

PLAY LIKE A
GIRL
HEAT METER

ZERO

Power

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SOFIA AVES

ZERO POINTER

a Rippton U sports romance

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

SOFIA AVES

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CHAPTER ONE

CHLOE

“Get it up, Chloe. Lift that racquet! Now, run.” My coach’s voice matched the man; his huge, musculature frame frittering in the biggest and best from Dolph Lundgren’s gene pool at some point.

It never occurred to me *not* to want to run. My legs screamed, and the first classes of the day hadn’t started yet, but I didn’t stop until finally, *finally*, Felix held up a hand, bouncing a bright yellow ball on his racket.

“Good girl.”

Feeling more like I earned a puppy pat on the head than working my ass off while the rest of the student population at Rippton U was still recovering from last night’s hangover, I threw him the bright smile my sister coached me into wearing years ago for the media. The one I stuck on my face daily, because it was easiest.

In case there was a camera, or some other random who stole a photo without permission. Fake, but frugal. At least in the sense of my emotions, which were always turbulent and on high alert. For a girl with an anxiety problem, fake was best.

Felix couldn’t tell the difference between media me and real me, and he preened in the early morning sun.

It wasn’t like he’d been the one running and sweating and shattering from the inside out for the last two and a half hours of coaching before my first class of the day. Even so, I gave Felix all the effort I didn’t feel, kicking my own butt across the clay court at the centre of Rippton’s brand spanking new tennis facility bearing my name.

That we were done for the morning called for celebration. I threw my hands over my head. “Victory!”

“Not so fast. Yes, you’re doing well. But you’re not flying like you did last summer. Those feet have to be fairy-level tiptoe fast if you want to beat Sarah Cummings in the next championship round. If you want a chance at a grand slam?”

Felix frowned, sucking the hype out of my sails as he passed me a water bottle.

I promptly tipped its contents over my head, indulging in the ice cold crackle against my skin, the flash of pain before the contrasting temperature of the water soothed my overheated skin, trickling into my scalp. I swept away ticklish remnants from the back of my neck.

“Relax, Felix. Three months. We have time, and I’m not slacking off. Not now, not ever. I promise,” I added.

He coughed and turned away, busying himself with collecting balls, kicking each up to bounce on his racket. His back was to me, but his grumpy mutter was still clear as morning dew. “The great Chloe Duke won’t be ‘duking’ nothing if you don’t commit to practicing more often. Four o’clock this afternoon. Be back here, with your fairy wings on.”

I found myself nodding if only to make him happy. *There’s that innate people pleaser in me making an appearance.* No matter what I did, I couldn’t get away from it. My sister-slash-manager wanted me to train harder. Felix wanted me to train harder.

So train harder, I did.

If I gave any more effort, I’d be able to run my own cheerleading circuit.

“Stretch it out before you hit the showers,” Felix called over his shoulder. “You know that lactic acid will screw with your ability to move later on.”

I groaned. It was leg morning followed by training, and he was absolutely right. At least he wasn’t insisting on an ice bath. Maybe the fact it was winter and, once I cooled down, the pale sun’s kiss wouldn’t do much for my muscles anyway. Jeans were looking good right now.

“Only if you’re not a little masochist,” I sassed him back, bratting out because I could.

Because it was the only measure of control I had in my entire scheduled out life. Every minute, mouthful, and spare

square inch accounted for. I didn't have time to slack off if I wanted to. Besides, the pain egged me on, that muscular burn to work through that gave me the sort of high I could chase through leg day.

But in no way could I convince Felix otherwise.

The constant doubt he displayed and that my sister backed crippled me.

I'm working my ass as hard as I can.

But that was an excuse; I knew it for what it was. Didn't mean I couldn't add a dollop of self-loathing on top in a bid to sabotage my mental space.

So I stretched, turning towards the showers, grabbing my spare change of clothes and my bag and another bottle of water. "Thanks, Felix. See you this afternoon."

He grunted again, his head already buried in his notebook where he scribbled furious notes.

He was still there when I headed back out from the showers to check on him. At least if the man was going to tell me to work harder, I couldn't argue with his work ethic. I was almost certain *lead by example* was tattooed somewhere on his body.

"I swear I'm going to get you a tablet for Christmas," I said fondly, giving Felix a one-armed hug and tapping my matching journal he gave me last birthday against his. "I promise I'll work hard. We have this championship in the bag. If *we work hard*," I slowed down a little so he could say the last part with me, our voices ringing around the tennis court like a doubles team.

"That's my girl." He stroked my ponytail until I flicked my head.

"Don't pull my hair," I griped, bundling everything up and stepping out of his reach. "I've got classes and all. A girl has to have moves, Felix."

I sidestepped his hug. I knew Felix harbored a soft spot for me, though I never saw that during coaching. Then he was in

active machine mode and I swore he sweated pure oil. But on the rare occasion, like today, he made a slight move we both knew wouldn't work.

Besides, The Schedule didn't leave me time for dating or socialising outside the necessary charity and media events.

Felix nodded, his grumpiness minorly satisfied. Glad I finally made him somewhat happy, I grinned, immediately hating myself for my previous reaction to his. Who said he wasn't being a brotherly figure after all?

Then his gaze rose, fixing hard on something behind me, like a guard dog at the gate. "Who the hell is that?"

I twisted on my toes, and one ankle rolled out beneath me. "Fuck, fuck, fuck." I hopped on the other foot and tried walking, but that wasn't happening either. "Ow." Okay, so I liked the type of pain that came with exercise, but not this sort.

"Shit. Are you okay?" Felix pushed me into my chair, and dived into my bag, twisting the hot/cold emergency pack I kept on me at all times. He ripped off his shirt, rolling the ice pack and wrapped my ankle with both until the pack was held firmly in place.

I rolled my eyes at the drama llama'ing. "Any chance to get naked?"

"For you, anything," Felix smiled blindingly, his white teeth too bright in his over fake tanned face, bleached blond hair sticking up his head.

"Sure, sure. See, you push me too much." I tried to make the comment a joke but missed the mark.

Felix huffed, inspecting my ankle. "How does it feel?" He looked up at me, pure worry in his eyes.

"Like it's suffocating under a ton of expectations," I said dryly. "Honestly it's fine, Felix. I'll be fine." If I said *fine* once more, everything would most assuredly *not* be fine. I smiled through my teeth.

"It could cost you your shot at this year's championships." My coach refused to drop it when I didn't give him the snark

he so obviously sought and turned his aggro elsewhere. “What do you want? This is a closed training session,” he snapped at our intruder.

A tall, slim shadow stood at the entrance to the tennis court. He stepped into the sunlight, all pale skin, angular features like a vampire come out to play at the wrong time of day. A satchel was slung across his body over a button up long sleeved dark grey shirt over black jeans, the hint of ink at his throat and wrists. Dark eyes pierced me from beneath a swath of shaggy dark hair that was too long to be any real style and stuck out in all directions. He looked too lean to be anywhere near a sports centre, but that wasn't his crowning achievement. On his feet were a pair of Jesus sandals.

Even without socks, they were abominable.

“Off the court with those things.” I waved a hand in his direction. “Just nope.”

“Chloe Duke?” he asked, ignoring me completely and walking onto the court.

The moment his toe hit the sand, Felix frowned.

I patted his bulky shoulder. “Take it easy, boy,” I muttered.

“Good boy... Does he need to be on a leash?” The man's face—he had to be my age, maybe a year or two older—split in a cheeky grin I responded to and hated all at once.

Felix turned purple. Clearly the boy had a deathwish.

“What's wrong with you? Who are you? You're not one of the journos from the school paper.” I knew all of them from the plethora of hours working out how to best promo the tennis management team for the university.

Supposedly it made a difference but I resented the too many hours spent talking to journos and not practicing on the tennis court. Not the most effective use of my time, which is what my life had transformed into: tightly scheduled blocks to get me to a grand slam.

“I'm your tutor.” He smiled at me, ignoring Felix entirely.

I blinked at him. “Tutor,” I echoed, wracking my brain. “For... Oh, shit. Engineering.”

He nodded enthusiastically. “Yep.” One shoe scuffed the sand, and Felix growled.

“Down, boy,” I muttered, my brain still playing catch up. “And they sent you. For me. You’re the class brainiac?”

His smile strained. “A few points short of failing.”

“You’re failing.” I made it a statement, not a question.

“Yes. Well, I wouldn’t be if I put effort in, but you know.” He shrugged, like failing anything was an option.

I shook my head, adamant. This was not how I saw my day going, hanging out with a geeky engineering boy who couldn’t put two and two together and come up with anything but the right answer. Blonde hair, coated in sweat, licked my face.

I flicked my ponytail out of the way. “Nope. No way. I’m not doing this.”

I didn’t say anything, the newcomer and Felix watching me curiously as I packed up my stuff. I made a show of hugging Felix, then limped away, trying to put pressure on my throbbing joint but it refused to play ball.

Halfway across the giant lawn between the sports areas and the lecture halls, I realized the engineering guy walked at my side, shortening his stride to keep up with my limping gait.

Hoping I could ignore him, I plowed on, maintaining my regular tunnel vision in an effort to get to class, plant my ass and wrap the ice pack around my ankle. That tactic worked right up until he spoke.

“You know, I’m passing that class better than you are.”

I started, flicking a glance sideways. “What?”

“You, Chloe Duke, are failing worse than me, and neither of us are because we’re not smart. You can’t remain the tennis champion if you’re failing, and if you change degrees in the middle of your second year, it’s gonna mean your studies will eat your tennis career in the best years of your life and blahdy

blah. College politics will ensue, and there goes your chance at a grand slam in the next year or so. Capisce?”

“And you, a kid who’s failing, is gonna help me?” I sneaked another look at him.

Kid wasn’t really apt. He stood slightly taller than six feet, though he slouched as he walked, I suspected, to look less... maybe just less. At least closer to my height. Close up, his high cheekbones and face scruff made him look a little less dirty and a whole lot sexy.

Time and a place, Duke.

He shook his head. “Any time, Chloe.”

Fuck me. I hadn’t meant to say that aloud. “Are you flirting with me?”

He shrugged, loping alongside me. Each long step kept him a little behind me, hiding his height, and maybe a few other things.

Being taller than me wasn’t impossible, but he was definitely over six feet to achieve that, and walking beside me I felt...daunted. And maybe a little curious. Definitely not interested. I had no time for that. My sister and Felix explicitly forbade dating, and after the last rounds I’d gone in the romance pool, I didn’t have the energy to spare to be involved anyway.

I had no time, and....

“The college gave me everything on file. That provided me with everything I *didn’t* need to know about you.”

“Lucky you.” I picked up the pace, but it didn’t deter him.

The guy sighed. “So, Chloe Duke. I made you a schedule.”

“You made me a schedule.” I didn’t bother to keep the incredulity out of my tone.

“Will you stop repeating everything I say?” His eyes sparkled as he sent me the cheeky kind of dirty grin that heated me from the inside out.

“Only if you start making sense.” I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply before opening them again, to find him staring at me, and that I’d stop walking. “I’m sorry. I just can’t deal with any more schedules. I have a class at one. I have a coaching schedule. I have a meal schedule. I have a nutrition schedule. I have a water drinking fucking schedule. I do not also need a study schedule.” I stared at him diffidently, trying for a second to grasp control of anything today.

I flicked my watch up in a show, making sure that the light glinted off his face. “My next class starts in four minutes. I better be there, if I don’t want to fail.” I put emphasis on the last *F* trying its best to turn into another version of *fucking*, but it didn’t quite work out.

“Walk and talk. We’ve got time, Duke. And you’ll like the schedule.” He slid a laminated piece of paper into my hand, his fingers grazing mine.

They weren’t smooth, as I expected them to be, if I expected them to be anything at all.

I read the thing twice over, knowing my people pleasing tendencies were coming into play regardless how I felt, and hating myself a little bit more for it with each minute.

“Okay so tutoring during lunch in the cafeteria – is that even feasible? I won’t be able to hear you and the curry is horrendous and I can’t eat it on my other schedule. And then... What’s this after practice twice a week? On Friday night. *And* Saturday night. Frat parties?” My voice rose a notch and I didn’t have the ability to hide anything any longer. “Are you serious?”

He walked alongside me, his hand stuck in his pocket, no longer gripping his leather satchel strap.

“Yes, Chloe Duke. I promise, I didn’t stalk you even a little bit. Your social life is well below the line, you’re not getting the college experience, and if you want to beat your next opponent, according to my research, you need to do a little bit of loosening up.” He grinned broadly, apparently pleased with himself.

“Are you doubling as a psych major as well as engineering?”

“Nope.”

“Are you a psychiatrist?”

“Not that either.”

“Okay then. So, you believe I need to loosen up,” I used my voice for emphasis, rather than air quotes, mainly because my hands trembled at the sheer audacity of this asshole, “because...”

“Because you’ve got a stick up your ass.”

I looked at him, blinked a few times, closed my mouth and strode forward.

His steps grew longer than mine, and he kept up with annoying ease.

“You know, if I had friends, I would’ve bet someone to see how fast I could make Chloe Duke pissy. Would have been fun.” He shrugged like that comment out of the wings wasn’t so far fetched at all.

That gave me pause, and I stopped to stare at him again. “You don’t have any friends?”

He laughed, a deep sound I was drawn to, regardless of how annoying the boy in sandals beside me was.

I twitched, my nails cutting into my palms. *I don’t have time for this.* “What’s funny?”

“Because I have friends. You really really do need to get that removed. Maybe surgically.”

“As long as you’re not offering.” I said under my breath.

He raised both hands in defence, facing me. “No way in hell then.”

My lips fought me to form a smile, so I pursed them instead. I couldn’t let this jerk know I thought he was funny. I couldn’t.

“That was nearly a smile. Right?” He fist pumped, and I laughed.

Shit.

“You’re really annoying.” I turned in a circle, staring at the insides of the quadrangle I didn’t recognise. “Where the hell are we?”

“Potty mouth at all.” He shook his head woefully and gave my puppy eyes. *Freaking puppy eyes.* Could he get any cuter? “Your class is up those stairs, third door on the right. I’m across the hall for the next two hours. How about we meet up for breakfast? You can pick what you eat. I’ll have beer and you can tell me all the things you don’t know about what we’re supposed to be learning and we’ll figure out where to go from there. Alright?”

I stared at him. “You’re having beer for breakfast?”

He strangled his satchel strap again. “Sure am.”

“You’re having warm beer for breakfast,” I clarified.

He rolled his eyes. “Course not. The bag’s insulated. I created a little refrigerator chip. It’s been extremely handy to get through classes and tests. Can’t wait to get the fuck out of this place and away from my family.”

Well, he just got a whole lot more interesting.

I didn’t bother to try and stop the smile that finally spread across my face. “Alright. You have my attention. After class, we can have beer for br... morning tea.”

He smirked. “See? No surgical removal required.”

He strode away, taking the stairs three at a time on long, loping legs with admirable balance, and a lightweight step that would have made Felix a pretty shade of orange tinged chartreuse with envy.

“Wait,” I called out. “I don’t even know your name!”

“Nick Jessop,” he called back, his name, echoing weirdly around the concrete stairwell. One of the few utilitarian fixtures of Rippton’s usually ostentatious campus.

I was still grinning, bemused, but I followed his directions and wandered up the stairs in his wake, trying to work out if I usually came into the building another way.

I was also twelve minutes into the class before I realized I was in the wrong one. One that wasn't mine.

Nick Jessop sent me to the wrong fucking class.

Tutoring was going to be fun.

CHAPTER TWO

NICK

Chloe Duke was one hell of a surprise. She was both everything I expected, and nothing like it. Long legs that went on for days at a time to tanned, curved, well-muscled ankles that looked right at home in those pristine white trainers, and the tiny little blue denim skirt she wore. Then she changed after her shower and ended up wearing jeans, and a white tank top... and I swore my heart actually ached for the athlete turned all-American hottie.

That was the girl I agreed to help Professor Reynolds with when he asked me to tutor her.

The almost perfect start for her sport. Even though I wasn't the biggest fan, I recognized skill when I saw it. After watching her train from the shadows for a bit before I announced my presence to the wall of muscle of her coach I could see *why* Chloe Duke, at least, with her slapped on facade, was the Allstars' highpoint.

It also wasn't hard to see she was over scheduled, and mentally exhausted enough to fail a class. I suspected she would have blitzed under other circumstances. Not that she'd know, because I doubt she checked her grades. Her agent or coach or someone else who held her tightly scheduled life together probably did the layman tasks, and those chose what information actually made it to her.

So I knew she didn't expect me to know she was failing class. Something I didn't think her coach knew, and I suspected he'd be shitty about that as well. I leaned back in my chair, fantasising about those long legs and what I could do with them wrapped around my head. Not that I ever have a chance with a girl like Chloe. We were from different worlds.

The best I could do was give her a little life coaching on reality on the fun side of campus to go with her engineering tutoring. Honestly, if she was that damn good at tennis, and from the championship she most recently played that was splashed all over the school newspaper as well as ones further

afield, it was clear she was heading for a grand slam next year. I didn't understand why she was in engineering at all. I could bet my wisdom teeth she had a kick ass knowledge base in nutrition and sports medicine.

My ruminations took me to the end of the period. I packed up my things, having taken hardly any notes – Chloe Duke was such a delicious distraction – slung my laptop case across my chest and headed out the door, only to find the object of my morning's fantasy seated across the hall from my class door.

Her blonde head down, she scribbled in a notebook with a holographic cover that reflected a kaleidoscope of shapes doubled in blue light across the floor in front of her.

A brief smile crossed my face as I found myself standing next to her. Planting my butt against the wall, I slid down it until I rested next to her

“What are you doing?”

“Journaling.” Her words were muffled behind her ponytail that slipped forward to cover half of her face. On a whim, I reached out and tucked her hair back over her shoulder where it hung just below the middle of her back, bringing her out of her reverie. She looked at me, surprised. “Why did you do that?”

“I wanted to see your face.” I dropped my hand, and she nodded. The air between us fell heavy, pensive. “So, what are you doing?” I dug deep into my pocket and extracted a granola bar I started for breakfast hours ago.

She eyed me. “What about the beer?”

My Professor left the classroom I just vacated, ignoring us.

“Probably frowned upon,” I murmured, sinking a little deeper next to her. My thigh brushed hers, but she didn't move away.

“The ‘Rippton Way’,” Chloe said sarcastically.

“Privilege. Don't you love it?”

She made a face at me, a cute one. “Not as much as being led to the wrong class.” Her nose crinkled—cutely—and she poked her pretty pink tongue out at me. I wondered if it matched her pussy lips.

I roared with laughter. “How long did it take you to figure it out?”

“Maybe fifteen minutes.” Colour flared in her cheeks, and she stared straight down at whatever she was writing.

I reached out and tipped her chin up, so she had to look up at me instead. “Look, princess—”

Her gaze snapped up to my face. “I’m not a princess.”

My grin widened. “Yeah, and you were never Daddy’s favourite.”

Chloe paused to pull away from my touch. “My father died when I was six.”

“Shit. Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Her head went back down, and her ponytail followed.

“Do you do that every day?” I leaned over her shoulder, peering at the way she scrawled her words across the page but not really reading them. She cleared her throat and I peered closer. “Hey,” I protested. “I’m not that much of an asshole.”

“If you get more than a paragraph, trust me, tutor-boy, you are.”

“Girl, you want to pass your classes or not?”

“Do I? I don’t know.” She jerked her head, flicking her ponytail in my face. “Get off me, Nick,” she grumbled.

Just to prove I was a dick I slung an arm across her shoulders, tugging her into a one-armed hug. Chloe froze stiff, her face reddening. She sat perfectly still, like an ice statue, like she didn’t know what to do.

“Not happening. But we don’t have to study, if that’s not in you.” I sent her an easy grin I didn’t feel, and by the side eye she gave me, I failed fairly spectacularly at that too.

“Fine. You’re intolerable,” she muttered, shrugging my arm off, but I wasn’t budging. She huffed, rolling her eyes. “I’ll check with Elisse—my sister—about the days on my schedule.”

“That schedule.” I’d just found out about it and already I wanted to burn the fucking thing to ash and smear it on the sister’s face. “Anyway, mine is better.”

“Next you’ll be comparing dick sizes with her.”

“Potty mouth, haven’t you.” I cracked my neck, focusing away from her. The control her family or team had over her shit me right up that wall across from us.

“Have you really given up on me that easily?” She frowned—or rather, I could feel her frowning at me. Her notebook snapped shut over her pretty scrawl.

Rather like her.

Way too easy to read, Duke.

“So, you gonna come to this party with me?” I tapped the cover of her notebook, guessing she’d stowed my schedule in the front, or maybe the back. Or maybe she screwed it up and left it in the classroom I sent her to.”

More frowning.

“I don’t date.”

She stiffened again, just when I got her to relax and tried to pull away, but I closed my fingers gently around her shoulder and squeezed. “Answer the question first, Chloe.”

“We’re doing coaching, right?” She changed the subject, her attention shifting. I wasn’t the only one fixated on the opposite wall, though I suspected for different reasons. “I mean tutoring. We’re here for tutoring. In the morning, with beers and things.”

Her hands trembled as she threw her notebook into her sports bag and nearly missed. Chloe struggled with it for a minute before I caved, reaching across her, closing the zip firmly.

“You okay?”

She swivelled sharply, and her ponytail flew on the horizontal, hitting me in the face. Again. I really didn't mind. She could hit me with that thing any day.

Her eyes widened. “Whoops?”

“Yes. Yes, you did.” I watch her. “Library? Cafeteria? Bar?”

“What?” She rose, planting her hands on her hips, and looked at me like I was an annoyance or some curiosity she couldn't shake.

Her, on the other hand....

“Goddamn, you're cute.” Pushing myself up the wall, I held out a hand, noting the way the top of her head came up to my shoulder. *Fucking perfect.* “Why don't you choose the place, Chloe Duke? Show me where you like to study.”

Her lips pressed into a thin line. “I think that's the problem. I don't study—”

“Because you play tennis instead? Why are you doing engineering?”

“I—” She shut down.

Completely.

Her face paled, those soft pink lips whitened, and she looked away, like maybe she brought her dad back to life for a few scant moments.

“Chloe. Do you love it?” My question seemed to surprise her.

“What?”

“Do you love it? Engineering?”

“Um. Well. Sometimes. The concepts are interesting. I had the math skills and I suppose that's what I'm into.”

I nodded sagely. “Your mom manages you?”

She grimaced. “My sister. Said I need something to fall back on when my tennis career falls over.” She flashed me a

too-bright smile that didn't match her words at all.

“Not with those people skills,” I groused. *What kind of a sister gives advice like that?* Okay, so cultivating multiple career options was smart. But with the money and influence she had over ehrs years of tennis and whatever came from her family that let her attend Rippton U, she wouldn't be lacking in those any time soon. “Does your sister rate a paragraph in your journal too?”

Chloe laughed. “Oh, you have no idea.”

Holding my breath, and with no real reason why I did it, I reached out again and tentatively closed my hand around her fingers like human contact with this girl was an experiment I needed to test over and over, to make sure she was real.

This girl is an island.

The thought hit me out of left field, blindsiding me, but I knew without question the unexpected assessment was correct. Chloe was completely alone in the world. The girl who made headlines and newspapers, with a huge social media presence, coveted by every boy on campus, and probably most of the dirty ass pervert teachers Rippton tended to employ, simply didn't seem to have anyone.

“When was the last time you dated?”

“What, you couldn't find that out from my socials?”

Ouch. “Nope.” I threw her snark back at her.

“Fair enough.” Chloe wrapped her arms around her. “Maybe I'll go to that party,” she said suddenly. “Maybe...I'll even find you there.”

My heart slammed into my chest and I managed to not disgrace myself at those words. “Even though your coach told you not to go?”

She flashed me a tight grin and didn't answer.

Because behind those pretty blue eyes, there was a certain brand of crazy I recognised.

The sort of crazy that matched mine.

“She doesn’t date,” a sharp voice broke into the tension building between us.

Chloe went blank.

As though all emotion swirling across her face a moment before dampened down, her expression—the things that made her *her* that I’d seen in our two short meetings—it all disappeared.

I got the blandest version of Ice-Princess Chloe that the media had ever seen. The one who made front pages and did press interviews.

That’s not my version, Princess. And I’ll do anything to get you back.

Extract her from whatever personal hell she just devolved back into.

Her hand slipped from mine and she was back to being an island, a habit I got to break for her if only for a few seconds.

“Are you listening to me?” The same sharp voice banged on, but I only had eyes for one girl at the moment. From the way she mentioned her manager before, I had a good idea who just interrupted the best conversation I’d had with her so far.

“You’re the sister.” I said it flatly, more than borderline in the realm of rudeness, but the woman behind me didn’t even flinch when I shifted, facing her.

“Chloe. You skipped another class.”

Another one? She’s making a habit of this?

No wonder the girl was failing. Suddenly my previous assessment of her regarding course choices ripped straight down the middle.

Who are you really, Chloe Duke?

The girl I studied could have been a carbon copy of the one seated beside me, albeit with a harder edge. Her face was all angles and where Chloe’s slim body filled out just right in all the places that made my cock twitch in my pants, this girl looked like she hadn’t eaten a full meal in several years.

I glanced at Chloe, but she didn't seem any more likely to answer her sister than the sister who refused to acknowledge my presence standing smack between the two siblings.

"You must be the author of the infamous schedule." I rose, putting myself further between this angular fury and the girl who shut down so completely she could have been mistaken for an ice carving. "Nick Jessop."

The girl stepped around me as though I didn't exist. "Come on, Chloe." She clicked her tone *and* her fucking pincers of fingers like she was talking to a dog. "We don't have time for this. Plus you have a sesh with the trainer to work on your injury before coaching this afternoon."

Chloe nodded, unfreezing like the ice princess I no longer suspected her to be. "Yeah, 'kay. I'll be right there. Give me a sec." Her words came out stilted, like she hadn't used this persona for a while.

Glad I got to see the real you, Chloe Duke.

I pivoted in full on my heel, catching her eye. "We weren't done tutoring."

Chloe sent me a look that could have shrivelled cocks all across the eastern seaboard, had it not been for the flicker of fear behind those sea-blue eyes.

Like she was begging me not to get involved.

Like a fucking martyr.

Or a girl whose control had been stripped away, layer by layer, until she forgot what it was like to have any.

That's not happening on my watch.

Unsure how I fell into the toxic mess of her family politics so fast, I reached out, catching Chloe's hand again and tugging her forward so her weight fell gently against me. Her breath hitched, though she didn't push me away, those pretty aquamarine eyes that were wide as a scared little kitty a second ago fluttering beneath thick lashes. Surprise, perhaps, that I lifted her so easily, held her tight to me. Something there

that responded to me, with an awareness that shot to every extremity in my body.

“Are we done for now, Chloe?” I asked softly, making the conversation a private one, despite the jekyll of a sister huffing around us.

I blocked all that out, trailing my fingers along her spine to trace patterns at the nape of her neck. Soft hairs rose beneath my touch, and she gave me the perfect little shiver I appreciated enough to almost push her against the wall and kiss the shit out of her right in front of her unwelcome audience.

Looked like the infamous ice princess had a little crush. I could use that to both our benefits.

But as much as I wanted to act on every damn impulse firing across my synapses, I loosened my hold, letting her know all I fought for on her behalf was the ability for her to make a choice, not switch one gilded cage for another.

And I had no real idea why I was doing this for her.

My cock called me a liar. I ignored him too.

“I probably should go and do...things,” she murmured in the softest, sweetest voice that screwed royally with every one of my intentions on the spot.

I pulled her closer and hoped like hell I didn't scare the shit out of her, molding her to my body. “You need to relax, Chloe. Do something fun. You're strung so tight, you'll snap.”

“How the hell do you know that?” the unwelcome sister squawked from my side. “How does he know anything? Who is he, Chloe?”

Chloe worried her bottom lip between her teeth, the tip of her pink tongue running along the inside edge. I instantly imagined her doing that to my bare skin, hot, wet flesh on flesh, and bit back a groan. What started as fun was fast forming into an unhealthy obsession with a girl I wasn't entirely sure wanted what I did.

“Really? Come on, Chloe.” I rocked back on my heels as Chloe was torn in two directions at once.

“Nick,” she murmured, fisting my shirt in something akin to desperation.

I didn’t think it was tutoring we were talking about any longer.

“Go on.” I dropped my hands to my sides, my palms cold and empty. “There’s a party tonight. Kingsman house. Do you know where that is?”

Chloe shrugged, still worrying her lip. I reached out, hesitant, and rubbed my finger along the plumpness there. She stopped and stared at me, her lips parted. Everything in me wanted to push my thumb inside, demand she suck on it, but we weren’t there yet.

“I do,” the sister butted in.

“Good. Bring her with you tonight.” *And then you can fuck right off while Chloe lets off steam.*

“Felix won’t be happy. Come on.” She gripped Chloe’s arm in a one-sided frog march and led her away.

Chloe said nothing the whole time, looking over her shoulder more than once while I stood in the hallway alone, wondering what in the actual fuck just happened.

CHAPTER THREE

CHLOE

“You were really rude then,” I muttered.

Elisse stared straight ahead. “You don’t have time for distractions with the championship coming up.”

“I don’t have time for life.” I pulled my arm free. “He’s right.”

“Who? Math boy?” she sneered, her fine features pulling tight, leaving the lines of her mouth hard.

Is that what I look like when I’m an asshole?

“Huh?” Elisse stared at me, her nose wrinkled. “Who’s an asshole?”

Fuck it. I fought a grin. Nick would be proud. “I’ll go tonight. Where’s the Kingsman house?”

Still blinking like she wasn’t sure what to do with the odd wild creature I transformed into, Elisse shook her head. “How can you be two years into Rippton and not know? You’re a mess,” she informed me, still gripping my elbow tight.

“Because you stopped me from going to anything. It became a habit.”

My routine was the same every single day, even on Sundays. I didn’t remember what a sleep in was, let alone a date, and I’d never had a boy sleepover. The only boyfriend I ever had was a brief fling in my senior year that involved wet kisses, bad virginal sex on both sides, and a tainted feeling once I realized he was also sharing the experience with a cheerleader with fake tits.

“You should fight back then,” Elisse eyed me, surprise widening her eyes as much as her botox habit would allow. “Don’t let me walk all over you.”

I stopped in my tracks “Fine. Then we’re going tonight.”

“He told me to bring you,” she immediately objected.

I didn't have the energy left to be offended, or even laugh at her. "Do whatever you want. I'll do me. You, you. Deal?"

"Deal," my sister said cautiously. "When's coaching?"

"A few hours." I didn't need to check my watch, but I did test my ankle with a harder step. It still ached a little, but more like a bruise than an impending tear. So, I could strap it. I'd be there on time like I always did. Then...

A light shiver worked its way along my belly and around my back, lingering where Nick touched me. The underlying strength in his arms, the way he pulled me into him, the muscle under his shirt—it turned out my first impression of my engineering tutor missed a *lot*.

Part of me—a big part—wanted to peel that shirt away and discover what was underneath.

"Earth to Chloe. Hell, girl. One boy shows a spark of interest and your focus is all screwed up. This is why—"

"I don't date," I finished wearily for her. *And whose fault is that?* But if that was the game we were playing, the fault—*ha, pun not intended*—lay squarely with me. Because like both Elisse and Nick pointed out so bluntly, I was a pushover.

Because I have goals.

Yeah, goals that allowed me to hide from the world and focus on the one thing I cared about, at the cost of my social life. Everyone seemed to think I was either an ice princess with a stick up my ass, courtesy of my sister's profile building on social media and my hermiting tendencies, or that I lived the high life on my parents' money and my own.

I hadn't touched my bank account apart from groceries in an age, or the annual tithe required by Rippton that came from my personal funds, just like every other student at the exclusive university. Oh, and when sand from one of the old courts invaded my phone, and clogged its ability to charge. My clothes were provided from the brands who sponsored me. Normal stuff for my industry, and for any of the Allstars who pushed their sporting career at Rippton.

What Elisse casually avoided was that I didn't date because no one ever asked me out.

Was that what just happened? With as much experience in college socialising language beneath my racket as a first year on orientation week, there was no way I wasn't attending that party.

My patience for my sister depleted, I did want to do exactly what she accused me of and daydreamed about Nick Jessop.

"Ugh, you're exhausting," Elisse groaned, tossing her pale blonde hair over her shoulder. "Fine. If we're going to the party, then you need to go shopping. Or..." A wicked grin curled the corners of her lips. "I might have something that will suit you. Come on."

"I thought I had training and classes and..." I trailed off as her grin turned manic, and groaned. "I know that look."

"Yeah, cause it mirrors yours every time you decide to go for a big game or whatever." She flicked a hand in my direction, dismissing my spiking anxiety. *Maybe this was a really shitty decision.* "And I've been remiss. You should have a full college education, Chloe. Let's make this party a big one. I'll message Felix." Her eyes practically glowed as she replanned my afternoon.

My mouth dropped open. "You. Will. Call. Felix?" Death would be preferable to a cancelled coaching session.

But Elisse was already on the phone. "Yes, and tomorrow's too. She'll be fine, Felix. Chloe needs to ice that ankle, that's all. Yup. Okay, see you later." She hung up and grinned smugly at me. "Mission accomplished."

"I have no idea what you just did," I said in a hushed voice. "You lied to *Felix*."

She shrugged. "Wouldn't be the first time. So, let's go. It'll take me the afternoon to do your hair and your make up."

"It will?" I tugged at my pony tail. "I usually just brush it before events."

“Like tennis presentations?” She raised both eyebrows, a feat in itself. “You might be gorgeous on a shot during a game and even after when you’re all sweaty, but sister, this will not be enough for a Kingsman party. They may as well be the only frat on campus.”

“Oh.” I trotted at her side, feeling like a puppy put through its paces. “How do you know all this?”

“Remember Barclay?”

I scrunched my nose. “The lord?”

The pompous young man who couldn’t deal with sunlight of any degree and liked his tea with more sugar than water came to mind. Mom loved him, but I also remembered their breakup wasn’t so friendly.

“Marquess.” Elisse waved my mistake aside. “He’s a Kingsman. So are the Allstars.”

Those I did know, mostly because presentation nights include the other varsity ice hockey, swim, and lacrosse teams. Most of the boys seemed nice enough, though they all drank a lot and Felix usually extracted me fairly fast during social events. And who would argue with my orange, mountain of a coach-cum-security guard?

“Oh. I liked them,” I said tentatively.

Elisse snorted derisively. “That’s because you don’t *know* them. They’re all over privileged assholes. Now, blue or green?”

“Blue,” I said automatically without realising why she was asking, distracted by her insult. If she thought the frat house boys were over privileged, what, exactly, did that make us?

I worried my bottom lip and remembered how Nick touched me there too. My heart strained a little painfully, leaving my gasping as we crossed the commons and headed up to our shared dorm. I didn’t get assigned a housemate like everyone else; instead, I got my sister. Felix was housed in nearby accommodations too. My team, all the time.

Sometimes, I forget how to breathe.

Nick changed that in one short morning.

As annoying as I found him at first, the engineering boy had some playful characteristics. It didn't surprise me that he tried to get a rise out of me when we first met. I knew the rumours of how untouchable I was, the same ones Elisse bolstered with my constantly pushed single status, declaring that I never dated.

Maybe that really needed to change.

“Dress,” Elisse said cryptically. “For the party.”

“Yeah?” I ventured as she shoved our door open and slammed it shut behind her. “Um, about my classes. I am supposed to attend.”

She turned on her heel to face me. “You weren't attending anything but that boy's ego this morning.”

My cheeks heated. “So?”

“So?” she shot back at me. “What happened to *I don't date*? How long has this been going on exactly?” she demanded, her hands on her almost non-existent hips.

“Uh, not long.” *An hour or two.* But she'd tear me apart if I let on to that. Something niggled me and it took me a frozen second to nail it. “Why the change in attitude? And how did you know about my ankle?”

Elisse wagged her phone over her head and wandered into her bedroom. “Felix and Felix,” she called, disappearing from view and leaving me standing in the middle of our enormous living area.

“Fair enough,” I muttered, flopping on the nearest sofa.

The apartment we shared took up nearly an entire corner of the large square towers that flagged the extremities of Rippton U land, with the sporting grounds set closer to the centre. I didn't mind the fifteen minute walk twice a day as it gave me a chance to get my head into whatever I was supposed to be doing, and out of what I just finished.

Having nothing to do was...unusual.

I fidgeted on the sofa for a minute, wondering if I could have my lunch early before Elisse emerged from her room, her arms full of various shades of blue.

“You look like a mermaid in uh—” Some of the material flopped to the floor, while another dress slithered from the top, wrapping around her throat.

“Help,” she rasped through a giggle.

“Oh, God. What have you done?” I snickered, unwinding dress after dress. “You know there’s only two of us. And I don’t think it’s cool any more to go in matching costumes.”

Elisse rolled her eyes and fluffed her hair. “And... claustrophobia healed. No, you’re not that out of date. I hated those outfits Mom used to make us wear,” she said absently.

I clenched my phone in my hand, turning it so my sister wouldn’t see the old photo I set as my screensaver. “I loved those,” I whispered, only loud enough for myself to hear.

Fortunately, Elisse didn’t notice. “Okay, let’s not go with dark blue near that hair. You’ll look like you’re going to a formal event, not a college party, and not the velvet. You’ll never get the beer stains out.”

I blinked. “The what?”

“Oh, the amount of fluids we get on these dresses! How about...your eyes or your hair?” She held up two dresses, both blindingly bright and covered in glitter, sequins and beads. “Peacock or the beachy blue?” She fluttered an aqua dress that looked like it was made of PVC and didn’t move with her hand at all, its hem so short I didn’t think it would cover my vagina. The other was an outrageous conglomerate of sequined feathers, its sweetheart neckline plunging low, but its deep navy hem slightly longer than the other offering.

I looked longingly at the pile she already discarded. “What about those?” I said hopefully.

“Nuh-uh. My clothes, my choice. These ones. Pick,” she said, narrowing her eyes.

“Ah, the peacock,” I said weakly and closed my eyes, sensing disaster in the offing.

The dress was draped gently over my lap and Elisse surprised me with a kiss on my forehead. “You will be beautiful and no one will be able to keep their eyes off you. Promise,” she murmured, tousling my pony tail and unwinding the band.

“No, because they’ll be blinded,” I muttered. “Can’t I just go in jeans and a black top?”

“No, sweetie. Not for the Kingsman.” She paused and twisted one strand. “I could braid it, but you’re so gorgeous with it out, you lucky bitch,” she said with a tinge of envy.

“Like your hair isn’t stunning, or you.” I flapped a hand over my head. “Stop poking me.”

Elisse ignored me. “The Kingsman household is made up of thirty of the top sports people—females aside of course—a rock star, at least two royals, and the wealthiest, most powerful families on campus. The regular rules don’t apply to them. Not the sort everyone else lives by, anyway.”

“Must be nice,” I grumbled. “If they have no rules, why are you giving me more? I’ll sink under the weight of rules and schedules one day.” And expectations. But then some of those I tended to put on myself.

“You will be stunning. I’ll float along behind you and bask in your feathery glow. Bathroom. Come on.”

“Be careful you don’t get burned. Isn’t there like eight hours ‘til the party? Shouldn’t we eat?” I didn’t really want to be in the dress for any longer than absolutely necessary.

“It will take that long to make everything work. We can snack later.”

Spoilers: that snack? Yeah. It never happened.

Tequila did though, thankfully after Elisse was done primping and priming me like a prized poodle.

Finally, she declared me ready and made up lime shots. “Bottoms up, baby,” she cried on her third, while I finished

curling the ends of her hair.

“Gorgeous, Sissy,” I said, smiling for the first time in what felt like forever. My face barely moved, or at least it felt like that, beneath the millions of layers of makeup. I swore I’d never complain about the greasiness of sunscreen ever again.

“I know, right?” She twirled in the PVC dress I rejected, claiming spilled drinks would roll right off. The dress still didn’t move and, on her, it did actually cover the important bits.

I tugged at the hem of my dress, making sure it didn’t creep up my butt cheeks. “This is too short. Could I wrap a scarf around my waist?” I begged, suddenly regretting the impulse to go to the party.

I could see Nick any day of the week and write about him in my journal. Maybe even something nice. Nope, tonight was a really poor decision and I knew I was going to regret the impulse.

Stick to the schedule.

Maybe there was a reason I had rules. Maybe I shouldn’t be doing these things. Tennis came first. Maybe...

A new shot of tequila was pushed into my face. “You’re beautiful. And your odd little engineering friend will think so too,” she promised.

“Nick.” I tugged at the hem again.

“Leave it. He’ll love it,” she said dismissively. “Now, bottom’s up and let’s go!”

“Already?” Alarm fluttered in no woman’s land between my chest and my stomach. “It can’t be time.” For all the hours it took to apparently be worthy of getting ready for a Kingsman party, I suddenly was loath to leave the dorm. “Let’s stay in. Take selfies and pretend we did.”

“You don’t want to disappoint your friend. Anyway, we have people to impress.”

The only thing I wanted to leave an impression on was my pillow.

“Alright...” I nibbled my bottom lip, remembering Nick’s touch and downed the tequila, proud when I didn’t come up spluttering with the after effects of shots, like death.

“Much better,” Elisse approved. “Let’s party until the sun rises.”

“At least the bird on my dress will glitter better then.”

Laughing as though my not-funny joke was the best thing she ever heard, my sister’s hyena sounds followed us out of the dorm and along the pathway.

I couldn’t help the pit of foreboding that danced with the tequila in my belly with every step.

CHAPTER FOUR

NICK

I couldn't shake the feel of Chloe Duke from my hands. No matter how I tried to distract myself for the next hours, the shape of her was seared into my palms.

"Stop moping and fucking lift, brother." Barclay Augustus Chesterfield, the marquess of some godforsaken corner of the British Isles with lands in France to match his pale complexion and mop of floppy brown hair grunted from the other end of the massive, solid oak table to pair of us attempted to shift from room to room.

"Surely someone else could have been about to help." I strained my arms but the damn thing barely left the ground.

"Wimp."

"Bitch boy."

"Fuck me, you two are a pair of toddlers. Put some muscle into it." Beau Bennett, the captain of the lacrosse team and head of the Kingsman frat folded his arms over his chest and watched us with the slightest derisive hint of curled lips. "Let's see you sweat."

This last was aimed thankfully at Barclay, not me. "Yes, sir," Barclay sniped.

I signed. "You're never gonna fucking learn, are you?" I shook my head. "If you had any intention of getting laid tonight, you know Bennett's gonna screw it first just for shits and giggles."

"Well, a good orgasm and moans at least. Wasn't there some uppity bitch you were pining over?" Beau's dark gaze grew a little feral as he zeroed in on Barclay, pushing away from the wall and stepping forward. "Or three."

We managed to drag the table across the room and a few of the ice hockey boys helped move it into a room we could lock.

"Jesus. Exercise is for the old. Or something like that." Barclay gasped, clutching his chest, though I wasn't sure how

much was theatrics, and how much was actual pain. “Why are we moving this again?”

“Because last time one of the star cheerleaders had a threesome on it. About where your head is right now.” Napoleon ‘Crush’ Lancaster, captain of the ice hockey team, leaned over to flick Barclay’s forehead.

“Shit.” The marquess moved faster than I gave him credit for.

“Damn, man.” I patted his back. “Who knew you had it in you?”

“Fuck off.” But there was no vehemence in his words. “Got a beer?” This last was directed at Beau, who raided the nearest fridge and tossed bottles to each of us.

“Thanks, man.” I nodded gratefully, intent not to get wasted as I wanted to remember every second of tonight, planning to torture both Chloe and myself with light touches, dark words to leave her on edge, and maybe steal a hard kiss from her by the end of the night.

My cock objected to that idea, but there was no way I wanted to scare off the girl who slid through my bloodstream like she always belonged there.

“You are moping.” Beau settled next to me, cracking his own beer and perching his ass on the French polished table we just moved.

I might have objected, but fuck it. Moving the thing and dealing with frat house politics wore me down too fast.

“And?” I sipped my beer, knowing I couldn’t get away from the fucker until he’d had his say.

“What’s her name?” Beau asked casually.

“Who said she has a name?” I grinned at him gamely.

He’d find out later tonight when I was all the fuck over her—if she even turned up. I had doubts she wouldn’t change her mind last minute—but for now I wanted to keep my newest obsession to myself.

“Chloe Duke.” Barclay shot me a shit eating grin and disappeared with half the hockey team in tow.

Fucker.

“Enjoy our team orgy, sweetheart,” I called after him, flipping the bird at his back.

Beau let out an appreciative chuckle. “Good to see you got balls.”

“Because I can shoot shit when the occasion calls for it?”

“Because you didn’t back down from me.”

Ah.

“You’re not the most comfortable person,” I said honestly. Hell, in for a penny or a pound, as long as I got my girl.

Fuck me, I was moping. I groaned, rubbing a hand through my hair.

“Just figured out I’m right, did you?” he sounded amused.

I sneaked a glance sideways. “Maybe?” I considered. Beau was in his third year with one more to go, studying medicine. He knew more about the campus secrets than anyone else, and ruled the Kingsman like they were his royal subjects in his own kingdom. “You know much about her?”

“I know she’s focused, never loses, and doesn’t play with anyone off the court.” He canted his head to one side. “If you get her through those doors, I’ll find you a better dorm buddy than Barclay.”

“No deal. Barclay might be a wanker—” I was picking up his British insults “—but he doesn’t snore or fuck when I’m around. He’s not so bad.”

“Damn, right when you impressed me.” Beau sent me a crooked grin. “I know she’s a sucker for dark chocolate, and she and her sister aren’t on great terms. Anything more detailed, ask your roommate. He knows the ins and outs of their family politics.”

“Noted.” I finished my beer in a long pull and headed for the kitchen, looking over my shoulder at him and held out a

hand.

“Are you asking me to fucking dance? Put that down.” He waved a dismissive hand.

I flicked my fingers impatiently. “Are you done with your drink, bitch? ’Cause I’m not your fucking maid.”

Beau cracked a full smile, a rarity, and tossed me the mostly empty beer. “It’s yours. Stop being nice and don’t fuck around with Chloe.”

My eyes narrowed. *I knew there was more to it.* “Why?”

“Because she’s my cousin, and you don’t fuck with my family.”

Oh joy.

“Duly noted. But I’ll still fuck around with her.” I mirrored his crooked grin from earlier and headed back to my room in search of Barclay.

A few extra tidbits of information never went astray.

Two beers, some shitty conversation later, and having my ass groped a half dozen times and I still didn’t know where Chloe was. Taking up residence in a hallway where I could watch the door—unless her sister brought her in via the back—I was ten minutes away from begging for the sister’s number from Barclay. Asking Beau was out of the question.

A favor like that I’d hold in reserve for a very rainy day, because Beau Bennett’s deals were the lifetime in hell sort with a toll that looked easy to repay until it wasn’t.

Music pulsed around us in a hedonistic beat that thrummed through every person in the Kingsman House, unravelling desires. In the main house living area, Beau sat with one girl perched on his lap, her generous tits out in the air, her skirt flicked up for a full display at either side. She pulled his shirt open, playing with his bare skin beneath. Another was on her knees between Beau’s legs, licking, and sucking at each of them, alternatively. Barclay stood in the shadows at the back

of the room, a deep scowl decorating his usually easy going face, his drink untouched by his side.

There was some unhealthy rivalry going on right there.

I grinned, knowing he was intent on writing himself off with alcohol, while his revenge could wait until after the party. Either way, I couldn't see a friendship bonding there.

My gaze fitted around the room. Most of the Allstar boys were flirting with cheerleaders who looked fake, or bored, or a bit of both.

And Chloe still wasn't here.

Barclay caught my eye, checking his head towards the doorways. My attention waned just in time to see the sparkling vision of a glittery girl who looks stunning in the sea of blues and greens to match her aquamarine eyes. Chloe's long, tanned legs were tucked into a peacock blue minidress with a slit at one side that flashed her skin enticingly with every step. The rest of the glittering peacock dress curved around her body like a sheath, dipping between her breasts and curving over her bare shoulders. I instantly craved her body in my hands, and to kiss her senseless.

I tipped my head back against the wall, watching but not making a move towards her, needing to drink the feelings that swamped me just looking at her.

My God, I'm so fucked.

And the beer had nothing to do with it. I put the empty bottle beside me as her sister followed her in, wearing what looked like a latex dress, glossed and complete with full-length gloves to her arms, all in some sort of pale blue. The ensemble could've looked cheap, but somehow it didn't, complimenting her curves...or the lack of them. Not my taste, but when I shifted my attention briefly to Barclay, the boy was drooling a puddle at his own feet.

I lifted a shoulder, as if to say, *What can you do?* He took my advice without another word, striding across the room without so much as a glance in Beau's direction, and slipped in

between the sisters, wrapping a possessive arm around Elisse, whispering something in her ear.

Who knew what he said, but it was enough to free up Chloe from her sister's clutches, the only girl I wanted to breathe in tonight.

Any fucking night.

Chloe's hair draped around her shoulders and glossy golden waves. My palms itched as I pushed away from the wall, making my way through the crowd towards her. She stopped just inside the doorway, her widened eyes taking in everything and seeking out something.

I slipped between party guests, managing not to wear beer that slopped over the side of red plastic cups and splattered the floor beside me instead. When I was within arm's-length of her, I reached out, brushing my knuckles from her shoulder to her wrist in an undeniably intimate gesture.

Chloe jumped like I bruised her, rubbing her arm with her other hand wobbling on her heels a little.

"Not used to anything other than trainers?" I grinned.

She stared at me, her lips parting on a breath I needed to steal from her. "Nick."

"Did you have another date for the party night?"

"Is that what this is?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Let's see what happens?"

She nodded, taking the hand I extended without objection, curling her fingers around mine.

A blinding flash went off in my face, and I blinked, feeling, rather like a fish in a fishbowl, unsure what happened on the other side. "The fuck?"

"Oh."

My vision cleared to find a plastic version of Chloe still clinging to me, staring off to one side, a fake as fuck smile fixed on her face I recognise from her socials, and when she dealt with any threatening situations, like with her sister.

This wasn't anything so simple.

Then the lightbulb-flash-went off in my head and it all clicked. *Shit*. Media. I hadn't even thought of that, and from the look of the girl with more cameras hung around her body than one person should ever possess, this wasn't the local school paper level feature we were talking.

Fortunately, she wasn't the only celebrity in the house, and we had processes in place.

"Kingsman rules." I stepped in front of Chloe, sliding a hand around her waist and holding her to my back. Trembling palms pressed to my shoulder blades, the heat of her searing me through the fine cotton. "No paparazzi. No media. Get the fuck out of here and don't come back."

The girl with the cameras tried to dodge around me. "Beau said—"

I shook my head and barred my teeth. "I don't give a fuck what Bennett said. Get the fuck out, or I'll throw you out on your ass." I pointed at a sign tacked to the house's front door with exactly those rules listed verbatim. *No media at parties*. Feeling rather like Bilbo Baggins, I found Barclay, and gave him a side glance. "We have an insurgent."

Barclay grinned. "My favourite sort." We grabbed an arm making sure not to leave marks – more Kingsman rules, and ones we were all well trained in – escorted the girl out the door.

Another flash went off behind me.

Barclay glanced over his shoulder and froze. "Fuck. She's claustrophobic."

I twisted back to see Chloe pinned against the wall by either three fans or more media, all jabbering in her face. One scribbled everything in a cheap notebook writing down everything she said or tried to say in a frantic bid to escape, another recording on her phone.

Wide eyes met mine, and her panic transferred across the ten feet distance between us that may as well have been a world ending chasm.

“Shit. I didn’t know that.” I had no idea what anything about Chloe’s life was like, apart from what I gleaned from my research and this morning.

No wonder she fucking stays at home if this is what happens.

“You got this?” I threw the comment at Barclay, not waiting for his answer before I took off back across the room, barreling my way through to Chloe and wrapping my body protectively around her. “You can all fuck off. And feel free to quote me any time.” I scanned the room for frat pledges, and jerked my shoulder towards the door. “Follow Barclay with these guys. He knows what to do.”

Three eager heads nodded as one, herding Chloe’s aggressive little fanclub out the door.

Relaxing a little as the threat dispersed, I loosened my papa-bear stance over her and wound an arm around her waist. A pledge got me two beers from the nearest bar fridge, leaving my hands free for a second to pull her close.

“That’s not what I meant to give you as an intro to a Kingsman party, Princess.” I nuzzled her hair, breathing her in. *Fuck, I’ll never forget what she feels like in my arms right now.* All sweet curves, feminine scents and a sharp tang of tequila and lime. A dumbass grin worked its way along my face until I realized she was still frozen. Not ever shaking. *Double fuck.* “Do you want to go somewhere quieter?”

Chloe started and looked up at me. “Will we be alone?” she whispered.

It wasn’t what I’d had in mind, encouraging her to hang out at a frat party, but hell, any port in a storm, because the rules changed.

“Only if you want to be.”

She shrugged, accepting the beer a pledge put into her hand, the star-struck idiot almost bowing at the waist as he presented her drink. She took it with a bemused expression, leaning a little more into me. “Lead on.”

“That’s my girl.” I kissed her temple, inhaling the sunlight and salty scent of her that wound its way through my mind like a drug.

Dropping her waist in favour of claiming her hand, I led Chloe through the kitchen and up the back stairs that were already cluttered with people making out and more. She let out a soft gasp as we passed a girl coming on one of the pledge’s fingers, her moans filling the hall above.

I pulled her a little closer. “Stick with me, honey.” I didn’t hear her whispered reply but she gave me no resistance as I turned left up the stairs, and along the row of bedrooms, pushing open the door to the first one. “Here.”

“And you’re... taking me to a random’s bedroom.” She looked at me, a flicker of betrayal in her eyes. “I didn’t let my sister poke me for eight hours to be fucked in some random fratwhore’s bed, Nick.”

“Is that what you want?” Releasing her hand, I placed the beers I took from her on the desk nearest the door. “To be fucked?”

“Isn’t that part of the college experience?” She lifted those bedroom eyes to fix on my face, her lashes fluttering slightly above sweet, soft, pink lips. My mind told me this wasn’t what she planned tonight.

Good.

Neither had I.

“I mean, if you want, but it’s not some random’s room.”

“What?” She let out a sharp laugh and picked up the beer I opened for her, tossing it back in one go. I raised an eyebrow and got her signature shrug for my efforts. “Just because I don’t party doesn’t mean I don’t know how to, Nick.”

“Do you know everyone who lives here?” I took the beer from her lips, taking a sip, and placed it back on the desk. Turning to her, I dropped my hands to her waist, walking her slowly backwards until her shoulder blades pressed against the door’s cold, unyielding surface. “I know this room.” I pressed

a palm to the door on either side of her head, caging her in. “Because it’s mine, Chloe. Not some random’s. Mine.”

She stayed silent for a moment, mulling it over and peeked up at me. “You’re a Kingsman.”

“Yeah.” I held her gaze for a tense second where her lips parted, but nothing came out except her sweet scent tinted with the sharp sting of lime. I breathed her in slowly, savouring every heady second. “So, you want to get fucked in my room?” I raked my gaze over her, daring her to take me on.

Because I could barely keep my hands to myself around her.

Her head tilted back, her eyes blazing. “If that’s what you want.”

Defiance radiated from her, and I saw what made her a champion in that moment. I’d been wrong about Chloe being a spoiled brat, about having an easy run at life and so many other things. She was strong, stronger than anyone I knew, pushing through insurmountable odds. It had just taken someone else’s perspective outside her team to show her what was missing outside that life of an elite athlete.

I should know. I have shared a house with twenty-six of the fuckers.

A blush worked its way along her cheeks at her words. I closed my hands into fists against the door, leaning on my knuckles. Pain radiated through my fingers into the backs of my hands, giving me what I needed to be able to think around her.

“If that’s what I want? Fuck, Chloe.” I bared my teeth, leaning close enough to inhale her sweet breath. “Because a fuck is all you’ll get out of me if this is how you play, Princess. Tell me. What You. Want.”

Chloe stared at me for a long, breathless moment. When she blinked slowly, I thought it was a prelude to her bolting.

“I thought you promised me a party?” she whispered, rising on her toes, gliding her mouth across mine in the barest kiss.

God above. Tiny flashes broke into the darkest corners of my vision, the music downstairs pumping through the house like its own heartbeat as I stared at her, watching the tightly wound girl before me unravel.

“Tell me you want this. Your decision,” I warned her, seconds from fisting her hair and fucking her against the door.

Her soft laugh fizzed between us as her lips found my ear, grazing my skin as she spoke. “I want you to fuck me in your room, Nick Jessop.” She eased back, every inch of her trembling so hard I felt it through the door.

Then her pink lips parted, the tip of her tongue emerging to slide across my bottom lip, and I was fucking done. Dropping both hands to her hips, I pressed myself roughly against her body, hiking the sequined material to catch her round ass cheeks and lifted her onto my hips, all in one movement. My mouth crushed against hers as I ground into her, fluctuating between claiming her mouth and doing whatever it took to slam my cock against her perfect little body.

Her hands laced behind my neck as she opened to me. The tip of her tongue teased mine as I drove into her mouth over and over, tasting her, opening her, doing everything I needed to devour her.

Soft little cries filled my ears as I squeezed her body hard enough to leave marks on her body tomorrow, grinding shamelessly into her. Finally, my senses returned around the time I ran out of air. I broke back from the kiss.

“This isn’t what I intended for you tonight,” I groaned against her mouth, savouring the sharp taste of the lime and tequila she had before the party mixed with a pure sunshine that radiated from her very pores. “I planned to dance with you, tease the every living fuck out of both of us, and maybe kiss you at the end of the night, ask you to stay or walk you home. I wasn’t gonna do this.” I drew a breath. “And I have no idea how to go fucking slow.”

Panting a little, she wiggled her body impossibly closer, tugging the buttons on my shirt until it hung open and pressed her hands to my chest. “Are you going to stop?”

Her breath kissed my lips as I pistoned my hips against hers. “Fuck, no. Unless you tell me to.”

“I won’t.”

Greenlight given, my brain switched off. I worked my mouth against hers slower this time, savouring every taste. My fingers pushed between us, stroking her wet and ready little pussy over her thong. I traced its path between the cleft of her ass there too, memorizing every one of her moans, knowing where I wanted to tease her, learning what made her gush into my palm.

Fumbling in my desk drawer, I found the box I was looking for and ripped it open one-handed. Tearing the foil packet, I kissed her again, brusing our mouths as she resounded to me so fucking beautifully, I never wanted to stop. This time would be frantic, a desperate bid to work our bodies closer together. Every session after I could make it up to her, needing to wring as many orgasms as I could from her strong mind and body.

My knees pressed to the wall, I raked my fingers over my zip but she reached out, helping me work my cock free until the thick length was heavy in her hand. She gripped me in a gentle touch that sent shivers cascading along my spine.

“Spit, honey,” I murmured, breaking our kisses enough to lean back and watch her work me with her hand.

Her eyes flicked up to meet mine, then she dribbled a long stream of drool onto my cock, working the slickness along my skin. I groaned, leaning my weight harder into her so she wouldn’t fall as she peeled the wrapper over me, stroking my length and pushing her slim fingers deeper to cup my balls. When she rolled them in her fingers, I lost the ability to form sentences.

“Chloe...”

Her soft little giggle broke my cock/brain fog. Pinning her wrists above her head with one hand, I pushed the other between us, stroking her pussy through her silky little thong until her dampness coated the material. I pushed the lace aside

with two fingers, lining myself up with her hole and drew back to watch her face. “I want to see this for the first time.”

Her mouth made a beautiful shape as I slid all the way in right until my balls tapped her perfectly round ass cheeks. Chloe’s head sank back, and she released a hollow sort of scream, both breathless and needy.

I had lied to her. It wasn’t that I had no idea how to go slow, just...not with her, right now. So I fucked the only way I knew, hard and fast and rough and until I ached with her.

And she ached for me.

CHAPTER FIVE

CHLOE

Nick was right. He fucked hard and rough, and hell, was it everything I ever wanted sex to be. The man fucking me against his bedroom door was the sort I always dreamed about but never acted on. The one who knew what he wanted, and took it, but still somehow managed to be some level of sex god previously unknown.

I could be addicted to Nick Jessop.

Or at least his dick.

No, he stood up for me this morning, showed me something I hadn't seen about myself. That was this morning? In the space of a day he reorganised my tightly scheduled life and gave me a window into how things could—*should*—be.

And I loved every second of it.

His mouth crashed over mine again, his kiss a frenzy of need and domination, demanding I open for him. I did exactly that, my body clenching with every thrust of his tongue into my mouth that matched the pace he set with his dick, pulling him tighter, closer so every inch of skin pressed on skin. Sweat built between us as our tongues tangled, sliding and dancing, fighting and duelling.

My pussy tightened, bearing down on him as I came hard, the pleasure ripped from me as I sank bonelessly against the wall.

Nick slowed for a full second, still moving slowly with me as his kisses gentled. “That’s one, honey. I promise you’ll see stars tonight, a whole lot of those fuckers when I’m through with you. Tomorrow too, yeah?” His liquid gaze found and held mine.

A dark sort of promise welled there, one I struggled to interpret.

“You want...more than this?” I gasped as he sped up again, railing me against the door, its hard surface digging into my back.

“I want you,” he growled, kissing me punishingly hard, nipping my bottom lip. “I want to suck on this mouth every time I see you chew that lip, push you down and wrap your tongue around my cock.” He groaned at the visual we shared. “Jesus, you like dirty talk, huh? This pussy is so fucking hot you’re burning my cock.”

I whimpered, clinging to him as he licked and sucked a path along my throat, pushing my hair aside. “Nick, I’m going to—”

“Come for me. Again, until you can’t talk, can’t walk, Chloe. I promise you, you’re mine now, and I’ll look after you.”

I shuddered, shocked at the fierce possessiveness in his voice. His fingers squeezed my ass cheeks, spreading me wider as he pummelled me. Tomorrow I would struggle to walk, knowing I’d be bruised from his sort of violent fucking that unleashed something deep within me. A cry ripped from my throat as I came again, as he promised.

Nick slammed deeper, until I was a whimpering mess, returning his frenzied, endless energy with soft kisses when I couldn’t keep up with him. For the first time in my life, I found someone who could match the well within me that almost seemed overflowing but he didn’t stop, not even when I ran to empty, holding my body in his arms and ravaging us both.

His roar over my head set me off again though I could swear I couldn’t come any more again ever, my body clenching tight. Heat gushed down my thighs, and I buried my head in his shoulder, sobbing out the remnants of the painful sort of pleasure he brought on.

The sort I loved.

When he wrapped his arms around me, carrying me to his bed and set me gently down, I let him undo my dress, barely managing to wriggle free as sleep claimed me, my hands and legs still trembling with the aftershocks of what he did.

He slid in beside me, trailing his fingers along my body, tucking my damp hair behind my ears as he tucked me against him. “You’re so fucking beautiful, Chloe. Sleep, Princess. You’re gonna need it.”

I grinned, trying to tell him that I was glad coaching was cancelled for tomorrow, but my mouth wouldn’t move, and I sank into a sleep filled with hard, rough hands and the hot mouth of a man who set my entire soul alight.

I woke up eye to eye with a bear wearing three jagged scars and a dry mouth that tasted like old beer. When I turned my head, the bear flattened and my stomach lurched.

“Ugh.”

“You need water, Princess?” Nick’s voice rumbled above me.

“God, yes please,” I muttered, still eyeing the bear tattooed to his chest. The scars ripped across its back, way too big for the image that covered most of his abdomen in black. When I trailed my fingers across the claw marks splitting the bear open, I encountered hard ridges. “Holy shit. Those scars are yours.”

“Yeah.” Nick tensed at my touch. “They’re real.”

“I thought the bear was, and nearly girlie screamed,” I confessed, hoping to bring him back to that easy side of him I saw before last night.

And last night...oh, my a-dick-tion. Or dick-a-thon. Either way, I wanted more.

My thighs ached, my pussy felt puffy, and a blanket of bliss and whiskey scented male was draped over me. I snuggled in deeper until something nudged the top of my head.

“Princess? Water, remember?”

I blinked, sitting up and the room swam through bleary eyes. Nick’s room, at least so he said last night. “You’re a Kingsman.” I took the Rippton U blue and white water bottle

from him and slugged it back like a camel. Probably with the grace of one, too.

“Yeah.”

“Is that all you’re going to say, or are you not a morning person?” I tilted my head to look at him, running my spare hand over my hair that puffed around me like a bird’s nest, or an impromptu cloud. “Jesus.”

“Stop it,” he said gently, taking the water bottle back and catching my hands. “You look beautiful, Chloe. So fucking gorgeous. Don’t you dare change a thing.” I let him ease me back to his chest where I traced the edges of the ink and avoided his scars, not wanting to upset him again.

“I probably look like a panda,” I said, trying not to rub my eyes. “I’m shattered.”

“I’m not surprised. We went long and hard last night.” He swept a hand along my spine, pulling me tight to him in a possessive grip I swore spoke to my soul.

“We did.” I pressed a hand gingerly between my legs. The flesh there was tender and bruised by his touch but no other damage was done. Surprising, as I didn’t think I’d ever been treated so roughly in my life.

And I loved it.

“You okay?” Nick caught my chin and tilted my head back, searching my eyes for something before he swooped in and kissed me hard.

My hand fell away from my legs and I moaned embarrassingly loud. “Do that again?” I whispered.

“Yes, ma’am.” His eyes darkened and he kissed the hell out of me, replacing the taste in my mouth with the masculine one of him. Nick broke the kiss and I mewled my protest, reaching for him, but like before he caught my hands and placed them gently by my sides. “Not just yet. I wanna make sure you’re okay from last night.” He slithered down my body, nudging my aching legs apart. “Spread for me, Chloe.”

I gasped at his words, remembering his sex talk from the night before, pushing his shoulder a little. “It was easier in the dark,” I whispered, barely able to voice my fear.

“And now I get to see you properly. My reward for keeping you safe last night.” His lips curled in a sinful smile. “Let me make you feel good, Chloe. So good you don’t wanna leave.”

Nick pressed firmly on my stomach, and I dropped my head back, surrendering. His touch trailed the insides of my thighs, and he pressed tender, wet kisses there, licking the same spots, then sucking a little. He’d probably leave marks, but for the first time, I didn’t care. Those hands I loved squeezed me, plumping the skin where he kissed and sucked, working his way over my hips and legs until he reached my mound.

“I thought you didn’t take it slow,” I gasped, reaching out to tangle my hands in his hair as his tongue slicked a fresh path along my bruised skin from his pounding the night before.

“You call this making love?” He nipped my skin playfully and I cried out, clenching my thighs around his shoulders. His breath hitched. “Jesus, Chloe. Tell me someone’s given you head before?”

I shook my hair, my hair flicking across my face and I hid beneath it. “Maybe...not,” I said softly.

Nick growled, a low rumble in his throat as he laved the length of my slit, covering all of me in long licks that both drove me higher and soothed my tortured skin. “You want me to stop?”

“Hell no.”

He laughed darkly. “Good girl.”

I gushed a little, moaning at the words that worked their way along my spine as he spread my legs wider, draping them over his shoulders, and sucked my clit. My body exploded beneath him, a wanton cry ripping from my throat.

“Christ, Chloe.” Nick worked his way up my body, his fist around his cock as he rubbed my entrance. “I wanna fuck you raw, but not right now.”

“Why not?” I blinked up at him, wiggling my hips to get closer.

“You’re so fucking needy,” he rasped, bending to kiss me roughly, leaving my own taste smeared on my lips. “No, don’t lick that off. Leave it there,” he ordered.

I stopped licking my lips and stilled, unsure. “What do you want me to do?” I asked, hating the wobble at the end of my words.

“Do?” He tilted his head to one side, grabbing a condom from his desk and rolling it on one-handed without taking his eyes off me. “Enjoy this, Chloe. Let me show you what’s missing from your life. Let me love you,” he rasped, gripping my hip tight with one hand before he eased slowly into me.

I arched at the dual rough and tender touch, my pussy pulsing as he glided inside me until he was fully seated and stopped, cupping my face and kissing me slowly. My breath lodged around a lump in my throat as he began to move slowly, a sweet look on his face that bordered between possessive and—

“You said you didn’t make love,” I cried as he gathered me into his arms, holding me close and rocking with me.

“I lied.” His kisses and his sweet, firm thrusts were too much.

With my second orgasm of the morning came my tears, the emotions he fed me too much to deal with. I wrapped my arms around his neck, sobbing my pleasure into his chest. Everything was too much. The room swam around us, but I clung to him and let him take me where he wanted, until he was all that was left.

He drew back as I came again, kissing the corners of my mouth, licking my tears from my cheeks and the corners of my eyes. “You’re mine, Chloe Duke. Say it.”

“You barely know me,” I gasped, unable to suck in a breath for the pressure building in my chest.

“Say it,” Nick cooed, licking a path along my throat, cupping his hand around the back of my neck so I had to look up at him. “Say. It.” He punctuated his words with two hard, punishing thrusts that were too much.

My tender skin spasmed and I came so hard the room blacked for a second, or forever.

And in the dawn light I heard my own words echo back at me.

“I’m yours.”

CHAPTER SIX

NICK

Chloe slept in my room that night and every night after for the next few weeks. Her ridiculously tight schedule shifted to accommodate the extra time, and even Felix acknowledged my presence at the courts during her practice where I usually slept stretched out across a row of seats or under them. Chloe dug her way under my skin, and I wasn't ready to let her go, now or ever.

But the more I saw of her in the Kingsman house, the more I realized how restricted her life was, what it did to her confidence and how she could barely talk to anyone when there were more than a few people present, usually more than just Barclay, Elisse and myself.

Because she wasn't the only new fixture to the house.

When we headed downstairs on the first morning—fine, lunchtime—in search of food, Elisse was perched on Barclay's lap, still in her latex dress complete with gloves looking all the world like a fucking sex doll, feeding him his breakfast while Beau glared at both of them from the other end of the room.

Chloe stayed, and so did Elisse. Which made for a happy, if somewhat noisy, shared dorm room.

Thankfully, the Kingsman rooms were oversized as fuck and we all fit just fine.

“We've got to be at the newspaper room in a few minutes, Chloe. Hurry the fuck up,” Elisse called, knocking on the bathroom Barclay and I shared.

Having Chloe's toothbrush on the benchtop and seeing her clothes hanging over random doors unleashed some previously unknown kink inside me to bring everything she owned over and fill the room with her.

Listening to her sister berate her did not.

“Take it easy.” I frowned. “She started her period yesterday.”

“Ugh. Overshare.” Elisse clapped her hands to her ears. “Isn’t it?” she implored Barclay, who studied the ceiling and shrugged.

One glance between them, the way she leaned forward and he unconsciously shifted sideways in the opposite direction said *all was not right* in Marquess Manor. Apparently the sex doll facade ran its course in short order.

I wouldn’t be sad to see her go if they were gonna break up a second time.

“Not my thing, but whatever,” he said softly, studying the light fixtures.

“Fine.” Elisse huffed, storming to the bathroom. “Chloe! Get your fat ass out here!”

I’d had it. “I said knock it off,” I snapped, rising. “Speak to her that way again and you don’t ever come back to this room.”

Elisse stared at me, and threw back her head laughing. “Are you being serious? You don’t have a sister, do you?”

My jaw ached where my teeth ground together. “I do not. But you will stop this bullshit.” I glanced at the bathroom door, frowning. “Chloe?”

Silence pervaded the room. Even Elisse looked slightly unnerved.

A deep pressure built in my chest. “I swear if you’ve broken her—” I started.

“Me? You’re the one fucking her so hard she’s got bruises and bites all over her. Do you know how hard those are to hide from the media?” Elisse snapped.

I winced internally. The thought Chloe would have to wear the opinion of others that she seemed to care about so much and yet hid from frequently bit me right in the heart strings.

“No, I didn’t.” I said softly.

Barclay’s attention drifted my way.

“See? You don’t know anything about her,” Elisse goaded. She banged the door hard enough to rouse the entire frat house. “Chloe! I swear I’ll go without you then you don’t get a damn say in what gets printed about you or which pictures they use!”

I opened my mouth, my rage rising ready to rip her a new one, when Barclay moved his ass and stepped forward.

“That’s enough, Elisse. You’re done,” he said, softly but firmly.

“Huh?” She looked up at him with wide eyes, her hand still banging on the door.

He caught her fist and turned her to face him, looking down at her sadly. “It’s over. I tried to want you again, but you’re a shadow of the girl I fell for last year. Now go on, out you go.” He shooed her off like the gentlemen he sure as fuck wasn’t, his British accent thickening with emotion.

“You can’t be serious?” Elisse was aghast as he herded her to the door. “I belong here. With Chloe! She’s my ticket to—”

Her mouth closed with a snap that probably rattled every tooth in her head.

Barclay observed her with a mildly curious expression while my eyes narrowed.

“She’s your ticket to what?” I asked coldly. “You already have all the money you could ever need for a lifetime. I’ve seen you together. She reacts, you demand.”

“Is that so different to what you do with her?” Her verbal slap hit me twice over in the chest.

“Nice deflection, you little narcissist,” Barclay murmured, looking partially impressed. “But the nice man asked you a question. Answer it, and maybe you won’t be barred from this house forever.”

“I— uh—” she glanced wildly between us. “I mean, I like doing all the work for her, setting up media and television and press conferences,” she said weakly, her lie fading fast.

I looked at her closely, studying the perfectly primed hair and makeup, the pastel blue twinset, and rocking Chloe's *Duke it out* slogan on her cap. "No, you like the residual limelight that comes with being her sister and manager. How many photos do you appear in, Elisse? How many interviews do you do without her?"

"No, that's not—" She glanced at Barclay for support but I suspected that door closed long ago. Maybe he only kept her around to annoy the fuck outta Beau in their ongoing war.

"You've bullied your sister the entire time I've known you and God alone knows how long before," he murmured, looking her up and down. "I'm not even sure what I saw in you apart from some tits and ass. Get out." He followed his crass gesture by crossing the room and pulling the door open. "Don't come back."

"But you said, *maybe*—" she wheedled.

Barclay shrugged. "I lied," he said simply, and shut the door in Elisse's face.

Offering my roomie a quick thumbs up, I tried the handle on the bathroom and found it locked. My fear spiked and I pounded once on the door. "Chloe?"

"The fuck is going on in here?" Beau roared, shoving the door to our room open. "I was trying to sleep, you motherfuckers. And who's the girl who just got evicted?"

Barclay rolled his eyes; Beau knew everyone in the house on a first name basis and probably their secrets. *What happened to 'she's my cousin'?*

"Chloe. She's locked herself in."

Beau glanced at the door then at me and nodded. "Break it down."

Grateful my fear reflected in my face, I raised my foot and kicked the door in.

The bathroom—all thirty square feet of it—was empty.

No towel, no unconscious Chloe, no throwing up, no body or blood or anything horrific my mind conjured.

A breeze from the plantation shutters that stood ajar brushed my cheek with cold fingers.

“She’s gone.”

I walked through the forest that bordered on the Kingsman house alone and silent. Chloe ran and I knew she wouldn’t have gone back to the apartment she shared with Elisse where her sister could corner her, nor would she have headed out to the interview, or to the courts to harass her coach who in my eyes shared the blame with her sister for the stupid amount of fucking pressure layered on her.

Chloe Duke needed to hide.

Which left a limited amount of places to hunt for my girl.

I crossed the small stream, jumping across the rocks just the right size for Chloe’s powerful legs, studying the damp ground for marks. Not many people came into the woods other than for a random assignation or to smoke weed.

Thankfully the eighty odd acres of land appeared to be vacant, except for me. Small prints that didn’t resemble any animal’s messed the edge of the path. I tracked them for as long as I could, and just when I thought I had fucked up and she’d gone somewhere else, I nearly fell over her perched on the edge of a granite boulder nearly as tall as she was.

“You know I thought I lost you,” I said conversationally, crossing my arms on the edge of the boulder near her thighs and giving her an easy grin I didn’t feel while my heart pounded the tattoo of her name into the inside of my chest.

Filtered sunlight glinted off a small blade in her hand, her wrists lightly marked with neat, pale lines like she’d been practicing.

My blood ran cold. *No one is meant to live in a cage.* Certainly not the sort her family put her in.

“Are you going to talk me down, beg me to put it away, and come back with you?” she asked distantly.

I tilted my head to one side. “Is that what you want?” My mouth ran dry when she turned emotionless eyes my way.

I don't know this side of Chloe Duke.

The girl who loved it when I played rough with her—I knew that girl.

The girl who fell apart when I made love to her, who cried my name and sobbed on my chest, releasing what I suspected was years of trauma and bottled emotion—I understood her.

This girl, with the glass eyes and the shattered soul?

I barely recognised her as Chloe Duke. But I did see someone else peeking through at me who might be able to help her when she thought it was too much and needed to escape.

Someone who felt that way once too, and who lost everything.

A reflection of myself.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHLOE

Chloe Duke was a distant stranger I didn't recognise. I struggled to reconcile the girl with the deep scar inside my chest, the one my sister and my coach carved me into, who went along with everything, and not only did her best, but became the best. Then there was the girl who responded to the wild man who tried new things and found a part of herself that had been locked away for too long.

Somewhere between the two of those was a slice of a person that was unrecognisable to either version of myself.

One of those versions was the one that tried to surface, and I was too scared to find out which would answer him. And if he would reject me.

"You were fighting. All of you. I could feel it," I said softly. "And it was just like being at a high-level game, feeling the crowd's attention where it switched between which players they backed and trying to ignore them, rather than feed off it."

"Do you feel that at home?" Nick slid his fingers closer to my crossed legs. His knuckles grazed my thigh, but he didn't push any further. Just left his hands against me.

Maybe I wasn't so deep in that no woman's land as to be undiscoverable any more. Part of me yearned to cling to him but that fear of rejection was too close, and so I hid from that too.

"I feel everything." I said, turning the razor blade over, scraping the surface of my skin. White line appeared there. "Elisse's bullshit, you and her fighting over me, Barclay's silent protests....it's like I couldn't get any freedom.."

Nick nodded. "I noticed." He paused. "He kicked her out."

"Barclay threw her out of the Kingsman house?"

"Yep." He tilted his head, watching me, not grinning when I might have expected it from him. "She's banned for life."

“You don’t look happy about it,” I commented, wondering why I didn’t feel anything at all.

That was the first.

I press the blade into my thumb so hard that miniscule scarlet drops beaded its length.

Nick’s finger pressed to the underside of the blade, stopping me from going any further.

I froze. “What are you doing?”

“Before you do that, I have a story about a bear.”

It should’ve been funny, but it wasn’t.

He didn’t move his finger, and I didn’t move the blade. “The scars?”

“Yes.”

I rolled my lips inward, biting them hard, unlike the pressure on the blade that released a fraction. “Okay.”

“You can give me that, if you’re ready.” He nudged the blade with his fingertip. Nick smiled, like always, when he should have been concerned.

“Not just yet.” But my chest loosened, and I eased the pressure a fraction more, experiencing the sting of the cut for the first time, the warmth of his hand wrapped around my wrist. I enjoyed feeling something again, especially with him.

He could have ripped the blade from me, pulled me from my perch and forced me to give it up, but he didn’t.

I appreciated that inch of control he let me keep.

Nick stilled, squeezing my wrist like the contact wasn’t one sided. “The story about the bear involves a seven-year-old boy. He ran away because everything felt too much. He ran away because his big brother and his father fought.” Nick let out a long breath, tension radiating from him. “That little boy ran into the woods, trying to get away from the fighting, and the pressure. He ran and ran and ran until his legs gave out. But he didn’t realize because he was so tiny and so young that

his big brother told him all about the dangers of the woods and fairy tales. *Goldilocks, Little Red Riding Hood.*”

Nick paused, looking down at our fingers, running his knuckles across the backs of mine. “But most of those fairytales have really bad endings. Have you noticed?”

Bile rolled from my throat and settled at the back of my tongue. “Yes,” I breathed. “And the bear?”

“The bear.” Nick smiled again, but this time it was cold. “Everyone looked for him when he wouldn’t come back and the boy got lost. His father, his big brother... The brothers found each other around the same time as the bear found them. With a pocket knife in his possession, the big brother fought the bear, and nearly died. He managed to stick it with the blade in just the right place to distract it from killing him. A fluke of fate, or some other bullshit.” He swallowed hard, and I reached for him, the razor blade tumbling from my hand.

“Nick,” I whispered, but he was as distant to me as I had been to him a few minutes ago, lost in some version of the past where he saw himself as the enemy.

“His dad didn’t realize, but his enemies took advantage of the situation. They waited until the younger brother came home, then stole both him and the young boy away, and God alone knows why, but they took the bear for good measure. It was defenceless. Like the boy.” He drove an invisible, hard line across the back of my hand.

“What happened?” I clung to him just as tightly, trying to be the sturdy rock he always was for me.

“The older brother was the only one left. The little boy was just too little, and the big brother managed to stay standing when they asked one of them to fight the bear for the kid’s life.”

Tears welled in my eyes, remembering the claw marks that rent his stomach with scar tissue. Nick met my gaze, his rich with empathy as it hit me.

“You’re the big brother.”

He nodded. “I had a small knife and a whole lot of determination against a bear already wounded, both their blood flowing into the drains in the fighting pits.” Nick extracted a slim knife from his pocket, a small scene of a man fighting a bear carved into its pale handle.

“It’s beautiful,” I murmured, running a hesitant finger across the markings when he held it out.

“The big brother got to keep the bear’s skin, and one of its claws.” He swallowed hard.

“That’s not shell, is it?”

Running his thumb across the engraved handle of the blade, his other hand wrapped so tight around mine that my bones cracked, Nick said nothing. Everything ached in me as the numbness fell away, but I didn’t care. I wanted to both never hear the end of this story and to hang onto every breath all at once.

“It’s funny what you can do in times of need,” he mused softly. “They let me keep a talisman as a reminder.”

Something in his tone altered and I knew this was at the end.

“D-did you get your baby brother back?”

“Yes.” Nick raised his head, fury pouring from him. “In a fucking bodybag. They shot him, and then my father drove me and my brother home. A message to my father not to cross into others’ territory. He’s barely spoken to me since.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, squeezing his hand back.

“Don’t you dare fucking apologise for that,” he snapped, glaring into my eyes.

I should have been terrified, knowing what he was capable of, what made him who he was.

“I’m grateful you told me.” I tangled our fingers together. “Have you ever spoken about that before?”

He laughed, a ruined, broken sound. “Are you fucking kidding? It’s like a reverse Goldilocks story, without any sort

of happy ending.” Breathing out hard, he raised one hand to trace my cheeks, running his fingers along my jawline. “Maybe you could be my Goldilocks, and make and make everything alright.”

“That was a terrible line,” I said with a small smile.

A slow smile spread across his face, chasing the darkness away. “Yes. It was.”

He pocketed the knife, then folded his arms around me tightly. For the first time it wasn’t my tears that flowed, but his. Nick’s body wracked with the sobs that rent from him and with every one that fell, an inch of my numbness dissipated, until my entire heart hurt for the man who held me.

I sank into his chest, resting my head in its familiar place against the steady thump of his heart. My fingers slipped through the gaps in his shirt, pushing the material open between his buttons to graze the ridges of skin there. A million things ran through my head to say.

Do you still visit your father? Where is your brother buried? Did you hurt the men who hurt you? You’re so brave.

Not one of those things made it out of my mouth. What actually fell out was, “I love you.”

Nick stilled for a long moment. “Yeah?”

I shrugged, deciding this was the new me and I’d own it. “Yeah.”

Nick hugged me tighter. “Me too.”

I tipped my head back, my lips parted. “Why did you come out to find me?”

He laughed, and it wasn’t as dark a sound as before. “Seriously? I expected to find you fucking unconscious and bleeding out in my bathroom, and kicked the door in.”

I blinked. “Oh.”

“It’s not sinking in, is it?” He leaned down and kissed me softly. “You’re not alone any more, Chloe.”

I swallowed hard. “I felt nothing. Everything. Too much.”

“And now?”

“Now is...” I leaned my head on his shoulder, sinking into him. “Better?”

“I think we can do a little more than just *better*, Chloe Duke of mine.” His eyes glowed, hooding with a shadow of need as he stared down at me.

My breath hitched. “Show me.”

The grin that spread across his face this time wasn't slow, and it wasn't easy.

“My pleasure.” He cupped my ass like he did that first night in his room, the first time I went to a Kingsman party, lifting my so my spine scraped the boulder's hard surface gently, but I didn't mind. This was who we were together.

Despite his tight grip on my hips, his kisses were tender, nothing like the words we spoke. That swirled around in my head as he carried me across the forest wall and set me down gently on the bed of multicoloured leaves.

“I want to take it slow, but I'm not sure I can.” Nick grated, his hands drifting to my thighs, where he dug his fingers in deep enough to leave new marks.

Soft breath pushed from my lungs as I caught his shirt, tugging him forward. “Is it okay if I want to be on top and be in control? Is that too...new?”

His dirty smile was all the answer I needed, even if that answer came in a slightly different way than expected.

Nick rolled us, so I straddled his hips. I laid atop his chest as he looked up at me from the halo of fall colors. “How about this?”

“It's different,” I said, suddenly shy.

“Cool. I want to see you and touch you.”

I bit my lip, looking down at him and rolled my hips against erection. “Like this?” I teased, my heart slammed fast in my chest.

“Yeah, like that.” Nick cupped the back of my neck, and pulled me down for a kiss. “It’s just us, Chloe. You and me and no one else. Promise.” Grabbing the bottom of my shirt, he tugged it over my head, pulling at my cotton sweater until only his jeans, and my thong separated our bodies from full contact.

His hands landed on my ass, the hard smack of flesh on flesh disrupting the forest’s silence. Reaching behind me, I managed to keep in my yelp, knowing he wanted those noises from me.

“Anything else?” I murmured, aiming for coyness.

Nick growled. “Do you know what those three words we both said before mean?”

I ducked my chin, hiding my eyes. “Yes,” I whispered.

Nick’s grip on the back of my neck tightened, forcing me to face him. “Yeah?” His eyes challenged me directly, something stopping either of us from backing down that was written into the way my brain functioned. “Trust is everything between us. I’m what you needed me to be. I don’t want you to be afraid.”

He pulled me forward until a breath separated us, his eyes like molten lava that could consume me.

What a way to die.

“I’m not afraid of you. I’m afraid of me, and my expectations.”

“Okay.”

I blinked. “Just like that?”

Nick laughed, a dark sound that left my feet curling at his hips. “Just like that, Chloe Duke. Stop hiding yourself in a corner and enjoy what’s right in front of you.”

A quiet smile lit my lips. “You mean like this?” I rocked my hips along his denim covered length, earning myself a deep groan as his head dropped back.

“Yeah. Like that, girl.”

“What, no honey, or princess?” I sassed him.

“Did I just create a monster?”

“Maybe.” I unbuttoned his jeans, working my hand inside until I withdrew his straining, swollen length. A few strokes from root to tip and he pushed his hips up, thrust into my hand.

“Keep doing that please, Chloe.” His voice changed, deepening, rasping. “But not too long. I want to come in you.”

I smiled. “Then do it.” I rubbed my wetness across his cock, and his eyes flickered.

“Chloe?” The strain and longing evident, I paused, leaning down to kiss him. Nick fisted my hair. “Don’t you tease me with this, Princess.”

“If you want it,” I managed to maintain my smile though my confidence plummeted. “You said you wanted to fuck me ra—”

I was on my back so fast, I forgot to breathe. “Nick?” I squeaked.

His hard, lean body arced over me, his hands gripping me hard. “Tell me you’re not teasing me.”

I shook my head. “I’m not. I got an implant a few weeks ago. We can, if that’s what you want.”

“It’s gotta be what you want, you know that.”

I leaned up to kiss him. “I want that.”

“Good.” He inched his hips forward, filling me in one long thrust.

This time I felt every part of him breeching my walls, and shuddered out a moan.

“Jesus, fuck.” Nick curved his hand behind my head, withdrawing to slam home again. “I wanna go slow.”

“Don’t—” I managed.

Nick rode me hard, kissing me between his own groans, his gaze hyper-focussed on me, swallowing my screams. One orgasm merged into the next, his pace relentless as he wrapped

me in his arms, curving his body around mine and working me like a desperate, starving man—and I responded to him. He caught my thighs, tilting my hips up and hitting somewhere *deeper*.

Nick groaned, his thrusts quickening as I tightened around him. “Fuck, you feel too good.”

“So do you,” I gasped back, tangling my fingers in his hair and pulling him down for a kiss as pressure built inside me again.

I met every thrust, grinding our bodies together, and when I came again, he followed, his hips jerking roughly as his breaths shattered against my mouth.

Afterwards, when we dressed, neither of us tried to speak, our conversation limited to light touches with trembling fingers and soft kisses filled with the remnants of our passion that refused to fade.

Nick held me close as we walked back to the house, talking to people as we passed them but I barely heard anything, resting my head against the shoulder. He didn’t need me to, tucking me into his side and curving himself around me protectively. When we made it upstairs to his room, he carried me into the shower, cleaning us both and kissing me until he lifted me back onto his hips. Just kissing, his hands firm on my body, blocking out the world, soothing my anxious heart.

For the first time in so long, part of me truly recognized love.

CHAPTER SEVEN

NICK

Chloe sprinted around the court chasing ball after ball Felix hit in a wide spread, making her move. Her ankle was completely healed, though I knew she was tender from last night's love making session.

I took a risk shortly after that night in the forest, though I hadn't told her yet. Living in a frat house remained a touchy spot for both of us. Barclay distanced himself from everyone, forming a friendship with Dex Breaker, of all people. But back on ground level with Chloe, there were too many people around on a daily basis. Fangirls who wouldn't leave her alone, and enough male attention that I was constantly on the alert, not that she noticed a single thing. I'd been a Kingsman for two years but maybe my time there was up now.

Her new manager, a middle-aged woman called Marjorie who could barely hold a tennis racket the right way up, watched from the top of the umpire's chair. What she couldn't do on a court she made up for in terms of marketing and branding for Chloe with all the right connections and finally let Chloe's real personality shine through. She waved at me from the height of the chair, taking aerial shots with her phone while directing a video drone with her other hand and conducting a phone call at the same time.

The woman could multitask like nothing else, and she lifted Chloe's confidence within the first two weeks of joining her team.

Chloe adored her, and therefore, so did I.

It wasn't the only change that happened. It turned out engineering had nothing to do with Chloe Duke. She did, however, want to change to architecture and a quick visit to the dean's office and a few words from her coach about the current financial situation made all the difference.

So did the new tennis court plastered with her name all over the side of it. The dean was grateful to the extra cash flow, despite the college coffers overflowing.

God knew where that money was going, considering the personal tithe we all paid. The dean was the most epic hoarder in all of history.

“Come on, Chloe,” Felix called, a genuine smile on his face. “You’ve got this.”

Chloe sprinted forward from the baseline, her body lifted into the air, and smashed the volley an inch past Felix’s shoulder before he could bring his racket back.

“Fuck, yeah,” called one of the Rippton boys who’d come to watch the open session.

Chloe waved at them.

Her attitude changed without the excess pressure her sister—who left Rippton and hadn’t returned yet—put on her shoulders. Without it, Chloe managed her anxiety a whole lot better, and managed to talk to fans like a regular person. A small step for some but for her it was huge. I couldn’t have been more proud.

Felix ran to the net for a high-five. “That’s championship material, girl. Don’t you ever doubt.”

Chloe sent me the sort of smile that left me glowing on the inside as she trotted toward me and kissed me with her arms around my neck, audience be damned. I deepened the kiss and she gave me an appreciative sound before breaking breathlessly away.

I hope she’d be as amenable for this next part, too.

“You should stop,” she said softly, but didn’t glance over her shoulder.

I held out two fresh bottles of water. “Not likely to stop any time soon.”

“Of course not.” She rose onto her toes and pressed her lips against mine with a sigh.

More cheers went up from her fanclub.

“I mean, if you don’t want me, you can always go for those guys.” I eyed the bleachers and picked out faces to

memorize.

Chloe peeked over her shoulder at the fanclub, and waved again. “You love them.”

I tighten my hold on her, reaching down to grab her towel and bag. “I love you.”

“Keep saying things like that, and my ego might get too big,” she murmured. “Can you put up with that sort of shit from me?” She peeked through her eyelashes at me.

I sighed, swatting at her ass. “You’re already so annoying and all...”

Chloe huffed. “Maybe I should be dating Felix. You know he has a soft spot for meeee—” she shrieked as I picked her up, swinging her around and captured her mouth in a rough kiss.

“Try it, Duke.”

“You’re intolerable.” Chloe tossed her hair, but her hands slid down my shirt.

“Getting cocky there.”

“I started that way.”

“Smile, kids,” Marjorie shouted down from the umpire’s chair, swivelling to take a photo of our conversation, still holding a conversation with whoever was on the other end of the line.

Chloe gave her thumbs up, while I flicked her the bird.

Marjorie cracked up. “Perfect,” she stated. “Going on the socials page.”

I grabbed the rest of her kit, and tossed it over my shoulder with my own bag as I towed her out of the arena. “There’s something I wanted to talk to you about.”

“What?” She pulled back from me in the car park. “Are you being a nosy stalker again?” She looked uncertain and too beautiful, and I stopped to kiss her once more.

“Nick—”

“Yeah?” I came up for air, lost in her eyes.

“You were going to tell me something good.”

“Oh. Yes. I was.”

Chloe blinked up at me patiently. “I think you were being serious, so...remember?” she prompted me.

“Deadly.” I kissed her nose, just to draw the suspense out. “It was getting noisy back at the frat house so I got a place. For, you know, us. It’s private and out of the way. It’s got four bedrooms. In case there was someone else we wanted to move in?”

I let the proposal hang in the air while she stared at me. Just as I thought I was going to have to poke her or rescind the offer altogether, she let out a shivery breath.

“Really?” Her eyes sparkled island blue. “Is it close?”

I raised both eyebrows. “You’re agreeing that easily to live with me?”

She snorted. “I’ve been living in your room for months, Nick. How is this any different?”

“Fair enough.” I pulled her close, needing the reassurance. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. So, friends—”

“Barclay’s already claimed one bed.”

“Did he?” She smiled, apparently delighted with our first new housemate. “Good, because he was the first person I thought of. Wait, he doesn’t want to live in the dorm room on his own?”

I grimaced. “There were tensions between him and Beau. I offered, he accepted.”

I didn’t tell her the story that wasn’t mine. He had his own family issues that crossed oceans, and he didn’t need Bennet breathing down his neck while he sorted his shit out. Plus, it provided him with a safe haven, like it did for me from my father, and hopefully Chloe from the press.

“So...can I see it tomorrow?” She looked up at me with those breathtaking eyes.

I slid my hand into my pocket and placed a key in her hand. “Whenever you want, Princess.”

She bounced on her toes. “Right now?”

“Right now, baby.”

She squealed, swinging her arms around my neck, and planted a large, wet kiss on my mouth.

“Jesus, girl.” I shook my head as she danced away, grabbing for her.

“Don’t care. Let’s go.” She ran for the passenger side of my Jeep.

A laugh rumbling in my throat, I slid into the driver’s seat, pulling her onto my lap.

“You can’t drive like this,” she protested, already opening the buttons on my shirt.

“We can do whatever we want, Chloe. Hell, I want you to stay forever.”

She paused, her gaze drifting back to my face. “You mean that?”

“Yeah,” I breathed, unable to make another sound come out of my throat for a moment.

She frowned. “Did you just propose?”

“Marry me,” I said, promptly.

“Yes.”

I blinked.

She kissed me.

And that was that.

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Read on for the first chapter of [OFF BOARDING](#)

CHAPTER ONE

NATE

A room can be full of talented people, but it can be empty of those who have the heart to succeed.

Those were the words my high school coach said to me the first year I played lacrosse. Words that had never struck me as true until the moment I walked into my pregame session for my first varsity game at an away ground.

“Presence doesn’t mean the same as present, Whitwood. There’s some soulless folk about, ones who work through a day without ever investing themselves in it. If you find those on a team, work your way around them. That mentality is contagious and it can ruin all the fucking potential in the world.”

I had nothing to say at the time but to offer a grinding, ‘yes, sir.’ A tour in my mind around the room inhabited by my new teammates reminded me why my old coach took us to a championship level year after year.

Rippton U’s college lacrosse team—for all their extensive wealth—looked like it held a whole two quarters of talent, and more deadwood than any lichen could hope to overpopulate. My lacrosse career could die here before it began.

Nate Whitwood, hometown golden boy slumped by America’s wealthiest private university.

Yep, death in my first year at Rippton. Perfection. My father would have a field day with that. Maybe the school paper could do me a eulogy write-up in advance. I’d heard the red-haired journo student was a feisty little firecracker. But if we put the work in, and Coach stepped up, maybe—*maybe*, and it was a faint wish—we had a chance.

My eyes slipped around the room to find Coach Cockett. The dorky, slightly bored washtub of a coach stood quietly in his own space, slightly separate from the team. Every now and then he looked up as though he might speak before diving back to hide in his notebook, where he ostensibly scribbled plays.

The other players were seated in random positions around the stale sweat-filled locker room. Some hands made fists and flexed while others pressed their palms together as though praying for the awkward meeting to be over.

One player with a head full of dark, shaggy hair and bright eyes met my gaze, and I recognised Dylan Mountforth from training earlier in the semester. A few glazed-eyed benchers who could barely put one foot before the other at practices.

Finally, I found our captain, Beau Bennett. He leaned beside one of the borrowed lockers with a practiced bored expression I knew well, all muscle, though a hint of deadly intelligence lingered behind his eyes. His fingers flexed by his side as he waited for an inspirational speech from Coach that never seemed destined to arrive.

This was usually where my smart mouth threw up something that would break the tension pervading the alien university locker room, but I suspected that a smart ass remark would bring nothing but trouble in a team where neither I—nor my new teammates—knew where I fit yet.

Ignoring Coach, I looked back at the captain, Beau, who returned the favour. He held my gaze with startling blue eyes that saw plenty more than I wanted to give away, before his attention drifted around the room. Taking in, I suspected, much the same of what I saw.

His jaw clenched, folded his arms, and finally, he settled his hard gaze on me. “So, Newbie. How are you going to go with an extra twelve minutes in your game?” he asked.

The question could’ve been laced with venom, and though several of our teammates snickered, he didn’t seem to mean the comment in a derogatory way.

“Never can tell,” I said softly, just loud enough to be heard in the otherwise silent room.

Beau’s eyes narrowed. “You were the top player of your team, wherever the hell it is you’ve come from last year?”

I held his gaze and kept on smiling. My new captain had the classic good looks girls wanted: all dark hair and blue

eyes, the son of a Fortune 50 company man, and I knew they probably dropped at his feet as the lead player of a college team, whether that team was successful or not.

“Some of the local boys helped me train for the longer sixty-minute games over the summer.” I shrugged. “We might not be playing at this level, but we tried something I could train to.”

Those manicured eyebrows lifted—barely—to display his surprise, and the set of his mouth changed to something a sliver more welcoming.

It was all about micro expressions with this guy.

The guy I obviously needed to take direction from, considering Coach hadn't opened his trap yet, and was still scribbling in a fevered silence on his part.

Most likely directions to the toilet with a loop back to the bus over plays if I read him right.

“That’s something,” Beau agreed. “But being the best in a small town school doesn’t make you a hero or diva here. Understood?”

He flicked his gaze around the room, watching the disinterested players with their glazed gazes before flicking that last back to me, but I was watching him and expected it.

“Agreed,” I answer, willing the rest of the team to emerge from their stupor. “Any tips on who we’re playing?”

Beau snorted. “Last year’s reigning champions. Cliffside. They are... formidable.”

I sneaked a glance at Coach, but he was still scribbling in his pad. By my count we had a few minutes left before the ref called us onto the field. “Any weaknesses?”

“Their defence has a few holes,” Dylan Montforth, our goalie, admitted, surprising me by speaking up. “Their attack is solid. That’s why they win. Makes up for the dregs they shove at the other end of the field.”

I nodded, grateful for the input, and glanced at our other attacker, Jason, a blonde behemoth I hoped could run with all

that extra muscle padding him. “We can use that.”

His shaggy blond head turned in my direction, and the hint of a smile flickered at the corners of his mouth. “We can.”

“Their captain, their best player, has a bad left knee,” Benson Mahoney, midfielder, added, looking up through his lashes at his captain slightly flirtatiously. “My fault, last season.”

“I remember you getting fouled out,” Beau added, dryly.

Dylan cracked a smile. “Then our defence pegs him. Stay on him, keep him out of that crease.”

Beau shifted from his practiced bored position, interest lighting his eyes. Granted. Who else do you want in there with you?”

Dylan tilted his head on one side as the call came for us to leave the locker room. “Jason?” He held up a fist that the blond player tapped.

“We got this.”

Beau scratched his head. “Right. Not the playbook we’re expecting from Coach, but hell. Let’s do it, yeah?”

“Let’s do it,” rumbled around the room in an irregular hum that woke the rest of the team from their daze.

Coach rose from his scribbles, his mouth open, his eyes slightly glazed and vacant.

Dylan thumped his shoulder, and the weedy man’s knees wobbled. “See you out there,” he called to me.

I followed the trailing players along the small tunnel that let out into Cliffside’s open field. A cheer echoed from the stands above, filled, I knew, with Rippton students who packed the four buses to support the team that never won. The culture was strong, even if the play was weak.

Part of that made me determined to ensure the team made a decent divot in the ground with this game.

Beau dropped back beside me, keeping pace with me. “The sun is shit here. Two quarters with it in our face, and this time

of day, there's nothing we can do. The other, and we've got a headwind, so if you throw for the goal, brute force might cover your ass. I doubt Dylan's gonna do as much as he wants. He pulled a hammy over the summer. Recovered now. But... our reserves are worse."

"Sounds like we can hold it from our end." I shrugged, knowing the team's track record and tried not to wince.

"What, you didn't consider Rippton a solid choice for a lacrosse team for an early draft?"

"Not like I got a choice." The look on my father's face when I dared request Yale for their team wasn't worth dwelling on. *I'm here now.* "He went to Rippton. I go to Rippton. Some ancestor probably etched his initials in the foundation stone for all I know."

"You don't buy into the *power and brimstone, rain hell on the plebeians* attitude?"

I shrugged. "Plebes fill the company walls. I have to work alongside them at some point."

Beau loped along beside me, close enough in height that I didn't tower over him like I did most people. "That's smart. Earn their loyalty; you'll have more productive workers."

"That's the goal. Something about fucking harder, not smarter and all."

He snorted. "Might do." A rough hand gripped my arm as we stepped out into the glaring sunlight. He was right. Visibility was shit. One arm wearing Rippton's red white and...you guessed it, blue, colours extended into my field of vision. "Look for the brown suit. Leonard Kingroy. Utter asshole, scrooge and a dick. You don't want to work with him, but you don't want to miss him either. He's ideal for new kids like you who display raw talent."

My ears pricked up at that. "Yeah?" I craned around him without trying to look like I was sneaking a peek.

Beau offered me a side grin. "His eye'll be on Cliffside, but make yourself known and he'll start to watch you. The sports management grapevine starts here. They gossip like a

pack of bitches but fight dirtier. He's one of the few that looks at all the games, including the first few in the season, because he knows the player has to be the top shit right off the starting gun. Play well, and help me find us a win occasionally, and you'll be on his radar."

"Good advice."

Beau snorted. "Yeah? Well, here's something we're not supposed to do. Come on." He dragged me to the left, letting the team walk onto the field without us.

"The fuck are we going?" I jogged lightly beside him as he trotted towards the bleachers where the cheer team was in high gear, revving up the crowd. "Jesus. How many come to watch again considering you—shit, we—never win?"

I found out on my first training session that Rippton was the recipient of the past five lacrosse season's wooden spoon, something they didn't tell you on the brochure, only featuring the rare high rolling past players that made it.

I should've studied the stats.

But by that point, it was too late to withdraw, and I would've had my ass handed to me on a Rippton-gilted platter by my father anyway. There was no way he wouldn't let his offspring—read: sole heir—attend the ridiculously exclusive school.

"They bring out busloads to watch us lose. They cheer, and they support. There's a bit of an Allstars culture going on, but the cheer team's mostly responsible for that."

I ran my eyes over the bopping team, their limbs moving together in a way that made me envious of their synchronicity. A quick head count came up with thirteen girls and three guys, tossing some of the smaller girls into the air with the skills of Olympic gymnasts.

"Holy shit. That's some decent airtime." I blinked as one girl landed in a handstand on the dude below her's outstretched palms.

"No kidding. They haven't dropped anyone yet."

I laughed, not entirely sure if he was kidding or not. “So, what are we doing?”

A sly smirk crossed Beau’s face. “You’ll see.” He tossed his helmet on the ground, and I followed suit as he pointed to the end of the row. “Join in. Take bitch spot. I’ll be right behind you.”

A grin formed on my face as I ruffled my ginger effervescent mass, knowing it’d be sticking out at crazy angles thanks to bucket hair. “Bitch spot?”

“Just promise me you won’t drop the soap, Homie.”

I laughed as we joined the cheerleader’s ranks, and tried my best to keep up with the high kicks that left me on wobbly legs and nearly landed me on my ass at least once. A girl in a pink top waved a giant silver and blue pom pom over her head, shouting silently into the void, her cheeks flushed as she cheered right along with us. I gave her a wave and on a whim, blew a kiss into the crowd.

Beau pantomimed spanking my ass when I stuck it out—only one love tap actually connected, thankfully. Wheezing with laughter as one of the cheer squad flicked the bird our way with fabulously pasted-on smiles, we took off back to the field arriving just in time to face off.

“You’re the big captain’s new bum boy, are you?” Sammy, one of the defenders in Dylan’s circle – I knew I was gonna call him Sammy the Dick for the rest of my college career – groused as I jogged past. Dylan the defender threw me a big double thumbs up and a comic face, his featured scrunched threw me before he lowered his shield and bent his knees.

Sammy called something derogatory at me that should have been aimed at the other team, but I was already in position, bouncing on my toes. The cheer squad lit me up nicely, Beau offering a tight nod as he checked our positions on the field.

I rolled my shoulders, settling into myself, letting the crowd fall away, focusing on the field before me and the

tension between my teammates as play began. My heart beat ramped, a roaring in my ears the moment my muscles tensed.

Five minutes later I hadn't seen the ball head in our direction past the midpoint apart from Beau's first throw. Every time one of Rippton's players got an opening, Cliffside's opposing midfielders took the opportunity and ran straight down the other end to score.

The captain switched in and out, as Jason observed, sliding from midfielder to attack, which I knew was far from normal, directing from the center of the field.

"Mids suck." I threw the comment over my shoulder at my captain. "We gotta do something about that man. Otherwise we'll never get attention down this end."

I jerked my chin to where Coach occupied the bleachers in the away team's reserved space. I didn't expect anything from him, and rightly so. He chatted quietly to the medic beside him, who glanced at me and the rest of the team several times in an attempt to draw the man's attention to where it was supposed to be, but to no avail.

Beau crouched, stretching his hammies. "Okay, you're gung ho, right? So listen up. We get Dylan involved. We tried this play last year, but we uh, didn't have the support." He lowered his voice so our other attacker wouldn't overhear. "The play is simple." He outlined the sequence in a quiet voice as it came to life before my eyes.

I nodded, getting myself into position as Cliffside scored. Again.

Beau finished his speech and looked at me. "If I set this up, and we pull it off to this point and you mess it up, we are not friends. And you're in bitch spot on the cheer team for the rest of the season."

I pointed at him. "Let's get it done."

Beau nodded his approval. "Let's do it."

To my complete surprise, within the first minute of the second quarter, the ball came flying down to Beau. He caught the impossible shot, Dylan hoisted neatly in his net, and

passed to me. I ran in to scoop up the pass and threw it straight at the goalie who didn't seem to have a clue what to do with it. As Beau predicted, there were holes big enough to throw a jumbo jet through Cliffside's defence.

Their goalie swung his net at the ball and missed by a mile, while my hard throw sailed into the back of the net.

I turned to Beau with a grin that had more cheese than a takeout burger to utter silence.

The stands didn't say a word, while I stood in the middle of the field, my net hanging over my shoulder. My breath caught in my throat, my heart thundering from the failing exhilaration of scoring my first goal for Rippton.

But no one moved.

Maybe they've forgotten how to celebrate.

My breath sucked out as I turned to Beau, his gaze sharpening on me.

Behind me, the crowd made a sound that grew and grew, filling my ears, and in a second my smile mirrored Beau's.

"That's one, kid. We need a whole lot more to win it," Beau said quietly, jogging beside me and slapping my backside hard enough to sting. "But I like you. Not enough to take bitch spot though. Let's see what we can do."

Four goals later, Beau and I started alternating tosses, and Dylan proved his worth at the other end. Jason spent his time fixated on Cliffside's captain, boxing him in halfway along the field with a little help.

Until right before half time, when one of them decided that he wanted in on the action and lifted his net in a high slung slingshot aimed in the unfortunate direction of my temple.

I blinked and opened my eyes to find Beau leaning over me close enough for a kiss. Reflex—if somewhat sluggish—threw a hand up to shove him out of the way and missed high fiving the air.

"Get the fuck out of my face, man." I shook my head experimentally. Pain lanced down one side of my face, but my

vision didn't swim. When I tried to get up, the medic pushed me back. "Don't move for a minute, a son." A bright light shone in my eyes. He peeled back my eyelids.

I flapped at him. "I'm not concussed."

"And I don't wanna get sued by a rich boy's father." He grinned to take the edge off his words, and I snorted, settling in to let the man do his job, tossing the helmet I clutched to the side.

Finally, I was allowed to climb to my feet, checking the scoreboard. *Eighteen to thirty-two.*

"If you need to go off, go off. First game isn't everything," Beau said in a low voice, gripping my shoulder hard.

"Are you fucking kidding me? After the comment you made about the brown suit, there's no chance in hell that I'm going off unless I'm dead."

"Better not dead, and able to play for the rest of the season, than screw your chances altogether."

"Find me a gravestone, man. We have a game to finish."

"You're sure?" Beau stilled, indecision warring on his face.

"I promise I'll leave you my stuffed bear collection if I die," I said hopefully.

He and Dylan, who edged up beside him, cracked identical grins. "Damn kids. He's got more balls than half the team. Party at ours tonight."

"I live for it." I winked at Dylan and shook my ass in his direction. "Keep lobbing those balls, my friend."

Beau strode away, taking up position, muttering under his breath. "Fucking better."

Staring up into the stands behind him, something blue and lurid pink caught my eye. The girl I noticed before when I was in bitch spot bounced around like she was her own version of the cheer squad, her hands raised to cup her mouth, yelling out some warcry I couldn't interpret at this distance. Dark brown

waves bounded along with her movements, her breasts easily a double handful encased in a tight tee above an impossibly tiny waist gave her the most exaggerated hourglass figure I'd ever seen.

Someone called my name, and I jogged slightly to my spot as she pointed at the field, her face tense with worry. Because I was bleeding? Because I forgot to put my bucket on, and the hair was sticking out all over the place? I had never been particularly worried about my hair, being my small town highschool's golden boy on the lacrosse team. Maybe being self-conscious was in my future.

She pointed again, and I turned my head, staring into that God awful sun Beau warned me about. A flicker of movement drew my attention, and I raised my net in slow motion. The weight of the ball crashed into it, and then I was running, passing and darting around Cliffside's defence that decided to grow balls at the last minute, playing it off with Beau until the ball left my net, and we scored.

Again. And again. And again.

By the time the buzzer echoed across the field at the end of the game, the score read twelve points in Rippton's favour, and the lacrosse team won a game against the reigning champions for the first time in eight years.

I found myself staring up at the sky as I was hoisted high, braced on the shoulders of teammates cheering my name and Beau's. I motioned for Dylan to join us, but he shook his head, herding away the cheer boys, who offered their muscly arms out to him.

"I'll keep my feet and ass near the ground. This duck don't like the air," he called, waddling off and quacking at a cheerleader, who looked startled when he pecked at her cheek.

I snorted, slapping Beau's proffered high five and let the celebratory chants roll through me. Out of the corner of my eye I caught that flash of pink and blue again. Struggling against too many hands holding me up, I wiggled my way back to ground level Dylan-style, and aimed toward the pretty

girl I spotted before who stopped me from crowing myself again.

Just as I fixed my gaze on her double handful of a tight tush, a hand planted itself in the middle of my chest.

“Whoa, big boy. You need to come talk to some people. Chase skirt later, huh?” Beau eyed me, jerking his head to one side.

“But—” I stretched out a hand. She was already out of sight, obscured by several hundred bodies cramming between the gates, headed for the busses home. I let my hand drop. “Yeah, what’s up?”

“Don’t look so crestfallen, kid. You just saved the team’s reputation. If you think they turned out to watch us at Cliffside, imagine what next week’s home game will be like. This way.”

I brightened, letting him tow me along. “Where’re we going, and have I broken out of bitch spot status yet?”

Beau barked a laugh. “Hell, no. A few more games like today’s and maybe I’ll trade spots with you, deal?”

“Deal.”

“Good. Now shut up while I introduce you to our sponsors.” He sent me a wink, planting me beside a blonde with the kind of skyscraper heels that would turn a stripper green and fake tits that didn’t move half as much as she did.

I shook hands with Mandy, noting her tits still pointed straight out beneath her low cut red top, and nodded to a woman closer to my mother’s age on her other side. Beau chatted amicably while I tried to follow the conversation before he brought me into it.

“Nate’s a natural. He’d be brilliant in one of your commercials. Knock him out with the ball again and revive him with your drink, hey? Yeah?” He nodded enthusiastically, a totally different beast emerging as the older woman shook her head.

“Beau, I swear you should be the head of my marketing department. Alongside Mandy, of course,” she added.

“Nate, this is Pauline. Powerhouse chemical engineer by trade, CEO, and makes the best choc chip cookies you’ve ever had, including your mom’s.” He winked again, switching places with me. “Why don’t you two talk thirty seconds of fame while Mandy and I discuss next year’s, uh...” He trailed off, looking down at the twenty-something bombshell as his fingers found the waistline of her skirt, grazing over her epic bubble butt.

“Fun times.” I raised an eyebrow. *So it’s like that, huh?*

He laughed softly, shooting me a cocky look and a chin jerk that read *read and weep, baby*. “Remember, afterparty tonight. You’re Rippton’s new lacrosse hero to revere.”

Relieved he didn’t seem too put out about the whole thing, I made the connection with Pauline, managing to get a promise for a tray of cookies at some future occasion while our glorious captain did his duty with the marketing floozy.

Walking back to the bus, I glanced around but there was no sign of the girl from the stands. All the buses except for ours were long departed, and even Beau beat me to the steps.

“Man, how long you take with her? I thought the old broads were the fastest.” He shot me a lecherous grin.

“If you’re always such a shitty winner, I might not help out in the next game,” I coaxed, then glanced down. “Lippy on your jock sock, man.”

“You’re kidding.” Beau looked down, frowning his disgust and swiped at his pants.

“Yep. I am.” I boarded the bus to my captain’s amused snort and the cheers of my teammates. Even the bus driver, Lil’ Ol’ Larry—true story—turned up his hearing aid and high fived me.

Yep, year one at Rippton U was going to be a very good fucking year.

[Read Nate & Raleigh's story in OFF BOARDING](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestselling author Sofia Aves writes fast-paced police romances, sizzling military units, steamy cowboys with a Montana backdrop and the occasional cheeky god. Married to a veteran, she often tackles topics of PTSD and reintegration and has a soft spot for all who work in uniform. Sofia writes kidlit for charity and has over one hundred and fifty publications across four not-so-super-secret pen names.

Sofia is a mum of three crazies in a returned veteran household and has an overly large fur baby who thinks she's a teacup puppy. After eighteen years of planning and dreaming, Sofia and her husband put the finishing touches on their very own alpaca park, Lorendel, this year. Sofia lives near Brisbane, Australia.

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