

ELLOUISE LISTON

SHE WAS MORE THAN
JUST A HOOK UP.

A

Hook Up TO Remember

A HOOK UP TO REMEMBER

BOOK THREE



ELLOUISE LISTON

Copyright © 2023 by ellouise liston

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review. This book is work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organisations, places, events and incidents are either the product of the authors imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or in locales is entirely incidental.

Contact Info: www.ellouiseliston.com

Edited by Mackenzie Letson @ Nice Girl Naughty Edits

Cover Design by Shannon Passmore @ Shanoff Designs

For my Family

ALSO BY ELLOUISE LISTON

HOOKING UP WITH MR WRONG

Book One

Ava didn't plan on hooking up with Conner. She hated him, in fact, but one too many drinks can show a truth one does not want to face themselves.

But Ava can't put it behind her because that night lead to her getting pregnant and now she must go through this with someone she hates.

But there is a fine line between love and hate ...

THE NON-HOOK UP

Book Two

Mia live a life of privilege, until tragedy strikes and she is left looking for a place to live and a job. Where else can she go but live with her friends hot older brother Riley. Not only that, but she ends up working in the same bar as Riley.

Now she must push past the temptation of working and living with Riley.

A HOOK UP TO REMEMBER

Book Three

Harper must make a choice, follow her heart or her head. The last time she followed her heart, it was broken by her friends twin brother, Hunter. Now she is back to face him again and her feelings have not gone, but can she risk staying for a love she cannot trust or leave for a future she might not want?

SIGN UP FOR MY NEWSLETTER

Be the first to learn about Ellouise Liston's new releases and receive exclusive content for both readers and writers.

www.ellouiseliston.com

CONTENTS

1. SOPHMORE YEAR
2. PROLOGUE
3. Chapter 1
4. PRESENT DAY
5. Chapter 2
6. Chapter 3
7. Chapter 4
8. Chapter 5
9. THEN
10. Chapter 6
11. NOW
12. Chapter 7
13. THEN
14. Chapter 8
15. NOW
16. Chapter 9
17. Chapter 10
18. Chapter 11
19. Chapter 12
20. THEN
21. Chapter 13
22. NOW
23. Chapter 14
24. Chapter 15
25. Chapter 16
26. Chapter 17
27. Chapter 18
28. Chapter 19
29. Chapter 20
30. Chapter 21

31. [Chapter 22](#)
32. [Chapter 23](#)
33. [Chapter 24](#)
34. [Chapter 25](#)
35. [Chapter 26](#)
36. [Chapter 27](#)
37. [Chapter 28](#)
38. [Chapter 29](#)
39. [Chapter 30](#)
40. [Chapter 31](#)
41. [Chapter 32](#)
42. [Chapter 33](#)
43. [Chapter 34](#)
44. [Chapter 35](#)
45. [Chapter 36](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[HOOKING UP WITH MR WRONG](#)

46. [Chapter 1](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

SOPHMORE YEAR



PROLOGUE



Why did I come here again?

Oh right, my friends wanted to go to a party. I'm not angry at them, I'm angry at the world for spinning so fast that it is hard to stay steady on my feet. I'm angry at myself for not saying no to more drinks. And I'm angry at myself for always going along with what everyone else wants instead of voicing what I want.

I was looking forward to tonight, the monthly movie night with my girlfriends, Ava and Mia, and it was my pick. We were watching a favorite of mine, *The Fault in Our Stars*, and didn't even get a chance to finish it before I was getting squeezed into a pair of skinny jeans and tight long-sleeved top that exposed too much curve for me to be comfortable.

Again, I wasn't blaming my friends. They don't know I don't like these things. They don't know I'd rather curl up in bed with a good romance novel or watch a romcom and swoon at fictional men. But I love my friends regardless. I love working nights at the bookstore with Ava and talking about all our favorite stories, and I love how Mia makes me laugh but also challenges me. Both of them are so different, but loyal all the same.

Which is why I am currently stumbling around this house party Mia told us her brother was throwing. I had never met her brother, as I usually only hang out with the girls, but judging from this party, he was the stereotypical frat guy. Only he didn't belong to a frat. Okay, maybe I was being a little judgmental. I mean, Mia does talk kindly about him whenever

she does. This is just not my scene, and I desperately need a bathroom or bucket of some kind before I redecorate this hallway.

I locate a long line outside the downstairs bathroom and groan at the ache building in the pit of my stomach. Knowing I cannot wait, I continue to stumble upstairs, which is not as crowded. I notice some couples giggling as they run around upstairs in search for a room to hook up in, drunken, delirious smiles on their faces. Setting my sights on the one open door at the end of the hallway, I start moving in that direction.

Placing my hand over my stomach, I curse Mia for insisting I take some shots and myself for not saying no. But I was curious, and I didn't want to be that friend that never did anything stupid, always playing it safe. I didn't want to be treated like an innocent child or something, so I took the shot... and many after.

I push the door open and crash to my knees before the toilet, then proceed to empty the contents of my stomach.

My eyes water as I grip the edge of the toilet, promising myself to never do this again. Distantly, I hear talking behind me. I can't make out the words clearly, but they're deep, like a male's voice, and suddenly remember I didn't close the bathroom door.

Dammit!

As the torment continues, I feel the weight of my hair being lifted away from my face and out of the path of destruction, and I finally make out the words being said beside me.

“Oh shit. It'll be all right, just let it out.”

I want to say a snide comment on how that is such a good idea and how I wish I had thought of that, but I know that would not help me. It was only the humiliation talking. So instead, I just continue until my sickness subsides, all while the guy beside me keeps telling me that it'll be all right.

After a while, it's nice to have something to focus on instead of the rolling of my stomach and the burning in my

throat.

When it's finally over, I sit there for a good few minutes, just taking in some deep breaths, making sure I'm truly okay before blindly reaching over for some toilet paper to wipe my face before flushing. I don't move from my place on the floor, though, and the guy still holds my hair. I wish he'd just go. I don't want to see who is giving me comfort because I know I look like hell right now, and probably smell worse.

I wince at the thought when the guy lets go of my hair, his soft voice a mix of uncertainty. "Are you doing okay?"

I nod, unsure of what else I could say, still waiting for him to leave.

I eventually feel him step away from me, then hear the water running for a short time before a plastic cup full of water is held before my face. I blink at it in confusion before forcing my eyes up the strong, muscular forearm, to the big bicep, and a wide, firm-looking chest. This is like the bodies I've read about and never thought actually existed, but it's when I reach his face that my breath gets stuck in my chest.

A pair of warm blue eyes, not light blue, but a dark blue, like the deepest part of the ocean, are looking back at me with a look of genuine concern that touches my heart. His jaw is strong and his hair blonde, which appears to be short on the sides and long on the top, looking as if he had just ran his hands through it. He's effortlessly hot and he has just seen me throw up. And now, I'm gawking at him like a shameless idiot.

I mentally slap myself, taking the cup, careful not to touch him. "Thank you." My voice comes out more timid than I'd like it to.

I take a sip, grateful to wash away the taste in my mouth as I wait for the hulking man beside me to leave, but he merely plops down on the tiled floor beside the toilet, facing me with his back against the wall, his long legs out in front of him as he regards me with a thoughtful expression.

I sit there, unsure of what to say or do, so I say again, "Thank you, um... you can go now."

But instead of leaving, he curls his lip and says, “What kind of guy would I be if I leave a sick girl alone in the bathroom?”

I narrow my eyes at the teasing lilt in his voice. “The kind that does what a girl asks.”

He continues to watch me as I take another sip, followed by a sigh as he speaks again. “What are you doing up here anyway?”

I give him a long look before nodding my head to the toilet. “I’d think that was obvious.”

“No, I meant that usually people come upstairs to fuck.”

I flinch from the word, always hating it and how crass it sounds. “Do you have to call it that?”

The man blinks at me, confused. “What? Fuck? Would you prefer *making love*?”

He raises a brow at me, and I shiver. “Anything but that?”

The man chuckles, amused, as he shakes his head. I furrow my brow at him. “What’s so funny?”

He lets the chuckle subside, smiling at me. “You’re just kind of cute.”

I cock my head. “Kind of cute? Um, thank you?”

“It’s a compliment.”

“Has it worked in the past?”

He shrugs, his eyes holding mine, and I have to resist the need to squirm under his gaze. “Never met anyone I found cute like you before.”

His words silence me as I process them, unsure of how to react. A part of me wants to scoff at the line I’m sure he has used on other girls before. I mean, a guy that looks like him is likely to have a line-up of girls to choose from. But there was also something about the way he looked at me with a fearless and unwavering gaze that made me feel like I shouldn’t be in here with him. I’m not scared he’s going to hurt me, but more scared of how those words and those eyes may affect me with

the combination of alcohol in my system. So instead, I give a nervous laugh, and eye the now closed bathroom door before looking back at him. “So, I take it you aren’t leaving?”

He scoffs, crossing his legs at the ankles. “So another guy can snap you up? No way.”

I raise a brow at his cockiness. “Who says you will?”

“I think if you give me a chance, you won’t be able to resist me.”

It’s now my turn to scoff, no way was I going to let this guy know he is winning. “Quite presumptuous of you.”

Those eyes hold mine with a promise, before his deep voice spreads warmth through my belly. “We’ll see.”

The intensity of the moment makes the room feel smaller and hotter. I can’t help but laugh nervously. “Well, you are the only to guy to ever flirt with me after seeing me just throw up.”

Still holding my eyes, he says, “Because I’m not like other guys, sweetheart.”

“Harper,” I tell him, for reasons I’m sure of. Maybe it’s because I’ve always hated being called ‘sweetheart’ by guys. Maybe because it made this moment feel impersonal and I want him to know who he is talking to. Maybe I wanted to hear my name from his lips...

“What?”

“If you are going to flirt with me, it might be a good start to know my name. It’s Harper.”

He watches me for a moment before a slow smile appears on his gorgeous face, and he leans forward slightly, extending a big hand out to me. I look at it, thinking about what Mia always says about guys with big hands, but quickly shake that thought away. It isn’t like me to think like that. “Nice to meet you, Harper.”

Against my better judgement, I take his hand and shake, trying not to concentrate on the warm roughness of his palm

against my skin, before quickly pulling my hand away. “Even under these circumstances?”

He leans back and grins. “Hey, it’ll be a great story to tell the grandchildren.”

At that, I let out a loud belly laugh. “Wow, you really are jumping the gun.”

And he is back to holding my gaze, only this time, one side of his perfect mouth is quirked. “Just know what I want when I see it.”

This time, I squirm where I am still perched by the toilet. “Well, you can want it, but that does not make it yours.”

“Like I said, we’ll see.”

I laugh at his confidence, shaking my head when I realize that he hasn’t told me his name. He is just a nameless, gorgeous man, hanging out with me in a bathroom at a party. This really would be an interesting story to tell the grandkids. “What’s your name?”

He opens his mouth to speak, but is suddenly cut off by a loud bang that reverberates around the room, startling me as a guy stumbles in on unsteady feet, a girl at his side helping to hold him up. But he only gets a couple of steps into the bathroom before my mystery man barks with an authority I didn’t expect. “Occupied! Go downstairs!”

I jump at his tone, but can’t help the between my legs at him taking charge. Wow, where did that idea come from?

Biting my lip, I wonder who I am becoming with this man I don’t even know. My whole life, I’ve just been the hopeless romantic who dreams of a romcom ending of her own. Of a guy standing outside her bedroom window with a boom box, a guy who’d run across town just to declare his love. But I never thought I would be a girl who would want a guy to tell her what to do in a sexual way.

I push the thought aside for now as the drunk guy and his companion stumble off in alarm at seeing us, closing the door behind them. “This is becoming a popular hangout spot.” The

observation leaves my lips before I can think too much about it.

“We could always go somewhere else?”

“Like where?” I ask, already knowing based on the heated look in his eyes.

“My room is just down the hall.”

Ignoring every part of me screaming yes, I remember why I was in here and am instantly all too aware of the gross taste in my mouth. “Oh my god! You just saw me throwing up!”

He simply nods his head to the counter behind my head. “There’s toothpaste on the counter behind you.”

“You are so gross.” I curl my lip in disgust, but proceed to reach behind me to retrieve the toothpaste. I dab a little on my finger and put it on my tongue, grateful for the minty taste.

“Would you rather I act disgusted?”

“Yes! Like a normal person, not like you have some weird puke fetish. Wait - is that what this is?”

He shrugs. “All right, if disgusted is what you want, here is it.” He sits up and makes a show of clearing his throat before exclaiming exaggeratedly, “That is disgusting! You must leave the house at once, you Frankenstein goblin!”

I raise my brows. “Frankenstein goblin?”

“Well, I couldn’t call you cute.” He winks, and I laugh, which only makes the smile return to his face.

“At least I got a smile.”

I bite lip as I see his eyes on my mouth, but that only makes the heated look return, so I release my lip and clear my throat. “That’s the only one you’ll get.”

“I bet I could get another.”

I scoff. “Oh yeah, how- oh no! Stop it!” Before I know what’s happening, he reaches over and tickles my sides. I’m so stunned, I collapse on the floor, curling in on myself to stop

the onslaught. I scream and laugh, begging for mercy. “Seriously, stop it! I’m really ticklish.”

“You don’t say.” He continues, moving from my stomach to my underarms, and I almost feel tears in my eyes as I grab his hands, trying to wrestle them away. My cheeks ache from the laughter and smiling, and I continue to plead.

“Please!” I beg, pulling his arms, but the way I pulled them, it propels him forward until I feel his body over mine. His warmth surrounds me and his weight stops my breath in my chest as I gasp.

We both freeze so suddenly, me lying on my back, the cold tiled floor sending chills up my spine as his body hovers over mine, his front pressed against me, our legs tangled, and his dark blue heated gaze staring into mine and moving over my face, only to stop over my mouth.

The only sounds filling this small space is the sound of our heavy breathing.

I know I should say something. I should laugh to break the tension filling the room, but I can’t bring myself to make a peep. All I feel is warmth in the pit of my stomach, an ache growing between my legs at his proximity, and something hard pressed against my hip.

He’s clearly thinking the same thing as me as he blinks, his eyes maintaining that heat when he returns them to mine. He says in a low gruff tone, almost sounding just barely controlled, yet gentle, “I’m on top of you.”

I swallow, forcing myself to speak, my voice breaking as I say, “It appears so.”

He looks at my lips again before asking, “Do you want me to get off of you?”

Every part of my body screams *no*, and even though I have a voice in my head cautioning me to what’s happening, I feel safe, desired, and I really want this right now. I want to be the type of girl that takes risks and I’m really liking how this guy is looking at me. “It might be the alcohol, but ...” I reposition slightly, opening my legs beneath him, allowing him to settle

until I can feel his erection through his jeans. I bite my lip at the sensation and move my hands to rest on his trim waist, playing with the hem of his shirt. “No.”

I watch his jaw harden with restraint when he presses his cock against me, closing his eyes briefly before looking down at me with an intensity that promises a primal experience. He’s holding himself back as he lowers his face to mine, stopping when his nose grazes mine, our breaths dancing together. “What do you want, Harper?”

One thing comes to mind, and I respond by pressing my hands against his sides, moving around and up his sculpted back. Pulling him closer to me, I love the feel of his muscles rippling beneath my touch and how he’s shaking with control. He’s bringing out a confidence I didn’t think I had, one I’ve only seen in movies and read about in books. It’s like all we want is to get closer, like we feel comfortable and safe in this place, despite not knowing each other. It’s this confidence that pushes me to lift my head up just enough so that my lips graze his soft warm ones, my legs curling around his waist to bring him closer, needing some relief between my legs that I know only he could provide. I whisper with a desperation I should be embarrassed about, but I just don’t care in this moment, “Kiss me.”

He doesn’t hesitate. It’s like something snapped inside of him as he growls before crashing his lips to mine until we’re only lips, tongues, and teeth, hands everywhere at once, his cock grinding against me. I lift my hips, meeting his thrusts with my own, our breaths mixed with heavy grunts and moans escaping us both. I’m truly lost in the sensation of him, so much so, that I blink in surprise when he pulls back, his lips red and wet from our kisses. He looks down at me, my chest heaving beneath him with each breath as he asks, “Just kiss?”

I quickly shake my head, knowing that if he were to leave me like this now, I may kill him. “No, more. Much more.”

I emphasize this by lifting my hips and rubbing along his cock. “Thank fuck,” he hisses, then his lips are back on mine, his weight heavy on me, but we’re still not close enough. My hands run over his back, up and through his hair, then back

down until I am gripping his ass and pulling him closer, making him groan with a need I understand all too well. I reach down to his jeans, my lips still on his as I work to unbutton them.

He breaks the kiss only long enough to push them down and kick them off, but before he can get back on top of me, I've already gotten to work pulling his shirt over his head. He kneels before me in nothing but black boxer briefs, his muscular body on display, looking like it was sculpted by an artist.

I feel his eyes running over me as he raises a brow. "Anything else you want off?"

I look down at him, his huge length pushing against the fabric of his underwear, and I am suddenly overcome with a mix of fear that it won't fit and excitement of what I could do to it, to him to make him moan and scream my name. He's still there waiting when I order him, sitting up and resting on my hands. "Take them off."

He smiles at that before awkwardly kicking them off in the limited space, then returns to kneeling before me, his length so long and thick, I can't help but lick my lips, which only makes him groan.

Oh, the things this man makes me want to do. I lie back down on the tiled floor, still fully dressed as I tease, "Now I have you naked and all to myself."

He eyes the clothes on my body. "And what are we gonna do about you? You are too overdressed." I giggle as he moves to hover over me, stopping at my breasts to nuzzle his face in them.

I run my hands through his hair. "That is true, what are we gonna do?"

He raises his head and a mischievous look meets mine as he reaches down and plays with the hem of my shirt. "Well, for starters, this needs to go." Lifting my shirt over my head and throwing it over his shoulder, his eyes grow hotter as he looks down at my lacy white bra barely containing my big,

heaving breasts. He licks his lips and groans as he palms them, lowering his head and taking one in his hot mouth, his tongue massaging my nipple through the lacy fabric. A moan is pulled from me as the ache between my legs becomes excruciating. I throw my head back, feeling a slight pinch as he takes a nipple in his mouth and bites lightly, his tongue moving over the tip to soothe, my hands gripping in his hair, holding him there.

I continue to moan until he pops the nipple out of his mouth and moves down my stomach, stopping as he reaches the top of my jeans.

“Now these definitely need to go,” he says against my stomach before popping the button with his teeth, his eyes on mine with an animalistic need. He pulls the zipper down with his teeth as well, and I can’t help my eyes from rolling back.

My body instinctively thrusts my hips up toward his face, making him chuckle as he works to remove my jeans, exposing the white underwear with pink flowers I had put on because I didn’t think I would be in this situation.

My eyes widens when I see them, but he grins, clearly amused.

Feeling my face going red, I open my mouth to explain or come up with an excuse, but he quickly silences me as he lowers his naked body onto me, his warmth and hard muscle against my soft skin almost too overwhelming as his mouth takes mine in another kiss.

I groan against him as I feel his hardness rub against me, right where my body is screaming for him.

“I can feel how wet you are through your panties,” he moans against my mouth, not breaking the kiss, but the feel on his hot breath makes me gasp.

“What are you gonna do about it?” I tease, taking a bite out of his bottom lip, making him groan again and surprising myself.

I’ve never wanted a man like this before, like I’m ready to scratch my nails down his back as he owns my body, But that’s not on my mind as he moves away from me enough to grip my

underwear and pull them down my legs. I help by kicking them off, then I am left exposed.

I continue to lie there with my legs open to him as he just stares at my pussy. Licking his lips, he says, "Fuck, you're so wet. I really wanna taste you."

I want him to do something else. Not that I don't want to be eaten out, but it's only happened once and it was weird and awkward. I felt nothing during the experience and right now, my body is screaming for him to be inside me. "I want you inside me," I say with a courage I didn't think I had and that only makes him moan. He reaches down to grip the base of his cock and proceeds to stroke very slowly.

I can already see wetness on his tip.

"Do you have anything?" I suddenly ask, remembering some semblance of reality.

He blinks until he realizes, letting go of his cock, reaching over to the jeans he had discarded and withdrawing a single condom.

He holds it up with a cute victorious smile, which I return, as he tears it open with his teeth. But before he rolls it on, he looks up at me through his long lashes. "You sure?"

I nod eagerly, not wanting to get this close only to lose this moment now. I'm not scared or nervous and worried I'd regret this. I'm not thinking about tomorrow, but only right now and how this man's making me feel.

I had always played it safe and it has gotten me nowhere, so maybe taking a risk is a what I need.

Without hesitation, he rolls the condom on before climbing back on top of me. My legs are open and ready for him as he perches himself between them, his cock already resting against my entrance, I'm gritting my teeth against the desire to thrust my hips up to push him inside.

I wait, but the man above me just hovers, his chest on mine so that I can feel his rapid heartbeat against my own, our breaths dancing between us as he continues to look at me.

I see the thoughts flickering through his eyes, his mouth opening and closing as if wanting to say something. But we stay silent until he blinks, the heat and intensity returning to eyes seconds before he crashes his lips onto mine in a hungry kiss before thrusting his hips into me, his cock spreading me wide as I gasp into his mouth at the full feeling.

He groans as he enters me, growling into my mouth, “Fuck.”

Pulling back slightly, he moves his mouth to my neck, burying his face there, kissing, biting, and licking the sensitive skin. I feel the taut muscle under my hands as I run them up his back and to his shoulders. He pulls back, only to slam into me again. I bite my lip against a loud moan and move my hands to thread them into his hair, gripping it and pulling it as he continues to pound into me.

In that moment, I’m no longer the girl who dreams of hearts and flowers, grand gestures and romantic words, but instead, merely a girl succumbing to her natural urges and it doesn’t feel wrong, not with this stranger.

With the man in my arms, I feel cared for and desired and strong.

So how could this be wrong? Besides, most stories start somewhere, right?

* * *

A COOL CHILL creeping up my spine awakes me. I groan against the light filtering through the window, only barely remembering what happened last night. Blinking against the morning light, I raise my hand up to shield my eyes and groan with my aching joints as I move to sit up, holding a towel to my naked body we had used as a blanket, as we found ourselves passing out after the best sex of my life.

I smile at the memory, thinking about how he had kissed the tip of my nose as I drifted off to sleep in his arms, neither of us wanting to move. But the smile slips when I realize I am now alone in the bathroom.

Looking around, I see that his clothes are gone and mine are piled in the corner. I worry for a second until I suddenly hear, through the quiet of the house, him talking to someone.

The smile returns and I quickly dress, running my hands through my hair to tame the mess as best as I can before making my way out of the bathroom.

The house looks different from last night. Now empty with red solo cups littered on the floor and a couple of pairs of panties scattered as well. I move quietly, careful not to make too much noise as I continue to follow my stranger's voice down the stairs, but my steps slow as I hear his conversation coming from the kitchen and he sounds annoyed. "Dad, it was just a party. I doubt one party will be detrimental to my future."

Silence lingers, and I know he is on the phone. I debate whether I should announce my presence, but a talk with his dad isn't something I want to interrupt, so I stay standing on the stairs when he continues to talk, sighing. "Yeah, of course I'm taking things seriously." Another pause. "Dad, you didn't pay anything for me to be here. I'm here on scholarship."

A longer pause this time and another sigh, but it's his voice that gets me. It sounds weak and defeated, so unlike the playful man I slept with last night. "Yes, sir." All his fight is gone.

Another pause, and I can feel the growing irritation from him from where I stand. I don't have to hear his father's words to understand the high expectations he has of his son and that is something I could never wrap my mind around. Parents that have such high expectations and the desire to control their kids' lives until it is no longer theirs. I know my friend Mia has parents like that, though she brushes it off like it is nothing, but I see how it weighs on her. I just never push the issue. That is another reason why I stay silent and still as he says, "Yes, I've been careful."

He is silent for only a moment before he exclaims into the phone, sounding even more frustrated, "Look, if you're worried about me ruining my future over some girl—"

He is cut off and the topic of conversation comes into focus. His parents have high expectations and worry that a girl would ruin it. I understand that concern because I know there are bad women out there. True, most of it I've read about in books, but I'm sure it happens in real life, right? As the thought enters my mind, so does another that makes my stomach sink when he growls into the phone, "Don't worry, the plan is still in motion. Only football, no girls."

What happened last night clearly meant more to me than to him. I guess I should have known better than to expect more than one night from a guy who had sex with me in a bathroom without telling me his name. But I saw kindness in his eyes and the little kisses he gave me ...

I should be angry, I should storm off in a huff, but instead I stay and feel sad. Not sad for me, but for him, because I can hear his frustration at not being able to do his own thing. I can hear how trapped he must feel. It still hurts that it was only that one night and he had no intention of there being another, but I will not be that girl who begs for more when a guy isn't willing.

"Yeah, I got it, Dad! Look, I gotta go." Then, he's hanging up with a huff.

I jump when the silence that follows is shattered by a clatter of something being thrown across the counter, probably his phone, followed by a curse. It takes me a minute to decide what I am going to do. I could either sneak out and never speak to him again, or I could face him and let him know that I get it and to not expect me to give my number. Leave with my head held high.

My decision made, I make my way to the bottom of the stairs and circle around to enter the kitchen at the back of the house, stopping in the doorway when I see him with his shoulders slumped and his head in his hands as he leans on the kitchen counter, his back moving slowly with each breath, the same back I had scratched my nails down last night. I blink the thought away before clearing my throat.

He stands up and turns around so fast, trying to hide his reality, but I've already seen. I've already heard. I school my features as he looks at me, unsure of what to say, so I shuffle my feet, pointing to the door over my shoulder. "Hey, um, I think I'm gonna go."

He blinks at that, looking surprised, "You don't have to—"

He takes a step toward me, but I hold up a hand to stop him. I shrug, like it's not a big deal. "I gotta study anyway, and then work tonight. But it was fun."

At that, he narrows his eyes at me, and for a moment, I worry I might have hurt him as he cocks his head at me. "It was fun?"

Unsure of what else to say or do, I slowly back out of the room toward the front door, with a small smile I know doesn't reach my eyes. "Yeah, um, thanks, and maybe I'll see you around."

My hand gratefully finds the doorknob as he opens his mouth to speak. He takes a single step toward me, and I quickly fling the door open and am out before anything else can be said or done. Before I can be taken over by his charm again, by his touch, and his kiss.

I bite my lip against the desire to walk back in, knowing this will only be a memory I look back on as a good time. *That was all it was.*

I make my way down the driveway, opening my phone, and see so many missed calls from my aunt and Mia before I proceed to call an Uber so I can go home and wash the events of last night away.

CHAPTER 1



HUNTER

“Strike!” I scream loud enough to warrant some looks from other lanes as I throw my hands up in victory and beam at my demolished pins.

A chorus of groans sound from behind me, and my grin grows as I turn and swagger back to my friends.

My twin sister, Mia, glares at me from her seat, and I assume she’s starting to regret this night out she organized. She’s always doing this, finding cool places and things for us to do and dragging us out, but now here she is, glaring because she hasn’t been able to hit any pins yet. “Another one, what a surprise.”

“Oh, don’t be jealous, sis. We can’t all be the athletic one.”

She narrows her eyes, standing to take her turn. “It’s bowling, let’s not get too cocky.”

“Yeah, because any one of us could kick your ass,” my friend and roommate, Logan chimes in, sounding a little too confident, considering everyone is beating him.

I raise a brow and point to the TV monitor projecting our scores. “Yeah, dude, look at the scoreboard and say that again.”

He steals his jaw but doesn’t look, merely shaking his head and muttering, “Dick” before sitting back down.

I smile at yet another victory as Mia lines up her shot, awkwardly holding the ball in her small hands, despite it being the lightest ball ever, before a sigh draws my eye to my other

friend, Ava, as she sits there with her eyes focused on her phone, her brow furrowed in concern.

Ava has always been like a second sister to me, and after knowing her for years, I know she is not one to hide her emotions. If she is bothered, it shows, like right now.

I rack my brain thinking of what she might be worried about, knowing she hasn't mentioned anything, but she has been looking at her phone a lot. So I plop myself down beside her and nudge her with my shoulder. "Hey, everything okay?"

She blinks, finally looking up from her phone, and gives me a brief smile, her brow still furrowed slightly. "Yeah, I was just waiting for someone."

"A guy?" I ask, raising my brows, but she just laughs.

"Definitely not. I invited a friend from work, and I thought she might come."

"Don't worry, she'll be here," I tell her with another nudge to the shoulder, and she gives me another small smile until Logan rises from his seat for his turn, plucking the orange bowling ball up in his hands as he asks, "Wait, is she the cute brunette from the party?"

Ava gives him a long look as Mia makes her way back to us with an annoyed pout, her turn over when again she sighs. "Yes, and don't even think about it."

Logan's jaw drops, and he puts a hand to his chest, feigning hurt as he exclaims defensively, "Hey, I'm a catch!"

To that, Mia scoffs. "I'm sure you are, but she's the kind of girl who's looking for Prince Charming, not Dopey."

Logan takes the hand that was on his chest and points at Mia, still defensive. "Hey, Snow White likes Dopey."

"But she doesn't want to fuck him."

My eyes bounce between everyone, suddenly wondering who this friend is and how everyone has met her but me. I've never even heard of their friend until today, but I've been busy, so there's that. So I ask Logan as he makes his way to the lane for his turn, "You've met her? When?"

“Yeah, at that party a couple of weeks ago. Remember? The one where you disappeared?”

I school my features, trying to hide what I was really thinking about, or who. Are they talking about the party where I disappeared to spend it with Harper, with her delicious curves and amazing lips, her dark eyes I could just get lost in. That night, when I was with her, I was able to pretend like I had the freedom to be with who I wanted and simply enjoy the moment. I could pretend my world didn't revolve around football because that's all my parents think I'm good for, always reminding me of the time and money they've spent on it over the years. I was just able to be a guy with a woman, but then morning came and she was gone.

I guess I should've been happy. I couldn't be with her or anyone without keeping it from my parents, but it still took everything in me not to run after her, to submerge myself in the world she created for us where my parents couldn't touch what we had.

I'm so lost in thoughts of that night, when Mia directs her attention to me, a curious brow raised as she asks, “Yeah, where did you go?”

I open my mouth, unsure of how to answer that, when I suddenly hear a familiar voice that hits me right in the chest.

“Hey, guys. Sorry, I'm late. I had trouble finding the place.”

And there she is, standing right before me in a pair of jeans that hug her wide hips, making me want to grab them and hold her to me, to feel her body against mine again and her hot breath against my ear as she moans for more of me.

I swallow back the groan, keeping my face neutral as I watch her big smile as she moves her eyes over us, skimming past me. I steel my jaw.

Mia scoffs and waves a hand in my direction. “It's okay. Hunter got a little impatient, and we started the game already, but you can have my turn, if you'd like?”

“No, I’m fine.” Her eyes meet mine, and that is then I see it, the recognition as her smile slips slightly and she starts to blink at me. She is only stunned for a second before her smile is forced back on her face when she asks, “Hunter, was it?”

I narrow my eyes, knowing she remembers me, but I play along. “Um, yeah.”

“It’s nice to finally have a face for the name. I’m Harper. We haven’t officially met, but Mia says a lot about you.”

“Really?” I say, raising a brow, folding my arms across my wide chest and leaning back in my chair as I cock my head at her. “Like what?”

Harper opens her mouth to speak and I wait, curious to her response, when Mia pipes in with a clap of her hands, breaking the moment. “Oh, look it’s my turn! Ava, why don’t you take Harper to get some shoes.”

Without taking my eyes off of Harper, I leave no room for argument. “Ava, your turn is next. I can take care of Harper.”

I see a moment of panic in her eyes, and I’m curious as she starts to stammer out, “Actually, I think I can handle this on my own.”

She starts to back away, looking uncomfortable even with her smile, and I know I’m not gonna let her run. I force my own toothy smile as I rise from my seat and level her with an unwavering gaze, showing her that I wasn’t budging so she might as well stop resisting. “Oh no, I insist.”

She opens her mouth to argue, but instead gives me a tight smile, feeling everyone’s curious eyes on her as they watch our strange interaction, nodding. “If you insist.”

I extend a hand, allowing her to go first, and she does. As I sneak a peek at her ass in those jeans, I regret it. All I want to do was to pull her to me, but I clear my throat and move to walk beside her, neither of us talking as we navigate the groups and families milling around happily.

The tension remains thick with unsaid words, but I am curious if she is going to speak and break the act she was pulling back there, maybe explain to me why she’s acting like

we don't know each other. Or maybe she really doesn't remember me.

Movement catches my attention at the corner of my eye as she starts to pick at the material of her shirt, smoothing her hands over the fabric, needing to busy herself because of her nerves. She finally clears her throat as we get closer to the counter for her shoes, breaking the silence as she says in an all too chipper voice, "So it was nice of you guys to invite me."

I scoff. "Is that what we are doing?" Her steps falter slightly, but she runs to catch up to me, and I turn to look at the confused look on her face. Yeah, this is what she is doing, but why? Not like I could pursue anything anyway, but it still bothers me. "Pretending we don't know each other?"

The act slips as she blinks at me, nibbling on her bottom lip and continuing to fiddle with her shirt. "Would you rather tell everyone the truth?"

"Why not?" I ask, more out of curiosity, when we finally reach the line at the counter.

She shrugs. "What would it matter anyway? It's never going to happen again because I'm not that kind of girl."

I frown at her words as she turns away from me. "What kind of girl?"

She levels me with a look of her own. "A girl who sleeps with a guy she doesn't know."

"But you did," I say, drawing the eyes of the couple in front of us until they divert their attention from my glare.

"Yeah, once, but I am not a booty call who can be used."

All making sense, I chuckle, crossing my arms over my chest again and cocking my head, a brow raised. "A booty call?"

Harper scowls, clearly not amused and honestly neither am I. The thought of her thinking she was a booty call pisses me off, but the sad thing is that it can't be more. "Don't laugh. I don't make a habit of sleeping with random guys. I don't judge

girls who do, but I dream of love and a happily ever after, things you don't get from booty calls and one night stands."

We reach the counter and every cell in my body is screaming at me to argue, to say that she is no one night stand. I haven't been able to get her out of my mind since, but it can never be more.

"Hunter! You're up! Hurry up and win the damn game!" Logan shatters the little bubble we've found ourselves in, bringing me back to the here and now, to the reality that the girl before me is one I can never have in the way she deserves.

So instead of arguing like I want to, I clench my fists in frustration and storm away, feeling her eyes at my back regret on my heels.

THE GAME ENDED and I won, but I didn't feel like fist pumping the air and gloating about it to anyone who would listen. Instead, I wanted to go home and try not to think about the curvy brunette across the room from me.

It was easier when I didn't know where she was or how to find her, but now here she is and I can't do shit.

Instead of going home, everyone decided to play some games at the arcade, whereas I followed Harper to the billiards room in the corner where she's now setting up for a game.

I sit, watching her with a basket of fries before me, untouched, lost in the way that she moves around the pool table confidently, setting up the balls where they need to be.

I know how she feels, smells, and tastes, but I watch on, wanting to know more, even if I can't have her. I want to know more about this woman who has haunted my dreams.

I'm lost in memories and thoughts of her that jump in surprise when a body suddenly plops down in the chair across from me.

I blink at Logan's knowing grin. "She's cute, huh?"

I roll my eyes, knowing who he is talking about. "She's my sister's friend."

“Doesn’t mean she’s not cute.”

“Shut up and eat the food I know you came over here for,” I growl, pushing my fries in his direction.

Logan shrugs, taking a handful of fries and shoving them in his mouth, talking around his mouthful of food. “Don’t worry, I won’t dare go there. Besides, she keeps looking over here when you’re not looking.”

My eyes instantly go to see her not looking at me and instead chalking the end of her pool cue. It takes me a second before I realize Logan is laughing loud enough to draw the attention of some of the surrounding groups.

I turn to glare at him. “Fuck off.”

“I’m sorry, bro. But she has been looking over here.”

I fight the urge to look at her again and shrug, schooling my features to Logan’s prying eyes as he chuckles, casting a glance over my shoulder.

“And if I were you, I’d run over there because I can see some guys eyeing her up.”

To that, I turn, and true to his word, there are a couple of guys gathered in the corner by the pool table, talking and laughing. One dressed in a red polo tilts his head in Harper’s direction, his eyes looking her over up and down, and I clench my fists at the thought of this dickhead being near her, knowing what she feels like, how she sounds. Those were things I know, those things are mine.

Before any logical thought enters my mind, I’m up and out of my chair, Logan’s laughter following me as I practically run up to the pool table to stand beside her as she leans over to line up her first shot.

I resist the urge to look at her ass, resist the thoughts of taking her over this pool table. Maybe I should get a pool table? I shake my head, not wanting to focus on that now as I redirect my attention to the guy still checking her out until his eyes reach me.

My eyes focus on his, glaring as I silently warn him to back the fuck off. His gaze holds mine in a mental battle, but I don't budge. We stay that way for I don't know how long until he finally tenses his jaw, frowns, and drops his gaze, submitting.

That's what I thought.

I mentally give myself a high five, so caught up in my victory that I don't realize Harper has already finished her shot and was now staring at me with a raised brow and an expectant look on her face as she props her hip against the pool table. "Can I help you?"

"Hi," I say with a nervous smile, and she cocks her head, confused.

"Hi?"

She continues to stand there, waiting for me to say something else. I rack my brain until I finally blurt out, "Um, do you like to play?"

"No, I just like standing near the table and setting it up. Of course, I like to play."

I give a nervous laugh. "Mind if I join you?"

She gives a shrug, then nods before handing me a pool cue. I take it and quickly chalk it up before lining up my own shot. Feeling her eyes on me as I hold the pool cue, I struggle to focus on the game before me, taking my shot and not getting a ball in.

I silently curse myself and rise from the table, hearing a little chuckle from her as she walks around the table, assessing where to take her shot. "I never asked, how have you been?"

"Um, fine," she says with a shrug, not looking at me as she proceeds to lean over the table again, this time giving me a nice view of her ample cleavage.

I swallow, speaking with a cracked voice. "Yeah, me too."

She takes her shot and rises, finally looking at me as she tilts her head again, and I start to shuffle my feet nervously, unsure of how to proceed with this girl. I want her, but I can't

have her, and I don't want other guys to have her. I know that makes me selfish, but I can't help it.

She raises a brow at me again. "You're really weird, you know that, right?"

I shrug, not knowing what to say but the truth. "Only with you, it seems."

This time, both brows go up. "That line usually work?"

"First time using it," I tell her, holding her gaze. I think I see her eyes soften, but just for a moment, because she then gives me a small smile, nodding her head.

"Uh huh, sure."

"What do you think of me? You think I'm just a player who has one night stands often?"

"Aren't you?"

I stay silent, because I have had one night stands, but not by choice. There's an expectation from my family and each time I mention a relationship to my dad, he loses his shit and talks to me about priorities and opportunities, that women can take your focus and ruin your chances. I don't agree, but he's not the kind of man who listens to any other ideas but his own. But sometimes you need that companionship, that touch, so yeah, I have one night stands because to me, that is better than nothing.

I let my silence hang there, shame appearing on my face as she nods to herself. "That's what I thought. But don't worry, I get it, which is why I'm trying not to dwell on it. Just move on from it."

"It's complicated," I say, wanting to explain it to her, but each time I've tried, the voices in my head are always saying the same thing: *Just do what you want, what can your father do, you are just being silly, etc.* I know that, but I think a part of me fears he may be right. What if I take a chance on a girl and my game slips? I don't have a backup plan for my future, just football. I can't risk a distraction like a relationship, yet I can't stop myself from thinking of possibilities with this woman.

“I know.”

“What if I want to dwell on it?”

“What good will that do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Look, I really get it, but it’s like I said, I’m not a one night stand kind of girl.”

“Oh, trust me, I know. One night would never be enough.” I watch as her eyes heat slightly and her cheeks go pink, and I know she is remembering that night as much as I am.

She blinks and whispers, “Hunter, don’t say things like that.”

“Why? It’s true. I haven’t been able to get you out of my head since.”

Her eyes turn doubtful as she asks, “So you’re telling me you haven’t slept with anyone since that night?”

“That’s what I’m telling you.”

Her gaze wavers on mine, her resolve slipping, and I can’t bring myself to shut up and walk away. Instead, I’m pushing for a chance, for her to see that she was more than a one night stand. What good will it do to have her know that?

I watch as she opens her mouth to speak and I wait with bated breath for her next words, next thoughts, until they are silenced by the loud singsong voice of my sister as she struts up to us. “Are we having fun? Ooh, who’s winning?”

Harper blinks, running a hand through her hair, and tears her eyes away from me to look down at the table. “Um, Hunter, but, I’m sorry, girls, I think I need to head home.”

Harper is already backing out the door, when Ava asks, “What? Why?”

“I’ve got a huge paper I’ve been putting off, and I think I should be working on that.” She avoids eye contact with me, still walking away.

Ava steps forward with a furrowed brow. “A paper? For what class? We have almost every class together.”

“It’s been fun. I’ll see you guys later. Thank you again for inviting me.” She turns on her heel and practically runs out of the bowling alley. Away from me.

Oh, I don’t think so.

I let her run away once and there is no way I’m letting her run away again without some answers.

I quickly offer up some excuse to everyone before gathering my things and sprinting out the door. I curse when I see that it is pissing down rain and wish I had brought a jacket or something. Pushing that thought aside, I search the parking lot, but it is the sound that gets me.

It’s the sound of an engine, not the smooth purr of it starting, but the painful grind of it refusing to start. I hear it again and again and focus my attention on the little yellow Volkswagen Beetle at the back of the parking lot, furrowing my brow when I see movement in the front seat.

I brave the cold rain and walk toward it until I see Harper in the front seat continuously hitting the steering wheel in frustration. I can hear her screams the closer I get until she finally stops and rests her head on the steering wheel in defeat.

I consider going back inside as I stand there with my hair sticking to my forehead and my clothes already soaked through from the heavy downpour, but there’s a strong part of me that wants to go to her, not only because I need answers, but because I feel like she needs me. I can’t walk away now after seeing her look so defeated.

So without another second of hesitation, I reach the car and open the unlocked passenger side door, plopping myself inside before closing the door behind me, shielding myself from the rain but not from her questioning stare.

I hold her alarmed eyes with mine as silence fills the car, unsure of what to say.

Silence lingers a moment longer until Harper finally asks in a small voice, “Hunter? What are you doing?”

“We’re not done.”

At that, she closes her eyes and gives a tired sigh, shaking her head. I already know what she is going to say when she says my name. “Hunter...”

“Why are you running?”

She blinks, looking from me to the steering wheel before her. “I’m not running, clearly because my stupid car won’t start.”

I see her hand go for the ignition again, but I am quicker. I reach over and pull the keys from the car before she can argue, holding them in my lap. “You are running, and I think it’s because you like me and you had fun that night and maybe that scares you.”

Harper scoffs. “Why would it scare me?”

I simply raise one brow at her, daring her to deny it because I can see the truth in the blush appearing on her cheeks. “Because you want more. You want the sex, the touch, and kissing, the dirty whispered words. But you also want the dates, love letters, and the happily ever after.”

She turns away from me, focusing her gaze on the rain painting her windshield as she says, “Well, none of that is gonna happen. I heard your phone call that morning. I only heard your side, but I could fill in the blanks. I never want to be a burden to someone or the reason the person I’m with doesn’t accomplish their dreams. Besides, it was clear a relationship isn’t in the cards.”

I stare at her, processing her words, remembering that phone conversation with my dad and cursing it all at the same time because it all made sense now. “Did you think to talk to me?”

She finally looks at me. “Would you have proved me wrong? Would you have picked the phone up and told your dad about the girl you slept with, the one you want to date?”

God, I wanted to. Well, I wouldn’t have told him the details. I would’ve told my dad that I was seeing someone, but I couldn’t. I knew what I would get, the same lecture.

“I didn’t think so.” The hurt and knowing look that appears on Harper’s face breaks me, and all I want to do is to prove her wrong.

“I know that you are a forever girl, but I just can’t give you that right now.”

“That’s okay.”

That look on her face is really starting to kill me, and before I can stop myself, I reach across the console and take her small hand in mine, squeezing gently as she looks at me. She does not pull away as I tell her, “But I wasn’t lying when I said I haven’t been able to get that night out of my head. I haven’t been with anyone else because every time I look at another woman, I compare her to you and they all seem to pale in comparison.”

I stroke the back of her hand with my thumb in gentle circles, and she shakes her head. “You don’t even know me, Hunter.”

“I know how you feel beneath my hands, against my lips. I know how it feels to have your hot breath on my ear as you gasp and moan.” I lean across the car slightly just to get closer to her and she holds my gaze with her own.

“What’s my favorite color? What’s my favorite book? Movie?”

“I want to know more... one day, hopefully soon.”

“When?”

“I don’t know.”

“So what? You want me to wait for a time you don’t even know?” I know how unfair that was for me to ask, but I can’t just walk away. So I use the hand in mine to pull her closer to me, until I know she can feel my warm breath on her face, her soft eyes looking at mine.

“I want you to be with me. I want to know more about you, but I just can’t give you the public dates, the public announcement of us as a couple. Not yet.”

It's all I can give right now, and even though I want to give her more.

I watch as her thoughts race behind her eyes, considering it until she says in a weak voice, "You could be playing me to get more sex."

"Do you think I am?"

"No." I give her a small smile as silence descends before its interrupted by a little sigh from Harper.

"So you're proposing what? Friends with benefits? A secret relationship?"

"In a way, yes. For now." I nod and wait as she mulls this over.

She sighs again, rolling her eyes. "I'm gonna regret this, aren't I?"

I blink in surprise. "Is that a yes?"

"Yes."

My lips are on hers, swallowing her gasp and digging my fingers through her hair to get her closer to me. Every cell in my body needs this woman close, and I thank God for her and the fact that she said yes.

PRESENT DAY



A YEAR AND A HALF LATER

CHAPTER 2



HUNTER

The screeching of my alarm jars me awake for the fourth time this morning. I groan under the covers, but poke my arm out and blindly reach for my phone, hitting it to snooze, and descending the room into blessed silence.

I retreat back into the covers, hoping to sleep away this day and everything I have coming, hoping to hide away and forget all that has happened in the past months.

All because of her.

My chest aches as I think of her dark hair and dark eyes and I growl, shaking my head and squeezing my eyes closed. That was the thing about silence, it was nice until it allowed the unwanted thoughts to creep back in.

But I'm not given long to enjoy the peace, when I hear the bang of my door being pushed open, hitting the wall as Logan comes barreling in. "Bro, what are you still doing in bed? You gotta go—"

"Yeah, I know," I groan from under the covers, but make no effort to move, not wanting to see the concern and disappointment on my roommate and friend's face. It's all I see now, all because I made a stupid mistake, but none of them know the truth behind it.

Logan doesn't leave, but starts tugging open drawers and pulling what sounds like clothes out and throwing them on my bed. I feel the weight of them as they land on me, and I groan again when another pair of feet enter the room.

“He’s still in bed?” my other roommate, Hadley, asks Logan.

“He’s still in bed,” he confirms, his breaths heavy as he panics.

I wonder what time it is and how late I’m going to be. I should be more worried like everyone else, but I just don’t have the strength. I’ll get there eventually.

But apparently, *eventually* is not soon enough because a second later, the covers are being thrown off of me and I yell against the sunlight filtering in my bedroom windows. Covering my face with my hands, I growl, “I was getting up.”

“Dude, you’re gonna be late and you can’t be late for—”

“I know,” I whine as I slowly sit myself up, flinging my legs over the edge of the bed and letting the exhaustion slump my shoulders. I run my hands up my face and into my hair.

Hadley appears before me, her blonde hair with colorful ends hanging around her face. Her hip’s popped, her hand resting on it as she narrows her eyes at me. “Do you, though? This is no joke, Hunter. If you screw this up...

“Guys, I know! Just leave me alone so I can get dressed.” They both stare at me, looking tired and worried, and my heart aches as I see what I’ve done to them, to everyone.

They leave without a word, and I proceed to get myself ready, trying not to think about what I have done to my life.

My best friend, Conner, tries to see me, but I push him away. I’ve already pushed my twin, Mia, away so much that she doesn’t even try to call anymore. I know she checks in and that she is giving me my space, but I have done that. Logan and Hadley treat me like I’m a patient at a hospital who they are waiting for to snap, but that already happened.

Months ago, I snapped, and someone could’ve gotten hurt. I try not to think about that too much, knowing it would only make things worse, but the ache that resided in my heart for months prior was too much. Only alcohol seemed to help numb it. It was heartbreak after heartbreak.

First, my parents died, and even though they weren't the best, they were all I had. Then, my sister started wanting to find herself. I understood that, but I kind of needed her, and it felt like she wasn't there. I know I shouldn't be angry at her because we both suffered a loss, but it was just so lonely without her, and only when I was on a downward spiral did she want to speak to me.

It was too late then, because I was pushed over the edge... by a girl.

I blink any thought of her out of my mind, happy to never see her again, yet doubtful that would be the case.

Pulling my shirt over my head, I'm putting on my shoes when I hear Logan calling from downstairs. "Dude, if you don't hurry up, we are leaving without you!"

I roll my eyes, hating I have to rely on him, on anyone to get me around because I was dumb enough to lose my license. *One mistake and it has ruined everything.* I make my way downstairs to hear Hadley and Logan bickering by the door as they gather their things for the day.

"I can't pick him up, I have a class I'm teaching at the Art Center," Hadley tells him, as if that's something he should've remembered.

"I can't, I have a test."

"Well, one of us needs to!" Hadley exclaims, and I grit my teeth at having them argue over what to do with me, as if I wasn't right here, letting me know the inconvenience I am. I did this to my friends.

I clear my throat, not wanting to dwell on that for long or I might go down another dangerous spiral. They turn to look at me standing at the bottom of the stairs. "I could get an Uber. I'm more than capable of doing that."

They both look at each other before looking back at me. Hadley sighs and puts a sad smile on her face. "I'll see if Anna can cover for me. She owes me anyway."

I grit my teeth again. "You don't have to move your life around, guys. I'm not gonna knock out the Uber driver and

drive myself. I wanna get back on my feet and this will be a good start.”

“We know, but it’s your first day and it would make us feel better if one of us drove you.”

I nod, instantly knowing what this is. It isn’t friends wanting to be there for me or friends worried I’d crash another car, it’s friends who don’t trust me to actually go to my community service.

Honestly, I don’t want to go, but I know I got off easy and it would’ve been worse if I had hurt someone else. I knew I have to go, but it still hurts to see my friends trust me so little. Instead of arguing, because I know it would be pointless, I simply nod before joining them in the entryway.

Hadley smiles and nods, throwing her backpack over her shoulder and fiddling with her keys as Logan does the same.

I look between them until Hadley says, too happily, “Let’s go, sunshine. I’ll get you a coffee on the way.”

I WASN’T TOO much of a fan of coffee, but I accepted the drink when it was handed to me as we exited the drive thru on our way to my community service.

Neither of us spoke, the silence and regret that lived there taking up residence in the car like an extra passenger. Instead, I focused on the houses and buildings that passed us until Hadley finally turned on the radio.

It was good to drown out some of my thoughts with the beat of the music. At least until I started thinking of Mia. My chest ached at the thought of my twin sister and how long it had been since I had seen her, and I had no one to blame but myself. The classic rock that’s blaring through the car is making me think of how she was with music, how she is. Ever since she was young, she would get lost in music. Her mood could change with a single song. She could find the answer to her problem in a song, every problem except me.

I clench my fists as I remember the look in her eyes when she had come to see me in the hospital after one of the biggest mistakes of my life. Broken and bruised, even after I had been cruel to her and pushed her away, she was there like she always was. But instead of accepting her love, I threw it back at her. I watched the pain and hurt touch her eyes and I felt that pain myself, then I watched her pain turn to anger as she finally turned away.

I blink, trying to wash away the memory as I quickly shut off the music and descend into silence again.

“So not a fan of that one?” Hadley comments, but I just continue to look out the window. Until this drive of horrors gives me another gut punch as we proceed to drive past the university.

My jaw tensing, I try to swallow my regret, but I am almost choking on it as the reality of what I have done really hits. I have pushed my friends away, lost my scholarship, and almost got myself killed in an accident, and am now having to do some community service. All because of a girl.

Unable to handle it anymore, feeling my anger and frustration growing, I squeeze my eyes shut and continue to let the silence take me, but clearly, that is too much to ask, as Hadley breaks the silence by asking, “Are you nervous?”

I open my eyes, finally turning to look at her with a furrowed brow. “What?”

“Are you nervous about today?”

“Why would I be nervous?”

Keeping her eyes on the road, she shrugs. “I don’t know.”

I scoff. “It’s not like I’m a kid on their first day of kindergarten, *Mom*. It’s just community service. I’ll go in and get it done so I can move on.”

“Hey, don’t give me that attitude. I’m trying to help you... we are all trying to help you.”

“Why?” I ask, turning in my seat to face her, but her eyes remain on the road. “You only moved in like a couple of

months ago, and now what? You think we are best friends?" I see her flinch at my words, and I wish I could stop, but I don't. My mouth moves without my control, spewing ugly words. "You don't know me and you have no idea what I have been through."

"Just because I've only known you a short time, doesn't mean I don't care, Hunter. You might not want me as a friend, but like it or not, you're my friend."

"And if I say no?"

This time she scoffs. "Who said you have any say in the matter?"

I narrow my eyes at her before sitting back in my seat, crossing my arms in a huff, but still, I feel a deep warmth in my chest. It's small but there. Knowing that I do have people in my life, if only I could stop hurting them. It's almost like I know they will leave and maybe it's just easier if I control how they do. Maybe it will hurt less because it hurts like a bitch when you don't see it coming.

We continue in silence until Hadley finally pulls the car over outside a large building with a sign on it reading: *Rising Sun Center*, with a little cartoon sun rising from behind the words. The sign looks happy and hopeful, like I'm sure it was supposed to, but it just sets my nerves on edge. I sit there unmoving until I hear, in a voice that is all too chipper. "All right, so I'll be back here to pick you up around 4 o'clock." Hadley is smiling a giant smile when I look back at her. "Have fun, kiddo," she quips with a wink, referring back to my snarky remark about me being a kid on their first day of school. With a grumble, I take my stuff and hop out of the car, ready to get this day over with.

I STAND OUTSIDE for a good ten minutes until I realize that if I don't move, I'll be late. I enter the building to see a large lobby area with backpacks and an array of kids either running around or sitting with their parents. Approaching the desk at the center of the room, I give the middle-aged woman, who

sits behind the desk with an open smile and southern accent, my name.

After a few kind words, she tells me to follow her and leads me to a single door off to the side. There is a long, narrow hallway on the other side of the door, with unflattering florescent lighting with the occasional flicker. The receptionist walks with a little too much of a bounce in her step, until she finally stops at one of the doors in the hallway, offers me another smile, and knocks.

“What?” an impatient woman’s voice calls from the other side.

“Sue? It’s Pepper,” she calls to the woman. “I have a young man here to see you. Hunter Belfort.”

It is quiet for a short moment until we hear an abrupt, “Send him in.”

Pepper gives me a final smile before opening the door for me. I take a breath and enter to find myself standing in a simple office with the same florescent lighting illuminating the small space. A row of filing cabinets takes up one side of the room, and a wide desk sits at the center of the room, with stacks of papers atop it, and a single computer. One of those old ones you don’t see anymore.

I keep my face composed as I wait for the small woman, who is sitting behind the desk, scribbling on a document in front of her. But then I jump slightly at the click of the door closing behind me. I don’t bother to check to see if Pepper is still there because I know I’m on my own.

I stand there a bit longer, shuffling my feet and I start to wonder if she has realized that I’m in the room or maybe forgot. She’s right in front of me.

A second later, her pen freezes over the document before she pushes it aside to join the other stacks of paper on the desk, and then finally, looks at me. I stay still under her watchful eyes, unsure of what to say.

Judging by the air of authority emanating from her, I would guess that she’s the boss, but you wouldn’t know it

looking at her. She's a petite woman dressed in a white button-down and black blazer, her mousy blonde hair hanging to her shoulders, and her young-looking face appearing pinched. Sharp blue eyes zero in on me, and I suddenly find myself nervous.

I swallow as she finally leans back in her chair, her eyes not leaving mine. "Hunter?"

"Yes."

"Why are you here?" I blink at her question, confused.

I open my mouth, then close it, before finally answering, "Um, I was told that you would be made aware."

"Oh, I am aware. But I wanna hear it from you."

I swallow again, then clear my throat before speaking. "I did some stupid stuff."

Her eyes never waver. "What stuff?"

I don't want to relive it, but this seems to be the theme this morning. Make a big mistake and the world won't let you forget it. But instead of arguing or huffing and puffing, because I knew that wouldn't get me anywhere, I steel my jaw and let out a deep breath through my nose. "Drove while drunk. I got hurt, but I also could've hurt someone else."

"You could've also been killed." I nod but don't like to think about that too much.

"And what have you lost because of this?"

I blink, surprised by her question. I actually think she was put on this earth just to punish me. She had to know everything, right? So why is she making me relive this by talking about it? "What?"

She doesn't react to my surprise. "You're a young man, who I'm sure had a plan for their life. Judging by the look in your eyes, I'd say you lost that, or something, at least."

You could say that. I try to hold back the wince at her words, but I force myself to speak, hoping to get this over with

so I can leave this woman and her painful questions. “Yeah, I lost my scholarship.”

“Football?”

I nod.

“You think I’m being cruel asking these questions?”

I know I should just shake my head. I know I shouldn’t nod like I want to. But I just say nothing. I just stand there and stare at the framed awards that decorate the wall behind her, not reading them but just using them as a focus point until she says, “Truth is, I’m not doing it to be cruel, but I believe it is important that when you enter these walls, you understand what you have done, what you have lost, and what you must earn back.”

It takes everything I have to hold back a scoff. “I won’t earn my scholarship back.”

“Life has a way of surprising us.”

I’m doubtful after everything that has happened, everything I’ve done, but her eyes hold mine like she knows I don’t believe her. I think I see the tiniest smile before the firm and serious expression returns. “You see, the *Rising Sun Center* is my life. It might not be yours, but I expect you to treat it, the workers, and the patrons with respect.” She looks at me pointedly with each word. “What do you know of the *Rising Sun Center*?”

I instantly curse myself, wishing I had at least looked it up before coming, but I automatically thought it was a community center or charity. Maybe it’s not. Honestly, I’ve just been avoiding thinking about this place until this morning when I was forced out of bed and to deal with the consequences of my actions. Now, here I am, looking stupid, as all I can do is shrug.

Her eyes narrow as she says firmly, “I need words.”

“I don’t know.”

She raises a brow at me. “You’ve come to do community service here and you don’t even know what it is? So far, not a

strong start for you.”

She rises from her place behind the desk, standing smaller than I thought. She only reaches my chest height, yet she still makes me nervous with her watchful eyes and no bullshit attitude. “Rising Sun is in charge of working with kids with special needs, using sports and athletics as a way to build communication skills, confidence, and hand-eye coordination. Generally, we have workers and some volunteers who build a great relationship with a child so we pair them up. A lot of these kids need routine and consistency here, so we cannot change the pairings too much. We want this to be a stress-free and friendly environment for the kids.”

I admit that the place sounds great, and a small glimmer of hope blooms in my chest at the thought of having anything to do with sports again. “So I’ll be working with one of the kids?”

She gives a little laugh. “Oh god, no. But it is important that you understand what we do here and who we cater for. You will be in charge of cleaning and maintenance. You’ll be working under Hector, our handyman, but first, I’ll take you out to Pepper, where she can get you set up and into the system. We’ll get you a set of keys for the rooms you will need access to. You will be limited to what space you can access.”

Of course that would be the case. They probably think I’m a troublemaker who will take money or steal documents or something. I cannot blame them due to why I’m here, but I can’t help but be a little hurt by it.

“Don’t I need access to clean it?”

“Hector will do that.” Sue stands waiting, and I shuffle my feet until she finally asks, her face firm and business-like, “Do you have any questions?”

I think for a moment, but it all seems pretty clear except, “Um, can I get shown around so I know where everything is?” Because the last thing I need is to get lost or found in a place I’m not supposed to be and end up getting into shit for it. I just wanna make this as easy as I can so I can just get it done and move on.

She gives me a polite smile that doesn't reach her eyes and a single nod. "Of course."

I nod in return, but before anything else can be said, we hear the click of the door. We both direct our attention to the door leading into the office as it springs open, and my heart sinks into my stomach at who I see standing in the doorway, holding a clipboard in her hand. "Sue, I just wanted to ask about the-"

In that moment, I see the same panic I feel reflected in her eyes as she looks between me and Sue, her mouth slightly open. Seeing her standing there, dressed in a yellow polo with the company logo over her right breast, it all makes sense. I seriously think the universe is trying to fuck with me because the girl that started this spiral is now standing right in front of me.

Harper Thomas.

CHAPTER 3



HUNTER

*H*er eyes are how I remember them. Of course they wouldn't change that much over the months she has been gone, but her hair looks longer, her bangs having grown out to graze her cheeks. Her eyes are still dark and alluring as they stare at me in the middle of the office of the *Rising Sun Center*.

Her mouth opens and closes as she stays there, dumbstruck, until Sue clears her throat behind me, making Harper blink back to the here and now, closing her mouth and redirecting her eyes to just beyond my shoulder. "I'm sorry to interrupt."

Sue scoffs behind me. "No worries. It's actually great that you are here, but what did you want to ask?"

She shakes her head, giving a nervous laugh. "Nothing, it's not important. What can I help you with?"

"This is Hunter. He will be working with the maintenance staff for a while. Could you do me a favor and show him around, where he needs to be and where to find everything?"

I watch Harper's face for any sort of reaction. We haven't spoken since I was in hospital after the accident. She had run in after months of being away, come to my bedside like a distressed girlfriend. But she made her choice, she left, so I told her to stay away from me and that I didn't need her. Of course she tried to fight me on it, but the memory of her walking away, and the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach... I couldn't do that to myself again.

Dad was right, women have the power to hurt you and ruin your life, because that is what she did.

Harper gives a curt nod to Sue like a good little worker, and before I know it, I am rising from my chair and following a nervous looking Harper, who is refusing to meet my eyes now, out into the hallway.

Silence descends between us as we make our way down the hall and out into the main area, where a variety of kids are gathered. Some are learning to throw a football, but are doing so awkwardly, others are kicking soccer balls into a goal, and the rest are learning to swing a baseball bat. The smell of the athletic equipment is both a joy and a ache to the chest as I think of how I've fucked up, throwing away any hope of going pro one day. I missed my team and the pain that came with training, so being surrounded by this every day is going to drive me mad.

Someone's throat clearing makes me blink out of my reverie and refocus my attention on a silently waiting Harper, standing with her arms crossed and a brow raised at me, like I'm wasting her time.

I roll my eyes and scoff as I continue to follow her, letting her play her best at the quiet game. We continue to walk until we reach another hallway, this one shorter with a single door at the end.

We stop at the door before Harper turns to me with emotionless eyes, waving to the door as she says, "This is where you will be. It's called the storeroom, but it'll have everything you need. I'm assuming you sign in with Sue so you know where her office is and as for that area out there..." She points to the open area with the sporting equipment and children before continuing. "You only have to be there if something needs to be cleaned or fixed. Hector is our head of maintenance and he's in there so he will be telling you what to do. Any questions?"

I merely shake my head, not knowing what else to say and just wanting to get this over with. All I can smell is Harper's familiar scent and I'm cursing it.

She shifts on her feet, but makes no move to leave yet. Neither do I until she says, “And try to stay out of trouble. My aunt’s friend didn’t get you this chance for you to ruin it.”

I laugh at that, crossing my arms over my chest. “What chance? I’m probably going to be cleaning up some kid’s puke or something and I have no chance of ever playing football again.”

“And who’s fault is that? No one forced a bottle to your mouth. No one forced you to drive drunk.”

I take a step back, because what can I say? I can blame her all I want, but she is right, no one forced me. Though she didn’t help things either.

Instead of arguing the point, I swallow some of my anger for now, putting my hand on the door handle. “Well, I’ll be sure to be on my best behavior then.”

CHAPTER 4



My shoulders are up to my ears as I stomp my way through the center until I reach Pepper at the front desk, needing an emergency dose of her positivity after drowning in what I used to know as Hunter Belfort.

I knew he was going to be here and I have been stressing about it for days. Really, I've been stressing about any time that I may see him ever since that day in the hospital when he scared the life out of me when he had his accident, and then after when he ripped my heart out when he told me to leave.

I didn't think he was serious. I mean, he had promised me someday and now it was like he was taking it back, wiping away at the memories we had made, and the worst part? I can't talk to any of my friends about it because they never knew. We couldn't tell them. It was just us, and now it is just us suffering.

I'm practically huffing with irritation when I reach Pepper, dressed in leopard print leggings and black long-sleeve top that shows too much cleavage, with big hair that makes me think of Fran Fine from *The Nanny*. She gives me a big toothy smile that crinkles the corners of her eyes, radiating genuine happiness.

"Oh, sweetie, a girl with a face like yours shouldn't be frowning," Pepper says, shaking a finger at me. I level her with a look until she sighs, her face softening. "Come on, tell Auntie Pepper what's wrong."

"Auntie Pepper?"

“Girl, I’ve known you since you were a preteen and stuffing your bra!” she exclaims too loudly, drawing the attention of some parents waiting for their kids in the lobby area. I proceed to duck my head against their questioning stares when Pepper points a finger at me. “I *am* Auntie Pepper.”

I raise my hands in surrender. “Okay, you are Auntie Pepper.”

Pepper smiles. “So what’s going on, kid?”

I consider telling her, but there is just too much to tell, and it’s all too complicated. Anyone from the outside would slap me for getting mixed up in this situation, for not walking away before anything happened, but they didn’t know what it was like being around Hunter and how he made me feel. Emotions are messy and they rarely make sense and this is just another example of that. So even though I want to talk to someone, I swallow it back and force a smile as I shake my head and wave my hand dismissively. “It’s nothing.”

This time, she levels me with a look, raising a brow. “Does it have anything to do with that fine boy who walked through here before?”

I force my face not to react, but I feel my shoulders stiffen at the mention of Hunter. Pepper smiles at me knowingly. “You know him?”

I bite my lip and simply nod.

Pepper nods in return. “But I mean, do you *know* him?”

I say nothing, which is answer enough, and Pepper nods again. “Judging by the broken look in your eyes that you’re trying to hide, whatever happened didn’t end too well.”

“My eyes are broken?”

Pepper holds my gaze with a look that radiates care and compassion, giving me a soft smile as she reaches over to take my hand, giving it a squeeze. “Broken recognizes broken, kid. But you know what? Women have been through a lot throughout the years and we are still standing, still going

because we are strong. You will be okay, kid. I've got your back.”

CHAPTER 5



HUNTER

*H*ector turned out to be a short and stubby man who made me think of Danny DeVito, with a balding head damp with sweat, a hook nose, and thin lips over some yellowed teeth. He didn't look like the friendliest guy, but turns out he was quite the jokester. Well, he would try to tell jokes, but they just ended up being dad jokes. I still chuckled anyway at the attempt.

Hector was patient about explaining my role, what jobs I may be doing, asking me questions about my skills before handing me a dark red jumpsuit to pull on over my clothes. I eye the garment and cringe, but change quickly.

Once changed, Hector hands me a walkie-talkie to clip onto my jumpsuit, saying that it would be how he and everyone else communicates with me about where I need to go next and what I need to do.

Hector allows me to shadow him, and I help him with some odd jobs around the place. Even helped clean the bathrooms, which were in better condition than I thought they would be. You hear such horror stories about public bathrooms.

I manage to get through my first day without any more runs-ins with Harper, but I couldn't help but wonder what she was doing. Each time I had that thought, I quickly shut it down and focused on my task until I was finally free and walking outside to Hadley, who's beaming from the driver's side of her car.

“How was your first day?” she asks, sounding all too happy as I open the passenger side door and plop myself down, remaining silent as I close the door behind me.

Hadley keeps smiling as she sits and waits, until she realizes I’m not going to be answering. “That great, huh?”

I don’t mean to be a dick, but I just don’t want to talk about it. This isn’t something I want to do, but have to because I made stupid decision. I also don’t want to talk about Harper and everything there because I couldn’t. That door has closed and there is no point opening it, so I grumble, “Can we just go home, please?”

Hadley continues to look at me, her eyes soft and thoughtful, tinged with worry as she eventually nods. “Of course.”

And just like that, we continue on our way home, in silence.

THEN



CHAPTER 6



I feel his heartbeat beneath my hand and wish I could stay here forever.

Week two of secretly meeting up with Hunter, and I expected to be filled with anxiety and the what ifs. Instead, all I feel is bliss as I lie naked in my bed tucked into Hunter's side, my hand resting on his chest, listening to his steady breaths as he sleeps.

I know I should be worried about the future. I should worry if I'm being used like any normal girl would, but it's hard to feel used with Hunter. When we meet like this, it's like we crash together, like we have been going without and suffering and are desperate for our next fix, like we need each other to breathe. A part of me says to be wary and know that this could end at any time, but another part of myself feels safe and secure, like nothing bad will happen as long as Hunter is near.

I know it sounds stupid, but can you blame me for wanting to believe that?

"Stop thinking so loud." Hunter's sleepy voice breaks through my train of thought as I slowly peek up at him to see one eye open and looking at me, his face peaceful as I smile and lift to rest my chin on his chest. He raises his hand to run it through my hair, and my stomach flutters at that soft and caring gesture. "What's got you troubled?"

"Nothing," I say, but he opens both eyes and gives me a look that tells me that he doesn't believe me. I sigh. "I'm just

thinking about us.”

“Good or bad?”

I shrug. “Both, I guess.”

“Talk to me.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Talk to me.” His voice is still soft, but tinged with firmness, leaving no room to argue.

“I’m happy.”

He raises a brow when I don’t continue. “But?”

“I also know that I should be wary. I mean, our situation is not your typical relationship, and I know I signed up for this, but I’m just worried I’ll get hurt.”

He considers this, pursing his lips before expelling a soothing breath through his nose, his arm squeezing me closer to his side. I welcome the comfort of his warmth as he says, “Look, I’ll promise not to hurt you, if you promise to not hurt me.”

I can’t help but chuckle, but he remains serious. “You make it seem so easy.”

Hunter shrugs. “It can be.”

He seems so sure, but that doesn’t stop the voice at the back of my mind warning me about going forward and letting this man into my heart. But feeling the fluttering in my chest as I look at him, I know I’m already lost, which scares me more than anything.

“Besides,” Hunter says, shattering my inner worries for the moment, “it won’t always be like this.”

“Sneaking around and lying to our friends? You know they would be cool with us, right?”

He nods. “Yeah, but I also can’t risk anything getting back to my parents.”

“I get that, but they are going to find out sooner or later.”

He considers this as well. “I know, but not yet.”

My mind flashes back to the dreams I had as a child of finding my prince charming, and I have to say, it looked nothing like this. Sneaking around, feeling like someone's dirty little secret. I hate the sinking feeling it brings, the worry. I remember hearing girls talk about being in this situation and shaking my head, believing that no guy would ever do this with me. Of course, that was before I met Hunter, before I knew I couldn't walk away from him.

“But, you know...” Hunter breaks through my cloud of worry again, and I blink up at him as he stares down at me with eyes twinkling filled with sexy mischief. One corner of his mouth tilts up slightly as his eyes move over my naked body only concealed by thin sheets. “I kind of like having you all to myself.”

I tuck my inner worries away for a moment as Hunter starts to move his body over mine, his heat overwhelming, his scent intoxicating, and I welcome every part that Hunter is willing to give to me. Now if only I knew for sure I would ever have all of him.

NOW



CHAPTER 7



I groan from under the covers when I hear the chiming of my ringtone screaming at me. The warmth from the morning sun beats down through my open windows as I throw my covers off of me, knowing I should be getting up as I reach for my phone and quickly answer.

“Hello?”

“Hey!” Ava says happily from the other side, and I can’t help but smile at the sound of my best friend’s voice, missing the normalcy of this moment. “How was Hunter yesterday?”

His name is like a bucket of ice water, washing away my good mood and filling me with anxiety as I think back to the previous day and how much it hurt to see him and the empty look in his eyes. Yes, that was the worst thing, but I wonder why Ava would be asking me, and I question her too quickly, sounding panicked and defensive, “How should I know? I’m not his keeper.”

I’m met with a brief silence, and I mentally kick myself for not keeping my cool, but I hate that I still have to lie to my friends even after everything with Hunter. The silence continues until Ava finally says, “Um, no, but you work in the same place. I figured you might see him around or at least know more than us.”

“Oh, right.” I mentally slap myself on the forehead as I sit up in bed, crossing my legs and running my hand through my messy hair. “Um, he seemed fine. I don’t know a lot because

we're doing different things. They've got him helping with the cleaning and maintenance."

Silence again. "That's ... great."

"Yeah."

More silence, but I can't think of anything to say. All I can think about right now is Hunter and I wish I could talk to Ava, to hear some guidance. I know another day like yesterday is going to be tough on my heart. But instead, I keep my mouth shut and let the silence consume me.

It only takes a couple more minutes before I hear Ava clear her throat on the other end of the line, saying in a voice that's chipper than before, "So the reason why I called is just to ask you about this weekend. Do you have any plans?"

I can't help but scoff. "Do I ever have any plans?"

"Well, I don't know, you might have a hot date."

I laugh again. "Yeah, that is not gonna be happening."

"You never know."

"Oh, but I do." Because I know I'm not going to be getting over Hunter any time soon. I know that no matter who I went out with, I would always be mentally comparing them to Hunter, so why bother wasting my time?

"Anyways, the reason why I ask is because Conner and I are planning a dinner at La Parez to celebrate our engagement with everyone and I *must* have my bridesmaid with me."

"I still can't believe I'm not your Maid of Honor," I tease, because I know it would get a reaction, and it does.

"If I could have all of you as my Maid of Honor, I would!" she exclaims in defense, and I laugh.

"It's okay, I know. I'm just honored that you would ask me to be a bridesmaid."

"How could I not? I love you just as much as I love all of my bridesmaids."

I smile into the phone. “And I love you, too. So, with this dinner, who is coming?”

“Everyone. Us the girls, Conner and the guys, though we’ll need to make sure Hunter doesn’t drink.”

My heart jumps at the mention of his name again like it usually does, only this time, my mind is flashing back to that moment I got the call that Hunter had been in an accident. I called my boss and they were fine giving me some time to go back home, so I booked my flight and rushed out the door. I remember the long drive to the hospital and the thoughts and worries plaguing my mind until I reached his hospital room and saw him lying there, bruised and broken. I had to bite my lip to keep from crying out at seeing someone I once saw as invincible in such a weakened state.

I blink and shake my head, not wanting to think about it right now. I clear my throat, and say with a cracked and weak voice, “Of course, but it should be fun all the same.”

“Definitely! Anyways, I’ll text you the details. Have fun at work today, and tell Hunter I said hi.”

She hangs up before I can say anything, but what could I say to that? I will not have fun at work because, even though it helps him, having Hunter there is a constant twisting of the knife in my heart, plunged in there after he turned away from me that day in the hospital. Every time he looks at me with either hatred or disinterest, it brings a sick feeling to the pit of my stomach that I can’t overcome.

Yeah, I have a great day at work to look forward to.

Looking at the time, I see I have a few hours before I have to be at work, so I take this moment to take in a deep breath, bracing myself for whatever is to come today. Maybe nothing, but is that better? I don’t know yet.

I suddenly hear dishes clanging around in the kitchen, signaling my aunt being awake. It would only be a matter of time before she walks in here to wake me so, before she does that, I force my legs to move, throwing them over the edge of my bed and rising to stand. I feel the ache in my tired muscles

as I stretch my arms over my head and yawn before making my way out to the kitchen.

I'm grateful for my aunt letting me stay here. I had decided to give up my apartment when I left for my internship, and besides, I couldn't afford to pay for it while I was away. Ava had told me that I could stay in her old apartment, but with her new baby, Charlie, and their new home, they couldn't keep the apartment anymore. So my Aunt Maggie said that I could move back into my old room.

Stepping out into the hallway, I feel a warm sense of familiarity as I walk past picture after picture on the walls. In each one, it was just us. It's always been my Aunt Maggie and I since I was two years old after my parents had died in a plane crash on their way to Hawaii for a romantic getaway. Maggie had taken me in and raised me as her own. Despite not having anyone to help and not knowing what to do, she always made sure I was cared for and loved.

I smile looking at the photos of us in the various stages of our lives. One of me standing with Maggie at her college graduation after she finally finished art school. Her smile was big and we stood with our arms around each other, knowing those late nights of Maggie studying and working in a restaurant while she sold paintings on the side were finally over. There were pictures of us dressed for Halloween, and of us at my high school graduation. I never felt the need to have any friends having Maggie by my side, until I started working at the bookstore my freshman year and became friends with Ava.

Now here I am, with a secret heartbreak I can't even talk to Maggie about and it is killing me. My smile drops at the thought until I hear her call from the kitchen, "Is that you, kiddo?"

I take in a deep breath as I continue on my way to the kitchen, tucking the ache in my chest away for later. "No, it's an axe murderer."

Maggie is standing at the counter, dishing out eggs and bacon onto two plates. Her long brown hair flows down to her

waist in curls, wild and untamed, and she's dressed in a pair of grey sweats and an oversized *Hocus Pocus* t-shirt that hangs off one shoulder. She narrows her eyes at me playfully as she turns to place the food on the little round table by the kitchen. "Don't joke about that. I see that shit on the news."

"I just don't know why you ask. If it was an axe murderer, do you really think they would announce they are there?" I say, going to the table and sitting down across from her.

She grabs her fork and points it at me. "Watch it, kid."

I chuckle before digging into the food, and we eat in silence. I search my brain for a safe topic to talk about as I start to feel her eyes on me, watching and assessing, so I swallow my food, knowing she has some client work to do. "So what's the plan today?"

As I look up at her, she is just watching me, but I resist the urge to shift in my seat because then she will know something is wrong. Her eyes hold on me for a second longer before she proceeds to dig into her food. "So we're not going to talk about how you've been dragging the chain this morning?"

I snap my head up, food in my mouth as I stare at her, trying to process her words. "What?" Maggie just raises a brow at me.

"Usually, when you're working at the center, you're up before me and bouncing off the walls. This morning, it almost looks like you don't wanna go. Any particular reason?"

I just shake my head and swallow my food before I say dismissively, "I just didn't sleep well."

"Again, I ask, any particular reason?"

I shrug, and she sighs. "Does it have anything to do with that boy?"

A clang reverberates around the small kitchen as my cutlery drops onto my plate, my wide eyes meeting hers. "What?"

She seems unconvinced while I was trying hard to hold my composure and failing, but she was good at this, interrogating.

“You remember when you were a kid and you discovered one of your classmates was stealing from other students?”

“Yes.”

“What did you do when you found this out?”

I furrow my brow, not understanding this trip down memory lane. “I reported him. He was doing the wrong thing.”

She gives me a small smile as she nods. “Yes, he was. Do you remember when I made you go to a sleepover with some girls in your class and they ended up stealing their dads’ liquor?”

I roll my eyes at the memory. “Yes, and I told on them too. I get it, I’m a snitch, but they were all doing the wrong thing, and you’ve always raised me report those kinds of things.”

“I’m not criticizing you. There is a point to this.”

I sigh, sitting back in my chair, suddenly feeling tired, my food now forgotten. “What is the point, then?”

Maggie cocks her head, a knowing glint in her eyes. “You’ve spent your life telling the truth and calling it out when people do the wrong thing, but then, out of the blue, you come to me and beg my friend Gretchen to defend a boy I have never met in court, a boy who could have seriously hurt himself or someone else.” Maggie cocks her head the other way and this time I shift in my seat under her heavy gaze. “You don’t do that for just anyone, so please don’t think I’m fool and lie to me. I know this boy means something to you, but I also see pain in your eyes when I mention him. Something happened, and I don’t expect for you to tell me, but don’t lie to me.”

I nod, not knowing what else I could say. Maybe, just maybe, I could breathe and finally tell someone about the ache in my chest and the racing thoughts in my mind.

I open my mouth, then close it, still not knowing how much to say. “I’m sorry, Aunt Maggie. Things have been crazy lately.”

“I know. I can see your mind going crazy behind those eyes of yours.”

I give a small smile that doesn't reach my eyes before I expel a tired breath. “We were ... close before I went away.”

“Close?” I simply give her a look, and it only takes her a second to understand. “Ah.”

“It was stupid and every part of me was telling me that I was going to get hurt.”

“But you didn't listen,” Maggie states, not asking.

I resist the urge to hang my head. “No. The way I felt with him... our whole situation was complicated. He had some family issues, so we agreed to see each other in secret until we would be able to tell anyone. His parents were on his back about dating, and when we were together, it just felt right, so I went along with it.”

“What went wrong?”

I close my eyes at the memory, my heart aching as if it was happening all over again.

THEN



CHAPTER 8



The phone in my hand feels like it weighs a thousand pounds, my eyes darting down to it every now and then as Hunter and I watch *Die Hard* upon his request. I wasn't in the mood for a movie, so I didn't argue with his choice, just forced a smile and made some popcorn, which I haven't touched, then proceeded to plop myself on the couch beside him.

I tried to relax, but it was hard to ignore the churning in my stomach of what is to come. I'm mentally cursing myself for not being honest with Hunter and not knowing what to do now. It's been merely hours since I got word of my acceptance into the new internship program. Hours since I found out I would be packing up my life and moving to Australia to work at their publishing company. It was an amazing opportunity to build international connections, travel, and get my foot in the door for an industry that is already hard to get into... but that would mean I would have to leave for a full three months.

Not that long, and I'm probably stressing over nothing, but I worry what will happen with Hunter and I if I leave. Will he wait? Will he call or email me? Or will he just walk away?

Maybe that is what I fear and why I'm not too eager to tell him, but now I have no choice. It is no longer just a chance I'll go, but now it is a definite, an opportunity I should be happy about.

I sit there, opening my mouth and closing it again, not liking how I've worded it in my head, when there is a sudden knock at the door. I finally let out a relieved breath as I jump

up from the couch. “I’ll get it!” I yell too loudly, wincing from my lack of subtlety and hoping that Hunter doesn’t notice.

I give the nervous looking kid a smile, then pay him before taking the pizza and closing the door to submerge myself back into my anxiety-ridden thoughts.

I let out a breath as I turn, the pizza box still in my hand when I face Hunter, who is now standing in the center of the living room with a furrowed brow as he looks down at something in his hand.

As I take a step closer, my heart drops into my stomach as I see my phone in his hands. My eyes widen and my mouth goes dry.

I must have left it on the couch in my rush for an escape, I realize, as he slowly looks up from my phone. But there is something else in those eyes. For a moment, I thought I saw pain, but that quickly slips away until I see nothing looking back at me. Hunter’s face turns blank, but his jaw tenses, telling me he’s holding something back. He doesn’t have my passcode, so he couldn’t have seen much...

He suddenly clears his throat, my phone still in his hands as he explains, “Um, your phone got an email.” Dropping his eyes to the floor, he extends his hand with my phone in it, my heart sinking further as I realize what might have happened and how the universe may have gotten impatient with me and taken things into its own hands.

I numbly set the pizza box down on the chair beside me before forcing myself to take the phone from him, my hand shaking slightly.

Turning the phone over in my hand to show the screen, I see what he had seen, and my heart officially reaches the floor. It’s an email from my new boss for the international internship program. The words ‘congratulations’ and ‘we look forward to meeting you’ are like nails in my coffin at this moment as I am all too aware of Hunter’s eyes burning holes into my face. I continue to stare down at my phone screen, knowing what I have to tell him and hoping he will take it well, but fearful he won’t.

I finally swallow before forcing my eyes to meet his, but it's like Hunter has already closed himself off to me and that hurts more than anything. My voice shakes as I speak. "I had applied for an international internship program, and I honestly didn't think I'd get it, but I didn't see the harm in applying."

Hunter looks at me. "What international internship program?"

I shuffle my feet nervously. "They only select one student a year, so it was fair to assume it wouldn't be me."

"But it was you."

"Yes," I say, the room suddenly feeling too warm as blank eyes look back at me, making me even more unsettled.

"Where is it?"

"Australia, at a publishing house. It's only for a few months, and it's a great opportunity," I explain, hoping he can see how this doesn't affect us. We can still call and text for a few months and keep on going when I get back, but something tells me he thinks differently.

Silence hangs between us as he slowly nods, taking this in and pursing his lips in thought until the silence becomes too much as I say with a nervous chuckle, "What are you thinking?"

He just stares at me a moment before sighing, running his hand through his hair like his sister does on occasion until he finally breaks the silence. "Well, you are right. It's a great opportunity. You should be happy."

He gives me a tight smile that doesn't reach his eyes as I watch the walls come up around him, blocking him from me. I take a step toward him as I quickly stammer out, "This doesn't change anything. I'll be back here in just a few months."

He gives me another long look. "And if you love it there?"

I shrug, having not thought about it, having not thought about anything but him. "Then I can come back for a holiday, bring you with me, and show you the sights."

“And if they love you so much they offer you a job?” He raises his brow, and I scoff, rolling my eyes at him.

“They won’t.”

I watch as one side of his mouth curls up in a slight half smile, but his eyes look sad as he says, “You doubt how easy it is to love you, Harper.”

I blink at his words, surprised, and wondering if he knows from experience. Was this his way of telling me he loves me? Surely not, but I can’t help but wonder, until the moment is suddenly broken by Hunter as he clears his throat and blinks to look away from me. “Well, it should be fun either way. Be sure to call if you have the time.” He looks around, gathering his wallet and keys from the coffee table and tucking them in the pockets of his jeans.

“You’re leaving?” I ask, as worry and panic sets in, wanting to talk about this and know that everything will be okay.

“Um, yeah. I gotta get up early for training tomorrow morning or coach will have my ass.” He doesn’t even look at me as he passes me, doesn’t give me a kiss or a pat on the behind. He simply calls over his shoulder, “I’ll call you,” before closing the door behind him. There’s something about that sound that makes me ill, so final, like it was him closing his heart to me. I’m left standing here for a few minutes before I realize tears are rolling down my cheeks as the ache of his absence hits me in the chest.

NOW



CHAPTER 9



HUNTER

*A*nother day at the center.

I've only managed to avoid Harper for a handful of the days that I've been here. There was an awkward run-in outside the bathrooms I was forced to clean, where we simply looked at each other, both unsure of what to say or do until we both averted our eyes and sidestepped each other, walking in the opposite directions.

Mature, I know.

There was another when I was talking to Pepper one morning as I came in and suddenly felt a pair of eyes on me, only to see Harper across the lobby, talking to a parent and a child, smiling and nodding in the kind and understanding way Harper does. Until I saw her eyes quickly flick in my direction, then widen slightly at being caught, before refocusing back on the parent before her.

Each run-in is just as awkward as the last, filled with unspoken words neither of us were willing to speak.

I head in this morning, and thankfully Harper isn't in yet, so I sign in happily, get my orders for the day, gather my things, and go about my business. Funnily enough, there's already a throw-up situation on the main floor. *That didn't take long*, I think to myself as I make my way back to the storage room to gather my things, only to stop when I hear something.

I stand in the middle of the hallway, my brow furrowed at the little voice. I can't make out the words; they seem to run into each other as the person speaks too fast. I consider just

walking away, thinking of the countless horror movies Mia used to make me watch as a kid, and knowing this is the moment when the evil twins come out to ask me to play with them forever and ever.

Against my better judgement, I follow the voice, which leads me into a room off the hallway, a space I didn't notice before, one that opens up to a large baseball room. The room has a bucket of balls at one end, black thick netting around the room to protect the walls and a baseball home plate. But that isn't what catches my attention, instead it is a small looking boy sitting on the ground by the home plate, his knees up. He appears to be young, his hair a mop of curly brown, his eyes a deep brown focusing on his knees, his hands waving around animatedly as he continues to talk so fast I still can't make out what he is saying.

I consider walking away again, but instead my legs carry me forward until I'm standing just before the boy, looking so small on the ground. I shuffle my feet, not knowing what to do now, but something tells me this kid should not be in here unattended.

I clear my throat and the kid continues like I'm not just standing there, like he hasn't seen me yet, so I try again. "You supposed to be in here, kid?"

Only then does he stop, the room now silent as he refocuses his brown eyes me, looking almost surprised to see me. *That makes two of us, kid.* But he doesn't answer, so I repeat, "Where are you supposed to be, kid?"

He shrugs. "I don't know."

His voice is deeper than I thought it would be, sounding softer when he was whispering to himself.

I want to leave, but I know I can't leave this kid by himself. Someone might be looking for him or he might be lost. "Come on. Let's get you to the main—"

"Do you know when baseball was first invented?" the kid asks, cutting me off and looking up at me expectantly.

I blink at his random question. "Um, no."

He shrugs again. “No one really does. It was invented in 1839, but in 1903, a British sportswriter had said that baseball came from another British game called ‘rounders’. Though a majority disagreed, saying that baseball was an American sport and is played on American soil. What do you think?”

I blink again, trying to take in what this kid is saying, fascinated by how his eyes appear to light up when talking about baseball, almost like how I used to talk about... I shake the memory away, refocusing on the boy who is still staring at me, waiting for an answer. “Um, I think people are gonna believe what they want to believe.”

The boy nods. “My mom doesn’t care about it either.”

I felt that in my chest, remembering the times I had come home to tell my parents I had won another game and they just told me that I was a good boy and went on about their day. Only in front of their friends did they praise and brag about my athletic accomplishments. Only another way to one-up the other people in their life.

As I look down at the kid, I see a person who obviously loves the sport so much that he would just want to sit in a room like this, like it was his safe haven. That I understood, so who am I to ask the kid to leave? Instead, I squat down so I am no longer towering over him. “What makes you think your mom doesn’t care?”

“She just doesn’t watch the games, or know about it like I do. She loves me and buys all the baseball stuff for me, but she doesn’t know about the game.”

I nod, taking this in and hoping that his mother isn’t like mine. “What does your mom like to do?”

He thinks for a moment. “She’s always making cakes and stuff. She likes to watch cooking shows on TV.”

“Because that is her thing and baseball is yours. Everyone has a different thing that makes us happy and makes us want to get up in the morning. Everyone has something that we know a lot about. One person’s thing is no more important than the other.”

He furrows his brow, cocking his head at me. “You mean, like my dog Misty. She loves playing catch, and she is really good at it. Is that her thing?”

For the first time in a while, I smile. “Yeah, kid. Just because your mom doesn’t know about baseball, doesn’t mean she doesn’t care. It just means she has her own thing. That’s not bad.”

He cocks his head the other way. “What is your thing?”

Before I can say anything, I hear the footsteps before her loud voice echoing in the space. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

We both turn our heads to look at the curvy brunette stomping into the room with a clipboard in her hand, dressed in a black polo this time, and a pair of black leggings that hug her shapely legs too much for me not to notice. I allow myself a second before I shake my head as Harper turns her worried gaze to the kid, before saying in a controlled voice, “What are you doing here, Lucas? You were supposed to meet me in the main area, you know this.” She then turns her attention to me, looking angrier with her gaze narrowed. “And you. What are you doing in here? Shouldn’t you have something else you should be doing?”

I rise from where I’m squatting before the kid, raising my hands in surrender. “Hey, I just heard something in here and found him. I figured it was better having someone supervise him than leaving him on his own.”

Harper cocks her head. “You didn’t think to take him out to the main area? Or even run and get one of us so we know where he is. When he is within these walls, he is our responsibility. All of these kids are our responsibility, but you wouldn’t know anything about that.” Those final words hit me in the chest, my eyes widening as she just stares at me.

Silence hangs between us, and we both feel Lucas’s eyes bouncing between us like he is watching his own game of tennis. The silence continues to drag, neither of us wanting to speak until a little curious voice breaks it. “What do you play?”

We both blink and furrow our brows before looking down at the small boy between us, seeing him look up at me with a look of curiosity as I ask, “What?”

“What do you play? Any sport?”

“Um, yeah, mostly football. I dabbled in baseball when I was a kid, though.”

Lucas nods. “That’s cool. You look like you play something. The people here are nice, but none of them are really athletes. They do what they can. They care about us and they are very patient.”

Harper remains silent, just looking at the boy, despite being mildly insulted. You can see that there was no malicious intent behind the words, just pure honesty.

I don’t know what to say, but luckily, Harper chooses that moment to speak to me. “I didn’t know you played baseball.”

I’m briefly thrown off by her question and by her actually speaking to me that it takes me a second to answer. “Yeah, when I was a kid.”

“Do you still remember how?”

I look between the two. “It’s not the kind of thing you forget.”

Before I can ask why they care, Harper blinks and turns her attention back to Lucas. “Well, we should be heading back out to the main area. Let’s go, Lucas.”

Lucas gives a disappointed sigh before rising to stand, and without another word, walks out, leaving Harper and I alone in the room.

She looks at me as if she is still trying to decide if she wants to say, until she suddenly shakes her head and walks away. Leaving me alone with so many questions and the sweet smell of her perfume.

CHAPTER 10



HUNTER

The day goes by without any further run-ins with Harper, so I am almost smiling when I walk past the front desk with my bag slung over my shoulder. I throw Pepper a nod, but she simply turns to me with a knowing smile, which sets my nerves on edge. “Before you go, the boss wants to see you.”

I frown and stop just before her desk. “Why?”

She merely shrugs. “You gonna have to find out. She’s in her office.”

I make my way to her office with my mind going crazy over what the problem might be. Have I not been doing enough? Have I been doing it wrong? Surely Hector would have told me, right? Was it the kid this morning?

My heart sinks as I worry that might bite me in the ass.

My worry reaches an all-time high by the time I reach Sue’s office door, raising my hand to knock on it, and pausing again before finally knocking.

Sue calls from the other side for me to enter, and I take a deep breath and open the door. I enter the office to see Sue sitting behind her desk again, a pen in her hand and her eyes focused on me as she instructs, “Close the door.”

I hesitate. “Is there something wrong?”

“Close the door.”

I do as she says and move to stand before her desk, the silence dragging on for what feels like a thousand years until

she finally puts her pen down and leans back in her chair. “So I heard you had an exciting morning.”

The panic I suddenly feel is so overwhelming, it’s clearly visible. “Don’t worry, you’re not in trouble.”

“I’m not?”

“No.” She looks at me a moment, her emotionless eyes tinged with sadness I don’t understand. “I don’t think you are a bad kid, Hunter. I think you got caught up in a bad situation. I think you are lost, and I don’t think cleaning vomit off a gym floor or fixing a loose lightbulb is going to help you, do you?”

“Um...” I stammer, unsure of what to say, but Sue saves me by continuing.

“Did you know that I built *Rising Sun* from the ground up?”

I shake my head.

“Then you don’t know why. My little sister had Cerebral Palsy, but she loved football. Her eyes just lit up whenever it was on TV and all she wanted was to see a game in person. She wanted to play as well, but... you know.” I nod, and she continues. “So for her 13th birthday, I wanted to surprise her with tickets to a game. I sold my things just to afford the tickets.”

My voice breaks when I speak. “Was it everything she dreamed?”

The sadness quickly returns. “She didn’t get to go. She passed away a week before her 13th birthday.”

Feeling that sadness myself, understanding that loss, I say, knowing that doesn’t do much, “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

The sadness remains on her face for a moment before she clears her throat and looks at me, her guard is back up. “Thing is, I looked around and I noticed that kids with special needs were usually disregarded when it comes to sports, yet so many love them. Not all, but many. These kids were not given the opportunity to learn and experience these sports they love or

understand how they help them in their hand-eye coordination.”

I nod, taking this in. “It’s great what you are doing here, but I’m still curious why you’ve asked me here now?”

She lets out a breath. “This organization runs on the goodness of others. Volunteers who want to give up their time to help and people who actually take on the responsibility and work here. But unfortunately, we don’t get any actual athletes in here to teach the kids.”

“Really? I thought athletes loved doing volunteer work, if not only for the press.”

“Yes, well, this is a very small organization. It has grown over the years, but it’s as well known.”

“I still don’t understand why I’m here.”

“That kid you spoke to today, his name is Lucas, and he has been with us for some time. In the time he has been here, he has only spoken to two people.”

“Okay,” I say, confused as to where this is going.

“Harper is one of them, so that is why she works with him. The other”—she points a bony finger at me—“is you.”

“Am I in trouble?”

Sue clasps her hands before her on the desk and leans forward slightly, looking very business-like. “Far from it. I want to work with you.”

I blink several times, slowly processing what she just said. “I’m sorry, what?”

“I’ve made some arrangements and I’m moving you from maintenance to be a trainer. Or assistant trainer, really. You need to get some documentation and stuff to be allowed to work with the kids on your own, so I’ve paired you with Harper.” She says this with a proud smile and my heartrate increases. The panic returns as I think of working in close proximity with her for the duration of this hell.

“Oh, no, I’m all right in maintenance,” I say with a hopeful smile as I ignore the need to run out of the door.

Her smile remains in place. “Oh, I think you will be fine as an assistant trainer.”

“No, it’s—”

“Let’s get one thing straight. I’m not asking. These kids need someone who knows what they are doing.”

I let out a frustrated breath through my nostrils. “Fine, but do I have to work alongside Harper?”

She raises her brows at this, clearly intrigued. “You have a problem with Harper?”

I open my mouth and then close it, not wanting to say anything about our past to this woman. That information is for us only, so instead, I steal my jaw and say, “No.”

“Well, unfortunately, she is the only one who is willing to work with you. In fact, it was her idea.”

It feels like my brain short-circuits for a moment. “What?”

“She came to my office and told me how Lucas was talking to you and how you are quite the athlete and how it would be horrible to waste such an opportunity. I did ask some of the other trainers, but she was the only one who volunteered to work with you.”

I process this, unable to make sense of it in my head. Surely she wasn’t trying to get me into trouble by telling the boss or she wouldn’t have made such a suggestion, but she knew. She knew football was my life and now that has been taken away. Was this her way of helping me or just the kids? I don’t know and I’m sure I want to open up that box again.

“Well,” Sue says, breaking through my train of thought and my eyes meet hers again, “have a good weekend, and we’ll get you started next week. Come in at the normal time, and we will get you a shirt and a schedule.”

I walk out of there on numb legs, my head in a fog as I make my way out to Logan’s car, still lost in my thoughts the whole drive home.

CHAPTER 11



I should be happy right now. I look around me in the dress shop and see a few happy brides-to-be giggling with their families and friends as they gush over the beautiful dresses they are wearing. One of the beautiful brides just so happens to be my best friend, Ava, today.

I'm sitting on one of the uncomfortable red couches before a small platform and floor-length mirror as Ava steps onto the platform and face the mirror, her eyes moving down the dress she is wearing as she looks at her reflection in thought. Mia stands beside her with a proud and happy smile. "What do you think?"

Ava tilts her head, assessing the mermaid style dress with a lot of sparkle on it, before telling her, "I feel like it's not me."

Mia takes another look at the dress. "But it makes your boobs look great."

We all look directly at them, sitting full and perky in the low-cut neckline, but I can still see Ava's apprehension so I ask from my place on the couch, "Do you see yourself marrying Conner in this? Do you imagine walking down the aisle in this dress?"

I already know the answer, but instead of answering, she shakes her head apologetically to the saleswoman.

The small saleswoman, although disappointed, forces a smile and nods as she leads Ava from the platform back into the dressing room to try another.

A wave of guilt hits me as I see Mia move over to a rack of dresses to look. I wish that I was more into it today, but my mind is somewhere else.

My mind is cursing me for making things harder on myself, for actually speaking to Sue yesterday and telling her about Hunter and how he can help the kids if given the chance. But I think a part of me was seeing how being cut off from football or any sport is impacting him. Football was his life, that much I remember, and now he doesn't have it, so what is to stop him from sinking so low again? I knew he needed something to keep him going and to pull him out of this bad place he's found himself in, even if he won't do it himself. So I offered an opportunity and left him no choice but to take it.

But now, because no one else was willing to help someone "that troubled," he and I will be pinned to the hip at the center. My days will be filled with him glaring at me, digging that hole in my heart a little bit deeper, reminding me of a past that is long gone.

This is going to hurt like a—

"Oh my fucking god!" Mia exclaims so loudly, some groups turn to glare at her before returning to their own thing, but I simply follow her wide eyes to Ava and do the same.

"Wow!" I finally rise from the couch as a beaming Ava makes her way to the platform, wearing the most amazing dress that makes her look, not like a princess, *but a queen*.

The white dress is strapless and holds her boobs up, just like the previous, but they're not spilling out this time. It's tight and hugs her curvy frame, cinching in at the waist, complementing her wide hips before falling to the floor. Intricate white flowers are stitched into the delicate looking lace. But it's the skirt that's wowed us. It appears to be figure hugging in the front, but it's fuller around the back and sides, like there's another part of the skirt pinned to the back. The allusion looks so beautiful on Ava, with her long dark hair flowing and her face lit up in happiness.

She truly does look like a bride now.

Gone is my goofy best friend, now standing before me is a mother and a soon-to-be wife.

How times have changed, yet I'm still thinking about Hunter.

"Girl, if you don't get this, I will," Mia says with a wave of her finger, making Ava laugh.

"But you're not getting married, unless Riley popped the question..."

Mia scoffs. "You don't have to be married to wear a wedding dress."

"But you will look very crazy walking down the street in a wedding dress. Plus, you might end up freaking Riley out."

Mia waves her hand dismissively. "Trust me, Riley is used to my antics." Finally turning serious, Mia takes Ava's hand. "But you really do look amazing."

Ava smiles, turning her eyes to me, expectantly, and I say with a smile of my own, "You look like a bride, Ava. It's perfect."

Ava's smile grows proud, and her eyes start to water. The guilt hits me again, hating that my head isn't fully here. But seeing my friend so happy with Mia by her side, I use all my strength to push away any worries before stepping forward to grab Ava's other hand in mine, giving a reassuring squeeze, letting her know we are both here.

Always just us three.

We stay in that moment, until Mia gasps. "A veil! We need to get you a veil to complete the look."

"I'm not sure I'm wearing a veil," Ava tries to say, but Mia is already heading in that direction, calling over her shoulder, "Now you're just talking crazy talk."

Without another word, she is gone, leaving us standing before the mirror, her eyes now focused on me, making me feel a little unsettled.

I force another smile before dropping my hand, attempting to change the subject. “Where is Lucy today?”

“Working. I’ll bring her another day so she can see the dress.”

I raise my brows in surprise as I think of Ava’s younger sister, of the young girl I remember with dark blonde curls and blue eyes and how much she has grown over such a short time. Parents are right; kids do grow up fast.

“She’s working now? Where?”

“She wants to work with animals like Conner, so he got her a job working the front desk on his off days at the veterinary clinic. Only on weekends, so it gives him the weekends to spend with Charlie and I.”

I shake my head. “Wow, she’s really grow up. Any thoughts of college yet?”

This time, Ava raises her brows. “You know, I forget that time is getting closer, but she has been talking about staying here in Boston, maybe trying to get into the same degree as Conner.”

“Things are all coming together then.”

Ava’s eyes turn thoughtful as she looks down at me. “How about you?”

I try to school my features. “What about me?”

“How have you been doing? You just seem a little distracted lately, like you have a lot on your mind.”

Because I do, but I don’t dare say that out loud. Instead, I keep my smile and wish I could just confide in my friend before me. “Just a lot of things happening at the center, that’s all. Everything is fine.”

I can see the need to push for more in Ava’s eyes, but she doesn’t get a chance to say anything as Mia struts back to us, holding a long, lacy veil up high. The mood shifts instantly, and I happily step out of the way, happy to be out of the spotlight... at least for right now.

AVA SAYS yes to the dress, and they take some pictures of us holding a cheesy sign. Then she pays the deposit and we leave for our lunch date.

I happily hop into Ava's car, my stomach already grumbling as we speed down the streets, pulling up outside Deb's Diner just a few minutes later.

Something I missed while I was in Australia is Deb's double cheeseburger. No one makes them like Deb, and my mouth's watering at the thought of one.

We hop out of the car, still buzzing with excitement from today's appointment as we enter the diner. I look around and smile at the 50's style interior, the red leather booths that need repairs, the wooden tables, and pictures of celebrities of that time covering the walls. A cheesy jukebox, that hasn't worked in a while, perches in the corner to top it all off.

Gosh, I've missed this.

After ordering, we make our way to a vacant booth, happy to have the whole place to ourselves so we have our pick of where to sit.

Once settled, Mia's practically bouncing with excitement. "So now that we have the dress, what's next?"

Ava smiles, thinking for a moment. "Well, there is a lot, but we do need to look at getting shoes, and bridesmaid dresses as well."

"Are we wearing the same thing? Different style, but same color? Whatever we want?" Mia asks incessantly.

"I'm open to ideas. We can go shopping and see what works."

Mia shrugs. "Sounds good to me. Just let me know where to be and when."

I nod in agreement, movement catching my eye as the bell over the door sounds, and a group of familiar looking guys enter, all laughing and talking loudly. Ava turns to face her new fiancé and they smile at each other, Conner's eyes

lighting up when he sees her, Mia grins at Riley as he gives her a half smile with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes promising something later. I smile until my gaze focuses on someone behind them, and I kick myself for being surprised when I see Hunter walking in with a sullen look, his hands tucked into the front pockets of his jeans. Logan walks beside him, talking animatedly about something Hunter seems disinterested in.

They all order at the register before making their way to us. I look around and notice that it's going to be a tight fit in this booth, so I give the girls a chance to sit with their guys as I wiggle to rise from the booth, catching their attention.

"Where are you going?" Ava asks as the guys reach us, giving me the same questioning look.

"Making room so you guys can sit together," I tell them like it's obvious, but Conner and Riley look at each other and laugh before moving to stand on either side of a table next to our booth before dragging it a few steps over to combine it with ours, making our table longer and placing the chairs that were left behind around it.

With a flourish of the hand, Conner says, "Problem solved."

I shake my head, amused by their solution, and continue to move out of the booth and sit a couple of chairs down, giving Riley room to join his girl in the booth, which he gratefully takes.

The couples snuggle up while Logan and I sit ourselves just on the outside, with Hunter plopping down across the table from me.

There really is no escaping this guy, but I guess I'm doing it to myself. I could've just stayed in the booth, but I could see the loving glances Mia was shooting Riley and no way was I getting between them. They have been pinned at the hip, especially since the accident a couple of months ago when we almost lost her. Mia was caught in a fire with Charlie, caused by a psycho douchebag. Luckily, she got Charlie out, but she almost didn't get out herself.

I look over at my friend, sitting there with twinkling eyes, looking happily at Riley, and I imagine that being gone. I flinch at the thought and am so thankful for how it all turned out. Yeah, there was no way in heck I was ever getting between them.

The couples start talking wedding stuff, like flowers and cake, while Logan and Hunter look absolutely bored. Feeling Hunter's eyes on me, I focus on Logan, with his soft, kind eyes, easy smile, and messy brown hair. I wonder why some girl hasn't snapped him up yet, but then he opens his mouth and I remember. Logan was always sweet, but he often says the wrong thing. Hopefully one day he'll find someone who gets him and treats him well.

I clear my throat loud enough for the two boys to hear, their eyes meeting mine as I make a desperate attempt to find something to talk about. "So how is the new roommate?"

Logan answers with a kind smile. "Hadley? Yeah, she's cool. A lot better than the potential serial killer we almost chose."

"Why would you almost choose a potential serial killer, and what makes you think that is the case?" I ask, looking between them, and they both look at each other, as if trying to decide who's going to answer that one, until Hunter finally speaks.

"Because they carried a knife collection with them, which they showed us with a little too much enthusiasm."

"They could've been a chef," I suggest, though it does sound suspicious.

Hunter raises a brow at me. "I'm sure a chef doesn't need a machete in their knife collection."

"Maybe he just likes knives."

Logan laughs. "That's not helping. They can like what they want, but I'm not chancing it. Hadley is good, except when she beats me at Call of Duty and rubs it in the entire day. Sore winner, that one."

Raising my brows, I laugh as a small figure pops up from beyond Logan's shoulder. "Hey, guys! Sorry, I'm late. Had to finish my shift."

"Little Daniels!" Conner calls with his arms out wide as Lucy approaches, dressed in a pale pink button-down shirt, black pants, and her long dark blond hair out in its beautiful curls down her back and over her shoulders. She casts a sweet smile to all of us, before making her way around the table and sitting herself next to Hunter and across from Logan.

Logan raises his brows when she sits down. "Shift? You work?"

I lean in. "I said the exact same thing, she's just getting so big."

Lucy laughs. "You guys make it sound like I'm a little kid. I'm almost done with high school."

Logan's eyes moves up and down quickly, as if just noticing she is not a kid anymore before shaking his head. "Nah, you'll always be a kid to me, little Daniels."

He gives her a wink and a cheesy grin, but she doesn't see the amusement there. Instead, she frowns, her lips looking fuller in a pout as she says, "Well, maybe one day, you won't."

He holds her eyes, his face serious for the first time. "Don't count on it, kiddo."

Her frown only deepens, but the subject is quickly changed as Conner asks how work at the veterinary clinic was. Submerging us into pleasant conversation to distract us from the possibly that our Lucy may have a crush on our Logan.

I wonder if anyone else noticed? I guess it could be played off like she just wants to be seen as a grown up now, but the hurt look and frustration that was in her eyes... yeah, that look, I know too well.

I'm so lost in my thoughts that it takes me a second to realize that I'm being watched. I look up, meeting Hunter's eyes as he asks, looking uncomfortable, "How was dress shopping?"

I nod, giving him a tight smile. “Good. She found a dress.” He nods, and I can’t help but notice how his eyes occasionally dart to his sister before focusing back on me. “You gonna talk to her and sort out your drama, or just sit and sulk?”

His brows pull down as he looks at me. “Just stay out of it, Harper.”

Frustration building inside me, I lean forward on my forearms so that he can hear me away from everyone else. “You think this will be the last wedding? Look at your sister.” We both look at her, and see her smiling lovingly at her boyfriend, before we return our eyes to each other. “She’s found this amazing guy, and it’s only a matter of time before they get engaged as well. Do you really wanna miss your sister’s wedding because you can’t get your head out of your butt? Or how about when she has kids? You gonna miss that?”

He finally breaks eye contact, looking off to the side, his jaw tense and his frown intense, but I keep going. “Conner is a good guy, who is not letting you miss this because he knows you will regret it, but you will need to make the move and do the work to win your sister back. She still loves you; she’s just waiting for you. How long are you gonna make her wait?”

He continues to avoid my eyes for a few more seconds until he finally looks at me with a mix fear and sadness. He knows the truth, but maybe he’s buried himself so far that he can’t figure out how to dig himself out. Maybe he already sees himself as gone. So I plead, “Just talk to her or give her a call later.”

“I can’t talk about this,” he whispers in a rushed panic, avoiding my eyes again, and I know there is so much going on beneath the surface.

“When can you, then?”

Hunter doesn’t answer my question, but asks his own, slowly turning his face back to mine. “Why did you talk to Sue about me?”

I blink, not expecting that. “What?”

“You heard me. What are you doing?”

I school my features. “I’m not doing anything. I simply told Sue about how Lucas was talking to you and your history with sports. It was her idea.”

It wasn’t entirely, but I’ll let him think that. It’s better that way.

Hunter cocks his head. “She said you were the only one willing to work with me.”

I shrug. “So? It’s for Lucas, not for you. You can help him better than I can, but you need to be supervised, so I volunteered. At least this way, you can still have sports in your life.”

He holds my gaze for a moment. “I don’t need your help.”

I beg to differ, but I don’t say it. Instead, I raise a brow at him. “Like I said, I didn’t do it for you, I did it for Lucas.”

We sit in silence, neither of us knowing what to say, when the waitress comes by with the food. We continue to eat with friendly discussion amongst each other, and I try to ignore how Hunter’s eyes move between myself and Mia, like he’s thinking of everything he has lost.

If only he knew, he hasn’t lost anything.

CHAPTER 12



HUNTER

Monday rolls around quicker than I thought it would. I start the day by going to Sue's office, and she hands me a pack containing a couple of shirts, a handbook, a whistle, and a new sign-in pass. After telling me that she hopes my shirts fit, she sends me on my way, letting me know Lucas will be here shortly and I can meet him and Harper on the main floor.

I nod wordlessly, still reeling from everything happening, as I make my way to the closest bathroom to change my shirt... and it certainly does not fit.

I tug on the black t-shirt and it is tighter than I thought it would be, stretching over my biceps and pulling across the muscles in my back, but it is the length that gets me. How the fuck did Sue think this would fit? Surely, I can't go out there like this.

Looking down at the shirt, my brow furrows at how it stops an inch above the beltline of my jeans. Basically a fucking crop top!

Maybe no one will notice. Or, maybe Sue will have other sizes in her office.

I smile at the idea and quickly step out of the bathroom to make my way back to Sue's office, walking in without knocking and very quickly regretting it.

I stop in the open doorway, my mouth open as I see Sue on one side of the desk and Harper standing on the other as they

chat about something. Then they are both turning to look at me.

Sue's face is fixed on mine, but one glance at Harper, her eyes move over my torso and down to where my skin is exposed above my jeans. After a second, she bites her lip to suppress a smile. *Yeah, laugh it up.*

"Um, sorry to interrupt, but this shirt doesn't fit. I think I need a different size."

"That's the largest size we've got at the moment. I'll order a bigger size for you, but it might not be here for a few days," Sue explains emotionlessly.

"Well, can I wear my own clothes until then?"

"The children here identify our workers by that shirt. If you do not wear it, then how will they know who you are?"

I shrug. "I'll tell them?"

Sue narrows her eyes, clearly unamused. "You will wear the shirt as it is the uniform. It fits well enough." She turns her gaze to Harper. "Now I will leave you both to it, as I'm sure Lucas will be here soon."

I open my mouth to argue, but she narrows her eyes at me, and I quickly shut my mouth, tensing my jaw and nodding. Harper gives her own nod, and we both make our way out of the small office.

Thankfully, she says nothing as I gather my things and we head into the main area, where already, a few kids are there and working with their trainers.

I look around and see a variety of kids at various ages, attempting to either kick a soccer ball, toss a football, and even throw a punch at a boxing pad.

The thought makes me think of Mia. Months ago, I was told by Logan that she was harassed at work and every part of my body wanted to find the dickhead and smash his face in the ground, but another part of me was proud she was taking things in her own hands when she jumped into learning how to defend herself. It also hurt knowing she felt she needed to, like

she knew I wasn't going to be there... because I wasn't. I was hurting myself, and in return, I was hurting her and everyone else. Sad thing was, I couldn't stop.

“Well,” Harper says with an enthusiastic clap, drawing my attention to her and away from my dark thoughts, “I’ll go and get the equipment, if you wanna wait here and keep an eye out for Lucas.”

She struts off without waiting for a reply, her ponytail swishing with each step, keeping in time with a hypnotic sway of her full hips. I instantly remember how those hips felt in my hands, perched up against my—

No!

I cannot think like that, and I certainly cannot think like that here! That shit is just weird. I shake my head and blink to refocus as she stops at a big box set against the wall, leaning over to withdraw what looks like a football.

The image sends a twinge to my chest until I tell myself that it is not the end of the world. It might not be, but it fucking hurts like a bitch.

I try to push down the pain of what I’ve lost, refocusing again when she struts across the main floor back to me with a confident smile. She spins the football in her hands, and there’s just something so hot in that, which I didn’t expect.

How she handled the football like she had handled one so many times before, even though I know she hasn’t.

Dammit, I cannot be thinking about her in any sort of way right now. I do not need that. I just need to focus and get this community service over and done with so I can get back to putting the pieces back together of my life, or as much as I can.

She’s almost to me until a guy approaches her, dressed in a similar shirt to mine, except his fits. His black hair is styled into a floppy Bieber-like cut, his build is tall and lanky, but he looks to be close to her age. I feel my spine stiffen as she stops and gives him a kind smile, nodding to whatever he was saying before replying with an animated wave of her hands.

I know I should stay here and keep an eye out for Lucas like I was told, I know I shouldn't walk toward them and interrupt their conversation, and I know I shouldn't drag Harper back with me away from this guy because I have no claim on her.

I know all of that, but apparently, my feet don't because, in the next second, I find myself approaching them.

I don't know what I'm going to do or say, but I also can't stop my feet or the internal screaming that's sounding off in my head: "*Mine! Mine! Mine!*"

She used to be mine, and that shit doesn't just go away.

It isn't until I am a foot away from them, that Harper's surprised eyes meet mine and the mystery guy follows her gaze to find me standing behind him, my big arms crossed over my chest as much as I can in the tight shirt.

He raises his brows at me, and I level him with a glare before telling Harper, "Lucas will be here soon. We should get ready."

Harper holds up the football in her hands. "We are ready."

I cock my head, ignoring the guy still standing there, very clearly seizing me up. "Why did you get a football? I thought Lucas was interested in baseball."

The guy cuts in, explaining with an arrogant grin, "Yeah, that kid does love baseball, but you also need to build a relationship with him, so maybe she thinks it's a good idea to start with something you know."

I narrow my eyes at the insinuation because this guy obviously knows shit about me and is trying to cut me down in front of Harper. *Nice try, dickhead.* "First of all, I know how to play baseball. Second of all, I've already started building a relationship with the kid because he actually spoke to me. Has he spoken to you yet?" The guy's smile drops as an answer, and I continue. "And finally, I was talking to Harper, who I'm sure can answer for herself and"—I take a step closer to the guy—"who I will be working very closely with. If I have any questions, I will ask her."

“Hunter,” Harper hisses at me, but we both ignore her, our eyes focused on each other.

The hatred is searing me through the face as the guy looks back at me, his jaw tensed until he gives me a tight smile, raising his hands in surrender. “Just trying to help, dude.” He gives a laugh before slapping my shoulder harder than necessary. “Chill.”

I give him my own tight smile, extending my hand, wanting to give him my own message. “You’re right. I’m sorry, let’s start fresh. I’m Hunter.”

The guy eyes my hand suspiciously, and for a second, I think he won’t take the bait, but with a glance at Harper, he takes my hand and bites his lip to stop himself from crying out. I squeeze his hand so hard, I start to feel his bones rubbing together. I keep the smile on my face as I ask, “And your name is?”

Fake smile in place and his voice shaking, he answers, “Anthony.”

I squeeze a bit harder. “Well, Anthony, it was nice to meet you, and I hope we can get along fine here.”

With that, I let go, and Anthony takes his sore hand in his other to cradle it. “Sure.”

With a nod at both of us, he scuttles away, the battle won by myself.

It isn’t until he is gone that I see Harper with her arms crossed over her full chest, her head cocked and her knowing eyes aimed at me.

I shrug. “What?” Then I spin on my heel, making my way back to where we were before, hearing Harper on my heels.

“I saw that.”

“What?” I say without looking at her until she finally hops in front me, stopping me in my tracks, and pointing a finger at me.

“You can’t do that stuff here.”

“What did I do?” I say with mocked innocence, batting my eyelashes.

“People already think you’re a troublemaker here, so going around and injuring the workers is not a good way to prove them otherwise.”

I scoff. “Who cares what they think? If they would take a second to ask why I’m here, they would know—”

“Know what? That you drove drunk? That doesn’t put you in the best light. I know you were going through stuff, but that is no reason to put yourself or others in danger.”

I scowl down at her, knowing the truth and hating how everyone has to keep rubbing it in my face. I am trying right now, and it feels like no one is seeing it. “Let’s not forget why I was in that bad place.”

She flinches. “No, don’t you put that on me. I was only going for a few months.”

“And you picked the perfect time to do it.”

“How was I supposed to know your parents were going to die?! Seriously, Hunter, you’re being ridiculous.”

I scoff again. “And did you come back? When you found out, did you come back to see if I was okay?”

“I called you!”

A laugh tears its way out of my mouth. “You called. Wow, how lucky am I?”

Harper frowns at me, her little hands balled up into fists at her sides. “And besides, what would I be coming home to? I told you I would be away for a few months, and you go ahead and push me away. You walked away from me.”

“Because that’s what you do when you care about someone. You’re there for them.”

She raises a single brow. “Like how you were there for me during that big opportunity? Or how you’ve been there for Mia, who also suffered the same loss? The world is not out to get you, Hunter; it can help you if you let it.”

We look at each other, knowing the truth, but neither of us wanting to acknowledge it, or at least I didn't. I couldn't, not yet.

But luckily, I didn't have to, because Lucas walks toward us in a shirt that hangs loosely on his skinny frame and shorts that reach his knobby knees. "I heard I had two trainers now. I'm either really good or really bad. Which is it?" he says when he reaches us.

And just like that, the tension is broken, for the moment.

THEN



CHAPTER 13



It's been weeks since I've last heard from Hunter, since that night he found out about the international internship. I knew I should have told him the second I knew, but would that have made a difference?

Maybe, but maybe not. I knew his father would always tell him horrible things about women, that they will distract you, ruin your life, and hurt you. I can only imagine what he is thinking, knowing that I am leaving and was waiting to tell him. But I will only be gone a few months! So, why did he seem so hurt?

I need answers, I need to hear his voice as he tells me that all he needed was space to process and how everything will be okay. I need to see the reassurance on his face as he says it too, which was why I'm spending my off day running around campus.

I've been calling Hunter for the past couple of days, and he hasn't answered any of my calls. I've texted with no reply, and if I will be leaving for a few months, I don't wanna spend those months wondering if he is okay and if *we* are okay.

I need to know where we stand.

It's around lunchtime so I make my way to one of the campus cafe I know Hunter frequents around this time on his full days, moving so fast that I sidestep all the students procrastinating going to class, having a chat along the way.

It isn't until I reach the café, that I stop in my tracks, feeling the sea of people behind me move around. I stand

frozen in place, looking at Hunter with a lanky looking guy I don't know and a beautiful, busty blonde who is looking up at Hunter with eyes that are all too friendly.

I should go over there, but a part of me is stopping me, telling me that maybe he doesn't want me there, maybe I haven't heard from him for a reason. I numbly take out my phone and try one more thing. More for me than him.

I find his number in my contacts and call him. At first, I think he will just ignore me, but then he starts rifling through his pocket, withdrawing his phone and looking down at it to see that I'm calling.

The next few seconds drag on forever as I stand there, unnoticed, with my phone in my hand, watching Hunter stare down at his own, his brows furrowing in indecision.

Whatever he decides next makes everything clear for me.

He holds the phone as the other two talk, but makes no move to answer it until his thumb starts to hover over the screen and hope blooms in my chest. But instead, he touches the screen and the call is disconnected.

My breath is stuck in my throat as I look down at my phone, seeing 'call ended' looking back at me, the message clear. Hunter tucks his phone back in his pocket and continues to chat to the people before him.

My hope not completely dead yet, or maybe it was just desperation, but I call his number again, only this time, it remains in his pocket and ignored, like I don't exist.

I let my breath out on a little cry, as I watch the call ring out at the same time the guy walks away, leaving the girl and Hunter together.

Looking at them both, I can't help but wonder if Hunter has already moved on. Surely, he hasn't. Surely, he'll show me the decency to tell me. Surely, he'll—

And just like that, the knife is pushed deeper into my chest as the girl starts to jump happily, her big boobs bouncing with her before launching herself into Hunter's arms in an embrace. And the knife twists inside me as I watch Hunter wrap his big

arms around her, those same arms that had once held me as he promised me that he would never hurt me.

Well, funny how things turn out, I think to myself as the girl steps back and smiles up at him, and they walk together toward the cafe, his arm slung over her tiny shoulders.

As I watch them leave, some things become clear. First, Hunter is scared, so he's running away from me. Second, how he feels and where I stand. And third, even though he is pushing me away, and it's hurting more than I can tolerate, I still can't help but love him. I don't know if I'll ever stop.

But I know what I need to do now.

I open up a text, not knowing if he'll even read it, but I start typing anyway, biting my lip to hold back the tears as I shut the door on Hunter as best as I can before hitting send.

'Okay, I get it. At least now I know where we stand.'

He reads it, but there is never a reply and, if it's possible, that hurts more.

NOW



CHAPTER 14



HUNTER

It's day two of working with Lucas. First half of the day was spent trying to get him to throw a football to me, which didn't go very well. He was clearly disinterested and was getting agitated at having to do it, so I changed things up by taking our little group to the room I first met Lucas in, designated for baseball.

As soon as we stepped foot into the space, the kid visibly let out a breath and gave me a small, lopsided smile. Though Harper seemed unsure in this space, I walked through it with confidence, welcoming the smell of the equipment.

We decided to start off by learning to catch without a glove at first using two hands, which Lucas was fine with. After he got that down quickly, we progressed to only using one hand. He participated eagerly, his eyes focused on the ball as I carefully threw it to him from a very short distance. Though he missed some, he was fairly good for his first day. At the end of our session, Lucas skipped up to me and asked if he can learn to swing. That he wanted to hear the crack of a ball hitting the bat. I told him we'd get there, but we needed to learn the basics first.

After nodding, he smiled again and ran back out to his mother in the waiting area.

The rest of the day has been pretty quiet between Harper and I, neither of us saying much to each other or even looking at each other.

But now, we return to the baseball room with Lucas buzzing with excitement, talking all things baseball, speaking so fast that it's hard to make out what he is actually saying.

I chuckle at his enthusiasm, respecting it as I instruct him to stand at the plate and hand him a glove. Lucas puts it on, admiring it on his hand as I tell him, "You remember how I showed you to throw and catch yesterday? We're gonna do that again, but this time, with a glove."

His eyes light up and he raises his gloved hand, ready to go, and I smile as I instruct, "But just know that it'll be different catching with a glove. It might be awkward at first, so we are going to start with me throwing the ball a little closer to you, and then I'll start stepping back. We just need to get you used to catching and using the glove, but it's okay if you drop some. It's just practice."

Lucas frowns in thought before nodding and holding his glove up.

We start practicing, and of course, Lucas does not catch a single one, awkwardly moving his arm around in an attempt to catch the ball, his brow furrowing further in his growing frustration. I know it's only a matter of time before he gets upset.

"Make sure to hold your glove more open than that. The ball needs room to fall in, so just keep the glove open." We continue to practice, and he nods, concentrating on the ball, until finally... he gets one.

He freezes and holds his glove up to show the ball in it, a smile taking over his face, and before I know it, I am cheering with him. A sense of pride grips my chest as Lucas takes the ball from the glove and throws it to me, asking, "Now when can I start swinging a bat?"

WE SPENT the rest of our time practicing catching with a glove and I can tell Lucas is getting frustrated, but I explain that if he wants to play in the big stadiums, he will need to practice these skills. At that, he smiles and nods eagerly, and it isn't

until after the session that Harper actually speaks to me, after feeling her eyes on me the entire time.

I'm at the water cooler, throwing back some water when she moves to stand before me, a cautious expression on her face. "You did great with him."

I crush the cup in my hands before throwing it in the trash with a scoff. "You don't need to sound so surprised."

"Well, I've never seen you with kids."

"And now you see that I'm not so cold-hearted?" I ask with a raise of my brow.

"I wouldn't say that, but it's good that he has someone who knows what he is doing."

I stand there, unsure of what to say, feeling very unsettled standing this close to Harper. "Thank you."

We stand for a minute longer until Harper nervously clears her throat and lets out a little chuckle as she leans in slightly, making her sweet smell more intense, and I refrain from stepping back. "Did you know that a majority of these kids have never been to a game?" I blink at both the slight change in topic as well as her friendly demeanor. She continues, nodding. "Yep, these kids love baseball or football or whatever, but they have never been to a game. Some of them have never experienced that feeling of unity when cheering for the same team."

I blink again, commenting, "You didn't until you came to one of my games."

She flinches, as if any memory of that time hurts, and I know the feeling, just like I know that rubbing that time into our faces will not help either of us. I expel a regretful breath, wanting to apologize, when an idea suddenly hits me.

I feel my eyes widen as Harper's words sink in. I hold my finger to silence her before she can speak and quickly ramble out, "You are brilliant! I'll be right back."

I silently curse my choice of words and the whiplash she's probably getting from me, but there is something I needed to

do first before I explain.

Harper opens her mouth, her brow furrowed in confusion, as I rush past her and across the main floor until I suddenly find myself power-walking down the hallway and knocking on Sue's door.

I'm bouncing on my feet when I hear Sue on the other side. "Come in."

I'm in and closing the door behind me so fast that Sue looks up from her desk in surprise. "Hunter, what on earth—"

"A game," I blurt out without thinking, cursing myself again for not having a working brain. Maybe something did happen in that accident. I shake my head. "I mean, the kids should go to a game."

She shakes her head. "Okay, you've still lost me. Hunter, don't you have kids that you should be working with right now?"

"Harper's got them for the moment, but I had to run this idea by you."

She holds my gaze in thought, before leaning back in her chair. "All right, what is this grand idea that was enough to make you leave your post?"

The displeasure is clear in her voice, and I hold back the wince at my decision to do this right this second. .

Knowing my time is limited, I start to explain. "A lot of our kids are passionate about sports, or a particular sport, right?"

Sue nods and waits.

"But apparently, many of them have never been to a game, right?"

"What is your point here, Hunter?"

I clear my throat. "I think it would be worth it to take the kids on a trip of some sort, maybe to an actual baseball game. I know they have a Red Sox versus Yankees at Fenway Park—"

Sue holds up her hand, descending the room into silence. “Do you have any idea how much money and work goes into planning a trip like this? Do you expect any volunteers to take a bunch of kids to a baseball game?”

I shrug. “If they’re baseball fans, yeah. Or if they actually care about the kids, then yeah.”

“This is a lot of work, Hunter. Can you explain to me how this will help them?”

I think for a second before stepping forward and resting my hands on her desk, leaning forward so she is looking at me. “Have you ever been to a game, Sue?”

She remains silent, but nods and I continue. “Then you know. You know how different it is to watch on the screen to being there and being submerged in the excitement. These kids want to know more and experience more, but if we keep on treating them like they can’t handle things like that, then they won’t progress anywhere else, and you know I’m right.”

“You’re asking a lot, Hunter.”

I know I am, and maybe I’m making a mistake, but maybe if Lucas sees a game himself, he will see how it works in person, experience the atmosphere, and make him smile like he never has before. I blink, not knowing where that thought came from but it was true. I’m growing fond of the kid, but I’m also worried what could happen when my service is up. That’s a concern I don’t know I would have. “Just think about it.”

With a nod, I turn to leave, only making it to the door, when Sue calls for me. I turn to face her and see irritation looking back at me. “I’ll run it by the parents and we’ll see. That’s all I can promise you right now.”

“That’s all I ask.”

CHAPTER 15



HUNTER

We had a session with Lucas later the next day, with still no word about the game coming up. We do more practice on catching, which Lucas has improved on, but now we have challenged him further with having him run to catch the ball. That, he is still learning, but things will take time. These are all skills that won't only help his hand-eye coordination, but skills that are needed in the game he loves.

I can tell that he's getting antsy, wanting to hit a ball with the bat, but he will get there. That has become his golden carrot. *But it's not all easy during Lucas's sessions*, I think to myself as my eyes find the curvy brunette currently bending down to pick up some of the balls we've discarded during our session.

A level of trust has developed. I thought she would try to control things and hold my mistake over my head, but instead, she merely steps back and lets me do my thing without any debate, only stepping in when I need assistance, and even then, I don't need to say it because she can see it. I guess it's the benefit of working with someone who knows you well, but we still haven't spoken. Every now and then, I'll go against my inner voice telling me not to, and I'll look at her to find her looking at me, and I will struggle to look away. Before, our eyes would always find each other, even when we were in a room of our friends who didn't know the truth. But even though things are different now, my eyes still find her like they haven't learnt the same lesson I had to.

“Why do you always look at each other?” I jump at the question, Lucas standing closer than expected, staring up at me, his head tilted. I open my mouth and close it, looking from Lucas to Harper, who was now standing and looking at me, her eyes wide like she’s been caught.

Fuck.

“Um,” I stammer out. “What are you talking about, kid?”

Lucas looks at me, then at Harper, who is slowly approaching us with balls in her arms and a question in her eyes. “Every day, you guys spend a lot of time looking at each other. Too much time to be nothing. I may be a kid, but I’m not an idiot.”

I try to school my features, shrugging my shoulders. “It’s nothing, kid.” I look down at my non-existent watch. “Wow, look at the time! Your mom will be waiting outside, so you should probably hurry.”

Lucas just gives me a blank look. “Fine, don’t tell me. Just don’t get too distracted that I end up getting a ball in the face.”

“Promise that won’t happen,” I tell him as he goes to leave, leaving Harper and I alone in the room, both of us feeling the full weight of the space between us.

The more I’m around her and cannot touch her or be near her, I feel it in my chest, but I know I can’t go there again. I’m only just starting to claw my way out of the hole I’m in, and I don’t wanna fall back down.

I clear my throat. “We should get ready for our next session.”

I’m out the door in a second, not waiting for her response, not sure there is anything she could say, but all that follows me is the regret always on my heels.

DAMMIT! I look down at the text I just got as I stand outside the center with my bag over my shoulder, ready to head home after a long day.

LOGAN: Hey bro, sorry I can't pick you up this afternoon, this class is running late. Call an Uber for today.

I'M NOT GETTING A FUCKING Uber because I am in no mood to sit in a car with a chatty stranger (and they are always chatty). I try calling Hadley and only get voicemail, when I eventually remember she's got an art class tonight and likely has her phone off.

I can't call Conner or Ava because I don't wanna do that to them while they have their baby and are planning a wedding. I scroll through my contacts and land on a name that stops me and twists at the pain in my chest.

Mia.

I could call her, but she's getting her life sorted out, and I don't wanna bring her back down with my bullshit. She doesn't need me, and I don't want the first time I call her to be to ask for help. When I call her or talk to her again, it will be because I am okay. I just hope she'll be willing to listen then.

I continue to scroll, stopping when a familiar car rolls up before me, the passenger side window down as Harper leans across to look at me with her brows raised. "You waiting for your lift?"

I shrug because I wasn't about to tell her that I'm stranded and probably forced to take the bus or a dreaded Uber.

Harper continues. "Logan texted me." She slaps the passenger seat. "Come on, I'll drive you home."

Not wanting to prolong this torture of being around her and certainly not wanting to submerge myself in a cocoon of her perfume, I shake my head. "I'm all good. I'll get an Uber."

Because I would rather take my chances.

Harper sighs, clearly annoyed. "Hunter, just get in the car. You and I both know that you will not call an Uber because

you hate how chatty they can be, you think public transport is a germ-fest, and it is over an hour's walk to your place.”

I tense my jaw against her valid points, unable to argue them. Rolling my eyes, I hate my lack of choices and just want to get home so, with a defeated pout, I get in her car and try not to think about the times I've kissed her in this small space, touched her, and fucked her. The times I've felt her heavy breath on my skin, heard her moans in my ear.

I clench my fists at my sides, trying to push the thoughts back as Harper starts to drive.

We drive for five minutes, with neither of us saying a word, but sitting in tensed silence, makes the drive appear longer and more torturous. The only thing breaking the silence is the slight sound of our breaths.

It continues on until I feel movement beside me, and seconds later, the car is filled with a pop song. My mind instantly fills with memories of Mia, and before I know it, my hand is out and turning off the radio until we are back in silence. Only this time, I can feel Harper's questioning look.

I refuse to meet her glances, focusing on the road before us until I see her shake her head beside me from the corner of my eye.

Harper finally says, sounding irritated, “Look, we all get it. You're pissed off at the world, or at me or Mia, but sulking about it like a preteen is not going to help you.”

My own irritation grows at her tone, and I shift in my seat to look at her. “Oh, really? Tell me what will help me then, because you know all about what I'm going through.”

I narrow my eyes as she glances at me. “Don't I know?”

“Not even close.”

“Well then, tell me! Tell Conner, tell Logan! Hell, somebody! You're so closed off to everybody, no one knows what to do or say around you anymore!”

“And who's fault is that?”

Her eyes widen in sudden fury. “Don’t you dare put that on me! You walked away, Hunter. You made the decision!”

I scoff. “No, that was you when you made the decision to leave and got on that plane.”

Harper throws a hand up in frustration. “I was only going to be gone for three damn months! And the first second you get, you move on.”

I flinch at her words, confused, noticing as she starts to blink her incoming tears away. I try to ignore how that affects me. “What are you talking about ‘move on’?”

Harper focuses on the road, hurt in her eyes and her grip on the wheel tight as she fights against the tears, not letting them fall. For a second, I think she won’t speak anymore until she finally lets out a long breath through her nose. “I saw you.”

I furrow my brow. “What?”

“Before I left, sometime after I told you about the internship, I saw you. I wanted to come and find you so we could talk and I could tell you that I wasn’t going anywhere, so I could promise you that I would be back. I found you outside the campus cafe with a guy and a girl.” She pauses as I try to remember that day. “The girl seemed to like you.” Another pause. “I tried calling and texting and then I watched you ignore them.”

My stomach sinks as I start to remember that day more clearly. I remember the pain, the uncertainty, and the fear. I remember my father’s words blaring in my head for days after Harper told me she was leaving, but I also didn’t want to be the thing that holds her back, so even though I wanted to answer those calls and texts, I used every bit of strength I had to ignore them. Remembering that day, I see what I had done, and my stomach sinks as Harper glances at me again.

“I didn’t move on from you, Hunter. You pushed me away and made the decision yourself. I never stopped thinking of you or asking about you.”

I cock my head. “And you think I stopped thinking about you? Why do you think I resorted to drinking?”

“Did it help?” she asks, already knowing the answer before sighing and continuing. “Look, we’ve both made mistakes, we both could have handled things differently, but right now, you need to start thinking about these kids and your friends. You might not be ready to really face Mia and talk to her yet, but you need to make an effort.”

“I have been!” I exclaim defensively, but she just shakes her head.

“No, I mean, getting out of bed without help from Logan or Hadley. They are your roommates, not your caretakers. If you want to talk, I’m sure they are there, but I don’t think they need to get you ready in the morning.”

“They don’t get me re—”

“I mean, making an effort to talk to your friends and maybe have a laugh. That’s one of the things I always liked about you, the way you were always there for your friends. Your best friend is getting married with you as best man, so you need to step up.”

I open my mouth, but she cuts me off again. “And you are doing so well with these kids. Just keep on being there for them. I get it, you hate me, but—”

“I don’t hate you,” I say loudly, and the strange thing is, it’s the truth. I say it so loud that it silences Harper for a moment as she processes it.

“Then hopefully we can leave some things in the past.” She shrugs. “Call a truce so everything isn’t a jumbled and uncomfortable mess.”

I want to laugh at her choice of words, sounding like we are in a war, but aren’t we? It’s what it’s been feeling like. We know what we did and how we’ve fucked up. Does it really make anything better to continue to punish ourselves?

I know she’s right. Conner is getting married, and I should be taking him out in celebration, but all I’ve been doing is moping in bed. I should be destroying Logan in the latest

game, but I haven't been. And I should be there for my sister, but I'm still not sure I'm ready for that yet, not ready to face my fuck up with her.

So I nod, accepting her truce. "Truce, then."

I watch her blink in surprise, her brows reaching her hairline as she shoots me a quick glance before looking back at the road, getting closer to my house. "Really?"

I nod. "You're right, and don't make me say it again."

Harper's lips tilt upwards in a small smile, and I start to miss the full toothy smile I used to get from her, having not seen it in a while. "I won't make this harder on you. Thank you."

CHAPTER 16



HUNTER

I've been playing our conversation on a loop in my head. It's been an hour since Harper dropped me off at the house, and I immediately got hit with questions from Hadley and Logan who were already making tacos for dinner.

I answered their curiosity with a shrug and reminded them with a pointed look at Logan that I had to find some way home and Harper offered. Logan accepted this, but Hadley narrowed her eyes, suspicious, as if she senses more.

Truthfully, she did give me a lift because Logan was busy, but what they don't know is that there was a lot of history there and we've only skimmed the surface.

"So, how was your day?" Hadley asks, giving me a curious glance, like she has been all throughout dinner.

Remembering Harper's words about trying, I think of what else I could say, but nothing comes to mind so I ask them both, "How were your days?"

My eyes move between them as they work to swallow their tacos, their eyes widening for a second until they both look at each other before looking back at me, Hadley being the first to speak. "Um, mine was fine. Morning class got cancelled, so I treated myself to a coffee at this cafe I walk past every day."

"How was it?"

She shrugs. "Overrated, but it was a nice treat anyway. Um, then I taught a figure drawing class."

That catches Logan's attention. "Wait, isn't that where you draw naked people?"

Hadley resists the need to roll her eyes as she answers. "Yes, Logan, and believe it or not, people are not giggling at the sight of boobs."

"Who says I would waste time giggling at such a marvelous creation? Those things deserve praise, not laughter," Logan says with absolute seriousness, leaving Hadley and I to just look at each other with concern.

Neither of us comment on his statement, but I say, "Sounds like fun. What other classes do you teach?"

Logan is busy with his food, but Hadley just looks at me, her brows now pulled down with concern as she leans in slightly, asking, "Is everything all right?"

I blink at her question. "Um, yeah, why?"

"The whole time I've been living here, you've never asked me a single thing about my life. When I interviewed to move in, it was Logan asking the questions and now you've not only asked me one thing, but two. Forgive me for being confused."

I want to flinch at her words because they were true. She has been so kind to me since moving in and dealing with my bullshit when she really doesn't have to, yet I've been cold and rude. I want to make a change, and I don't want to hurt anyone. I never did, just myself I guess. But in the end, I ended up hurting those who care about me most, Harper being one of them.

Still feeling Hadley's eyes on me, I know I need to say something so I clear my throat. "Yeah, I'm sorry about that. I was going through some shit and you didn't deserve that."

"And I did? She wasn't the one that had to clean up after your lazy ass."

"Yes I was," Hadley declares.

"Hey, I washed his dishes!" Logan exclaims defensively, pointing a finger at Hadley, to which she just cocks her head at Logan before saying, "You barely wash your own dishes, let

alone someone else's. When I moved in, this place was disgusting and in desperate need of my help. I cook, do dishes, and even do your stinking laundry. Emphasis on *stinking!*”

The previous discussion forgotten, Logan and Hadley get lost in another argument, leaving me some time to escape.

I make my way upstairs to my room without any issue, closing the door on the banter going on downstairs, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

I'd usually try to drown it all out with alcohol, but clearly, that did nothing but cause more trouble, so instead, I plop myself down on my bed and allow the thoughts to flow. I think about what has happened and how I got here. I think about what Hadley and Harper said.

Yes, my parents are gone, and my scholarship, and I've lost the girl I loved, but I've walked away from an accident that could've done worse damage. I have been given an opportunity and the center, and I have great friends who are still by my side despite all that I've done.

I could continue how I have been and lose all of that as well, or I could try and not fuck everything else up.

There are some things I cannot face yet, like Mia, but everything happens in small steps.

With shaking hands, I pull my phone out of my pocket and look down at my lockscreen, a picture me, Logan, and Conner, with some beers and grins.

I unlock my phone and open up a fresh message, starting to type and deleting it before typing again and deleting again. The cycle continues until my irritation grows at my inability to form a simple text. I growl at my phone and refrain from throwing it, when a rustling from my dresser drawer catches my attention, the top drawer over stuffed with shirts hanging out of it rattling the most.

I frown, curious until a familiar pair of beady eyes pop out of the bundle of shirts.

Rasputin.

I let out a breath at the familiar creature.

He was Conner's before he left, always known for scurrying around the house and scaring the shit out of us when he pops out of shocking places. We always know when he scares Logan because the house would hear him scream like a chick, though he denies it, but here he was.

The little brown ferret looks at me like he's judging me, like he knows what my inner turmoil is. Chances are, he's just surprised to see me and not thinking anything.

But looking into those black eyes, I see an opportunity to talk without true judgement, without fear of someone telling me what I don't want to hear, without fear of someone sharing my secrets.

I see my chance to confess at the church of Rasputin.

I sigh, my shoulders dropping from the weight of everything hanging over my head. "What do you say when you fuck everything up?"

Rasputin just continues to look at me, and I nod. "Nothing, huh? It's probably best. I've hurt a lot of people, and the things I said to my sister... You didn't see the look on her face that day." I wince at the memory, shaking my head to refocus. "And things aren't so easy with Harper either. We called a truce today, but what does that mean? Do we play nice? Are we friends?" I close my eyes and let out a breath. "What if my feelings haven't gone away? I'm hurt and scared, but how can I be friends when my thoughts are more than friendly?" I open my eyes and look at Rasputin again, still looking at me, and I could only imagine what he would be saying if he could. "Take a chance? Sounds easy, but what if that could lead to more heartbreak. Look what it did to me last time; I can't do that again."

"I sure hope you haven't gotten that close to Rasputin, or we may need to keep him away from you." I jump from my bed, and Rasputin scurries back into the dresser as I turn to see an amused looking Hadley, her arms crossed in her oversized red flannel as she leans against the doorframe of my bedroom.

I must have been so lost in my thoughts that I didn't hear the door open, which makes me wonder how much of that conversation she heard.

A corner of her mouth tilts up as she cocks her head and raises her brows, waiting to hear what I have to say. I open my mouth and numbly say without too much thought, "I was just talking *to* him, not *about* him."

Her face softens, turning thoughtful as she takes this in. "I talk to him too sometimes."

"Really?"

She nods. "Yeah. I always loved ferrets, so he comes in my room a lot, and I talk to him when something is bothering me." Her eyes hold mine. "Glad to know he's helping others."

Her eyes tell me what she heard, and she drops her arms and steps into my room. Usually there is only one reason why a girl would come into my room, but with Hadley, it's different. I don't have that need and she doesn't appear to either. The vibe between us feels more like friends or even siblings; being around her is similar to being around Mia, except Hadley has this air of knowledge and experience that comes with age, despite being the same age as me.

It's comforting.

"If you weren't talking about Rasputin, then who were you talking about?" Hadley asks with a confidence to her voice that tells me she knows.

I consider denying it, and if it was Logan, I would because that dickhead cannot keep a secret, but I think Hadley could. It would be nice to be able to talk to someone, so I let out another breath in defeat. "A girl."

Hadley nods. "Was it the girl that dropped you off earlier? Harper?"

I nod before explaining, "There's a history there."

Hadley scoffs at that, coming up and plopping herself down on my bed. "Duh! Anyone who's in the same room as

you guys can see something. I imagine your decline happened when she left last year?”

“It didn’t help, but yeah, and then the stuff with my parents...” I finish on a shrug.

“And now you’re working with her. That must be tough.”

I narrow my eyes. “Yes, it is, and thank you for reminding me.”

Hadley rolls her eyes. “Based on what you were saying to Rasputin, I think being a friend is a good start. If you are scared, it’s best not to jump straight in. Dip your toe in and maybe send her a text. Think of it as an olive branch to let her know you are serious about putting the past behind you. Get comfortable with each other again, and then you’ll know when you’re ready for more because you won’t be too scared anymore.”

“What if I’m always scared?”

Hadley cocks her head. “Then you will have a good friend who you will support when she moves on, when she dates someone else, marries them and has little ones with them. You cool with that?”

I see it, Harper with another guy, maybe that guy at the center, *Anthony*. I see him in my head, touching her and kissing her like I have done many times. The thought makes my knuckles crack and my jaw tense, and Hadley grins at me. “Then you might want to send that text.”

On that note, she struts out of the bedroom, but as she reaches the doorway, I say, “What do I say?”

“I’d start with ‘hi’.” She stops, looking over her shoulder. “And don’t worry, your secret is safe with me.”

With a final wink, she leaves, and I feel a hundred pounds lighter as I look down at my phone. I force my fingers to type before sending the message with shaking fingers, hoping that this is not the first step to my demise.

ME: Hi.

I WATCH MY PHONE, sinking back onto my bed as I watch three bubbles appear, signaling her response.

Then the bubbles disappear, then appear and disappear again.

“Goddamnit, woman! Write something,” I growl at the phone as the bubbles reappear for a second before a her response hits.

HARPER: Hi.

THAT’S IT? I growl at my phone again in frustration before typing the lamest thing ever.

ME: Fancy meeting you here.

Harper: In a text conversation you started? Yes, fancy that. Is everything okay?

Me: Yeah, why?

Harper: Just didn’t expect you to text me.

Me: This is a truce, right?

Harper: True. What’s up?

I GO TO TYPE, but my mind is blank. What is up? What do I say to that? Oh, I’m just questioning everything and unloading all of my romantic problems on my roommate and my pet. All normal things! No, I’m not going to be saying that.

ME: Just hanging with Rasputin.

Harper: Oh how is he?! I haven’t seen him in forever.

Me: He'd like to see you again, maybe you could come by to visit him.

I INSTANTLY REGRET SENDING it when I am met with silence for too long. I almost think she won't reply until she finally sends:

HARPER: I'd like that.

I FEEL a small smile curl my lips as she takes the olive branch, giving me hope that I can have my life back.

ME: Anyways, I just thought I'd say 'hi'.

Harper: Hi LOL

Me: I should probably go. I'm neglecting Rasputin to text you.

Harper: :O Well, we can't have that. I'll see you, Hunter.

I DON'T WANNA TYPE the message because I want to say more, but this is a good start. I say my goodbyes and spend the night with the first bloom of hope I've had in months.

CHAPTER 17



Reality was eventually going to come and hit me in the face, I just didn't know it was going to be in the form of an email from my boss.

Evalyn, my boss from my international internship in Australia has been emailing me since I left. Approaching the end of my internship, Evalyn had pulled me into her office, telling me that she would love if I could stay, that they can train me and teach me on the job, that I have demonstrated significant skill. It also doesn't help I made quite the impression on a few of their big name authors who requested to work with me. It was all surreal and I was thrilled, but my mind went to Hunter each time. I told him I would be back, but I also wondered if he would be there for me to return to, if he would want me.

Anyone who knows about the publishing knows how hard it is to get a decent job in the industry. Usually you spend years working your way from getting coffees to eventually doing what you would like to do: work with authors. They were offering me that dream on a silver platter, but I still couldn't stop thinking about Hunter so I took a risk and asked for some time to think about it.

Evalyn offered a smile and told me not to take too much time.

That night, I remember trying to reach Hunter. I called and texted with no response. My heart sinking, I decided to call both Mia and Ava, smiling yet sad I would also be leaving them. What did I have in Australia except a job opportunity? I

knew I would be crazy not to take it, and I would always wonder, what if.

I told the girls the news that night and I was surprised by their support. I also kind of wished they would've asked me to stay, but they had their own lives, which I get, and I needed to start thinking about mine.

I texted Hunter after another failed call, telling him that I had been asked to stay, that I asked for time to think about it. I'll never forget his text back, the first contact since he found out about the internship.

GOOD LUCK on your future endeavors.

SO COLD AND DISTANT, like he was already done with me, but I wasn't done with him, which made it hurt more when I returned to Evalyn the next morning with my job acceptance and an empty heart.

Now that it feels like I'm finally seeing the old Hunter back, getting time with my friends, reality comes crashing down as I look down at my phone to see Evalyn's name blinking up at me.

I open the email and read about her concern due to me leaving so suddenly, after saying that there was an emergency in the family, and asking when I intend on returning.

This is the third email in the last week, only this one feels more demanding and impatient. I know if I'm not careful, I could make a bad name of myself in the publishing industry. I could piss the wrong people off. But at the same time, I only have one concern at the moment: Hunter.

So I close the email, tucking my phone in my pocket, knowing I will need to deal with that tonight before I really screw things up.

I return to the here and now, expelling a breath through my nose and leaning back on my hands as I sit on the floor of Ava's living room. My butt already grows incredibly numb as

the girls around me continue to talk about flowers I have never heard of before that could be used in Ava's wedding. They all have their laptops out, though I didn't get the memo, so I'm just sitting here while Ava, Mia, and Lucy scroll through options. Hadley sits on the floor with me, sharing an uncomfortable look, both of us feeling useless to the group.

I'm restless and it doesn't help knowing Hunter is near. The guys came over with everyone else, heading straight out to the back patio, Hunter giving me a small smile as he passed. They are supposed to be talking about their bachelor party, but who knows what they've ended up talking about out there.

Thoughts of Hunter being so close are starting to bother me, especially after a few days ago when we called our truce and sent a text later that night. It almost felt like old times, so much that it hurt a bit, but I also didn't want the conversation to end, scared it would be the last time he tried, that he would push me away again. I shift in my place on the floor, my brain searching for something until I clear my throat, their chattering dying and their eyes going to me as I stagger to my feet. "Um, girls I'm gonna go get some drinks. Did you want anything?"

They all smile, oblivious to my inner turmoil as Ava says, "Yeah, water sounds good. There are some bottles in the basement. It's in the cooler at the bottom of the stairs. Thank you!"

I smile and walk awkwardly as my butt starts to tingle from the numbness. I walk past the back patio door on my way to the basement and try to stretch my hearing to hear any sign of Hunter. Maybe he is okay today, maybe he is talking and laughing with the guys, but I don't hear him.

So, I make my way down to the basement, careful with each rickety step until I hit the bottom, opening the large cooler and reaching down to gather five bottles of water in my arms. I let the top of the cooler fall shut as I turn and make my way toward to stairs only to have my life flash before my eyes when I see a tall, dark figure in the shadows of the stairway. I gasp and drop the bottles at my feet. Luckily, all of them survive the fall, and I stand for a minute, trying to catch my breath. My eyes settle and take in Hunter's large familiar

build, those wide shoulders I used to hold, his eyes looking darker in the shadows at he stares at me, and I am all too aware of how alone we are right now.

I put a hand to my chest. “Oh god! Hunter, what on earth are you doing lurking around the shadows like that?”

“Didn’t mean to scare you,” he says simply, but does not move.

“Well, mission failed because you did,” I tell him, dropping my hands to my sides and cocking my head at him, curious. “What are you doing down here?”

He just stares at me a moment. “You’re moving funny.”

It takes me a second to understand and I nod. “Oh yeah, I was sitting on the floor and my butt went numb.” I start to rub my butt for some reason, and it’s hard not to notice his eyes cast downward, one side of his lips tilting up.

“Want me to help?”

I can’t help but laugh. “I think I’ll be fine.”

He cocks his head. “I thought we were in a truce?”

I stop rubbing my butt. “Yes, but I also don’t let my friends rub my butt.”

He holds my eyes, his gaze intense as he says in a low tone, “I used to. In fact, I remember you liking it.”

I suddenly feel the ache starting to build between my legs at the memories, thoughts of him bending me over and squeezing my hips and ass as he pounded into me from behind, thoughts of him rubbing the globes of my ass as I rode him. The thoughts just keep on coming and making me all too aware of how long it has been. I quickly shake that thought away because I can’t help but wonder where this has come from. Earlier this week, he couldn’t speak to me, and now he’s being flirty and sexy. I furrow my brow. “Are you okay?”

He blinks as if being pulled out of a trance, clearing his throat. “Yeah, just trying to be friendly is all.”

I raise a brow in question. “Offering to rub my butt is you being friendly? Wow, I wonder what you did with other girls.”

“No one but you.” The darkness returns to his eyes as he looks at me, all serious as he growls, “There hasn’t been anyone but you. I never wanted anyone else, Harper.”

Words are stuck in my throat as I hear the promise in his words and, strangely enough, I believe it, because it was the same with me. I might have been away from him, but no else has compared, no one could. But what does one say or do after something like that? In movies, the couple would run to each other and kiss, and in a romance novel, they would kiss and reconcile, but there is so much more to us that needs to be resolved and it cannot be resolved with a kiss.

Before I can say or do anything, light fills the space from upstairs when Hadley opens the door to the basement. “Hey, Harper! What is taking so—?” Her eyes widen as she sees us down there, as if she saw us doing something else. “Oh shit, sorry, I didn’t know—”

Quickly closing the door, I hear her footsteps as she runs away before I refocus on Hunter, submerged in shadow again.

“You should probably head back to the girls.” He takes some slow, purposeful steps toward me, his eyes remaining on mine, and I don’t move as he reaches me, standing before me until lowering himself to the ground to pick up the bottles of water I had dropped earlier, gathering them in his arms. It’s hard not to notice that his face was perfectly level with my—
No!

I blink as he rises from his place, now standing so close that I can feel his warmth and smell his familiar scent, bringing back even more memories.

“See you around, Harper,” he says to me as I gather the bottles from him into my arms awkwardly.

I nod, my smile uncomfortable. “Yeah, see you.”

And just like that, I leave and return to a world that is blind to my pain and heartache, sitting down in my place on the floor after handing out the waters. I am sitting there for a

moment, trying not to notice Hadley casting furtive glances at me when my phone buzzes again. This time it's Ava's name on the screen.

I frown and glance up at her. She's looking at me with soft and caring eyes while Mia and Lucy talk about music.

AVA: Are you okay? You seem distracted.

ME: I've just got a lot on my mind. I'll focus, I promise.

AT THAT MESSAGE, she frowns before typing back.

AVA: I don't care about the wedding right now. Okay, that is totally a lie, but I care about my friend more. I know things are different with Charlie, but I'm always here, you know that, right?

I SMILE down at the message, feeling seen and acknowledged, wanting to talk to someone, but something about that still feels wrong. Talking to someone about my past with Hunter without Hunter knowing.

I might be overthinking it, but I'm happy to have the support offered.

So I smile as I reply before returning to all wedding talk, with Ava not seeming too convinced.

ME: I know and I'll be fine. I promise xx

CHAPTER 18



It's been a couple of weeks since the run-in in the basement with Hunter, and since then, he has greeted me each day at the center, talking to me and asking how I am. He'll throw a smile my way when he works with Lucas, and he'll text me goodnight each night. Nothing else will be said except that, and I guess I'm worried what will happen if I say more.

I've managed to get some more time from my boss after finally returning her email, but I could tell by the tone of her response that it was not a smart move and I do not have all the time in the world. But despite the big opportunity, what if I really don't want to leave? What if I'm finally having so many reasons to stay?

I worry about the disappointment in my aunt's eyes if I turn away from such an opportunity, I worry what would happen in my future. Would Hunter return to me and live happily ever after? I know this is not a movie, and I need to live out my days like I'm not being pulled in two different directions: one led by my head, and the other my heart.

I glance over at his smiling face, the biggest smile I have seen in a while, as he looks out to the field before him, probably feeling proud of himself because he managed to convince Sue to organize and allow a field trip to Fenway Park to watch the Red Sox versus Yankees game. I honestly don't know how she got tickets so last minute, and when I asked, she merely said that she knew a guy, which made me curious but I didn't push further. Best I don't know.

Only six kids wanted to go, so it was only Pepper, myself, and Hunter that were required to supervise. The game's underway and my heart is full as I watch the kids, Lucas looking so entranced by the players and the field. Every now and then, Lucas turns to either one of us and tells us another random fact about baseball, his eyes completely lit up.

Due to the seating, we have one kid sitting on either side of us, and another four sitting directly in front of us with Pepper.

Often, I find myself lost in my own thoughts until I realize I've missed something and then I ask, earning me a little chuckle from Hunter that makes my stomach flutter.

I start to drift off again until a round of cheers erupts from the crowd, and I blink back to the here and now to see everyone looking at me. I sit up a little straighter, my heart racing in my chest as Pepper says, "Lay it on him, sweetie!"

I blink again, confused, until I see it, or see *us*.

On the big screen, looking over the crowd, is Hunter currently staring at the screen, in shock.

The damn kiss cam! Of course that would happen.

Not wanting to force that on Hunter when he is just now dealing with things, I go to shake my head, but instead, a pair of big, warm hands cup my face, turning me in my chair until my lips are pressed against a pair of soft, familiar ones that always make my muscles relax.

I squeak in surprise as Hunter kisses me, his lips on mine, until I relax into him, my hands coming up to rest on his biceps. I don't even care about the crowd and the cheers. The only thing on my mind is that Hunter is kissing me and it's better than I remembered. He feels safe, like home, and I definitely want more, but then he pulls away, and I'm left reeling.

The crowd is now cheering for other kissing couples, completely oblivious to the party that's happening in my stomach and the tingles between my legs. I should not be thinking of such things, but as I sit there, focused on what just

happened, Hunter sits back in his chair, his eyes back on the game.

I resist the urge to pull him aside and demand to know where his head is at. I have a job to do, I have kids to supervise, and one of them is now poking me in the side.

I turn to little Kimmy beside me, and she explains that she needs to use the bathroom.

Smiling, I tell Pepper, not wanting to look at Hunter right now, that I'll be back before leading Kimmy out to the bathrooms.

Kimmy states that she is fine on her own, and I know that she is, so I wait outside the bathrooms and replay that kiss on a loop in my head.

He definitely grabbed me and kissed me like he used to, kissed me so I could feel it in my toes. My toes curl at the memory as I lean my back against the wall, resting my head as I cross my arms over my chest.

Maybe he was just doing it to get it over and done with? Yeah, that must be it. Maybe he's dropping his walls? Yet, I feel too scared to drop all of mine.

I let out a big breath as I hear, "Girl, you need to tell me about that kiss!"

I blink as I see Pepper walking toward me, and I furrow my brow. "Why aren't you with the kids?"

"Hunter is with them, and don't change the subject." Pepper puts her hands on her hips and cocks her head, waiting.

"It was for the kiss cam," I explain weakly, making Pepper scoff.

"Yeah, no one grabs someone like that on a kiss cam unless they are together."

I shuffle my feet. "Well, we're not." I pause, before saying what I wanted to avoid saying, "But we used to be. A while ago, before I left for Australia."

Her eyes alight with excitement as her jaw drops. “You must tell me everything.”

“There’s nothing to tell. We were together, then I had to leave, and Hunter didn’t take it too well, so things were over before I left.”

“And now the spark’s rekindling?” Pepper asks, hopeful, and I can’t help but smile at her enthusiasm.

“I don’t think anything is rekindling; it was just for the kiss cam.”

She raises a doubtful brow. “The way that boy looks at you and the way he just grabbed you like he wanted to claim you”—Pepper fans herself—“girl, if I had a man like that, I wouldn’t get off him.”

A laugh burst out of me at that because I understand that, and sometimes it takes a lot for me to hold myself back. Like when I see him smile or wink, even hear his laugh. Each day feels harder than the last to stay away.

“He looks at me?” I ask, unable to stop myself, and Pepper winks before sashaying back to the kids and Hunter, leaving me with nothing in my head but Hunter.

CHAPTER 19



The kiss is not mentioned for the duration of the game, which only makes the game feel like a million years long. I would cast furtive glances at Hunter and see his eyes focused on the game. Only rarely would he turn to me with a toothy grin, like he was proud for doing this to me.

Pepper didn't mention anything further either, even as we stood and made our way out of the stadium, except for talking about how cute the players' butts were.

We walk through the sea of people, making sure to keep the kids with us the whole time until we are finally out, and I can breathe a little.

Gathering just outside, away from the crowds, we wait for the kids' parents to pick them up. They are there waiting with smiles and their arms out, and after a quick thank you over their shoulders, the kids are gone.

Pepper clears her throat as the crowd coming out of the stadium dwindles. Hunter and I both look at her standing between us. "I should be off as well. I got a lot of errands to run."

I almost want to beg her to stay, but I know that would not be fair on her, so I remain silent as she joins the crowd, heading for her car, leaving Hunter and I to stand by ourselves in awkward silence.

I feel his eyes on me, but I haven't met them yet, not knowing what to do. I stare down at my feet and clear my

throat, trying to buy time until I ask, “So, who is picking you up?”

As I finally meet his eyes, I am met with a sea of calm looking back at me as he shrugs. “Haven’t thought that far ahead. Told Logan and Hadley that I didn’t need a lift home, so I guess I can get an Uber.”

He pulls his phone out, and I say before I can stop myself, “I can drive you.”

He looks up from his phone, surprised, and I know I cannot take it back. I also don’t want to. “Really?”

I nod, giving him a tight smile as my own phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out and read the text from my aunt.

MAGGIE: Don’t forget, you promised you would clean the gutters when you get home. I’d get home before dark if I were you.

I ROLL my eyes at this morning’s conversation where Aunt Maggie conned her way out of cleaning the gutters by claiming she has a fear of heights, a fear I haven’t heard of until now. I should have argued, but what would be the point?

“What is it?” Hunter asks, reading the text over my shoulder before I can shield it from him. “Do we need to make a pit stop?”

I tuck my phone back in my pocket, shaking my head as I tell him, “No, it’s okay. I’ll get you home and have plenty of time to do what I need to do.”

Hunter raises his brows, looking doubtful. “How about this?” He takes a step forward, leaning into me until I am hit with his familiar scent, and I bite my lip to stop from gasping. “You take me back to your place, and I’ll clean the gutters for you?”

He does not move away, but we hold each other’s eyes as I ask, my voice cracking, “And what do you get out of this?”

His full lips slowly creep up into a sexy smile. “I’ll let you know when the time is right.”

“And when might that be?”

Sexy smile still in place, he gives a little chuckle before leaning in a touch more. “Do we have a deal?”

The cautious part of me is screaming no, but every other part, including the juncture between my legs, is screaming yes, which is why I simply nod and am currently on the car on my way back home with Hunter perched comfortably in the passenger seat.

It isn’t until we are five minutes from the house that he finally breaks the tense silence. “I never got a chance to meet your aunt.”

“Well, we rarely ventured outside of the bedroom, if you remember.”

“How could I forget?” he says, his voice going slightly deeper as I feel his eyes on me.

I shift in my seat at the memory that often plagues my mind and makes my body all too aware of how long it has been since this man has touched me.

Clearing my throat, I attempt to redirect the conversation. “Thanks for this, by the way. You didn’t have to do this.”

He shrugs. “It’s okay. I wouldn’t have offered if I didn’t want to.”

“Why do you?” I ask before I can stop myself. “Why do you want to help me?”

I feel his eyes on me a moment before he finally sighs. “Honestly? I know things have been... different with me lately. I’ve been going through some stuff, and I can keep on moping about everything, or I can try to make the best of what I’ve got. My life went downhill, and I can blame people all I want, but it’s really me.” He pauses, and I hold my breath. “I’m tired, Harper. I’m tired of arguing and pushing people away. I would like for us to be friends again, and this is me trying.”

Friends...

The word stings more than I can admit. I should be happy that he is letting me in, but it's not in the way I wish he would, like he used to. It's like he's close, yet still so far, and that distance is the worst thing of all.

I think back to the kiss today and my chest aches to feel it again, to feel his hands on my face pull me closer to him, like he can't stand the distance either. I miss the groan he used to make when our lips touched, like that single touch was all he wanted, all he craved.

Friends...

I tighten my grip on the steering wheel, force a smile as I try to push the ache of that word aside, and be grateful that he's letting me this far. "If you put it like that."

We continue to drive in silence, and I ignore the glances Hunter keeps shooting my way until we finally pull up outside my aunt's house, her homemade wind chimes hanging outside and reflecting off the sunlight. The single story house looks back at me so full of memories as I start to think of Hunter seeing it. Of Hunter walking inside and seeing the cramped space filled with second hand furniture and homemade art pieces perched on tables and up on walls, all surrounded by photos of Maggie and I.

Hunter will finally see into my world, how different our worlds were growing up, and I guess I worry that might push him away again. I often wonder if that fear will ever go away.

I turn off the car and face him in my seat. "We're here. You ready to work?"

I raise a single brow at him, and he curls his lip in a half smile. "You know it."

We get out of the car, and Hunter follows me up the drive until we finally reach the front door. I unlock it with shaking fingers before finally pushing it open, allowing us to enter, instantly hit with the familiar smell of dried paint. I wonder if Maggie has a new project that she's working on now.

I close the front door, the click of the door sounding throughout the small house before Aunt Maggie calls out from somewhere in the house. “Harper? Is that you?”

“Yeah, I’m home,” I yell back as I nod my head for Hunter to follow me.

“Good.” She sounds relieved. “I went to the store today and got those tampons you asked for.” My feet stall in the middle of the living room at her words as she continues. “The heavy flow ones!” My eyes widen as my humiliation only gets worse. “We don’t want a repeat of last month.”

“And company!” I shout out into the house, feeling Hunter’s amusement from where he stands beside me. I avoid looking at him, so he cannot see the redness across my cheeks.

“What?” Maggie asks, sounding surprised, which I don’t blame her for. I rarely bring people over. It never felt right because the house was always Maggie’s workspace.

I clear my throat. “I have company with me.”

Silence meets me before I hear the pounding of footsteps on the hardwood floors, getting louder as they get closer until my aunt stands before us dressed in grey sweats, an oversized band t-shirt with paint stains on it, and her hair up in a wild, messy bun atop her head. Her eyes move from myself to Hunter before going back to me, her mouth agape.

She stays like that a moment until Hunter says, breaking the silence, “Nice to finally meet you.”

Aunt Maggie blinks and shakes her head before a smile graces her face. “Nice to meet you too.” She steps forward, extending her paint-stained hand to him while giving me a side-eye. “Whoever you are.”

He shakes her hand. “Hunter. I’m a friend of Harper’s. We work together at the center.”

Recognition hits her eyes when she hears his name. I’ve told her the story but luckily, she keeps her smile in place, her eyes moving between us as she says, “Oh, well then, it is definitely nice to meet you.”

“Hunter’s offered to help clean the gutters,” I explain, and she raises her brows in surprise, putting her hands on her hips.

“Really?”

Hunter and I nod as he says, “Yeah, what are friends for.”

I try not to wince at that cursed word again, but my aunt instantly looks at me and takes in my tense smile. She knows, she always knows, but she nods, keeping her own smile in place as she says to Hunter, “Well, aren’t you sweet.”

It doesn’t take long for Hunter to get to work, Maggie giving him everything he needs and showing him the way outside and where to start, but she doesn’t leave us there. As Hunter works, she continues to ask Hunter questions, like she is giving him the third degree. Each time I give her a look telling her to knock it off, she pretends like she doesn’t notice as she asks another question. I wouldn’t be surprised if she asked what his intentions were with me, but she keeps her questions basic, which I was somewhat grateful for.

What do you like about working at the center?

What are your future plans?

What do you like to do?

Pretty basic stuff that Hunter answers each time as he continues to work.

My aunt remains perched against the railing of the front porch when she turns her attention to me. “Harper, the poor boy is almost dying of thirst! Go get him something to drink.”

She gives me a pointed look, and I instantly furrow my brow. Why doesn’t she get it? Instead of arguing, I make my way inside and quickly pour some lemonade already made in the fridge.

Balancing three glasses in my arms, I make my way back toward the porch, my feet slowing down as I hear my aunt, her voice sounding different, sounding serious.

My feet stop just before the door as I stand and listen.

Hunter sounds unsure as he asks, “What do you mean?”

“I mean, what are your plans with my niece?” She says each word carefully, and I hold my breath, hating that she asked, but also wanting to know the answer myself.

“We’re friends.” When will that word stop hurting when I hear it?

“Just friends?”

There is a brief pause before he answers, “Yeah.”

“You help your friends out like this a lot?”

Another pause. “I’ll help Harper.”

I can’t stop the small smile that touches my lips, but I continue to listen as my aunt says, “That girl is all I have, you know.”

“You guys are lucky to have each other.”

“I’ll protect her until my last breath.”

Another pause. “That’s good she has that, but I don’t understand where you’re going with this.”

“I’ve noticed the way she looks at you and the way you look at her. I notice the way you clench your fists each time you use the word ‘friend’ and the way my niece flinches when she hears it. If all you are going to do is string her along and break her heart—”

“No, ma’am,” he says, almost like a growl.

“Then what are you doing?”

Another pause, followed by a sigh. “I’ve lost a lot over the last year. My family, my future, and maybe even my friends. I guess I’m just looking for something.”

“Like what?”

“Like home, maybe.” The vulnerability in his voice reaches into my chest.

“You think my niece is it?”

“I know how I feel when I’m around Harper. I guess I’m still trying to figure everything out.”

Another pause as my aunt takes this in. “Just make sure my niece isn’t hurt in your process of finding yourself.”

“Don’t worry, I don’t think Harper is gonna be hurt by what I do.”

“Then you don’t know her very well, do you? You haven’t noticed the way she looks at you or heard the way she talks about you.”

“She talks about me?”

And that’s my cue to bring the drinks and stop this conversation.

CHAPTER 20



The sun's down by the time Hunter's finished, so Aunt Maggie has decided to ask him to stay for dinner. He said yes, of course, and is now in the bathroom cleaning himself up while I stare daggers at my aunt across the kitchen as she finishes ordering Thai food on her phone. A knowing glint in her eye.

With a smile, she hangs up, tucking her phone away and looking down at her feet, obviously avoiding my eyes.

Pointing a finger at her, I whisper so Hunter cannot hear me, "Don't act all coy with me! What was that?"

She finally looks at me and shrugs, batting her eyes. "I was simply ordering dinner." She cocks her head. "You don't want Thai?"

Narrowing my eyes, I approach the counter so that I am standing opposite her. "You know what I'm talking about! It's difficult for me to be around him."

"And yet, you brought him over," Maggie says with a raised brow, her head still cocked.

I sigh. "That was different," I say, thinking back to the deal made outside the stadium today.

Maggie gives me a doubtful look. "Uh huh. And you also got him that 'promotion,' which required him to work with you."

"That was for the kids."

“Whatever you tell yourself, but I think there is a part of you that doesn’t want to leave for that job. I just don’t know whether you are finding reasons to stay, or trying to make up for lost time before you go.”

I wish I knew as well, I think to myself, but remain silent. Aunt Maggie comes around the kitchen island to stand beside me, her arm wrapping around my shoulder like it has many times before. “You’re worried about regret, don’t be. It’s inevitable in life. Worry about what you can’t live without.”

She gives my shoulder a squeeze, and I finally look at her as she says, “I understand this job is a great opportunity, but is it the only opportunity?”

I think for a moment. “Not really, but it is the only one being handed to me right now in an industry where it is hard to get your foot in the door.”

Maggie nods, pursing her lips in thought. “True, but there is more ways to skin a cat. As in, there is more than one way to do what you want to do. And take it from someone who knows, finding a man that looks at you like that boy does, it’s very rare these days.”

“What are you saying?”

Maggie offers a small smile. “If that boy was hanging around me, I wouldn’t let him get too far away.”

Giving my shoulders another squeeze as her point sinks in, the same thoughts I’ve been trying to avoid come back to the surface. Maybe there is truth to them. I know that leaving him again would be hard, the first time nearly killed me.

But will he ask me to stay? He never did last time. I waited for the words and they never came. Truth is, I would stay for him if he asked, but I guess I want to truly know that I matter to him if I do stay. And if the kiss at the game was any indication, and the way he pretended it didn’t happen afterwards, my hopes aren’t very high.

* * *

DINNER REMAINED uneventful with polite chatter about today's game and how the kids have been doing. I even asked Maggie what she had been working on, which got her talking animatedly about her work, allowing some time to think and decide I cannot let go of this opportunity until I know what I am letting go of it for. Until I hear the words from Hunter, I will leave, because I know there will be a day when Hunter will move on and I do not want to be here for that.

Once dinner is finished, I help Aunt Maggie with the dishes until we notice Hunter has gone exploring, and she tells me to keep him company.

I want to argue, but she gives me the look that warns me not to. I resist the urge to stomp my feet like a child, and go in search for Hunter.

It doesn't take me long to find him in the hallway outside my bedroom door, looking at the photos lining the walls with a look of peace and bliss.

I slowly approach, but before I can say anything, he simply says with his eyes still on the photos, "You're lucky." I move to stand beside him as he continues. "Even when my family was here, you could see in the photos that there was no love there. It was all cold and empty, but in these, the smiles seem genuine, and you both have light in your eyes that only comes with true happiness."

"You had Mia."

His smile turns sad. "Had. Yeah, because of my stupidity, I *had* her."

"Have you tried talking to her?"

"What do I say?"

I shrug. "You could start with 'I'm sorry for being a dick.'"

A chuckle is forced out of his mouth before the sad smile returns. "I guess I just feel like that's not good enough."

"Maybe let her be the judge of that."

He finally looks at me, his eyes deep and thoughtful for a moment as he whispers, “Thanks.”

“For what?”

“For being patient. For being you.”

I can’t help the little flip that happens in my chest at his words, but I keep my face composed with a small, controlled smile. “Don’t know any other way to be.”

He gives me a smile that makes mine a little less controlled, turning into a beaming grin as he starts to look around the hallway surrounding us, his eyes landing on the doorway behind us, and that is when my smile drops.

He takes in the *Twilight* and *One Direction* posters I had been meaning to get rid of for years, and I watch his lips curl with amusement. He opens his mouth and before he can speak, I point a finger at him, warning him. “Don’t you dare laugh.”

He holds up his hands in surrender. “I take it that’s your room.”

“Yes,” I explain. “I moved back in when I got back home. I ended up giving up my apartment when I left. I didn’t see the point in paying rent for three months if I wasn’t living there, especially when I wasn’t going to be paid for the work I was doing.”

He nods. “That’s fair.” His eyes scan the door up and down before he asks, “Can I see?”

My eyes widen. “What?”

My mind flashes to the underwear on the floor, and old magazines and romance novels on my shelves as well as diaries from over the years. And don’t even get me started on what I’ve stuffed in my side table!

“Can I see your bedroom?” Hunter asks, already making his way to the door, but I quickly jump in front of him until my back is pressed in the doorway as a human barrier. Only, that also puts me a little too close to Hunter.

“Of course not. A girl’s room is very personal.”

He raises a brow. “But I’ve been in your room before.”

“Not this one.”

His smile turns devilish. “Okay, now I’ve got to see.”

Before I can protest, he places his hands on my shoulders and guides me back, making me stumble into my room. I know I can either cause more of a fuss or just get it over and done with.

Gritting my teeth and crossing my arms over my chest, I say, “Fine, you are seeing it, now let’s go.”

But he makes no move to go. Instead, he is side stepping the underwear on my floor I have yet to put in the laundry, eyeing them. “Thongs? That’s a little different for you.” He looks up at me through his lashes, his eyes looking darker. “I approve.”

“Great, because that’s what I’ve always wanted,” I snip back at him, my arms still crossed as he makes his way toward the bookshelves and glides his fingers along my journals.

Nodding, he comments, “Diaries.”

“Okay, you’ve had your fun.” Before I can finish, he’s already making his way to the side table, reaching his hand out to pull open the drawer. My feet move fast, launching myself across the bed to wedge myself between Hunter and the side table, the look of panic clear on my face as I stare back at Hunter’s look of surprise.

That look of surprise is short-lived as it morphs into a confused frown, and then into a knowing smile as he cocks his head. “What are you hiding in there, Harper?”

I school my features, but I know he won’t stop now until he knows, his curiosity is piqued. “That is none of your business.”

“Well, based on your reaction, you’ve made it my business.” With that, he leans forward to whisper in my ear, “You were never good at keeping a straight face.”

I bite my lip as the heat from Hunter’s mouth tickles my ear and neck as he whispers, “You were never good at hiding

things from me. Now, do I have to move you, or are you going to move aside, because one way or another, I am seeing what's in that drawer.”

The little voice is screaming in my head to stay firm, but the tingling between my legs at having him this close and in my bedroom is why I step aside until the backs of my legs are touching the side of my mattress.

He reaches forward, pulling open the drawer, and the room falls silent as he looks inside, suddenly frozen in time, neither of us moving or speaking for a few moments, until he says very low, “What do we have here?”

“All girls have one, you don't have to be so surprised,” I say defensively, my voice shaking slightly as I watch him withdraw the pink vibrator from my drawer, turning it over in his hands as he stands to his full height.

His lips are pursed in thought as he looks the device over, the sight only making the tingling between my legs worse. All I can do is squeeze my legs together to settle some of the ache, but it isn't enough. Hunter slowly turns to face me, his tall body standing in front of mine until his eyes move from the vibrator in his hands to my eyes.

I keep my face composed and my eyes on his, avoiding looking at the device as he says, “Did you always have this?”

“Always?”

He takes a step closer until I can feel his warmth against me. “When we first got together, did you have this?”

I swallow, not knowing if I should tell him the truth or lie. As he looks into my eyes, the blue appearing darker now, I know he would know if I was lying. He's good at telling most of the time. So I say on a sigh, “Yes.”

His eyes remain on mine as he holds up the device. “So you had this... toy”—he puts the tip of the vibrator to my collarbone, and I freeze, unable to move or protest, not wanting to—“and you didn't”—he turns on the vibrator with the button at the base until the silent and tense room is filled with nothing but a low buzzing. My pussy clenches with need

as I feel the vibrations when Hunter starts to move the tip of the vibrator downwards, his voice turning into a growl on the last word—“share.”

I bite my lip to keep myself silent as he steps closer to me, the vibrator still moving to my belly until it reaches the tops of my jeans. Hunter leans in, his mouth against my ear, his hot breath touching the sensitive skin of my neck as he growls, “That’s not nice. I should punish that bad behavior.”

My breath is stuck in my throat, unsure if this is a dream or not. It definitely feels real, and even though I don’t know what this means, I don’t want this to end. I swallow before daring him. “Then do it.”

He chuckles in my ear, but that only makes the wetness grow between my legs as he tells me, “Stay standing.”

After popping the button of my jeans, he puts his hand and the vibrator inside until he is finally where I want it.

My legs buckle momentarily when the tip of the vibrator touches me there, and I gasp until Hunter says in my ear, “Best not make too much noise or your aunt will catch us.”

My eyes roll as he starts to move the vibrator in the best way, leaning back to look at me as the climax builds. I am all too aware of how long it has been and how much I need it right now, how desperate I am to replace the vibrator with something else, but I do as I’m told and I stand still, until he pulls the vibrator away, still buzzing, just not touching me anymore.

I blink before glowering at him. “Should I let you come, Harper? You didn’t share your toy with me, and that’s just not nice. I feel left out. Maybe if you beg, I might forgive you and let you come.”

The vibrator touches me again, surprising a little moan out of me that I manage to swallow before anyone hears except Hunter. He closes his eyes, as if taking it in, groaning as he says, “Those are things I miss.” He opens his eyes and looks at me. “The noises you used to make. I always knew when you were close. Your breasts would bounce with each heavy

breath, your eyes would roll back, and you'd made this desperate little moan that would always get me there too." My climax is so close... "Uh uh uh." Hunter pulls it away again, and I grit my teeth and growl in frustration, needing it now as I clench my fists. "I'm waiting for the begging to start."

I open my mouth to beg, but I'm quickly silenced by the sound of my aunt calling from outside. "Guys, I got some ice cream if you want any for dessert!"

Silence descends for a few seconds until Hunter says, tilting his head with a half-smile on his face, the look setting my nerves on edge, "You know, ice cream sounds really good right now."

"Don't you dare," I growl at him as he turns off the device and withdraws it from my pants, every part of me screaming as he does so.

"Rain check," he says with a wink before leaning in to whisper in my ear, "Just know this, you don't come unless I make you come." My body is practically aching as he moves away and holds up the vibrator I intended to use when he left, just out of spite. "So that you are not tempted, I'll keep this for now."

My jaw drops. "You can't do that!"

Backing up toward the door and tucking the device into his back pocket, just barely out of sight, he tells me with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, "Watch me." He reaches the door, then stops. "Don't worry, you'll see it again."

And just like that, he's out the door, leaving me with my pants undone, painfully horny and pissed off. What the hell was that, and what does this mean?

Does he want me again? Does this mean we are together? He never said, but I also never asked. With Hunter, it was never clear, and I guess we are following that same pattern again. Thing is, that won't work for me this time. I want more. I want to know that I matter to him, so I guess I won't see my vibrator again unless he finally tells me what I need to hear.

Who knows if that will happen?

CHAPTER 21



“*I* thought bridesmaids dresses were meant to be ugly to make the bride look better,” Mia comments as she twirls in front of the mirror in a lavender colored dress with a sweet-heart neckline that holds her boobs in place and tightens at her waist, before coming down to her feet. It’s a simple but beautiful dress on Mia, whereas on me, I’m struggling to keep my boobs out of sight.

My mind flashes to what Hunter’s reaction would be at seeing me in this dress until I quickly shake the thought away.

It’s only been days since that moment in the bedroom and I am all too aware of my growing frustration when I think of him. When I think of his scent and his warmth, the sound of his voice and the feel of him against me— *Dammit!*

Curse him for taking my vibrator! Who does that?! I tried relieving this relentless ache with my hand last night, but it wasn’t enough. I needed more, but I wasn’t going to be getting it.

I remember growling and punching my pillow before jumping to another restless sleep.

Now I need to present myself as a normal and functional human being. Should be easy, right?

I run my hands over the fabric of the dress at my waist when Ava’s younger sister, Lucy, comes around in the same dress, accentuating her subtle curves that only remind me of how much she has grown up over the last couple of years.

Soon she will be joining us at college, or maybe not me.

I give her a small smile. “Wow, look at you, Lucy. So beautiful.”

She beams at me and gives a spin. “Thank you.” Then she turns to her sister, who is perched on the purple couch in the store, admiring us in the bridesmaids dresses she has chosen, smiling as if proud of herself as Lucy tells her, “Such a good choice, Ava.”

“I don’t like that idea of making bridesmaids look bad to make the bride look better. You guys are beautiful and no matter what I put you in, you all would have rocked it anyways.” She shrugs. “Besides, I didn’t want your horrible dresses ruining my wedding, so of course I chose beautiful dresses.” Ava throws us a teasing wink, making us giggle, before I focus back on the mirror, my eyes scanning up and down my body and the dress.

I give one last twirl when Ava comes up to me, a thoughtful expression on her face as she asks, “Everything okay?”

I force a smile, not wanting to taint this beautiful time for her. “I’m great. Just shocked you found a dress to fit *all* this curve.”

She does not laugh at my joke. “I would kill for your curves, and I know that something is up because you’ve been off since you got back.”

She raises her brows expectantly, waiting for an answer and not budging.

My shoulders drop in defeat when I sigh, knowing what I must confess to her, what I’m willing to. “I don’t know if I’m back for good.”

Ava blinks before furrowing her brow. “What do you mean?”

“You know that job they offered me in Australia? I still might take it.”

“Might?”

I swallow. “They’re thinking I’m coming back, but I guess I’m still trying to figure it out.”

Ava’s eyes turn sad, but she tries to keep her face composed. “So that’s it? What about school?”

“They said I will learn everything on the job, and I guess I made an impression.”

Ava nods. “Sounds like it. So *when* do they expect you back?”

I nibble on my bottom lip before answering, “They’ve actually been emailing me about coming back. I’ve explained that I am here for the wedding, but they do want me back if I want to take the job.”

Ava regards me with another thoughtful expression. “For such a big opportunity, you don’t sound too thrilled about it. Do you want to take the job?”

Mixed emotions emerge within me, my eyes darting over to Mia and Lucy, who are too into their own conversation to hear me, as I don’t tell the whole truth. “Of course, but I do have a life here with friends that I’ll miss.”

“So you will be leaving?”

Unless someone gives me a reason to stay... “I think so.” I watch as Ava’s face turns sadder as the reality of the situation sets in for her. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t come back and visit. I have family and friends here I won’t be leaving behind.”

Ava gives a small smile that doesn’t reach her eyes; she doesn’t believe me and neither do I, which makes it hurt more. I’d like to think I’ll visit, but I probably won’t be able to visit as often as I would like. Time will pass, people will grow closer or fall apart, and I will be on the outside of that.

Ava’s warm hand holds mine. “Whatever you choose to do, you will always have me here for you to visit when you come back. And I expect some Australian toys for Charlie.”

With a forced smile, she turns, letting go of my hand to make her way to the other girls. I am left to stand on my own

in front of the mirror.

I look over my dress once more before I notice it, a pair of grey eyes looking at me.

My eyes widen for a second as I suddenly notice Hadley sitting behind me on the couch, her eyes on mine and in those eyes are all I needed to know.

She heard every word. She is close enough to, but she makes no move to speak. We just hold each other's gaze in the mirror, and my heart sinks at the idea of her telling the guys, telling Hunter. I wasn't ready for him to know; I didn't want him to push me away again.

After a second, Hadley rises from the couch and slowly makes her way around to face me, her eyes taking in my dress. "You look beautiful," she says simply, and I am instantly on my guard.

I don't know much about Hadley, but she always seems nice. Only, right now, she's got me on edge because of what she knows.

She looks back up at me, her expression soft and kind. "I won't say anything if that's what you're stressing about." My shoulders relax slightly as she continues. "But I think you need to tell him."

And my shoulders stiffen again. "Him?"

She raises a brow, as if to say 'do you think I'm stupid?' "I think we both know who. You guys are not exactly subtle, but I guess this wedding helps take the attention away."

My eyes dart to the girls as Hadley continues to talk. "I won't say anything, and I wasn't even going to tell you that I know, but Hunter and I are friends. I know you guys have been spending a lot of time together, and he cares about you. I just don't want to see him hurt and spiral again. Do what you need to do, but be careful with him."

On that note, she walks away to join the other girls. Hadley knows about Hunter and I, and she's telling me not to hurt him. I'm not trying to, but I also don't want to *be* hurt either. Now a new worry has emerged, though. What if he spirals

again when I leave? What if he gets into another accident and dies this time? My heart clenches at the thought, and I know Hadley is right. I might not know what I'm doing, but I know I want time with Hunter. Will I stay if he asks? And am I being too selfish wanting to spend time with him if I intend to leave?

I should distance myself from him, but I know I can't. Each time I've tried, things have always drawn us together. I do not have the strength to push him away like he did to me. Maybe that will be my downfall.

Time will tell.

CHAPTER 22



A couple of weeks have passed since the dress fitting when my secrets were revealed... kind of. Hadley has not said anything to anyone else, which gives me comfort, but I can't help but wonder if everyone knows but hasn't said anything.

Hunter hasn't said anything abnormal since that night in my bedroom, and I can't help but be a little disappointed. I should be happy he isn't pushing things, but it just leaves me with more questions.

Things at work have been normal with Lucas transitioning from catching and finally getting to hit the ball with the bat. The only problem is, he has yet to hit one. Well, except for yesterday, when he tapped the ball, but each time he misses, he gets closer and closer to a breakdown, which worries me. I hope that he will fulfil his dream of hitting a ball soon.

Other than that, Hunter has been nothing but professional, and now I am being forced to spend more time with him. The only benefit? I probably get to shoot him.

The guys and girls gather, getting our gear on for what's supposed to be a fun game of paintball. Ava and Conner explained they wanted a joint bachelorette and bachelor party, and instead of going out for drinks or even a movie night, they decided on paintball. Only because Ava has never played it and neither have I, but that was by choice. Call me crazy, but I don't love the idea of running and hiding with the possibility of getting shot with paintballs that are supposed to hurt and bruise. Yeah, that doesn't sound like fun to me.

I resist the urge to grumble to myself as I finish awkwardly, slipping on my armor and attempting to pull the shirt they gave me on, only for it to get stuck around my head.

I growl, but before I can call for help, I feel the shirt being tugged from the outside. I manage to pop my head through and am surprised to see an amused looking Hunter as he eyes me in my gear and clothes.

He chuckles. “You’re looking snug.”

I roll my eyes. “It’s either that or get shot.”

Cocking his head, he says, “You don’t look too happy to be here.”

“What’s not to like? I get to run around with my friends in a forest and possibly get shot.”

“They’re just paintballs.”

I narrow my eyes. “They still hurt.”

He chuckles again, this time shaking his head. “Look, I’ve got your back. I’ll make sure no one shoots you.”

“I thought we were playing against each other.”

Hunter shakes his head as any hope of shooting him flies out of the window. “No, we’re on the same team, but we are playing against them.”

He nods his head behind me, and I awkwardly turn around to see a group of lanky and knobby-kneed boys with hair that looks like it needs a wash and some with faces full of acne.

Oh no, really?

I face Hunter again with my brows raised. “Kids? We’re playing against kids?”

“Teenagers, but yeah, so it should be easy.”

“Keep on thinking that, gramps.” We hear as three of the boys from the group come around to us, standing in a trio with their arms crossed and an air of confidence I didn’t think existed at their age. They give us cocky smiles, and Hunter blinks in surprise.

“Gramps? I’m twenty-one.”

The boy in the middle with brown hair that needs a cut, and brown eyes that appear too big for his narrow face, shrugs. “Doesn’t matter when you’re going to lose to us anyway.”

Hunter and I are stunned, and I suddenly feel like I’m in the middle of *West Side Story*.

“What?”

The boys laugh, one nudging the other before saying, “Let’s go, boys, we need to get ready to destroy these pussies.”

I feel my jaw drop at their language and Hunter appears equally shocked as they waltz back to their group. Hunter and I both look at each other, and I can’t help but comment with an eye roll. “Yeah, kids, it should be *real* easy.”

Hunter eventually gathers himself before scoffing. “It’s all talk, Harper, don’t let them get to you.”

* * *

NOT LONG INTO THE GAME, those kids take out Logan, Mia, Lucy, Ava, and Hadley. Only ones remaining are myself, Hunter, Conner, and Riley. Whereas no one has been able to get those kids.

They are small so they can hide in strange places to get their shot, and since they know the game so well, they’re fast too. Turns out those kids that were ‘all talk’ actually do this kind of thing every weekend, so of course they would be good, but that doesn’t make this less humiliating. I huddle against a fallen tree, not wanting to move until the game is over.

I silently curse Conner and Ava for planning this and making me do this. I should’ve just asked if I could sit this out, but here I am.

I flinch each time I hear footsteps or the crunch of leaves, sucking in a breath whenever I think I see something out the corner of my eye. How could anyone think this is fun?

Yes, fearing for my life and safety, real fun!

Sitting here, I wonder how much longer I will be forced to endure this, when a hand suddenly pulls on my shoulder. Another one claps over my mouth to silence the little scream I was about to let out, when I am pulled into something warm and firm.

I feel panic for a moment until I hear a familiar voice being whispered in my ear. “They know you are here. They’re coming, so you can either stay here or come with me.”

My heart sinks at the knowledge they know where I am and that I am their next target. With Hunter’s hand still clamped on my mouth, all I can do is nod. Only then does he let go, stepping away carefully to crawl around to face me. A part of me feels the absence of him as the cool air hits my back where he was. I try not to dwell on that right now, as I must try to avoid getting shot.

Putting a finger to his lips, telling me to remain quiet, I hold my breath as he extends a hand to me. I eye it, unsure of the gesture, but he reaches farther to me with a sense of urgency on his face.

There is nothing to this. *He is just trying to help me*, I think to myself as I take his hand in mine. Once he has my hand, and we carefully look around at our surroundings, he leans in so close that his lips are grazing my ear. “Coast is clear. Stay with me, okay?”

My chest aches at those words, if only I had heard them in a different context. I blink the thoughts away, really needing to stay focused as I nod and rise to stand slowly with him. We make our way carefully around the forest, hopping from tree to tree for cover.

Luckily, I see no kids, but I also don’t see any of our team either. It’s all quite frightening and I can’t help but think about those horror movies Mia always makes us watch.

I instinctively clench the hand holding Hunter’s, making him stop in his tracks until he faces me with a furrowed brow and a question in his eyes.

He stares at me a moment before his eyes soften in understanding, probably seeing the fear there. Taking a step closer and putting one hand on my shoulder, he leans in to whisper, “Everything will be okay. It’s just a game, and I won’t let anyone shoot you.”

“What can you do? Walk around me like a human shield,” I joke, but he merely shrugs.

“If it comes to it.”

I blink in surprise at this answer, waiting for his laugh, but he just stares at me and it is then that I realize he is serious. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why are you helping me?”

He shrugs again. “We’re friends, right?”

Goddamn that word! I guess I asked for this, but the frustration is starting to drive me crazy. “Friends? That’s all we are?”

Hunter cocks his head. “What else could we be, Harper?”

I open my mouth and close it, unsure of how to answer, but the words eventually start spilling out, “You kissed me at the game.”

“For a kiss cam.”

“And the vibrator? What the hell was that?”

He is silent, and his jaw tenses, his eyes suddenly guarded. But he says nothing, which only makes my frustration turn to anger because I wanna know where I stand with this man.

I pull my hand from his, giving his shoulder a shove. “What? You have nothing to say? You going to do shit like that and take my vibrator and now say nothing to me?”

I go to shove him again, in hopes of getting a response, but he suddenly looks at something over my shoulder, his eyes widening a second before yelling, “Harper!” Shoving me out of the way, he grunts as a splatter of blue paint hits his side.

They've found us!

With the hand still on my shoulder and a panicked look, Hunter tells me, "Run, Harper!"

And even though a part of me is wanting to take my gun and shoot the stupid kid that shot Hunter, I know I wouldn't hit my target and more likely shoot my own foot accidentally. So I do as I'm told and run.

I can hear their laughter and voices as they shout orders to each other, all running after me like the easy target I am. Some shots go off and hit the trees I run past, but I just continue to run.

Their voices get farther away, and I think I might get through this, until I notice movement at the tree in front of me in the distance a second before a shot goes off. I am hit so hard that I stumble back on my unsteady feet and pain spreads throughout my chest.

That little brat shot me!

But I also can't ignore the fact that Hunter had taken a shot that was meant for me. Was he just keeping his word, or was there more to it?

I really need to find out where he stands or I will not sleep tonight.

CHAPTER 23



It was decided that after the paintball game we brutally lost, drinks and food were needed, so we all went home to get showered and changed to meet at Mia's new workplace, *Danny's*. The place is newly renovated after a recent fire that we almost lost Mia in and is run by a guy named Danny, hence the name of the bar. It has music, dancing, drinks, and food. All good things! And yet, I feel like I can't get the sour look off of my face, nor can I stop the thoughts from racing about today.

"Stop thinking so loud, you're giving me a headache." I blink and turn to face who spoke to me, only to see Hadley come around and plop onto the barstool next to me.

Breathing heavy, she gives me a weak smile, and I'm a little surprised to see her sitting here and talking to me. She and I haven't really spoken much since the dress fitting, where she basically told me she knew about me and Hunter. Obviously, she hasn't told anyone else, or I would know about it right now. I'm grateful for that.

"What?"

Her weak smile turns softer. "What's got your mind so busy?"

I cast a look over her shoulder at Hunter as he orders at the other end of the bar. The others are out on the dance floor, but as I watch Hunter smile, I sigh. "Just stuff."

Hadley follows my gaze over her shoulder before looking back at me with a knowing look. "Ah, that kind of stuff. You

know, you could just go talk to him. We both know that's what you want to do."

I sigh again. "It's not that simple."

"It kind of is."

"I have a job waiting for me overseas if I want it. I can't just jump into things with Hunter when I don't even know where I stand with him. There's too much on the line."

Hadley raises a concerned brow at me. "Dude, all you gotta do is talk to him. I'm not asking you to confess your love to him or some shit. Maybe say 'hi' or talk about the game and the fact that he took a paintball for you."

"You heard about that?"

She chuckles. "Those little shits were laughing about it so much that everyone knows about it."

I run a hand through my hair as I feel the tension in my shoulders start to grow, my skin feeling too tight and the temperature warming in the bar.

"Hey." Hadley puts a hand on my shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze with her kind smile still in place. "It'll be okay."

"No, it won't," I tell her, not meaning to sound abrupt, but there is just too much going on.

"Look, I'm not going to pretend I know what you are going through and how you are feeling, but you are not alone. I know I'm kind of new around here, but you have me in your corner if you need me."

I bite my lip, feeling her words in my chest, what I've been longing to hear. I've been feeling very alone. I cannot tell Hunter about the job out fear he will push me away, and I cannot tell my friends about Hunter because we had agreed not to out of fear of what they will do or say. I'm also worried that Mia will blame me for her brother's decline because I know I do, and I don't want to lose another friend.

The girl before me giving a kind smile may be my only confidant. "I just don't where I stand with him. When I first

got the internship, and that was only for *three months*, he pushed me away. I'm scared of what he will do if he finds out about the job."

Hadley ponders this. "Would you take it? If he knew about it and wanted to be with you, would you still take it?"

"If he asked me to stay? Yes, I would stay."

"Have you told him that you wanted to be with him?" I give her a look and she continues. "Guys are generally dumb and need to be spoon-fed information. You want him to tell you where you stand, but have you ever told him where *you* stand? Maybe he's just as uncertain as you, maybe he's just waiting for you."

I allow her words to sink in, my heart falling into my stomach as I realize. I just assumed he would know how much he matters, but I guess me leaving might have told him otherwise, played on fears put in him by his parents. Yes, Hunter could have handled it better than going off the rails, but a sensitive nerve was touched and since I've come back, I never told him where I stood.

Maybe Hadley is right, but what if I tell him and he still walks away? Then at least I know. It will hurt, but I will know.

A knowing smile graces Hadley's beautiful face before getting up to join the dancing crowd. "Food for thought."

Hadley now gone, I am left on my own at the bar. I can't stop my eyes from finding Hunter still at the other end of the bar, but my heart caves in on itself as I see that he is not alone.

Before him, I could only see the back of her blonde head. The girl standing him is tall but not as tall as him, her slim figure hugged in a short and tight black dress, with sexy back heels on her feet. *Everything I wasn't*, I think as I look down at myself.

My short and curvy frame is wrapped in a pair of dark blue jeans, with black boots that hit my knees, and a white sweater that falls off of one shoulder. My dark hair is out in its natural waves, and I'm only wearing a little bit of mascara and lipstick. I'm not the girliest girl, but I try my best, and it

definitely feels like a poor effort compared to the girl chatting up Hunter.

I can't tear my eyes away as he talks to her, nodding and smiling to what she is saying, and only occasionally looking over her shoulder and meeting my eyes.

I tense my jaw and school my features, not wanting to show my pain, but I know I'm not hiding anything from him. He knows what he is doing, yet he continues to talk to her. Maybe this is a sign I need to go because in front of me is my future if I stay. I will only be here to watch Hunter move on like he is now.

A hopeful part of me waits for him to walk away from her, to come to me and smile at me like he is her, but instead, I watch as her hand comes up to his shoulder, running her hand up and down his arm as she takes a step closer to whisper something in his ear, his eyes on me as she does so. I can't do this.

It's not her fault, but I hate the girl and how Hunter is playing with me, so I clench my fists, needing a moment to catch my breath and gather my thoughts. I stomp my way through the crowd and into the girls' bathroom, which is thankfully empty.

I run into the closest cubicle and sit down on the toilet, putting my face in my hands as I feel my hope slip from me. If he cared, he would not have entertained the girl while looking right at me. He knew what he was doing and his message was clear. We are just friends, and I know I cannot be here to watch that again.

Taking in deep and slow breaths, I whisper to myself, "You're okay, you're okay, you're okay."

But no matter how many times I tell myself, the ache remains in my chest, so bad I wince from the pain of it. I almost don't want to leave out fear of what position Hunter and the girl will be in when I go out there, or worse, that they won't be there because they are busy elsewhere. I wince again at the thought, but I can't stay in here.

I give myself a few minutes to just settle my emotions as best as I can because at least now, my question is answered. I know what I must do. I rise from the toilet and take a breath before opening the toilet stall door.

In the mirror in front of me, I see the pain I feel and no matter how many times I blink and take a breath, it remains. I wonder when that will go away, if it ever does.

The music from outside gets louder as the bathroom door opens and closes. I turn and am speechless as Hunter's dark blue eyes stare at me as he stands in the middle of the girls' bathroom before locking the door behind him, keeping us from the world outside.

My eyes go from him to the locked door, knowing there is no way out, but I don't feel scared. He will not hurt me, but the determined look on his face is making me a little unsettled.

He widens his stance, blocking the door completely with his size, and crosses his arms over his chest, waiting for something.

I force myself to speak, my voice sounding loud against the silence in the bathroom. "What are you doing, Hunter?"

He cocks his head. "What are *you* doing?"

"Look, if you're in some kind of mood to argue, go elsewhere, because *I* am *not* in the mood."

"Not wanting to argue, but I would like to know why you were glaring at me in there like you wished I were dead."

I blink, processing his words. Was that how I looked? Maybe I was looking at the girl like that, and yeah, I was hurt. I *am* hurt, but I wasn't going to say anything. Unfortunately, my mouth and brain decide to disagree and a scoff slips out of my mouth. "Surprised you paid any attention to anyone other than blondie."

I instantly bite my lip, wishing I could take back the words when I watch him register my comment, a slow and amused smile curling his lips. "You almost sound jealous, Harper."

I try to school my features and control my voice. “Not jealous. We’re friends, remember?”

“So you don’t wanna know what she whispered in my ear?” Hunter asks, his voice deepening, and an ache builds between my legs at the look in his eyes. I steel my jaw and swallow my desire because Hunter is talking to me about another woman.

It’s crazy for me to want him right now. I shrug, crossing my own arms over my chest. “Why would I care? It has nothing to do with me.”

“Doesn’t it?” Silence lingers, and his eyes hold mine, until he drops his arms and starts taking slow and careful steps in my direction, speaking so low it could almost be a growl. “You’re telling me that if another girl offered to suck me off, you wouldn’t be pissed, after everything we’ve been through?”

I start to back away from Hunter’s advances, knowing nothing good will come from getting too close. We don’t exactly have a good history with bathrooms. “We’re friends, Hunter.”

His steps falter for a moment and his eyes go darker than I thought possible before he continues. “You know what I would do if a guy offered to fuck you, even being friends?” I gasp when the cool tile of the bathroom wall hits my back, and before I know it, I am stuck. He is so close, with his eyes now moving up and down my body, and I resist the urge to squirm under his gaze. “I’d take you into the bathroom like this”—he stops, his body inches from mine, and my breath is stuck in my chest—“pick you up against the wall”—he raises his arms to rest his hands above my head, leaning in until his mouth is grazing my ear, and his hot breath dances across my neck—“and fuck you so hard that you’d be too busy feeling me to notice anyone else.” He pulls back, then as I almost feel my legs buckle from the unbelievable ache from between my legs, his eyes focus on mine. “That guy wouldn’t be a problem.”

Every part of my body is screaming for him to do just that. I want to grab him and wrap my legs around him, grind myself against his length, but it’s always the same. He wants to have

sex with me, but I have yet to be told that I mean anything to him. If we have sex right now, what then? Will he introduce me to everyone as his girlfriend? He doesn't have his parents to impress anymore, so why keep me a dirty little secret? Is that all I'm good for to him? I clench my fists at my sides and use all my willpower to say, "Can't fuck what isn't yours."

He leans in so fast that I gasp, his mouth going to my ear again, but this time taking the lobe in his teeth and giving it a quick and delicious nip that makes a moan slip out of me. "You keep swearing like that, I might put that mouth to use."

He pulls back and I tell him, curious to see what he will do, "What the *fuck* are you going to do?"

I watch his nostrils flare, his dark blue eyes moving from my mouth to my eyes, then back again as if a war is going on inside his head. That I understand. A part of me wants him to close the distance and claim me, but another part knows it would hurt in the long run.

I suck in a breath as Hunter's mouth slowly lowers to mine, the battle still going on in his head, but it is clear which side is winning.

I know I should stop him, demand that he tell me how he feels before giving him more of myself, but I was never good at saying no to this man. I want him just as bad as he wants me. When we are together, it is like all we see is each other and all we want is each other. I used to think that meant something, but I've figured out that sometimes you need to be told in order to know.

I just wait for his lips to touch mine.

"Hey! Why is this door locked?!" We both freeze seconds from our lips touching, the only thing between us our lingering heavy breaths until the room is filled with the loud banging of someone knocking on the bathroom door.

Clearly someone needs to pee, but I don't move.

Will he take me despite what's going on outside? Will he take me somewhere where we can talk because it's clear we need to?

He takes in a controlled breath and my heart shatters as I watch his guard come up, the heat from before now hidden from me as he takes a slow step back. I am suddenly overwhelmed by the cold left in his wake.

Backing up to the bathroom door, he says with a shaking voice, "I should probably head out to the others."

My heart still shattering, I say, "To the blonde too, right?"

And he surprises me by giving me a humorless laugh, shaking his head as his hand goes to the door handle of the bathroom, looking over his shoulder at me with a sad and lost look I haven't seen in a while. "That's the thing. No one ever compares to you."

And with that, he unlocks the bathroom door and leaves me without another word. Leaves me to feel the weight of his words, and I can't help but feel frustrated and... angry.

CHAPTER 24



*N*o one ever compares to you?

Who says that to someone and just leaves?

And what the hell does that mean? I stand in the bathroom for a while with those words spiraling in my mind on repeat. Is this his way of telling how he feels? If so, why just leave?

The spiral keeps going and I keep getting angrier with each passing second, that by the time I leave the bathroom I'm convinced I have steam coming out of my ears.

That is it! Clearly, this boy is incapable of telling me how he feels, but I deserve answers. After everything that's happened and how he pushed me away and the games he's playing now, I deserve to know how he feels and where we stand and I cannot keep waiting for him.

Am I scared I won't like what I hear? Of course, but time is running out, and I'll need to make a decision soon, a decision that's determined by what Hunter says to me.

I storm out of the bathroom in a huff, with a single mission in mind: find Hunter. I am searching the place and starting to feel like the terminator when I find Ava making her way to the bar. I stop her and see her sweating and breathing heavily from the dancing, a dreamy smile on her face as she sees me. Before she can speak, I ask one question, not caring if they find anything out anymore, "Have you seen Hunter?"

As expected, her brows furrow at the question. "Um, yeah. He caught an Uber home, said he was feeling tired."

I bet. Playing with emotions can be quite exhausting, but now I know where I must go.

I nod, giving her a grateful smile. “Thanks.”

But before I can leave, she grabs my arm in her small hand, a concerned look on her face. “Is everything okay?”

“Ask me in the morning,” I tell her and run, leaving her with her questions and assumptions.

It doesn't take me long to get to his house and thankfully no one else is home. They are all still at the bar, which is good for me because I didn't want an audience for this showdown. I pull up just outside, get out, and slam the door behind me before stomping my way up the drive, my shoulders tensed up to my ears as I reach the door and bang on it with a closed fist.

I'm huffing when I hear Hunter's heavy footsteps before the door is swung open.

Hunter is still dressed in the same jeans and shirt, but his feet are bare as he gives me a surprised look, his brows rising up to his hairline. “Harper?”

I grit my teeth and push forward until I am standing in the entrance of Hunter's home, him now staring at me with a guarded expression as he closes the door behind me before facing me.

I open my mouth and close it, unsure of what to say now that I am here. Crossing my arms over my chest then uncrossing them, I feel everything as Hunter watches me, waiting, but there is only one question that's been haunting me for months.

“Why didn't you ask me to stay?”

He frowns in confusion. “What?”

I clear my throat and try to control the shaking in my voice. “When I left, you just pushed me away like you didn't care.”

“You seriously think I didn't care?”

“Well, you just pushed me away!” I yell, throwing my arms out to the sides, as his own anger appears in his eyes as he yells back, “I dropped you off at the airport!”

“Yeah, I stood there and waited for you to ask me to stay,” I say to him, my voice finally breaking on the last word as I remember that day and the sick and painful feeling I had walking away.

“Would you have?” Hunter asks, cocking his head. “If I had asked, would you have stayed, without any regret?” Narrowing his eyes, he takes a step closer, growling, “I was not going to be the reason you stayed and I won’t be the reason you don’t follow your dreams.”

“You are the reason I left!” I yell again, this time a single tear rolling down my cheek as my emotions start to overflow.

“What?”

I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself. “When I went to find you and found you with... the girl.”

Hunter’s shoulders deflate as he remembers. “Harper—”

I continue, cutting him off. “You declined my calls and ignored my messages. So my decision was made. After everything, you just pushed me away and even tonight... you keep pulling me back in, then pushing me away. I can’t keep up with this! Do I matter to you or not?!”

Silence lingers between us, the tension so thick in the room as he simply looks at me, an internal struggle appearing in his eyes until he sighs in resignation, telling me in a soft voice, “You matter more to me than anyone.”

I can’t help but scoff. “Really? Then why push me away?”

“I wasn’t going to hold you back, and I will never hold you back.”

I take a step toward him, the space between us getting smaller. “Who said you were going to? I was only going away for three fucking months! We could’ve skyped or had phone sex. I could’ve had someone to talk to about my day rather than coming back to a room alone with nothing but thoughts of

you. We could have made it work, but it was like you didn't even want to try."

His eyes turn sad as he looks at me. "And what if it extended to more than three months? You're really talented and smart, so any place would be lucky to have you, and I didn't want to be thing to hold you back."

I keep my face composed because he doesn't know the truth in his worry. "You wouldn't be holding me back. Just tell me the truth, do I matter to you? Do you want me? Just tell me where I stand with you!"

He looks at me again, a moment of silence before he says, his eyes focused on mine the entire time, "When I think of my future, I see you, or I see no one. There is no one else for me and there hasn't been since that first night. I can never get your laugh or your smile out of my head. No amount of alcohol helped me, and I thought keeping my distance would help, but turns out, it's hard to stay away from you. I wanted to ask you to stay. I wanted to get on my fucking knees and beg, but I didn't want to be the reason. I was angry, yes, but mostly because I knew no one else would compare to you, and if you were gone, I'd always feel empty. That was made worse when my parents died and Mia started pulling away and living her life. The emptiness just got worse. Now that you are back, I feel that emptiness going away, but I'm also scared you'll be taken again."

Every word sinks into my heart, filling it. I take another step closer to him, this man that I know I cannot be happy without, and my decision is made, a weight being lifted off of my shoulders as I do so. "You are my home, Hunter. If you want me, I'm here, and I'll always be here. There are opportunities everywhere, so don't worry about that. So if you want me, tell me. Tell me that you don't just want the sex. Tell me that you want to be with me and introduce me as your girlfriend. Tell me you don't want me to be your secret anymore."

He looks at me, his face expressionless as he closes the distance between us until all I can feel is his warmth, my muscles relaxing at the familiarity of it. He raises his hands

and cups my face to hold me in place as his face lowers to mine. “I want everything with you.”

His lips touch mine, and I finally feel peace.

CHAPTER 25



HUNTER

I feel like I've been starved all this time, and I am finally getting my taste as I take her mouth with mine.

My mind was going crazy, as well as my heart, so scared of what making this move will mean for us, for me. Finally telling her how much she means to me forces me to put my trust in her despite my fear that she will leave.

I guess you can never know except for what they tell you, and she told me that she is here.

I didn't know how much I needed to hear those words until they were out and soothing the gentle ache of my heart, and then my body was not mine anymore, it was hers.

My strength to hold back is gone as I watch her stand there so close, her need for me so clear in her eyes, I couldn't help but wonder if that need was elsewhere.

When my lips finally crash into hers with a desperation of my own, her little gasp sounds in my ear and surges me forward, taking her hips in my hands and holding her to me so she can feel how much I've missed her. How much I don't want to be without her again. She moans into my mouth, and I start backing her toward the staircase, hoping we can actually make it to the bedroom.

We reach the foot of the stairs, my hands moving to her ass and squeezing, hers moving up my chest and into my hair, giving it a pull that elicits a groan from me. Almost there, until Harper starts talking into my mouth while kissing me. "Maybe we should slow things down, talk about everything more."

Oh fuck no, not when I'm so close to having her again.

Instead of stopping, I give her bottom lip a little bite and continue our trek toward the stairs, reaching the bottom step as I pull away, only enough to push my face into her neck, giving her kisses and biting her there with a hunger I had forgotten. I lift to her ear, giving her lobe a lick of the tongue. "Yeah, let's talk." I use my hands on her ass to lift her up one step, and she does not protest, but instead her breaths become heavier. "Let's talk about how many nights I've dreamed of sinking inside of your warm pussy again." I lift her up another step. "Or how about how I missed the taste of your pussy on my tongue." As I lift her up another step, my jeans feel tighter than ever against my cock. "And you know what?"

I finally pull back to look at her eyes, looking darker and heated, her mouth slightly ajar as her breasts move deliciously with her breaths. I just can't resist taking one step down until I am at eye level with them.

She stays silent as I admire her, moving a hand up to rub one globe, tilting my head in admiration as I say, "I certainly miss these. How many times I thought about taking them in my mouth or pushing them together so I could fuck them."

Her eyes roll back at my words, and a moan escapes her and that little, innocent moan was all I needed. My hunger becoming unbelievable, I pull down the top of her shirt until her boobs are exposed to me, held in a lacy white bra.

Oh, I remember that bra. Fond memories race through my mind until I pull it down as well, exposing her pink nipples. Her moan of surprise is louder, but it doesn't stop me as I take her nipple in my mouth.

Harper cries out, "Yes!" her hands in my hair, holding me there as I start to massage her with my tongue, flicking the tip back and forth, relishing in her

Pulling away, I move to the other one and continue my assault there. My arms going around Harper until I feel her softness against my hardness, my own need growing, but before I take her, I want to hear her scream my name. I want to enjoy every second of this and taste every part of her.

I pull away again, this time my lips moving up her chest and her fingers moving through my hair as I reach her ear again. "Get on the step."

"What?" she breathes, and I growl.

"Sit down on the fucking step." This time, she does what she is told like a good girl and sits down on the step. I take her mouth in mine as I crouch down in front of her, not able to make it to the bedroom like I suspected. I get to work unbuttoning her jeans.

"What are you doing?" she gasps into my mouth, and I undo her zipper.

"I am going to devour you, and I'm not stopping until you're screaming my name." I pull back from her, tugging her jeans down her legs, her lacy white underwear going with it until it is thrown on the floor behind me. I sit back and admire my girl, her cheeks pink as she sits there breathing heavily, the same desperation looking back at me that I feel myself. But it is what I see when I look down that has me groaning and reaching to rub my hard and aching dick, her eyes going there too as she bites her lip.

Her legs open for me, presenting me with what I've been wanting for months. Her pussy glistening in the soft light, wet and ready for me, and I am all too eager to enjoy.

I take her ankle in my hand and move to crawl to her, my eyes on hers as I lower my head slowly, my hand moving up her leg and her breaths becoming heavier as I get closer to her pussy.

My eyes hold hers the second before my mouth closes the distance, and I finally taste her on my tongue. I groan loudly, and greedily take her with my mouth, her loud moans echoing around the house, moans I've missed so much. I glide my tongue up her folds until I find that blessed nub. I see Harper's back arch, her chest sticking out as she throws her head back and cries out, "Oh god!"

God has nothing to do with this.

I continue my meal of her pussy, her hands going to my head and pushing me into her wetness as she fucks my face. “Oh yes! Oh fuck, I’ve missed this.”

My cock gets so hard that it’s almost painful as she starts to swear. Harper is never one to swear unless she’s really angry or turned on, and both are exciting for me whenever I get that kind of treat.

I can feel her getting wetter and her cries get louder and louder, and I know she is close. “I’m coming! Oh, I’m coming!”

“Say it, baby, say it,” I growl into her pussy, and she does as she is told.

“Hunter!” she screams as she tumbles over the edge, and I smile as I pull away from her pussy, still tasting her on my tongue, but now I desperately need to feel the warmth I’ve been missing for months.

My desperation is clear as I undo my own jeans and pull them down enough for my cock to spring free. I sit myself down on the step, needing her now. I grab her as she starts to come down from her orgasm high and place her so that she is straddling me on the step, her wet heat dripping onto my dick.

“The bedroom...” Harper starts, but I take her lips in my own as I hiss, “Fuck the bedroom,” and slowly sink her over my cock.

My head is thrown back as I am enveloped by her tight heat. I take a moment to breathe to keep myself from exploding early. It has been a while.

Harper’s head is thrown back as well, her hands placed on my shoulders to steady her.. Her hips start to move under my grip, and I grit my teeth. “Don’t move yet.”

But she doesn’t listen. Instead, she rises before sinking herself back down on my cock, and I squeeze her hips in my hands.

My need for her wins out as she continues to move up and down, her full tits bouncing in my face as she fucks me.

“What if someone comes home early?” she moans out, but makes no move to stop.

I nuzzle my face in her tits. “Then they will be getting quite the show.”

She moans, and I feel her pussy clench around me at the idea. “Oh, you like that, don’t you? You like the idea of getting caught, people watching. Such a dirty girl.”

She does not deny it, but continues to fuck me, with no care for anything else.

Her desperation fuels me as I grab her hips, pumping her faster. “That’s right, fuck me. Tell me you missed this.”

She doesn’t stop, but says something unintelligible through her moans, and that excites me further.

“You sure you don’t want to stop and go to the bedroom?” I tease as I feel my climax getting closer, my balls drawing up as she yells at me.

“Don’t you fucking dare stop!”

Her movements get quicker, and I feel her pussy clench the fuck out of me as she screams, “Yes! Fuck yes! DON’T STOP! Oh god, Hunter!” she screams so loud, I wouldn’t be surprised if we get a noise complaint, but I don’t stop. I keep pumping her over my dick until I finally reach my own orgasm, screaming her name as I bury my face in her tits again, her arms going around me to hold me there as she milks me dry, leaving us sweating and half naked on the stairs.

CHAPTER 26



HUNTER

“*N*ot gonna run away this time?” I ask, then hear Harper’s throaty chuckle against my chest as she rests against it, her bare leg thrown over my hip and her breaths still heavy from the fucking we just did. Even after I gathered all of our things, tucked her in my arms, and carried her to my bedroom, she’s still breathing heavily.

Running her hand up my bare chest, she says, “Shouldn’t I be asking you?”

I squeeze her closer as I think about how close I came to losing this, and plant a kiss in her hair. “I’m not going anywhere.”

She squeezes me back. “So what does this mean?”

“I thought it was quite clear when I was eating you out.”

She chuckles again before pulling back enough to rest on her elbows and look at me, her hair mussed and sexy from my hands. I can instantly feel myself growing hard again at the look of her. “You know what I mean. When they come home, do we just walk out hand in hand?”

I think about it, and I can’t help the sense of pride I feel in my chest at having this woman in my arms, to say that she is mine. I really don’t have to hide it this time because my parents are gone, and I have no one to answer to. She is here, and she isn’t going anywhere.

I give her another gentle squeeze before stroking her soft, delicate cheek with my finger. “We could always go back to

the stairs and have you riding me again. That would be a clear indicator.”

“It would be a shock.”

I give her a devious smile. “That wasn’t a no.”

She rolls her eyes, slapping me on the chest playfully. “You still didn’t answer my question.”

“When they come home, we can tell everyone. I’ll tell them you’re mine.”

Her eyes alight with heat for a moment. “Yours? How caveman of you.”

She gives a little giggle, but the heat looking back at me has already got me thinking of all kinds of ways to celebrate this, all kinds of positions. But I also want to take Harper out and see her in ways I’ve only thought about. Would she be shy on date? Flirty? Forward? Does she kiss on the first date?

“Hey, what’s got you worried?” She cups my cheek with her hand as I feel my anxiety bubble to the surface. I consider brushing it off, but she sees it. “Tell me.”

I think about it and know I need to tell her. Truth is, I haven’t told anyone except Mia and that is only because we grew up together. I feel my cheeks heat as I let out a resigned sigh. “It’s silly.”

Harper waits, her brow creased with worry, but her eyes are soft with compassion.

I stroke my hand up and down her back as I speak, my eyes not meeting hers. “I guess I’m nervous.”

“About what?”

“Taking you out on a date.” As soon as the words leave my mouth, I feel her stiffen underneath my hands and know I need to explain. “Not because of you, but because... I’ve never taken a girl out on a date before.”

I’m met with silence, and it becomes so deafening that I finally meet her eyes. She just looks at me with utter confusion as she shakes her head. “What? No, you have.”

“I’ve been out with friends, I’ve met someone while out, but I wouldn’t classify that as a date because those rarely lasted more than a night. And we were never known for going out on dates. The only thing I know about dates is from what I’ve seen in movies.”

My cheeks grow hotter until her face softens into a smile. “So you’ve never taken a girl out? Not even in high school?”

“I was always at a party or with a group of friends, and it always led to making out or sex.”

“And you’re nervous?”

I sigh again. “I don’t wanna mess this up.”

Harper smiles, crawling to lie on top of me until all I can feel is her softness and her warmth. She takes my face in her hands and kisses me before pulling back. “That is the cutest thing, but you don’t need to be worried. Lucky for you, your *girlfriend* isn’t high maintenance and doesn’t need a fancy restaurant. It’s just gonna be you and me, talking like we are now... but with more clothes.”

Her words calm some of my anxiety, but there was one word I latched onto. “Girlfriend, huh?”

She smiles, proudly. “That’s right, buddy, you’re stuck with me.”

She parts her legs on either side of my hips until I can feel her wet heat against my cock, and I feel myself harden underneath her.

“That excites you, huh? That I’m yours.”

I put my hands to her hips and hold her over me. She giggles, shaking her head. “You really are a caveman.”

She has no idea, I think to myself a second before I flip us. She squeals in surprise as I lay her on the bed with myself on top of her, my hips still cradled between her legs and it would only take one thrust, but I want something else first.

I take her mouth in a hungry kiss, her hands moving down my back until they reach my ass. Her hands give it a squeeze

and I harden more at the bite of pain her nails give. I groan as I feel her pull me closer to her, but not yet.

Ideas are dancing through my head of what I want to do with her now that I have her, when her ringtone shatters through our lust-filled haze.

“Just let it ring,” Harper moans against my mouth, but I have another idea.

I pull away and grab her ringing phone from the table where I put it. It stops ringing when I grab it, but quickly starts ringing again as I hold it up between us, a mischievous glint in my eyes and a cautious look staring back at me as I speak. “Answer it. No matter what, you keep talking and don’t hang up. If you hang up or tell anyone what is happening, I’ll stop completely.” The ringing continues and through the uncertainty, I see a little interest I’m not surprised by in my girl’s eyes. My dirty girl. “Do you understand?”

She nods.

“Better answer it, then,” I tell her, holding it out, and she takes it with shaking fingers before lying back, her eyes on mine as she answers.

“Hello?” There is a pause, and then she starts to talk, sounding calm and happy. That will be harder soon. “Yeah, I’m sorry I left so early. I wasn’t feeling well.”

Her eyes are still on me as I place a light kiss between her breasts, then continue a slow trail down her stomach, until I reach the little patch of hair between her legs. I look at it, her lips there glistening already as she knows what is coming. Glancing back up at her, her breaths begin to increase, her conversation still going. “Yeah, we can definitely do something before the wedding.”

The smell of her sex is so intoxicating that I start to crave it. I lower my head, my eyes holding hers before I’m burying my face in her pussy, my tongue stroking her from entrance to clit, taking in her juices and savoring them.

She cries out a second before biting her lip, but the person on the other end notices because she quickly stammers out, her

voice shaking, “I thought I saw a spider, that’s all.” Her eyes roll, and she swallows a gasp as she continues to talk like a good girl. “Uh huh, yeah, I’m fine.” She opens her mouth to scream, but holds it back as she moans, “*So fine.*”

I take her clit in my mouth and start to suck on it until her back arches, pushing her breasts into the air. Her one free hand slaps the bed until her hand fists the sheets underneath us. The sight is so hot that it just makes me suck harder, flicking my tongue over her clit, and the phone conversation is soon forgotten by both of us.

She moans into the phone, her mind no longer here and lost in what I am giving her. The sight only makes me want to give her more.

Needing more of her, I release her clit and climb up her body and take her phone. I hang up and throw it aside, not caring who that was at the moment and only focusing on the lust that I see in her eyes as she looks up at me.

Still feeling her juices on my mouth, I command, “Taste.” I lower myself and take her mouth with mine, swallowing the moan that comes from her as she greedily takes my mouth in a kiss.

I feel her hands run through my hair, grabbing it and pulling me closer, needing more of me.

“You like the taste of yourself?” I growl into her mouth, my cock growing harder at the idea, and she only moans in response, a desperate moan as she continues to claw at me.

“What do you want, Harper?” I ask against her mouth before giving her bottom lip a playful nip.

“You.”

I cock my head, feeling her heat beneath me as an idea pops into my head. “How do you want me? Tell me, Harper.” I lower my mouth to her ear, flicking her lobe with my tongue. “What do you think about when you play with yourself. You think I forgot about that device I found in your room? What do you think about?”

She starts to squirm beneath me. “You.”

Lowering myself until I am cradled between her legs, I ask, “Yes, but what am I doing? Tell me what you think about?”

She hesitates, and I can feel the uncertainty radiating from her. I pull back enough to kiss her soft cheek, using my other hand to push some of her hair from her face as I look into her eyes. “Usually, you have me against the wall, my legs around your waist and you’re fucking me.”

I buck my hips against her heat out of reflex at the image she’s painting, making her gasp. “Interesting.”

“You like that? Being fucked against a wall? What if I were to bend you over my desk? Pull your hair and slap your ass? Does that excite you?”

Her reaction is my answer as I feel her hips lift, like her pussy seeking my cock, craving it. This girl likes to play the romantic nice girl, but she has a darker side I am all too excited to see again. I give her a mischievous grin as I lower myself to take her mouth in mine again, saying against her soft lips, “Oh, the things I plan to do to you.”

Her body easily melts into mine, her arms wrapping around my waist and feeling the muscles in my back, her knees lifting to present herself to my cock, ready. I reach down, eager to feel her wet warmth around me when my bedroom door suddenly bursts open.

“Dude, why the hell did you- Oh my god!” Logan screams, shielding his eyes, but not making any effort to leave.

“What the fuck!” I yell as Harper squeals in surprise, both of us shielding ourselves with the covers.

“Hey, what’s going-” Hadley enters the room, stopping in the doorway with her eyes widening for a moment before an amused smile takes over her face. “Oh, that’s what’s going on.”

“What are you guys thinking just walking in here?!” I scream at them, but it’s Logan who answers me, still unable to look at me.

“Excuse me! But you haven’t brought a woman back here in months, so I’m sorry for not expecting this.” I watch as he finally registers the scene before him, finally allowing himself to look. “Harper?”

Holding the covers over her chest, her face goes red as she raises a hand in an awkward wave. “Hey.”

“Well, this I wasn’t expecting.”

But Hadley doesn’t look shocked, just amused, as she crosses her arms over her chest and leans against the doorframe just as another body enters the room. “What is going on up here?”

Ava stops in the middle of the room, her eyes going wide and her mouth dropping, the room silent as we all watch her shock shift into excitement.

“I knew it!” Ava exclaims, pointing a finger at us. “I knew something was going on.”

Hadley scoffs. “You’d have to be an idiot not to.”

“Hey!” Logan exclaims, offended, but Hadley shrugs him off as I sigh, moment clearly ruined and the cat out of the bag.

“So wait, when I called you before, that was you and Hunter...” Her excitement shifts into disgust as she realizes. “Ew!”

“What are you all doing here?” Harper asks.

“We all decided to come back and hang out. Didn’t want the night to end,” Hadley explains, looking between us with a raised brow. “Clearly, neither did you.”

Harper’s face gets redder than I thought possible, but the sight only makes me want to kiss her. Only *she* would go red like the shy girl, but want her hair pulled and her pussy fucked behind closed doors. It’s like I have a secret piece of Harper no one else gets to see and I love it.

I sigh again, knowing that the time is now. “Look, let us get dressed. We’ll come downstairs and explain everything.”

Everyone leaves until it is just Harper and I lying in bed, me still cradled between her legs. I run my fingers through her hair as she watches me. “I guess it’s time.”

She takes her hand in mine. “How do you feel about that?”

“I’m nervous, but only because you were only mine, like we had our own secret world away from everything, and now we are letting the world into ours.”

“Hey, as long as we are together, we will always have our little world.”

I want to believe her, but I can’t shake the unsettled feeling in the pit of my stomach. I can’t explain it, so instead, I smile and nod before we get dressed and make our way downstairs.

EVERYONE WAS PRETTY accepting of everything. We told them how it all started and why we kept it a secret and even how it played into my downhill spiral. We told them about how we are together now and after some looks of uncertainty, everyone looked pretty happy for us. There were a pair of eyes, though, I worked to avoid but couldn’t help feeling on me.

As Harper spoke, Mia’s eyes remained on me, watching me, and I knew what this would mean. I’ve been avoiding her since I lashed out, unable to face what I have done, but I know I will need to.

As everyone gathers around for friendly chatter, I leave to get some drinks for everyone, needing some distance and it isn’t long until I hear a pair of small feet following me into the kitchen. I knew I would see her standing there when I turned around so I wasn’t surprised, but it’s the thoughtful look on her face that I wasn’t expecting.

I let out a resigned breath, going to rest my hands on the kitchen island, facing her.

We stand like that for I don’t know how long, but her eyes turn slightly sad when she eventually speaks. “Was this a part of why you pushed me away?”

I think before I answer, wishing I had more time before having this conversation. “A small part. I had a lot of things going on.”

Her eyes narrow. “So did I, and I needed my brother.”

I feel like shit under her gaze, regret seeping into my chest. “I’m sorry. I know I handled it badly.”

“Yeah, you did.”

“But I couldn’t talk to you about it, or anyone. Like we said out there, we kept it a secret. So instead of dealing with it, I let it fester. Our parents death didn’t help and you were going on and finding yourself.”

“So I’m the bad guy?”

“No!” I exclaim, holding a hand up to stop her for a moment while I gather my thoughts. “Mom and Dad didn’t just mess you up, but me too. I couldn’t date with dad breathing down my neck so I kept Harper a secret. Dad used to always tell me how woman leave and take advantage, and I guess a part of me was always scared of that. So when Harper left, it was like he was right. Then they died and you started going off on your own. I’m proud of you, Mia. I really am, but it was a series of things that made me spiral and you just got caught in it. I’m sorry for that.”

Mia just looks at me, as if taking in my words but still cautious. “Why didn’t you talk to me sooner?”

I shrug. “I didn’t know what to say. You were the one person I swore I would never hurt and I did that. It wasn’t something I was ready to face.”

“And now?”

Looking at my sister, the one face I’ve had by my side my whole life, I’ve missed it more than I thought. I’ve missed this ability she has of making me feel better about things. It’s one of the reason I pushed her away, because I wanted to suffer and I didn’t want to feel better. But now ...

“I miss my other half, and I’ll always live with the regret of hurting you, but I hope to become a part of this new life

you've created for yourself.”

Her face turns sad again, her eyes brimming with tears. “All I've wanted is to have you in my life again. I love you, Hunter, and I've missed you too.”

She comes around the island, and I take her in my arms, giving her small body a gentle squeeze before kissing the top of her head. “I'm here.”

She gives me a squeeze in return. “I'm happy to have you back.”

And in that moment, I allow myself to think that things will be better now. I allow myself to hope.

CHAPTER 27



HUNTER

*I*t was difficult going back to work. The work itself isn't hard because all the kids are cool and fun to be around, but it's Harper that makes it harder. Even though I was just inside her this morning, seeing her walk around in a pair of leggings that hug her ass in an irresistible way, her polo looking tighter than usual but I'm sure it's just in my head. Seeing her like this and knowing I can't have her only makes me want her more.

Instead of taking her hand and leading her away to the nearest room, pulling down those leggings and bending her over to fuck her until she's screaming my name, I blink and shake my head.

I focus on the boy before me, holding the baseball bat like I've told him, taking some practice swings into the air. Lucas has been practicing like I've said. His brows are creased in concentration, his eyes focused on the ball in my hand, but he looks too stiff. He'll get too excited and swing too early like he usually does.

I need to get him to relax, so instead of throwing the ball, I ask, "So how are things going at home?"

Lucas frowns further, unsure, still not dropping the bat. "Um, it's okay?"

I nod, my face calm and composed. "And school?"

This time, I see his face falter, but he composes his face quickly before saying, "School is school."

I cock my head, playing with the ball between my fingers. “Something going on with school?”

Lucas thinks for a moment, contemplating. “School is just school.”

I look past Lucas to see a concerned look in Harper’s eyes before focusing back on the kid. “Wanna talk about it? Sometimes when you keep things in, it effects your swing.” Not the truth, but I find myself caring about what is happening with this kid, and I worry because I know how school kids can be.

Lucas sighs again. “There’s a guy in my class and he took my baseball cards. They were my dad’s, and he trusted me with them.”

My shoulders suddenly stiffen as I picture another kid picking on the little boy before me. “How did he take your baseball cards?”

Lucas just shrugs. “He took them from my hands.”

My anger grows, but I focus on remaining composed, knowing that Lucas doesn’t like when people yell or raise their voices at him. “Did you tell your teachers? Your mom?”

He shrugs again. “Teachers spoke to him, and he just said I was lying. Teachers like him so he always gets away with things.”

“What the-”

“What did your mom say?” Harper interrupts, stepping forward, and I see the same concern and anger inside of her.

We love this kid and the thought of anyone doing anything to him is something that doesn’t sit right with me.

“She’s called his mom, but nothing happened.”

“So that it? Someone takes something of yours and they just leave it?”

Logan waves his hands. “Don’t worry about it. I just wanna hit this ball.” He lifts the bat to hold it, and any thought of relaxing Lucas is gone and replaced with thoughts of

righting a wrong. I share a look with Harper, and I know she feels the same way. I also know that pushing the issue right now will only upset Lucas, so I store it away for later as I hold the ball out in front of me.

We have practiced for weeks and he often swings too early or late, or too low or too high. Harper stands behind him with a glove to catch the strays, and when I see that everyone is ready, I throw the ball, aiming for Lucas's bat.

Time drags on as the ball sails through the air, the room tense and silent until Lucas swings and hits the ball with a resounding crack that echoes throughout the room, sending the ball sailing to the other end of the room, hitting the netting surrounding us.

The silence lingers for a second until we realize what just happened. Harper drops her glove and holds her hands over her mouth in shock, my wide eyes watching a big smile spread over Lucas's face until he drops the bat and throws both fists in the air. "I did it!"

"You did it, kid!" I cheer, approaching him and wanting to give him a big hug, but knowing he would hate that. He didn't like hugs, so neither of us ran for him like we wanted to. Instead, we beamed with pride as we approached him. "I knew you could."

"I can't wait to tell mom."

"You'll be a pro in no time, kid."

I HAD a couple of sessions until the end of the day, but before our last session, I was summoned to Sue's office. Harper and I shared a look of confused worry before I left her with the kid and a football and made my way there.

I raise my hand to knock, but quickly hear her yell through the door before I can. "Come in!"

Shrugging, I drop my hand to open the door. "You called?"

Sue remains in her chair behind her desk, her hands clasped in front her, looking very official. "Take a seat,

Hunter.”

My nerves going wild, I remain composed as I close the door behind me and make my way to the chair opposite her. After plopping down, she starts. “Your service is almost done.” My heart sinks at the thought of not coming back here, not seeing these kids again, but I school my features as I nod, letting her continue. “How do you like it here, Hunter?”

I answer honestly. “I love it. The kids are great, Harper and I are a great team. It’s just a great place.”

She nods, contemplating this. “It is, which is why I think you should stay.”

I blink, surprised. “What?”

“The kids love having you here, you’re really good with them, and I heard about the win with Lucas today. I think this place will be good for you too, if you choose to stay on to work. You can continue working with Harper because the kids need consistency, but I’ve got other kids I could line you up with if you want extra days. Truth is, we need someone with your experience.”

I blink again, wanting to pinch myself because this is too good to be true. “So you’ll pay me to be here? This will be my job?”

She nods. “If you want it. You could do some amazing things here. You care about the kids and the center and you have some good ideas.” She pauses while I process what is happening. “So I can give you time to think about it-”

“I’ll take it!” I blurt out, wanting this more than I thought I did. Honestly, I didn’t think this was truly an option, but hearing it now, for the first time in a long time, I am excited about the future.

CHAPTER 28



Work is done, and I am left to clean up the equipment while Hunter goes to speak with Sue. As I move about the space, picking everything up, my eyes keep darting to the door, waiting for Hunter to come through but can't help the sinking feeling of worry taking root in my stomach.

I didn't hear anything when I came in today so I don't know why Sue would need to see Hunter. I just hoped it wasn't something bad.

"Hey!" I jump at the sound of Melanie, an older woman who has been working here for years, as she comes trotting up to me, her curly hair bouncing as she moves. "I've got this, clock off early. Maybe take that man of yours out." She finishes with a wink, and I work to suppress my blush.

Hunter has been professional with me, but it's hard to miss the cheeky smiles and flirtatious winks he throws my way, or even the way we are pinned at the hip here.

I open my mouth to say no, but stop myself. Why shouldn't I take this opportunity to enjoy myself and go out with my boyfriend. Wow, it feels so weird to say that now, but that is what he is.

My boyfriend.

I smile and nod. "All right, if you're sure?"

She gives me a wave of her hand. "Go ahead. You're young, enjoy it while you can."

“Thanks, Mel,” I tell her, beaming as I make my way out and down the hallway, heading to the room where employees put their things, lined with lockers.

I’m bouncing with each step, excited for another night with... my boyfriend. Yeah, I’m gonna need to get used to that, but I still can’t get the smile off my face.

I do a little skip, almost to the room, when I am suddenly pulled out of the hallway and into the storage closet. I squeak in surprise and stumble as I am submerged in darkness when the door closes behind me.

I’m about to scream when a warm mouth crashes into mine in a searing kiss, an intoxicating scent all around me, a familiar warm wall of muscles pressed against me.

Hunter.

My muscles instantly relax, and I wrap my arms around his neck to pull him closer. He moans as he molds his body to mine.

“Is everything okay?” I ask against his mouth, and he only moans in response. I use all of my willpower to turn my face away from his, but he just moves his mouth to my neck, kissing the spot near my collarbone. “What did Sue want to see you about?”

He gives my neck a nip with his teeth and a moan slips out of me just as he pulls away. Through the darkness, I can only see the outline of him, but I can feel all of him, and I try really hard not focus on a part of him that is sticking into my hip as he says, “She wanted to talk to me about my community service.”

He pauses and I wait, his voice not giving anything away.

“You’re stuck with me.”

I can hear his smile, and it takes me a second to realize what he’s just said. “What?”

He holds me closer, the excitement bursting from him. “They want to keep me here. Turns out, I made quite the impression.”

“Oh my god!” I squeal and jump into him. He catches me, and I proceed to wrap my legs around his waist, holding him to me as my mouth crashes into his. “I’m so happy for you. You’ve worked so hard for this,” I tell him between kisses, and it isn’t long until the kisses get deeper and more heated, his hands at my ass as he slowly backs me against the door of the storage closet, the cool wood touching my back and making me shiver.

“You know,” Hunter says, biting my bottom lip, “I haven’t forgotten about your fantasy.” Hunter pulls back slightly so that our lips are only grazing as he whispers, “And I’ve been trying real hard to be good today.”

“Oh, really?”

I feel him nod, and he pushes me into the door more, pressing his body into mine until he’s between my legs. I bite my lip to suppress the moan. “You walking around with these leggings, teasing me, knowing I can’t touch you, it’s driving me crazy.”

He rolls his hips against me once, and I gasp, my body instantly wanting more. “You like teasing me, Harper?”

My voice shakes when I speak. “Yes.”

“Maybe I should tease you.” He rolls his hips again, and this time I moan when he leans in to whisper, “Do you want me to tease you?”

I know what this man is capable of. “No.”

“How do you want it, Harper?”

I let a breathy giggle slip as I answer, thinking of all the possibilities with this man. “Surprise me.”

This makes him chuckle as he pulls back to look at me through the darkness. “You sure about that?”

“Yes.”

Silence lingers and my desperation grows as I see him cock his head, thinking. “How about a game?”

Suddenly cautious, I ask, “What kind of game?”

He rolls his hips again. “I really like how desperate you get when you’re horny and pushed to the brink.”

“I am not-” He stops me with a kiss, taking my mouth until he says, “I’m talking.”

He pulls back, and I remain silent. “Let’s see who can break first.”

I furrow my brow, confused. “Break first?”

“I want you to tease me. I wanna be on my knees by the time you’re through with me. Do that, and I’ll do the same to you. We’ll tease each other until one breaks.”

“What happens if one breaks?” I ask, hating how intrigued I am.

“Then we give in.”

“Why not just give in now?” I ask, rolling my own hips into his hardened cock, making him hiss, followed by a chuckle.

“Oh, you are gonna be good at this.” He leans into me, his face close to mine as he explains, “We can give in now, but trust me, it’ll be fun to play the game.”

Definitely intrigue and curious to see what he can do, I agree. “All right, but when do we start?”

He chuckles again before quickly setting me down on my feet and throwing open the door to the storage closet, the light from the hallway filtering in.

I’m stunned, my jaw dropped as I watch him grin down at me in victory. “It’s starts right now.” Then he kisses me on the cheek, walking out of the closet, leaving me speechless and unbelievably horny.

“I’m also taking you out for dinner tonight, so come prepared! Be at yours at seven!” he calls over his shoulder, and I clench my hands into fists as the ache between my legs becomes unbearable.

Yeah, this was not a good idea, and it looks like I may need to call in some reinforcements.

CHAPTER 29



“*H*ow did you rope me into this?” Mia asks from my bed as Ava, Hadley, and I rifle through my closet for something to wear tonight.

“Because I didn’t give you choice,” Ava answers shamelessly, pulling out a blue dress I wore for my high school graduation before scrunching her nose at it, then letting it drop to the floor before diving back in. “And it would be nice if you could help.”

“I am not participating in this sex game you’re playing with my brother. I wish I never knew.” Mia sits up, crossing her legs and holding one of my pillows to her chest.

“You’re not participating, just helping a friend,” Hadley comments, holding her finger up, and I can feel my anxiety growing the more clothes we throw to the floor.

I run my hands through my hair. “Guys, maybe I should just cancel.”

“Or you could wear nothing,” Hadley says, holding up a top in front of her, unaware of what she just said until she notices us all looking at her with raised brows. “Well, you will certainly win the game.”

True, but it’s not my style. I didn’t really know what my style is. I’ve read books where couples teased each other, and I’ve seen *Fifty Shades*, but never gone out of my way to drive a guy crazy. There’s an element of power in the idea, but I don’t let myself think about it too much as we refocus.

“You’re not going to cancel, we will find something sexy for you to wear to drive Hunter crazy,” Ava says with a wink, and Mia groans.

“Okay,” Mia says, hopping off the bed and walking over to us. “I’ll help if we agree to stop talking about driving my brother crazy with sexy things, and let’s just acknowledge how weird this is.”

No one says anything, but everyone steps back to let Mia into my closet. She is in there for two seconds before she yells, “Bingo!” and emerges from the closet with a strappy red dress I had gotten on a whim and forgotten about. I remember it cupping my boobs to make them look fuller and hugging my curves in the best way, like Jessica Rabbit. I wonder why I had never worn it. Maybe because I didn’t have a reason.

I guess now I do.

“Here, this will look great on you.” Mia hands it to me, and I take it, looking it over as does everyone else.

“Oh, yes!” Ava squeals, clapping her hands in excitement.

Hadley leans in and says, loud enough for everyone to hear, “I’d also suggest forgoing underwear. Really drive him crazy.”

Mia throws her hands up. “Okay, I’m done!”

Mia runs from the room in disgust, and we can’t help but laugh. Ava gives me a kind smile, taking my hand in a gentle squeeze before leaving. “Have fun.”

Hadley stays behind, her watchful eyes on me, full of worry. “Are you okay?”

I am excited to finally go out with Hunter, but he’s better at teasing and sex. He probably has a list of ideas to drive me crazy tonight, whereas I have no idea and that makes me nervous. I don’t want to disappoint.

I say nothing and Hadley’s eyes soften. “No need to be nervous.”

“That obvious?” I give a nervous laugh.

“Just a little. Look, don’t be scared. Have fun with this. If there is something you want to try or say? Do it. Seen something in a movie or read something in a book you wanna try? Do it. That’s the fun side of being in a relationship, trying all these things with someone you trust without judgement. Do you think Hunter will judge you?”

I don’t hesitate. “No.”

Hadley nods. “Just don’t overthink it.” Giving me a final smile, she starts inching toward my bedroom door. “Oh, I was serious about the no underwear thing. Slip it into conversation casually, and it’ll drive him crazy, especially if you’re in public and he can’t do anything.”

And with that, she leaves, and my brain starts to buzz with ideas.

THE GIRLS ARE GONE and my aunt is having a *Golden Girls* marathon when Hunter arrives at the house at seven like he said. I walk out of the house before he can knock, wearing the unbelievably sexy red dress that pushes my boobs up and stops mid-thigh. A pair of strappy heels are on my feet and my thick hair is out in wild waves. My make-up consists of a subtle smoky eye and red lip. I’m definitely more done up than I’ve ever been, and at first, I feel like a kid playing dress-up. But then I walk outside and see the look on Hunter’s face.

Worth it.

“Fuck,” he groans after basically gasping, his eyes moving up and down my body, getting heated the more he sees. He visibly gulps before looking back up into my eyes, clearing his throat. “You don’t play fair, do you?”

“This was your idea.”

“I love it and I hate it all at the same time right now,” he tells me, giving me another once-over before extending his arm, and I finally allow myself to take him in.

Standing before me with his arm extended to me, Hunter is dressed in a pair of dark jeans and a black button-down that

stretches across his chest and hugs his big biceps, the sleeves rolled up slightly to reveal his muscular forearms, his hair styled and his face is freshly shaved.

The man before me is simply mouth-watering and he is all mine. With that thought in mind, I loop my arm around his and allow him to walk me to my car.

Once inside, I get settled and start the car.

“Where are we going?” I ask as we start driving.

“This restaurant on the other side of town, it’s called Papa’s.”

“Ah yeah, I’ve seen it. It’s a nice place.”

“Only the best for our first date,” Hunter says, and I can’t help but smile as I drive down the busy streets until Hunter grumbles playfully. “Although in my head, I imagined our date differently.”

“You’ve imagined our date?”

He shrugs, watching the passing houses and buildings. “Of course.”

It’s hard to hide the surprise, but I ask, “How did you imagine our date going, then?”

He thinks for a second before answering, still not looking at me. “I’d be the one driving, for starters.”

I scoff. “Well, you’re not, so just enjoy being driven around.”

I feel Hunter’s eyes on me. “I think I will.”

The flirtatious lilt to his voice, the deepening of it as he speaks, makes me tense a second before his big hand falls on my bare thigh.

My eyes dart down for a second, and he says, “Keep your eyes on the road.”

I focus on the road and try to control my breaths as his hand slides to rest on my inner thigh, so close to my core. Out of reflex, my legs open for his hand, all too aware of the lack

underwear. A part of me is curious to what he would say or do when he finds out. Will that be his undoing, or will he undo me right now?

His hand is not moving, but he is stroking little circles on my thigh with his thumb, leaning across the car to whisper in my ear, "Let's not forget our game. Have you come ready to play?"

I nod, my hand gripping the wheel as we get closer to the restaurant. "Have you?"

He gives a little laugh that makes me excited and nervous and inches his hand so close that I swear he can sense I have no underwear, but he doesn't react. "You bet."

He keeps his hand there for the duration of the trip, then takes my hand as we enter the restaurant. Strutting in with an air of confidence, he holds me close like he's scared I'll run, but I'm not going anywhere. It's hard to miss the looks he gets from some of the women in the restaurant, including the waitresses, and especially the hostess standing before us in a simple black dress, with curly blonde hair.

"I have a reservation for two," Hunter tells her, and she gives me the eye, raising a brow before leading us to a table in the back of the restaurant.

"Your server will be with you momentarily." Her eyes stay focused on Hunter as she asks, "Is there anything else?"

He doesn't even look at her, just smiles at me sitting across from him. "No, we're good. Thank you."

She stands there a moment longer, as if he may change his mind, but eventually leaves. I guess I should get used to this, but it's comforting having his attention solely on me.

We sit across from each other, and I can't help but quip, "Must be hard being you."

He furrows his brow. "What do you mean?"

"Having women fall at your feet."

A slow smile spreads across his face, as he leans forward to rest his forearms on the table. "Are you jealous?" I narrow

my eyes at him in response until he continues. “The only woman I care about is you. I don’t see anyone else. I thought we established that.”

His eyes turn serious as he speaks, and my breath gets stuck in my chest.

It takes me a second to breathe and compose myself, giving a nervous giggle as I fiddle with my napkin. “Don’t get too cheesy on me now.”

“Not cheesy if it’s true.”

“No, I think it’s still cheesy.”

His grin still in place, a figure pops up at our table. “Good evening, welcome to Papa’s ...” the young waitress with red hair hands us the menus and sprouts off the specials, but I am more focused on the man before me as he opens his menu and looks down at it with a furrowed brow. Focused and concentrating and looking kinda cute.

“I’ll get the beef ravioli,” he says, and she notes it down in her notepad. “And just a water, please.”

He looks at me and I only now realize that I haven’t even looked at the menu, so instead, I awkwardly smile at the waitress and tell her, “Yeah, I’ll get the same.”

She takes our menus and scampers off, leaving us in silence.

I shift in my seat under the weight of Hunter’s watchful eyes, unsure of what to say or what to talk about now that we are here.

His eyes narrow on the movement. “So what are your plans for this date?”

He cocks his head. “What fun would that be to tell you? Beside, why don’t we just sit back and enjoy our time together.”

And he does sit back, his eyes darkening into a deep blue, not straying from me. I raise my brow at him.

“Because I know you’re planning something, otherwise you wouldn’t have created this whole game thing.”

“What if I told you that I actually don’t have a plan? What if I told you the game was created because I like when you are pushed to the brink? What if I told you I like your dirty mouth and how you take control when you are pushed?”

I squeeze my thighs together to suppress the growing ache there, made worse by his words and the images that pop into my head. Images of me walking around this table and sitting on him, riding him.

I feel my cheeks heat as a slow smile spreads over his handsome face. “That’s what I thought.”

“I don’t talk dirty,” I tell him unconvincingly, my eyes darting around in hopes no one can hear us, my voice sounding small to my own ears.

“Oh, you do.” He leans forward, resting his forearms on the table again, his voice low and deep as his eyes hold mine. “If only you could feel how hard I am at the thought of it.”

I swallow. I am all too aware of how hot I feel even in this tiny dress. He wants to watch me squirm? Fine, then I’ll enjoy watching him.

I lean forward, mirroring him, leaning forward so he has a good view of my cleavage. His eyes dart down, and I watch as he licks his lips before looking back at me, and I whisper back, my face closer to his, “If only you knew how close you were to touching bare pussy earlier?”

“Here’re your drinks.” I hear the waitress as she places our drinks down on the table, Hunter’s eyes boring into mine with a different kind of intensity I have never seen, like it is taking all his strength to control himself. I can’t help but love the level of power I get from his reaction.

The waitress continues to talk in her too chipper voice. “And your food will be out soon. Is there anything else I can get?”

“No,” Hunter growls, not looking at her, and she appears a little taken aback by his response, but she gives us a tight

smile and nods her head.

“Have a good night,” she tells us, sounding clipped, before walking away.

Still feeling Hunter’s eyes on me, I grab my water and take a big drink, licking my lips and giving a little moan before setting it back down on the table. “So refreshing.”

“What did you mean by that?” Hunter demands, his voice strained. His hands clench into fists on the table, and it excites me that I can make him react this way.

I keep my face composed, giving him a coy smile. “Oh well, I was thirsty, so the water-”

“You know what I mean.”

I lean forward again and whisper, “I may or may not be wearing panties right now.”

“You’re fucking with me?”

“Not yet.”

He visibly gulps. “You’re telling me that you’re sitting there in that dress with nothing underneath?”

I take another sip of water. “You could end this game and find out.”

His eyes hold mine until he lets out a little chuckle, sitting back and shaking his head. “Well played, Harper.”

I give him a smile, but I feel it falter, the nerves from earlier dancing in the back of my mind, threatening to take over.

“What is it?” Hunter asks, concerned, the game momentarily forgotten. I consider lying,, but I can’t.

I let out a shaky breath. “Honestly, I was quite nervous about tonight.”

“Why?”

I shrug one shoulder. “Because it’s you. I guess I’m always worried I’ll disappoint.”

“Let me stop you right there,” he says, holding up his hand before taking my hand in his, rubbing the back of my hand with his thumb. “Nothing you do disappoints me.”

“Not even when I left.” I hold his eyes and see the shadow of pain in them. Thinking of that day I hurt him, the day we hurt each other.

He blinks and kindness replaces the pain as he looks at me. “I was happy you were following your dream, but I guess I was scared of being left behind.”

“I didn’t leave you behind.” I sigh, wishing he knew how many nights I dreamed of him, how much I buried myself in my work to keep the pain of being away from him at bay. That was how I got the job. I worked and worked because if I stopped, I would feel his absence. If only he knew. “I thought about you every day. You might have pushed me away, but I never stopped caring. You might not know this, but you were with me the whole time I was away. Each time I felt scared, I pretended like you were with me and it helped a little.”

He squeezes my hand, and I place my other hand over ours. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there.”

“Well, we’re here now.”

“We are.” We share a smile, finally at this place where we can be happy.

“Dinner is served.”

DINNER GOES by quickly with groans of satisfaction and cheeky smiles. The waitress stops by halfway through our meal to check if everything is okay and we both nod, too busy eating.

When our meals are done, we both sigh and sit back in our seats, satisfied.

“Wow, that was so good!” I exclaim, still licking my lips when the waitress comes back.

“So how was everyone’s meal?”

“The best!” I tell her, and she smiles proudly as if she made the meal herself.

“That’s great. Would you like dessert menus?”

“No, I’m good for dessert,” Hunter says before I can say anything. I look at him and my words get stuck in my mouth when I see the heated look he’s giving me. “We’ll just take the check.”

My cheeks flush as the waitress looks between us and then scampers off.

I clear my throat and force the words out. “I might want some cake or something.”

He looks at me and says with a straight face, “Well, I want your legs around my head and my tongue on your cunt. Then I’ll get you some cake, unless you want something else after.”

My jaw drops as I process his words, and I’m back to shifting in my chair again. “Oh my... so that’s how we’re playing this?”

He wants to play this game? Well, I might not know a lot, but I know how Hunter works and he likes to be the one to bring me pleasure. He hates the idea of something else unless he is controlling it. He took my vibrator because of it, goddamnit!

So I push my shoulders back, holding his gaze as I slip my hand up my dress until I find my wet center. A little gasp slips out of me as my finger grazes my very sensitive nub, and Hunter’s eyes zero in on me, his jaw tensing.

“What are you doing, Harper?”

I bite my lip. “I’m touching myself under the table.”

“Are you wet?” he asks, his eyes holding mine.

Very. “Maybe. You could find out if you give up this game.” I raise a single brow because that is what I want. I want him to touch me, to take me. I will win this. I will break him.

“Oh, I will find out anyway.” He cocks his head. “Are you thinking about my head between your legs?”

I swallow a little moan as I continue to rub circles on my clit. “Yes... and other things.”

“Other things?” The moans slips out, drawing the attention of a couple at a nearby table, but I can’t stop. I don’t care to stop as I watch Hunter’s eyes alight with excitement. “What other things, Harper?”

I swallow. “I want something of yours in my mouth.”

“Harper, you’ve ridden my cock, let’s not be coy. I know you can talk dirty so let me hear it.”

“Fine. I want-” Our bubble bursts when the waitress returns with the check, placing it on the table. I quickly withdraw my hand, internally screaming as I do, but I give the girl a tight smile.

She scampers off and we wordlessly rise from our chairs, Hunter paying before he places a hand at my back and walks me out.

The silence between us is so thick, and I am all too aware of his hand on my back and how badly I want it elsewhere. I continue to move, walking beside him as we make our way around the restaurant to the parking lot.

We reach the car, and just as I go to get the keys out, another hand grabs mine, Hunter’s. He takes my hand and spins me around until I am pinned to the side of my car, with him pressed into my front and his hard cock against my hip.

I gasp as he takes my face in his hands, forcing me to meet his eyes, looking intense, his face inches from mine. “Now you need to finish that sentence. What do you want?”

In that moment, with him pressed against me, the wetness between my legs begging for him, I don’t feel fear but lust and power as I say what I want. “I want your cock in my mouth. I wanna watch you crumble. I want you to watch as I swallow everything you want to give.”

His mouth crashes onto mine with hunger and desperation, pulling back with our heavy breaths mingling as he fists my hair. “Very well played. Now get in the car. I’ll tell you where to go.”

CHAPTER 30



We are silent as I drive, only speaking when Hunter gives me direction until we pull up outside a hotel. I turn off the car and look out the window. “Why are we here?”

“Because I intend to have you screaming by the end of tonight and don’t want to wake my roommates or your aunt,” he says, unclipping his seatbelt, and I raise my brows.

“So will this game continue when we get up there?”

Hunter grins. “You bet it will.”

I curse as he gets out of the car, just wanting relief. No more teasing, I just want him. I take in a deep breath to calm myself, which does nothing as I get out of the car and walk hand in hand with Hunter through the hotel.

Hunter gets us checked in and upstairs without any trouble, but it’s hard to remain composed with the tension between us growing thicker with each passing second.

We finally arrive to our room, on the third highest floor, and the door opens up to a darkened space.

Hunter flicks on the lights, and I gasp. It’s an open plan room with a large double bed and a flatscreen TV in the adjoining living area. Across from me are some glass doors that open up to the balcony overlooking the city.

“Wow,” I gasp at the beauty of the room and jump slightly when I feel Hunter’s warm arms encircle my waist, pulling me closer until my back is against his front. I feel his lips at my

ear, his nose in my hair, and I angle my head to give him better access, needing the contact.

Holding me close, he says, “Now be a good girl and get on the bed.”

“No,” I reply with a small smile, curious to see what he will do.

I don’t have to wait long because the next second he has me off my feet as he starts to carry me toward the bed. I squeak with surprise when he drops me on the soft mattress and proceeds to walk to a chair sitting opposite the bed, slowly undoing the buttons of his shirt as he sits and leans back in the chair. “Lie back.”

I consider not doing it, forcing him over here, but curiosity spurs me onwards as I lie back, only slightly propped up by my elbows so I can still see him as his eyes take me in.

“Now I want you to reach down and touch yourself.”

My voice shakes when I speak, the tingling between my legs growing unbearable. “Is this part of the game?”

“You bet. I will have you begging for my cock by the end of tonight.”

I raise one brow in challenge, but I don’t doubt him one bit. I was close to begging *now*. “Pretty big statement there.”

He holds my eyes. “You’ll see. Now do as your told.”

I do. Using one arm to support myself, I move one hand down my front, moving slowly as I reach underneath my dress.

“Uh uh.” I stop, and he says, “Lift up your dress and spread those legs. I wanna see how wet you are.”

I pull my dress up until it’s bunched around my waist, my legs spread and my pussy on display for him as I move my hand to the sensitive little nub begging for relief. I throw my head back at the sudden contact, and it takes a second for me to gather my thoughts. I suck in a deep breath before looking back at Hunter, and moan as I see his pants are undone and his

cock is in his hand. Moving his hand up and down as he watches me touch myself, and it's never been hotter.

I'm going to break, I know I will, so I try to talk in an attempt to distract myself from what he was doing, trying to turn the tables on him. "What do you want? You keep asking for my fantasy, what is yours?"

His face is composed, whereas I have to try to not let my eyes roll into the back of my head. "You sure you want me to tell you that right now?"

"Oh, yes." Anything to make his harder for him like it is for me.

"I have many fantasies, Harper."

"Give me one."

"You sure you don't wanna give up and we can play it out?"

"Just talk," I grit out, followed by a moan, and he thinks for a moment, only the sound of my heavy breaths filling the space.

He tilts his head, his strokes getting slower. "I wanna try tying you up one day."

"Oh god." Yeah, I'm not gonna last. Bad idea, bad idea! He's gonna win and the funny thing is, I don't care. He continues to talk like I'm not in fucking hell.

"Hands and feet tied to the bed, having you spread for me. I'll have you tied up and I'll use my mouth, hands, and cock to bring you close to coming, over and over again, until you are screaming for it. Only when I finally undo the restraints will you push me down, climbing onto my cock like the greedy girl you are, and riding me. You have no restraint, just desperation. God, I love how you get like that when pushed to the brink. Why do you think I created this game?"

His strokes increase in speed, and I can see a bead of precum on his tip, begging for me.

I lick my lips. "You could have just tied me up and fulfilled your fantasy."

“Oh, I’ll have time for that, but I also like watching you squirm. So how about it, Harper? Give up yet?”

Oh god, I want to, but instead, I say, “Never. What about you?”

“Not yet.”

I won’t last. An idea springs into my mind, and I can’t help but get excited about it. He likes it when I squirm, well, I love when he does.

Despite every urge telling me to keep going, I pull my hand away from my wet center and scoot to the edge of the bed, my eyes on his.

“Stay on the bed,” he orders, and I suddenly get this surge of power again. I could get used to this.

He stops stroking himself, his eyes on me, cautious as I shake my hand, standing before him.

“Not this time,” I tell him right before I pull my dress over my head, dropping it to the floor until I stand before Hunter in nothing but my heels.

His eyes widen as I step closer. “What are you doing?”

“It’s like you said back at the restaurant.” I reach down and touch the precum with my finger, making him shiver. “Dessert.” And with that, I stick my finger in my mouth and suck the salty flavor off, needing more and moaning as I do so.

“Get on your knees.” Hunter’s voice shakes as he regards me with wide eyes.

I cock my head, withdrawing my finger. “Do you give?”

“Fuck the game and get on your damn knees. You want my cock in your mouth, you’ve got it.”

I can’t help but smile as I do as I’m told. I get on my knees before him until I have his cock bobbing in front of me, teasing me. *Enough teasing*, I think as I finally take his cock in my mouth, closing my lips over his thick head. I groan at the feel of him and suck. “Fuck! That’s it, Harper.”

Hunter growls as my head moves up and down his cock, sucking and licking. His hands fist my hair, pushing me down over him as he fucks my mouth, taking it like it's his because it is.

I am his.

My hunger grows as I continue to suck him, going deeper each time, hearing his moans and groans and they spur me forward, turning me on more until I suddenly feel him stiffen under me. "Harper, I'm gonna..."

I suck him harder, wanting to taste him, but instead I am pulled off the floor. Hunter's dick falls from my mouth, and I exclaim, "Hey!"

My outrage is silenced as he throws me on the bed, pushing his pants off completely as he climbs over me, his hot body flush against mine as he grazes my nose with his. "Another time I'll come in your mouth, but right now, I wanna feel you around me when you come. I want you to squeeze the fuck out of me with that tight cunt of yours."

On his last word, he thrusts once, and I am full with him, my body singing like it was an itch I was desperate to scratch. "Ah!"

My back arches, and Hunter takes one nipple in his mouth, sucking and biting it as he fucks me like a man starved and I am his next meal.

I wrap my arms and legs around him, holding him closer, not letting him leave. I am so close.

"That's right, squeeze the fuck out of me," Hunter moans against my chest, pulling back to look down at me as he fucks me, admiring his handiwork. So close, but I need more.

"Harder, Hunter," I demand, and he smiles as he pounds into me harder, going deeper, and my eyes roll. "Oh, yes!"

He throws his head back. "God, I love it."

"Just shut up and fuck me."

"Yes, ma'am." He grabs one of my legs and holds it up, spreading me wider. I scream with how deep it feels it's

exactly what I want and how I want it.

“Oh my...” I throw my head back and I scream, not caring who hears as we both come, clutching at each other as the delicious tremors work their way through our bodies.

We stay like that for a second before Hunter pulls out of me, and flops down beside me on the bed. Both of us exhausted and thoroughly fucked.

“I guess I win,” I say in between breaths with a cheeky smile.

I feel his hand in mine as he says, “I’d say we both did.”

CHAPTER 31



It's the night before the wedding and we are all curled up at Ava's house. Conner decided to stay at the guys' house with Hunter and Logan, so now the place is ours.

I sit cross-legged on the floor in the living room, wearing my warmest flannel pajamas, Mia and Lucy sit on either side of Ava on the couch in the same pajamas as me. Hadley joins me on the floor, all of us smiling at the excitement that is to come tomorrow.

I still can't believe my friend is getting married and it's come so quick. Just a simple ceremony in a park and the reception at Danny's bar. Very simple and very *them*.

The girls laugh and theorize about what the boys will be getting up to, but my mind is focused on the email I got that morning from my boss in Australia. She asked when I was going to be coming back... again. I know I should have told her by now that I wasn't taking the job and to thank her for the opportunity, but it felt wrong to do it over email. I need to call her and tell her myself and it will hang over me until I do.

So as the girls continue to laugh, I give them a tight smile, excusing myself and heading out the back door to stand on the back porch. With my phone in my hands, I have no idea how to do this, but I have to.

Things are so great with Hunter and I can't leave again, not without him. There will be other opportunities, there has to be, but there will not be another Hunter.

I square my shoulders and dial, putting the phone to my ear, hearing my friends cheer happily from inside when the call is answered by a high-pitched voice I don't recognize.

“Evalyn Taylor’s phone, this is Denise, how may I help you?”

I blink, confused. “Denise? Um,” I stammer, not remembering a Denise. “Is Evalyn there?”

“Who may I ask is calling?”

“Harper—”

“Oh yes, Harper. Miss Taylor said you may call.”

“Um, yes.” I shift on my feet, nerves settling in my stomach. “Is she there? I need to speak with her.”

“I’m sorry, she’s out of town right now, but she will be back next week. Would you like for me to leave a message?”

I consider it and decide I will just call her back next week. “No, it’s fine. I’ll call back. Thank you.”

She hangs up, and I am left in the darkness with nothing but my racing thoughts and the distant laughter of my friends.

I stand there for I don’t know how long, before the sound from inside gets louder as the back door opens. I turn around to see Hadley, closing the door behind her with a thoughtful expression.

“Everything okay?” she asks, and I consider putting on a fake smile, but instead I say the truth with slumped shoulders.

“Is it a mistake? To say no to the company in Australia?”

She thinks for a moment before answering, “Why? Do you want to go?”

“It’s an opportunity. Is it stupid to turn it down for a guy?”

She tilts her head. “Is he the only reason?”

Is he? I always thought he was and that I didn’t have anything else to stay for. I guess I do. I have friends and I have the kids at the center. But is it enough? What if things don’t work out?

I'm lost in thought when Hadley speaks again. "Unfortunately, I can't answer that. It's your life. You just have to think about what you need to be happy. Will this job make you happy, more than any other job you could find here?"

Her eyes are soft as I think about her words and it is true. I am not limited to this one. It will not be an easy road, but I won't be alone.

I let out a breath, giving her a thankful smile. "Thanks, you know, for not judging me and just listening."

She scoffs. "Who am I to judge? And listening is the easy part. So what are you thinking of doing?"

I think again, feeling more sure than I was seconds ago. "I wanna stay. My boss is out of town, so I'll need to call her next week, but I'm gonna stay."

Hadley smiles and nods as the back door opens again and bodies fill the doorway.

Mia, Ava, and Lucy all stand with questions in their eyes. "Everything all right out here."

I nod, smiling at my friends as I tell them, "Never better. I'm staying and not taking the job."

Ava's eyes widen, and a smile takes up all their faces. Mia claps and cheers, "Now we have another reason to celebrate!"

Yeah, I guess we do.

CHAPTER 32



HUNTER

Well, we're finally here and Harper looks beautiful. My jaw dropped as soon as I saw her walk down the aisle. The bride looked beautiful too, but my eyes were set on Harper during the whole wedding ceremony. Her make-up is simple but beautiful. It doesn't hide her beauty, but brings it out more. Her hair is down in soft curls, and her dress really draws attention to her breasts.

My stomach fluttered when I saw her walk down the aisle and a crazy thought occurred to me. Maybe one day.... I shook my head, knowing I was jumping the gun, but then gave myself a small secret smile at the thought and allowed myself to imagine.

We give each other flirty looks and winks throughout the ceremony, while also smiling at our friends as they say their vows and promise each other forever.

To think all this started with a party.

A party where Ava and Conner hooked up and got pregnant, forcing them to finally admit their feelings for each other.

A party where I met Harper and couldn't let go since.

She smiles at me and I know my future is that girl, and she has chosen me to be hers. I smile in return as our friends kiss and we all cheer and clap. As we leave the ceremony, I sneakily pinch Harper's behind, making her squeal and shoot me a look. Even though she loves it.

I am happy.

DANNY CLOSED the bar for the reception. The wedding band is playing on the stage, and the guys and I are hanging out by the bar while the girls are on the dance floor.

I clap my hand on Conner's shoulder and grin. "Well, you're a married man now and a father. How does it feel?"

Conner looks out at the dance floor, where his bride holds hands with Harper and Mia, dancing happily. He smiles and looks back me, bliss on his face. "It feels like heaven." His face shifts into concern. "How about you? Are you okay?"

I smile. "I've never been better."

All the guys smile at me, relieved, and I know how much I worried them. I can't help the guilt that sits in my stomach at the thought, but all I can do is be better now.

A chorus of laughter erupts behind us as the girls join us at the bar, Harper curling up at my side and I wrap an arm around her, loving the feel of her body against mine. "Having fun?"

She smiles. "The best! But someone has some good news!"

We all furrow our brows as the women grin like Cheshire Cats until all of their eyes go to Ava's little sister, Lucy. Ava is the one to speak up while Lucy blushes. "Guess who's going to college here?!"

We all turn to Lucy, who now gives us a shy smile.

"You're kidding?" Conner says, a big proud smile taking up his face.

"I got in. I just found out this morning." Lucy beams with uncontrollable pride before she is taken in by group hug.

"This is amazing!" I cheer as I think of how much this girl is growing up before my eyes. Not long ago, she was a kid following us all around and now she will be going to college. I know Ava would be happy about that, any reason to get Lucy away from their father. He was always verbally abusive to

Ava, though she claimed Lucy never experiencing the same, but I still don't like the idea of her living with that man. Now she will be free, they both will, and I can't help the weight from lifting off of my shoulders at the idea.

We let the girl go, but Logan gives her one last squeeze, picking her up before putting her down, exclaiming, "So proud of you!" He pulls back and slaps a hand on her shoulder. "You did well, kid."

As he says the word, I watch as her smile slips from her face and is replaced with a look of disappointment. She quickly covers it up with a smile that doesn't reach her eyes, but I get it. She is getting older, and the older you get, the less you wanna be called a kid, but something tells me it may be more than that.

I just hope it's not what I think it is.

A kiss to my cheek pulls my attention back to the woman in my arms. I smile, giving her ass a gentle squeeze as the music changes to a slower song. I recognize it to be "*Come wake me up*" by Rascal Flatts.

Harper stretches onto her toes and whispers, "Dance with me?"

Normally I would say no, but looking at Harper's eyes, I find myself nodding. "Yes."

She grins, taking my hand and leading me to the dance floor where most of my friends already are. Riley and Mia are near to the stage, their faces close together, smiling as they giggle. My heart warms at the sight of my twin being happy. Ava and Conner are in the center of the crowd, Ava's head resting on Conner's chest, her eyes closed, content with a smile on her lips.

Whereas Logan sits perched at the bar with a beer as he watches us all, a look of sad longing in his eyes, and Lucy stands at the other end of the bar now, her eyes equally sad but looking at Logan.

Oh no, I was worried about that.

But I don't allow myself to think about it for too long. Instead, I take my woman in my arms and hold her tight, enjoying this moment as I move us around the dance floor to the music, everything feeling right in that moment. So right that the words slip out before I can stop them. "I love you, Harper."

Her eyes widen slightly and I hold my breath until her face shifts into a big smile, her eyes watering slightly as she says in a breathy reply, "I love you too, Hunter. So much."

Her hand moves through my hair at the back of my head, pulling me down to her until her mouth is on mine in a sweet and gentle kiss.

We dance for two more songs before we are both exhausted and I ask if she wants a drink. She nods and I leave her to head to the bar for something to refresh us.

I order us two waters because we've both decided not to drink tonight. I haven't had anything since the accident and she's decided to do the same. I suspect it is for me, but she denies it. The owner, Danny, leaves to get our waters when a someone pops up beside me.

"How's the big guy?" Hadley says beside me, her words slurred slightly to show that she may have had some drinks tonight, but not enough to be drunk off of her mind yet.

I give her a smile. "Happy."

She smiles in return. "I'm happy for you, for both of you. I suspect it was a long time coming, with your accident and her job offer that's been bothering her lately, but I'm so glad everything has turned out."

She smacks a hand on my shoulder and my eyes widen at something she said, an anxious and nauseous feeling taking root in my stomach as I turn to look at my friend just as Danny places the drinks in front of me before leaving to serve other customers.

"What job offer?"

I watch as realization hits and her eyes widen in panic before she slaps a hand over her mouth, cursing, "Shit!"

I ask again, “What job offer?”

Hadley looks between myself and the dance floor, indecision on her face until she finally sighs in resignation. “It’s nothing.”

“Let me decide that,” I tell her and brace myself.

“Harper had a job offer from Australia. She was given time off to come home, but she has to give her final decision soon.”

My stomach sinks. She hasn’t decided yet and she had this offer and didn’t even tell me. Is it because she knew she was taking it or...

A war of emotions take over my body, the ache building in my chest becoming unbearable as Hadley stammers out, “No, she’s made her decision to stay, for you. She just hasn’t told her boss yet because—”

I leave before she can finish, having trouble breathing. I need air, because there is not enough in here. I push past Hadley, hearing her curse again as I leave the bar.

The cold night air hits me and I suck in a breath, my body shaking as I think of all those moments with Harper when she could have told me and chose not to. Was she not sure? If she wasn’t, why not reject the offer? For me, Hadley said. Harper’s rejecting it for me? My heart aches for a different reason now. I never wanted to hold her back. This is an opportunity and if I am the only reason she is not taking it—

“Hunter?” My back stiffens at the sound of Harper’s voice as she comes out of the bar. “What are you doing out here?”

“Do you have a job offer from Australia?” I ask, not turning around yet.

The silence that meets me is answer enough, and I close my eyes against the ache growing in my chest.

“I wasn’t going to take it. I’m *not* going to take it,” she says, her voice shaking and desperate. I turn around and see the fear in her eyes looking back at me.

I force the words out. “Why? Why are you saying no?”

“Because of you, of *us*.” I wince against her words. I should be happy about that. I should be happy she is choosing me, but I also don’t wanna be the thing holding her back. My heart breaks at the thought of her not living her life because of me. I almost ruined things for her before, but now as I stand here, knowing how much I love her, I know I would do anything to make sure that she lives the life she deserves, and that includes getting her dream job. I won’t be in the way of that.

I swallow, trying to suppress the pain, but I still feel it burning in my chest. “Is that it?”

“Hunter, I have a life here.”

“You could have a life there, too,” I tell her, my voice breaking as I say it, and watch as her shoulders stiffen and her brows furrow.

“Do you want me to go?” Her voice is only a broken whisper, but I hear it, I hear how much I’m hurting her as I say these words, after just saying that I loved her. And I do, which is why I’m making sure she gets everything she deserves.

I almost think I can’t get the word out, but I say through gritted teeth. “Yes.”

Her face almost crumbles, tears welling in her eyes as a mix of sadness and anger looks back at me. “No.”

“No?”

“No.” She shakes her head, storming up to me and getting in my face with a look of anger and pain and frustration. “I’m not letting you do this to me again. I love you.” She takes my hand in hers, and I almost groan in pain as I pull away.

“Be smart, Harper,” I say in a calm tone before I start to lie. “Who’s to say we will last?” She flinches as my words and I continue. “This is an opportunity that doesn’t come around often, and are you really stupid enough to let that go for me? For a fuck?”

She flinches again, and I watch as the tears start to roll down her cheeks, a broken expression looking back at me. “But I love you.”

I clench my fists at my sides to keep myself from holding her and wiping away the tears, the tears that I was causing. “Sometimes love just isn’t enough.”

The anger returns. “So that’s it then? You hear about this job that I wasn’t even going to take and you’re just pushing me away? Again?”

“We wouldn’t have worked out anyway. Look at our track record.” I barely control the tremble in my voice.

“You don’t even want to try?”

I force myself to meet her eyes and steel my jaw. “No point,” I say before turning on my heel and forcing my feet to carry forward, not knowing where I was going, but knowing that I needed to leave before my own tears fall.

Last time, I didn’t do right by her. I didn’t support her but pushed her away for my own selfish reasons. I pushed everyone away. But when you really love someone, you want them to be happy and have the world, even if that means giving them up so they will take it.

I never want her to resent me, and now she will be given the opportunity she deserves.

That’s what love is: Sacrifice.

CHAPTER 33



HUNTER

I spent the rest of the weekend in bed, only getting up to use the bathroom. Hadley and Logan dropped food off by my bed to make sure that I ate, and just like that, I am back in that place of being taken care of by my friends again.

I had wanted to avoid it, but I also couldn't get up. I didn't want to see the pity in their eyes. I already felt like shit. I already worried that I would regret my decision, but I know, deep down, that I am doing the right thing.

My room is submerged in darkness, and I let the darkness take me until the next morning when Hadley busts into my room, throwing open the window and letting some sunlight in. I cry out against the light, but Hadley just reminds me of my shift at the center. Reminds me of Lucas.

A part of me considers staying here and pretending like the outside world doesn't exist, but picturing Lucas, I know I have to be there. I can't let him down, even if it feels like I'm broken on the inside.

I curse and get myself dressed for Hadley to drop me off. Thankfully, we drive in blessed silence for a good five minutes until Hadley sighs from the driver's side. "Are we not going to talk about—"

"No," I say, not looking at her. I'm not angry at her, but I also don't want to talk about something I can't change.

"I think it would be good—"

“I said no, Hadley.” Still not looking at her, I cross my arms over my chest and try to avoid the clench in my heart at the possibility of Harper being there and working with her.

Hadley says nothing for the rest of the trip, but the worry is thick in the cab, so thick that I let out a relieved breath when she pulls up outside, and I eagerly hop out.

“Hunter!” Hadley calls out as I shoulder my bag and turn and give her a look, waiting. “Call me if you... need to leave.”

Warmth spreads in my chest at her gesture, but I can’t do that to the kids, even though a part of me really wants to. I just need to make it through today.

With a nod to Hadley, I suck in a break and turn to make my way inside like any other day, but it’s not. I can tell from the moment I step foot into the lobby and am met with Pepper’s kind and sad eyes looking at me as I pass.

“Oh hun, how are you dealing with everything?” I blink at Pepper’s question, surprised at her finding out about Harper and I so quickly.

“Um, I’ll be okay.”

“We’ll miss her, though.” My body stiffens at her words, grimacing as I focus on Pepper.

“What are you talking about?”

Pepper’s mouth opens and closes, her brow creasing as I feel my stomach sink. “Harper’s leaving.” I keep my face composed as she continues. “Today is her last day. Turns out, she got a job in Australia and they want her ASAP.”

I swallow against the ache stabbing me in the chest. This was what I wanted, but I would be lying if I said it didn’t hurt that she is so quick to leave. I thought she would fight more, but I guess this makes it easier to let her go. It should, at least.

I nod, my face expressionless under Pepper’s gaze. “Wow, such a big opportunity.”

Pepper’s frown deepens. “Hun, are you all right? I know that you and her were close.”

I force a tight smile that doesn't meet my eyes. "No, I'm happy for her. It's what she's always wanted."

Before anything else can be said, I pull my bag higher on my shoulder and walk past Pepper, eyes focused straight ahead, ignoring the inner voices telling me to run and hide under the covers until the pain goes away. Who knew letting her go the second time was going to be *worse* than the first?

Looking at the time, I drop my things, cursing being late. I throw my things in my designated locker and run out to the main floor. I don't see either Harper or Lucas. Frowning, I decide to run and check the baseball room.

I run and stop in the doorway, my heart sinking as I look down at the boy sitting on the floor, leaning his back against the wall, his eyes vacant and looking straight ahead. I take a breath before walking into the room, but Lucas doesn't even look at me. "Hey, Lucas, sorry I was late."

"Harper's looking for you," he says simply, no expression on his face.

"I must have missed her." I go to crouch down to Lucas, hoping to get him to look at me. "Lucas, look, I'm sorry."

"You were late. Our sessions start at 9:00, it is 9:15," Lucas says, his words getting a little louder and more forceful. I can tell that he is upset, and I feel the weight of his disappointment on my chest, making it hard to breathe. It's similar to the crushing loneliness I'll feel when Harper goes, knowing she will find happiness without me. It hurts so much, but I have to do it.

My skin is feeling too tight, and I run a hand through my hair, trying to reach Lucas with my words. "I know, I know that it starts at 9:00, but—"

"You were still late."

"I know I was late!" I shout so loud the kid jumps in his place on the floor, still not looking at me. "But you know what, kid? Life happens. People are late and people *leave*! You've just gotta learn to deal with that!"

By the time I've stopped shouting, Lucas has broken into full freak-out mode, squeezing his eyes shut and gritting his teeth as his hands cover his ears against my yelling. Before me is no longer the cool kid who talked passionately about baseball, but instead a kid that I made crumble. When the silence hits me, so does the pain of what I have done. I've hurt the kid, something I never wanted to do, never thought I would do.

You've done it again.

You always hurt and always destroy. Maybe it's a good thing Harper is leaving, then she won't have to put up with your shit.

"What have you done?" I blink as the sweet, familiar sound of Harper's voice fills the tense and quiet space. I rise from my crouch beside Lucas and step away to allow Harper to reach him. She does not touch him, but merely whispers calming words into his ear, shooting daggers at me the whole time.

I know I've screwed up big time.

Harper continues to whisper to Lucas, but there is no reaching him right now, so with her jaw tensed in anger, she rises and pulls me aside by the arm before hissing at me, "What is wrong with you?"

I swallow, unable to speak, because what could I say? I fucked up and now looking at Lucas and what I've done makes me feel sick.

"Being mad at me is one thing, but don't you dare take it out on a child, especially not Lucas. He trusted you, which is not easy for him, and you probably just broke that. Lucas is not a kid you can yell at, that is not how you get through to him, and you know that."

"I know," I tell her, running my hand through my hair again. "I fucked up."

"Well, you can't fuck up with these kids. They need kindness and patience. If you don't have that, maybe you should leave."

“I made a mistake,” I tell her through gritted teeth, hating the growing pain in my chest, made worse by her driving the knife in and twisting. “I am human, just like you, and it is unfair that you expect me to be anything else. I’m going to be upset, and yes, I handled it badly, and I’m sorry for that.”

She’s breathing heavy and regarding me with a thoughtful expression when I realize that I cannot do this. I cannot be here with her like it is any other day. I cannot be my best self for the kids like this. I need a day or two because I cannot breathe being in Harper’s presence, knowing that time is limited and it is because of that reason I walk out.

She calls my name, but doesn’t follow me. I feel like shit for leaving her and Lucas, but I know it is for the best. I do not want to yell at Lucas again. Never. So I grab my things and tell Pepper on my way out that I’m not feeling well and taking the day off and that Harper has the kids for the day.

I feel like a dick, and know I don’t want to go home. I don’t want to go to a place where I had laid with Harper and saw her smile and heard her laugh. I need an escape so I make my way down the street.

I continue to walk, not knowing where I’m going or what I’m looking for, until I come across a little bar, similar to *Danny’s*, but more like a dive. It’ll do.

I make my way in and plop myself on the barstool, the pain in my chest becoming so unbearable that I almost wince when the bartender reaches me. I look beyond his head at the line of booze, and I know I shouldn’t. I don’t want to go back there, but maybe just one drink to help me relax and sleep the day away. Yes, one drink, and then I’ll leave.

ONE DRINK TURNS INTO SEVERAL, and before I know it, I’m slumped over the bar with a dazed look on my face, but the voices in my head have quieted. Each drink chased them away, and I have quickly lost track of time.

A glance outside shows a dark night sky. *Wow, I guess I should head home*, I think to myself before ordering another

drink.

“Don’t you think you’ve had enough.” I frown as I sway on my barstool to look over my shoulder, surprised to see Logan looking back at me with a face of disapproval.

Not in the mood for his antics, I turn back around and take my drink, ready to sip it, only to have it yanked out of my hands. “Hey!”

Logan holds the glass away from me, his face serious, which isn’t very Logan. “I said, you’ve had enough.”

I scoff. “Fuck off.”

“Real intelligent, now let’s go home. We’ve been worried.”

I give Logan a drunken smile, embracing how numb it’s making me at the moment. “I’m fine. No need to be worried.”

“Well, too bad, because we are. You’re not doing this to yourself again.”

I shrug. “It’s just one night. I’ve had a bad day, so I think I deserve it.”

This time, Logan scoffs. “Yeah, I’ve heard that before. Remember, I was the one to put you to bed last time, and made sure you had a bucket by your bed in case you were sick. I was the one who had to watch you destroy yourself, and I’m not doing it again.”

“It’s one night, Logan.”

He shakes his head. “No, not this time. Look at you, man. Harper called us and told us about the kid.”

I harden myself against the ache that’s started to leak through my haze at the memory, and I feel the urge to ask for another drink when Logan continues to speak. “We know you love the kid and you don’t want Harper to go, so why punish yourself by pushing her and everyone away?”

“I’m not punishing myself.”

“Yes, you are. You have a woman who loves you and wants to be with you. You have no idea how lucky you are to have that. Man, I wish a woman who would look at me the

way Harper looks at you, but I'm either a convenient lay or a joke to most women. You have it all, and you're throwing it away."

I clench my fists, not wanting to deal with this right now, the pain too great. "Logan, just don't," I warn, not looking at him now.

"No! I'm not letting you do this to yourself. If you want to wallow in your room, that is fine, but I won't let you drink your life away again. I thought I lost my best friend last time, and I won't lose him again. I love you, man, and you have so many people who love you. Are they not enough for you?"

My chest aches for a different reason now. I know the truth in his words, and I bite my lip against the tears that want to fall. Of course they are enough, but the pain is still there. Maybe it will always be there, but do I really want to punish my friends and sister again? No, but how can I make it through this?

Logan's voice is soft as he says, "I'm not leaving here without you, so you might as well come with me. We don't even have to talk, we can just sit and take our frustration out on some video games. I can leave you alone in your room, if you want, but if you want to talk, I'm here."

I nod, pushing against the voice telling me to get another drink and allow my friend to lead me out, my arm slung over his shoulder to help steady me. I know that I am not alone. I am in pain, but not alone.

"I love you too, bro," I slur, making Logan chuckle.

"I'm sure that is the booze talking, and I will definitely hold it over your head."

CHAPTER 34



“*I*’m gonna miss you, kiddo,” Aunt Maggie says as she sits on my bed, helping me fold my clothes and put them in my suitcase.

I leave tomorrow, and I know I should have been more prepared and packed by now, but I guess a part of me doesn’t want to leave. Pretty much all of me doesn’t want to leave, but if staying here means feeling the pain of Hunter pushing me away or moving on to someone else, I’d rather not be here for it.

I’ll miss everyone, and it hurts to think of the lonely nights I have ahead, but I cannot stay. Hunter is right; this is an opportunity, and I don’t know if Hunter and I would last, but it breaks my heart that he wasn’t willing to try. Like I wasn’t worth trying for.

And everything that happened with Lucas yesterday...

I give my aunt a small smile that doesn’t reach my eyes and she gives a sigh. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

I look at her, holding a shirt in my hands as I think before answering. “This is a great opportunity.”

“Yes, so why aren’t you happy?”

I shrug. “Maybe I’m just nervous.”

I continue packing, but feel her eyes watching me, always seeing and always knowing. “Is that it?”

“What else could it be?” I ask, stuffing more clothes in my suitcase.

“What about a tall, blonde, muscular man who has his eye on you?”

I grit my teeth against the pain, thinking of him. “I told you. We broke up.”

“And now you are running.”

I scoff. “I’m not running.”

“Oh, honey, I know running and this”—she points to me and my suitcase—“is running, but sweetheart, you can’t run from this. It’ll follow you and haunt you. It’ll infect every relationship you have in the future. I know.”

Looking at her now, I see for the first time the same pain I’ve been through, like looking in a mirror. She sighs, staring down at her hands. “Before you were born, I was in love. I was young as well. I had gone to England over the summer, and I had a little fling.” She looks off in the distance, lost in the memories, her eyes dreamy. “We spent every day together and he was my first for a lot of things.” She blushes, looking down at her lap with a little smile, before looking back up at me, “But I had a choice to make. Come back home, where I would go to college and do everything I was supposed to do, or stay with him.”

“You came back home,” I say, already knowing, and she gives a sad smile, nodding.

“Yes. It was the safer option because I didn’t know if we would last long term, and I was too scared to try. So I left. I never spoke to him again because it hurt too much, but each day I wonder where he is and if he’s happy. Each day I wonder what could have been if I didn’t make the *safe* choice. Of course I don’t regret it because I have you, but I wonder...” She gets lost in the memories again and my heart breaks for my aunt. “Anyway, what I’m trying to say is, make sure you’re doing what *you* want to do. Don’t think about if it is the safe choice, or if you will last. Sometimes love needs to be reckless.”

I bite my lip to keep my own tears at bay, nodding and taking in her words, but I school my features as I tell her, “It

wasn't my decision. Hunter made the choice. I'm just respecting it."

I continue to pack and feel my aunt's watchful eyes the entire time and know that I will always think of Hunter, but hope that time is kind and allows me to move on.

A small part of me knows I won't, though, but what choice do I have?

CHAPTER 35



HUNTER

Today is the day.

I've migrated from the bedroom to the living room, the TV playing a show I don't know, but it breaks up the silence. I cannot handle the silence today, the day Harper leaves. I look down at my phone and read the time, my stomach sinking as I realize that Harper will be at the airport now.

Mia told me what time her plane is. Everyone has gone to see her off, everyone but me.

I couldn't do it again, knowing that she won't be coming back, and it's all because of me.

I sit here until the front door opens and a chorus of footsteps enter the house, my friends all gathering into the living room with me.

Conner and Ava hand in hand, with looks of sadness aimed at me, Logan with his hands tucked into the pockets of his jeans, his brows furrowed, Riley holds Charlie in his arms and shakes his head, while Hadley and Mia both stand with their arms crossed over their chests and their lips turned down in anger.

I roll my eyes, not wanting to deal with this right now. "What?"

Mia drops her arms. "Don't *what* me. Are you seriously just letting her go?"

"It's what's best."

Mia scoffs. “Says who? Did you even give her a choice?”

I narrow my eyes at her. “Just stay out of it, Mia.”

“So what now? You gonna push me away again too? We just got you back, we *all* just got you back, and we don’t want to watch you decline again.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “I won’t. I’ll be fine.”

“Really? Is that why you haven’t been back to the center? Harper called me. You really gonna let these kids down?”

My muscles get tighter and my irritation grows as doubt and fear starts filling my head. I shake my head to ignore it, knowing I am doing what is right for Harper and the kids as I rise from the couch and push past my friends to get to the kitchen, grumbling, “I said stay out of it, Mia.”

I hear Mia follow me, and I rest my hands on the counter. “Why?! Just tell me why?”

I spin on my heel and finally face her as I yell, “Because I don’t wanna do that to her, hold her back! I don’t wanna be the thing that holds her back. I don’t wanna be a regret. I don’t wanna look into her eyes one day and see resentment.”

Mia’s eyes soften. “Did it ever occur to you that living without you will be a bigger regret for her? Take it from me. I thought I lost you and I didn’t know if you were ever gonna speak to me again. Don’t you get it? Living without you is the regret!”

I watch as tears build up in her eyes as Riley comes up behind her, resting his free hand on her shoulder as a sign that he is there if she needs it, and it makes me happy she has that.

I stand there, looking at everyone in the kitchen, my friends, my family as I whisper, “I’m scared.”

“That’s okay. We’ve all been scared.” She gestures to our friends behind her. Ava, Conner, and Riley all nod, their eyes kind. “But think about it. Can you go on thinking about Harper being with someone else.”

The thought kills me, but I answer honestly with my voice weak, “If she was happy, yes.”

Mia raises a brow. “She was happy with you, you idiot.”

Hadley steps forward. “She didn’t want the job. She felt like she had to take it, but she *chose* you instead. I was there when she made that decision.”

The fear is still there and Mia sighs, stepping forward and taking my hand in hers. “Don’t be a martyr, Hunter. It doesn’t make you a bad person if you want her to stay. It’s what she’s always wanted from you, so are you really going to let her go and make you *both* miserable?”

“What if this ruins her life?” The question makes everyone laugh, and Mia shakes her head.

“I think you and I both know that will only happen if she gets on that plane.”

I look at my family, squeezing my sister’s hand, and try to push down some of the fear in my chest. “But she’s already at the airport. I won’t make it, I don’t have a ticket—”

“Got it!” Logan says with a grin, holding up his phone. “You’re booked into the same flight, so how about we get in the car and get your girl.”

I furrow my brow. “You didn’t need to do that.”

Logan waves his hands at me dismissively. “Don’t sweat it, let’s just get moving.”

“I’ll stay here with Charlie,” Riley says, and Mia smiles at me.

“You need to do this. We’ll stay here.”

“We’ll drive you,” Conner volunteers, squeezing his new wife, Ava, to his side.

My heart melts at the kindness and generosity of the people around me, and I know what I need to do. I’m terrified of what will happen, but right now, I’m even more terrified of Harper getting on that plane.

CONNOR AND AVA pull up outside the entrance, and I hop out before they stop the car, sprinting through the airport, seeing

time ticking down as I check in and make my way through security. My legs won't move fast enough, time is moving too fast. I run through the airport, pushing past groups of people and luggage until I finally see Harper's boarding platform, and lining up to hand their ticket over and leave me forever, is Harper.

Her bag is propped on her shoulder and her hair is down in gentle waves, dressed in a pair of jeans and red sweater, her head down as she progresses in the line.

I want badly to run to her and grab her and tell I'm sorry, but instead I stay there and yell, wanting to see if I still have a chance, wanting to see if I'm still in her heart. "Harper!"

Everyone looks at me, but my eyes are focused on Harper as her back stiffens and she slowly turns around to see me, her brow furrowed until her eyes turn sad as they meet mine.

I open my mouth to speak, but I don't know what to say. We just stand there, looking at each other until she drops her bag by her feet and proceeds to walk toward me, her steps slow as first until they start to pick up speed the closer she gets. And the closer she gets, the easier it gets for me to breathe, the more I can see the sadness shift from her eyes to a look of relief. She cries out a second before she reaches me, throwing her arms around my neck and me pulling her so close that I can feel every curve of her body. It feels like home. I wrap my arms around her and breathe in the scent of her hair as I hold her to me.

"I'm so sorry," I say into her hair and she pulls back enough to look at me, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Don't be sorry." She shakes her head, and I lift my hands to cup her cheeks, holding her there and forcing her to look me in the eye, making sure she can hear me.

"Stay. Stay with me, baby. I know that is selfish, and I know the future is uncertain, but I can't have a future without you. You are my future, Harper."

She laughs through her tears and holds my hands to her face. "I want you to be selfish. Please be selfish with me."

I rest my forehead against hers as I beg, “Please stay. Don’t get on that plane. If you do, I’ll go with you. I don’t care, but I just need to be with you.”

Her breath hitches and she pulls away to look at me. “My home is here, with you. All I’ve ever wanted from you is for you to tell me to stay, to tell me that you wanted me.”

I hold her to me again. “God, I’ve always wanted you, baby. I’ll never stop wanting you.”

She laughs again against my shoulder. “Then I guess you’re stuck with me.”

We pull back and look at each other. “No other place I’d rather be. Now give me those lips.”

I love the little moan that slips as her lips touch mine in a passionate and desperate kiss, so full of promise and a happy future.

CHAPTER 36



HUNTER

The Uber pulls up outside of Danny's bar, where the guys texted and told us to meet them. Harper and I have been grinning and kissing since we left the airport, not wanting to take our eyes off of each other out of fear this isn't real and she really is gone.

Going to the airport, I was terrified, but now, with Harper sitting beside me, the fear is gone and it all just feels right.

We thank the Uber driver and walk hand in hand toward the entrance of *Danny's*.

"Why did they want you to meet them here?" Harper asks, and I just shrug, not knowing myself.

We enter, and the space is dark. I consider texting everyone and asking what the hell is going on when the lights suddenly spring to life, momentarily blinding us as a chorus of cheers erupt.

Our eyes adjust to the light and we look around and see a rushed homemade banner along the back wall over the booths reading 'Welcome home, Harper!' and our friends gathered in front of us, holding glasses up in cheers and grinning like mad.

Harper holds her hands up to her mouth in shock, and I'm stuck blinking, still processing what everyone has done. Harper laughs. "Oh my, guys, I didn't go anywhere yet."

Mia shrugs. "Yeah, but we wanted you to know, in case you forgot, that your home is here with us and that we love you." Mia looks at both of us. "Both of you."

We both shake our heads. “You didn’t have to do this.”

Mia and Ava grin at each other. “We didn’t have to, but we wanted to. Now how about we have some drinks and celebrate Harper’s homecoming!”

A chorus of cheers erupt around us again, and I take Harper into my arms and lift her up in a big hug, needing to feel her as our friends gather and laugh.

I put Harper down as a figure comes up beside us and we turn to see Hadley looking apologetic. “Look, I’m sorry I said anything to you, Hunter. I was drunk and I wasn’t thinking—”

I hold my hand up to my new friend. “Don’t worry about it. We all do some silly things while drunk,” I say, looking at Harper pointedly as I refer to our first time meeting, and she drops her jaw and shoves me off her playfully.

“Jackass.” Shaking her head, she turns to Hadley. “Seriously, it’s fine. I’d actually like to thank you for being there for me lately and listening.”

Hadley gives her a small smile and nods. “Anytime.”

“Who are you, sweetheart? And how have I never seen you before?” Travis, one of the bartenders here and one of Mia’s friends, says flirtatiously, throwing an arm over Hadley’s shoulder, giving her with a heated look.

Hadley looks at him and scoffs. “Not a chance in hell.” Elbowing him in the ribs, she saunters off, winking at us as she does.

Travis rubs his ribs and watches after her, and I know he ain’t giving up that easily. *Poor guy*, I think as he goes back to the bar, leaving Harper and I together.

Harper looks at me with a flirty smile, her eyes running up and down my body, setting all my nerves on fire as she throws her arms around me, rising on her toes and whispering in my ear, “You wanna help me fulfill my fantasy?” She pulls back to look me in the eye with a raised brow, questioning, and my mind flashes back to when she told me her desire to be fucked against a wall. “I think they have a closet somewhere.”

I grab her hand and pull her through the bar in search of a closet before she even finishes her sentence, her chuckle following me, and I am unable to keep the smile off my face.

Because this is it. This is home, with her.

EPILOGUE



It's my first day back at the center, and I'm thankful they wanted me back. After deciding to stay, I had to eventually call Evalyn and tell her that I was not taking the job. She was not happy that I dragged her on this whole time, which I understood. I know I won't be getting any work there ever again, but it's fine. There will be plenty of opportunities. Besides, the way things are going, it might benefit me to try freelance after graduation if no jobs pop up.

I kept waiting for the regret to come up, but it never happened. I bounced into the center with a beaming smile, excited to see Lucas and all the kids again. It's also a benefit that I get to work with my new boyfriend as well.

My smile grows as I pass Pepper, who gives me a big hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Oh, hun! I'm so happy you're back!"

"I never left," I remind her with a laugh, but I understand. I'm happy to be back too because this is home.

She pulls back and winks. "Your man's in there waiting for you."

I can't help but blush as I leave and drop my things off in my locker before heading out to the main floor. My chest warms at the sight of Lucas smiling at Hunter as they sit side by side, looking at something between them. I'm so happy that Lucas is looking at Hunter again. After the outburst, I had worried Lucas would lose his trust, but luckily, he appears to be fine.

I walk up to them just in time for Lucas's eyes to light up at me as he jumps up to his feet and trots closer, holding something in his hands. "Harper! Look at this! Look what Hunter got back for me!"

I look down and my jaw drops as I see baseball cards in his hands. My eyes widen as I look up to see Hunter, now standing and making his way over to us, his hands tucked into his jeans as a look of pride appears on his face. "You got his baseball cards back?"

Hunter shrugs, and I bite my lip to keep from crying tears of joy at the man before me, the man with such a big heart.

"How did you get them back?"

Hunter shrugs again. "Magic?"

"Thank you, Hunter!" Lucas is jumping with the cards still in his hands when he suddenly wraps his skinny arms around Hunter's middle. Time freezes, and we both gasp in surprise as we gape down at the boy, who refused to be touched, now hugging Hunter.

Hunter's eyes are wide and his body stiff and unmoving, as if afraid to spook Lucas if he moves or hugs him back. Hunter just stands there with a look of awe on his face and I can no longer hold back the tears. One rolls down my face as I realize what a mistake it would have been to leave and miss this opportunity before me.

Lucas pulls back as if nothing's happened and exclaims happily, "Well, let's get started!"

Before waiting for us, he runs toward the hallway where the baseball room is, and we are both speechless in his wake.

"Did that just happen?" Hunter gasps, pointing to where the kid just ran to, and I smile.

"It did. I guess you got his trust back."

Hunter smiles at that as we follow Lucas, ready for another good day, but I can't help but ask, "You never answered the question. How did you get those cards back?"

Hunter gives a wolfish grin. “It’s probably best I don’t tell you.”

“Oh no, you didn’t hurt the kid?”

Hunter laughs. “No, but he will be thinking twice before messing with our boy.”

“You scared him, didn’t you?”

He grins again, which is answer enough, but I can’t be mad because that is Hunter. He will do anything to protect those he loves, even if he risks himself. And let’s be honest, I would have done the same if I could.

I laugh, shaking my head as we reach the baseball room. “What am I going to do with you?”

“I can think of several things.” Hunter says with his deep and flirty voice before pinching my behind, making me squeal in surprise, and I am all too excited about everything to come in my life, in my future.

HOOKING UP WITH MR WRONG

Continue to check out the first chapter of Book One ...

CHAPTER 1



August 2019
Freshman Year

*F*uck me!

I've been reading the same line over and over from this stupid book, so many times that Heathcliff's words will be forever burned in my brain. I had wanted to make a good impression on my professors by getting started with the reading list early, but it's hard to focus when I've got Rhianna blasting through my walls, thanks to my inconsiderate neighbor.

Go to college, everyone said. It'll be fun, everyone said. It'll be a fucking experience! Well, right now, I might as well be at home for all the education I'm getting at the moment.

But my little sister Lucy kept pushing the issue... and now here I am.

I let out a breath of relief when I finally hear Rhianna start to die down, only for my muscles to start bunching up in irritation again when Drake starts to play.

I groan, not knowing whether I want to scream or cry when I plop my head, facedown, on the book I'm trying to read. I'm lucky enough to get a single dorm room, thinking I would be left alone to do my studying in peace, that and my best friend Mia decided that she didn't need to follow the rules

by living in a dorm our first year, but instead got her parents to insist she live off campus in a nice place provided by them.

Too bad she couldn't let me come with.

My head pops up at the sound of my phone vibrating, somehow able to hear it through the noise. Mia, speak of the devil, I think as I answer the phone, running my fingers through the mass of dark brown hair on my head and start to rise from my chair to pace around the small dorm room.

“Hey, bitch.”

“Hey to you too.” I can't help the small smile from peeking through my mask of anger. She always has this effect, ever since first grade when she punched Tommy Hollis for calling me ugly. Then I proceeded to fight *her* for standing up for me when I can stand up for myself.

We've been friends ever since.

“What's up? You sound tense.”

I glare at the wall where the music is coming from. “I'm surprised you can't hear it.”

“Hear what?”

“I still don't know why I can't just stay with you.”

She sighs. “Because my parents are douchebags. We both know this. The condition of getting my own place is that it is just me. *I'm not paying for your freeloading friends, Mia!* Like I said, douchebags.”

I can almost hear her shrug and I want to hug her. She's always had problems with her parents, specifically her mother, but at the same time, I know she wants their approval, even if that means she doesn't get a say. I wish I could talk to her but she just clams up when I talk about it. So, I do all I can, be there for her.

There is a long pause before she says, “Do you want me to come over?”

“No, I'm actually going to—more Drake?! Really?!” I shout at the wall when another Drake song starts to play.

“What?”

“Oh, it’s just my stupid neighbor. They’ve been playing Drake songs at full volume and I can’t concentrate.”

“What did Drake ever do to you?” She laughs, and I turn my glare to the phone.

“I appreciate music as much as the next person, but to play it that loud is rude.”

“I know, how dare they not invite you.” Mia continues to laugh at my expense.

“Ha ha, easy for you to laugh when you are in your quiet apartment.”

She finally stops laughing long enough to say, “Look, Ava, if it’s bothering you that much, just talk to them or get your RA.”

“I’m not getting my RA. That will classify me as a snitch in the dorm.”

She sighs. “Well, I guess you have to deal with it then, princess.”

I roll my eyes. “Thanks for your help.”

“I love you!”

“I love you too,” I grumble before hanging up and throwing the phone on my bed just as the music gets a bit louder.

Did that fucker turn the music up?

The sudden pounding in my head answers that question and I growl, “No fucking way.” A second later I storm out of my dorm room in my boxer shorts with little lambs on them and my white tank top, my hair in a messy pile on my head.

I storm out of my room and proceed to bang on my obnoxious neighbor’s door with a closed fist until it suddenly swings open to reveal a pair of the bluest eyes I’ve ever seen.

The boy in front of me looks down at me, taking in my attire before I watch his eyebrows kick up to his dark hairline.

“Can I help you?”

I blink, looking beyond his broad shoulders to see the mass of people laughing and dancing in the small space behind him, with red Solo cups in their hands.

He’s having a party?!

He looks at me expectantly, like I’m the rude one interrupting his *party*.

I throw my hand out to the scene behind him, scoffing, “Seriously?!”

He frowns, looking back at the party before looking back at me, still confused. “Did you want to come in? I mean, you’re not exactly dressed for the occasion but I’m diggin’ it.”

I scoff again, my jaw hanging open at how ignorant this guy is, or maybe he just doesn’t care. Every part of me wants to punch one of those blue eyes, but he is not worth me getting in shit, so I take a deep, calming breath and say in the most relaxed way I can, “No, I don’t want to come in because I am trying to study and it’s kind of hard to do that when you’re playing your music so loud.” My words almost turn into a growl near the end despite the smile I try to hold in place.

He just stands there, taking me in again before a small smile curves one side of his mouth. “You’re a little firecracker, aren’t you?”

I blink, unsure if I heard him correctly. “Excuse me?”

“You wear these cute fuzzy PJ’s but underneath it, you’re a fiery one.”

I clench my jaw, already feeling him poke at me. “Only when someone plays music so loud it vibrates my walls.”

“You can request a song if you don’t like what we are playing.”

“I don’t want to request a song; I want silence so I can study.”

“You are aware it’s only the first week, right?”

“And unlike you, I care about my education,” I snap before spinning on my heels to leave because it’s obvious I’m not getting anywhere.

I feel him follow me to my door.

“Hey! That’s a pretty big assumption to make when you’ve only just met me.” He stops just before my door, crossing his arms over his massive chest and making the T-shirt he’s wearing stretch over his broad shoulders. I make sure not to stare too long and instead focus my glare on him.

“And so far, I’m not impressed. You are loud, obnoxious, ignorant, and rude.”

It’s his turn to scoff. “I’m rude? You’re rude, stuck up, mean, and a prude.”

“A prude?”

“You seem like you would be one.”

“That’s a pretty big assumption there, buddy.” I step into his space, poking his firm chest with each word, until a sly smile appears on his face.

“Are you going to prove otherwise?” He raises a brow in challenge and I hate that my lack of experience is so obvious to him when I feel my cheeks redden, and I hate that he is now using it against me.

I open my mouth and close it, unsure of how to respond. I could slap him but, again, didn’t want to get in trouble. I could tell him to fuck off but that would only show how much he’s getting to me.

Before I can even respond, his smile turns smug as he steps back. “That’s what I thought.” He starts to walk back to his party, the music spilling out into the hall when he opens the door. “You’re welcome over any time, little lamb.”

I look back down at my lamb boxers when I hear his door close, the music still blasting through, and I know there is only one way I’m going to sleep tonight.

It’s time I go into ‘snitch’ territory.

I'M NOT in bed for more than twenty minutes before there is a loud banging at my door. I groan and push myself up from the bed and make my way to the door, swinging it open to reveal a familiar pair of blue eyes glaring down at me as he rests his hands on both sides of my doorframe, his huge body taking up a majority of space in my doorway.

I blink and look up at him, loving the silence that surrounds us.

I cross my arms and lean on my doorframe, smiling a smug smile up at him. "Can I help you?"

"You called the RA."

Not a question because we both know I did, but that doesn't mean I'm going to admit it.

I shrug and blink up at him innocently. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"Bullshit. You complain about the party and the next thing I know, it's being shut down by a pissed-off RA."

"I am insulted that you would accuse me of such a thing."

"You are so full of shit. I know it was you."

"It could've been anyone on this floor. You were playing your music too loud."

He gives me a tense smile before he leans into me, until I can smell his woody scent. He smells like a nature walk, if that is possible. "This isn't over."

I raise my brows at him. "Excuse me?"

"You just started something, little lamb."

Just as he goes to walk away, I yell after him. "Stop calling me that."

"Sorry, but you didn't give me your name."

I growl before telling him, "Ava."

He smiles a mischievous smile that has me on edge as he backs into his room. “Conner. Until we meet again,” he says before closing his door and leaving me with an uneasy feeling that my life is not going to get much easier, and that I will most definitely see that guy again.

* * *

Weeks later

“WELL, I’VE HAD A GREAT TIME.” Vic, from my American Lit class, gives me a shy smile as he pulls his hands out of the pockets of his jeans.

I fumble with my room key, feeling the awkward silence almost smothering me as I give him my own shy smile. “Me too.”

“So, should we do it again?” He looks hopeful with his big brown eyes and I instantly feel the weight of my regret for saying yes to a date, but what do I do? He’s cute with floppy dark hair, big brown eyes and a lanky build. He’s not mouthwatering, but he’s cute, like a friend. I guess I’ve just read *Pride and Prejudice* too many times that all my heart wants is its own Mr. Darcy. Someone brooding and troubled, or maybe just someone who interests me. But alas, I have yet to find someone who lights my fire.

And unfortunately, that means a sad rejection for my friend here, but before I can even say a word, I distantly hear footsteps approaching behind me at the same time Vic’s smile is wiped from his face and his attention is somewhere behind me.

Feeling my muscles tense, I don’t need to look to know who it is.

The next second, he is beside me with a shit-eating grin. “Hey, little lamb.”

I growl through gritted teeth, feeling my back straighten at the little pet name I've acquired. "I've told you—" But before I can finish, he cuts in.

"Your mom called."

I blink, thinking I misheard him because I haven't heard from my mom since she left when I was a kid. "What?"

"Yeah, she wanted to check in to make sure you're taking your medication. You know how you get? She said you were supposed to pick up a new script."

I narrow my eyes, seeing the mischievous twinkle in his eyes as I hear Vic gasp. "Medication?"

Conner cocks his head at Vic, as if just realizing he's there. "Oh yeah, it's nothing. If she takes the medication, then she's fine. But remember that one time you didn't take it and then you ran naked through the—"

Both Vic's and my eyes widen and I resist the urge to slam my hand over Conner's mouth, but instead I say too loudly, "Thank you for the message but I think you can go now." I finish with a tight smile and a look promising death to Conner.

Conner looks back at Vic, before throwing an arm casually over my shoulder and nuzzling my head. "What are friends for, right?"

Conner grunts when I elbow him in the ribs, making him drop his arm from my shoulders as I turn my red face to an uncomfortable looking Vic, slowly backing away.

"I gotta go, Ava. But I'll see you in class."

Did I just get rejected by the guy I was going to reject? I guess I should be happy, I mean, now I don't have to do it. But now, he probably thinks I'm crazy or something thanks to the grinning fool beside me who I turn to glare at, waving my finger in his face. "I was on a date, you idiot!" I poke his firm chest so hard, it may leave a bruise but he doesn't react, just continues to smile his smug smile.

"Oh come on! You weren't really going to date that guy,"

I tilt my chin up to meet his eyes. "I might have."

“Please,” he scoffs. “Your keys kept inching toward your door, like all you wanted to do was to get away.” Fuck, was I that obvious? Oh well, I’m not letting him get to me. No way will I let on that he is right.

“And besides, if he’s that quick to walk away, I may have done you a favor,” he adds, and I don’t even want to argue because he’s kind of right. And I hate that. “All in the act of helping you.” He winks, giving me a proud smile before placing a hand on my shoulder in the act of comfort but I can smell the condescension a mile away.

So, I brush off his hand. “Do me a favor, and don’t help me,” I say before fumbling with my keys again and open my door to rid myself of this horror of a night.

As I close my door, I see Conner’s smug face as he sings, “You’re welcome.” And I slam it in his face.

“WHY ARE YOU LAUGHING? This is not funny,” I chastise Mia as she continues to laugh into the phone.

“Really, because it sounds funny.” She continues to laugh and I sigh, waiting for her to calm down before I can continue to tell her what happened last night after my date.

As she starts to get her breath back, I ask, “Are you done?”

“Oh come on, it’s not like you’re interested in Vic anyway.”

“That is exactly what Conner said. Am I really that obvious?”

“I don’t know about him, but I just know because the last relationship you had was... never.”

“I’m picky,” I exclaim into the phone.

“And there is nothing wrong with that, but maybe Conner did you a favor.” A point I already realize is true.

I grumble, throwing myself onto my bed with a flop. “That’s also what Conner said.”

“Sounds like Conner’s real smart.”

I roll my eyes, picturing his smug smile and twinkling blue eyes. “You wouldn’t think that if you met him.”

Mia sighs. “Do you want me to come over? We can watch *The Big Bang Theory*.”

Even though the idea is tempting, I know I have too much work to do and don’t want to stress about it later. I groan, “No, it’s fine. I got a lot of homework to do anyway.”

“All work. That’s why you are my Leonard.”

I smile a warm smile at our names for each other. “And you are my Penny.”

Now even though Penny and Leonard are romantically involved, Mia and I have always resonated with them. She is the hot blonde that can talk to anyone and I am the awkward smart one. Lucky me, but to have a friend like Mia, yeah, I’m pretty lucky.

* * *

One month later

THE AIR IS KNOCKED out of me as a heavy weight plops on top of me as I sleep.

“Holy shit!”

“What the fuck?”

My eyes spring open at the groggy but familiar voice as I twist at the waist, my legs getting more tangled in the blankets as I see through the darkness a pair of blue. Fucking. Eyes.

Conner’s eyes widen as he takes me in, surprise appearing on his face which makes no sense considering he is trespassing in my room.

I thought I locked the door, but obviously, I was too busy Skyping with my little sister Lucy to concentrate on basic security measures.

And now here we are.

But why is *he* here?

The scent of alcohol hitting my nose answers my question as I persist in pushing him off.

“Stop pushing me.” He grunts, still hovering over me, his weight pushing down on my lower body.

I continue to push. “What are you doing here? Get off!” I give him one good push that not only sends him sailing to the floor with a loud thump but me tumbling after him, landing with a hard hit to the side and my legs still in the blankets.

We both grunt on impact, slowly wiggling out of our cocoons to glare at each other. Well, I glare at him, he just stares groggily at me as he rubs a hand over his tired face.

He is drunk.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“Me? What are you doing here?!”

“It’s my room, you jackass.”

I can see a fight flaring up in his eyes but just as he opens his mouth, he quickly shuts it, finally noticing the girly shit and textbooks filling my room. “Oh.”

“Yeah, oh.”

“Sorry, I must’ve gotten our rooms confused. I had a bit too much to drink, obviously.” He gives me a drunken smile, still sitting by me on my floor, leaning back on his hands.

I raise a brow. “On a Tuesday night?”

“I was celebrating.”

“What?” I cock my head, genuinely curious as to what could be so amazing that he’d drink about it with class the next day.

His smile grows, and he lifts his arms, extending them out to his sides. “Being me.”

I roll my eyes, disappointed that I didn’t see it coming. “You are nauseating,” I tell him and finally manage to free my

legs enough to stand in my oversized T-shirt and my usual lamb boxers.

I notice Conner's smile when he sees them and I hate myself for even wearing them, but how was I supposed to know he would sneak attack me?

"And you would be really hot if you weren't so uptight," he tells me as he stands, a little shakier than me, and stretches his arms over his head enough to lift the bottom of his shirt to reveal a sliver of skin.

I mentally slap myself and blink, forcing my eyes to his just as he looks at me, finally recalling what he had just said. "What?"

"I'm just saying, you've got this whole hot, smart thing going. If you weren't so uptight, more guys may notice."

I roll my eyes, putting my hands on my hips. "Yes, because that is my life goal. To be noticed by a boy."

He raises his brows, catching the tone I am projecting and raises his hands in surrender. "I'm just saying," he says before walking away only to stop just as he reaches the door, turning back to me. "For the record, I like uptight." He gives me one final smile and wink before leaving me, fully awake and utterly annoyed at how much this guy thinks he's God's gift to women. He seriously thinks he can get away with murder. While the rest of us work our asses off.

This guy just drives me crazy.

* * *

Months later

Sophomore Year

THE SUN IS BEATING DOWN through the windshield of the U-Haul truck as Hunter, Mia and I fly by the ancient homes looking for one particular ancient home.

Mia is beaming in the middle seat while her twin brother, Hunter, who also acts as my brother at times, sits in the driver's seat, his short blond hair sticking to his forehead from the heat.

"You know, I'm probably going to hang out here, right?" Mia informs her brother as she plays on her phone beside him.

"Bullshit, you got your own place from Mom and Dad."

"A place I would've let you stay in, if you asked," she coos as she puts down her phone to rest her head on her brother's big shoulder, only making him shake his head at her. "Besides, you could've had a place too."

"And be in their debt? No thanks," Hunter scoffs, showing his obvious dislike for his parents. Safe to say they are not the most loving.

"Who are you rooming with?" I ask, changing the topic as I fan myself with a stray flyer I found in my purse.

"Some guys from campus, but one of them I actually know from football camp, though he doesn't play anymore. We haven't seen each other in years, but we met at a party a few months ago and we've just been hanging out."

"Oh, is that the one that..."

"Yep, that's him." He nods, laughing to himself about some secret memory, but it makes me happy to see him so at ease.

"Well, at least there will be one familiar face."

"Hey, speaking of, when are you moving into your place, Ava?" Hunter asks, genuinely concerned. My place has been up in the air for months with an idiot landlord jerking me around but luckily all that headache is over.

Giving him a tense smile. "Next week hopefully."

Mia smiles. "You know what that means?"

Both Mia and Hunter look at each other mischievously a second before eliciting girlish screams as they cheer, "House party!"

I laugh. “No way. I’m not having strangers in my new place.”

“Party pooper,” Hunter grumbles, goodheartedly nudging his sister with his elbow just as we pull up to an old-fashioned two-story gray brick house with navy blue shutters on the white windows. It is beautiful with a long driveway and even a simple garden lining the driveway. If only I could afford a place like this, but either way, I’m happy for Hunter.

“PUSH IT!”

“*You’re* supposed to be pushing!”

“How am I supposed to be pushing? I’m trying to bring it into the room. What are you trying to do?!”

I hear Mia and Hunter bicker from my place downstairs, the sound almost like a welcome home sign which is weird, but it’s what I grew up with being around the two of them.

I shake off their shouting and continue in my journey up the stairs with a small table in my hands.

I’m too focused on the task of avoiding hitting the walls with the table that I don’t hear the footsteps until they are right in front of me a second before I feel the slight impact, followed by a thud and a curse.

“Oh shit, I am so—” I stop, dropping the table and seeing who it is laying on the ground, cupping his jaw and frowning at me. “Actually, I’m not sorry at all.” I give Conner a sly smile, liking seeing him on the ground, taken down a bit.

His hand still cupping his jaw, he moves to stand. “We’ve got to stop meeting like this.”

I scoff, moving around the small table sitting in the middle of the stairway. “We’ve got to stop meeting at all.”

Placing a hand over his heart. “That hurts, little lamb.”

“Stop calling me that. And what are you even doing here? Are you stalking me or something?”

He laughs. “You wish.”

We are interrupted by the heavy footfalls of Hunter, Mia following after him and when Hunter's eyes land on Conner, I can't help but hope he'll get his ass kicked for trespassing, but the universe isn't that kind.

Instead, Hunter's eyes light up as a huge smile takes over his face. "Conner!"

"Hunter!"

They collide in the middle of the stairway, sharing a bro hug and slapping each other's shoulders, while my mind works at connecting the dots only to short-circuit when I realize what is happening.

Hunter turns to me, his arm still draped over a smug-looking Conner. "Mia, Ava, this is—"

"It's you!" I exclaim loud enough to stun everyone but Conner, in the stairway, pointing an accusatory finger at him.

He shrugs sheepishly. "Guilty."

Hunter looks between us. "You guys met?"

"Oh!" Mia offers us a sly smile as she slowly checks Conner out. "So you are *the* Conner?"

Conner cuts a curious look back at me as I squirm and also think of ways to permanently mute my best friend. "You talk about me, huh?"

"Someone wanna fill me in?" Hunter demands, holding his hands out, and we all just look at each other until Conner decides to do the honors.

"You remember that chick I told you about? Well, that's her."

Hunter blinks, finally understanding when I ask, "You talk about me?"

Conner winks. "You bet."

"Well, at least we all know each other. That should make everything easier," Hunter says, trying to look on the positive side as he throws an arm over his sister's shoulder and they

make their way back upstairs to fix whatever they were trying to fix, leaving Conner and I alone.

I see that same smug smile as he leans against the railing of the stairs, his ankles crossed and his hands in the pockets of his jeans. “One big happy family.”

I growl as I stomp my way up the stairs, following Mia and Hunter, leaving Conner to deal with the table still there, hating that this guy can get under my skin so well and he knows it.

Yes, him living here won't be easy, but at least he's no longer my neighbor and maybe I won't ever see him again.

Maybe.

But we all know how the universe is a bitch.

“I CANNOT BELIEVE you're going to be living here.” Mia scrunches up her nose at my new apartment as we bring the next lot of boxes in from her car.

She drops the box at her feet and puts her hand on her narrow hips, looking around the apartment in disgust.

“Why? It's not that bad,” I say more to myself as I look around at the chipped paint on the walls, the scratched up wooden floors and the broken cupboards in the kitchen. Some walls even have holes behind the doors as if someone had banged the door open so hard, it bashed into the wall behind it.

Okay, it's a shit hole, but it's all I can afford.

“There's graffiti on the walls,” Mia exclaims, throwing a hand out to the open door leading out in the hall with the flickering light.

I shrug, lowering my box to the rickety table that came with the apartment. “Just in the stairway.”

She scoffs, “Yeah because that's better.”

“Mia, I can't stay in the dorm another second.”

“You could've lived at home, you don't live far from campus.”

I give her a look. “Okay, you and I both know why I can’t live at home.”

Home is no better. True, the dorms gave no privacy and limited space, but home is where I’m left vulnerable to harsh words that cut deeper than any knife. I don’t talk about my home life often but Mia knows from our childhood how life was for me. How cruel Father was and how he blamed me for my mother leaving. Or maybe he just hated me because I looked so much like her.

Either way, I couldn’t do it, so I shake off the memories of my past as Mia sighs, knowing the truth. “I just worry about you. I don’t wanna get a phone call telling me my best friend has been raped and murdered.”

I laugh at the image she tried to paint, knowing I’ll need to get multiple locks tonight. “Thank you for that.”

“Just being honest.”

Seeing the worry in her eyes, I move to stand before her, taking her small hands in mine and giving them a squeeze. “I will be fine. I promise. Besides, it’s not like I can afford much better.”

She nods, agreeing but still hating it until our moment is shattered by a loud shout bellowing through my doorway. “You cannot be serious!”

We both jump at Hunter’s arrival as he storms through the door, taking in my new apartment with a look that matched Mia’s. I look at him innocently, as if I don’t see it myself. “What?”

He extends his arms out. “This place screams horror flick. You are not staying here, I won’t have it.”

I roll my eyes. “It is not that bad.”

But as I turn to focus my attention on the box Mia dropped by her feet, I am frozen by the next figure that saunters his way into my apartment like he owns the place. “Actually it is that bad. I just got a whiff of a funky smell down the hall. I think someone may have died.” He scrunches his nose in disgust at this and I say through gritted teeth, boxes forgotten.

“What are you doing here?” Turning my attention to Hunter, whose eyes are shrouded with guilt. “What is he doing here?”

Hunter shrugs. “He offered to come.”

“I figured you’d need an extra pair of hands.”

I narrow my eyes at Conner. “Well, you figured wrong.”

“Really?” Mia pipes in and I hold my breath as her next words leave her mouth. “What about the old TV or mattress sitting in the moving van downstairs?”

She just looks at me as if she didn’t just put her foot, ankle, and whole leg into her mouth. I glare at her but she doesn’t react, though I know she did it on purpose. Why, I didn’t know, but she must have.

Before I can even think of another excuse, Hunter slaps his hands together and gives them a rub before turning on his heel and heading out the door. “So it’s settled. Come on, man, let’s do some heavy lifting.”

Conner throws me a knowing grin as he follows Hunter down the stairs and I can practically feel steam leaving my ears as I level a glare back at my best friend, growling, “What was that?”

She merely raises her hands in surrender. “Hey, I’m not lifting a mattress above my head just because you have a problem with him.”

I resist the urge to stomp my foot. “Why is he even here?”

“He told you, he wanted to help.”

I growl, glaring at the doorway they just exited from. “He wanted to annoy me.”

“I think he just wanted to help.”

WITH EVERYTHING almost already set up, I gather the blankets that sit in the last box. Hunter is putting the last touches on my TV unit, while Conner helps. Mia decides she is hungry and goes to get us some food, which I am grateful for because I am starving.

Gathering the blankets up in my hands, I make my way down the hall to the closet, feeling Conner's eyes on me as I go and I resist the urge to glare at him, to let him know that I know he is watching me.

I've caught him many times throughout the day but whenever I glare at him, he just flashes me a toothy smile, like he is proud to be caught. I am not looking again.

So instead, I pull open the closet and try to push the blankets on the top shelf.

Hating my height, I know this isn't going to work, so using one hand, I pull myself up and use my other hand to push the blankets onto the shelf properly.

I sigh when I finally have it in place, happy to be mostly done when my heart leaps into my chest as my sweaty hand holding the shelf slips, sending me sailing backward with a gasp.

I scrunch my eyes closed and brace to prepare for the impact of the hardwood floor but instead I hear a deep grunt and feel the firm warmth of another person beneath me.

I open my eyes, thankful to not be hurt, but that is short-lived when I glance back to see who caught me only to find myself staring into Conner's blue eyes and amused smile

No.

"Be careful there, little lamb," he says, holding my eyes with his until I register the feel of his hands on my waist.

Unsure of what else to do and knowing I need to get away, I jerk my elbow back, making him grunt when my elbow connects with his firm stomach. "Oh, I'm so sorry," I say insincerely as I get up, leaving him on the floor.

He picks himself up, smile still in place as he watches me adjust my jean shorts that had ridden so high on my legs they were starting to look like underwear. "Small price to pay for playing hero."

"You were not my hero."

"Did I not just save you from landing on your ass?"

“You should’ve let me fall.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“You wanna bet?” But as I go to turn away his big hand takes my small one in his, forcing me to look at him and trapping the breath in my lungs as he closes the distance between us, standing so close that I can smell him.

“I do, actually.” His voice is husky and low as he looks down at me, my lungs unable to function properly until there is some distance between us because yeah, he’s cute. I’m not stupid. But he’s a goddamn jackass.

With that thought in mind, I rip my wrist out of his grasp, blink, and turn away to walk back out to the living room.

“I think you kind of like me,” Conner calls out to me, stopping me in my tracks, and I turn back around to laugh.

“Really?” Putting my hands on my hips and cocking my head, I ask, “What makes you think that?”

He doesn’t answer at first. He just watches until he starts to take a step forward. Then another and another until he is right in front of me again. “The redness on your cheeks when I get close like this.”

I steel my jaw. “I’m feeling smothered.”

And before he can notice anything else, I turn away and escape to the living room, hearing him call after me, “Yeah, right. You can deny it all you want, but I think you kind of like me.”

“And I think you’re crazy,” I call over my shoulder.

“COME ON, I’ll give you the rest next week. I’ve got a test on Monday and I need this.” I beg the young cashier at the campus bookstore. If only the bookstore I work at had the book I needed but it’s only a small bookstore with limited selection. This would be so much easier. But instead, here I am with what little I have clutched in my hands and holding up the service line with my stubbornness to move on.

“Sorry, you should have got it earlier.” No shit.

“I didn’t have the money earlier.”

The young cashier chews her gum obnoxiously and gives me a bored look as she says, “You don’t have the money now.”

“But I will have the rest next week!” I exclaim, feeling the muscles in my shoulders tense as I feel my irritation start to grow. I am off by twenty dollars. I was going to pay it!

But the cashier merely shrugs, not bothered by my outburst. “I’m sorry but we don’t do payment plans, now I have to ask that you move aside because other students want to make purchases.”

At that moment a chorus of irritated and impatient groans sounded from behind me in the line as the students vocalized their displeasure at being held up.

I feel the sweat break out over my brow and down my neck as I feel their annoyed gazes on me and the weight of next week’s test, the test that determines if I stay in the course or if I get asked to leave. It’s an editing course which is seen as an advantage if you wanna go into publishing like I do. It’s a competitive industry and every advantage helps.

Just as I start to search my brain for ways to get the extra twenty dollars, without asking friends, I feel a wall of warmth close in behind me at the same time a muscular arm reaches around me and hands a card to the cashier.

The students go silent behind me.

“Here, I got it.” My heart stops as my brain registers that voice and without thinking I spin on my heel and find myself standing too close to Conner, the warmth of his body enveloping my front now, while the counter blocks my escape at the back.

The cashier takes the card from him and before anything else can be said, I say in his face, “What? No!”

He merely cocks his head at me, amusement touching his eyes. “No? Don’t be silly, just let me get it so we can go. How much is it?”

The cashier answers, “One hundred eighty dollars.”

Shooting her a quick glare over my shoulder, I turn back to Conner and tell him firmly, “I’m not letting you get this.”

He smiles. “Well, it seems to me that you don’t have much choice. You can either let me get it and we can let everyone else get out of here, or you don’t get this book you need for a test next week. Choose,” he says, crossing his huge arms over his massive chest, drawing my eyes there for a second.

I clear my throat and blink when the cashier intercepts our stare-off. “Ma’am, I’m gonna ask you again, if you’re not making a purchase, you’ll need to step aside.”

I feel my glare intensify at Conner as I say through gritted teeth, knowing my options were limited. “Fine.”

The cashier rings up the book using Conner’s card. I feel his eyes burning into my head as I snatch up the book and without a backward glance, I storm out of the bookstore, hoping to not go back again.

I’m walking for a couple of seconds before I feel him walking next to me. “You know, you could say thank you.”

I continue to face forward as I tell him a quick thank you. “Thank you.”

We continue to walk side by side without speaking before I finally stop in the middle of the courtyard, spinning to face him, my hair fanning out as I spin. “Why are you following me?” I demand, evening his surprised look with a glare as my hands rest on my hips, waiting.

He looks around momentarily before shrugging, starting to look a bit shy and it just occurred to me that I don’t think I’ve ever seen him shy before. I didn’t think he was capable of it. “I don’t know. I thought we could hang out. You do kind of owe me one.”

I scoff, “I don’t owe you a thing! And if it’s the money you want, here.” I shove the money bunched in my free hand into his firm chest with a shove that doesn’t move him an inch. “I’ll get you the rest next week.”

But before I can walk away, he blocks my path, my cash in his hand. “Whoah! I was just teasing. But I did want to hang out.”

I watch as shy Conner returns, his feet shuffling where he stands and an uncertain look on his face, it makes me curious so I ask, “Why?”

He looks at me a moment before a corner of his mouth turns up. “I kind of miss my neighbor. She was cute, especially when she got mad.”

I can’t help but roll my eyes. “I’m sure that happened a lot around you.”

He looks at me again, this time thoughtful. “Why do you hate me so much?”

I pause at first, unsure of how to answer. I do have reasons why I hate him, but if I’m honest, those reasons change each day, so I refer to old reliable. “Because you are rude.”

He raises his brows, surprised by my response. “I’m rude?”

“Yes, you have no consideration for others.”

He scoffs, “I just paid for your books.”

“And now I’ll never live that down.”

“Look, obviously we got off on the wrong foot at some point. Can we start over?”

I contemplate just walking away, so why don’t I? I guess I’m curious over which Conner I’m gonna get. The drunk party boy, the flirt, or the shy boy. What else is behind that pretty face? I instantly shake that thought from my head as soon as I get it, not knowing where that came from and I ask, “Why?”

He shrugs. “I wasn’t lying when I said I missed my neighbor.” I search his face for amusement or laughter but all I see is a softness to his blue eyes I haven’t seen. “One chance, maybe a coffee and if you still hate me by the end, I’ll leave you alone.”

The complexity of the man before me makes me pause in thought. What could it hurt? One coffee and he would either prove me right or wrong. And it's a free coffee, what's not to love about that?

I open my mouth, about to accept his offer, when our moment is shattered by the sound of a high-pitched voice calling from across the courtyard. "Conner!"

We both follow the voice to see a busty redhead running across the courtyard with bright eyes and a beaming smile aimed right at Conner. Her breasts are heaving as she stops before Conner, not even acknowledging me as she gasps, "So, are we still on for tonight?"

Conner gives her a tense smile. "Yeah, wouldn't miss it."

She gives a little excited bounce as she says, "Can't wait."

I watch the two as everything comes into focus and I instantly want to hit myself for letting my guard down for a second.

"Oh my god," I mumble to myself, shaking my head as I move past the couple, not believing that I was actually proved right faster than I thought. Conner doesn't consider other people, he plays them, he takes no responsibility and I can't believe I almost gave him a chance.

"Hey, wait! Ava!" I hear behind me and before I know it, he's in front of me, his hand wrapping around my arm to stop me, a look of confusion marring his face.

As soon as I feel his hand, I rip my arm out of his grasp to point a finger in his face in warning. "You know what, for just a second I thought I might be wrong, that I should give you a chance."

His brows furrow. "What are you talking about?"

"You asking me to coffee when you have a girlfriend. Now I don't know how your harem handles each other, but I will not be one of them."

He actually looks hurt. "Harem? How busy do you think I get?"

“It’s not important, just go back to your girlfriend.”

“Girlfriend? I think you’re misunderstanding something here.”

“I’ve got somewhere to be.” And I start power walking away faster than I thought I could, hating that I allowed him to get to me, that he almost had me. So close. Never again.

“Ava?!”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Okay, so this book was an experience to write. Harper and Hunter's relationship was formed from the very beginning and it was great to finally dive in but a lot happened when writing this book. I suffered a loss, but I also got married and found out I was pregnant. Thankfully I got the book done before the hell of the first trimester got me, so this book has been sitting completed on my computer for five months. Now I'm feeling more like myself, I'm ready to share it.

I'd like to say what I always do, and always will. I'd like to thank my husband Levi for always being there and supporting me even when I don't feel like supporting myself. He is a big reason why I finish these books and I'm grateful for him everyday.

I'd also like to thank my family so their constant support and for nurturing my creativity as a child. Hopefully I can do the same with my own baby.

A big thank you goes out to my beautiful beta readers for always working with me to make these stories better. I value all of your love and support!

And I'd like to shout out my editor Mackenzie and my cover designer Shannon. Both make the process so smooth and easy and I look forward to working with them more in the future.

Thank you so much to the amazing writing and reading community which kept me sane during the writing process and even during my pregnancy. You don't know it, but you helped me through tough times.

And finally, thank you to my baby who is in my stomach right now. I look forward to meeting you and loving you forever xx

It means the world to me when anyone reads my work and I look forward to sharing more stories with you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ellouise Liston is a self-published author of debut romance novel *Hooking Up with Mr Wrong*. She writes romances of all kinds, from contemporary to fantasy. Don't worry, every book she writes has a romance in it!

But she wasn't always a writer, she was a movie buff and avid book reader. After being raised on movies like *Breakfast Club* and *Friday the 13th* and loving books like *Harry Potter*, it only made sense for her to write her own stories.

Born and raised in Sydney Australia, Ellouise lives out her days writing, reading and teaching young minds as a High School Teacher. When she is not wearing her many hats, you can find her enjoying a movie night with her husband or playing with her dog, Shep.