

He reaches across the table and stops my rambling with his touch. Those strong hands and those long fingers with rough edges. “You’re not an idiot and you don’t know if it’s a prank.”

“E. Rex Sean?” I say again, still pissed at myself for being scared of some jerk who has the maturity of a sixth grader. Fuck, it might be a sixth grader.

“You’re not an idiot,” he repeats. “I grew up in a house of boys. Perverted names were one of our many specialties.”

I laugh at that, though I struggle to picture Hendrick as a kid making jokes about erections. He seems like a guy that’s always carried the weight of the world on his shoulders.

“Thank you,” I say softly. “And I’m—”

“Don’t say sorry. It’s literally my job.”

I fall quiet because everything I want to say is me apologizing more.

“And also,” he says, voice low. “Even if it wasn’t my job, I’d do whatever I could to keep you safe.”

Later, I’m watching TV in the living room by myself when there’s a knock at the door. I press mute and freeze, waiting for another knock. I’m not expecting anyone. Daisy is at Jordan’s hockey game, Vi is at a study group, and Dahlia left today for a golf tournament.

I’m still tensed, mind reeling with scenarios, when Hendrick’s voice calls out. “I know you’re home, Jane. I saw you through the front window.”

Cursing the open curtains, I get up and open the front door to a smiling Hendrick. He glances past me into the house.

“What are you doing here?” I cross my arms over my bra-free chest.

“Can I come in?”

“Sure,” I say slowly and step out of the way. He follows me over to the couch and we both take a seat. He eyes the muted TV with amusement.

“*Farmer Wants a Wife*,” I tell him. “It sounds bizarre, but I’m totally hooked.”

One side of his mouth lifts. “Where is everyone?”

“Out. What’s up? Everything okay with Flynn?”

“The eye is getting blacker by the hour, but otherwise he’s good, I think.”

“Good.”

He rubs his palms together. “I don’t like you being here by yourself.”

“I’ll set the alarm (I finally agreed to one of those, though I still hate it), and my roommates will be back later, I think.”

“You think?” One dark brow lifts.

“Did you need something or did you just come here to give me a hard time?”

He takes a second before he speaks again. “I was thinking, what if you came and stayed at my place for a few days?”

“Yeah, that’s the plan, right? I’ll be over in the morning.”

“No, I mean, what if you stayed all day and all night?”

“You want me to move in with you?” My voice raises several octaves, and a thousand butterflies take flight in my stomach.

“Logan is looking into the email, but until then I would really feel better if you weren’t sitting home alone.”

I open my mouth to argue that I’m perfectly safe, but his face takes on a vulnerability that I’m not sure I’ve ever seen from Hendrick. He’s usually so closed-off and grumpy. “I’m sure you’re right and that it’s unnecessary, but right now I don’t feel like I can do my job and manage things at home. You’d be helping me out. Otherwise, I will talk to Logan about someone taking over for me.”

Move in with him or get a new bodyguard completely? He’s not playing fair.

“What if I just get there *really* early in the morning and come home *really* late at night?”

He says nothing, but his face is impassive.

“It feels like overkill.”

“Probably, but I’m not willing to take any chances.”

“Can I think about it tonight?” I’m planning on going to his house tomorrow morning anyway, so that gives me some time to talk him out of this

plan. I can't move in with him. That's crazier than this farmer finding a wife on reality TV.

"Sure. Yeah. Of course."

After a beat, he shifts and settles back on the couch, staring straight ahead. He lets his head fall to the side and he smiles. "Are you going to hit play or what?"

"You're staying?"

"If you won't stay with me, then I guess I'll have to stay here."

JANE

ON TUESDAY MORNING I ARRIVE AT THE HOLLAND HOUSE WITH A SUITCASE, laptop and school stuff, plus coffee, donuts, three magazines, and I downloaded two audiobooks just in case. I have no idea what I'm in for.

I park in the driveway, per my instructions. I'm not sure if I should find it endearing or overbearing that he specifically parked his big black truck along the street to give me a spot in the small driveway next to Archer and Brogan's Bronco.

The door opens before I can knock. Hendrick does a slow sweep of me standing on the other side before reaching for the coffees and donuts. "What is all this?"

"I brought caffeine and sugar. I figured if I was going to spend so much time with you, I might need both to keep you in a good mood." I smile sweetly at him.

Brogan laughs from where he stands in the kitchen, shirtless and with some serious bedhead. "Shit, Hen, she's got your number."

When Hendrick sets the donuts and coffee down on the island, Brogan reaches for one only to have his hand batted away. "Didn't you hear her, they're all for me."

"You couldn't even if you tried." Brogan comes sauntering out of the kitchen toward me as I set the rest of my stuff down at the dining room table. Though maybe it's more just a table in the dining room, since it's obvious from the various items littering the top, it hasn't been used for anything but storage lately.

"This guy lives on oatmeal, grilled chicken, and veggies."

“That’s not true,” Hendrick says.

“He had a cheeseburger and fries yesterday,” I counter. “And I saw him eyeing the milkshakes.”

“Well, that explains why you were up half the night hitting the bag in the garage,” Brogan says to Hendrick, then pats his stomach. His very flat, very muscled and defined, washboard abs to be more specific. “Had to work off those extra calories.”

“That’s not . . . I wasn’t . . .” Hendrick trails off with a laugh. “Take a damn donut and get out of here.”

Brogan grins as he flips open the box and chooses a vanilla frosted donut and a glazed. “Thanks,” he says after he’s taken a large bite out of the vanilla. “One for Arch too.”

“There’s extra coffee,” I tell him. “But don’t take the one with the HH on the side.”

He finishes off his donut before getting a coffee. He lifts it into the air in a salute to me as a door opens and Archer steps out. His eyes are half open as he shuffles out in his boxers. He adjusts himself while he lets out a loud yawn. Brogan smirks as his buddy finally looks up and sees everyone staring at him.

“Hey, Archer,” I say, trying to diffuse the awkwardness.

Archer doesn’t look my way, but he sees the coffee and donut in Brogan’s hand and asks, “Where’d that come from?”

Hendrick meets my gaze. “He doesn’t have his hearing aids on yet.”

Brogan points at me and Archer swivels around.

“Oh shit,” he says when he spots me. He drops one hand to cover his flannel-covered crotch and waves with the donut in hand. “Hey, Jane. Didn’t know you were here already. Mornin’, roomie.”

I glance back at Hendrick. Of course, he already told them I was moving in before I agreed. He’s always so damn confident. He eyes my suitcase as if to say, “well I was right, wasn’t I?”

“Morning!” I chirp back and then busy myself with pulling out my laptop and getting set up at the table so I can work on school stuff while Archer and Brogan disappear, presumably to put some clothes on.

“Sorry.” Hendrick comes over to help. He shoves a stack of clothes over, then picks up a remote and mutes the TV. “Mornings around here can be a little chaotic. They’ll be out of here soon.”

“I don’t mind,” I say honestly. “Actually, aside from the slightly

awkward encounter with your brother in his boxers, it's all sort of endearing."

He arches a brow in disbelief.

"I'm serious. It has such a different vibe than our house. We're all quiet and considerate, coordinated furniture, wine stocked in the fridge, gowns in the coat closet, and dance music always at the ready, and you guys are sports, empty beer bottles, half-naked guys, and—"

"A mess," he finishes for me.

"I was going to say brotherly banter, but you aren't wrong." I pick up a pair of dirty cleats and hold them out toward him.

"I didn't think about you needing a spot to study. Obviously not a lot of studying happens here."

"It's okay. I'll manage. Go have a donut or three, and I got you a special coffee."

He walks over and picks up the coffee with the HH on the side of the cup. He sniffs it and makes a face. "Do I even want to know?"

"It's a salted caramel something or other."

"Salted caramel?"

"At least try it before you decide you hate it."

He takes a sip and waits a second before he says, "I hate it."

"In that case, there's an extra regular coffee." I pull out a pair of headphones and open my laptop on the table. I'm not sure what to do with myself, but focusing on schoolwork seems to be a good place to start.

He comes over, still holding his salted caramel drink, and hovers.

"Do you need something or are you going to stand creepily over me all day?"

"I heard back from Logan early this morning about the email."

"Oh."

"Do you want to wait to talk about this later?"

"No. Now is fine." I close the lid of my laptop, and he takes a seat across from me. He wraps both hands around the cup. "He was able to track the IP address, but it came back to a computer in the library, so not that helpful. Same as the email address. It was created there, and the only activity is the email they sent you."

"Someone from school sent me the email?" My throat tightens. "I guess I should have assumed that because of what the email said, but people here have been cool."

I always assumed it was someone from my past or a series of pranks, but what if it's all one person at Valley who really hates me and wants me gone?

"Logan also looked into Clint. He was definitely in California at the time of the email and the night of your party."

"Okay." I guess I'm relieved it's not him, but at least he was a solid lead. Without someone to point a finger at, I'm afraid I'll go back to looking at everyone like they might want to hurt me.

"But . . ." His jaw flexes before he continues. "He's still keeping tabs on your social media accounts. Logan found at least two burner accounts he uses to follow you, Ivy, and all the fan pages."

"That's creepy."

"Don't worry, he's blocked everywhere."

"Won't he just create another account?"

"Maybe, but Logan's pretty good. He'll keep an eye on him."

I nod. "So what now?"

"You get busy studying and I'm going to clean up this mess."

"I mean about the email and Clint and everything . . ."

"I know what you meant," he says softly. "You continue to be cautious, but you live your life as normally as possible."

I glance around. "This doesn't feel normal."

A smile lifts the corners of his lips. "Anything you need, just say the word."

"A time machine?"

We both fall quiet, until he says, "I'm good at my job, Jane. I'm not going to let anything happen to you. I promise."

Warmth spreads through my chest, easing some of my nerves. I can feel the confidence in his words. If he believes that, then maybe I can too.

I'm just getting off the phone with my parents when Violet texts in the group chat.

VIOLET

Umm . . . excuse me, why was your hottie bodyguard sleeping on the couch this morning?

ME

I told you he was staying. He wouldn't leave no matter how many times I told him you were coming home later.

VIOLET

I thought you were kidding. I nearly had a heart attack.

ME

At least you would have died looking at the hottest man alive.

I haven't told them about the email, but it's time they know too.

ME

I got a weird email on my school account so security is going to be a little tighter.

DAISY

Oh my gosh. Are you okay?

ME

Yeah. It was just some jerk calling me a bitch and telling me to go back to Cali.

VIOLET

Ugh. I want to junk punch this guy for real. Does he think it's the same person that was in your room?

My stomach is in knots as I type out my response.

ME

Not sure yet, but he wants to keep a closer eye on me.

DAHLIA

I'm so sorry, babe. Wish I was there. I'll be back tomorrow.
HUGS!

VIOLET

Does that mean Hendrick is going to be a regular sight on our couch?

DAHLIA

OMG please tell me he's moving in. Felix will lose his mind. He hasn't stopped talking about Hendrick since he met him at our party.

ME

No, not exactly. He has a family thing going on, so I'm crashing at his place for the rest of the week.

No new messages come in for so long I question if my last message sent. Then it's a barrage of messages all at once.

DAHLIA

YOU'RE MOVING IN WITH HIM?! OMG.

DAISY

<wow emoji>

VIOLET

I am so here for this. You and your hottie bodyguard shackled up together. <fire emoji>

ME

It's just for a few days. And I've barely seen him this morning even though we're under the same roof.

About an hour ago he said he was going to work out and went into the garage. Flynn is in his room with the music going, but otherwise the house is completely silent. Knox is at work, Brogan and Archer on campus.

DAHLIA

The circumstances are shitty, but I'm thankful you have him.

DAISY

Ditto. Let us know if you need anything. <3

When the messages die down, I set my phone on the table and decide to wander around a bit. Hendrick cleaned up this morning, so I can see a little more of the house. The kitchen, living and dining rooms are all open. It's not a huge house, but the ceilings are tall and it feels very airy and open. There's a loft above the dining room, but the stairs to get up there look a little rickety so I don't venture up.

The bedrooms are all on the first floor, along with a bathroom. Hendrick's room is the closest to the living room, sort of in the middle of the others.

I'm bored already. I'm not used to so much alone time. All my professors

were really cool about me doing my classes online for the week, though. A silver lining.

I'm inching toward the garage, listening for Hendrick as I step quietly. Access is off the kitchen and the dishwasher is going. The thing is seriously loud. I saw Knox kick it several times to get it going this morning.

When I'm close enough I could reach out and grab the doorknob, I lean forward and listen closer for any sound of him. Is he just sitting out there to avoid being in the same room with me?

I get my answer when the door unexpectedly flies open. I jump back in time not to get smacked in the face, but Hendrick is moving forward and doesn't see me until it's too late. We collide.

My face is buried in his bare, sweaty chest, and his arms circle my waist to keep me upright.

"Shit, sorry."

"It's okay." I rest my hands on his biceps to steady myself. He's slick with sweat everywhere. He definitely wasn't just sitting out there then.

When he pulls back, I'm flushed and out of sorts and I can't stop staring at his chest. "I was bored and checking out the house, then I thought I'd come see what you were up to."

He stands in front of me, hands on his hips now. The pose pulls his athletic shorts down slightly, revealing a hint of black boxer briefs. My body always has a strong reaction to Hendrick, but I'm damn near panting as hard as him. Staring at him should be a sport. I'd place first every single time.



As soon as I'm done with classes, I text with the girls some more and then do a little reading in front of the TV. I have claimed the remote and banned ESPN from playing non-stop. I swear it's the same five stories repeated all day long.

When it's time, Hendrick and I take Flynn to basketball practice and when we get back, Archer and Brogan are home. Not long after, Knox shows up too. I was surprised when he immediately started making dinner—fajitas—but no one else said anything so I guess that's the norm. Interesting. I didn't picture Knox as the cooking type. He finishes that and leaves the rest of us to eat while he picks up Flynn. He wouldn't hear of anyone else doing

it.

We're all in the living room. I gave up control of the TV so Archer and Brogan could play video games. Knox and Flynn eat standing next to each other in the kitchen. It's adorable. Same pose, same expression. The pace at which they eat is even identical.

Knox heads to his room as soon as he's done. Flynn tries to do the same, but Hendrick stops him.

"Do you have any homework?"

Flynn freezes and stares at his brother like it's the strangest question he's ever been asked.

"Yeah, a little. Why?"

"Let's do it."

"I was going to work on it in my room after I shower."

Hendrick says something too low for me to hear, but Flynn relents with a sigh and heads off to his room, presumably to get his schoolwork.

"I think I'm going to get ready for bed." I stand and then look around. "Where would that be?"

"You can have my room," Hendrick says.

"Where are you going to sleep?"

"The couch."

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him that's silly, but a sullen Flynn comes back with his backpack over one shoulder.

"It's fine," Hendrick says as they move to the dining room table. "Night, Jane."

HENDRICK

BY THURSDAY, ALL MY BROTHERS ARE IN LOVE WITH JANE. ARCHER AND Brogan are up and showered fifteen minutes early so she can have the shower as soon as her alarm goes off. Flynn spends far less time in his room when she's here, and Knox leaves every morning telling me to "say good morning to Hollywood for me," which I never do.

And me, well, having her safe at my house where I don't need to constantly scan our surroundings, I find it's a whole lot harder to ignore how much I want to look at her and talk to her. She's sleeping in my bed at night. It's a fantasy and a nightmare. Basically, I'm frustrated as hell, and I have no one to blame but myself. I'm currently working out that frustration in the garage while she practices French.

I have my earbuds in, listening to music, while I pound the bag. I have no idea how long I've been out here, but sweat drips down my brow and my heart thumps wildly in my chest. Any frustration I've burned off is back as I realize I'm going to have to go back in there and spend the next few hours pretending like her presence doesn't make me want things I have no business wanting.

Movement catches my eye and I glance over to the door expecting Flynn to come out and ask when we're leaving for practice. Instead, Jane stares wide-eyed as she steps into the garage.

I remove one ear bud. "Hey, everything okay?"

"Uh-huh." Her gaze snaps up. "I needed a break. I've done more studying this week than I have in my entire life."

Nodding, I take out the other ear bud as she walks closer. Tentatively, she

reaches out to touch the worn black bag. Her eyes flit up to mine, then drop to take in my bare chest and stomach. “You do this a lot?”

“Yeah, guess so.”

“I can tell. You’ve got some serious muscles going on.”

Her honesty and obvious appraisal of my body make me laugh. She throws a half-hearted punch that the bag absorbs without budging.

“Not like that.” I come around and take her hand, pry her fingers open and move her thumb. “Now make a fist while keeping your thumb on the outside.” When she complies, I say, “There you go.” I extend her hand. “Keep your wrist straight and hit the bag with this part of your hand.”

I demonstrate by placing her hand in the right position. Neither of us moves as we stand there frozen with me caging her in, my fingers wrapped over her wrist as her hand presses into the bag. That coconut and vanilla scent and the way her body fits against mine makes my dick stir.

“Like this?” she asks in a quiet, throaty voice.

“Yeah,” I say, no longer looking at her hand but at her mouth. That perfect fucking mouth.

Clearing my throat, I let go and step away. She refocuses her attention, pulls her hand back and tries throwing a punch on her own. “Ouch.”

“It also helps if you have gloves.” I reach down for my discarded T-shirt and wipe the sweat from my forehead with it. I sit on the bench in front of the weight rack. “Almost done for the day?”

“Yeah,” she says as she walks around the garage taking in the various workout equipment and old boxes, a few tools. “I need to submit an assignment for sociology, but I can do that later. Flynn goes back to school tomorrow and my roommates are all home tonight. There’s no reason for me to keep taking all your time. You can take Flynn to practice and then maybe take a break and enjoy the rest of your day. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.” She heads now for the open garage door. The skies are clear, and the sun is out. It’s still cold, but the rain is gone. “It’s beautiful out.”

And so is she. I keep that cheesy ass line to myself.

“I don’t need a break. Besides, if you leave before I drop off Flynn, he’ll be disappointed.”

That makes her laugh. “He’s sweet.”

“My truck stinks from all the cologne he’s started wearing to practice.” I shake my head. “He has a crush on you. They all do.”

“I think they’re being nice so I keep feeding them.”

I snort a laugh. Tuesday she brought donuts, Wednesday she had bagels delivered, and today it was a variety of breakfast sandwiches. “There’s probably some truth to that.”

“Besides, boys don’t have crushes on me, they have crushes on Ivy.”

“I hate to break it to you, but you are Ivy.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I do.” Plenty of girls were only interested in dating me because I was a pro football player, however short-lived that was. I guess it didn’t bother me then because I wasn’t looking for anything more, but I can see where that’d get old after a while. “But I doubt they’re only crushing on Ivy. You’re a cool girl. Beautiful and smart, funny.”

She turns and comes back into the garage. “Thanks. You’re not so terrible either.”

“High praise.” I laugh.

She wears a smug smile that drops as she gets closer to me. “Speaking of how super awesome I am, don’t you ever get tired of working? When’s the last time you took a night off?”

“Not that long ago,” I say even though I don’t really remember. “Come on, it’s about time to take Flynn.”

When I open the door to go inside, I’m immediately met with the smell of his cologne.

I try not to breathe as I say, “Hope you can hold your breath for the drive.”

“Thanks for the ride,” Flynn says as I pull up to the curb in front of Valley High School. He glances at Jane in the passenger seat before opening his door. “Are you coming by tomorrow?”

“I don’t think so,” she says. “You’re going back to school so I’m out of excuses to avoid campus.”

“Too bad. Hen smiles more when you’re around.”

Jane looks at me with a happy, smug expression before giving my baby brother her attention again. “This is him smiling more? Wow. What a sad case he is, huh?”

“Yeah, go ahead and talk about me like I’m not here,” I say dryly.

Flynn cracks up. "I have a game tomorrow night. Will you come watch? With Hendrick." He adds the last part like he's doing it for my benefit.

Before I can tell him that she has other plans, she says, "Sure, I'd love to."

"You don't have to do that," I say to her.

"No, I'd really like to." She smiles at Flynn and then looks at me. "I mean, if that's okay. I've never been to a high school basketball game."

"Yeah, it's fine by me." I wrap my fingers around the steering wheel and squeeze. The more tightly she becomes intertwined in my life, the harder it's going to be when the job is over. But I can see how excited Flynn is, so I suck it up. "Prepared to be dazzled. Flynn's one of their star players."

His cheeks turn red, and he finally opens the door. "My friends are never going to believe me. I can't wait to see their faces. Thanks, Jane. See you tomorrow."

"Bye," she calls after him.

He runs up to the front door and disappears inside.

"You really don't have to come," I say, regarding her seriously. "And I'll talk to him about using you to show off to his friends. I'm sorry about that."

"Are you kidding? I love it. I mean, yeah, it's weird when guys my age do it, but for Flynn, it would be my honor."

"Thank you for being so cool with him."

"I like your brothers." She shrugs it off like that statement is no big deal, but I know we're a lot to take. "But speaking of Flynn going back to school, I don't really need to stay anymore."

I feel my brows rise. I should have expected it, but the disappointment of her leaving hits me hard.

When we get back to the house, the Bronco is in the driveway. Jane follows me inside, where Archer is pulling on a clean T-shirt as he walks out of the bathroom and Brogan is ironing a pair of jeans.

"What are you two doing home? And why does Archer look like he combed his hair?"

Brogan smirks at Archer, then sets down the iron and removes his jeans from the ironing board before he answers. "Party tonight at the football house."

"Isn't it a little early?" I glance at the clock on the microwave. It's just after four.

"We have a team meeting first, then we're going to The Hideout for a

bit.”

“Is the party at Felix’s place?” Jane asks as she gathers her stuff on the dining room table.

“Yeah. Are you going?” he asks her.

“No.” She shakes her head. “But that explains why Dahlia just texted me to see what I’m doing tonight.”

“You should come,” Archer says, then looks at me. “You both should.”

“I’m exhausted.” She smiles but it doesn’t reach her eyes. She lifts her backpack onto one shoulder and then walks in front of me, stopping to pat me on the chest. “But you should make this guy go and force him to have fun. Send photos.” This time her smile seems more genuine. Her fingernails lightly scrape down my pecs as she removes her hand. “I better go. See you guys later. Thanks for letting me crash.”

The door closes behind her and my brothers look at me.

“She’s right, you know? You should come. You need a night out.” Brogan turns, not even waiting for my answer.

My gut reaction is to say no, but something stops me. “Maybe.”

They both hoot their surprise.

“Hell yeah. Really?” Archer asks. He’s practically beaming at me. “You aren’t fucking with me?”

“I’m not fucking with you.” I shake my head. “I’ll be right back.”

I take off after Jane, catching her as she’s starting her car. When she sees me, she rolls down the window. “Miss me already?”

“Don’t go.”

“What?” She laughs quietly as she studies me.

“I think you should keep staying here for a while longer. At least until we figure out who sent the email. No one outside of your friends and my brothers knows to find you here.”

Her chin tilts down as she regards me closer, and her long blonde hair falls forward into her face. “I can’t hide forever.”

“I know. Not forever. Just give me a little more time. I want to be sure that whoever is behind the email isn’t going to escalate things.”

She sighs. “All right.”

“Really?” I’m shocked that she’s agreeing so easily.

“I trust your judgment. If you think this is the right call, then okay.”

I can’t fight the smile that breaks out across my face.

“But I’m still leaving for a little while. I wasn’t kidding earlier. You need

a break.”

“About that, I think you should go to the party tonight.”

Her eyes widen with surprise. “Excuse me?”

I rest my hands on the car and lean forward. “I understand why you’ve been staying in and not going out. I can’t imagine what it’s like for you. But you can’t stop living your life.”

“I’m not—” she starts.

“Yes, you are. And as the guy whose top concern is to keep you safe, I should be thrilled because it makes my job a whole lot easier if you stay in every night, but that’s not you.”

Her mouth falls into a straight line and she glances down.

“I know how much you want to go and have fun with your friends like you used to.”

“You can see that?” She glances at me and then away. “Guess I’m not that good of an actress anymore.”

“I just know you.”

“I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but I can’t ask you to watch me all day and all night too.”

“You didn’t ask me to, I volunteered.”

She cocks her head to the side. “You know what I meant.”

“I do.” I grin because I can tell she’s going to give in. “Let’s go to the party tonight, Jane. I won’t let anything happen to you. I’ll be right there looking out for you while you cut loose and have fun with your friends. I won’t drink a drop. Neither will Archer or Brogan if I ask them to help me.”

“I don’t need three bodyguards.” She laughs lightly.

“How about one really awesome one then?”

She nods. “All right. But don’t think I didn’t notice that you turned what was supposed to be a fun night out for *you* into work.”

I chuckle as I push off from her car. “Work is fun. I’ll pick you up at eight.”

JANE

“WHY DIDN’T YOU LET HIM PICK YOU UP?” DAHLIA ASKS AS WE WALK INTO her boyfriend’s house an hour later than planned. She’s a saint for waiting for me through a dozen dress changes, countless pairs of shoes, and several mini panic attacks.

“Besides the fact I wasn’t ready?” I run a hand through my hair and then smooth the straight strands back into place.

“Yeah.” She laughs softly. “Besides that.”

“I didn’t want it to be like my big brother was taking me to a party to keep an eye on me. Even if that’s the basic setup here.”

“He’s not your big brother,” she says, her blue eyes boring into me and then dipping lower to my outfit. “No way he’s going to see you in that dress and have any brotherly feelings at all. Trust me.”

“I know he likes me, or is at least attracted to me, but he won’t cross the line unless I push him over it.”

She laughs louder but it’s partially drowned out by the music coming from the backyard. “Oh, Jane, what are you planning?”

I take in the living room and kitchen of the football house. A few people are hanging out inside playing video games and a group of guys is playing cards at the dining room table, but otherwise everyone seems to be outside.

I turn back to Dahlia. “Nothing. I’m not going to do anything. No matter how much I want to. I respect his decision to keep things between us purely professional.”

“Wow, you almost sounded like you meant that.”

“I do.” I shove at her shoulder lightly.

“So, all this is just for you then?” She waves a hand in front of me. Did I put a little (a lot) of extra effort into getting ready? Absolutely, I did.

“Oh, hell no, I want him to die a little inside when he sees me in this dress.”

She keeps on laughing at me as she grabs two cups from the kitchen counter, then starts to fill them with Sprite and vodka.

“But as much as I am dying to kiss him again, I don’t want to mess things up. I have no idea what I’d do without him. He makes me feel safe.”

“I’m glad.” She hands me my drink and then loops her arm through mine. “I’m sorry you’ve had such a tough semester.”

“Me too, but I don’t want to think about any of that tonight. I want to drink and dance and have fun with my girls.” Even as I say the words so confidently, my insides are a mess of emotion. Hendrick is worried about the threats escalating. I have so much faith in him, I really do, but his worry has added to mine. I want to enjoy tonight, but to completely let go and believe that he can handle anything that might happen—that’s a lot to ask of him and a lot to trust.

“Me too. Come on, let’s go find Daisy and Violet.”

Our friends aren’t difficult to spot. Neither is Hendrick. They’re all standing together in a big group. The backyard is filled with people and the music is loud.

My stomach is filled with butterflies as Dahlia and I walk toward them. Hendrick spots me first, which is really not surprising. I’d swear the man has a tracker on me with the way he always knows where I am.

His hazel eyes lock on me as he steps away from the group and toward me.

“I think he definitely died a little inside,” Dahlia whispers before letting go of my arm and stepping away.

“Hey,” Hendrick says, his stare drops to take in the black dress and strappy high heels. “Nice dress.”

“Thanks.” I do my own slow, appreciative scan of his outfit. He looks nice, as he always does, but tonight he’s casual, looking like half the other guys at this party in jeans and a plain gray T-shirt. He’s pulling it off better than any of them, though. So, so much better. “Borrow Archer’s clothes again?”

“Nope.” He grins proudly. “These are all mine.”

“Sorry I’m late.”

“Daisy warned me you don’t leave the house without trying on at least half the dresses in your closet.”

I finally look past him to my friends. The three of them are all watching us. “What else did she say?”

“Not much, don’t worry. All your secrets are still safe.”

“If I had any, I’m pretty sure you would have already figured them out.”

“True.” He opens his stance and in a high-pitched voice asks, “Ready to get crazy?”

“Was that supposed to be me? I don’t sound like that.” Okay, I probably do.

He tips his head toward my friends. “Have fun, but don’t take drinks from strangers.”

“Duh.” I stay glued to the spot. It’s safe here and I want to soak up the feeling.

His fingers find mine at my side and he brushes his thumb over them lightly. “I’ll be right here all night. As close or as far away as you want.”

I nod my head, or I think I do, as I let out a breath. I lace my fingers through his. “Close. I want you close.”



It takes a little while, and a couple drinks, before I start to relax. Hendrick doesn’t leave my side, and it isn’t weird having him hang out in our little group. He’s been talking with Jordan, Gavin, and Felix about various sports topics for the last thirty minutes. If I didn’t know him better, I’d think he’s completely unaware of me, but any time I move an inch, he tracks the movement. His attention is addictive and has my body buzzing as much from that as the alcohol.

Daisy, Vi, Dahlia, and I are sitting in a circle of chairs playing Fuck the Dealer. They seemed to sense that I needed them tonight and haven’t left my side either.

I love them for that, and I also hate it. A few months ago, I would have been in the center of the dance floor without a care in the world.

“Another game?” Daisy asks as she shuffles the cards.

“Sure,” Vi says, sounding only half-interested. Dahlia nods.

If I don’t do something, we’re going to be wallflowers all night long. We

could have done that at home. “I’m bored of cards, and I know you guys are too. Let’s dance or play flip cup or something.”

They all look at me with surprise and hesitation in their expressions.

“Are you sure?” The fact that Vi even has to ask is just further proof of how much I’ve hidden away lately.

“I am positive.”

“O-kay.” Daisy stands with a huge smile on her face, and Dahlia and Vi do the same. It takes me a second more to push away the last of my nerves.

When I stand, Hendrick glances my way.

“Dance?” I mouth.

He says something to the guys and then they’re all coming our way. He doesn’t say a word when I glue myself to his side and walk through the party to the edge of the dance floor. The football house doesn’t have a huge backyard so there isn’t that big of a dance area, but we form our own little group and my friends start to dance around me.

My heart is hammering in my chest. Music has always been a lifeline. Acting was a means to an end, but it didn’t consume me in the same way. So, I take a second to breathe it in and I let the music slowly ease my anxiety.

Dahlia raises her voice as she asks Felix, “Can we get a song change?”

“Of course, Hot Stuff. What’d you have in mind?”

She flashes a wicked grin my way and then stands on her tiptoes to whisper in his ear.

He nods and hurries to the guy playing the music from his laptop at a little table with giant speakers on either side.

Not long after, my favorite Taylor Swift song starts. My chest fills with happiness and my eyes get a little misty as all three of my friends stand in front of me and belt out the first verse of Blank Space.

I don’t know why I love this song so much. Actually, that’s a lie. I love it because it’s so much fun to sing. I do not have a long list of ex-lovers, but T. Swift makes me feel like I can be anyone I want to be for a few minutes.

I join in, finally leaving Hendrick and making a little circle with the girls. I sing like I haven’t in weeks, maybe months. I close my eyes and tilt my head back. I know my friends are screaming the lyrics right back at me, but I can’t hear anything above the happy thump of my heart.

When I open my eyes and look around, I can’t see anything except the guys crowded around us, watching with smiles. I can’t see Hendrick, but I feel him behind me. He’s not quite touching me but hovering so close I can

feel the heat radiating off him. I lean back so my back hits his chest and turn my head to meet his gaze.

Something dangerous swirls in those hazel eyes, but I'm not scared.

"Thank you," I say, breathless from singing and from him.

He leans closer so I can hear him. His lips ghost across my cheek. "You're welcome."

It takes a lot of willpower to pull away from him, but Daisy takes my hand and pulls me back into a tight circle with just us girls.

For several songs, we're in a world all our own as we sing and dance our hearts out. My face is hot, and my throat is scratchy when Daisy and Vi say they need a break to get something to drink.

Hendrick is hanging back with Felix. Dahlia grins at me. "I think my boyfriend has a dude crush on Hendrick."

"Who could blame him?"

She snorts a laugh. Felix drapes an arm around her shoulders when she takes her place next to him. She fans her face. "I'm dying. I need a drink."

"The fridge in my room is stocked with black cherry hard seltzers."

Her favorite kind. It's sweet, but I didn't miss the way he conveniently put those in his room.

"Don't steal her away all night, Walters." I wag a finger at him, and he tries to hide a mischievous smile.

"We'll be right back," Dahlia says as they start to walk off. "Ten minutes tops."

"Make that fifteen," Felix calls over his shoulder.

I turn to Hendrick when they're gone.

"How are you doing?" he asks.

"Good. Better. Thank you for tonight. For everything."

His lips part with a smile. "You're welcome. Need another drink?"

"Yeah. I think I sweat out the last two."

As I turn to walk back into the house, Mackenzie appears in front of me.

"Hey." There's an awkward beat where we stand there staring at each other. I'm surprised to see her. She and Ted rarely come to the jock parties. Finally, I snap out of it and lean forward to hug her. "Did you just get here?"

"Just leaving actually," she says and looks from me to Hendrick and then back at me again. "Ted has a class with a couple of the football guys, so we stopped by, but it's not really our scene so we're gonna head out."

"I'm glad I ran into you," I tell her honestly.

“Me too. I wanted to thank you for whatever you said or did to get Paris to let us perform at the Spring Fling.”

“I didn’t do anything. She was raving about how good you were. You are going to kill it.”

“I hope so. I know everyone wishes it was you singing instead.”

I hate that she feels that way. “Your voice is incredible. I’m not just saying that.”

“Thanks. Ted keeps telling me that too, but I’m nervous. We have four new songs, but they’re all still a little rough. Maybe you can stop by sometime and listen? Eric listens to you better than anyone else.”

“Definitely. I’d love to hear the new stuff and help any way I can.”

“Really?” She smiles with such relief it makes me feel like a jerk for not doing it sooner. “I would love that.”

“Absolutely. I’ll be there,” I assure her.

“Thanks, Jane.” She motions with her head toward the door. “I better go. Ted’s out front grabbing a sober ride.”

“Bye.” I wave as she heads inside.

Hendrick waits until she’s completely gone from view before he speaks. “How come you don’t want to sing at Spring Fling?”

“It’s complicated,” I say, then realize that’s total bullshit. “I’m nervous about singing in front of a big crowd now that everyone knows who I am. What if I get up there and freeze or mess up the lyrics? It’ll be shared a million times before I step offstage.”

“Oh, I see, we’re playing the worst-case scenario game,” he says seriously, nodding and shooting me a sly smile. “You could also get struck by lightning while up there or a bear could rip through the crowd and attack. All equally likely.”

I roll my eyes at him. “Those are not equally likely.”

“You won’t freeze. You light up when you sing. Even tonight, singing with your friends, I can tell how much you love it.”

“Yeah, well, I’d like to continue to love it. With everything going on I don’t know if I could give it the focus I’d need to learn and perform a show. Plus, Mackenzie is going to be amazing. It’s a great opportunity for her and the rest of the band.”

He doesn’t say anything, but he doesn’t need to. I know the thing I’m not saying is that it could also be a great opportunity for me. I have the world’s attention right now, but maybe not forever.

“Someday,” I say and promise myself that it’s true. “When the time is right.”

HENDRICK

“OH MY GOSH!” JANE YELLS. “IT’S LIKE A PLAYLIST OF ALL MY FAVORITE SONGS.”

She dances in a circle, smiling and bobbing her head side to side, as another song starts to play over the speakers in the backyard of the football house.

It’s a pretty cool spot. When I was in Seattle going to school, we had something similar. I was living in the dorms, but a couple older teammates had an off-campus house where we often hung out and had parties.

Jane and her friends are playing flip cup at a table just outside the back door with her roommate’s boyfriends and some other football guys, including Archer and Brogan.

The longer the night goes on and the tipsier she gets, the more she seems like that girl I was watching from afar months ago.

And I forgot how much that girl got under my skin. Don’t get me wrong, there are a lot of layers to Jane, and they all intrigue the hell out of me. It’s just that I’m not a guy who acts without running through the scenario ten different ways, but when she’s carefree and happy like this, I find myself moving toward her without thinking.

“She’s unbeatable,” Brogan says and points to Dahlia. “We need to mix up the teams. I call Dahlia and Jane with me, Arch, and Felix.”

“You took our best player!” Vi screeches.

“Yeah, but we also took Jane, so it evens it out.” Brogan puts an arm around Jane’s shoulders.

“I should be offended,” she says, giving him a playful glare. “But I am

really, really bad at this game.”

My pulse ticks faster as Brogan’s arm lingers on Jane’s bare skin. She’s wearing a strapless black dress that barely contains her cleavage. One little tug of the zipper at her back would send the small scrap of black material to her feet.

I pull my hands into fists to stop the tingle spreading down my fingers at the thought. I’d also like to shove Brogan about five feet to the side.

“I think I’m done anyway,” she says. “I want to dance some more.”

That’s my cue.

She finally looks my way as she steps out of a disappointed Brogan’s hold.

“What?” He whines. “No, come on. I was kidding.”

She laughs. “No, you weren’t.”

I meet her halfway. She tosses her arms around my neck. With the tall heels she’s wearing tonight, Jane is only a few inches shorter than me. The perfect height to lean forward and take her bottom lip between my teeth. Fuck, I gotta get a hold of myself.

“Will you come dance with me?” she asks. Her fingers play with the hair at the nape of my neck.

“I’ll walk over there with you.”

Her head moves slowly side to side. “That’s not what I meant.”

I know exactly what she meant. “What about your friends?”

“We’ve reached the point in the evening where it’s no longer chicks before dicks.” She turns her head to look at them. Jordan and Daisy are kissing while everyone else figures out teams, Gavin has one arm around Violet’s waist holding her against him, and Felix’s hands are somewhere under Dahlia’s shirt.

A small chuckle rumbles in my chest. “I bet they’d still dance with you if you asked.”

“Probably.” She steps backward while keeping her arms linked around my neck, pulling me with her. “But I’m asking you.”

Once I start walking on my own, she lets go and leads the way across the small yard to the area where a group of mostly girls are still dancing.

The way she moves, even drunk, is so graceful and easy. She spins back around when she reaches our destination and starts to dance in front of me.

I don’t immediately join in, and she narrows her gaze at me. “Don’t tell me you don’t dance. It’ll ruin the fantasy.”

I cock a brow, wondering but absolutely not asking about any and all fantasies she has about me.

“Come on, Hendrick.” She takes my hand and tugs. “Don’t make me dance all alone.”

As soon as I start to move, her face lights up. “Yay!”

She invades my space as she tosses her head around and lifts her hands out to her sides. She has endless energy as she bounces around to some upbeat song and sings along with the chorus. Her dress inches down a little too far and she presses one forearm across her chest, smashing her boobs but keeping things in place as she continues to jump.

When the song ends and a slower one starts, she pauses and stares up at me with a hint of uncertainty.

I loop one arm around her waist and a second later she eagerly drapes her arms along my shoulders. Her dress is still dangerously close to falling down. She follows my gaze and giggles, then adjusts the material. “Bad choice of dress for tonight.”

“Or fantastic choice, depending on your point of view.” Damn. Probably should have kept that to myself. Without even trying she makes it hard to keep things strictly professional. Though I think she does try, just to get under my skin and get a reaction out of me.

She giggles again and presses closer against my chest, then just kind of melts into me. “I like the way it feels being in your arms.”

One finger trails down over my shoulder to my bicep and over my forearm, then back up. “You have really great arms. And eyes.” She tips her head up to meet my gaze. “I like how sometimes they’re clearly hazel and other times they look green or brown.”

As she speaks, that finger continues to explore. Between the temporary move to Valley and the odd hours of the job, it’s been a while since I’ve gone out with a woman. I really haven’t had time to even think about hooking up with the exception of the Jane incident last month, but right now I’m suddenly wishing I’d made time. Maybe then her touch alone wouldn’t have me hard.

“I could keep going. I like a lot of things about you.”

“You’re drunk. You like everyone right now.”

“Maybe, but not as much as I like you.” Like she suddenly just became aware of what she was doing, her hand moves back to my shoulder. “Sorry. I promised myself I wouldn’t hit on you tonight. I can’t seem to help it right

now. My body is buzzing with alcohol and happiness.”

“I’m glad you’re having a good time,” I say honestly.

“I really am. Not quite as good as I’d be if your hands moved about three inches lower though, just saying.”

I cough my surprise.

“Sorry, sorry. I have no filter right now.”

“It’s all right.” My voice is tight as I reply, and I do my best to ignore the heat rushing through my veins.

Her gaze is filled with vulnerability as she stares into my eyes. “I don’t want to lose you.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Good. I feel safe with you.”

Those words make my chest fill with air. Her trust means a lot to me, and that’s something I need to keep at the forefront of my mind. No matter how badly I want her, keeping her safe is the only thing that matters.

She sings softly through the rest of the song. I’ve heard her voice a number of times—YouTube videos when I first got the job, in class now that she wears the earpiece, and tonight with her friends. But no matter how many times I hear her sing, her voice still gets to me. Every word is dripped in emotion like she feels the lyrics so deeply. It’s no wonder people are clamoring to see her perform again.

“Jane!” Someone calls her name as they wrap a hand around her upper arm.

Without thinking, I step between them and pull her behind me.

Cameron Payton holds both hands up defensively, brows lifted in surprise and an amused smirk on his lips. “Whoa, dude. Just wanted to say hey to Jane.”

He points and peers around me to look at her.

“It’s okay,” she says quietly and comes to stand next to me. “Hey, Cam.”

“This your bodyguard?” he jokes.

“Something like that.” She smiles at him. “What are you doing here?”

“Stopped by with some of the guys. We were at The Hideout earlier.” He lets his gaze slide over her, and I grit my teeth. “You look great. It’s so good to see you out.”

“Thanks.”

“Wanna dance?”

“Oh, um.” She bites the corner of her lip and looks at me.

“It’s cool, man. I’ll keep an eye on her.” He winks.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes, but it’s the thump over the head that I need to remember I’m not here as her date.

“I’ll be close,” I say quietly where only she can hear me, and give Cam a hard look as I leave them.

JANE

I THOUGHT MAYBE THERE'D BEEN A FLASH OF JEALOUSY IN HENDRICK'S GAZE when Cam asked me to dance, but I'm starting to think I'm too drunk to trust my own brain. One dance turned to two and then I got pulled into a game of beer pong (can confirm I still suck at it) with Cam and his friends.

Hendrick hasn't interrupted and he isn't even hanging that close. He's still watching me, of course, but if he's bothered by me spending time with Cam it doesn't show on his always grumpy and serious face.

Violet comes over to where I'm sitting with Cam in a lawn chair next to the keg. "We're gonna go. Do you want to ride home with us?"

I look past her to see Gavin, Daisy, and Jordan all standing in a little group waiting for her.

"No. I think I'm gonna stay a little longer."

"She's definitely staying." Cam places a hand on my knee. He's been very touchy tonight and more attentive than I thought he was capable of being. Almost as attentive as my roommates' boyfriends have been with them all night.

"Are you sure?" she asks again, eyes pleading with me like she thinks it's a terrible idea.

It's well after midnight, and the party is dying. The music is quieter, no one's dancing anymore, and everyone that's left is just kind of sitting and hanging out in groups around the yard.

"I'll get a ride home from Hendrick later." I let myself look over to where he's sitting with Archer and Brogan and a few other guys I recognize as football players.

His gaze flicks to me and then quickly away. He does that often, always checking on me but not letting his stare linger too long, like he's checking in but trying to give me space.

"Okay." She reaches down to hug me and whispers near my ear, "Be careful. Love you."

"Love you too." I squeeze her back.

When she's gone, I realize Cam's hand is still on my knee. It feels good to be wanted, but his touch doesn't have the same tingling effect that Hendrick's does. My mind takes a quick trip down memory lane to the time we kissed in his room, and then to earlier today in the garage, and finally to tonight, dancing with him. A shiver wracks my body.

"You cold?" Cam asks, sliding his hand higher.

His hands aren't as strong and rough as Hendrick's, but my body still heats with pleasure as his thumb strokes the inside of my leg. "Maybe a little."

"Yeah, me too. So, how do you know Hendrick Holland?" Cam asks. "I didn't recognize him earlier. Kinda weird that an ex-pro football player is crashing a college party, don't you think?"

My claws come out as Cam glances over in Hendrick's direction with something like disgust.

"He's actually a really cool guy," I say. "We have mutual friends. And he's here with his brothers." It's as close to the truth as I can say.

Cam shrugs. "Looks like this place is about to be a ghost town. You wanna get out of here and come back to my place?"

I don't know why his offer surprises me since his hand is only a few inches from my vagina, but it does.

"Back to your place? For the night?" I probably sound like an idiot, but I need him to spell it out for me.

"Well, yeah. There's probably still a few guys up so we can drink and chill, and then you can crash with me." His hand creeps an inch higher, making his intentions very clear.

I won't lie, part of me wants to go for no other reason than to see this thing through and find out if Cam can make me forget about the massive crush I have on my bodyguard.

I've been berating myself all night about being so loose with my affection for him when he's been very clear about what can and can't happen between us. It's not fair to him.

Still, I know going home with a guy I don't know that well—not to mention one who didn't exactly impress me on our first and only date—amidst everything going on is a dumb idea. I can't very well ask Hendrick to tag along while I hook up with some other guy. Can I? I consider it in my drunken state.

“Are you ready to go?” Hendrick's deep voice cuts through the night air. When I glance back at him, his gaze is hard with . . . jealousy? Maybe. Grumpiness at being out past his bedtime? Most likely.

“I got her, man,” Cam says as his hold on my leg tightens. “She's coming home with me.”

If looks could kill, Cam would be a very dead man. I stand quickly and step in front of Hendrick. “Actually, I think I better call it a night. It was good to see you.”

“Don't go. It's still early. I can give you a ride to your place later if you want.”

Hendrick looks like he's seconds away from busting a blood vessel in his eye. Yeah, I need to get him out of here.

“Sorry. I really should go now.” I give Cam a small wave as I step away from him.

Hendrick's already heading for the house, leaving me to hurry after him in shoes that were not meant for rushing.

“I need to say goodbye to Dahlia,” I tell him.

He nods, his grumpiness still making his features hard and dangerous looking.

I spot Felix's black hair and Dahlia is right next to him. I push past Hendrick to get to her.

As soon as she sees my face, her smile drops. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, just tired. I hit a wall.”

Her lips curve back into a small smile. “Tonight was fun. I'm glad you came.”

“Me too.” My throat is thick with emotion. “Are you staying here tonight?”

“Yeah, I planned on it. Is that okay? You're staying at Hendrick's, right?”

“Right. Yeah.” How could I forget I have to go home with the guy currently glowering at me.

“Okay.” She hugs me. “Text me and let me know you made it home.”

“I will.”

She looks past me to him. “He doesn’t look very happy either. Are you sure everything is okay? Did something happen with you two?”

“Nothing happened, I promise. I just need sleep and he’s probably tired because he’s old.”

She laughs and with another hug, we finally say our goodbyes.

The street is dark and quiet as Hendrick and I walk the block from the house to get to his truck. He unlocks it and opens the passenger side door, still saying nothing.

He’s annoyed, I think, but I don’t totally understand why, and I don’t want to fight with him.

Before I can get in the truck, he blocks me by putting his body between me and the open door. “Tell me you weren’t seriously thinking about going home with that dickwad. What if something happened?” He keeps his voice low. “What if it is Cam?”

Could Cam be the one who sent me that email? I shake my head. “It’s not Cam. And you don’t really believe that either or you wouldn’t have let me hang out with him all night.”

His jaw tightens. “You can do way better than that guy. Way fucking better.”

“Maybe you didn’t hear me when I told him no?” I say in a sassy voice as I cross my arms over my chest. “And don’t give me the whole ‘you can do way better’ speech. I know exactly who Cam is and what he wants from me. So what? Who says that isn’t exactly what I’m looking for? You don’t know everything there is to know about me, Hendrick Holland.” I shout the words at him. God, he can rile me up. Dammit. I’m tired and angry and sad this night is over. It was fun and I forgot how much I enjoyed being out with my friends.

“Bullshit, that isn’t what you want.”

“How would you know? Did our one make-out session make you an expert on my sex life?”

His dark eyes bore into me and his jaw flexes, but he’s silent. Maybe I stunned him or maybe he’s mulling over more angry words to yell at me, but it doesn’t matter because I’m just drunk enough to say exactly what I’m feeling.

“I want to be kissed and pushed up against the wall. I want my clothes to be torn from my body and I want multiple orgasms and I want my life not to be so damn complicated. Ever since I became Ivy again, guys treat me weird.

I know Cam does too, but at least he's transparent about what he wants from me. So even if it's bullshit, sometimes it's fun to be wanted like a normal college girl."

"Don't be stupid, Jane. Lots of people want *you*." He seems as annoyed by that as by the thought of me having sex with Cam.

"Oh, really?" I step closer to him. "People like you?"

He says nothing, but his throat works as he swallows.

"Exactly. So don't give me this caveman bullshit. You missed your shot, buddy."

Crap. I shouldn't have said that last part. His face twists into a regretful expression. "Jane—"

"Save it. I don't need another 'I can't protect you if we're sleeping together' lecture. Can we just drop it?"

The air is thick between us as I wait for his reply that doesn't come.

"Please, Hendrick? Just take me home."

HENDRICK

THE HOUSE IS QUIET WHEN WE GET BACK. BOTH FLYNN AND KNOX'S DOORS are closed, and all the lights are out. The only sound is soft music coming from Flynn's room. He sleeps with it on, at a much more reasonable volume than he keeps it at during the day.

I follow Jane into my bedroom. She didn't say a word on the drive back. Neither did I. There's too much to say and not enough words.

She kicks off her shoes and then falls onto the mattress and curls into herself on top of the covers.

"Do you want me to grab something for you to change into?" I ask, hovering in the doorway.

"There are two of you." She stares up at me through half-closed lids. "Is your twin nicer?"

Despite everything that's happened tonight, I find myself chuckling. "No, he's an asshole just like me."

"You're not really an asshole." Her lashes flutter closed. "I wish you were. I'd like you a lot less."

"I'll let you get changed. I'm going to grab some water and Advil."

Brogan and Archer are coming in as I fill a glass for Jane.

"Hey," Archer says, a drunk smile on his face. He goes to the fridge and pulls out two beers. "Want one?"

"Nah, I'm good."

"Come on. Have one beer with us?" Arch sets one beer on the counter in front of me, then gets another from the fridge and takes both into the living room for him and Brogan.

“It’s late and I gotta get this to Jane before she passes out.”

Brogan gives me a thumbs down as he lifts the bottle to his lips.

I slip back into my room and then freeze. My heart tries to climb up my throat and heat swirls in my gut. Jane’s dress is lying at the end of the bed and she’s passed out mostly naked.

I do my best not to look at all her tempting skin splayed out over my navy comforter. I set the water and meds on the nightstand, then open my dresser and grab one of my T-shirts for her.

Coming back to the bed, I sit on the edge of the mattress. “Sit up for me.”

She does with a groan. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” I lift my shirt and pull it down over her blonde hair. She struggles to get her arms through, but then flops back onto the pillow wearing my old Huskies football shirt. It’s too big for her, but it’s bunched up around her waist, leaving her tiny black panties in plain view.

“Tonight. Cam. Everything.”

“You don’t have anything to apologize for. You were right, it’s none of my business.”

She flinches at my words. “Well either way, tonight was really great for a while. I forgot about everything and was able to just have fun. I didn’t realize how much I needed that, so thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” I get the Advil and water and wait while she downs the medicine.

She hands the glass back to me looking so unsettled that all I can think about is wrapping my arms around her. I’m still pissed about Cam, even if I have no right to be.

I start to stand. “Night, Jane. If you need anything, I’ll be in the living room.”

“Wait.” She reaches out and grabs my forearm. “Don’t leave. I mean, you don’t need to keep sleeping on the couch. We can build a pillow wall.” She takes two pillows and puts them down the middle of the bed.

“It’s fine. The couch isn’t so bad.”

“I don’t like being alone anymore,” she says quietly.

My chest is tight. “I won’t be far.”

She nods and turns back to her side to sleep. By the time I pull the comforter up over her bare legs, her breathing has evened out. I shut the light off and slip back into the living room.

I go straight for the beer still sitting on the counter, twist off the top and

take a long drink.

After I swallow, I let out a long sigh and take a seat in a chair across from Brogan and Archer.

“Hard day at the office?” Brogan asks as he brings the bottle back to his lips.

Archer snorts, then takes off his hearing aids and sets them on the coffee table. I wonder what it’s like for the world to be silent. He stands and asks, “Another?”

Brogan nods. I do the same.

“Yeah, why not?” Maybe it’ll distract me from the half-naked woman sleeping in my bed.

My brother comes back with three more beers.

“Thanks,” Brogan says and signs the word. He’s always been the most considerate of Archer’s hearing loss.

We all know ASL, but rarely need to use it since Archer learned to read lips instead of relying on signing himself. He was ten when he had the accident that caused him to lose his hearing, so I don’t blame him for wanting to keep as much of his life the same as possible, but sometimes I wonder if he’s accommodated us too much instead of the other way around.

The hearing aids help, but they don’t give him perfect hearing. He told me once wearing them made the world feel more alive around him, but that sometimes he preferred the silence because it was exhausting trying to keep up with conversations when it sounds like everyone is whispering around you.

I sign thank you as he takes a seat across from me.

“So . . .” Brogan starts, eyeing me in a way that makes me already dread the next words. “Jane and Cam Payton looked cozy tonight.”

“I don’t see it.” Archer scoffs. “Jane could do way better.”

Brogan shrugs. “Girls dig him though. He’s hooked up with at least half the female population of Valley U.”

I take another long drink instead of adding my thoughts on the situation, but Arch shoots his beer cap between his thumb and ring finger at me. It hits me in the center of my chest. When I meet his gaze, he lifts one brow. “Are you gonna do something about it?”

“I had Logan look into him. He’s an idiot, but he’s not a threat.”

Brogan and Archer share a look, then the latter says, “That’s it?”

“It’s not any of my business who she hooks up with or dates.” Not my

business, but it still makes my skin crawl.

They let it drop at that, and the three of us make small talk while we finish our beers. After they go to bed, I sit in the living room a few minutes longer trying to decide what to do.

I should sleep on the couch like I've done the past few nights. That's the smart thing, no question.

My thumb taps against the side of the empty bottle in my hand. Fuck it. It isn't like I'm going to be able to sleep anyway. Might as well lie awake in there if that makes her feel safer.

I stalk quietly into the room with that indifferent attitude, but all it takes is seeing Jane curled up, hugging one of the pillows to her chest, for all that indifference to turn to longing.

I want to be near her, and she wants to not be alone. For tonight, we can both have what we want.

I change into sweats and get into bed on the other side of the pillow wall she erected. They're on top of the comforter, so once I'm underneath they aren't really doing anything to keep us apart. Still, I stay well on my side.

Jane turns toward me and flings an arm out until she feels me, then pulls back like she was just checking if I was next to her.

"I'm here," I say softly. "Go back to sleep."

"Okay." A second later, she's tossing both pillows between us onto the floor and then scooting closer to me.

My body stills as she cuddles up next to me. She lodges herself so close that her boobs sandwich my bicep, and her silky panties rub against my hip.

"What are . . ." I don't get the question out before her hand begins to stroke along my stomach. Her long fingernails lightly glide up and then back down, sending heat racing through my body.

"Jane?" My voice is low and husky, and drowned out by the little moan that escapes her lips as she wriggles herself half on top of me.

I don't move a muscle. I don't even breathe.

"I want to kiss you again. It's all I've thought about since it happened."

She lays on me, fitting so perfectly in all the right places. My dick doesn't have the same good intentions that I do. I'm hard so fast I don't even have time to fight off my body's reaction.

"Do you want to kiss me again?" she asks, staring at me with those big green eyes.

"We can't," I say, finally finding my voice. I move my hands to her hips

to lift her off me, but for some reason I don't do that. My palms rest against her smooth skin. "You're drunk. You don't know what you're saying."

"I know what I'm saying. I just asked if you wanted to kiss me. And then I said I know what I'm saying." She flashes a sexy drunk smile at me. "So, do you? If not, I'll scoot back over and go to sleep, but I think maybe you want to kiss me as much as I want to kiss you."

"It doesn't matter what I want." I find the strength to move her back to the bed next to me and sit up.

She mirrors me, sitting up and facing me. "You really believe that, don't you? How come everyone else gets what they want, except you?"

I swallow thickly. "What I want and what's best are rarely in sync."

She climbs into my lap. This time I don't stop her and I'm not sure why. Maybe it's because she hit on something I've thought about a lot. What the hell do I want? I'm not even sure I know anymore. I've spent the better part of my adult life making decisions that I thought were best for my brothers, but now that I'm back I'm not sure if they were or not.

"In this case I think you're wrong." She shifts so her core grinds against my hard length. Lust shoots up my spine.

"Not tonight, Jane. You're drunk."

But she doesn't back down. Her arms wrap around my neck, and she brings her mouth close to mine. She looks up at me through thick, black lashes. "Fine. It can't happen, but first admit it. Admit that you want to kiss me again, and I'll go back to sleep."

"I want to kiss you again more than I want my next breath," I say the words with as little emotion as possible, but the air still crackles with tension between us.

The admission makes her bolder.

"What else do you want?" she whispers, holding my gaze as she inches closer. Her lips brush against mine in a soft kiss, teasing me, before pulling back.

Something about the way she's always so honest about what she wants makes it hard to sit here and pretend I'm unaffected.

"I want you on your knees with that soft mouth wrapped around my cock."

I bring one hand up to rest at the side of her neck. She lets out a little groan as I run my thumb along her pulse point.

"I want to bury myself so deep inside of you that you can't remember

your name. I want to bury myself so deep inside of you that *I* can't remember my own name." I nip at her bottom lip. "I want a lot of things, Jane. So be real sure that's what *you* want before you make your next move."

I get up quickly, sending her falling backward on the mattress. My dick throbs as I stomp out to the couch. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.* As usual, what I want is in direct opposition of what's right.

And now there's absolutely no freaking way I'm falling asleep.

JANE

I WAKE UP WITH A START. THE BED NEXT TO ME IS STILL EMPTY. I KNEW HE wouldn't come back. When Hendrick makes his mind up about something, there's no changing it. Last night he decided I was too drunk to know what I wanted. As if I haven't been completely transparent about my feelings for him all along.

My heart is pounding and there's a dull ache in the front of my head as I grab my phone off the nightstand to check the time. It's a little after four in the morning. After drinking the rest of the water Hendrick left for me, I get out of bed. I pause for a second to test my mental and physical clarity. I stand on one foot, then the other, while reciting the alphabet backward.

Satisfied that I'm no longer drunk, I rummage through my bag to find my disposable travel toothbrushes. I make quick work of cleaning my teeth and tongue. I don't know why I'm rushing when he's asleep out on the couch, I just know I need to see him now.

I pull the bedroom door open slowly, peering out into the living room as I do. I can't see much in the dark, but I assume the lump on the couch is Hendrick. I tiptoe toward him with my heart racing.

The floor creaks under me, and he sits up too fast to have been asleep. His feet hit the floor and he stands in one smooth motion. His hair is messy, and stubble dots his jaw. I'm busy checking him out as his gaze rakes over my bare legs. "Everything okay?"

He stalks toward me. This all feels like a terrible idea now. The poor guy is trying to sleep and I'm out here to what? Seduce him. But I've come this far, so I say the thing that I wanted to say a few hours ago but knew he

wouldn't believe.

"I want all those things too. I always have. Being drunk didn't change that."

His expression shifts from concern to something else. Something that looks a lot like desire. He keeps moving forward until we're an arm's length apart. Barefoot, I feel a lot smaller standing in front of him.

"That's it? You got up before the sun to tell me that?" he asks with no emotion like we're talking about the weather.

I shift uncomfortably. Huge, terrible idea. I wish I could rewind to five minutes ago and convince myself I am still drunk. Let's be real, there's still plenty of alcohol swimming in my blood.

"Yeah. That's it."

He still just stands there looking at me like I have two heads or something.

"I'm sorry. I'll let you go back to sleep." I turn, dying to get back to his room and hide. I only take one step before his fingers wrap around my forearm. Then his lips are on mine, catching the gasp that escapes as he pulls me back into his chest.

His tongue slides in immediately, invading my mouth, and he kisses me so damn hard my knees buckle. It doesn't last nearly long enough, but I'm breathless when he pulls away.

I keep my eyes closed a beat longer, then let my lids flutter open as my lips curve. My skin buzzes with electricity when I find his hazel eyes on me. Always watching me.

He stares at me like he sees every piece of me—the good, the bad, all of it. Like he sees me and he still thinks I'm someone worth protecting. I'm addicted to that look and the way it makes me feel. Desired, coveted, and safe. He makes me feel safe in a way that has nothing to do with him always looking out for me.

I launch myself at him, or maybe he lunges for me first. I don't know how it happens, but I'm in his arms and his mouth slants over mine as he carries me into his room. Those rough, calloused fingers of his dig into the back of my thighs, and I hold on to him just as tightly.

He stops kissing me again. He must be insane.

"Say it again." The vibrations of his deep voice rumbling from his chest shoot straight down to the throbbing between my legs.

I know what he wants from me, but I don't answer him right away.

Instead, I slide my palm along his jaw, enjoying the way his stubble pricks my fingertips and wondering what it'd feel like against my most sensitive areas.

He waits me out, holding me but not kissing me until I tell him what he wants to hear.

“I said, I’m sorry. Then I told you I was going back to sleep.”

He drops me onto the mattress with a sexy glare. “Not that.”

I consider toying with him more, but it’s in direct contradiction with how badly I want him to kiss me again. “I want you, Hendrick. Kiss me. Fuck me. Make me forget my name. And yours.”

One knee drops to the mattress, and he hovers over me. “Don’t forget my name. I want to hear you scream it.”

My pussy clenches. I reach for the front of his sweats, but Hendrick catches my hands and lifts them over my head against the bed.

“Keep them here,” he says as he places a kiss on my collarbone.

“On the mattress? Where I can’t touch you? Seriously?” I huff and shoot him an exasperated scowl. The man holds out on me forever and then isn’t going to let me touch him?

He meets my needy gaze. “You wanted me to kiss you, and that’s damn well what I’m going to do.” His lips drop to my stomach, just below my belly button, where the T-shirt he gave me to wear has ridden up. “You’re gorgeous splayed out underneath me. I can’t wait to taste every inch of you.”

And he’s forgiven.

I squirm as he continues down my body, brushing his lips over every inch of bare skin. I ball my hands into fists to keep from moving them where I want—on him. “And fuck me?”

“No.” He delivers the news with a slow lick across my hip bone. “Tonight, I just want to kiss you.”

Frustration bubbles up my throat and comes out in a mix of a groan and cry. His mouth is amazing.

“Did you just growl at me?” He cocks one brow while wearing a pleased smirk at my desperation.

“I need you,” I tell him honestly.

That smirk falls into a determined, serious expression, and Hendrick burrows himself between my thighs. From that position, he looks up at me, then pushes my T-shirt up, uncovering my chest. He groans when he realizes I already took off my bra.

He lets out a breath that skirts over my sensitive core. His palm glides down between my breasts, then his thumb teases one nipple. My back arches and I press into his touch.

“So beautiful,” he says so quietly I’m not sure he meant me to hear. He lets his hand roam over my stomach, down my hip, and all the way to my ankle.

Finally, he loops one arm under my knee and pushes my legs wider. He stares up at me as he nips at my inner thigh. I can’t keep still a second longer. My fingers find his thick hair and I scratch my nails lightly over his scalp.

I’m so keyed up that I jolt when his tongue flicks under the side of my panties. He pulls back and I give his short strands a tug.

“Taking your frustration out on my hair?” he asks as he moves his attention back to my hip bone.

“You’re teasing me.” I moan and pull harder. He reciprocates by biting me in the same spot he just kissed.

“I’m not teasing you. I’m savoring.”

My insides melt. Hendrick goes back to kissing me everywhere but where I want, and I lie back and try not to combust. I’m writhing beneath him and pulling on his hair so tight that I might have given him a bald spot when he has mercy on me and slides two fingers over my center. He rubs me through the satin material of my panties until they’re damp, then hooks one long finger under the hem.

“You’re perfect,” he says as he shifts to drag my panties down my legs.

His praise makes me feel lightheaded.

He holds my panties in one fist and leans up to take my mouth. I kiss him with everything I have. I want him to know how badly I want him, how frustrated I am for more. He meets me with the same urgency surging through me. We’re a mash of teeth and tongues, trying to get impossibly closer.

My T-shirt is discarded between kisses, then his hard length presses into me, and I lift my hips to get the friction I crave. He lets me use him like that for a few more seconds before he breaks away from our kiss and slides down my body. He trails more kisses on the way. On my breasts, my stomach, even my elbows. There’s not a single part of my body that he doesn’t graze his lips over before he settles back between my legs.

“Damn, Jane.” One index finger drags down my slit.

My upper body shoots up off the bed. I’m drunk on the pleasure

ricocheting through me from that one touch. Hendrick stares at my pussy like he's in a trance.

“What? What is it?” I ask, suddenly feeling self-conscious. “Is something wrong? Do I look weird down there? People always told me to look at myself with a mirror, but I couldn't ever bring myself to do it.”

I've never had any complaints, but I'm not sure anyone has ever stared at it this hard either.

His brows lift. “A mirror?”

“You know, like a little handheld one.”

He flicks the end of his tongue over my clit. “Maybe you can just trust me when I tell you that your pussy is gorgeous.”

Heat floods my face and the throb in my center intensifies.

“Lay back, baby,” he commands.

“I want to watch.” I do just that as he licks me slowly, keeping his eyes locked on me. It takes everything in me to keep myself propped up, watching as he devours me. It's the hottest thing.

My eyelids feel heavy as the pleasure builds. “I'm so close.”

He sucks hard on my clit and pushes one finger inside of me.

“Hendrick. Oh—” Whatever else I was going to say is cut off as my orgasm shatters me. My eyes water with the need to close them, but I can't look away from him as the last of my climax shudders through me.

My body goes limp and my arms give out. He presses another kiss to my thigh before he climbs up my body, brushes another kiss over my lips, and then falls onto the mattress beside me.

“That was . . .” My heart is still racing as I let my head fall to the side so I can look him in the eyes again. “Thank you.”

He chuckles softly as he wraps an arm around my stomach and pulls me against his body. He's still hard, and even though I just got off twenty seconds ago, I can't resist rubbing my butt against him.

He swats my bare ass. Not super hard, but enough that I let out a little yelp. “Go to sleep.”

“What about me? I didn't get to kiss you back.”

“You need to sleep.”

As if my body is on his side instead of mine, I yawn.

He moves only to pull the comforter back up around us.

“Fine. We'll sleep for one hour and then I want my turn.” I snuggle back into his chest and I'm asleep in seconds.

JANE

FOR THE SECOND TIME TODAY, I WAKE UP IN HENDRICK'S BED. THIS TIME he's in it with me and someone is knocking on the door.

"What do you want?" He barks in a deep rumble as he sits up and runs a hand through his messy hair. It's sticking up everywhere. Probably because a wild woman had her fingers in it last night.

The knocking continues, forcing Hendrick to get up and answer the door.

He adjusts himself in his sweats before pulling it open. An amused Archer stands on the other side. "You're alive."

"Yeah. Why wouldn't I be?" Hendrick asks. He holds the door so his brother can't see inside, but I nuzzle farther down in the warm sheets anyway.

"Uh. Maybe because it's lunchtime and you're still in bed. Your phone has been going off nonstop."

Lunchtime?! I glance over at the window. At the edge of the blackout curtains is a small strip of sunlight. *Crap*. If it's really that late, that means I missed both my morning classes.

I don't hear the rest of what they say, but a few seconds later, Hendrick shuts the door and turns around to face me. He has his cell phone in hand. Archer must have brought it to him.

"Morning." He crooks one arm behind his head to rub his neck. My stomach flips at this messy, rumped version of my protector.

"Hi." I sit up, feeling shier than I did last night while he went down on me. I knew where we stood then, but not now. "Is everything okay?"

I tip my head toward his phone. He glances down at it before replying.

“It’s just Logan checking in about the email.”

And just like that, the real world pops my happy bubble. A knot forms in the pit of my stomach. “Does he know who sent it?”

“No.” Hendrick’s mouth pulls into a tight line. “Proving harder than expected to pin down who was using the computer at the time.”

“Oh.” I pull my knees up to my chest under the sheets. I knew that we weren’t going to wake up today and suddenly all my problems would be fixed, and Hendrick and I could just pretend that we’re two regular people that hooked up last night, but I thought there’d be time for more of all that before we went back to business as usual.

He’s my bodyguard. His priority is keeping me safe. He’s always been clear about that. And I have a pretty good idea that he’s about to remind me that he can’t do his job if we’re sleeping together. Still, I force myself to ask, “So what now?”

He sets his phone on the dresser and then grabs the T-shirt I was wearing last night off the floor. Leaning down, Hendrick covers my mouth with his in a quick kiss. “Well, you already missed your morning classes, so I guess we get dressed and have breakfast. I’m starving.”

“But what about . . .” I trail off as a giddiness replaces the fear. Did he not understand what I was asking? “What about everything that happened last night? Where does that leave us? Should we set new rules?”

“I think we’re a little beyond rules now, don’t you?”

“Really?” I let the sheet fall away and get to my knees on the bed. “I thought I was going to have to fire you again.”

One side of his mouth hitches up higher. He gives my naked body a slow, appreciative once-over and then pulls the T-shirt over my head before kissing me again. “You’re not getting rid of me that easily.”

He pulls back with a little slap to my butt. “I’m gonna shower and then call Logan. When you’re ready, we can go grab something to eat before your sociology class.”

“Okay.”

I wait until he’s gone to let out the happy squeal burning my lungs. Then I quickly get dressed in jeans and throw on a sweatshirt over Hendrick’s old college T-shirt. He is already showered and on the phone when I come out of the room. I slip into the bathroom to wash my face and brush my teeth, and I pull my hair up into a ponytail.

Some of my earlier shyness returns when I walk into the living room.

Archer and Brogan look up from their matching giant bowls of noodles.

“Hi.” I wave and stand awkwardly next to the chair Hendrick’s sitting in. His brothers watch us carefully, so I do my best not to touch him or seem overly friendly. They obviously know we slept together in the same bed, but Hendrick doesn’t strike me as the kind of guy who wants people in his business.

“Have a good time last night?” Brogan asks me with a smile.

“At the party,” Archer adds.

They’re both grinning at me, and I want to disappear back into the bedroom to wait for Hendrick. Deciding that’s exactly what I should do, I open my mouth to make my excuses, but Hendrick reaches up and places one hand at my waist and then guides me down onto his lap.

My cheeks flush as he holds me tightly around the waist and continues talking to Logan on the phone.

Something about him claiming me in front of his brothers has all the awkwardness dissipating, and a real smile takes over my face. I aim it at Archer and Brogan. “Yeah. I had a really good time.”

HENDRICK

“So . . . YOU AND HOLLYWOOD, HUH?” KNOX ASKS AS WE WATCH FLYNN warm up with his team before the game.

“Her name is Jane,” I grit out as I glance toward the gymnasium doors. She went with Archer and Brogan to load up on snacks for the game. Maybe I should have gone with her. I have this uneasy feeling that it was a terrible idea to bring her here.

Logan isn’t any closer to figuring out who’s behind the email, and this afternoon she got a text from a random text app number that said basically the same thing as the email had, *No one wants you here, Cali bitch*. She brushed it off, but I could tell she was freaked out. It seems like whoever was behind the message in her bedroom and the email is not only the same person, but also not giving up. I told her all this earlier, but she just shrugged and said that she promised Flynn she’d come to his game, and she wasn’t going back on her word unless I thought whoever sent those messages was a Valley high schooler.

I don’t. Which was exactly her point. Still. The need to keep her safe is stronger than ever.

“I know.” He grins. “But you get this murderous glint in your eyes every time I call her Hollywood.”

I aim that glint right at him. Not that he’s scared of me. Knox isn’t scared of anything, unfortunately. Least of all me.

“I don’t know why you’re all grumpy about it. She’s hot. Own it.”

“Knox,” I warn, sitting straighter next to him.

He raises a fist over his mouth as he chuckles. “Sorry. Couldn’t resist.”

I return my focus to Flynn so I don't pummel Knox. "I can't believe how good he is. Remember when we all used to play HORSE in the driveway? Flynn could barely get the ball to the rim, and he was so damn mad every time he lost." Damn, that feels like forever ago. "How old was he then?"

He shakes his head, eyes straight ahead on the court. "Five, maybe. I don't think that basketball hoop got a lot of use once Mom got sick."

The mention of Mom feels like a gut punch. All these years later and it still feels as raw as if it happened yesterday.

"He'd destroy us all now," Knox adds.

"Definitely." I swallow down the lump in my throat.

Jane appears in full Valley High merch. She has on a red hat with the bobcat logo, and a matching shirt over her dress, and she's carrying more snacks than one person could eat in a day. Archer and Brogan flank her on either side. Knox follows my shifting attention and smiles.

"For real though, Jane seems cool. Plus, she fits your whole L.A. life. Is she planning on moving back when she's done with school?"

"I don't know. We haven't talked about it."

"And what about you? Have you heard anything from your agent for next season?" He moves his feet from the bleacher in front of us to make room for the others.

"Not yet."

"There's still time."

"Maybe. I don't know. I think I might be done with all that."

"There are a ton of options. You could go to the AFL for a while even."

"I don't know." I rub my palms together. "Thinking that maybe it's time to hang all that up and move back."

He laughs, but when he realizes I'm serious, his smile drops. "Don't give up now. You've worked too hard to walk away for some girl."

I don't have time to correct his assumption before Jane steps up in front of us. "Hey. I didn't know what you liked, so I got a bunch of stuff."

"More like two of everything they had," Brogan mutters.

"Nice hat." Knox juts his chin toward her.

She flushes slightly and holds out a bag of peanut butter M&Ms to me. "Or I've got Starburst, Twix, pretzels, popcorn, and a pickle."

"These are great. Thanks."

Knox barely holds in his laugh. He leans over and takes them from me. "Hendrick needs to watch his sugar intake. Big pro athlete and all." He winks

at her. “I, on the other hand, live on sweets. What else you got?”

I move over and she takes a seat between me and Knox. She places the food options out on the next bleacher down, and Archer and Brogan sit beside it in front of Knox.

Keeping the popcorn, she scoots closer to me. “I might have overdone it.”

I tap the brim of her cap, then grab a handful of the buttery popcorn. “Nah.”

“I couldn’t help myself. I missed out on all this.” She looks around the gym. Red banners dating back fifty years hang on the walls.

Coming back here always fills me with nostalgia. It’s not that I miss it or anything, but life was definitely simpler.

“Archer showed me your football trophies,” she says, placing the bag of popcorn between us.

I groan. “You’re kidding.”

“No. Your awards and plaques take up an entire case. You still hold the school record for most passing completions or passing yards or . . . something passing related. There’s even one of your signed footballs in there. I am thoroughly impressed.”

I shift uncomfortably.

“I bet all the girls were in love with you.”

Knox sits forward and butts in. “Oh, they were. He had quite the lineup junior and senior year. He was Prom King, too.”

I am going to kill him later.

“Really?” Jane’s eyes light up.

“Flynn says there’s still some graffiti on the football bleachers declaring you the hottest guy to ever graduate Valley High.”

Heat climbs up my neck.

“Oh my gosh.” Her grin is so wide.

Thankfully the buzzer sounds, and our attention is dragged back to the court as Flynn and his team huddle up on the sideline.

The same guy that was running the scoreboard and announcing the starting lineup when I was in high school starts to call the opposing team. Then it’s time for the Valley players. Flynn sits on the bench with the other starters. The expression on his face is determined and calm. Only his bouncing leg gives away his nerves. He’s the only sophomore on the varsity team, but I can see the respect his teammates have for him.

The lights dim and a spotlight bounces around the court. Music starts up

and the announcer lowers his voice as he says, “And now, your Valley High starting lineup.”

Jane’s jaw drops and she looks over at me with such raw excitement that I forget I’ve seen this whole pre-game intro a million times before. Like everything else, it’s basically identical from when I was here.

The cheerleaders line up with their red and white pom-poms. Someone dressed in the old bobcat mascot costume circles the gym with their arms raised. The crowd stands.

The announcer waits until the crowd is properly antsy before he begins. “A six-foot sophomore, number eighteen, Flyyyyyynn Holland.”

My little brother stands and runs out to half-court. Jane screams so loudly that people around us all turn to stare at her. Flynn’s cheeks turn red, but he can’t hide the grin stretching across his face.

The other four players are announced in the same fashion. Jane cheers for all of them, but none as loud as Flynn. I bet he freaking loves that.

When the lights come back up, the team takes off their warmup jackets and tosses them into a pile at the end of the bench. Flynn steps back onto the court with the number eighteen proudly stretched across his chest. Our mom’s birthday. January eighteenth. It’s the number I wore too.

The rest of the crowd sits, but not Jane. She bounces on her toes, yelling proudly for Flynn. Knox shoots me an amused look as he tosses more M&Ms into his mouth.

She finally sits after tip-off, but she’s on the edge of her seat, following the action so closely I have a hard time not watching her instead of the game. But as soon as Flynn scores, she’s back on her feet. He scores often after that.

The popcorn she’s holding is strewn around us from her jumping up and down, and people nearby are starting to get into it too. I think they’re all cheering extra hard for Flynn just to see her reaction. A few people have recognized her, mostly students that I’m sure heard my brother bragging about her, but except for posing for a few selfies, they’ve left her alone.

By halftime, Flynn has over twenty points, Jane has made friends with all the people sitting around us, my brothers are even more enamored with her, and fuck, I am too.

She convinces me to take her outside and show her the football field. Not a lot I wouldn’t say yes to right now where she’s concerned. I gave in last night and now I can’t seem to bring myself to fight it. I want her. My fascination with her isn’t distracting, it makes me the best person for the job.

Or at least I hope that's true.

"Did you play basketball in high school too?" she asks me as we walk down the sidewalk away from the gym toward the field behind the school.

"When I was younger, I did, but I focused on football in high school."

"I saw a picture of you in your uniform. You were cute." She slips her hand around my bicep. "I would have had a huge crush on you even then. Though apparently, I would have had to get in line."

"They're exaggerating. That is definitely not how I remember it."

"And now?"

"Now what?" I open the side gate that leads to the field and let her go ahead of me.

"Do I need to get in line?"

I can't stop the laugh that breaks free.

"I'm serious," she says. "You're a young, hot, professional football player. There's no way girls aren't throwing themselves at you."

"Was a professional football player," I clarify. "I haven't really had time to date that much. My schedule during the season is pretty hectic, and during the offseason I take whatever work Logan can get me."

"So . . . no girlfriends back in L.A.?"

"I dated a little when I first moved to California, but nothing serious."

"What about repeat hookups?" She arches one brow as she waits for my answer.

"A few of those," I admit.

She smiles like it doesn't bother her in the least. Fuck, maybe she's got her own list of guys she keeps on standby, like Cam. That thought doesn't sit well, but she steps onto the field and our conversation dies.

Jane turns in a circle, arms held out wide, head thrown back, and somehow smiling even bigger. The wind blows her hair around and damn near takes the hat off her head. She places one hand on her head but doesn't make any move to capture the wild strands. She's so carefree despite the heavy things going on in her life. It might be my favorite thing about her.

I step up in front of her and wrap my arms around her waist. She tilts her head up and meets my gaze with the same wondrous expression she's worn all night.

"There's no line," I say. "Not anymore."

The smile on her face widens as she brings her arms up around my neck. "Good. Because I would fight them all."

I turn the hat on her head around backward to get it out of my way, then drop my mouth to hers. Her body presses into mine automatically, sending a surge of heat through me. She's tall and lean, but her curves mold against me like she was made for me.

All day we've gotten by with little touches and a few short kisses, but now that I have her alone, I want to watch her come again with my name on her lips.

"Ever make out on a high school football field?" I ask her right before I scoop her up into my arms.

She squeals into my mouth but doesn't stop kissing me to answer. Her hold on me tightens as I lower us both to the ground.

She straddles me, resting her weight on my hard dick. "No, but I once made out with a guy in a sky box at a baseball game."

I growl my disapproval at her making out with anyone but me, which makes her giggle, and I pull her bottom lip between my teeth. She arches into me, letting her head tip back. I take full advantage of the position, and trail open-mouthed kisses along the column of her delicate neck.

She rolls her hips over me and moans as I suck a sensitive spot along her collarbone.

"I hate the thought of anyone else touching you," I admit. I slide one hand between us, under her dress. Her panties are already damp when I cup her pussy.

She grinds into my palm. My thumb strokes lazy circles over her clit. I stop kissing her only so I can meet her stare. Lips puffy and those green eyes sparkling. She's fucking gorgeous with the flush of pleasure on her cheeks.

The buzzer in the gymnasium sounds in the distance.

"Second half is about to start," I say as I slip one finger under her panties.

The only acknowledgment is the increased pace as she rubs herself on my hand.

She's close when she drops her forehead against mine and says, "I really missed out. High school is the best."

I don't have a single high school memory that's as good as this one, but I'll relive them all if they end with my fingers buried in her sweet pussy.

I slant my mouth over hers and increase the pressure as she comes apart on top of me. She rides my hand until every last bit of the orgasm is wrung out of her, then she melts into my chest.

We hurry back to the gym and take our seats about halfway through the third period.

“Where’ve you two been?” Archer asks with a knowing smirk.

“Hendrick was showing me the football field.” Jane smooths her windblown hair and adjusts the hat so it’s facing forward again.

“I bet he was,” Brogan mutters.

Knox kicks him. “I’m glad you’re back. Flynn keeps looking over here, and it’s not to see our ugly mugs.”

“You’re not ugly,” she says matter-of-factly, staring ahead at the game. “None of you are. Actually, you’re all really hot.”

He smirks around her at me.

“But Hendrick is the hottest,” she quickly clarifies.

His smirk falls. And I flip him off behind her back.

JANE

EARLY MONDAY MORNING, I GET DRESSED IN WORKOUT CLOTHES AND HEAD out to the garage. Hendrick's on the phone, his brothers are asleep, and I'm feeling antsy.

We've barely left the house since Flynn's game Friday night. The only other place we've gone is to my house so I could grab some clean clothes and assure my friends I was still alive.

The rest of the weekend was spent hanging around his place with his brothers. It's nonstop here. Someone is always coming or going. They're rarely all home at the same time unless it's to sleep. Still, I've enjoyed all the little moments getting to know them better. The way that they show each other they care is different than what I have with my friends, but no less real.

From Knox making dinner almost every night, Archer and Brogan always trying to lighten the mood, Flynn choosing the music he blasts from his room based on who's home and their preferences, to Hendrick sitting at the table with Flynn all day yesterday to help get him caught up in school.

Their bond is tight, and I feel really lucky that I've been able to witness it. It's been great being holed up in Hendrick's little world where I feel like nothing bad can happen to me, but this morning I woke up knowing that I have to go back to classes and back to wondering when the next awful email or text is going to pop up. Or maybe the next time my harasser will decide to deliver the message in person. The thought sends a shiver through me.

"Hey," Knox says, jutting his chin toward me as I step out into the garage. He places a hand on the punching bag to stop it swinging.

"Hey." I walk around him and grab a dusty yoga mat resting against the

wall. “I won’t get in your way.”

He nods and watches as I roll out the mat and lower myself to it. I place both legs out in front of me and lean forward. Knox peels off the boxing gloves and then grabs a water bottle over on the weight bench.

“Wanna do some yoga with me?” I ask, arching a brow in a silent challenge.

He lets out a soft chuckle. “Not really my idea of working out.”

“You’d rather punch things?”

One side of his mouth quirks up. “Exactly.”

While I move into another stretch, he takes a seat on the bench. “Hendrick let you out of his sight?”

“He’s on the phone.”

“Ah.” Knox takes another long drink. “His agent or his boss?”

“Logan. They’re trying to get more information from the school on anyone that logged into the computer the day the email was sent.” That uneasy feeling grows inside of me.

I shift into another stretch and give Knox a small smile. I don’t know how much he knows about everything that’s happened, but he doesn’t press for more.

Instead, he gets up and walks over to the workbench that runs along the back wall, then comes over to the front of the mat. “Stand up.”

“Change your mind on yoga?”

“Ever thrown a punch at someone?”

I drop my gaze to the black material in his hands. “No, but it seems like you Holland brothers spend an awful lot of time hitting things.”

His brows dance as a playful smirk stretches across his face. “Wanna punch me? It feels great. The third best way I know to blow off a little steam.”

Intrigued, I pull myself to my feet. “Third best way? Are the other two less hardcore? Because I’m not sure I have it in me to hit you.”

“Hendrick will kill me if I take you out on my bike or get you naked, so third best will have to do.” He winks. “And I said throw a punch. I’m not going to let you hit me.”

I let his comment about getting me naked go. I don’t really think he has any interest in me. I think he likes to rile up his brother by flirting, but something tells me I’m not Knox Holland’s type at all.

“Okay.” A little bit of excitement shoots through me, replacing some of

the anxiousness. “What do I do?”

I don't know how much time passes as Knox wraps my hands, explaining as he does, then shows me a few sparring moves. I'm sweaty and my arms feel heavy. I'm tired but also filled with energy. It feels good to try to punch at Knox, even if he blocks each one easily.

“That's right. You're not really trying to take me down, but you want my balance off when you throw the punch.” Knox doles out the praise as I attempt a footsweep followed by a darting cross. “That was good. Try it again.”

I do, summoning all my strength. He grins. “There's some fire. Again.”

Before I can obey, Hendrick's voice cuts through the garage. “Aren't you supposed to be at work?”

Knox is slow to let his gaze flick from me to his brother. His expression is harder with his brother than it is with me. I guess it isn't surprising that he knows how to turn on the charm for the ladies, even those he isn't planning on getting naked, but it seems like these two are always ready to trade verbal punches.

“Flynn has a late start day at school. I took the morning off.” Knox steps away from me and places both hands on his hips. “I thought your girl could stand to learn a few basic self-defense moves.”

In the back of my mind, I knew that's why Knox was teaching me, but hearing it out loud makes me want to go back inside and hide for another week or two.

I turn away from Knox, letting my tired arms fall to my sides. When I do, Hendrick's attention shifts from his brother to me, dipping down over my sports bra and shorts. He's seen me much more naked, but his stare is slow and curious like he doesn't want to let the opportunity pass him by.

Without taking his eyes off me, he says, “Knox, can you give us a few minutes?”

“Sure. I need to shower and get ready anyway.” He grabs his discarded shirt off the floor on his way inside. He turns to meet my gaze before stepping inside, wearing that cocky Knox smirk. “Nice job, Hollywood. You've got a pretty good right hook. Don't be afraid to use it.”

Once the door closes behind Knox, Hendrick closes the distance between us. His eyes are dark, and I can't read his expression. Is he mad that I was out here with Knox or about to kiss me? I really hope it's the second.

He reaches for my hand and lifts it to inspect the black material wrapped

around my wrist and fingers. “Is it too tight?”

“No. It feels okay.”

His thumb glides over the top of my bound hand before he drops it and moves into position in front of me like Knox had. “Show me what you learned?”

At first, I feel more self-conscious with Hendrick than I had his brother, but he praises me in the same way. He also gives me minor corrections here and there, but always with a gentle voice.

It isn't long before he steps back, obviously satisfied with what he's seen. “Knox is a pretty good teacher.” The words sound like they're painful for him to admit. “And he's right. It's not a terrible idea for you to learn how to defend yourself.”

My stomach slowly fills with dread again. “I don't know if I could hit someone for real.”

“And I hope you never need to.” Hendrick steps closer and cups my face. “My job is to prevent that, but I would feel better knowing that if I fail, you can pick up my slack.”

I doubt the man has slacked at anything in his life.

“But let me teach you instead of Knox.” He takes my hand again and starts to slowly unravel the wrap from my right hand, then he does the same for the left. When he's done, he brings my hand up to ghost a kiss over my red knuckles.

“Why?”

He doesn't answer, which makes me want to press him harder for the answer.

“Why don't you want Knox to teach me?”

His mouth continues over my sweaty skin to my elbow and then my shoulder. “Because it makes me jealous as fuck.”

With that, he tugs me into him and then captures my mouth. His kisses never start slow. Sometimes they turn lazy, but they always start like he's on the precipice of control and decided to catapult off.

And I am always ready to dive off the cliff with him.

My hands claw at his crisp white T-shirt and he skims his fingers over my back and down. The shorts aren't super short, but the material is so tight and thin that it's almost like skin-to-skin contact. Those powerful hands roam all over the backs of my legs and he grabs handfuls of my ass on the way up. Then he drags those rough palms around to my stomach.

“I think I like you jealous,” I say as he slides his hand under the elastic waist and down toward my pussy.

He wastes no time before gliding two fingers through me. I tighten my hold on him as my body sways. I’ve lost track of the number of orgasms he’s given me this weekend, but it hasn’t done anything to dull the ache I have each time he touches me. If anything, it just makes me want him that much more. I know what those talented fingers are capable of, the least of which is helping me forget about everything else for a few minutes.

He pinches my clit, then circles his thumb lazily over the sensitive nub. I’m so close so fast.

“Hendrick.” My voice is filled with so much need. I need him the same way I need air.

His hazel eyes meet mine. He drops a feather light kiss on my lips and then pulls back to stare at me as the pleasure builds between my legs.

“Hey, Hen—”

I hear the words only second to realizing Hendrick has already pulled his hand out of my shorts and turned to block me from view.

“What?” he barks.

“Uhh . . .” Flynn’s voice is hesitant like he’s realized he walked in on something. I step out from behind Hendrick and smile at him. His cheeks are bright red. “Knox wanted me to tell you that the guy that was supposed to come fix the dishwasher cancelled again.”

Hendrick nods at him and his demeanor softens. “Thanks, Flynn. Are you ready for school? Jane and I can drop you on our way to campus.”

“Knox is going to give me a ride.” He looks from Hendrick to me and back to his brother, cheeks getting redder by the second. “Thanks, though.”

After he hurries back inside, I burrow my face into Hendrick’s back and giggle. “I think we traumatized your brother.”

“Fucking Knox.” He turns around. “I guarantee he sent him out here to mess with us.”

“Brothers are brutal.”

“You have no idea,” he says dryly, then runs his thumb over my bottom lip. “You better get ready. We need to leave in twenty so you’re not late.”

“Do I have to?” I whine.

“I thought you’d be dying to get back to classes by now. Are you worried about something happening? I won’t leave your side.”

“A little worried, I guess, but I’m more concerned about going hours

without you kissing me or touching me. It sounds like a real bummer day.”

He chuckles softly and drops his mouth to mine. “How about tonight I take you out then, to make up for all the torturous hours you’ll have to endure today?”

I know he’s mocking me, but it’s going to feel pretty torturous. “Like a date?”

“Yeah, like a date.” His lips pull into a smile. “Sound good?”

It sounds freaking fantastic.

HENDRICK

“WHERE ARE YOU TAKING HER?” BROGAN ASKS, BRIEFLY LOOKING UP FROM his phone.

“I was thinking Araceli’s. Is that place still nice?”

His brows shoot up. “Yeah. Yeah, Araceli’s is nice. Really nice. So, this is like a *date* date then.”

Archer throws one hand up in the air, the other digs into a bag of chips. “Of course, it’s a *date* date. Jane’s been in there getting ready with her friends for over an hour.”

The three of us are standing around the kitchen island while Knox puts a couple frozen pizzas in the oven.

“Maybe Arch and I should stop by and make sure you don’t screw it up,” Brogan suggests.

Knox snorts.

“I think I got it,” I grumble under my breath. The last thing I need is those two tagging along. They’re around all the damn time. Catcalling when they catch us kissing or grinning like idiots when they come home and find us sitting on the couch together. It doesn’t even matter if we’re touching, though we usually are, my brothers are loving that they can razz me about a girl.

Maybe I should have tried to keep things between me and Jane quiet, but that felt impossible with all of us living together. Besides, I want to give her some of those experiences she’s been wanting but struggled to find with assholes like Cam.

The door to my bedroom opens and I turn instinctively, the way I always do when Jane is nearby.

Her friends file out first. Violet, Daisy, then Dahlia. I haven't gotten to know them that well yet, but I know how much they care about her. I'm glad she has them.

Those tender and grateful thoughts are kicked aside as Jane comes into view. *Holy fuck.*

The short green dress shows off her mile-high legs. It scoops low in the front and her tits are pushed up. Her hair is down and straight, falling over her shoulders like usual, but the green is gone.

She stops just outside of the room and flashes a shy smile. Her fingers come up to touch the blonde strands. "I thought it was time for a change."

I'm still frozen, staring at her, chest tightening.

"You look great," Brogan says. "I like the hair."

"Thank you." Her hand falls away and she glances up at me, still looking more hesitant than I thought her capable of.

Archer elbows me, snapping me out of my trance. I clear my throat and step forward.

"He's right. You're beautiful."

Her smile widens and she gives me a once-over. "You look nice too."

"We should go," Violet says. She moves to Jane and gives her a quick hug. "Have fun. Text us later."

"I will." Jane hugs each of them one by one. "Thank you guys for coming over."

"Any time," Dahlia says as the three of them head to the front door.

Brogan follows to see them out.

"Ready?" I ask her.

"Yeah." She clutches a small gold purse in both hands. "Where are we going?"

"Uhhh . . ." Brogan interrupts. "Did someone order something from Home Depot?"

My brows furrow. "Home Depot?"

"They just pulled into the driveway."

"Maybe they got the wrong house," Knox says as a guy fills the doorway, holding a tablet. "Hendrick Holland?"

Brogan looks over his shoulder at me.

"I'm Hendrick Holland."

The guy looks down at his tablet. "I have a Bosch dishwasher for you."

"You must have it wrong. I didn't order anything."

“Actually . . .” Jane pulls her bottom lip between her teeth. “You did. Or I did. It was supposed to come later, *after* we left.”

“You bought us a dishwasher?” I ask, dumbfounded.

“It’s no big deal. I wanted to do something to say thank you for letting me stay here and everything.”

I continue to stare at her.

“Is it cool if I bring it in?” The guy still standing in the door looks at me for confirmation.

I ignore him and keep my focus on Jane. “You didn’t need to do that.”

“I know. I wanted to.” She shrugs.

“This is my job. You pay me to keep you safe. I don’t need gifts.”

She tips her chin down to scowl at me. “My dad told me that you’ve all but stopped taking payment for being my bodyguard.”

Dammit. She was not supposed to know that. The only thing I’ve let them pay for is Logan’s hours. He should get paid regardless of my involvement with her.

“Okay. It’s more than a job. But that’s exactly why I don’t need payment or gifts. You’ve already thanked me and that’s enough.”

“It isn’t enough. Not even close. Besides, Knox has kicked that one so many times it’s basically useless.” She motions with her head toward the old dishwasher and smiles.

Someone must have given the go-ahead because a fancy new dishwasher is being wheeled through the living room to the kitchen. It’s a thoughtful gesture, but completely unnecessary.

“Please don’t be mad. I wanted to do something nice for you and I knew you would say no if I asked.” She steps closer and threads her fingers through mine. “If you won’t accept it, then let me do it for your brothers. It isn’t their job to look after me, but they have. You’ve all been really great to me, and it means more than I could say with a simple thanks.”

I know that the dishwasher is probably a small price compared to the fee I was originally taking for the job, but it still feels like too much.

My attention is drawn to my brothers checking out the new dishwasher and smiling like it’s the coolest gadget they’ve ever seen as the guy removes the old one. Even Flynn has emerged from his room. If I tell them we can’t keep it, they’ll be salty about it. And she knows it.

“Thank you.”

She lifts onto her toes and lets her lips graze over mine. “That almost

sounded like you meant it.”

I circle her waist and pull her flush against me. “I’ll properly show you my thanks after dinner.”

Her eyes light up. “I’m going to hold you to that.”

Araceli’s is as nice as I remember, and the food is great. We talk about nothing and everything. She’s so easy to be with, so excited about everything. She really knows how to be in the moment. It’s nice.

After we’re done eating and the check is paid, we linger. This is maybe the best date I’ve ever had, and it’s all coming to an end far sooner than I want.

“Tell me about living in L.A. Where is your apartment? Where’d you hang out?” She has both elbows on the table as she stares at me with excitement dancing in her green eyes. Guess I’m not the only one that doesn’t want the night to end.

“Excuse me.” A woman steps up to the table. She looks at Jane, flicks her gaze at me, and then refocuses on my girl. “I’m so sorry for interrupting, but are you Ivy Greene?”

At the mention of Ivy, I tense. Jane shows no such reaction. She sits back and smiles. “Yeah, I am. Hi. Have we met?”

“Oh, heavens no.” She waves off the idea. “But my daughter was a huge fan of that show you were on. The one with all the singing.”

Light laughter slips from her lips. “How old is your daughter?”

“She’s seventeen. A junior in high school. All honors and she’s in chorus too.” The woman hypes her daughter and Jane just grins back like it’s all super fascinating stuff.

“That’s incredible. Congratulations. You must be really proud.”

“Thank you.” She holds up her phone. “Do you think we could take a photo? She’ll never believe me when I tell her I ran into you. You’re really going to Valley U then? What about your acting career?”

“Absolutely.” Jane nods eagerly, ignoring all the questions except the first one. I detect the tiniest bit of discomfort, but I doubt anyone else would be able to see it. “Let’s take a selfie or a video. What’s her name?”

I watch on as Jane and the woman chat back and forth and then take

several photos and videos. She thanks her, and Jane tells her how nice it was to meet her. She's sincere too, which surprises me.

"You're something," I say after we're alone again. "You just made that woman's night."

"Sorry about that." She takes a sip of her water.

"Nah, don't be. I just met your number one fan."

"My number one fan's mother, maybe." She grins. "Are you ready to get out of here? I saw a waiter eyeing me like he's trying to figure out who I am and how he can use it to his advantage."

Fuck, that has to be weird. I do a quick sweep of the room as I stand and find the waiter she's talking about instantly. Sure enough, he has his phone out and has it aimed this direction. I step in front of her and block his view the entire way out of the restaurant.

Once we're outside I find myself slowing my pace as we walk out to my truck. Before I open the passenger door for her, I stop and use her hand to tug her around to face me. "I don't want to go back home yet."

"Okay," she agrees quickly.

"Yeah?"

"I mean, if we go back, we can get naked sooner, but whatever you want."

I take her mouth in a quick, hard kiss. That is tempting, but I want her all to myself for a little while longer. No brothers interrupting or in the other room listening in.

I don't have a plan when I get behind the wheel. She plays with the radio, scanning until she finds a song she likes. Finally, she stops on an old Fleetwood Mac song. Sitting back, she sings along.

I glance over at her, ignoring how this particular song makes my chest tighten. Even more so with her voice drowning out Stevie Nicks.

"You like this song?" I ask.

"Of course. It's a classic. You?"

"It was my mom's favorite."

"Really?" She beams as she angles her body toward mine.

I nod.

"What was she like?"

Staring straight ahead, I try to think how to explain her. I guess no one has ever really asked me about her so directly. "She was smart and funny. Very no-nonsense, which I guess she had to be raising four boys basically on

her own.”

“What did she do for work?”

“She owned a bar.”

“Really?” Her eyes sparkle as she stares at me in surprise.

“Yeah. Her family owned it for something like twenty years. She took over when her dad passed away. She was only twenty-one, pregnant with me. It was a cool spot, not far from where The Hideout is actually.”

“It’s not there anymore?”

“The building is, but the bar closed not long after she passed.”

“What was it called?”

“Rosie’s Place. Her dad named it after her. Her name was Rose, but everyone called her Rosie.”

“I love that. Let’s go see it.”

“Now?”

“Yeah. I mean if that isn’t too weird for you. I can tell it’s important to you, and I’d love to see it.”

It is important to me, but hearing her say it makes that tight spot in my chest twist a little more.

I drive out past The Hideout and turn down a gravel drive. It’s far enough away from the main road that it feels secluded out here, especially at night. It’s dark, but I can still picture it how it was then, all lit up with neon signs in the window.

This place was my mom’s pride and joy. My brothers and I spent a lot of time here, cleaning or helping her fix odds and ends. Dad wasn’t much help, that’s for sure, and a bar like this took a lot to maintain.

“I can totally picture it,” Jane says as we get out of the truck and walk up to the front windows. She puts her face up to the glass and peers inside. “It looks like it has a lot of space inside.”

“Yeah. It does. The bar ran along the left wall here.” I point. “Tables were spread all around the center, then pool tables and dartboards, and a few video games on the back right, and then there was a small stage for karaoke nights and live entertainment.”

“She ran this whole place herself?” She looks properly amazed.

“Yeah, basically. She had staff and forced us to help with some of the upkeep, but it was her vision and hard work that kept the doors open.”

“What about your dad? You said he was around on and off, but not a lot else. Was he ever in the picture?”

“He’s not my favorite topic.” I kick a rock with the toe of my shoe. “He and Mom were together until I was ten or eleven. After that he really only came around on birthdays and holidays. He drives a truck, so he was gone a lot even before they split. And later I think it was a convenient excuse to stay away. Or he did drive a truck, I have no idea what he’s doing now.”

She nods.

“The bar was a sore subject with him,” I continue. I really don’t like to talk about him, but for some reason I want Jane to know. “He thought it took too much time and money. He was always on her to sell it, but she loved it. A few months after she passed, he sold the place. They never officially got divorced so his name was on everything. He said it was to pay for bills and shit. She went through a few rounds of chemo and radiation, so I’m sure it was expensive, but I don’t know. I think it was an excuse to finally have his way.”

Jane takes my hand, making me realize how tense I am talking about it. My body relaxes a fraction.

“I was so pissed. Still am. The people who bought it ran into some money trouble and never did reopen it. It’s sat empty for years.”

“Oh, Hendrick. I’m so sorry.” She squeezes my fingers.

“I know it’s just a bar and that he never would have stayed around long enough to run it anyway, but I hate that something she worked so hard for and loved so much is just gone.”

“It’s not gone. Not all of it anyway.” She places a hand on my chest over my heart. “She sounds amazing. A total badass. I’m not surprised in the least because you and your brothers are all pretty awesome.”

“She was a badass.” I cover her hand with mine. “I think you would have liked her.”

“Duh, of course I would have.” Her fingers slide up and she drapes her hands on my shoulders. “Thanks for bringing me here.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Any other dark, abandoned buildings you want to take me to tonight?”

A laugh builds in my chest and slips free. “Yeah, I guess this isn’t the most romantic place to bring someone. Tales of death and deadbeat dads.”

“No. That’s not what I meant. I love getting to know you and hearing about your mom. Honest. It means a lot that you brought me here. The high school, this bar, even your house—they all tell me little things about you.”

I appreciate her words, but I don’t want to linger too long in the past.

Especially when the present is so damn good. “Yeah? Did any of those places tell you that this dress is making me crazy?”

“No, but if it wasn’t I’d be very disappointed. I can barely breathe in it.”

I lean closer and stop millimeters away from her lips. Her breaths quicken and those green eyes darken.

“Yeah?” I scoop her legs out from under her, eliciting a happy and surprised squeal out of her as she grabs hold of my neck. “Sounds like you need rescuing.”

“Oh, I do. Immediately. It’s a dire situation. Better get me home and tear me out of it, Mister Bodyguard.”

This girl is too fucking much. And I can’t get enough.

JANE

MY BODY IS BUZZING WITH ANTICIPATION BY THE TIME WE PULL INTO THE driveway. Hendrick parks and hurries around the front of the truck to open the passenger door. His eyes are dark with the promise of all-night pleasure.

I turn in the seat so he can help me out, but instead of taking his hand, I widen my legs. His gaze drops. I'm not wearing any panties.

"Fuck, Jane," he mutters.

"Yes, please." I am dying to finally have sex with him.

He steps closer, then drops his head between my legs. I expected him to toss me over his shoulder and hurry inside, but this works too.

Hendrick wastes no time. He flattens his tongue over my center and then flicks the tip across my clit. My fingers tangle in his hair and thighs tighten around him.

"You're so wet, baby." Glancing up at me, his hazel eyes taunt me. "Have you been flashing that bare pussy around all night without me knowing?"

When I don't answer, he grazes his teeth over my inner thigh.

"No." I shake my head. I'm already so close. I don't know how he does it. He plays my body like he owns it. "I took them off at the restaurant."

"Because?" He pushes a finger inside as he continues to lick and suck.

I grind into his face. I'm so freaking close.

"Why, Jane?" He pulls back a fraction, then glides his tongue over me slowly. My whole body shudders around him. "Were you hoping I'd be so desperate to have you that I'd reach over during the drive and slip my fingers into this drenched pussy?"

"Yes," I pant.

He adds another finger. I moan loudly into the quiet night. I don't care if anyone hears. I need to come more than I need my next breath.

"I'm always that desperate for you, but I wanted you splayed out in my bed where I could worship you from head to toe."

"Yes," I repeat. Oh god, that sounds so good.

"Yes, as in you want me to stop and take you inside?" he asks as he increases the pace of his fingers thrusting in and out of me.

"Please don't stop, but yes."

He chuckles. "Don't worry. I'm going to let you come and then I'm going to take you inside and do it all over again just the way I planned."

The only words after that are the ones I mutter incoherently as he buries his head between my legs and makes me come so hard that the world becomes hazy and my legs are useless.

He finds a napkin in the glove box and cleans me up, then offers me his hand.

"I don't think I can walk yet," I say as I shift to step down.

With a pleased smile, he scoops me up into his arms. I rest my head against his shoulder while he carries me to the front door. Voices inside are loud, but I can't make out who or what's going on.

"Are they having a party?" I ask as a chorus of excited "Ooooohs" drifts outside.

"There aren't any cars parked out front." Hendrick sets my feet on the ground and then opens the front door to the chaos.

All four brothers are in the living room, though it looks nothing like it did when we left a few hours ago. Brogan has a golf club in his hand, the others are scattered around what looks like an elaborate maze of some sort, set up with cups and pots, textbooks, and a hair dryer? Actually, that's my hair dryer.

"What in the world?" I ask.

They all turn, just realizing we're home, and stare at us like deer in headlights. Then they start laughing.

Hendrick and I share an amused look, then walk farther into the living room. He shuts off the hair dryer, which is on the coffee table, and looks around. Then he *smiles*? Not the reaction I expected at all.

"Happy Gilmore?" He takes in the setup, making more sense of it than I can apparently.

"Yeah." Knox is vibrating with excitement. I've never seen him quite like

this before. “Check this out, Hen.”

He talks incredibly fast as he goes through the entire setup. It’s like Mouse Trap but with a golf ball.

“I take it this is something you’ve done before?” I ask Hendrick, fighting a smile.

“Who, Hendrick?” Brogan claps him on the shoulder. “Level-headed, serious, grumpy Hendrick?”

“He invented it.” Knox takes the club from Brogan and hands it to him.

“I can’t,” he says. “We were—”

“Gonna go fuck? Yeah, yeah, yeah. But first hit the ball.”

He hesitates.

“Come on, Hendrick,” Knox encourages.

“Henny, Henny,” Brogan starts, and soon they’re all cheering him on.

Still not giving in, he looks to me for approval.

“Better hit the ball, Henny,” I tease and take a seat on the arm of the couch.

It’s actually pretty entertaining. He has to hit the ball into a plastic cup that’s resting on a paint stick stirrer on top of a stack of books. The stirrer tips with the weight of the ball. From there the cup empties the ball onto the coffee table, the hair dryer assists in blowing the ball down a tunnel of books to drop off the table and bounces into three pots of varying sizes. The last bounce is the trickiest because the ball loses steam a couple times and doesn’t quite make it.

I’m not sure I’ve ever seen Hendrick look so happy or determined. It takes him a few attempts but as soon as he gets it through the entire maze, he throws his hands over his head and cheers, then captures me around the waist and kisses me.

His kiss reminds me that: a) I’m not wearing any panties and b) I was promised another orgasm. I think he just remembered too.

“Jane’s turn,” Knox says, interrupting our lust-fueled stare off.

“Oh, I don’t think—” I start to protest but they start chanting my name the same way that they had for Hendrick. It’s obvious we are not getting out of here until I take my turn.

Smiling, he leans down and brushes a kiss on my cheek as he hands me the golf club. “Don’t take too long, sweetheart.”

I shiver as he pulls back.

If my beer pong skills hadn’t been an indicator that Happy Gilmore was

not my jam, then they should have been. I'm terrible. So terrible that they take pity on me and adjust the setup, so I don't have to hit the ball into the cup (because that was never going to happen).

Dahlia would love this. A pang of sadness hits me at how little I've seen her recently. Sure, the girls came over tonight and we all went to the party, but I used to see her a dozen times a day. I miss lying on the pillow fort in her room and talking all night long or sitting downstairs in front of the TV doing homework.

ME

I need a girls' night soon.

DAHLIA

WHAT HAPPENED? Did Hendrick fuck up? I'm getting dressed and coming to get you.

ME

Keep your pants on—or off in this case. The date was . . . there are no words. I like him so much, Dahl. So, so much. But I miss you!

DAHLIA

I miss you too. I'm so happy for you. I want all the details. I have a tournament this weekend, but let's plan girls' night for sometime next week!

The tightness in my chest eases just knowing we're going to make an effort to hang out soon.

ME

Good luck at your tournament. Love you <3

DAHLIA

<3 <3 Love you!

I glance around at Hendrick and his brothers after I finish texting with Dahlia. I miss her, Daisy, and Violet, but I think I'll miss these guys too when everything is over and I can stay at my house again.

Hendrick notices the shift in my mood. "I think we're gonna call it. Jane has to be up early for class." He points to Flynn. "So do you."

With some grumbling, everyone agrees. Flynn heads off to bed first, followed by Knox. Brogan and Archer start to tear down the maze, and

Hendrick pulls me toward his room.

I yawn as I toss my shoes into a corner with my bags.

“Sorry our plans got derailed.” Hendrick wraps his arms around me from behind.

“Don’t be.” I lean my back against his chest. I yawn again. “We still have time.”

He chuckles and places a kiss at the crook of my neck. “You need sleep. You have a test at eight.”

“How do you remember these things?”

“I just do,” he says. He unzips the back of my dress and then slowly pushes the fabric down over my hips and lets it drop to the floor. His hands caress my sides and he drops another kiss to my back. My insides light up even as I fight another yawn.

Hendrick steps away and a few seconds later returns with one of his T-shirts. He pulls it over my naked body.

“I was promised another orgasm,” I say, voice thick with sleep.

He laughs lightly. “Sleep first.”

“Fine.” I climb into the bed. I have every intention of rubbing up against him as soon as he gets into bed, but when his arms finally wrap around me, I’m already asleep.

I wake up before my alarm goes off. Hendrick lies on his back and I’m curled up against his side. He sleeps in basketball shorts and no shirt. At this point I’ve seen his naked chest more times than I can count, but it still amazes me. His muscles aren’t the kind you see on guys that work out a few times a week. It’s way beyond a chiseled six pack. Hendrick’s chest and stomach are hard planes of muscle. Even unflexed, there’s a deep line running down from his chest to his belly button where the muscles separate.

I run a finger down that line, back and forth. Hendrick stirs and I quickly move to straddle him as he wakes up. His hands go to my hips and he gives me a sleepy smile.

“Good morning,” I say as I feel him growing hard underneath me.

“It sure is.” His palms glide under the hem of my shirt and over my stomach.

“I slept.”

He chuckles lightly, but it’s cut off as I wriggle down and kiss his chest, then down over his impressive abs, and lower.

I glance up at him as I pull his shorts down. Heat seers back at me through those hazel eyes. He’s given me so many orgasms and I’ve barely touched him. There’s always something going on, or some interruption, but I’m determined to finally make him feel as good as he’s made me feel.

He lets out a low groan when I wrap my fingers around him. I’m a little nervous as I bring my lips to the head of his cock. I’ve only done this a few times and what if I suck at it—and not in the good way?

My lips slowly slide down his hard shaft. He lets out another groan as his fingers tangle in my hair, holding it back out of my face. It pushes me on, giving me more confidence. I swirl my tongue along the head as I come back up and then start to take him down my throat again.

“Eyes on me,” he grits out.

Immediately my gaze snaps to his. The look on his face erases any lingering self-consciousness. Maybe I’m not super experienced, but the chemistry between us is too good for this to be bad.

My stomach dips and heat pools low as I continue bobbing up and down, increasing my pace as his grip tightens. He never takes his eyes off me. Seeing him like this, being responsible for every groan and tightening of his jaw, is the biggest turn on. I’m throbbing and he hasn’t moved his hands from where they remain tangled in my hair.

“Take it all.” He takes over, thrusting farther down my throat and then using his hands to guide me off. “Good girl. Keep those pretty green eyes on me.”

I moan around his dick. His praise only increases the need building between my legs. My eyes water, but I couldn’t look away if I tried.

“I’m gonna come,” he says as he tangles more of my hair around his fingers. He tries to pull me off at the last second, but I don’t budge. I keep going, gaze locked on him, as I swallow him down.

“Oh, fuck, Jane. That’s so hot.” He drags his thumb over my bottom lip when I finally release him. “Come here.”

I scramble up his body. His fingers pull up the T-shirt and his mouth covers one nipple.

I arch into him and moan. A moan that’s drowned out by my alarm clock.

“Ignore it,” I say.

He does, but a few seconds later someone knocks on the door.

“Go away!” Hendrick practically growls the command, then flips us so I’m underneath him and he’s hovering over me.

His mouth goes back to lavishing my breasts with attention, and he brings one hand to cup my pussy. I jolt at the contact.

“I’m so close already.”

He hums against my skin. “I’d like to drag this out until you’re whimpering and crying my name, but there’s always next time.”

Next time. I hope there’s a million more of them.

His fingers drag through my slick heat, then he grabs a condom from the nightstand and covers himself.

My heart is racing as he slowly pushes into me, and I’m already unraveling when he starts to pull out. He swallows my moans by kissing me and continues to thrust in and out, hard and somehow still savoring. He stares down at me with a look of pure adoration that sends me over the edge.

Hendrick isn’t far behind, dropping his forehead to mine as he groans through his release.

“That was . . .” I say as my body melts into the mattress. “So good.”

“And too damn quick. I never get to take my time with you.” He nips at my bottom lip and then gets up and goes to the attached bathroom to get a washcloth. He comes back and wipes it gently between my legs. It’s sweet, but already has me wishing we had time for more. The fact that his dick is hard again tells me he might be thinking the same thing.

“Don’t look at me like that. You can’t be late today.”

I groan and get up. He’s right. Diction isn’t a hard class, but I can’t miss the test. Once I’m dressed, I grab my phone. I had my number changed to stop the spam texts, but I still scroll through a few texts and emails to make sure there’s nothing new that I need to worry about. It feels like I’m just waiting for another creepy message.

I put my phone away and sit on the bed. “After classes today, I want to stop by Eric’s place to watch the band practice.”

He nods. “All right.”

“You don’t have to come. I’ll go straight there and back.”

Grinning, he comes over and brushes a kiss over my lips. “I don’t mind. Any opportunity to hear you sing.”

“I won’t be singing. I’m merely going to listen and help in any way I can. This show is going to be huge for them.”

I can't quite read the expression on his face, but I know he's holding something back. "What? You don't think so?"

"No, I do." He takes my hand and pulls me to my feet. "I'm happy to come with you if that's what you want."

"I want."

JANE

AFTER MY DICTION CLASS, I HANG BACK UNTIL EVERYONE IS GONE. Hendrick is waiting for me outside, like he always does.

“Hey,” I say through the earpiece. “Can you come to the classroom?”

“Sure thing.” He doesn’t even bother asking why.

Far faster than seems possible, he walks into the room. His eyes search me out and his features soften when he finds me standing alone in front of the teacher’s desk.

“Close the door,” I say.

He complies, then walks over to me. “Everything okay? How did the test go?”

I flash him a wide smile. “It went great, and I want to celebrate.”

After I hop onto the desk, I grab a handful of his T-shirt and pull him closer.

His expression morphs from concern to surprise. “Here?”

“Yes, here.” My hands roam over his chest and down to his stomach. “I have compiled a list of the best places on campus to have sex.”

One side of his mouth quirks up, then quickly falls. His hands grip my hips and his dark eyes narrow. “Have you ever had sex in here before?”

“No.” I shake my head. “I’ve never had sex anywhere on campus. Unless you count the handjob I gave some guy in Freddy dorm last year or the—”

His hold on me tightens, cutting off my reply. “Thinking about you touching anyone else makes me want to burn down the fucking place.”

I don’t know if I should be so turned on by his jealousy, but I am. “Don’t do that. Then my campus bucket list will never get completed.”

My fingers work on undoing the button on his jeans and he takes my mouth in a hard, possessive kiss.

He breaks just long enough to say, “I don’t have any condoms.”

“Good thing I was prepared then.” I nod toward my backpack. “Front pocket.”

His brows rise and he lets out a low chuckle. “You’re carrying condoms around in your backpack?”

I don’t miss the way he rushes to get them though.

“Did I mention I made a list? I wasn’t kidding.”

“Can’t wait to cross every one of them off.”

My body lights up at the promise of his words. While he rips a foil open, I shimmy my panties down and slide them down my legs. My dress rides up my thighs as I widen them. His gaze drops to my pussy as he rolls the condom over his erection.

“So fucking gorgeous.” Gripping himself, he steps between my legs and rubs the head of his dick along my clit and down until he nudges against my entrance. I groan as he pulls out and the thick tip circles my sensitive nub again.

“We don’t have time for you to tease me. I have another class in ten minutes.”

“Don’t rush me, sweetheart.”

I wrap my fingers around him, just below where he grips himself.

“Feel that?” His voice is deep and guttural. “This is what you do to me. I walk around all day so hard it hurts.”

“Really?”

With his free hand, he takes my chin between his thumb and pointer finger. “Yes. Really.”

Our eyes remain locked as he continues his slow torment. I kiss him, needing to release some of the frenzied energy inside of me. He gives back just as good. Wet, messy kisses that pull moans from my lips.

I’m out of my mind with need when he finally pushes inside of me. We let out a collective groan as he buries himself completely. I’m so full and still somehow want more.

“Hendrick,” I whisper his name like a plea.

“Hold on, sweetheart.”

That’s my only warning before he pulls out and slams back into me. My fingers wrap around the edge of the desk, and Hendrick holds me

possessively by the back of the neck as he keeps up the punishing rhythm.

I clench around him, earning myself another one of his tortured groans.

“I’m so close.” So close, but my body doesn’t want to let go. I’m coiled so tightly I feel like I might die if I don’t come soon.

Hendrick seems to sense that I need more because he pulls out, tugs me off the desk, and then spins me around. I’m dizzy with the movement, but as soon as he bends me over the hard wood and fills me again, I cry out with relief. The new angle has his dick hitting a spot that makes my vision hazy.

My orgasm hits me like a wave, pulling me under, silencing everything else but the pounding of blood in my ears. I resurface to his lips trailing soft, tender kisses along my back.

He must have said something because he lifts and turns me around to face him, gaze searching my face like he does so often. “Did I hurt you?”

With a sigh, I drape both arms over his shoulders. “You absolutely ruined me.”



When Hendrick and I arrive at Eric’s house later that afternoon, I have a familiar pang of excitement laced with sadness at the first sound of the band playing together. The thing about this hot, fun chemistry with Hendrick is that it makes me all too aware of the things in my life that bring me down. I’ve been on cloud nine but coming here I realize now how much I’ve missed music. Once we figure out who’s responsible for the threats, and the Spring Fling is over, I need to come by more often. Even if I’m not singing with them, I can soak it all in.

They’re at the end of a song when we walk in. When the music fades, Eric is the first to greet me.

“Look what the cat dragged in.” He smiles then slides his gaze to Hendrick.

“Hey, guys.” I drop Hendrick’s hand to wave. They all say their hellos and then glue their attention to the man beside me.

“This is my bo—” I start to say bodyguard, but Hendrick jumps in. “I’m the boyfriend. Hendrick. Nice to meet you.”

HENDRICK

I HOLD MY HAND OUT TO ERIC FIRST. HE TAKES IT WITH A COMPETITIVE GRIP and hard set to his jaw. He likes Jane. He's never admitted that to her, or maybe even to himself, but I knew that the first time I saw them together.

"Nice to meet you."

"You too," he says, but he doesn't mean it.

"Hendrick Holland," Lennon says as he stares at me wide-eyed. "You played for the Rams."

An uncomfortable laugh rumbles lightly in my chest. I was not expecting any of them to recognize me.

"Yep, he sure did," Jane says proudly, shooting me a questioning gaze. Maybe it was an asshole thing to do, claiming her like I did, but I don't know these people as well as she does and I'm not sure I want them knowing the real reason I'm with her. And to be fair, the real reason is muddled as hell at this point.

"I'm a huge Rams fan." He extends a hand. "I was pissed when they cut you. You've got a hell of an arm."

"Uhh, thanks," I say.

Ted shakes my hand last. Mackenzie gives me a shy wave.

"You sounded so good," Jane tells them. "Is that one of your new songs?"

I fade into the background and take a seat on a couch pushed against the far wall while Jane catches up with them.

Mackenzie talks a mile a minute. The girl obviously idolizes Jane and wants her opinion on every little thing.

Eventually Eric interrupts. "Are we ready to go again?"

Jane comes over to sit next to me while they play. She's on the edge of her seat, eyes continually scanning over each member like she's memorizing every single part of the song. The guitar, the drums, the vocals. She's all lit up.

They play two or three songs, stopping between each to let Jane gush over how good they are. And they are. I'm enjoying listening to them almost as much as watching Jane listen to them.

When they're done, Jane stands. "The set list is so good. I love the original songs."

"None of them are quite right to end the show on though," Eric says.

Jane nods thoughtfully. "What if you did one of the cover songs for the final song? Something that will have everyone singing along."

"Not a bad idea," Lennon says, looking around at his other band members.

Ted approves with a simple nod and Mackenzie's smile is so big that her agreement is obvious. She'll go along with anything Jane says.

"Which one is the question." Jane paces in front of them with one finger pressed to her lips.

"Mac kills on 'Crazy Little Thing Called Love.'" Ted taps out the beginning of the song.

"The ending is kind of blah though," Eric says.

"What about 'Teenage Dirtbag'?" Mackenzie suggests.

It looks like her bandmates are about to argue, but then she says, "Let's just try it."

"All right." Eric pushes his hair off his forehead.

"Jane, sing it with me once?" Mac asks her.

"Oh no. You should do it like you're going to that night."

"Please?" The girl begs. She places both hands out in front of her like she's praying. "One time?!"

"Okay, okay." Jane reluctantly steps up next to Mackenzie.

She looks nervous as the guitar and drums start, but when she opens her mouth to sing, all that hesitation is gone.

Her voice gets to me every time. It's sweet but hard, soft at times but still fills the room. I'm mesmerized and caught off guard when the song ends. A beat of silence hangs in the air as the music drifts off.

Mackenzie is the first to break the silence. "Holy shit, that was amazing! You have to perform it with us at the Spring Fling."

Jane's immediately on the defensive. She backs away and shakes her head. "I can't. And you don't need me. It will be just as amazing without me."

"No. It won't." Mackenzie places both hands on her hips and faces the guys. "Back me up here. What better way to close the show than performing that song *with* Jane? People will lose their minds!"

"She's not wrong. It's pretty fucking great and people will be surprised since you're not listed with the band." Eric rests both hands on the strap of his guitar.

Lennon strums softly, nodding.

They all look to Ted. Even Jane seems to be hanging on his response, giving away how much she wants them all to be in agreement.

Ted turns his attention to his girlfriend. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

She nods so adamantly her red hair shakes around her head.

"Fine, I agree," he says, not all that excited for his girlfriend to share the spotlight.

Mac returns her eager stare to Jane. "What do you say?"

She glances over her shoulder at me. She doesn't need my approval, but I understand why she's seeking it. I'll figure out what we need for security at the event. Keeping that look on her face is all I care about right now. I smile at her. "I think it's a great idea. You two will kill it together."

"The barista hates me," Jane says as she hands me a to-go cup of coffee.

"She doesn't hate you." I take a sip and grimace. "She hates that you order complicated drinks. Apple?"

"Apple crisp macchiato." She gives me a rueful smile.

"It's terrible."

She passes over her regular coffee with a splash of cream and sugar. I take a drink to get rid of the apple flavor, then pass it back. She wraps her fingers around the cup. It's cold out this morning, sun hidden behind the clouds. A last bit of winter before hot weather takes over the desert.

"I got you something too."

She scans me, finally spotting the campus bookstore bag in my left hand.

I hold it up to her and she eagerly passes the coffee back to me before she grabs the bag and dives into it. Her reaction makes me want to buy her things a whole hell of a lot more often.

Smiling up at me, she pulls the pink sweatshirt out and holds it up against her chest. “You remembered.”

“Of course.” I remember all things where Jane is concerned.

She pulls it on over her T-shirt and then attaches herself to my side. “Thank you. I love it.”

“It’s just a sweatshirt.”

“No. It’s my new *favorite* sweatshirt.”

I’ve seen her wardrobe. It’s far more lavish and expensive than this cheap thing. I do a quick scan of our surroundings, then drop my lips to hers for a brief moment. It would be easy to forget I’m supposed to be looking out for her and just enjoy being with her. Too easy.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I pull it out, hoping it’s Logan with an update, but am surprised when it’s my agent’s name on the screen.

I stare at the phone, warring on whether or not to answer it. But when Jane spots Violet and her boyfriend, I excuse myself to take the call while she goes to say hello.

“Hey, John,” I answer, watching Jane as she talks to her friends.

“Hendrick. Hey. How’s vacation treating you?” His voice is loud and boisterous.

I hold the phone away from my ear a fraction. “Everything’s good. What’s the news?”

“Congratulations, man. The Rams want to see you on the field next month.”

“On the field?” I can’t hide the surprise in my voice. “Why?”

He laughs. “Coach Maxwell is inviting you to try out. He saw your hard work on the practice squad last season, and he wants to give you another shot. Smith accepted a trade to New York and Daughtry is injured. They need someone, and I convinced them that someone might be you.”

I thought maybe they’d offer me a contract for the practice squad, but a tryout? It never crossed my mind.

“I told you I would get it done. This year is your shot to show them what you’re capable of.” He prattles on, but I stop listening.

Jane throws her head back and laughs at something Violet says. I can’t hear her, but I know that sound by heart. A second later, she turns to find me.

It's such a simple thing to do, but it causes my chest to tighten.

"Hendrick?" John calls my name like it isn't the first time.

"Yeah. I'm here. That's great news."

"You're damn right it is. I hope you've been keeping up with your workouts. Can you swing by the office sometime this week and we come up with a game plan?"

"I'm in Arizona visiting my brothers."

"Still? Okay. Well, call me as soon as you're back, and in the meantime let me know what you need. We gotta get you in top shape."

Jane parts with her friends and starts back toward me. "Thanks, John. I'll let you know as soon as I'm back."

I end the call as soon as he says goodbye, and Jane flashes me a tentative smile as she approaches. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah."

She stares back at me, disbelieving. "Did Logan find something?"

Too many thoughts swim through my head. I can't seem to figure out the right words. She takes my silence as a reason to worry.

"You're freaking me out. Just tell me. I can handle it," she insists, stepping closer to me and wrapping me in that coconut and vanilla scent.

"It wasn't Logan. It was my agent. The Rams are offering me a tryout."

Her smile is slow, but spreads across her face with so much joy that it intensifies the tightening in my chest two-fold. "Hendrick! Congratulations!"

Jane wraps herself around me and bounces in place. I stand there frozen. Should I be excited? Maybe. I can't seem to feel anything but shock. I made my peace with my career as a football player being over. I've made plans. Not officially, but for months I've thought of Valley being my home, at least a temporary one until I make sure my brothers have everything they need. Now I don't know.

As soon as her classes are over for the day, Jane goes to Eric's house so she can practice with the band for Spring Fling and I go for a drive. I go by the high school, Mom's old bar, and a dozen other places I use to frequent when I was growing up.

Things have changed, but they're the same too.

When I get back to the house, Jane's still gone, so I change and head out to the garage to hit the bag.

It doesn't do anything to clear my head, but I keep at it until my muscles burn. I'm taking off the hand wraps when Jane steps out into the garage. She's all lit up like she always is when she sings. Some relief loosens the tightness that's grown since she's been gone. I don't have answers right now, but I know that being near her feels good.

JANE

OVER THE NEXT FEW WEEKS, A NEW SORT OF ROUTINE EMERGES WHILE I prepare for Spring Fling. I spend my days on campus, my evenings practicing with the band, and I fall into bed every night with Hendrick, exhausted but happy.

But today, Eric had a study session he couldn't miss, so I'm back early.

"I thought I might find you out here," I say as I walk out into the garage. Since he got the call from his agent about the Rams offering him a new contract, he's been working out nonstop. I thought he was built before, but new muscles have emerged that I couldn't have imagined. Couldn't imagine, but am thoroughly enjoying.

I run my fingers along his sweaty chest, then tip my head up to kiss him.

"Is it eight already?"

"No. It's just after six. We called it early tonight. Eric dropped me off. How long have you been out here?" Long enough that he's lost track of time, apparently.

"A while," he admits. "You should have texted. I could have picked you up."

"I know, but he was driving right by the house anyway." I wrap my arms around his waist. I don't even care that he's all sweaty. These long rehearsal evenings have seriously gotten in the way of spending time with him.

It took a lot of convincing to get him to agree that he didn't need to stay at every rehearsal. And I'm glad that he's had more free time to spend with his brothers and train for the upcoming season, but I miss him.

"Is this what you look like during the season?" I drag both palms over his

pecs.

He snorts a laugh.

“Speaking of, how are you feeling about the tryout?”

“I don’t know. Weird, I guess. I’m still not sure it’s the right thing to do. It feels too late for a comeback.”

“If anyone can do it, you can. If you ask me, I think it sounds like an amazing opportunity. Plus, you’ve worked really, really hard for this. You deserve it.”

He doesn’t look convinced.

“If you’re worried about me, I can easily replace you. Though I will miss you.” I lean forward and brush my lips against his.

He chuckles softly as he kisses me back, but it lacks some of the enthusiasm I’ve come to love in his kisses.

“Your brothers will be okay too. Knox is already planning your going away party.”

He huffs a laugh. “Yeah, I bet he is.”

“What’s really going on? You’ve been quieter since you found out you were invited for this tryout. I thought you’d be more excited.”

He steps away and pulls off his wraps, tossing them onto the workbench.

I follow him. “I know you want to be here for your brothers and for me, but I think some part of you wants to be back there too. As you should. You worked hard to get where you are. It’s a big deal. I get that. So do your brothers.”

He runs a hand through his hair and then faces me. “What if I chose wrong all those years ago?”

“By following your dreams?”

“My dreams?” He shakes his head. “I don’t know if football was ever really my dream. I liked playing, don’t get me wrong, but more than anything, it was a way out. I couldn’t wait to leave Valley. This place felt like a prison after my mom died. Our dad always came in and out of our lives, but with him as the only parent, the responsibility of looking after my brothers fell on me.” His jaw flexes and his body is wound tight. “I resented it. I just wanted to be a normal high school kid.”

I take his hand and squeeze. My heart breaks for him. I can’t imagine what it must have been like to lose his mom and then not have his dad around either, but I know that he took on that role for his brothers with the same determination that he does all things.

“So when I got a full-ride scholarship to play college football, I told myself that things with Dad weren’t so bad. I’d survived it and they would too. It was hard on them when I left, but I let myself believe that in the end it was going to work out.” He pauses, but his chest still heaves with frustration and self-loathing. “I don’t know how much Dad was around in those first two years that I was gone, but during Christmas break of my sophomore year, I came home and saw just how bad things were. The house needed repairs, they were behind on bills, and Dad was nowhere to be found. When I pressed Knox, he said it’d been months since they’d seen him. *Months.*”

I swallow around the lump in my throat.

“Knox was barely eighteen. He wasn’t any more ready to step up than I had been, but he did because I wasn’t there. He dropped out of high school and got a job so he could keep everyone together. I saw how that impacted him. He wanted out of Valley as bad as I had, but he stayed because he was all they had.” His face twists with pain. “I went back to college after break, told my coach I wanted to enter the draft, and a few months later I was signing with the Rams. I told myself it was for them. I was going to get a big paycheck that would help keep them together and in the house where we grew up, plus pay for whatever else they needed. But I think more than that I just didn’t want to come back and get stuck here like Knox had.”

“You made the best decision you could at the time. A decision that no kid should have to make.”

“For me. I made the best decision *for me*. Knox resents me. Flynn barely knows me. Archer and Brogan settled for going to Valley when they could have taken scholarships somewhere else. All of them paid the price so I could have what I wanted.”

“You don’t know that. I’ve spent a lot of time with your brothers. They love you. Flynn looks up to you so much, Archer and Brogan seem pretty happy here for two guys you claim settled, and Knox . . . well, Knox is Knox. I have a feeling he’d find something to be angry about no matter what choice you’d made. You have to stop beating yourself up. You can’t change what happened.”

“I know,” he says quietly. “But I can make a better decision now.”

That he’s even considering giving up his life to come back and try to rewrite the past says more than I think he realizes. But I know Hendrick well enough that I know he isn’t going to stop punishing himself just because I tell him he’s off the hook.

“Do me a favor?”

He nods slightly.

“Go to L.A., meet with your coach or agent or whoever, try out, give it your all, and see what happens. Figure out what you want. Then talk to your brothers. Staying here and being miserable or wondering ‘what if’ isn’t the answer.”

He finally releases some of the tension he’s been holding and hugs me back. “Yeah, all right.”

I squeeze him harder. “You are a good man, Hendrick Holland.”

He doesn’t reply, but presses a kiss to the top of my head. I have a feeling I might have to repeat that sentence a few hundred times before he believes it.

“That doesn’t look like studying,” Hendrick says, pulling my attention from my phone.

I set it down on the table and glance over to where he’s sitting across the library. He isn’t looking my way, but I catch the smirk on his face.

For the past hour I’ve been going over notes and the study guide for my French midterm. And okay, fine, texting Dahlia.

“My brain hurts,” I say quietly so only he can hear me through the earpiece. The university library is packed with students doing the same thing as me. Hendrick is sitting in a chair by the stairs because he didn’t want to distract me. Studying would be a lot more fun if he were distracting me, just saying.

“Need a break? Snack? Coffee?”

“Any more caffeine and I’m going to be awake until the end of time.” I stretch. “And I promised myself I wouldn’t leave until I was positive I could get an A on this test.”

“I’m positive you’re adorable all nerdy and studious.”

“Aww, thanks. That’s the first time anyone has ever called me studious.”

He chuckles. “What do you need?”

I love how he’s always so quick to ask. Sometimes I haven’t even realized I have a problem to solve before he’s coming up with fixes. “Distract me for a few minutes.”

“I think the hundred or so other people in here might not appreciate me

fucking you in the middle of the library.”

The man stares at the front doors with a bored expression as his words send tingles throughout my body.

“Aaaaand now my panties are damp.” I blow out a breath. “Maybe just a quickie in the back? I can be quiet-ish.”

He finally flicks his gaze to me and his lips curve into a knowing smile. “Liar.”

I shift in my seat. I need to move this conversation along or I’m not getting any more studying done. “What were you like in school? Did you get good grades?”

“Decent. B’s mostly. I didn’t want to be bothered with homework and studying when I could have been playing football or fucking around with my friends. I admire that about you. You work hard.”

“I wish I cared a little less sometimes,” I say. “I know that in the grand scheme of things, my grade on a French midterm isn’t going to matter. I just want to know that I can do it. Not going to regular school as a kid, I always wondered where I would have fit in. If I hadn’t been Ivy Greene, would I have been the straight-A student who stayed in every night and read ahead in class or the social butterfly who neglected her studies for boys and booze?”

His laughter is soft in my ear. “Maybe somewhere between those two, but I would have been happy to let you neglect your studies to hang out with me if you’d gone to my high school.”

“And now?”

“I have a little more restraint.”

“Too bad. I could pretend to be the eager, peppy cheerleader and you could be the broody, serious football player who needs a little extra cheer before the big game. My character on the show was a cheerleader. I look very cute in a pleated skirt.”

“I have no doubt, sweetheart.”

The endearment makes my stomach flip.

“Do you really think if I had just been another girl at your school, nerd or cheerleader or whatever, you would have still noticed me?”

Hendrick is quiet for a moment. A group of girls at the table next to me are laughing about something, holding their hands over their faces and trying to stifle their laughter so not to disturb anyone.

“The first time I saw you, you were unloading your car after the break. You had on this long, oversized black sweater that hung off one shoulder and

your hair was pulled up out of your face.”

“You were out for a run. I remember. I almost tripped up the stairs watching you go by.”

He dips his chin in a small nod. “I knew what you looked like, of course. I’d done my research, but nothing prepared me for how gorgeous you were up close. Or how much I’d look forward to seeing you every day. There aren’t any scenarios in which I would have met you and not wanted you.”

“Same.” The word comes out a little breathless and my heart squeezes in my chest.

When he smiles like he is right now, all big and carefree, I don’t mind so much that I didn’t have those experiences. Whatever my life was or wasn’t before, it led me here with him. I can try on different characters like favorite dresses while I figure out exactly who I am, and yet he still seems to see through it to the very core of *me*.

JANE

THE NEXT NIGHT, DAHLIA SUMMONS ME TO THE HOUSE AFTER I'M DONE WITH rehearsal.

Hendrick pulls up out front and kills the engine.

"I don't think it should take too long," I say as I open the car door. "Dahlia said if I didn't stop by to see them, they were going to report me missing."

He laughs. She was serious.

As we walk up the stairs of the house I've barely stepped inside in the past month, I swing Hendrick's and my joined hands. "Do you want to go back to your place, and I'll get a ride later?"

"Nah, this is fine. I've barely seen you the past few weeks either. Except when you're crawling into bed at night."

"You didn't seem to mind so much last night."

He grins and then knocks on the front door, like I don't live here, before pulling it open.

I step in before him and then freeze as I see my friends and their boyfriends all standing in the living room waiting for me.

"Surprise!" They yell in unison. Each one of them is wearing a little paper party hat and the house is decorated with balloons and streamers as far as I can see.

"What?" I look from smiling face to smiling face, then back at Hendrick.

"Happy birthday, Jane." His knowing smirk sends a wave of realization over me.

"You knew?!"

“We had to guarantee you would show up,” Dahlia says, stepping forward. She places a party hat on my head and then hugs me.

“My birthday isn’t for another week.”

“If we had planned it for next week, you would have been suspicious.” Violet grins. “Plus, with everyone’s crazy schedules tonight was one of the few nights we were all free.”

I walk in and turn in a circle, taking in all the decorations. They even taped up pictures of the four of us on the wall above the TV. “You guys didn’t need to do this.”

“Of course, we did.” Daisy thrusts a plastic flute in my hand and then Jordan pops the cork on the champagne.

“Happy twenty-first!” Violet yells and holds up her glass.

Everyone joins in. My eyes are teary. I can’t believe they did this for me. I mean, I can because they’re the best, but still.

Hendrick’s hand comes to rest on my lower back. A silent comfort.

“To Jane,” Dahlia says. “The next twenty years are going to be twice as much fun as the first because now you know all of us.”

My laugh comes out in a half sob. I mouth “I love you” to her as everyone says, “To Jane!”

In no time, the eight of us are sitting around the living room floor with two empty bottles of champagne and scraps of wrapping paper from the presents they all got me. Dahlia blew up a photo of Hendrick in his Rams football jersey to poster size, Daisy put together a collage of photos and memories, plus some drawings she’s done of the four of us, and Vi wouldn’t be Vi if she didn’t use this opportunity to make me another dress.

“I have a rainbow of green dresses,” I say as I hold the lime green material up in front of me.

“I don’t think that’s how a rainbow works,” Jordan says.

“What are you, the color police?” I ask him and then burst out laughing. I’m tipsy and happy. So unbelievably happy.

Hendrick sits beside me. I angle my body and lean into him so my back rests against his shoulder. He shifts to pull me into his chest and wraps an arm around my waist.

“I’m pretty sure a rainbow isn’t determined by specific colors,” Gavin says, looking thoughtfully toward the ceiling. He pulls out his phone. “Siri, what’s the definition of a rainbow.”

Siri rattles off the definition, which doesn’t specify the colors. Gavin and

Jordan argue back and forth.

“Will you try it on?” Vi asks me. “I’m dying to see you in it.”

“Of course. This will be easier for Hendrick to get me out of later than these jeans.”

I tip my head to look him in the eye, then wink. He shakes his head with a laugh.

We leave the guys and go upstairs. It’s weird being back in my room. The few times I’ve stopped by, it was to grab something and go. There’s a laundry basket of clean clothes on the bed that I left the last time I was here. It feels like a lifetime ago.

I change into the dress and admire it in the full-length mirror on the back of my closet door. “You are a genius, Vi. I don’t know how you do it.”

“Dahlia helped me.”

She shakes her head. “Barely.”

“Well, I love it. Thank you. Both of you. I think I’ll wear it the next time Hendrick and I go out.”

“Speaking of the *boyfriend*,” Daisy says the last word pointedly as she gets comfortable sitting on my bed. “How are things with Hendrick?”

“He’s not my boyfriend. He only said that to cover for me. Eric and the rest of the band don’t know he’s my bodyguard and I’d like to keep it that way.” At least I think that’s why he said it. I haven’t brought it up and neither has he. Every time I think about asking him, I kiss him instead.

“You’re spending a lot of time together, though. Time that he doesn’t need to be with you as your bodyguard,” Violet interjects.

“Naked time,” Dahlia adds.

Daisy pins me with a serious and scrutinizing stare. “Do you want him to be your boyfriend?”

“Of course, I do.” I nod and move to sit on the edge of the bed with my friends. “I like him so much. But he has a lot going on right now with his brothers and deciding what to do about his contract.”

“What will you do if he leaves?” Vi asks.

“Cry,” I say with a small laugh. “I can’t imagine him not being here.”

Daisy gives me a sympathetic smile. “Will you hire another bodyguard?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. I know I need to keep taking precautions.”

“Any update on E. Rex Sean?” This from a concerned-looking Dahlia. She worries about me the most.

“No, not really.” I tell them how Hendrick’s boss has been trying to

pinpoint the person who emailed and texted me but so far, they don't know any more than they did the first week. "Hopefully, whoever it was got the hint that I'm not going anywhere."

"I'll drink to that," Vi says and lifts her champagne flute.

"I left mine downstairs."

"Knock. Knock," Hendrick says as he does just that on my open door. He holds a glass of champagne in hand. "Thought you might be missing this. Turned out, I was right."

He lingers there and my friends' gazes ping-pong between us.

Vi moves first, swinging her feet off the bed. "I should go check on Gavin. He's been awake since five o'clock this morning and is probably curled up in a ball downstairs asleep."

"Same." Daisy follows her.

Dahlia smiles at me and then gets up, too, leaving me alone with Hendrick.

He walks in, looking around my room like he hasn't seen it before.

I stand and meet him halfway between the door and bed.

His gaze sweeps down my body. "Wow."

"You like the dress?"

"I like the dress on you."

"Good answer." I drape my arms around his neck. His stare is squarely locked on my cleavage. "Sorry I left you downstairs with the boys."

"It's all right. I like them, but we've reached the point in the evening where it's . . . how did you phrase it? Chicks before dicks." He has a playful glint in his eyes and a teasing smile.

He laughs and presses a kiss to my lips, which lights me up like it always does. I wonder if his kisses will ever stop feeling like standing on center stage. The butterflies in my stomach and the tightening in my chest feel like something life-altering is about to happen.

"Hey, I have a question for you." My pulse quickens.

"All right." He leans back, gives my cleavage another glance, then flicks his gaze up.

"Shoot."

"That night when I introduced you to the band, and you said you were my boyfriend. Why didn't you just say friend or . . . I don't know, anything else?"

His stare narrows. "You wanted me to introduce myself as your friend?"

“No, definitely not.”

A slow-forming smile tugs at one side of his mouth. “I didn’t want them to know I was your bodyguard.”

I ignore the disappointment of his simple answer. I assumed that’s why, but now I know for sure. “I thought so.”

“That’s it?”

“Yep.” I try to pull away and reach for my champagne, still in his right hand, but he holds on tight with his left.

“Wait,” he says. “That’s not it.”

His hazel eyes spark with heat and something else . . . something that looks a lot like danger. “I said I was your boyfriend because I wanted them to know that you’re mine. Bodyguard, boyfriend, friend, whatever *you* want to call me is up to you. I’m yours and that’s all that matters. But to everyone else, I want *them* to know that I’m the guy they have to answer to if they hurt you.”

A shiver dances up my spine and I think my ovaries explode. *Holy shit.* I’ve always known he was someone I could count on to watch over me, but I think I’ve just realized how far he’d go to keep me safe. He isn’t just following me around and looking out for bad guys; he’s ready to put himself between me and any danger lurking. The same way he’s always putting himself between danger and the people he loves. Who looks out for him?

If there was any doubt that I was in love with him before, there isn’t now. The thought of anything happening to him makes me want to set the world on fire.

“I guess that makes me your bodyguard too, then.”

One brow lifts. “Oh yeah?”

“Yes. If anyone touches you, I’ll claw their eyes out.”

He chuckles softly. I’m sure he thinks I’m kidding. I’m not.

“But boyfriend has a better ring to it, so I think I’ll call you that. Hi, boyfriend.”

His lips pull into a real, honest to God smile. “Hi, girlfriend.”

I close my eyes as he drops another kiss to my lips. My insides buzz with happiness.

“I get it now,” I confess.

“Get what?”

“Why, at the end of the night, couples always sneak off together like they can’t wait another minute to be alone.”

“Is that your way of saying you missed me?”

“Yeah. I guess it is.”

“I missed you too.” His teeth graze along my collarbone.

I roll my head back as he trails kisses all over my neck and down to my chest.

“Hey, girlfriend?” His deep voice rumbles next to my ear.

“Yeah?”

He lifts my champagne to his lips and takes a sip before passing it to me.

“Would you mind taking this dress off now, so I don’t rip your birthday gift? I need to be inside you.”

Something I am more than happy to accommodate.

JANE

THE FOLLOWING WEEKEND, DAISY, VIOLET, DAHLIA AND I ALL FIND ourselves free on a Friday night. The hockey and basketball teams have away games, Felix is out with the football guys, and Hendrick went to watch Flynn play baseball. One sporting season ended and baby Holland jumped right into another.

“The house smells like a locker room,” I tell them. The girls laugh as I wave my hands around dramatically. They’ve been firing questions at me about living with Hendrick and his brothers. “And bacon. I swear Knox fries a pound of bacon every day. He puts it in everything, even green beans.”

“You must not mind the smell too much,” Vi says pointedly. “Because you two never stay here.”

“No, I don’t mind at all. It’s different, and obviously I miss being here with you guys, but it’s fun to experience a big family dynamic like that. It’s loud and messy, but so full of life. And I really love seeing how they all interact. One minute they’re annoyed and yelling at each other, and the next they’re laughing like nothing happened. You should see Hendrick with Flynn. He’s such a good big brother. It makes my ovaries swoon. Me, the girl who doesn’t want kids until I’m at least thirty.” I sigh.

The girls are quiet as they stare at me with matching expressions like they’re fighting back laughter.

“What?”

“You have it so bad.” Daisy tosses a throw pillow at me. We erupt into giggles, but then Violet silences us with a gasp. “Oh, oh, oh. It’s my favorite part.”

A hush falls over the room as we turn to stare at the TV. We're watching *Pride and Prejudice* for the millionth time. The Keira Knightley version. The four of us all have our favorite moments. I love the ball at the beginning where Elizabeth and Darcy meet for the first time, Daisy loves the moment when Darcy helps Elizabeth off the carriage, Dahlia enjoys the end where Darcy crosses the field, and Vi loves the scene we're watching now where Darcy confesses his love to Elizabeth in the rain and she tells him he's the last man she would ever marry.

When it's over, we fall right back into conversation.

"He has it bad for you, too," Dahlia says.

"You think?" I ask. He's said as much, not in those exact words, but there's something about my friends' opinions that make it feel more real.

"Definitely." Daisy nods. "The way—"

A knock at the front door interrupts her. We all share a confused look.

"Who could that be?" Vi asks. She looks to Dahlia, then grins. "Ten bucks says it's a tipsy Felix."

I stand, calling out as I walk to the door, "Walters, no boys are allowed tonight."

Pulling it open, I give the man on the other side of the door a playful glare. A man that is not Felix.

"Hendrick? What are you doing here?" Surprised, I step back and open the door wider.

"Hey!" The girls say in unison, waving at my boyfriend still standing outside.

"Hi, ladies." He steps inside. "Sorry to interrupt. I just wanted to check the house before I head to bed." His gaze shoots over to me. "Alone."

"Awww." My friends are swooning. Me too.

My cheeks flush as I shut the door. "You didn't need to do that."

Hendrick is already checking the windows, making sure they're shut and locked. "I did if I wanted to sleep tonight."

With a wink, he takes off for the kitchen, presumably to check the back door. I settle back on the floor with the girls. My insides are mushy from the sweet gesture, and I feel a little breathless as I realize Daisy was absolutely correct. I smile at my friends. "I have it so, so bad."

Before he leaves, I walk Hendrick out.

"Are you sure you don't wanna stay over?"

His lips tease mine. "Mmmm. I'd love to, but earlier you told me no boys

allowed.”

“I changed my mind.”

He chuckles. “I’ll be back in the morning. Early tomorrow morning.”

“Okay.” I press up on my toes and throw my arms around his neck while I kiss him like tomorrow morning is days away instead of hours.

He untangles himself from me with a groan. “Call me if you need anything.”

“I will.” I stare after him as he walks to his truck.

He hits me with a wink. “Be good.”

I wake up on the pillow fort in Dahlia’s room. I sit up, smiling when I see Felix in bed with her. They’re all curled up together. So adorable and making me that much more anxious to see my man.

Quietly, I tiptoe out of the room. I text Hendrick as soon as I’ve showered and changed, then head downstairs to wait for him.

When his truck comes into view, I hurry outside. He flashes me a smile like maybe he’s missed me as much as I did him as he gets out to greet me, but he pauses halfway up the driveway. His smile falls and I follow his gaze to my car. My steps falter as I take in the broken glass in front of me.

“Careful.” Hendrick holds out a hand to stop me from coming any closer.

My pulse races as he walks around my vehicle. The back seat windows are completely shattered. I can see through the front passenger window that my nice headphones and designer sunglasses are still sitting in the console, so whoever did this obviously wasn’t interested in what was inside.

After he’s circled the car, he comes over to me and hands me a piece of paper. “This was tucked under the door handle on the driver’s side.”

The notebook paper is creased where it was folded several times and in slanted, red pen says, *Leave town now, bitch.*

I swallow around the lump in my throat. When I look up, his hazel eyes are filled with fiery anger and a touch of remorse. I don’t need to hear him say it to know he’s blaming himself for not being here. This isn’t his fault. He needs to hear me say the words, but when I open my mouth to say them, a sob escapes.

He has me in his arms in a flash. Pressed up against his chest, one of his

big palms cradling my head to him. “I got you, sweetheart. I’m here.”

JANE

THE NIGHT OF THE SPRING FLING CONCERT, THE GIRLS STOP BY TO CHECK ON me. I'm a bundle of nerves. The band is on the stage warming up, but since I can't be seen with them, I'm hiding in a tent where we can all hang and relax before going on tonight.

My friends are the perfect distraction from all the worry and trepidation I'm feeling. They brought coffee and cookies. They tried to bring me tea for my throat, but the order got screwed up. It was a sweet gesture anyway. The four of us are sitting in folding chairs we pulled into a tight circle.

"Are you nervous about going out there?" Dahlia asks as she takes a chocolate chip cookie from the bag.

"Terrified," I admit.

"Security is intense. I think you're going to be just fine." Daisy tips her head toward two guys standing at the door blocking anyone trying to get back here.

"Not about that." She's right. Hendrick has this place covered. He's barely left my side since my car was vandalized. I wasn't sure if I should perform, but he spoke to the university police and they gave them all the resources they could. Then he got Logan to send two more of his guys for tonight. Hopefully it's complete overkill but I'm thankful for it anyway.

I blow out a breath and tuck my hair behind my ears. "The longer I've gone without singing, the more I feel like people are waiting to judge my voice. I should have gotten it over with months ago. Is anyone even going to be excited to see me at this point?" The last time I sang in front of people was Halloween almost six months ago.

“Are you kidding? Your voice is sensational,” Dahlia says. Always the first one to stand up for me. God, I love her. “Everyone is going to be so excited. They will lose their shit, for real.”

“She’s right.” Daisy gives me a reassuring smile. “Everyone at Valley thinks you’re amazing. You’re our very own resident Hollywood star, and we’re thrilled to watch you shine.”

“I love you guys.” I tip my head over toward her and she does the same until the tops of our heads touch for a brief moment.

“We love you too,” she says.

“And I love these earrings. Wow.” Vi leans forward from my opposite side and eyes my emerald earrings with a friendly kind of envy. “If you ever take those off, I’m totally going to try to steal them.”

“Hendrick gave them to me for my birthday.” I re-tuck my hair behind my ears to give them all a better view. “So, hands off.”

“They’re gorgeous,” she says as she sits back in her chair. “And I will wait to steal them until after you break up.” She winks so I know she’s teasing, but then adds, “Kiiiidding. You two are so hot together. I can feel the sexual chemistry. The air crackles when you’re in the same room.”

“You can’t break up with him or Felix will be heartbroken,” Dahlia says.

We all laugh. Those two do seem to have a special kind of bromance.

“I’m so serious.” My friend smiles. “And I would be sad too. I think he’s great for you.”

“He is.” I hope I’m great for him too.

When the band is finished warming up, they join us in the tent. Paris is feeding us before the show, and we have a little time to relax and prepare before people start crowding around outside.

The girls say their goodbyes. I’m sad for them to leave, but I really need to get my shit together in the next hour.

“Party at The White House tonight after the concert,” Vi says. “We can celebrate your first of many more amazing performances this year.”

“I’ll be there.” I hug her and then Daisy. “As long as I don’t embarrass myself and need to hide for the rest of my life.”

“We’ll be the ones screaming our heads off in the front row,” Daisy says as she pulls back.

When Dahlia steps forward, I say, “If I pass out or mess up the lyrics or anything else embarrassing, promise me you’ll pull a fire alarm or something.”

“I promise.” She squeezes me. “But you’re not going to need me to do anything. You’ve got this.”

I walk them as far as the tent door and then backtrack to talk to the band. The guys are all ready to go, but Mackenzie is touching up her makeup with a little compact hand mirror.

“You guys sounded great. Sorry I couldn’t help with setup,” I say as I join them.

Eric’s leg is bouncing in a steady rhythm. He’s scrolling his phone but looks up as I take a seat next to him. “It’s cool. Are you ready?”

“Yeah. As ready as I’m ever going to be.”

Lennon unscrews the cap on a bottle of Fireball, takes a drink and then passes it to Eric. It’s their tradition before performing. It goes to Eric, Ted, Mac, and then she hands it to me. I tip the bottle toward them and then take a small sip.

“Pizza is here,” Ted says and motions toward a guy standing at the entrance with a stack of pizza boxes. One of the security guards takes the pizza, actually opens the boxes to check like he thinks someone is going to poison us, and then sets them on the closest table.

We crowd around a table and eat together in amicable silence. A nervous excitement hangs over us. Mac barely eats, Ted drums one hand while shoveling pizza in with the other, Eric stands and eats, and Lennon is the only one that seems at ease.

When we’re done eating, we all stay sitting around the table. I’m just about to start warming up my voice when one of the security guards calls for me, holding an embarrassingly large gift basket.

“Fan mail?” Eric asks with a snort.

“Nobody even knows I’m here,” I say as I stand.

“Paris.” Eric’s voice doesn’t hold any jealousy at the idea that the Panhel president sent only me a gift basket, but I catch a flash of unease on Mackenzie’s face. Paris is paying the band, but I wouldn’t let her or them give me a cut for the small amount of time I’m going to be on stage tonight. I guess this was her way of saying thanks.

The guard waits for me to approach him.

“Anything good?” I ask, trying to lighten the weird feeling in my chest.

“Chocolates, peanuts, candy, and some water,” he recites as he looks over the large basket. When he places it in my outstretched arms, I can barely see over it.

“Thanks,” I mutter and take it back to the table. The guys and Mac are up, everyone starting to get ready to go on. I look through the basket, finding exactly what he claimed. I take one of the waters and then pluck the note from the front.

Simple cardstock with only my name scribbled across it. I tuck it back into the basket and then unscrew the cap of the water. My phone pings in my pocket.

HENDRICK

Hey, girlfriend. Got time for a quickie?

HENDRICK

“Hi!” JANE THROWS HER ARMS AROUND ME. “I’M SO GLAD YOU’RE HERE.”

She clings to me like a lifeline. She’s nervous. She’s been nervous for days, but right now she’s as anxious as I’ve ever seen her.

“I got you tea.” I hold the cup out to my side so it doesn’t spill as she continues to squeeze me tightly.

“Thank you.” She breathes deeply. “Thank you so much. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“It’s just tea.” I chuckle lightly.

“I meant for being here.” She tips her head back to meet my gaze. “Always knowing when I need you.”

“You don’t need to thank me. Tonight, I am just any other guy here to watch my super sexy and talented girlfriend kick ass.”

“Okay, but can you do me a favor and watch from the crowd?”

The plan was for me to hang off to the side of the stage. The closer the better, basically.

“Please?” she adds. “I have a surprise for you.”

“I don’t like surprises.”

She laughs. “I could have guessed that about you. But I think you’ll like this one. Please? Just while I’m on stage. After, you can come straight back here and hover some more.”

“You like it when I hover.” I glide my knuckles over her jaw and then cup the back of her neck. I lean down to kiss her. I need to get back out there and check a few more things, but the urge to get lost in her is strong. These past weeks have gone by in the blink of an eye with her getting ready for

tonight.

When we break apart, she looks a little calmer.

“Did you book your flight yet?”

I groan. Not this again.

“I already called Grady. He’ll be here Sunday afternoon.”

“You didn’t need to do that. I told you I will talk to the coach and see if there’s any way we can push back my tryout a week or two.”

“And I told you that I would find backup while you go to L.A. for your tryout. You have to go and figure out what you want.”

I know she’s right. Pushing back the trip is a sure way to piss off Coach Maxwell. He’s a fair and decent guy, but he’s already going above and beyond for me. Plus, I’ve spent too long making decisions for the wrong reasons. It’s not as easy as I thought it would be to figure out what it is that I want. But I don’t want to leave her. She’s been officially spooked since her car windows were smashed out.

“I want you.” That part I know for sure.

“You have me. No matter what you choose.” Those green eyes hold me hostage. “So, you’ll go?”

“Yes,” I agree reluctantly.

“Promise?” She holds up her pinky finger.

“I promise.” I hook mine around it. “Now, I need to go check a few last things. If you need me—”

“Go, go. I’m good. I’m going to drink my tea and freak out some more.” She lifts up on her toes and kisses me quickly.

On the way out, I let the two campus security guards know about the change in plans with me going out front for the end of the show. I do a circle around the venue, quadruple checking everything. Mostly I just need to keep myself busy so I don’t worry about all the things that could go wrong. Tonight, and with whatever the future brings.

The Spring Fling is set up in the middle of campus. Tents are lined up on both sides, with a walkway in the middle. Fraternities, sororities, athletic teams, academic departments, and more are hosting fundraisers for their organizations.

The turnout is great. Students have been roaming around all day, but now they're crowded around the stage set up in front of the library watching the band. I push my way through to find my brothers front and center. They all came. Even Flynn. There was no way he was missing this.

Archer juts his chin when he spots me. Brogan smiles. "I thought you were standing guard backstage." He air quotes the last few words, then smirks. "Did she need a *hand* getting ready?"

"Did she take her Vitamin D?" Knox asks, with a similar smirk on his face.

"Shut the fuck up," I tell them with a laugh.

The band finishes their current song and Mackenzie speaks to the crowd. "Thank you so much. We are so honored to perform for you tonight. We have two more songs and we're going to need a little bit of extra help. Please put your hands together for our very own Valley U star, the one and only, Jane Greenfield."

The screams and applause are deafening. Knox laughs and turns in a circle to take it all in. I don't take my eyes off the girl walking to the front of the stage. Her steps and smile are confident, but I catch the slightest unease in her eyes as she waves and joins Mackenzie.

"Hey, everyone," she says, grabbing the microphone stand. Already her nerves seem to be settling in front of the crowd. The crowd that's still screaming their heads off for her. "Wow. Thank you so much."

It finally quiets a little. I see Jane take a deep breath, then scan until she finds me. The smile she aims at me makes my pulse quicken.

"This one is for Hendrick." She steps back and the guys start playing. Mackenzie has moved back to the keyboard, leaving Jane out front.

As soon as she sings the first few words, my chest tightens and the world around us disappears. She sings right to me, and I feel every note. I couldn't look away if I tried.

I'm brought back only by Knox nudging me with an elbow. "Wasn't this Mom's song?"

I nod. It's a remixed version of the Fleetwood Mac song that basically is my childhood, but Jane does it justice. The crowd sings along with the chorus. With every second that passes, she comes more alive. My pulse still hasn't stopped racing. My heart is completely outside of my body.

She ends the song, smiling right at me. She blows me a kiss and that has everyone around us looking to see who has her attention.

Brogan claps me on the shoulder. “Ah, isn’t young love the best? That’s hypothetical of course, seeing as I have no experience with it, and you aren’t that young.”

I shrug out of his hold and tell him to fuck off, something I’m sure gets lost in the roar of the crowd. He’s not wrong though. I’m completely in love with her.

They go right into the last song. It’s the one that I heard Jane and Mackenzie practice the night she agreed to do the show. She was right, it’s the perfect way to close out the night. People are swaying and singing, totally enraptured with my girl.

None more than me. She owns me.

JANE

HENDRICK HAS ALREADY MADE HIS WAY BACKSTAGE BY THE TIME I DRAG myself away from the screaming crowd. I want to soak up their smiles and screams and hold onto it forever. Through all the ups and downs, this is one of those moments I want to remember.

He's smiling as I rush toward him. I jump and he catches me in his arms with a laugh.

"You were amazing!" He spins me around, and my body and heart soar with happiness.

When he puts me down, I ask, "I didn't wreck your mom's favorite song?"

"No, it was perfect. I loved it. She would have loved it too."

I want to scream, "and I LOVE YOU" at the top of my lungs but I'm well aware this high I'm feeling right now is part adrenaline-induced. There's also the band. After a show, we always spend some time unwinding and then packing everything up together.

"I have to help tear everything down and drink like a gallon of water."

"I'll wait," he says.

"No. That's silly. I'll catch a ride with Eric."

He grumbles at the mention of my guy friend. I don't hate seeing him jealous though.

"In his car, not on his joystick." I kiss him.

"Jesus, woman. That mouth."

Happy laughter bubbles from my lips. God, performing is such a high. Combine that with this amazing man in front of me and I am practically

floating. “You love my mouth. Now go home. You have been here all freaking day.”

“So have you.”

“Yeah, but I was just sitting around for most of it. Stop arguing with your girlfriend.”

“I’m not leaving you, but I do need to go check on a few things and thank the guys who drove in today to help. I’ll wait for you in the security tent.” He tips his head to the right where the team of security guys had a tent setup similar to the one for the band.

“Okay. I will hurry.”

“Don’t rush.” He kisses my forehead. “Do you need to go by the house first or are we going straight to the party?”

“The house, I think. Maybe. I’m not sure. I want to change. Hopefully this doesn’t take too long, but if it does, I might want to go straight to the party.” I’m talking fast, adrenaline still crashing through me. “Can I ride your joystick on the way?”

Chuckling, his eyes flash with dirty promises. “Absolutely.”

Eric and the rest of the band are talking and joking around not far from us. They sound as on top of the world as I feel. I pull away from him. “See you soon, boyfriend.”

Mackenzie is the first to step toward me when she sees me heading their way. “Thank you. Thank you.”

“For what?”

“I’ve never experienced anything like that. It was all because of you.”

“No way. They were screaming for all of us. Your voice has never sounded better.” I hug her and then Ted holds out a cold water to me.

“I told her the same thing,” he says.

It’s sweet to see him always trying to build her up. I thank him for the water and then take a long drink. The guys are double-fisting it—water in one hand and beer in the other.

Paris comes back soon after to let us know how great the show was and thank us about a dozen times. After that, the five of us start to pack up all the band equipment. Mackenzie and I focus on bringing all the cases and storage to the front while the guys disassemble the instruments.

“Has anyone seen the case for the cymbals?” Ted asks as he searches the stage.

“Oh, I think I saw it in the tent. I’ll grab it.” I carefully pick my way

around the stage and then down to the tent just to the right. I find the case and take it back to the stage. Eric and Lennon are already taking stuff to their cars.

“What’s left?” I ask.

“I think this is it,” Mackenzie says as she watches Ted place the cymbals in the case.

“Cool. I’m gonna grab my stuff and get out of here. Are you guys going to the party at The White House tonight?”

“Not me.” She shakes her head. “I have to get up early tomorrow for a community service day with my sorority. Speaking of, I should go.” She kisses Ted and then comes over to hug me again. “I hope this means you’ll perform with us more often.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I squeeze her back.

She leaves and I go get my stuff from behind the stage. I hope Eric is coming back because I want to say goodbye and thank him for believing in me and constantly trying to get me back out there. Ultimately it was Hendrick who gave me the confidence, but Eric has always had my back. I grab another water from the giant gift basket and pull out my phone to text him and make sure he hasn’t left.

I’m greeted with so many notifications. Calls and texts from friends and family. My heart squeezes in my chest. I uncap the water and chug it while I scroll through a few of them.

The girls sent a video of them taken during the concert. Their backs are to the stage so you can see me, and they sing along.

And Brogan sent me two texts. One is a high five emoji and the other is a photo of Hendrick watching me sing to him.

There are so many more, but I close out of them so I can text Eric. Then I hear him out front. I take a step and stagger a little. My legs suddenly feel like I’m walking in quicksand. That’s weird.

The next step takes me to the ground. I wince at the impact on my elbow. What the hell? My thoughts are jumbled. I open my mouth to call out for the guys, but then forget why I was going to yell for them. My head feels funny and my arms and legs are too heavy to move.

Footsteps vibrating against the floor and coming closer get my attention, and I look up.

Ted squats down, looking me over. “Jane?”

“I . . .” I start to speak but my tongue gets in the way. I reach for the

water bottle. Maybe if I could just get another drink. He kicks it out of my way and his gaze goes from confused to angry. “Dammit, Jane. You always fuck everything up.”

HENDRICK

KNOX WAITS WITH ME IN THE SECURITY TENT. HE WAS A BIG HELP TODAY with setup and being another body to get shit done.

“Thank you,” I say as I take a seat next to him.

He has his phone out and is watching a video clip of a race. Not once since I’ve been back has he mentioned it, but I think he still misses competing.

“You still keep up with any of your old racing friends?” I ask him.

“Not really.” He closes the video, and we sit silently for a few minutes before I decide I should tell him about my upcoming trip to L.A.

After I give him the details, his expression is far less excited than I expected for a guy that’s been pushing me out the door for months. The only thing he says is, “Does Jane know yet?”

“Yeah. She knows.”

“I’m sure you two will figure it out, and in the meantime there’s always FaceTime sex.”

“It’s only for a few days. I’ll be back Wednesday night.” Though FaceTime sex sounds kind of fun. The thought makes me smile because it’s such a Jane thought. Always up for whatever. I love that about her.

He sits forward. “Why?”

“That was the quickest turnaround I could make work. I’ll fly out Sunday and then tryouts—”

“No, no, no. Why are you coming back at all? Don’t you need to stay and get ready for the season?”

“It’s a tryout. Nothing is official. Besides, I haven’t decided if it’s even

what I want. Hopefully this trip will give me some clarity.”

“What you want?” One of his brows lifts as he regards me.

“Yeah. I’m considering letting go of all that for good.”

“And doing what? Are you going to be Jane’s bodyguard for the rest of your life?”

My jaw hardens. “I was thinking about sticking around. I could help out more with Flynn and the house, which I think we both know is needed. Flynn is barely going to pass tenth grade.”

“He’ll pass. He always does.”

“He’s capable of so much more.” I check the time on my phone. The band is taking a long ass time. Though I saw the bottle of Fireball they were passing around, so I’m sure they’re celebrating as they pack up the equipment.

“I don’t get you, man. You’ve been busting your ass for years for this opportunity and now that it’s here you’re acting like you don’t want it or you want to sacrifice it all to come back here and play big brother. What was the past four years about if not for this moment with football?” He gets up and storms to the other side of the tent. Typical Knox, running away from a conversation when he’s annoyed (which is almost always).

I follow him, cornering him so he can’t leave again. “I’m sorry that I haven’t visited more and I’m sorry that when I left you had to give up everything to step up in my place. I can’t change the past four years, but I can help take some of the load now so you can chase some of your dreams too.”

He shoots me an annoyed glare. “It isn’t about any of that.”

“Then what the hell is the problem?” I’m ready to finally have this fucking out. I’ll own my mistakes, if he can stand here and have it out with me long enough to hear them. My phone vibrates with an incoming call. I check it expecting Jane, but instead it’s Logan. “One sec.”

I accept the call with trepidation. My boss isn’t big on small talk. If he’s calling, it’s because he has information. “Hey, Logan. What’s up?”

“I finally got a hit on E. Rex Sean. He popped up again this morning, but this time he was dumb enough to use his own computer to order a gift basket that was sent to Jane at the concert tonight.”

“And?” My pulse thrums quickly.

“Registered to a Ted Amos. He was also on the list of users that logged into the library computer the day of the email. Pretty sure it’s our guy.”

“Ted?” The picture of the skinny, tattooed drummer flashes before me.

“You know him then?”

“Yeah, I fucking know him. He’s one of the guys in the band.” *Fuuuuck, he’s one of the guys in the band.* “She’s with them right now tearing down the equipment from the show.”

His tone hardens. “What do you need?”

“Send me everything you have.” I’m gonna kill him. I run out of the tent. Knox is right on my heels.

I hang up with Logan and immediately try Jane’s cell. It goes to voicemail after a handful of rings. “She’s not answering her phone.”

“Other people are with them. I’m sure she’s fine. They’re probably still finishing up.” Knox’s voice is tight but confident.

I want to believe he’s right, but I have a sinking feeling in my gut.

“It’s been too long. I should have realized something was wrong.” *Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

“Jane!” I yell. Campus has cleared out from the Spring Fling. The booths are all torn down and all that remains of the stage is some yellow tape and cones where they had the front of the library blocked for the band.

From there I run toward the tent they had set up for the band to chill in before and after. It’s still standing, but when I get inside, it’s also empty. Dammit. I place both hands on top of my head and turn in a circle.

Some chairs, a couple of tables, a few water bottles left on tables and the floor. But no sign of Jane. I call her again. Spinning around, heart pounding in my chest, I listen to that damn ringtone while I try not to smash my phone into pieces. A flicker of light catches my eye in the back of the tent. I hurry toward it. The sight of Jane’s phone on the floor makes my heart stop and that uneasy feeling in my stomach turns into ice cold dread as I pick it up. Something isn’t right, but what about the rest of the band? Surely, they would have noticed if Ted had tried anything with all of them here.

“I’ll call Brogan and see if she’s shown up at the party.” Knox lifts his phone to his ear.

I can tell immediately from Knox’s side of the conversation that they haven’t seen her.

I scroll through the text Logan sent with information on Ted. It has his phone number, but I want to confront the asshole in person. Besides, I don’t trust anything he’d tell me would be the truth. How could I not have seen that this was the guy?

Knox hangs up and confirms what I already presumed. “They haven’t

seen her or Eric, but they're going to ask around."

I nod. My pulse tics and my mind reels.

"What do you want to do?" he asks. "Go to the party and look for her? Drive by the house in case she went there? Or maybe she's at her place."

"No. She isn't in any of those places." I can feel it.

She needed me and I wasn't here. I fucked up.

"You don't know that," Knox says, back to being the reassuring optimist. "Let's go check. Do you have Eric's number?"

The fact that it hadn't even occurred to me to call Eric yet should speak to how much I'm not in my right mind. Or maybe it's just that I don't really believe it's as simple as she decided to leave with him, forgot her phone, and decided to not do the things she said she would. It's too many things that don't add up.

"I do, but his house isn't far." I'd rather talk to him in person. "If she isn't with him, then maybe he'll at least be able to tell us where she went."

We start back for the truck, practically sprinting through the dark empty campus.

"This guy Ted," Knox starts. "Do you have his address in case we need to pay him a visit too?"

I nod. "Logan sent it. He lives in an apartment a few miles from here."

"Should we go there first?"

Maybe he's got that same gut feeling that things aren't right or maybe he just wants to deck Ted. He'll have to get in fucking line.

"Eric's house is closer."

"She'll be there," Knox says pointedly as I start the engine. "She has to be there."

I'm not sure if he's trying to reassure himself or me.

JANE

I FEEL LIKE I'M DROWNING UNDER THE WEIGHT OF THE QUESTIONS SWIRLING in my head. Where am I? What happened to me? Why is my brain foggy? Why won't my legs work? Why is Ted here? Where's the rest of the band?

My memory is fuzzy. We were all helping pack up the equipment after the show and then . . . nothing.

The light is off in the living room where I'm sitting on a worn leather couch. The kitchen is to my left. It's a small space, a sort of galley kitchen with the counter dividing the two rooms. I've only been to Ted's apartment one other time, but I know that's where I am. But why?

He's pacing in the kitchen, obviously agitated, three steps forward, turn, three steps back across the kitchen, repeat. He runs his hand through his hair and mutters to himself. I can't make out the words.

With some effort, I swallow and try to speak. The only thing that comes out is a squeak, but it gets his attention.

Ted comes over with a bottle of water. "Drink this. We have to get the drugs out of your system."

Panic blooms in my chest. "Drugs?" I'm not sure if I get the word out, but he answers anyway.

"It should wear off soon since you didn't drink that much."

I sip the cold water as the memories come back slowly and not in order. I had my phone, and I was about to text Eric. We were done packing up equipment and I went into the tent to grab my things. The water bottle I drank from, then Ted kicking it away from me. The gift basket.

I stop drinking and spit it out. Ted snarls. "It's just water this time."

This time. “Why?” I’m not sure if I manage to get the word out.

“Don’t look at me like that. You’ve been fucking everything up for Mackenzie. Before you came around, she was the one everyone came out to hear. Tonight could have been a big break for her.”

I can’t seem to make sense of anything he’s saying and my pulse is racing.

“I tried to warn you to leave town. I just wanted you to go, but you wouldn’t listen. You were supposed to drink the water before the show. Everyone would think you were too drunk to go on, and Mac would get her moment to shine. I should have known you were going to find some other way to fuck everything up.”

“Mac was in on this?” I don’t know why that makes it feel worse, but it does.

“Don’t be stupid. She has no idea. No one does. And it’s going to stay that way. I did what I had to do. Anyone in my shoes would have done the same. Mac’s my girl. I’d do anything for her.”

I might have thought that was a sweet sentiment if he weren’t so deranged.

“I don’t feel so well. Maybe we should call someone.” I’ve never done drugs. I was always afraid that I’d be one of those rare cases where the first time I tried a drug, I’d die from some weird, one in a million reaction. Highly unlikely? Probably, but I’d never been tempted enough to test my luck.

“You’re going to be fine.” His gaze narrows. “Drink some more water.”

“Where’s my phone? I should at least let Hendrick know where I am or he’ll worry.” Each word burns my throat and is barely audible.

“No. No one can ever know about this. Got it?” He leans in closer. “If you tell anyone—”

“I won’t,” I croak out. I don’t need to hear the end of that sentence to feel the darkness of his threat. I sink my teeth into my bottom lip to stop it from quivering. “You could just take me home. I won’t tell anyone what happened.”

I just want to be in Hendrick’s bed with his arms wrapped around me, telling me everything is going to be okay. He must be so worried. Well, maybe. I don’t have any concept of time. Have I been here minutes or hours? I know Hendrick, and he’ll have figured out by now that I’m missing, but how will he know to look for me here?

A knock on the apartment door makes Ted freeze, but hope blooms in my

chest.

“Don’t say a word,” he warns before he moves across the room and then down the steps that lead to the front door. It’s a second-story unit, but the entrance is ground-level. I remember thinking I liked that setup the last time I was here, now it’s preventing whoever is at the door from seeing me.

The door creaks open and Lennon’s voice carries up the stairs. “Hey, man. I tried to call a bunch of times. I thought we were going to Prickly Pear?”

“Sorry,” Ted replies. “Something came up. I’m not going to be able to make it. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

No, no, no. Don’t go. I open my mouth, but my voice is quiet and hoarse. I drag my feet along the floor to get them underneath me, then try to stand.

“Wait.” Lennon laughs uncomfortably. “Is everything okay? You look like shit.”

I manage to get to my feet while they continue to talk, but my legs are so wobbly, and my head is still spinning. I scan the room, looking for something to help me. Maybe I could go out onto the balcony, but it’s too far to jump and my coordination is shit anyway.

My heart races when I see Ted’s cell phone on the counter. If I could just text Hendrick or maybe I should call the police. This is all too much to make sense of right now. Ted drugged me and then took me to his apartment so no one would know, but he wouldn’t hurt me, right?

A full body shiver crawls up my spine. The Ted I thought I knew wouldn’t have, but I wouldn’t put anything past this version.

Ted and Lennon continue to go back and forth. The latter presses him, but Ted just grows more irritated.

“I said everything is fine. Go hang out with your geek friends, Len.” The door shuts, kicking up my pulse another notch.

It’s now or never. I shuffle as fast as I can to the kitchen counter. Each step is painful and the room sways in a way that makes my stomach churn. My fingers wrap around the cell phone with a jolt of relief. It’s locked, but I hit the emergency call button.

“What the fuck?” Ted’s voice slices through the apartment and his footsteps pound up the remaining steps, closing the distance between us. He takes the phone from me. “You were gonna call the fucking cops?”

“I just want to go home.” My eyes fill with tears and my stomach cramps so hard it sends me doubling over in pain. Bile rises up my throat and I heave

onto the carpet.

Ted jumps back, curses again, then grabs me by the arm. He drags me into the bathroom and shoves me toward the toilet. My legs collapse and I fall hard onto the floor, hitting my head against the vanity on the way.

He curses again but leaves me alone.

My breaths come in quick, shallow bursts. Panic and anxiety coarse through me.

You're okay. You're okay. You're okay. I lie to myself until the panic abates.

When I'm fairly certain that I'm not going to be sick again, I move as quietly as I can to the door and peer out. The living room and kitchen are empty, and there's a light on across the apartment where the bedroom is located.

I cannot stay here another second. I will go off that balcony if it comes to it. Some of my movements seem easier after throwing up. My legs aren't quite so heavy and the room isn't spinning as badly.

When I get into the living room, I can hear Ted talking from the bedroom. He's on the phone from the sound of it. His words come in short bursts like he's waiting for a reply. I don't try to make sense of what he's saying, I just bolt.

Holding onto the banister so I don't fall, I take the steps as quickly as I can manage. My heart races and blood thunders in my ears. Every step closer makes me want to cry with relief.

I don't hear him coming, but as my hand reaches for the doorknob, Ted slams his palm against the door to keep it shut.

"Are you stupid? I said, you're not going anywhere yet." He grabs my arm and pulls me toward the stairs.

"Please?" I beg. "Just let me go home. I won't say anything."

"You won't get a block in this condition. You have to stay here." He tries to tug me again, but this time I hold my ground and yank my arm free. I go for the door again, and this time I get it open.

"Fuck!" He wraps his hand around a chunk of my hair to keep me from fleeing. My scalp burns with pain, but all I focus on is getting the hell out of here.

He's more frantic now, gripping me anywhere he can and trying to place himself between me and freedom. "Dammit, Jane. I don't want to hurt you."

He manages to get in front of me. We're about the same height and his

face leers inches away. With every ounce of strength I can summon, I shove at his chest. He staggers back a step. I ball my right hand into a fist and then attempt to sweep his foot out from under him. It doesn't work, but it throws him off balance enough that I'm able to land a punch on his jaw.

He recoils in shock. "You bitch."

My hand screams with pain but I push it all away as I throw open the door and rush out. It's dark outside, but the streetlights give me some sense of direction. A black truck comes to a screeching halt in front of the apartment.

I see Knox first. His eyes are wide as he rushes from the passenger side of the truck toward me. But then someone else is in front of him. Hendrick.

My Hendrick. His expression is relief and rage, and fear.

I run toward him, even though my legs feel like they're seconds from giving out. My arms wrap around his middle before I go down, and he clutches me against him so tightly it steals the breath from my lungs. I close my eyes and let my body melt into him. I'm safe. Safe, safe, safe.

JANE

THE NEXT TIME I OPEN MY EYES, I'M LYING FLAT ON MY BACK IN A DIMLY LIT room. My heart rate begins to accelerate as I take in the sterile and cold surroundings. I'm hooked up to at least two different machines and my head feels like it's been split open.

It's when I see the familiar dark head bent over at my side that I relax. He's barely touching me. His pinky finger covers mine, the smallest amount of contact like he was afraid to hurt me but couldn't bear not to feel my skin against his.

I raise my pinky finger. He jolts upright from the chair he sits in and scans my face. Some of that fear I remember seeing on his face earlier surfaces.

"Hey." My voice is still raspy, but my throat hurts less.

"Hey. You're awake." He leaves his hand touching mine, but raises the other to my face. "How are you feeling?"

"Better, I think. What happened? Where's Ted?" I swallow thickly. "He put something in my water bottle. I couldn't walk or talk."

"I know." His jaw hardens. "They gave you something to flush it out of your system faster."

"It was him. The email, the text, all of it." My voice cracks.

"I know." His touch is feather-light against my cheek. "I'm so sorry."

"For what?"

His face twists with pain. "I should have figured it out. I should have been there. I should have checked on you sooner. No excuses. I failed you, but you're safe here. Ted is in custody and I'm not going anywhere. Just rest

and get better. I can take you home tomorrow.”

“Hollywood! You’re awake,” Knox greets me as he walks into the room with two coffees. He offers one to Hendrick, who shakes it off.

Knox sets the extra coffee on a cart at the end of my bed and gives me the same once-over Hendrick did. “You scared the shit out of us, Hollywood.”

“Ted is in custody?” My head isn’t as fuzzy, but it’s still taking me too long to make sense of it all.

“The police arrested him,” Hendrick says softly. “It didn’t take us long to figure out he’d slipped you something when we found you. You were so out of it. Scared the shit out of me.”

“Ted filled us in on the rest,” Knox says.

“He did?” It surprises me that he’d admit to it so easily after the lengths he went to try to keep me at his apartment.

“He had a little encouragement after Hendrick beat the shit out of him.” Knox smirks.

My attention snaps to my boyfriend, and my eyes widen.

“I punched him once,” Hendrick clarifies.

“Right. My bad. It must have been the hit *you* got in.” Knox flashes a proud grin at me. “By the time we got to him, one more is all it took. He would have given up his bank passwords to avoid getting hit again.”

I squeeze my eyes shut trying to focus on everything they’re saying. “Nothing makes sense right now.”

Hendrick brushes my hair back and rubs his thumb along my jawline. “Get some rest. There’s nothing else you need to worry about right now.”

I nod and curl up on my side with Hendrick’s hand still cupping my face. The fear and unpleasant memories threaten, but they’re pushed back by the exhaustion of the day. I link my pinky finger around his. *I’m safe. I’m safe. I’m safe*, I repeat to myself over and over as sleep pulls me under again.

The hospital releases me the following afternoon. Hendrick basically carries me to his truck and then drives below the speed limit to his house.

When he comes over to help me out of the passenger seat, I hold my hand up. “I got this.”

I’m not sure if I do or not, but I need to try. That feeling of not being in

control of my body is going to haunt me for a long time to come. It was exactly like the nightmares I'd have as a kid after watching a scary movie. In the dreams I'd open my mouth to scream but no sound would come out.

I think it physically pains him watching me take slow, measured steps up the driveway. The front door flies open when I'm five feet away.

Flynn stands there staring back at me and then rushes forward. There's an awkward beat where he seems unsure of what to do next, but I smile at him and then he closes the last bit of distance between us and hugs me.

"Easy," Hendrick warns him.

"It's fine." I raise my arms and hug Flynn tighter. "I'm okay. Better than okay. Just a little tired."

"Jane!" Brogan shouts, drawing my attention back to the doorway. He and Archer stand in it, flashing matching smiles.

"I told you guys not to crowd her when she got here," Hendrick mutters.

Flynn loosens his hold on me and steps back.

"Don't listen to him," I tell them. "This is the best greeting ever. I'm going to demand it every time I walk in from now on."

"Careful what you wish for, Hollywood," Knox says, joining us.

"Did you guys clean?" I ask as I walk into the living room and take in the space. Not a beer can or dirty sock in sight.

"In case you wanted to hang on the couch today while you recuperate," Brogan says.

"Hendrick threatened us," Archer adds.

I bite back a laugh. It feels good to be back here.

"I can't wait to steal the couch and make you all watch reality TV, but I am so tired I think I need to lie down for a bit. Thank you for this."

They all nod as Hendrick ushers me into his room. I kick off my shoes and crawl onto the bed. I don't even bother getting under the covers.

"I feel like I could sleep for a hundred years," I mumble into the pillow.

"The doctor said to expect that." He grabs an extra blanket from his closet and drapes it over me. "Your friends have been texting nonstop."

He continues, answering the question I was about to ask, "Dahlia got concerned last night when you didn't show up at the party. I found your phone and after her hundredth call, I decided to answer it. I only told her the very basics. They want to come see you later if you're up for it."

"I'll be up for it."

"We'll see," he says as he lays down next to me and wraps me up in his

big, strong arms.

Somehow, I sleep for another twelve hours and then spend all of Sunday cuddled up with Hendrick. But when I wake up late Monday morning, I feel much more like myself. Knox took the day off and Flynn stayed home from school. Brogan and Archer go to classes, but are back early and don't make any plans to go out. Having all the Holland brothers take care of me is sweet and weird, and somehow it feels so much like home. They're like family in the same way Daisy, Violet, and Dahlia are my sisters.

Things with Hendrick and his brothers seem better, too. Maybe it's that they're all focused on me, but there's an ease in their interactions. Knox and Hendrick made lunch together without throwing any punches, I noticed Hendrick practicing sign language with Brogan, and someone even put a calendar on the fridge with all their weekly activities.

My parents have been calling every hour. Hendrick fields most of the conversations, but I talked with them long enough to assure them that I was okay, and that the Hollands were taking good care of me. Eric, Lennon, and Mac check in too. I text with them a little. Mackenzie is in shock, Lennon blames himself for not realizing what was happening when he came by, and Eric is pissed. It's all so tiring. I can't even hate Ted right now because that would require feeling too much. I want to stay numb.

Paparazzi have been camped outside my house since news broke about my hospitalization and Ted's arrest, so I haven't attempted to go back. Eventually, but not today.

That night Hendrick and Knox cook dinner and the guys all humor me by watching my farmer dating show in the living room.

After, my friends come over. Dahlia and Felix are the first through the door. Dahlia's eyes are filled with tears as she hurries to my side. She hugs me lightly like she's afraid to hurt me. "I am so sorry. Are you okay?"

"I'm okay," I say but my voice wavers and I start to cry. All the emotions I've been pushing away refuse to stay dormant any longer as my best friend hugs me and tells me how much she loves me.

Felix and Hendrick hang back while we keep hugging and crying. Hendrick watches me like he wants to burn the world to take away my pain.

Felix looks away, giving us a little privacy. “I heard the news. Congrats?” There’s a hint of uncertainty in the word, like he’s asking a question.

“Thank you.” Hendrick shakes his hand.

Oh my gosh! The tryout in L.A. Amidst all the drama, he missed it. But maybe they’re going to give him another shot or decided that he was so amazing he didn’t even need to try out? I don’t have a chance to ask him about it before Daisy and Violet show up with Jordan and Gavin.

After the initial questioning of the other night’s events, lots of hugs and more tears, we settle in the living room and hang out and chat like it’s just a normal night. Hendrick sits on one side of me holding my hand and Dahlia on the other letting me rest my head on her shoulder.

I think it’s going to take some time to work through all the emotions, but right now I’m just so happy that I have so many amazing people in my life.

HENDRICK

“I’M NOT TIRED,” JANE SAYS AS SHE YAWNS. “I’M REALLY NOT. MY BODY IS just confused.”

“We’ll come back tomorrow,” Dahlia promises as Jane hugs her like she’s never letting go.

“Promise?”

“Of course. We can build a pillow fort in your room and Felix and I can sleep over with you two.”

I feel one brow lift. Say what now?

Dahlia giggles. “Or not. You should see Hendrick’s face right now. Seems like he might need you to himself for a few nights.”

Jane glances over at me and her lips pull into a smile. “I think you might be right.”

As soon as they’re gone, I go over to where she sits on the couch, looking tired but misty-eyed. I take her hands and pull her to her feet.

“Ready for sleep?”

“No,” she protests. “But I can tell by that stubborn glint in your eye that you’re going to insist I lay down anyway.”

“You know me so well.”

Light laughter slips from her sweet lips as I scoop her up and carry her into the bedroom. She had a big day trying to assure everyone that she’s fine.

I set her feet on the ground. While I get her my favorite shirt, she strips out of her leggings and tank top.

“Thank you for taking such good care of me.” Her eyes are heavy as I pull the T-shirt down over her head.

“It’s the least I can do.”

She brushes her fingers under her hair to free it from inside the shirt, then steps forward and places a hand on my chest. “Stop trying to blame yourself.”

My jaw tightens. “I never should have left you alone. Not even for a second.”

“You can’t follow me around everywhere I go for the rest of my life.”

“The hell I can’t.”

Her smile grows. She thinks I’m kidding, but I’m not.

“No, you really can’t,” she says. “And I would never want that. This job was always supposed to be temporary.” Her voice lowers. “I heard Felix congratulate you, so I’m assuming the Rams wised up and decided to offer you a contract without trying out. Hendrick, that’s amazing. I’m so happy for you.”

I take a step closer and wrap my arms around her back. “I had a call with them. They understood the situation and offered to move the tryout a few days, but I told them no. I’m not going back.”

Her green eyes flame with surprise.

“And before you say anything, it’s not just about you.”

“Oh good. I wouldn’t want to get a big head.” She laughs. “You’re staying for your brothers. I understand why, but are you sure? It’s a lot to give up.”

“It’s not, though. That’s the thing. I love football and I enjoyed playing, but giving it up doesn’t feel like a sacrifice. It just feels . . . right. I want to be here with them and with you.”

“Admit it, you can’t bear the thought of not seeing my face every day.” She leans forward like she’s going to press her lips to mine but stops before they make contact. “Or kissing me a thousand times a day.”

“A thousand?”

“Rough estimate. I’ve never actually counted, but that sounds like a fun game.”

“It sounds like a fantastic game.” I close the distance. “One.”

She laughs lightly.

“I love you,” I tell her and then kiss her again. “Two.”

Her lips curve into a smile.

“I’m so in love with you.” My throat is thick with emotion. “I don’t know if I can ever forgive myself for not figuring it out sooner. Not getting there faster.”

“Stop. It wasn’t your fault. Letting him put that thought in your head is him winning. And fuck him.”

It isn’t as simple as letting myself off the hook, but I know her words are true.

“No more talking about Ted tonight.” She kisses me again. “Three. And also, I’m in love with you too. Like really, really in love. I’m basically living out my own romantic comedy. Or maybe it’s a drama. A romantic dramedy.” Smiling, she brings her lips to mine again and lets them linger.

“You forgot to count.” I cup the back of her head.

Her eyes lock on mine. “Infinity.”

Jane goes back to campus a week later. She lets me drive her and walk her from the parking lot. A few paparazzi are still staked outside her house, ready to grab photos of her to go with the news headlines about Ted’s arrest, but since she’s staying with me, they haven’t managed to get many shots. We go to the café, where she insists on buying me a coffee—mocha cookie crumble Frappuccino—and then I walk her to her first class.

“What are you going to do all day?” she asks.

After a lot of back and forth, which included Jane getting my brothers to take her side, we agreed that I didn’t need to be her shadow anymore. I want to be here, if for no other reason than I know Jane is still spooked and that people still want to take her photo. But I also get that she wants to move forward, and having me follow her around, looking over her shoulder, might do more harm than good. So, it’s boyfriend duties only from here on out. Officially. Unofficially I’ll never stop protecting her.

So, technically I’m unemployed. I told Logan I was staying here, so unless another high-profile client moves to Valley, I doubt he’s going to have any work for me.

“I don’t know. I guess I should look for a job or something.” I have enough saved up to last a while as long as I’m careful, but I need something to do, or I’ll go stir crazy.

“Oooh.” Her eyes light up. “Will you wear a suit for interviews?”

I chuckle. “Why? You got a thing for a guy in a suit?”

“Uhhh yeah. Me and most of the rest of the female population.”

“Good to know.” I drop her hand and brush her hair off her face. “I don’t think a lot of jobs around here are going to require a suit.”

“Bummer,” she says. “You could dress up and boss me around all day. We could do a little sexy billionaire role-play. I’d pay for that.”

Her professor walks into the class behind us, giving her and then me a curious look. It sounds like I’m her boy toy. I give her the good dick for free.

“I gotta go, but I’ll see you this afternoon.”

“Okay.” She leans up on her toes to kiss me, then backs away into the class. “Will you be wearing a suit when I get home?”

I shake my head. But for her, there’s a good chance I might.

JANE

EVERY DAY THAT GOES BY I FEEL A LITTLE BETTER AND MY ANXIETY LESSENS. I spoke with the police a few days after the Spring Fling. Hendrick went with me. Thanks to all the stuff Logan and Hendrick dug up about the emails and texts, it was enough to press charges for assault and harassment.

I don't feel good about it, but if it means that no one else has to go through what I did, then it will be one good thing to come out of it. I haven't been able to bring myself to go see Mackenzie. She's texted a bunch, and I've tried to reciprocate, but I don't know what to say. Hendrick told me to give it time, so I guess that's what I'm doing.

I walk into the Holland house and spot Hendrick in the kitchen, shirtless and sweaty like he just came in from a workout. Make that two good things to come from the situation. How different my life would be without him. In a matter of months, he's become so important to me. He was my bodyguard, now he's my sexy boyfriend, and whatever comes next, I hope he'll continue to be mine.

He makes me feel grounded and loved and just . . . content. Like this is exactly where I'm supposed to be. Here with him. Being loved so completely makes me feel like I can have and be anything I want, but also that it doesn't matter nearly as much. Everything but the people in my life are just movable pieces. Hendrick, his brothers, my friends, my parents . . . they make everything else seem possible because I have the foundation that lets me be me.

And right now, this me is quite enjoying the sight of my hot, half-naked man.

“Hey.” He chugs from his protein shake and then sets it in the sink. “Did you have a good day?”

“I did.” I drop my backpack in his room and then go into the kitchen. His shorts hang low on his hips and his muscles contract with every movement. “But I missed seeing you.”

I reach out and trail my hand along his chest and down his stomach. “I really, really missed you. Did you get hotter in the past six hours?”

“I missed you too,” he says and leans down to brush his lips over mine.

“Where is everyone?”

“Flynn had a late baseball practice, Knox is still at work, and who the hell knows about Archer and Brogan.”

“So, we’re all alone?”

His expression turns dark and playful. “Mhmm.”

“What ever will we do with so much privacy?” I walk my fingers along the band of his shorts.

“I don’t know.” He eliminates the space between us and wraps an arm around my lower back with his hand palming my ass. “I guess we could grab something to eat, maybe watch a little TV.”

He nods absently toward the living room where the TV is on ESPN, but his heated gaze stays on me. His fingers slip under the hem of my dress and tease the back of my thigh. He’s warm and sweaty and a delicious ache starts in my core.

“That sounds fun,” I say, a little breathy. He’s been treating me so carefully since I got out of the hospital, which was sweet, but damn, I missed this.

“Or . . .” As his word trails off, he lifts me onto the counter and steps between my legs. His rough hands drag up them, pushing my dress up around my hips. “I could just eat your sweet pussy instead.”

My skin flushes from his words. Hendrick’s mouth crashes down on mine and his fingers dig into my skin.

I’m dizzy with happiness and need. I’m safe and I am cherished. Now I want to be ravished. Widening my legs, I pull him closer and lock my knees tight to keep him there.

“You always smell like coconut and vanilla,” he murmurs as he kisses down the column of my neck. Hot, wet, open-mouthed kisses.

“It’s my perfume.”

“It makes me hard. *You* make me so hard.” His lips roam down my chest,

over the cotton fabric of my dress, and then lower.

Wasting no time, he drags my panties down my legs and then shoves them in his shorts pocket.

He hooks an arm around one leg and guides me gently back onto the counter, where I'm splayed out for him. I prop myself up so I can watch as his mouth covers my sensitive flesh.

His hazel eyes stay locked on mine as he flicks his tongue over my clit. His grip on my legs is tight, holding me in place as my body jolts with pleasure.

It doesn't take long at all for him to have me on the brink of my first orgasm. I want to hold out, but he sucks hard as he shoves two fingers inside of me and I can't stop it. I fall back, no longer able to hold myself up. He moves fast, shoving his shorts down and filling me.

We stopped using condoms since I told him I'm on the pill and, wow. I had no idea it would make things between us that much hotter. He thrusts in hard and fast, pounding me against the kitchen counter. The only sounds in the house are our pants and groans and the quiet TV in the background.

I'm drunk on lust, eyes heavy and limbs shaky. Hendrick's hand comes up to rest lightly against my throat. He uses his thumb to tip my chin down. "Eyes on me, sweetheart. See what you do to me?"

I stare at our bodies where he continues to push into me, then up to his dark hazel eyes. "You're my undoing," he says. "You fucking own me."

My next orgasm rips through me without warning. Hendrick smashes his mouth down on mine and shudders through his own release. He thinks I own him, but he has it backward. I'm his. Every piece of me.

I gasp for air as he presses one more soft kiss to my lips and then pulls away. He tucks himself away and then helps me sit up. I'm sticky with sweat and sex.

"Probably shouldn't tell Knox we did it on his cooking prep surface."

Hendrick laughs. I can't get enough of that light, happy sound. "No, we probably shouldn't, but since he's not here, wanna try out the couch next?"

Before I can answer, the front door opens.

"Later," I tell him as I hop down. Because with him, I want to try everything.

The next morning, I'm getting ready for school when Hendrick comes into the bedroom and laughs. My stuff is everywhere. I've sort of taken over his room.

"I know. I'm sorry."

He sets my coffee on the nightstand and drops a kiss on my lips.

"You know, I don't really need to stay here anymore."

"You and I have different ideas of what you need. I think you *need* to be in my bed every night."

I laugh. "I'm not saying I won't stay over some nights, but it's time for me to move my stuff back to my house. Think of it as one less person fighting over the shower in the morning."

His expression is less than thrilled.

"I sleep in your clothes when I'm here anyway." I drape my arms around his neck and lightly scratch my nails along his scalp. "You could stay at my place sometimes too."

"Fine," he mutters. "Take the top drawer in my dresser for anything you want to leave."

"Really?" The idea of having my very own drawer in his room is almost as exciting as the prospect of the many, many more nights I plan to stay here.

"Yeah." A resigned smile plays over his lips. "I've been thinking I need to give up this room anyway, so Brogan and Arch don't have to share."

"Where will you go?"

"I was thinking with all this time I have on my hands while looking for a job, I'd fix up the loft and move up there. Temporarily. Eventually I'll get my own place, but I want to be here to help while Flynn finishes high school."

"I love that idea," I tell him as my heart squeezes in my chest. "Flynn will love it too."

"Only if you come over all the time. He'll be more heartbroken than me that you're moving out."

"Deal. Anything for Flynn."

He makes a low growl in his throat and smacks my ass.

HENDRICK

SATURDAY AFTERNOON, KNOX AND I START WORKING ON THE LOFT. THE basic structure is still good, but it needs a banister and new stairs at minimum. It's a large enough space that if we put the bed on the far wall, Brogan will still have some privacy.

When I told everyone my plan for staying and that I was going to fix up the loft to give us more space, Brogan wouldn't have it. He played it off like he actually wanted the loft, but I think part of him still feels like he doesn't deserve to live here as much as the rest of us. It's bullshit, but I'm not mad about still having a room with a door.

The TV is on some motorcycle race, but they're still doing qualifiers so it's not that exciting—at least to me. The stairs are done. We'll need to sand and paint them, but we'll get to that another day. Knox has abandoned work and is sitting on the bottom step watching TV. I grab a beer from the fridge and hand it to him. We haven't talked much one-on-one since I told him I was staying, but I can tell he's still not on board.

I watch with him until it goes to a break. He looks up at me like he didn't even realize I was here.

“Ready to work on the banister?” I ask.

He nods, takes another long gulp of his beer, and then sets it down on the floor before heading up the new stairs of the loft.

We work in silence for another thirty minutes or so until I can't take it.

“I'm sorry.”

“You're sorry?” He narrows his gaze at me. “What for?”

“For leaving and then not coming back when I knew you needed me to.

You shouldn't have been the one to drop out of school and take care of everyone."

"We both did our part," he says simply and dismisses me by picking up the next board.

"Can we just have this conversation once and for all instead of dancing around it?"

He drops the board slowly and faces me, an expression I can't quite read on his face. "We don't need to have this conversation."

"I think we do."

"You think I'm mad that you left, and you didn't come back, but you're wrong. Or, fuck, maybe I was, but I'm mostly pissed that you don't realize how fucking lucky you are. You were Hendrick Holland, pro football player for the Rams." He raises both arms in the air.

Technically true, but it isn't like that. "I haven't played in years and when I did, I wasn't even that good." I had promise, but I was still finding my footing when I got injured.

"But this season could be different. And even if it's not, you left and you made something of yourself. You think I wanted you to give that up?" He shakes his head. "I knew it had to be me and I don't resent you for that. I resent that you're not fighting like hell to stay gone. There's nothing for you here and you know it."

"That's not true."

"It is. All you used to talk about was leaving. Now here you are. That's not what I wanted, I promise you." His shoulders relax. "I'm so fucking envious of the opportunities you've had, but proud as hell too. So don't stay because you think it's the right thing to do. One of us should get a chance to chase crazy dreams. If not, then what the hell was it all for?"

He gets back to work without another word, but his silence feels more comfortable after hearing him speak his piece.

"You're wrong. So was I. I thought I needed to leave to be the person I wanted to be, but that was bullshit. I was running away, hoping that I could forget about Mom dying and Dad abandoning us. Guess what? It doesn't work that way. This is my home. You, Arch, Brogan, Flynn . . . you're my family. I *want* to be here," I say as I fall in beside him. "And it's not too late for you. If there are things you still want, you should do them."

He's quiet a beat before shaking his head. "Nah. Nah. I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be."

Later that night, Jane comes over. She's straddling me naked with a beautiful post-orgasm glow.

She runs her fingers along my stomach and chest. "What do you want to do tonight?"

"I'm doing it right now." I grip either side of her hips and let my hands glide up her smooth skin to the curve of her waist.

"So, your plan for all of tonight is sex? It's barely six o'clock." Her sweet laughter fills the room.

Seems like a hell of a good plan to me.

"What do you want to do?" I ask her.

"Well, your plan does sound fun, but first can I take you somewhere? I have a little surprise."

"Might be hard to top your last surprise." Watching Jane up there on stage singing my mom's favorite song is a memory I won't soon forget.

"I accept that challenge."

We get dressed and into my truck.

I start the engine and then realize I have no clue where we're going. "Where to?"

"Let's go to The Hideout."

That wasn't in my top five favorite ideas for the night, but as long as she's coming home with me later, we can chill wherever she wants.

When we get close, I slow down to turn. Jane sits forward in the passenger seat. "Keep going."

"I thought—" I start as I roll past the entrance to the popular restaurant.

"Turn here." She points to the familiar gravel road that leads to my mom's old bar.

I do as she says, confused but intrigued. It's as dark and abandoned as the last time we were here. Jane gets out without waiting for me.

I take my time. Coming here always hits me with a nostalgic feeling that has to be acknowledged with a moment of reflection. Someday another business will take over the building, or maybe they'll bulldoze it completely. I hope not. There's no place where I feel closer to my mom than standing in this lot.

Jane walks all the way to the boarded-up front door and then turns to face me.

“What are you up to, sweetheart?” I ask as I catch up to her.

“Okay, so you know how you were a big shot football player and then decided to stay here but you haven’t found a job yet?”

I chuckle. “I guess that does pretty much sum up the current state of my life. Thanks for the reminder I’m a bum.”

“You’d be a very sexy bum,” she says with sass. “But you’re not a bum. You’re amazing. Staying here to be a part of your brothers’ lives is the most incredible thing. I’m so proud of you.”

Her words are like a balm to a wound I’m not sure will ever completely heal. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She tips her head up to kiss me quickly. “Well, keeping all that in mind, I wanted to do something to show you just how much I appreciate everything you’ve done for me.” Her hand flies up in front of my face as my lips part to speak. “And before you say it was your job, let’s just both acknowledge that you went way, way above and beyond.”

I keep my mouth shut. I don’t know if it’s an argument I’ll ever win. Was it different because of my feelings for her? Of course. But the bottom line is I was exactly where I wanted to be, doing exactly what I wanted. I don’t regret any of it.

She takes my hand and slips something cold and metal in it. I stare down at a silver key. “What’s this?”

“The key to this place. I’m returning it to your family.”

JANE

“IS IT TOO MUCH?”

He hasn't spoken in what feels like hours but was probably only seconds.

“Of course, it's too much. I know I can be a lot, and this is a lot. If you don't want it, then I totally get it. I just wanted you to have the option. A sort of final say on what happens with this place.” I stop rambling and clamp my mouth shut.

“I can't believe you did this. You said you had a *little* surprise.”

Crap. I knew it was too much. A normal girlfriend would have bought him a nice shirt or something. He turns and frames my face with both hands and drops his head to mine. “I don't know what I did to deserve you or this.”

“So, it's not too much?” I ask hopefully.

“It absolutely is too much.” His laughter is tight and strained and those hazel eyes I love so much stare at me in wonder and surprise.

I was prepared for this, so I have all sorts of logic on my side. “Consider it backpay. Now we're even for all the months you wouldn't let me pay you.”

“I know what this place is worth.” He cocks a brow at me.

“Well, you were underpaid. You saved my life. Backpay and a bonus.”

He shakes his head at me like he thinks I'm a little out of my right mind. “I'd burn this place to the ground to keep you safe.”

I know he means it. That he would sacrifice everything for me and the people he loves. Which is my final bargaining chip.

“Burn it, sell it, whatever you want. The point is that you and your brothers can decide this time. You lost a lot that you can't get back, but this doesn't have to be one of those things. Will you accept it? Pretty please.” I

throw the last two words in as a plea. I can never tell him how much I appreciate him, but this building feels like a symbol of it.

His forehead drops to mine. “God, I love you. Your big heart and your generosity, and the way you have come into my life and made everything feel exciting again. I don’t know what’s next for me, but I know it includes you.”

He looks up at the building. “I can’t tell you what this place means to me.” Then his gaze flicks back to me. “Or what you mean to me. I love you so damn much.”

“I love you too.”

“I will accept it on one condition.”

My heart flutters in my chest. “Anything.”

“Move in with me.” His lips fight a smile and his eyes twinkle.

I shove playfully at his chest, laughter falling from my mouth.

Hendrick wraps his arms around my waist and kisses me. “Almost had you.”

“You do have me. All of me.”

A few weeks later, four wallflowers gather in the living room of their off-campus house. It’s just a house, yet it’s so much more. It’s the place where we became friends, where each of us fell in love, where we watched Jane Austen more times than I can count, studied together, drank wine, played dress up, cried, and laughed. Years from now when we’ve all graduated and started our lives, we’ll look back at this moment and remember that what we shared was special. A once in a lifetime kind of friendship. Or in my case, thrice in a lifetime.

As I look around at my friends drinking wine, wearing beautiful custom gowns, talking about boys and life and our plans for the future, I wonder if we’ll always be this close. If we’ll continue to share our lives when we’re not bound together by these four walls. We will. I know it. I need them. They’ve become a part of me.

Music from a party next door at The White House threatens to drown out the TV in front of us, but we aren’t watching it anyway.

“Okay, your turn,” Daisy says to me. “Would you rather give up sex or kissing?”

We've been going around asking these types of questions all night long. When do we want to get married? Are we going to have kids? Where will we live? And then of course it turned to sex.

"Kissing. No, sex. No, crap, kissing. I can't decide," I say.

Laughing, Vi gets to her feet. "I'm gonna grab another bottle of wine."

"I'm coming with you to get more snacks," Daisy says and follows her.

Dahlia scoots closer to me and rests her head on my shoulder. "This is exactly what I needed tonight. Me, you, Vi, and Daisy."

Her phone lights up in her lap. We both look down as Felix's name flashes on the screen with a text.

"And your boyfriend not so patiently waiting to come pick you up?" I ask with a laugh.

On the coffee table, Daisy's phone vibrates. Dahlia and I share a smile before she leans forward to confirm what we're both thinking. "It's Jordan."

We laugh. "Who would have thought that we'd be hanging out and boys would be blowing up our phones begging us to hang out with them?" she asks.

"I would have. We're amazing."

She smiles back at me, warm and caring and with a kind of understanding that only your truest friends ever really know.

"Cheers to that," she says and clinks her wine glass against mine softly before finishing off the last of it. I do the same.

Dahlia sets her empty glass on the coffee table. "I saw that Penelope and Clint broke up."

"Yeah, me too." It was splashed all over the front page of every major news outlet this morning along with news that Clint had gotten into an accident while driving drunk and allegations that Penelope had filed a restraining order against him. And the big superhero movie he was doing . . . yeah, they dropped him too. There was a lot going on there and the media was eating it up.

"Are you okay?" Dahlia asks.

"Yeah." I nod. "I'm sad for her, of course, but I'm okay. Maybe I'll reach out," I say off-handedly, but it isn't a terrible idea.

"Speaking of celebrities, guess who texted me?"

"Who?!"

"Eddie Dillon." Her eyes are bright with excitement as she mentions the pop star we met last year. She had this huge opportunity to design an outfit

for him, and totally crushed it.

“I knew he’d be back begging you to design more clothes for him. You’re so talented, babe,” I say.

“Well, he didn’t beg, but he did offer me a summer internship with his wardrobe team.”

The three of us squeal at her news. Dahlia blushes and soaks it all up as we take turns hugging and congratulating her.

“A-mazing.” I wrap her in another tight hug. “I am so proud and so, so happy for you. You’re going to kill it.”

“Thank you, but there’s more. He also asked me to pass on his number to you.” She tilts her head toward me.

“What? Why?”

“Why do you think?” She squeezes my knee and gives it a shake. “He saw the videos of you bringing down the house at the Spring Fling and he wants to collab with you.”

My stomach bottoms out. “Are you fucking with me right now?”

“Nope.” Her smile pulls wide. “Maybe this summer I’ll be designing outfits for the both of you.”

An hour later, my friend’s boyfriends have reached a level of impatience that has a symphony of vibrations and pings going off in our living room.

“I cannot believe Hendrick hasn’t texted at all,” Dahlia says. “Did he have plans tonight?”

“He’s hanging out at home, I think. I told him he could come over when we were done.”

“Well now I feel bad that we’re leaving,” Daisy says.

“Go, go,” I tell them. “I don’t mind. Really. I’ll clean up.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to come with me next door?” Vi asks. “Text Hendrick and have him meet us there.”

“Maybe. I’ll let you know what we decide.”

After they leave and I toss the empty wine bottles and wash the glasses, I text Hendrick.

ME

Hey, chicks before dicks time has come to an end. Want to come over?

HENDRICK

Already on my way.

EPILOGUE

JANE

ON A SUNNY OCTOBER DAY, THE FALL AFTER HENDRICK CAME INTO MY LIFE, he takes me to my first NFL game. The stadium is huge and beautiful. I didn't expect it to be so beautiful. Bright colors and fun music and so many happy, smiling people.

My parents are here. I'm not surprised in the least that they absolutely adore Hendrick. They haven't come right out and said it, but I'm certain they're thrilled my boyfriend doubles as my bodyguard.

The girls came with us, too. Partly because who doesn't want to watch an NFL game in a private suite? Partly because they've all come to love Hendrick and wanted to do this for him. But mostly because Felix is playing. After graduation, he moved to Minnesota to play and today his schedule brought him here. Dahlia is beside herself with nerves and pride.

"Are you nervous?" Daisy asks me as I hum lightly, warming up my voice.

Oh yeah, I'm also singing the national anthem today. So, when I said that Hendrick brought me here, that was only sort of true. Today I get to step onto the field that meant so much to him and sing for thousands of people.

"A little, but not as much as I expected," I tell her honestly. I've performed a few times since the Spring Fling. Once with Eddie Dillon this summer on his tour (top five best moments of my life) and twice with The Letterman Jackets.

It was several months after Ted was arrested before Eric managed to get the band back together. Mackenzie was the most reluctant, but she finally caved when Eric found someone to play drums. A *she* someone. I think

somehow Ted being replaced by a girl made it easier for her. And they sound even better than before.

“You’re going to be great.” She bumps her shoulder against mine.

“Can I borrow Jane for a few minutes?” Hendrick asks, coming to stand next to us.

“She’s all yours.” Daisy grins and moves to join Vi, who’s trying to console Dahlia.

“Borrow me for what?” I ask as he takes my hand.

“I want to introduce you to a few people.”

We tour the facilities, where Hendrick introduces me to past coaches and trainers and some of his old teammates. I don’t know a ton about football so most of the players I don’t recognize, but when Hendrick shakes hands with Keegan Daughtry, I get a little starry-eyed. He shows up just as much on celebrity gossip sites as he does the sports section. He’s incredibly private about his personal life, doesn’t maintain a social media presence, and rarely does interviews. All that should make him less popular than other football players, but he’s gorgeous and amazingly talented so people clamor for every single detail they can get.

“And this is Jane.” Hendrick places a hand on my lower back. Then Keegan’s attention is focused on me, and wow.

“The girlfriend I’ve heard so much about,” he says. His smile is small but friendly as he offers me his hand.

I take it, still staring at him in shock. “You’ve heard about me? Keegan Daughtry knows who I am.”

Hendrick chuckles and Keegan smiles a fraction more.

“I kept pressing Hendrick, trying to get him to come back. Now I understand.”

My face flushes and I blurt out, “He’s opening a bar.”

Keegan looks from me to Hendrick. “A bar?”

“Yeah.” My boyfriend looks embarrassed as he tells his old teammate about renovating his mom’s old bar, but he’s turned it into the most incredible space. He kept a lot of the original setup to honor his mom, but added an outdoor space where people can drink and chill and play games. It hasn’t opened yet, but I already know it’s going to be successful. He’s put so much of himself into it. There’s no way it won’t be just as fantastic as him.

Hendrick wraps an arm around my hips and pulls me into his side. “Enough about me. How’s the back doing?”

Keegan's face grows somber. "A little better, but I'm not ready to go yet. Maybe by December if I'm lucky. But the team needs help now and I hate not being out there. Any regrets?"

"No." Hendrick drops his gaze to mine. "Not a one."

Keegan laughs quietly. "Well, it was good to see you, Holland. Don't be a stranger."

"I won't," Hendrick promises, and they shake hands again.

"Nice to meet you, Jane." Keegan walks off and I turn to my boyfriend.

"You were going to take Keegan Daughtry's spot, and you passed it up?" I whisper-screech.

"Eh . . ."

"Oh my gosh, you were?!"

His eyes glint with laughter and we begin to walk away from the locker rooms and player facilities back toward the private box where we'll watch the game. "It wasn't quite a done deal, but if things had gone well . . . maybe."

"Wow." I knew that Hendrick was giving up an opportunity to play, but I suddenly realize just how big that opportunity was. "I don't know what to say."

He stops abruptly. "Say yes."

"Yes," I say automatically, then turn to him. "What exactly am I saying yes to?"

Suddenly there's a ring in front of my face. A stunning diamond ring and Hendrick drops to one knee.

"I wanted to ask you months ago, but then this trip came up and I knew there was no better place to tell you how much I love you and ask you to be mine. Being back here feels like I'm closing one chapter and starting another. With you. And I'd choose you every time. I know you'll probably want to wait until you're done with school, but I couldn't go another day without asking. Marry me, Jane? Make me the happiest guy in the entire world."

"Yes!" I scream in the hallway, earning us a few looks, some laughs, and from people who are close enough to see what's happening, some applause.

He slides the ring on my finger and then picks me up and spins me around. And it feels exactly like home.

Thank you so much for reading Tempting the Player! I hope you enjoyed Jane and Hendrick. If you aren't quite ready to say goodbye, download the bonus scene [here](#).

Want to know what's coming next? [Sign up for my newsletter](#) to get the latest updates or [follow me on Instagram](#).

PLAYLIST

- Grrrls by Lizzo
- Plain Jane Remix by A\$AP Ferg feat. Nicki Minaj
- Way 2 Sexy by Drake feat. Future and Young Thug
- Obsessed by Mariah Carey
- Riptide by TwoPilots
- Spin Back by Losenn
- Need to Know by Doja Cat
- Misery Business by Paramore
- Sure Thing (Sped Up) by Miguel
- Blank Space by Taylor Swift
- Everywhere by Viva La Panda and Miss Mathilda
- Teenage Dirtbag by Wheatus
- Chemical by Post Malone
- Champagne & Sunshine by PLVTINUM feat. Tarro
- Sweater Weather (Sped Up) by 90degrees, Franklaay, and Melodyz Town
- Everywhere by Fleetwood Mac

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have so many people to thank for helping me bring this series to life.

To my husband and family, thank you for cheering me along and for understanding when I'm in my head thinking about fictional characters.

Devyn—for keeping my life (and business) in line. You're the employee of the month (every month).

Amy and Catherine—You both continue to inspire and push me to be a better writer and human.

Nina and everyone at Valentine PR—thank you for everything that you do for me and my books.

Becca, Becky, Ellie, Margo, Nancy, and Sarah—I love working with all of you. Your attention to detail, creativity, and support mean more than I can say.

My beta readers—I cannot tell you how much better my books are because of your insights and notes. Love you both so much.

And last, but definitely not least, to everyone who picked up this book, thank you so much for taking this journey with me.

ALSO BY REBECCA JENSHAK

Campus Wallflowers

[Tutoring the Player](#)

[Hating the Player](#)

[Scoring the Player](#)

[Tempting the Player](#)

Wildcat Hockey Series

[Wildcat](#)

[Wild About You](#)

[Wild Ever After](#)

[In Your Wildest Dreams](#)

Campus Nights Series

[Secret Puck](#)

[Bad Crush](#)

[Broken Hearts](#)

[Wild Love](#)

Smart Jocks Series

[The Assist](#)

[The Fadeaway](#)

[The Tip-Off](#)

[The Fake](#)

[The Pass](#)

Standalone Novels

[Sweet Spot](#)

[Electric Blue Love](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca Jenshak is a *USA Today* bestselling author of new adult and sports romance. She lives in Arizona with her family. When she isn't writing, you can find her attending local sporting events, hanging out with family and friends, or with her nose buried in a book.

Sign up for her [newsletter](#) for book sales and release news.