

CADENCE
COUGARS
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Hey, Batter Batter

A SPORTS ROMANCE NOVEL

SUZANNA MANSHIP

Hey, Batter Batter

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To Life:

“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?

No, a summer’s day is not a bitch.”

-Nick Miller

Content Warnings:

Cursing, graphic sexual content, drinking, fighting, briefly described aggressive behavior toward women, multiple mentions of parents passing away.

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Chapter One: King

I've been in enough bar fights to recognize the signs of one brewing. If the angry hand gestures and fevered pacing weren't enough to tip me off, the way his eyes had been tracking me for the last ten minutes would have made it clear.

"What are the odds he comes over?" Miller's question is as casual as his body language as he stretches his back against the bar top. Anyone looking at my best friend right now would think him more likely to fall asleep than throw a punch, but I can see the tension below the surface. Miller's arms are loose at his sides as he leans against the bar, but his eyes are trained on the man across the room.

"One in sixty." In the mirror behind the bar, I see the man throw his hands in the air, pointing angrily in my direction. His friends are all nodding in agreement with what he's saying, several also turning to face us. This isn't shaping up to be a fair fight if that's what it comes to.

Miller finishes his beer, pushing off the bar top to face the room. It's a busy night at MB's, with plenty of people filling the dance floor and occupying the tables between the angry men and us. The nice thing about having this many witnesses is it leaves little doubt about who started the fight if there ends up being one.

The annoying thing about witnesses is they tend to take photos and then sell them to the media.

“You might want to reassess the situation.” Looking in the mirror again, I can see his friends standing now, and they seem to be readying themselves to move in our direction. I’m not sure what he could have said to rally them into action. He’s the one who was harassing the young woman on the dance floor. All I did was step between them and calmly remind him that women deserve to be treated with respect.

Granted, I might not have said it that *kindly*, but still. He’s clearly the one in the wrong.

“You remember the rules?” I can’t help but smile around the last sip of my beer, my eyes cutting to my oldest friend. Miller’s shaking out his hands as he bounces on the balls of his feet.

“We don’t throw the first punch,” I recite the decade-old rule, pushing to my feet as I pull out my wallet. “Unless the fucker deserves it.”

Dropping three hundreds on the bar, I catch the bartender’s eye and tilt my head toward the group of guys finally approaching us. “For damages,” I explain at Matty’s look of confusion. He quickly scoops the money out of the way, shaking his head as he walks back to the other end of the bar. I’m not worried about him intervening; history has proven Matty’s more likely to join a fight than stop one.

I catch my reflection in the mirror again, dark eyes gazing back at me. How the fuck did I get to this point in my life? I’ve loved this city my whole life and thought it loved me back. For a long time, it did. It still does, technically. My face

is on more than half the billboards, my name is splashed on menu specials at every restaurant, and they even have an entire park named after me, but something ruined the connection between my beloved city and me—several somethings.

Several *someones*, if you're being technical. First, it was Kaylee Carlton, the off-broadway B-lister, then Annabelle Minx, the adult film star looking to break her way onto the silver screen, and last but not least, Jasmine Jenkins, the new-money heiress looking to stabilize her image. They each decided I was their best chance to break into the limelight, and like an idiot, I fell for it. I was just as shocked as everyone else each time one of them publicly (and brutally) kicked me to the curb as soon as they caught the eye of someone more famous than me.

The most annoying part of the breakups was the press. If you can call gossip columns “the press”. They were quick to believe that I would treat women with anything but the utmost respect.

Worst still, no matter what I say, they won't let it go. The press has been stalking me for the last two years, showing up at my home and my field, shoving their cameras in my face, and asking who my next “victim” will be. They treat me more like a serial killer than a Major League pitcher.

The fighting doesn't help with my image, either. Ten years ago, I wouldn't have dared to get in a fight, much less be bored by the idea of one. All I wanted was to play baseball with my best friend, to be on the mound with the world watching and knowing I wouldn't fuck it up. Because I was the best.

I *am* the best.

That's not bragging; it's just a fact. A fact that went straight to my head as a young man. My delusions of grandeur started the first fight Miller and I ever got in. The one that ended up splashed across the internet, dragging our names into the mud. Luckily for Miller, the press latched onto me as the fight's instigator, claiming that Miller simply "jumped in to save me". We each took issue with that sentence for different reasons. That fight resulted in my first two-week suspension from the MLB and sealed my fate as baseball's newest "bad boy".

At thirty-two, I'm getting a little old to be the "bad boy" of anything. For over a decade, I've been carrying that mantle, and I'm getting really fucking tired if I'm honest.

Miller's slap against my arm brings me back to the present just in time to see a guy swing at me in the mirror. Ducking on instinct, I spin under his arm and come up behind him as he stumbles into the bar. All three of his friends have followed him into this shitshow, foolishly thinking that four against two are good enough odds. That's the thing about the press constantly painting me as the fighter, saying Miller only ever jumps in to help me out of a bind.

No one expects him to come out swinging.

Idiots.

—

“I can’t believe he bit you!” Miller’s loud laugh sends a cloud into the cold night air, his shaggy brown hair dripping something dark onto his shoulders. His knuckles are covered in blood from the poor guy whose nose he broke, and I can see his left eye swelling shut. The cut on his lip opens when he smiles broadly at me, and I shake my head. I can’t imagine I look much better. My lip is so swollen I wouldn’t be surprised if it is split, and my right eyebrow connected with the bar at one point during the fight. I had to wipe the blood from my eyes more than once.

Miller and I managed to hold our own until Matty forced us out the kitchen door into the darkened alley just as the cops entered the bar. It’s one thing to be in a bar fight; it’s another to get arrested for one. Matty will show them the footage from the night, proving it was self-defense, so there’s no real reason for us to stick around just to get harassed about what happened.

Not to mention the paparazzi, who I’m sure are already on their way. If there’s one thing you can count on, it’s those vultures showing up.

“Uber’s here,” Miller points to a sleek black sedan as it pulls to a stop along the curb at the end of the alley. He pushes off the brick wall we’ve been leaning against, and I see him wince.

“I’m gonna walk home.” The words are out of my mouth before I realize I’m even thinking them. My apartment isn’t far from the bar, and I would only be going to Miller’s to get my car.

“You sure?” Miller’s light brown eyes narrow, assessing me under the street light. I know what he’s thinking, but I don’t have the energy to debate it.

“I’ll get my car from you tomorrow,” I call over my shoulder, escaping down the sidewalk before he can change my mind. The walk will be good for me, anyway. Help clear some of the shit going on in my head, or so I tell myself as I set off toward my apartment.

I love Cadence at night, with the soft glow of the street lights guiding my way. I’ve lived here my entire life, but it hasn’t been the same in the last few years. This is the only time it still feels like the city I grew up in. When it starts to snow, I slow my pace and force myself to enjoy the moment. You never know how many more you’ll get.

I haven’t been doing that enough lately.

My bubble of peace is broken when I turn onto my street, only to see two familiar vehicles parked outside my building.

Vultures.

Someone must have tipped off the tabloids about the fight. I can only imagine what the headlines will look like tomorrow. “King Strikes Out” is a favorite. They use it so often I’ve started expecting to see it in my Google Alerts each morning.

Yes, I have Google Alerts set up for my name. Sometimes not knowing is worse than the alternative. I learned that the hard way.

Well, fuck. There's no way I'm getting into my apartment with Kyle and Marcus parked out on the front steps. There's a back entrance, but I'm willing to bet Darren is camped out there. The "tabloid trio" are never far from one another. If I didn't live on the third floor, I would break in through my bedroom window like I used to. Foolishly, I didn't think about that when I got this apartment.

It's too late to try and get an Uber to Miller's, and waiting for one on the freezing street is not a good idea. The snow has picked up, and the wind is cutting through my coat in a way I hadn't noticed until I stopped walking.

Looking for anywhere to go that will hide me from these paparazzi fucksticks, my eyes catch on a light halfway down the street. It's on the side of the road that faces my building and is closer to me than the idling vehicles, so there's a decent chance I could make it there without them seeing me. I try to remember what businesses are on the street and which might be open this late, but I can only picture the pet supply store on the corner where I buy treats for Hazel's dog every few months.

I get close enough to see the sign, making me pause. Are there bakeries that are open at three am?

Making it to the door without hearing anyone on the street shout my name feels like a miracle, and relief washes over me when the bakery door swings open easily. There's a soft tinkling sound from a bell above the door that I hope isn't loud enough to draw attention my way.

The bakery is quiet but inviting, the warm air sinking into my bones as the door closes behind me. It's tastefully

decorated, unlike most bakeries in this city. They always seem to be covered in hot pinks and electric blues, with kitschy decor and wall signs declaring them ‘the best in the city’. This one is different though. The tables are all light blonde wood, with jet-black chairs and cement centerpieces holding trios of white candles and small potted plants. The wall to my right is covered from top to bottom with greenery and houses a bright white neon sign reading “Bennett’s Bakes”.

The large black hanging lights are the only ones currently turned on, though I can see the can lights running the entire length of the ceiling. The cement-top counter extending from the greenery wall into the center of the room has black bar stools pressed along the front, each topped with a green velvet seat. Behind the counter, between the industrial coffee maker and the currently empty glass cabinet, I can see two doors. One is closed, but the other is propped open, and I glimpse a large stainless steel oven just beyond the door.

“Elliot? Did you remember the trays?”

Oh, shit.

I am not Elliot, and I do not have any trays. Now I know why the can lights are off, and the glass cabinet is empty. This bakery is closed.

I am breaking and entering.

Technically, with the front door being unlocked, I wouldn’t describe it as *breaking*, but I doubt that’s how the police will see it. Or the media.

Logically assessing the situation has not made this look any better. Essentially, this woman is here alone at three in the

morning, and a strange man has waltzed through the door—a strange man who is bleeding from the head.

Fuck.

I'm still trying to decide if running back out the door and dealing with the neverending questions and photos is a better option than scaring the life out of this woman when she pushes her way through the kitchen door. She stops dead, her eyes growing wide when she sees me, and I brace myself for her scream of surprise, but it doesn't come.

She's tall, with long blonde hair piled messily on top of her head and the brightest green eyes I have ever seen on a person. She has a tray of pastries in her left hand and a dark green, flour-covered apron tied around her waist. The woman cocks her head to the side, her gaze running the length of my body in a way I swear I can feel to my very bones. I'm about to back out the door while making half-assed excuses for my presence when she speaks, her honey-rich voice stopping me from going anywhere.

“You're bleeding.”

Chapter Two: Ellie

This is pointless.

It's well past midnight, and I can't sleep. All evening I was so tired my eyes wouldn't stay open, but I was wide awake again when my head hit the pillow. I never used to have trouble sleeping, but lately, I've been finding it harder and harder to fall asleep and stay that way.

"Fuck it." I'm out of bed and across the room in moments, slipping down the ladder in my yoga pants and oversized crew neck. I live alone in the space above the bakery. Partly because I don't have time to cultivate an actual relationship between dealing with the bakery and helping out my family and partly because it's *technically* an attic. It's meant for storing things, not living in, and I wouldn't subject anyone else to sidestepping across rough plywood and exposed rafters.

I wouldn't subject myself to it if the ease of living close to the bakery weren't too much to pass up. It is really fucking nice being able to roll out of bed and be at work in moments. Especially when you have to be at work at four in the morning most days.

I'm not sure what started my insomnia this evening, but I know what will fix it: Lemon Tarts with Lavender Meringue. It's my mother's recipe, but I've been making it for

so long that I know it by heart. I don't usually stock it in the bakery until spring, but I know I won't ever sleep again if I don't make some right now.

That might be a bit dramatic, but it's how I feel.

Pushing into the kitchen, I smile as the automatic lights ping on. I love this kitchen. I love this whole bakery. It's been my dream to own a bakery since I was old enough to help my mother in the kitchen, and some days I still can't believe I made it happen. My mother always believed in my dreams, though.

I never got to thank her for that.

A dull pain in my chest has me rubbing absentmindedly at the spot just above my heart as I fire up the industrial ovens and start pulling out all the ingredients for the tarts. I quickly lose myself in the ritual of baking, my mind clearing as muscle memory takes over. Before I know it, I'm putting the finishing touches on a perfect batch of tarts, dusting the carefully piped meringue with lemon-infused sugar crystals. The exhaustion has truly set in, and I'm just about to check the time to see how much sleep I can get before Elliot shows up when I hear the telltale tinkling of the front doorbell.

Shit. The tarts must have taken longer than I realized if he's already here.

"Elliot? Did you remember the trays?"

Carefully balancing the plate of tarts in my left hand, I push through the door into the lobby area. Mom's lemon tarts have always been my twin's favorite, and I can't wait to show him that I've made them early this year.

I consider shouting “surprise!” which is admittedly excessive this early in the morning, but I know it will make Elliot snort-laugh like he always does when he’s tired. I manage to stop myself just in time, though.

It’s a good thing, too, because the man standing in the lobby is not Elliot.

He looks just as surprised by me as I am by him if the way his eyebrows shoot to his hairline is any indication. Unfortunately for him, one of his eyebrows appears to be bleeding, and the motion sends a fresh drop of blood down his face, narrowly missing his eye.

I don’t know what to do. I’ve never had anyone break in before, so I’ve never thought through the protocol.

“You’re bleeding.”

Wow, Ellie. Of all the dumb shit you could say, that’s at the very top. Right behind, “*would you like a tart?*” and “*are you here to murder me?*” which is a valid question. He looks like he could murder me and hide my body without breaking a sweat. He is...very large. Standing over six feet tall, according to the height markers I couldn’t get removed from the front entrance. His dark hair is sticking up in every direction, clearly mussed from whatever skirmish caused the damage to his face, but his calm gray eyes are focused wholly on me.

If he weren’t almost definitely a murderer, he would be hot.

That statement goes to the very top of the dumbest things I could say right now.

Another drop of blood slips off his chin, and I watch it splatter on the tile floor. Damn. That can't be good for my health and safety rating.

"Can I," the tarts wobble as I slide them onto the counter, taking my eyes off Mr. Potential Murderer for just long enough to ensure they're safely in place. "Can I help you with that," I point to his eyebrow, raising one of my own in question.

Oh, great plan. Let's invite the possible (probable) murderer to hang out while you patch him up. That won't end poorly for you *at all*. The police absolutely won't think you're an accomplice, and you definitely won't end up in prison.

I would not do well in prison.

"I have a first-aid kit," I plow on when I realize he hasn't responded to my question. He hasn't said anything at all. "Why don't you have a seat?" I point to a table halfway between us. It's the one I sit at every night, reviewing the budget spreadsheets Elliot has made and coming up with new recipes to try. "You're a bit too tall for me to help while you're standing," I continue explaining to the silent man as if this situation is normal and we're just two friends chatting about the weather. "Also, can you maybe try not to get blood on anything else?"

The man raises his still intact eyebrow at me, clearly questioning his ability to sit anywhere without getting blood on it. That makes me smile against my better judgment. A fully rested version of me would *never* smile at a could-be murderer.

Not knowingly, at least.

Thankfully, he doesn't make me ask twice and carefully makes his way to the table. In one smooth motion, he spins the chair, sitting in it backward. That shouldn't be hot, but it is. I can't help but watch as he folds both arms over the back of his seat, rolling out his neck before looking up at me. Those dark gray eyes catch on mine again, and I have to stop myself from sucking in a breath.

Get. Yourself. Together.

I dig through the first-aid kit, ensuring there are enough bandages to patch him up. When I look up again, he's still sitting in the chair facing me, but he has shed his coat and has one hand lifted to his forehead. I see him wince as he prods a finger into his split eyebrow.

"Don't do that," I admonish, hurrying over before he does something to increase the bleeding. Thankfully, I don't have to do much digging in the kit before I find a handful of alcohol-free cleaning wipes. Opening one, I hand it over, intending for him to clear the blood from his cheek and neck gently. Instead, he roughly scrubs the wipe across his brow, gritting his teeth with a hiss when he pulls at the skin around his wound, causing me to wince in sympathy.

"Okay, no." Pushing his hand away from his face, I lean forward to wipe the blood from his brow carefully. Surprisingly, he's even more handsome under all this gore: sharp cheekbones, full lips, a handful of freckles across his nose, and those stormy gray eyes. While clearing the dried blood around the cut, I hear him suck a breath through his teeth.

“I’m Ellie, by the way,” seems as good a distraction from his pain as any. When he doesn’t answer, I wonder if he has a concussion. My oldest brother William is a doctor, but I doubt he would appreciate me calling to ask about concussions at three in the morning when I could easily google it.

“Is Ellie—”

The deep rumbling of his voice startles me, and I accidentally poke him in the eye. “Oh, shit! I’m so sorry,” I hiss in sympathy as he closes his eye against the pain. “I, uh... what were you going to say?”

“Is it short for Eleanor?”

I almost ask, “*is what short for Eleanor?*” like a total idiot, but I save myself just in time. “Oh, no. Do you think I look like an Eleanor?”

“Eliza?”

“Close,” maybe, if I can keep him talking, he might eventually explain the blood, hopefully in a way that won’t make me an accessory to a crime. I grab a clean wipe off the table, the last one from the kit. Once this is clean, I can put the bandages on him and get him out of the bakery. My stomach flips at the thought of him leaving, but I ignore it.

“Elizabeth, then?”

“Elizabeth Jane Bennett.” Wow. Fifty dollars to anyone who can tell me why I gave this *possible murderer* my full legal name.

“No,” is his gruff reply, and I have to hold in a smile at his surprise. “That cannot be your real name.”

“My mother was obsessed with Jane Austen.”

“Clearly.” When he looks up at me, I swear there’s almost a smile on his face, but it’s gone before I can get a better look.

“This is the part where you tell me your name,” I prompt, dropping the last wipe into the pile with the others. “Fair’s fair, you know.”

He tries to frown at me again, but I press my fingers against his eyebrow, effectively cutting off the motion. I want to joke about his face getting stuck like that, but his phone vibrates loudly against the laminate tabletop, drawing our attention to it. He reaches out to silence the call without flipping the phone over to see who it is. It’s my turn to raise a questioning brow at him.

“Miller” is the only answer he gives, as if that explains anything.

“Your boyfriend?” That gets another almost smile out of him; this one is more noticeable than the last.

“My best friend. He’s a pain in the ass, but I love him,” another attempt at a frown. “Though, I wouldn’t ever tell him that.”

Interesting. That’s the most I’ve heard him say since he arrived, sneaking in like some sort of...well, I was going to say “pseudo-Batman”, but the man is bleeding from the head and wearing a cashmere sweater, so he could genuinely be Batman for all I know.

“Why wouldn’t you tell him that?”

“It would go to his head.” His direct response startles a small laugh out of me. The gargoyle has jokes. I like that.

I find two butterfly bandages in the first-aid kit and get them open one-handed with little to no fumbling, an absolute win for me. Mr. Possibly Not A Murderer’s phone rings again, rattling hard against the tabletop, and he quickly silences it before blindly slipping it into his pocket.

“Not interested in phone calls, huh?”

“More interested in what’s in front of me.” He says it so casually, but he’s looking directly at me. Damn, those smoke-gray eyes are something else this close.

I try to shake myself from the moment, breaking eye contact to look at the bandage in my hand, but I can still feel him watching me. “You never did tell me your name,” I point out, looking for any distraction from the electricity pinging between us.

“You don’t know my name?”

Ah, shit. My eyes track over his face again, and there is something familiar about it, but nothing I can put my finger on. “Should I?”

Applying the bandage to his face is difficult with him frowning at me, so I reach a hand up to smooth out his brow. He relaxes instantly, causing me to smile. At least he can take direction. He doesn’t say anything in response to my question, but the silence isn’t uncomfortable, mostly because I’m so focused on getting this bandage into the right spot to keep his face from bleeding any more.

Leaning to get the second bandage off the table, I accidentally dig my thumb into his brow, causing him to inhale sharply. My eyes move to his, a quick apology on my lips, but I'm surprised out of saying anything when I notice how close we are now. He must have leaned in farther to assist with my struggles, and his face is inches from mine.

Those eyes are getting more dangerous by the minute. They trace a line down my neck, and I sway toward him without thinking. He's leaning so far into me that his breath fans across my collarbone with each exhale. Electricity zaps through my body when his hand brushes along the outside of my thigh.

He's still looking down, angling his head, so I have full access to his eyebrow. I lay the second bandage across his brow with shaky fingers, forcing myself to focus on the task. The moment I finish pressing the bandage in place, he looks up.

Fuck. Me.

I stop myself from saying the words, knowing they will sound more like a plea than praise. This man is pure sex, and I want it. Whatever it is that those mysterious gray eyes are offering, I'll take.

His hand shifts on the seat beside me, moving closer to my ass but not quite touching. He isn't touching me anywhere, yet my entire body is pulsing with need. I squeeze my thighs together to try and ease some of the ache deep inside me, but all I manage to do is trap his knee between my legs, effectively holding him against me. If I just shifted forward, even a little...

“Sam,” his voice is deep, deeper than before, and a shiver races up my spine.

“Sam?”

“My name,” he explains with a huff, and I can’t stop the smile from spreading across my face.

“Was that a laugh?”

“What?” It’s his turn to be confused, but before I can say—or do—anything else, the front door bursts open with a gust of freezing air. The door bangs off the wall hard enough for the sound to reverberate through the space. The shock of it breaks us apart, and he’s on his feet before I know what’s happening.

“I should go,” he nods to the open door, another frown pulling at his bandaged brow. I nod in response, not trusting my voice just yet. “Thank you, Ellie.”

Just like that, my mystery man disappears out the door and into the inky black night without looking back.

Chapter Three: King

The ball slaps into Miller's glove just under one hundred miles per hour.

We've been practicing for the last hour and a half, taking full advantage of the empty field like we do every day in the off-season. Most players use the downtime to take vacations with their families; spending their time off getting tans on far-away beaches or wind-burned cheeks on mountain tops. Not us, though.

We grew up on the Wayne Miller work ethic. From the moment we were old enough to swing a bat, he had us on the field. Nights, weekends, and all summer long, you could find us practicing every drill under the sun.

Or the rain. Or the snow. Wayne never let us miss a day of practice, no matter the weather. At least he was a good coach for us. As a retired Major League player, he knew the right way to run every drill, and he would make us practice until we knew them in our very bones.

It used to drive Hazel crazy. She would have to keep dinner warm until we were done with practice or rearrange meeting up with their friends until Wayne was done screaming us into shape. We were the best damn little leaguers you've ever seen, though.

Plus, we made it into the Majors. I've never seen Wayne as proud as he was the day we got the call. We were being drafted to the Cadence Cougars.

All those practices were worth it. Every cold dinner, every missed date, every summer vacation spent throwing baseballs and swinging bats until our shoulders burned.

We could probably use a vacation now. It's been thirty years of non-stop baseball. A week on the beach, baking in the sun with cold beers and the best views in the world stretched before us, sounds like the best possible reward.

Unbidden, Ellie pops into my mind. The image of her perfect body lying in the sand, a small bikini barely containing her generous curves. Beach Ellie smiles at me, arching her back and spreading those thick thighs that have filled my dreams every night since we met.

"Let's call it," Miller shouts across the field, pulling me from my blissful daydream back to my bleak reality. Miller jogs toward me, and I can't help but laugh when he shakes his head, sending sweat flying everywhere.

"You need a shower."

"And you need a—"

I'm spared from hearing what he thinks I need by the sound of Coach Maggert shouting my name across the field. My heart sinks when I see him point toward his office, the message clear in the set of his jaw.

Fuck.

"That's not good," Miller mumbles as we watch Coach storm back into the hall leading to the stadium offices.

Carriage Park is laid out in a half circle, with the stadium seats cascading down three sides of the field. A ring of offices sit above the seats, their glass walls looking over the field. Over the years, I've been in those offices more times than I care to admit.

Miller and I both have, though he generally gets off easier than I do. It's always been like that. When we were younger, people used to mistake us for twins, but Hazel always said the easiest way to tell us apart was to see who got caught first. That one was me.

Miller and I still occasionally get mistaken for twins as adults, even though his eyes are brown, and he lacks the freckles scattered across my nose. I am a full inch taller than him, but he has a good thirty pounds of muscle on me—much to my annoyance. The gym turns into a competition every time, and while I can usually win the upper body challenges, Miller dominates on leg day.

Something tells me I won't be joining him in the gym after this, though. Not if the conversation Coach and I are about to have is what I expect it to be.

"I'll catch you tomorrow," I slap Miller on the arm, turning to jog toward the hall Coach had just disappeared down. Better to get this over with quickly.

I'm up three flights of stairs in minutes but find myself stalling outside Coach Maggart's office. Do I want to know what he's about to say? I can guess, based on history. He will tell me I'm a fuckstick for getting in another fight, then he'll threaten to bench me, and he'll yell at me to get out of his office.

Hopefully, anyway. The alternative is the end of my career, and I'm not ready for that yet.

"Sit," Coach points to the seat across from him. He watches me from the other side of his desk, the surface overflowing with paperwork, pens, and paper coffee cups in varying stages of emptiness. His bushy mustache and matching black brows are out of control today. They look like they are trying to reach out to one another. I would have joked with him about it if I weren't about to get in trouble.

"Do you have any idea how fucking annoyed I am right now? Don't," he points a meaty finger at me, cutting off whatever I'd been about to say. "I don't need any of your sarcasm today, Kingston."

Oh, fuck. Coach only uses my full last name when I'm in real trouble.

I settle deeper into my chair, feeling like a child getting in trouble for bullying on the playground. The dirt stain on the knee of my pants becomes the most exciting thing in the room to look at.

"You wanna guess how I spent my morning?" Maggert braces both hands against the desktop before him, raising his brows at me expectantly. I'm not sure if I'm supposed to respond, though. "I'll tell you," apparently, not responding was the correct answer. "I spent my morning on the phone, assuring all of our board members that, once again, you were not instigating a fight but just *happened* to be pulled into one. That you aren't as much of a *shitbag* as the media paints you to be and that you *will be cleaning up your act*".

He growls the words at me, his brows finally pulling low enough to touch between his eyes. I'm still not sure if I'm supposed to be saying anything, so I remain silent in my seat.

“I am *tired*, Kingston. There's too much shit for me to do before Spring Training to deal with your drama on top of it, so here's the deal: you end up in the media again, and you're benched. If I see your name on the news, you're done. The same goes for Miller because I know that shithead isn't blameless in this”.

He waves a hand at the paperwork spread in front of him. “I'm going to do my *actual job* for the next five weeks, and *you* are going to lay low. Any kind of scandal, big or small, and you won't step foot on the mound all season. Do you understand me?” I nod, but he seems to feel the need to elaborate further in case the message isn't clear enough.

“One more wild night out, one more fight, one more beautiful woman crying to the press, and it's over for you.” This time, he waits for my response, folding his hands in front of his massive stomach and leaning back in his seat.

“Yes, Coach.”

—

What the fuck am I going to do?

Pacing the length of my apartment for the millionth time tonight, I look out at the city before me. Carriage Park lights up the night sky, a beacon in the dark. I can't get

benched. I wouldn't know what to do with myself if I couldn't pitch any longer—couldn't play in the Majors.

There's no doubt Coach will bench me. He's wanted to for years, and if I weren't undeniably the best, he would have done it by now. Unfortunately, my lousy reputation appears to be outweighing my talents these days.

It shouldn't be hard to stay out of the media; people do it all the time. The problem is that the world seems to think everything I do is media-worthy. They never report on the good things I've done, though. It's never "King Sponsors Animal Hospital," "King Spends Sunday at Homeless Shelter," or even "City Breaks Ground on the Samuel Everett Kingston I Memorial Cancer Ward". Those titles are a bit long for clickbait, but they paint a more accurate picture of who I am.

Unfortunately, that means Coach is right. The only way to stay out of the media is to lay low; no bars, no fights, no women.

Resting my hip against the arm of the couch, I rub a hand over my eyes. I need to sleep. I would flop down and sleep here if this couch weren't so damn uncomfortable. I don't know how Miller naps on this thing. Like most of my apartment, the leather sectional is a rich cognac color with several fluffy white blankets strewn around it and a large navy blue pillow in every corner. I'm nothing if not a man with a theme. Everything in my life is navy blue and white, down to the colors of the team I play for.

In my defense, the colors are popular in this city, making them easy to find. We don't have a professional

football team, and the city's people have made up for that deficiency by making baseball their entire personality.

Myself included.

I pride myself in not overdoing the navy and white theme, mainly using it as pops of color in my otherwise very brown and black apartment. The kitchen has all stainless steel appliances with white ceramic details, and the dining room has a large brown kitchen table with navy placemats and a white centerpiece that Hazel put fake flowers in.

I drew the line at having navy blue sheets, though. Instead, I splurged on an emerald green bed set that goes surprisingly well with the navy blue accents around the room.

The deep green comforter reminds me of the greenery wall in Ellie's bakery. My eyes drop to the street below, instantly finding the bakery entrance. The lights turned on half an hour ago, and I've been crawling out of my skin ever since. She's down there, making pastries and looking gorgeous, and I can't go to her.

It could have been because it was nearly four am with dimmed lights and the snow falling, but it felt like something had happened between us. I'm sure the time I spent with Ellie was life-changing for both of us, but I can't do anything about it now.

I spend a few moments playing the night over in my mind. Her face, her smile, her laugh. The gentle press of her fingers against my face—how she sucked in a breath when I leaned into her.

I'm pressing the call button for the elevator before I realize what I'm doing. This is a bad idea. She probably isn't even single, and even if she is, who says she wants to see me again? I'm just some guy who showed up in the middle of the night, bleeding all over her bakery.

I have never spent this much time or energy stressing over a woman.

The elevator doors open right as I decide to abandon my plan, and my feet carry me forward against my better judgment. The lobby is the second-best thing about my apartment building. It's grand, with white marble floors and floor-to-ceiling windows spanning one entire wall. The front desk is tucked away in one corner, hardly noticeable in the ample space, but it's always staffed by someone ready to assist in any way necessary. This morning, I'm glad to see it's Ralph.

I stop by the doors, checking that there aren't any paparazzi waiting in the street. I haven't had any google alerts this morning, so I don't think I'm a priority for them today, but you can never be too careful. You can't see directly into the bakery from here, but there's a decent view of the greenery wall. The "Bennett's Bakes" sign is lit again, the soft white neon against the green backdrop luring me like a moth to a flame.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ralph standing behind the lobby desk, watching me. I know he's caught me staring at the bakery more than once this week. He even gave me an annoyingly *knowing* look when I went out for my third walk past the bakery entrance yesterday. Luckily, he hasn't verbalized his opinions about my behavior.

Not that I anticipate that lasting forever.

“Morning, Mr. Kingston.”

“Good morning, Ralph.”

“Heading out again, Mr. Kingston?” Ralph raises his eyebrows.

My luck has run out. Damn. I was hoping Ralph would give me at least a week before he started commenting on it.

“Yes, Ralph.”

I allow the thought of having a come-to-Jesus conversation with my doorman to propel me through the doors, his soft laugh following me into the street. As I cross the empty street, the wind cuts through my coat, and I head straight for the bakery doors, not wanting to spend more time outside than is strictly necessary.

Will she be happy to see me? Will she remember me at all? I hesitate at the door; my fist raised inches from the glass. What if she doesn't remember me?

Shaking the worry from my mind, I force myself to knock.

Chapter Four: Ellie

It's too early for functioning.

Tuesdays are an early wake-up for me since Elliot has classes and can't come in to help. For some reason, this Tuesday is feeling extra, extra early. I can't seem to keep my eyes open as I scurry down the ladder from my attic/bedroom and end up crashing into more than one chair on my way to the kitchen.

Baking is my passion, and I never want to take for granted the fact that I get to spend every day doing what I love. That said, if people could stop wanting baked goods at the asscrack of dawn so that I can sleep in like a normal person more than one day a month, that would be *great*.

An hour later, I'm covered in flour, have burned myself twice, and am completely exhausted, but somehow I'm ahead of schedule. I'm still deciding what to do with the twenty minutes I've managed to carve out for myself when I hear it. There's a soft knocking sound coming from the front of the bakery. I know it isn't any of my brothers since they have keys (and busy lives that don't involve stopping by the bakery at five in the morning). I'm tempted to ignore it, but then it happens again. It's louder this time, like the person knocking wants me to know they're not just a tree branch on the windowsill.

Of all the people I expect to see when I peek around the kitchen door, Sam isn't one of them. He's not even top ten. I wasn't sure I'd ever see him again, but here he is, standing in front of my bakery. My eyes catch on his hat as I make my way to the door, letting him in from the frigid night. There's something familiar about the deep color of it, even though it has faded enough to no longer pop against the white number "15" stitched into the front panels.

"Can I get you some coffee?" It's the first sentence my brain can come up with that doesn't involve, "*I thought I imagined you,*" or worse, "*damn, you really are that big, huh?*"

"Yes, please." His deep and surprisingly soothing voice makes me want to curl up and listen to him talk for hours. I lock the front door, moving back around Sam toward the counter where the coffee maker is percolating away happily.

Coffee is the first thing I make every morning, and I make enough to caffeinate a small army. It won't be wasted, though. I sell more coffee than anything, except maybe my pain au chocolat, and I'll make several more pots before the day is out.

Looking up, I start to ask how he takes his coffee, but I'm stopped by the sight of him stripping in front of me. Okay, not *stripping*, but he's taking his coat off in a way that is decidedly sexual. I watch the fabric of his sweatshirt stretch across his chest, begging me to reach out and touch the contours hidden behind the soft knit.

"Um," I shake my head, looking away to try and regain my focus. "How do you take your coffee?"

“However you make yours is fine.”

Interesting. “So, six sugars and half a bottle of french vanilla creamer?”

“Somehow, I doubt that’s how you make your coffee.” His smile is small, but it’s there, plain as day, pulling at the corners of his lips and making me want to smile in return.

“Most people would believe it based on my thighs alone.”

“Most people are dicks,” he shrugs, accepting the lightly sweetened coffee as I hand it to him. I hadn’t meant to say it aloud; I’m usually better at keeping the self-deprecating comments to myself, but I’m off my game this morning.

“I’ll drink to that,” I raise my coffee to my lips, sipping carefully—time for a subject change. “Are you here to tell me what happened to your face?”

“Bear attack.”

Oh, so we’re doing this, then. “Really? I was thinking house cat”.

“*House cat?*” One large hand grips his chest as if in physical pain. “It was definitely a bear. A big one”. He raises a hand a foot above his head, eyes wide in earnest

“Sure thing, Sam.” I laugh, taking another sip of my still-too-hot coffee. Sam’s face falls, and I feel my heart sink with it. He looks like he’s about to tell me something I definitely don’t want to hear.

Shit. Maybe he is a murderer.

“I’ve been trying to figure out how to say this all morning, and the best I can come up with is just blurting it out, so here it is,” he takes a deep breath, steeling himself against his next words. “I’m King.”

I can tell my reaction isn’t what he’s looking for, but I can’t help the small relieved laugh that escapes my lips. “I wasn’t aware we had a Monarchy in America.”

“Very funny,” he frowns at me, but I see his lips twitch up slightly. “No, I’m *King*. As in, Samuel Everett Kingston II”.

Apparently, that’s supposed to mean something to me. “Nice to meet you, I guess.”

“You’re killing me, Ellie!” His laugh is incredulous, and his exaggerated look of disbelief is enough to have me laughing too.

“Why? Am I missing something obvious?”

“Yes! Everyone in this town knows me,” another exaggerated look in my direction. “Most people in *America* know me. I’m a pitcher for the Cadence Cougars...my face is on multiple billboards in this town, Ellie!” He throws a hand out, gesturing to the city beyond the bakery walls. He sighs heavily when I still don’t show any sign of recognition.

I don’t know what to say that will make up for not knowing who he is, so I opt for a subject change. “What are you doing today?”

“Nothing,” Sam’s confusion shows on his face, but he rolls with it. “Why?”

“I was going to ask if you could help out here for the day,” I shrug like it’s no big deal that I’m asking him to hang out with me, even as my brain shouts that it’s a *big fucking deal*.

“Oh,” Sam clears his throat, looking around the bakery thoughtfully. “You wouldn’t want me here during business hours. It would get annoying”.

“What makes you think it isn’t already annoying?” I joke, throwing a towel at him before returning to the kitchen. I can’t express how relieved I am to hear Sam follow me through the door.

—

I have never seen the bakery this busy. Where did all these people come from?

Sam’s smile as he hands a receipt to the woman batting her eyelashes at him is so blatantly forced that I’m surprised the woman hasn’t called him on it. Instead, she only smiles brighter, leaning in to place a hand on his forearm. “Thank you, *King*” she all but purrs, and I have to hold back a laugh at the way he quickly removes her hand from his arm.

“Next!” He shouts, turning his back on the woman as he spins to face me. “How much more do we have?”

“Not much,” surprisingly. I’ve never sold out before, and I wouldn’t have thought it was possible this early in the day. It’s not even ten am.

“Good,” his response is mumbled, but I can see his relief as he turns back to the counter. “Good morning! What can I get for you?”

A man and his son are smiling back at Sam, and I notice the young boy is wearing a hat almost identical to Sam’s. The only difference is that the boy’s hat has a crisp white 29 on the front instead of the faded 15 that Sam’s has.

“Hi, I’m Jace. I’m a big fan!” The young boy pipes up, the smile on his face bright enough to light up the whole room.

“It’s nice to meet you, Jace. I like your hat,” Jace beams up at Sam, clearly overjoyed at speaking to him.

“Tell the man what you’d like, Jay,” his father smiles down at him, placing a hand on his head to turn him toward the glass display case. We don’t have much left to choose from, but the boy still takes a moment to look at each item.

“Can I have one of those?” He points to the last two croissants in the case, looking at his dad for confirmation.

“We’ll take them both,” his father smiles, handing his card to Sam as he rings up their order. I can’t stop myself from stepping forward to get the croissants, quickly slipping them into a Bennett’s Bakes bag and handing them to Sam when he turns to get the pastries. He smiles at me thankfully, turning back to hand the bag to Jace.

The boy reaches out a shaking hand to grab the bag, pulling it into his small chest. “Thank you, Mr. King!”

“Do you play baseball, Jace?” All morning, Sam has been polite but curt. Fielding questions people ask him but

never asking questions of his own. Something about this boy and his father has Sam slowing down, though, and I find myself smiling as I watch them talk for a moment.

The conversation quickly turns to baseball as Jace tells Sam about his little league team. For the first time since we opened the doors, Sam relaxes. He's focused on the conversation, listening intently to everything Jace and his father have to say. When it's time for them to leave, I can tell Sam is sad to see them go.

I realize, with a start, that it's the first conversation I've heard him have about baseball all day. We've had over a hundred customers trek through this store, and only one of them has mentioned baseball.

Twenty minutes later, we've sold out, and Sam is ushering the last of the loiterers from the room. He locks the door with a snap, leaning against the glass with a heavy sigh.

“Tired?”

“Exhausted.” The truth of the statement is written on every inch of him, but he pushes off the door with renewed determination. “What needs to be done to clean up?”

“Oh, you don't have to—”

“Stop,” he raises one hand, silencing my protests. “Just tell me what to do, Ellie.”

Sighing, my eyes sweep the counter between us, catching on the pile of dishes in the sink. “Can you wash those?”

He nods, moving to the sink at once. I'm about to grab the disinfecting spray and cloth to clean the tables when all

thoughts melt out of my brain.

Sam has pushed his sleeves to the middle of his forearms, revealing a full sleeve of tattoos running from his left wrist up his arm. I can't see anything specific, but the subtle colors and interlacing designs have me mesmerized even from this distance.

Grabbing the disinfectant, I walk past him toward the row of tables closest to the sink. I try to get a better look at the designs, but they're covered in soapy water.

My fingers itch to touch them, and I have the fleeting thought of wanting to taste them. *Oh my god, be a little more aggressively horny, Ellie.*

"What else needs to be done?" Sam's question startles me out of my daydream, and I'm shocked to see he's finished washing the dishes already. How long did I stand here staring at him like a total perv?

"Ellie?"

"Huh?"

He huffs again, and I'm beginning to think that's how he laughs. "What else can I do to help?"

Honestly? Nothing. Just letting me stare at you is more than enough, thanks. I almost say it, too. This man is short-circuiting my brain. "Uh," I hunt around for anything that needs doing, preferably something that will get him closer to me so I can get a better look at these tattoos. "The mugs," I point at the shelves of Bennett's Bakes branded mugs lining the wall behind the table I've been pretending to clean for who knows how long. "They need to be dusted."

They do not. I dusted them yesterday, but he doesn't need to know that.

Sam grabs a fresh towel as he moves in my direction, and I have the distinct impression he's smiling at me, but I can't be sure.

He picks up the first mug, running the rag over it and the shelf beneath. I watch the muscles in his forearm flex with each move he makes, allowing my eyes to focus on the intricate tattoos. It's a complex pattern of shapes and colors. Many of them even look like watercolor drawings. They're beautiful, and I can't take my eyes off them. Sam repeats the process of cleaning three more mugs before breaking the silence between us.

"Bennett's Bakes?" Sam raises a playful eyebrow at me over his shoulder, and I'm so distracted by the look on his face that I momentarily forget the question.

"You don't like it?" I can sense his eye roll, and a smile tugs at my lips.

"It's...cute." Cute? Not the word I was expecting out of him. Not that I should know what to expect; I just met the man. He throws the towel over his shoulder before reaching up to adjust his hat, running a hand through his hair. I track the motion with my eyes, and I'm vaguely aware of Sam making another huffing sound. He really does do that a lot.

Suddenly, Sam turns around, bracing his right arm on the back of my chair and resting his left arm on the table in front of me. His body looms over mine as I look up into his dark gray eyes.

Hang on...*when did I sit down?*

“I’ll show you any part of me you want to see, Ellie. You just have to ask”.

Wow, okay. That is way too hot.

I turn my attention back to his tattoos, hoping he won’t see the blush rapidly spreading across my face. Reaching out with tentative fingers, I run them lightly along the design.

Our eyes lock again, and all thoughts evaporate from my brain, chased away by the palpable weight of his gaze. He’s watching me in a way no man has ever done before, though I can’t pinpoint what’s so different about it. It’s like he wants to eat me...but in a fun way.

Sign me the fuck up.

Sam sighs, straightening to his full height before stepping away from my chair. The sudden distance between us clears the fog in my brain, and I know there’s no hiding the blush covering my face now. He clears his throat, rubbing a hand against the back of his neck and giving me an apologetic look. “What else can I help with?”

Okay, we’re just...ignoring whatever that was. Got it. “Uh, can you help with those?” I point to two stacks of empty trays on the counter near the sink. Pushing back to my feet, I hurry forward, scooping up one massive pile and darting into the kitchen, narrowly avoiding the doorjamb in my haste.

I take two steps forward, so focused on putting the moment with Sam behind me that I misjudge the distance between the kitchen door and the island. My right foot slams

into the island's base with so much force I hear something pop.

Fuck. Me.

Fuck my ever-loving life. You would think I'd know how to avoid that corner after spending ten-plus hours a day, seven days a week, for the last eighteen months in this kitchen. Yet, here I am, curled over the edge of the island, trying not to throw up on the trays still cradled in my arms while pain radiates through my foot into my lower leg.

Delightful.

"Jesus, Ellie! What happened?" Sam pulls the trays from my arms, easily moving them to the counter with one hand.

"Stubbed my toe," I only just manage to stop from adding "fucking hard" to the end of my sentence.

"Let me see" are the positively wild words from Sam's mouth. He even makes a little grabby motion toward my foot with his hands. Okay...that's a little adorable, but I can't fully appreciate it through the pain.

"Absolutely not. It's fine," The throbbing has dulled, and I try to put my foot onto the ground. I can tell it's a mistake before I even put my weight on it.

"It isn't fine," Sam growls behind me, swinging a stool from the corner to the island. "Sit," he commands, pointing at the chair. If I weren't in so much pain, I would argue about being told what to do in my own kitchen. As it is, sitting sounds like the best possible plan.

Sam kneels at my feet, making quick work of removing my shoe and expertly ignoring my protests. “Fuck, Ellie. That’s broken”.

“I don’t think it’s *that* bad,” I defend as we stare at the angry purple bruise spreading across my foot. Sam’s eyes cut to mine, and I can tell he’s holding back a scathing remark.

“I’m taking you to the hospital.”

Chapter Five: King

We don't go to St. Thomas Hospital. Instead, Ellie directed me to a small practice about ten minutes from the bakery. Pulling into the parking lot, I see a sign stating, "Dr. Bennett, Family GP".

"Dr. Bennett?" I ask, pulling into the parking spot nearest to the front doors.

"My oldest brother, William," Ellie explains, unfastening her seatbelt and beginning to push open her door.

"Wait," I demand, quickly getting out to rush around to her side of the car before she does something stupid like try to walk.

She fought me the whole way here. She didn't want to leave the bakery until it was clean. She didn't want to take my car. She tried to drive herself.

She tried to *drive herself*.

To the *hospital*.

With a *broken. right. foot*.

This woman is insane.

She's also incredibly funny and genuinely kind. And so fucking beautiful I can't take my eyes off her, even when she's glaring daggers at me like she is right now.

“I can do it myself,” Ellie insists the moment I open the door.

“Oh, I know,” I assure her, reaching out to help her from the vehicle. “I would just prefer if you didn’t do it yourself”.

I would prefer it if you hadn’t broken your foot. In fact, I would prefer it if you were never in pain again. It’s actually incredibly distressing to me that you’re in this much pain, and still insisting on doing all these other things before going to the hospital, you insufferable woman!

I have to bite my tongue not to say the words aloud. Ellie brings out a protectiveness in me that I hadn’t previously been aware of, and I’m finding it difficult to control.

Ellie hops twice on her left foot; one hand rests against the car as she gently sets her right foot against the ground before trying to take a step. She’s done this three times now, and I have to grit my teeth not to yell at her every time. Thankfully, I’m ready for it now, and I’m able to reach out and catch her before her leg gives out.

“That’s it,” I snap, pulling her toward me. “You’ve lost your walking privileges.” Before she can react or any dissenting words can come out of her perfect mouth, I bend down and scoop her into my arms.

Ellie lets out a squeak, her arms flailing helplessly before coming to rest around my neck. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing? I’m carrying you inside”. *Since you clearly can’t be trusted not to put weight on*

your foot.

Ellie splutters, but I feel her relax in my arms. I have to hold in the smile that brings to my face. I don't get to appreciate having her in my arms for long, though. We're not two steps from the car when the front door swings open. A young black woman in bright green scrubs and long braids comes rushing out to meet us, concern written on every inch of her face.

"Ellie! What happened?" The fear is evident in her voice as she quickly scans Ellie from head to toe, her eyes lingering on Ellie's swollen foot. She insisted on putting her sock back on, but it hasn't done much to hide her injury.

"I'm fine, Anna." Ellie quickly assures her before turning her head to glare up at me. "It really isn't *this* big of a deal."

"It definitely is," I correct, turning sideways to pass through the doors. The lobby is bright, the wall of windows facing the parking lot letting in the midday sun. I imagine the light wood floors and soft yellow walls help keep the area feeling light and bright, even when it's gloomy. I make my way toward the seating area, but Anna stops me before I can cross the room.

"Take her straight to the room," she motions us toward another door between the seating area and the nurses' station. I follow Anna through the door and into a long hallway beyond. The hallway matches the lobby, with the same light wood floors and a wall of windows to one side, the other lined with doors. Each door is marked with a number, and Anna quickly

leads us to the one marked with a shining silver four. “I’ll send Will your way as soon as he’s available.”

She reaches out a hand to pat Ellie’s shoulder as we pass through the door. “Thank you, Anna,” I smile over my shoulder, noting her look of surprise that I’ve remembered her name. I’m about to ask how long she thinks he’ll be, but I lose my train of thought when I see the room she’s led us to.

Everything is green.

The walls, the furniture, and even the ceiling are different shades of green. Several large plants hang in front of the plate glass window at the back of the room, and even a few smaller potted ones are dotted around the space. The right wall is made up of floor-to-ceiling cabinets with green glass doors, and the hospital bed in the center of the room has a green sheet over it.

Somehow, against all odds, the room works. All the different shades of green are cohesive and surprisingly calming.

Ellie huffs a laugh against my collarbone, the puff of air sending a shiver down my spine. I look down to see her smiling up at me and notice her eyes are the same startling green as the glass cabinet behind her. “We call this ‘the green room’.”

“I can’t imagine why.” Taking two quick steps toward the bed, I gently rest her on the edge of the mattress before stepping away. I hadn’t realized how comfortable I’d been with her in my arms until she’s no longer in them. “Oh.”

“Oh.” Ellie echoes back to me as she realizes that Anna has shut us into the room together.

I point at the door, “I’ll just—”

The door swings open, and a tall man with light blonde hair and electric blue scrubs comes waltzing into the room. He’s looking down at his phone, tapping away absently as he kicks the door closed behind him.

“What’d you do now, ya fucken clutz?” He asks the question to the room at large, only briefly glancing up to ensure Ellie is there. He must catch sight of me standing next to her, though, because he suddenly stops dead. His bright eyes lock on mine, a perfect mirror to Ellie’s. I see the moment he recognizes me, a look of surprise taking over his features.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t realize anyone else was here.”

“Sam, this is my brother, Will. Will, this is my... Sam”.

My Sam.

I know she only said it because she didn’t have a way to explain our relationship outside of “this is Sam, the guy who broke into the bakery and bled all over everything,” but it still sends warmth spreading through my chest.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, *Sam*,” His emphasis on my name proves that he knows exactly who I am.

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” I turn to Ellie, desperate to leave the room before her brother starts asking questions about how we know each other. “I’ll be in the lobby.”

My phone begins to ring, vibrating against my bouncing knee. It's been an hour and forty-five minutes, and I'm still waiting in the lobby for Ellie to come out.

Anna has stopped by a few times, bringing me snacks from the breakroom. I like her. She's quiet and confident, like a woman who knows exactly what she's doing. Being around her is going a long way to calm my nerves about what Will might have told Ellie about me.

I don't have to check the name flashing across my phone screen to know it's Miller. I texted him twenty minutes ago, saying I wouldn't make it to practice this afternoon.

"What the fuck are you doing that's so important?"

"Nothing. I'm just at the hospital, and—"

All sarcasm leaves his voice as Miller snaps to attention. "Oh, shit! What happened?"

Sighing, I rub a hand against my left eye, where a headache has begun to form. I didn't sleep last night, spending most of the night worrying over how I could change my reputation and the other half staring at the bakery through my living room window. "I'm not *in* the hospital. I took someone else to the hospital, and I'll have to drive her home".

"Her?"

"Yes," I don't elaborate.

Miller huffs into the phone. "Is that all I get?"

"Yes."

“No.”

“Fine,” it’s my turn to huff, sinking deeper into the chair. I chose one facing the parking lot, so I wouldn’t be tempted to stare at the door to the hallway the entire time. “You know how Coach called me into his office yesterday?”

“Oh, yeah. I meant to ask how that went”.

“Not great. I’m at the end of my leash with the board. I either clean up my act, or I get benched. Actually,” I wince, remembering the second half of Coach Maggert’s threat. “*We* get benched.”

“What the fuck did I do?”

“Got in a bar fight. Same as me,” I remind him, rubbing at my temple again. “Anyway, I was up all night worrying about what will happen if I can’t clean up my act”.

“So, naturally,” Miller drawls, and I know I won’t like where he’s going with this. “Not twenty-four hours later, you’re sitting with a mystery woman at the hospital. That won’t make a good headline *at all*”.

I laugh at his succinct analysis of the situation. “She isn’t a mystery woman. Her name is Ellie, and she runs the bakery on my street. We’re...” what? Flirting isn’t a relationship category, is it? “Friends. I needed someone to talk to, something to distract me from my spiraling thoughts. I assumed you would be balls-deep in your own distraction, so I stopped by to see Ellie instead of bothering you. She happened to break her foot while we were talking, and I offered to drive her to the hospital”.

That's the simplest way to explain all this, but I know I won't get away with skirting around the facts for long. I just don't feel like getting into the details of my attraction to Ellie in the middle of her brother's office.

"So, she's hot."

It isn't a question, and I groan at his directness. I can't lie to him when he asks me point-blank like that. "Yes."

"And you're sticking to this 'just friends' story?"

It's really fucking annoying when he sees through me like this. "Coach was clear: No bars, no fights, *no women*". A sound to my left has me looking up directly into Ellie's eyes. She's standing not six feet from me, crutches propped beneath both arms and a giant gray boot on her foot. "I gotta go, Mills."

"Fine. Talk to you tonight," he chirps, sounding entirely too happy for my liking. I can't imagine how annoying he will be about this the next time I see him.

"Are you ready?" Ellie nods toward the front doors, a strange look on her face. I nod back, standing quickly. Knowing Ellie, she will try to open the doors herself if I don't get to them first.

What did her brother say about me that has her making that face? Or was it something I said to Miller? I play back the conversation in my head, but I can't come up with anything that might have made her look at me like this. We're barely through the doors when she stops, spinning to face me as best she can on one foot. "Did you really mean that?"

Her words aren't accusatory, which is a good sign.
"Did I mean what?"

"Did you mean that we're friends?"

No. I want to be a whole lot more than friends with you. "Yes, I did."

"Good," she beams up at me, turning back toward the car. "Fair warning: It's been a long time since I've had a friend who isn't one of my brothers. I'm a bit out of practice".

It hurts me to my very soul that this beautiful, kind, caring woman wouldn't have a million people to call her friend. How am I the only person with that honor?

I can't fuck this up.

She slides into the passenger seat, handing her crutches to me with a light laugh. "I never really imagined that my brothers would be jealous of my friends, but Will helpfully informed me that knowing a Major League pitcher is a *big deal*. Even if he is desperately in need of rebranding".

The sound is so sweet it almost distracts me from what she's saying.

"Alright, let's hear it," I sigh, dropping heavily into the driver's seat before facing her. "What did Dr. Bennett have to say about me?"

"First of all, *adorable* that you called him Dr. Bennett. You can just call him Will," her smile is blinding, and I'm glad to see she's enjoying herself, even if it is at my expense. "He mostly just said a lot of things about you having a poor reputation with the media and that you are a total badass but tend to break women's hearts, so I should 'be careful.' He

wouldn't listen to me when I tried to explain we aren't dating. He's going to feel like a real dumbass when he realizes we're just friends".

Her laughter fills the car as I reverse out of the parking spot, but it does nothing to alleviate the sinking feeling in my gut. How did we go from being friends to being *just friends* so quickly?

Wait. Did I just fucking friend-zone myself?

—

"Seriously, Ellie. Let me fucking do this." I can't help but growl the words at her, reaching over her head to finish pulling open the door to the bakery.

"You don't have to do everything for me, Sam," she huffs in annoyance. I can tell she's already tired of being dependent on other people, and she's only had the crutches for half an hour.

I try to hide my laugh at her frustration as I follow her through the door. "No, but this is what friends do. Before you try to argue," I quickly add over the start of her protest. "If Miller were on crutches, I would open doors for him too. This is what being friends with me is like, sweetheart. You're just gonna have to get used to it".

She doesn't seem to have an argument for that, and I smile triumphantly as I move behind the counter toward the kitchen. "What can I help get set up for tomorrow?"

“Nothing,” she calls from the other side of the bakery lobby. “I can handle it.”

Pausing, I turn to face her, waiting for her to follow me toward the kitchen. She’s still standing by the doors, staring at a spot on the wall in the far corner with a surprised look on her face.

“Why are you staring at a ladder?”

Her response is quiet, and I wouldn’t have been able to hear it if I hadn’t moved to her side. “Because it’s a *ladder*.”

Her response makes no sense, so I try a different question. “Where does it lead?”

“My bedroom.”

That bit of information surprises me. I knew she lived above the bakery, but I hadn’t realized she used a *ladder* to get up there. “You can’t climb a ladder, Ellie.”

“Yes, I am realizing that as well.”

We both stare at the ladder in silence for another moment, and a plan begins to form in my head. She probably won’t go for it, but I have to try. “You can’t stay here.”

“I also realize that, yes.”

“I live across the street.” I try for nonchalance, but I’m not sure I’ve achieved it based on the way she whips around to face me.

“You do?”

“I do. I’m in the fancy building with all the windows. We even have an elevator,” here goes nothing. “One that you could easily use.”

“Why would I use the elevator in your apartment building?” Her confusion is adorable, and I have to stop myself from reaching out and folding her into my arms. That wouldn’t help my case here.

“You could stay with me.”

“Oh, no.” Her dismissal is immediate but not nearly as strong as I expected. I don’t say anything immediately, watching her think through my suggestion. “I couldn’t impose on you like that.”

“You wouldn’t be imposing,” I assure her, turning so we face one another fully. “It would be close to the bakery, so you wouldn’t have to rely on anyone to drive you or have to get an Uber every day. Plus, it’s free”. She’s thinking about it, but I can tell she still isn’t sure. “This is what friends are for, Ellie. Miller stays at my place all the time”.

“He does?”

He has, though it’s been when he’s too drunk to drive or he needs to hide from a woman. “He does.”

She hesitates again, her eyes darting between me and the ladder at the opposite end of the room. I can’t tell what she will say when she opens her mouth again, all I can hope is that it comes out in my favor.

Chapter Six: Ellie

I cannot believe I'm about to agree to this.

Sam and I barely know each other, and while he is right that his apartment will be the most convenient (and cheapest) option for me, I still don't know that moving in with him is the best idea.

Okay, I know it's a terrible idea, and I'm genuinely surprised I'm considering it.

"Fine," the word slips from my lips before I'm ready to say it. Sam's face instantly lights up, and I can feel an answering smile spread across my lips. "But you can't murder me."

"I pinky promise I won't murder you."

His response, complete with him extending one hand toward me, pinky out, has me laughing in earnest. "Yeah, no. The pinky promise actually doesn't make me feel safer".

"That's fair," he laughs, too, and I take a moment to note how his face changes when he is genuinely laughing. "What do you need?"

I must have zoned out staring at his face because he's looking at me expectantly now, and I'm not sure why. "What?"

"From the attic," he points toward the ladder, one eyebrow raised in question. "What do you need?"

“You can’t go up there,” my heart rate instantly triples when I realize what he’s offering. The attic is a mess of clothes, sheets, and—dear god. Vibrators. I left my vibrator out this morning; I’m almost sure of it. Even if I hadn’t, I usually keep it in the bin with my underwear, a place he would definitely have to get into unless I want him thinking I walk around commando all day.

Sam pipes up as if he can read my mind, “Ellie, it’s not like I’m going to go riffling through your underwear drawer. You can’t get up the ladder, and you’re gonna need clothes. This is strictly one friend packing a bag for another friend, and I won’t judge anything I see up there.”

No, this is one incredibly hot friend seeing his brand new friend’s *hot pink vibrator*. I can only hope he doesn’t think it being out has anything to do with him.

Even though it absolutely does.

“Do you have a dead body up there or something?” Sam’s question catches me off guard, startling a laugh out of me.

“Nothing that serious, but just,” I take a deep breath, hoping against all odds that the vibrator is at least under my comforter where he won’t be able to see it. “Promise we’ll still be friends after this”.

—

“Sam, this is a studio apartment.”

It is a truly *gorgeous* studio apartment that takes up the entire third floor of his building, but it's a studio all the same. The elevator opens directly into the room, with the kitchen to your right, followed by the bedroom area. To the left are the dining and living rooms, where an enormous couch dominates the far end of the space. The wall opposite the door is made up entirely of windows overlooking the city. I bet the views are to die for, but from this far away, all I can see is the sky.

“Technically, yes.”

“You didn't mention that when we talked about me staying with you.” I feel like my concerns are obvious, but Sam doesn't seem to understand what I'm getting at.

He raises an eyebrow at me, thankfully not the one still healing from the other night. “It's a pretty big space, so sometimes I forget it's a studio. If you're concerned about us getting in each other's way, don't be.”

Yeah, not so much concerned about that as I am that there's *only one bed*—a massive bed with a deep green comforter that looks more expensive than my car, but still. “I guess I just didn't realize that when you offered to let me stay with you, you intended for us to,” oh god, I do not want to say this right now. “Share a bed”.

“Oh, no!” Sam's eyes widen, and his gaze jumps from mine to the bed. “No, Ellie, *I'm* sleeping on the couch. I was always planning to sleep on the couch”.

I expect to feel relief at his words, but all I feel is disappointment. “Okay, that makes more sense. Although,” I frown at the couch, anything to not make eye contact with him right now. “I should be the one sleeping on the couch.”

“No,” He doesn’t hesitate; the word is out of his mouth before I’ve even finished my sentence. “Absolutely not. And I’m not arguing with you about this, either, so just drop it. Let me show you around”.

I can’t help but snort at that. There isn’t much to show since the entire room is one big open square. “I’m pretty sure I’ve got the layout down already, thanks.”

“Oh, really?” His smile is back, crinkling the skin next to his eyes. “What about those doors?” He gestures to three doors set into the right wall that I hadn’t noticed earlier. There’s one in the kitchen, one between the kitchen and the bed, and another near the windows. “Do you know what’s behind them?”

“I’m guessing one of them is a bathroom,” I snark back, glad to have returned to the neutral territory of teasing one another.

“Yeah, the far one. The middle is the laundry room and closet, and this one,” he points to the door closest to us. “Is the pantry.”

“I’m impressed you memorized such an exhaustive list of rooms. You must give this tour often,” I move a bit farther into the apartment, inching closer to the wall of windows. I’m a sucker for a city skyline.

“Not really,” Sam admits, following behind me at the same glacial pace I’ve set. I hate these fucking crutches. I keep wanting to take a step without them, but I know Sam will yell at me if I do. I’ll have to try it sometime when he isn’t home. “You’re one of the only people I’ve ever had in here.”

“Really?” That surprises me, especially since I spent a good hour today listening to my brother talk about how much of a ladies’ man Sam is. I expected him to have a long list of women who’d been in this apartment. Or maybe he just doesn’t care enough about his one-night stands to count them as visitors in his home. That thought doesn’t fit with anything I know about him, and I quickly dismiss it as a possibility.

“Oh, wow.”

I’ve finally made it to the other side of the apartment, and the exhausting journey was well worth it. You can see all of Cadence from here, including my tiny bakery on the street directly below us. I take a moment to find all my favorite spots. There’s the public park, both colleges, and...oh. In the center of it all, you have an unobstructed view of Carriage Park—home of the Cadence Cougars baseball team.

I have to bite my lip to stop the laugh from forcing its way up my throat.

“What’s so funny?”

“Oh, nothing.” A giggle escapes my lips, and I lift a hand to stifle it. “I was just noticing your view.”

“And that’s funny because...”

“It’s a love letter to Carriage Park.”

Sam is so close to me that I feel his laugh more than hear it. “You’re the first person to call me on that.”

I look up at him, shocked to see how close he is. “There’s no way I’m the *first* person to say something about this.” I gesture to the city beyond the windows but don’t take

my gaze from his face. He smiles down at me in a way that makes my heart skip.

“You are. Everyone else who’s been in this apartment has been a player as well, and they’re more jealous of the view than anything else. I suppose Hazel mentioned it the first time she came by, but only to say she wished she had a view this nice when they lived in the city”.

“Who’s Hazel?” I hope the question sounds casual and not like I’m trying to determine if Hazel is one of the women to have shared his bed.

“Hazel is Miller’s mom. Well, she’s basically my mom, too, since she raised me”.

“She did?”

He nods, his eyes dropping to the floor. “I keep forgetting you don’t know my history. Most people know about my childhood because they knew about my dad”.

I can’t help but feel guilty at my next words. “Should I know your dad?”

Sam huffs a laugh, shaking his head and turning toward the window, looking at the city beyond. “Honestly? It’s kind of nice you don’t”.

“You don’t have to explain it if you don’t want to.”

“I *do* want to because it will give you a better explanation of who I am.” The vibe of the conversation has taken on a more serious tone. Most of our conversations up to this point have either been us joking or butting heads. This feels like the kind of conversation that shifts your relationship at its very core.

I watch Sam choose his words carefully. “My father was,” he takes a deep breath, and my heart breaks for him. His father *was*. I can’t believe I didn’t realize that he’s only referenced his father in the past tense. “My father was Samuel Everett Kingston I.”

“That’s why you’re Samuel Everett Kingston II?”

“Exactly,” he laughs, but it’s missing his usual lightness. “My father was a great man. Strong, kind, generous. Determined. He was the second greatest pitcher in Major League Baseball history”.

Sam smiles at my expression of surprise that he followed so closely in his father’s footsteps. “He sounds like an impressive man.”

Sam laughs again, shaking his head as he smiles down at me. “You ruined my line, Ellie.”

“What does that mean?”

“Ninety-nine percent of the time when you tell someone that a person was the *second* greatest at something, they ask who was the best.”

“Oh shit,” I grasp at the opportunity to lighten the mood. “I didn’t realize I was fucking this up. Do it again,” I prompt, waiving my arm in a ‘hurry up’ gesture.

“Are you ready?” I nod enthusiastically. “My dad was the second greatest pitcher in Major League Baseball history.”

“Oh, wow!” I nearly shout, exaggerating my look of shocked awe. “But, wait? Who was the greatest?” Sam’s shoulders shake with silent laughter, and I hear him mumble something that sounds suspiciously like “a terrible actress”.

When he finally regains his composure, he continues.
“Samuel Everett Kingston II.”

I can't help the laugh that comes out of me at that.
“That is a terrible line.”

Sam laughs again, but it's softer this time. “It is. Plus, it's not even that impressive if you know anything about the history of baseball. I only beat his record because I've pitched for longer”. Sam's serious expression has returned, and I can tell that what he's about to say isn't going to lighten the mood.
“He was twenty-nine when he died.”

Oh, fuck. Twenty-nine is too young for anyone to die. I can't imagine how hard that must have been for Sam and his family. “Sam, I am so sorry. How old were you?”

“Three.”

Jesus, my heart breaks for him. I can't help but reach out, laying a hand against his bicep. I'm no longer surprised he worked so hard to follow in his father's footsteps. “That must have been so difficult for you and your mother.”

“Actually,” I don't like the sound of that *actually*. His eyes drift to mine from where they've been fixated on the window. I can see a well of sadness in them. “My mother died giving birth to me.”

“Fuck, Sam.”

“It's not exactly a happy bedtime story.” He sighs, resting a hand over mine. I hadn't realized I was still touching him. “That's how I ended up with the Miller's. Miller's dad was the first baseman for the Cadence Cougars for almost fifteen years. He and my father were best friends,” he smiles at

that, staring out the window with a far-off look. “Hazel and Wayne took me in and raised me as their own. I will never be able to repay them for all that they’ve done for me. I don’t know that I’ve ever even tried”.

“What do you mean?”

“The fights, my drama in the media, I just can’t seem to stay out of trouble. Since my father is a legend in this town, I knew the board of the Cougars wouldn’t fire me, and I’ve taken advantage of that. I never tried to clean up my act because I knew firing me would be a catalyst between them and the fans”. His shoulders slump and he begins to shake his head dejectedly. “They’ve threatened to bench me next season if I get in trouble again, but it’s more than that this time. They’re going to bench Miller, too”.

I don’t have to exaggerate my look of shock this time. “Can they do that?”

“They can. They can do anything they want.” I can feel how heavy this is weighing on him. Suddenly, it makes sense why he would be desperate to change his reputation. “The Millers raised me. They don’t deserve for my actions to bring down their son’s dreams. Baseball is the only thing Miller’s ever truly loved. The only life he’s ever wanted to live”.

I can’t let him spiral, so I ask the question that’s been bugging me. “You keep saying ‘The Millers’, but isn’t your friend’s first name Miller?”

“You really don’t know anything about baseball,” his smile is crooked, pulling at one corner of his mouth.

“Is this one of those ‘history of baseball’ things?” A huff pushes past his lips, and...was that an eye roll?

“More like a history of sports. When you play sports, there’s a tendency for people to call you by your last name. It becomes a nickname of sorts. Miller’s full name is Nathaniel Miller, but he’s been playing sports for so long that everyone has always called him ‘Miller’. It’s why people call me ‘King’.” He shrugs, leaning one hip against the back of the couch as if he’s settling in to tell a long story. “My father was ‘Kingston,’ and it would get too confusing if we both went by that, so my name got shortened to ‘King’.”

“Two questions,” I hold up my pointer and index finger as if to tick my questions off.

“Go for it.”

“You said Miller’s dad played First Base. Was he not also called Miller?”

Sam smiles, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “No, he was ‘Piney’.”

“What? Why?”

“Is that your second question?” He raises his eyebrow, and I bite my tongue.

“No,” I sigh, rolling my eyes at his smug look. “If everyone calls you ‘King’, why did you introduce yourself to me as Sam?” His smile turns sheepish, and I find myself staring at his face a bit too intently.

“I like that you call me Sam,” he admits, clearing his throat quickly. “Initially, I just didn’t want to introduce myself to you as King in case it caused you to recognize me. Then it

was just nice to hear someone refer to me in a way that wasn't associated with my past. It's like Sam was a different person," he rubs at his neck, avoiding eye contact with me as he says the next part. "Sam is the person I'm trying to be. He already has a better reputation. He would never get in a bar fight—"

"I knew it wasn't a bear attack," I dramatically hiss the words under my breath, and they get the reaction I'm looking for. Sam laughs loudly, and I can feel the weight of our conversation lift from the air.

"*Sam* may or may not occasionally exaggerate stories to his friends. That's another thing," he points at me triumphantly. "*Sam* has more friends than just Miller."

"You know, I've heard that about Sam. Everyone says he's a nice guy with lots of friends." We laugh again, and my eyes drift to the city beyond the window. It's clear there are many things I still don't know about Sam, but I know one thing: I won't ever believe anything written about him in the media.

Chapter Seven: King

The elevator dings just as Ellie disappears into the bathroom.

The doors slide open, revealing Miller with two large pizza boxes balanced in his left hand, one six-pack pinned beneath his right arm, and another clutched in his right hand. There's a white bag gripped between his teeth, but he still manages to coherently ask, "Why the fuck aren't you answering your phone?"

I move toward him, grabbing the bag from between his teeth and smiling when I realize it's just a shit load of Parmesan cheese packets. "I never heard it ring."

"I tried to call three different times," he moves around me, sliding the pizzas onto the island before making his way to the fridge. I watch as he expertly shoves things around, making room for the two six-packs by removing the remnants of an old one.

He pops the tops of the remaining beers spinning to face me with one outstretched. "I told you I'm not drinking anymore."

"I thought you weren't drinking *in bars* anymore. I don't remember you saying anything about not drinking in the comfort of your own home".

He isn't wrong there, and I gratefully take the ice-cold beer from him. I'm about to ask what he's doing here when a noise from the bathroom catches Miller's attention, and I realize I never told Miller that Ellie was moving in with me. I didn't tell Miller much of anything about Ellie.

"Oh, my God," his voice carries easily in the open space, causing me to wince. "You have a woman here!" He stage whispers the words at me, pointing toward the bathroom door with the biggest shit-eating grin I've seen on his face in years.

"It isn't like that."

"I think it's *exactly* like that."

It's impressive that he can smile that wide while sipping his beer. "Miller, we talked *this morning* about how I wouldn't be sleeping around anymore."

Miller rolls his eyes dramatically. "Yeah, I thought that's why you had her *in your apartment*. So no one would see you in public with her".

"Will you keep your voice down? She's gonna hear you and think I'm embarrassed of her." I almost shout at him but manage to keep my voice even.

"Hang on. Do you want people to see you with her?"

Before I can call him an idiot, Ellie comes hobbling out of the bathroom, grumbling about her crutches and evidently unaware that we have a guest.

"Oh!" Ellie's eyes settle on Miller, a look of surprise taking over her previous frown. "You must be Miller!"

Miller's eyes widen, darting to me briefly before he turns his megawatt smile on Ellie.

“You must be the baker!”

Fuck. The asshole doesn't remember her name. Thankfully, Ellie laughs, slowly making her way toward the kitchen and extending a hand to Miller for him to shake. “Ellie Bennett. It's a pleasure to meet you”.

“Nathaniel Miller. And I can assure you, the pleasure is all mine”. I don't like the tone of his voice as he says it, his smile hinting at a leer.

“I think that's a long enough handshake,” my words are directed at Miller, and I know he can hear the undertone of them ‘let go of her or I'll break your fucking fingers’.

He smiles at me over his shoulder as he slowly lets go of Ellie's hand. “Can I get you a slice of pizza, Ellie?” Miller's tone is still too flirtatious for my liking, and I know that he's doing it intentionally. Nothing makes him happier than getting under my skin.

“Oh yes, I'm starving.”

“You are?” She hadn't mentioned being hungry at any point this evening, or I would've gotten food for us. Thinking back over the day, I realize I hadn't seen her eat a single time, and I've been with her since four am.

“Good because I brought more than enough.” Miller throws open the pizza boxes, revealing an extra large pepperoni and a fully loaded supreme. “King wasn't answering his phone, so I didn't know he had a guest, or I

would've found out what kind of pizza you like." The side eye accompanying that statement is pointed.

"That's fine. I like pepperoni." Ellie smiles at Miller, reaching out to pull a plate from the kitchen cabinet.

"Can I get you a beer?" I don't love that Miller is playing host in my home, and I glare at his back as he makes his way to the fridge. I swear, if Miller starts hitting on her, I'll break his damn nose.

"Sam?" My eyes snap to Ellie's, and I realize she asked me a question, but I don't know what it is.

"Huh?"

Ellie chuckles, pointing to the boxes in front of her. "Do you want some pizza?"

"Of course," I move to her side, grabbing my own plate on my way around the island. Miller returns with Ellie's beer, and we quickly fill our plates.

Miller moves around the island toward the living room as soon as his plate is loaded with all the pizza it can hold. I have a dining table, but no one ever uses it. We always eat on the couch, usually while watching sports, though the occasional shitty reality tv show finds its way into the rotation.

"Let me," I murmur to Ellie, cutting off her attempt to grab her plate, beer, and crutches. When she narrows her eyes, I smile brightly back at her. "This is—"

"If you say 'what friends are for'," she threatens, rolling her eyes but moving toward the living room. I smile after her, easily balancing a plate in each hand and both beers under one arm.

Ellie is still giggling at Miller's enthusiastic rendition of the dance scene from the movie we've just finished when she stands, making her way slowly to the bathroom.

"I like her."

"I can tell." Ellie hadn't even fully settled into the couch before she and Miller were bonding over some tv show I've never heard of. They haven't stopped talking since, not even when we finally decided on a movie to watch. At one point, I nearly offered to switch seats with Miller so they wouldn't have to talk across me all night.

"Somebody sounds jealous."

"I'm not jealous, but I am glad you like her." Miller's smile is enormous, stretching nearly from ear to ear, and I can't stop myself from ruining his fun. "Since she'll be around so much for the next few weeks."

"For a few weeks?"

I shrug, reaching forward to grab the last slice of cold pizza, forcing myself to keep a serious look on my face even as a laugh bubbles up in my throat. "Yeah, she's living here until her foot is healed."

Until this moment, I wasn't aware you could feel someone go still. I knew Miller would hate the idea of Ellie living with me, he has very specific rules about sharing space

with women, but I didn't think it would break him. "Are you okay?"

"She lives with you?"

"Yes."

"You met her on Saturday. It's *Tuesday*, and she *lives with you*. Are you insane?" Miller's wide eyes haven't left my face since I told him the news, so he sees the moment my face cracks into a smile. "Oh, thank fuck. I knew you had to be joking."

I shake my head, enjoying this moment more than I should. It's just so nice to be the one giving Miller shit for once. "I am not joking. She moved in this afternoon."

"Fuck off."

"No."

"How did this happen?" He demands, turning on the couch to face me. "You know better than to move a woman in, King!"

Shrugging, I take the last bite of pizza, chewing slowly and carefully before answering. "She had nowhere else to go."

"That is so fucking false," Miller points an accusatory finger at me, and I slap it away from my face. "I've known her for three hours, and I can name at least two other places she could have gone."

I huff, crossing my arms over my chest. "None that would be as convenient as this."

"That's such a rookie move! This is how it starts. Next thing you know, you'll be casually dating, then she'll move in

permanently, and then you get married, and have babies, and my life is ruined!”

“Did you just make this about you?”

Miller gives me his patented ‘*don’t be a fucking idiot*’ look. “This is a slippery slope, King. You better know what you’re doing.”

“I do.” I do not.

“Good,” Miller nods, his body relaxing back against the couch. He’s silent for a moment, seemingly thinking over our conversation. “Does she have any hot friends?”

I’m saved from having to respond by Ellie hobbling back out of the bathroom. “Are we going to watch something else?”

“Maybe another time, Ells,” Miller slaps both hands against his knees, pushing himself into a standing position. “I have a feeling I’ve forgotten somewhere I need to be.”

“You...” Ellie’s look of confusion swings between Miller and me.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be back,” he winks at her, moving around the couch toward the elevator doors. I can’t stop myself from glaring at him over Ellie’s shoulder.

Ellie smiles, giving him a small wave. “It was nice to meet you.”

“It was very nice to meet you too, Ellie.” Miller’s soft laugh follows him into the elevator, where the doors blissfully close quickly behind him.

“What was that about?” Ellie’s face is suspicious, but a jaw-splitting yawn replaces the look.

“Seems like maybe it’s time for bed,” I laugh, resisting the urge to reach out and pull her into my arms. I want nothing more than to carry her to bed, but I know that won’t go over well.

She nods, slowly blinking up at me. “It’s at least an hour past my bedtime,” she sheepishly admits, crutching toward the bag I packed for her earlier today. “Do you have any sheets I can throw on the couch?”

“Ellie, you are not sleeping on the couch.”

“Yes, I am.” She shoots back, sounding entirely too stern for someone so tired.

I cross my arms, stopping next to where she’s attempting to pick up her bag. “No, you aren’t. This couch is unbearably uncomfortable. There’s no way I will allow you to sleep on it.”

“It is pretty uncomfortable,” she sighs, standing up to face me again, the bag secured across her chest. “So you probably shouldn’t be sleeping on it either.”

“There’s nowhere else to sleep. I don’t have an air mattress.”

“No, but you do have a king-size bed.” We both swivel to stare at the bed sitting unassumingly beside us. “It looks big enough to share.”

I don’t know if it’s my imagination, but I swear that Ellie’s voice has gone soft in a way that I’ve not heard from her before. “I suppose I’m willing to try if you are.”

“We can always argue about who gets the couch tomorrow night if it turns out to be a disaster.”

I wish I knew what kind of disaster she is expecting, or at least how she would define a disaster when it comes to sharing a bed with me.

“Do you want the left or the right?”

—

I cannot share a bed with Ellie.

There’s no way I can keep my hands to myself all night. It’s a large bed, more than big enough for us to each pick a side and stick to it, but I know myself. I’ll be reaching for her the moment I fall asleep. Then she’ll be pressed against me; all sleep warm and pliant.

Shaking my head, I move to the laundry room, searching the shelves for a pair of sweatpants decent enough to wear to bed tonight. Usually, I would sleep in just my underwear, but I have a feeling the more layers between us, the better.

Reaching for a shirt, I pause with my hand on the sleeve. I can see my reflection in the mirror on the wall beside me, my tattoos standing out against my winter-whitened skin. I’m reminded of the day in the bakery when Ellie caught sight of the tattoos on my arm. I could feel the weight of her gaze following my every move. That is only a quarter of the ink covering my body.

How would she react to seeing the rest?

I leave the shirt hanging on the rack.

Ellie still isn't out of the bathroom by the time I make it back to bed, and I find myself hesitating before getting in. Selfishly, I want Ellie to see my tattoos before we get into bed. I want her to be able to rake those gorgeous green eyes over my entire body before she has to spend the night lying in bed beside me.

Give her something to dream about.

Needing something to do with my hands, I spot a pile of cables on Ellie's nightstand. I quickly untangle them and plug each into the power strip next to the bed. That took precisely two minutes.

If she doesn't come out of the bathroom soon, I might actually go insane.

I wait three more minutes before I can't take it anymore. Pushing to my feet, I make my way to the bathroom door, but I can't bring myself to knock. What if she hasn't been in there as long as it feels like? Then I'm the asshole who hurried her out of the bathroom when she was just trying to change.

Before I can move from my spot outside the door, it swings open.

Chapter Eight: Ellie

Why did I have to open my mouth? Now I'm desperately digging through my bag of clothes, looking for anything even remotely appropriate to wear while *sharing a bed with Sam*.

I can't exactly roll up to his bedside in my electric blue pajama shorts and tie-dye Yellow Submarine crop top that I wear to bed every night. It doesn't look like I have much choice in the matter, considering the only other clothes in the bag are chunky sweaters and jeans.

Balancing on one foot while trying to pull my shorts on nearly ends in disaster. I've never had a great center of gravity, and I nearly topple ass over teakettle into the side of King's shower.

I look around the large bathroom for something to hold onto that won't end in an additional injury and find myself at a loss. Everything in here has pointed corners and sharp edges. Even the vanity is a floating slab of concrete. The last thing I need is a concussion to go with my fractured foot. It looks like I'm getting dressed on the toilet.

After what feels like an eternity, I'm dressed in my ridiculous pj's and one fuzzy sock. Now I have to walk out there and face Sam. I can do this.

Maybe he won't even notice?

All hope of Sam not noticing is shattered when I bump into him outside the bathroom door.

Holy. Fuck.

He's shirtless, and...damn. I knew he had several tattoos on his left arm, but I didn't realize their extent. They cover his entire left arm, bleeding onto his chest from his collarbone down his sternum and across his abdomen.

I couldn't stop my eyes from tracing over his body even if I wanted to. I'm shocked to see several of them disappear below the line of his low-slung sweatpants. His tattoos are all different patterns and objects in varying styles and colors, but somehow they flow. It's like I'm reading a story on his skin, and I can't get enough of it. In fact, I'm acutely aware I'm not getting all of it when my eyes fixate on the spot where two of the watercolor designs disappear below the line of his sweatpants.

Sam's body is like nothing I've ever seen before. He's a genuine Adonis come to life. The defined edges of his muscles and long lines of his abdomen call to me. I want to trace every line with my fingers and tongue, memorizing every drop of ink covering his skin. I nearly reach out and touch him before my brain comes back online.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry." I'm unsure if I'm apologizing for bumping into him or for standing here drooling for the last minute. Either way, I'm not actually sorry.

"It's fine. I was just coming to...check on you." He sounds unsure of the last words, and I feel a blush creeping up my neck at the implication. He was coming to *check on me*? Was I in the bathroom for that long?

“Yeah, sorry. It’s just a little awkward getting used to the boot.” I trail off, getting distracted again when I notice there aren’t any tattoos on his right arm or side. I wonder why he’s chosen to put so much ink on only one side of his body. Does he have plans for the blank spots? Will his tattooed skin feel different than the rest?

Sam clears his throat, opening his mouth as if to say something, but quickly shuts it again. With a start, I realize I’m still standing directly between him in the bathroom, staring at him like he’s my last meal. “Shit! Sorry, let me just—” We move in the same direction as I try to get out of his way, and my chest collides with him again.

It’s annoying how good he smells right now. No one should smell this good at the end of the day! He should smell like he’s been existing in the world all day, not like he’s just stepped out of a Men’s Cologne ad. I mentally caption the ad “freshly cut grass and swagger” and have to stop myself from giggling at my own stupid joke.

Sam gently places both hands on my shoulders, effectively holding me still as he steps around me. I’ve barely processed the feel of his hands against my skin before he’s gone.

I’m still standing there, staring at the bed, when I hear the bathroom door close. “Great job, Ellie. That wasn’t weird at all,” I mumble, resting my crutches against the wall as I slide my duffel bag beneath the bed. I reach for the chargers I left on the nightstand, only to find that Sam has already plugged them in for me.

It's surprising how thoughtful he can be, and I'm not used to having someone look out for me in the small ways he does.

I settle into the bed, waiting for Sam to come out of the bathroom. I avert my eyes when he finally appears again, shutting off all the lights before sliding under the covers on his side of the bed. He's far enough away from me that I am not sure I could touch him even if I wanted to.

If I wanted to. Ha.

“Good night, Ellie.”

“Good night, Sam,” I say the words back, knowing that I won't fall asleep anytime soon. I am too aware that he's on the other side of the bed, looking like a fucking wet dream.

At this rate, I may never sleep again.

—

Sam wraps his arms around me, pulling our bodies together in the dark. Hot breaths ghost across my neck as he traces a line down my throat with the tip of his nose. I whimper when his hand moves beneath my shirt, running up my side to cup the bottom of my breast, his thumb brushing against my nipple. “Sam,” I breathe his name into the space between us, rolling my hips into his, begging for more.

My alarm cuts through the silence of the apartment, startling me awake. I reach for the phone, misjudging how close I am to the edge of the mattress. Thankfully, a hand

splays across my stomach, stopping me before I fall off the bed.

Sam is pressed against my back, his body running the entire length of mine. His heat, the feel of his breath against my neck, and his strong arm wrapped around my waist nearly have me whimpering.

“Easy, Ellie.” Sam’s voice is like gravel first thing in the morning. He pulls me back from the edge slowly, his hand sliding across my rib cage, causing his knuckles to brush against the bottom of my breast. I’m instantly reminded of my dream, and I have to close my eyes against the image.

I don’t know if it’s the newness of waking up in bed with another person, the fucking *sex dream* I was having, or the fact that I haven’t gotten laid in over a year, but every part of my body is screaming for Sam to touch me. His hand lingers against my ribs, and my brain screams at me to do something—*anything*. Move closer, turn over, grab his hand, and press it exactly where I need it. Anything that isn’t just waiting for him to make the first move.

I know his coach said, “no women,” but it seems far more likely that he meant “don’t date” and not “don’t rail Ellie into the mattress like she’s fucking dying for you to do”.

I don’t know his Coach, but I think the man would agree with me on this one.

“It is very early,” Sam grumbles against my back before rolling away to grab his phone. The moment his body moves from mine, I release a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. The lack of oxygen must be why my brain and body had been completely malfunctioning.

I need out of this bed.

Now.

Scrambling to my feet with this ridiculous fucking boot on is basically impossible, and I nearly knock over my crutches in my haste to stand. Thankfully, I manage to catch them before either clatters to the floor, drawing even more attention to my blatant attempt to escape.

Once the bathroom door is safely shut behind me, I slump against it, taking several deep breaths in through my nose and out through my mouth to try and calm my racing heart.

“What *the fuck* was that?”

—

Thirty minutes later, I'm moving clumsily around the bakery kitchen when I hear the front door open. Sam offered to accompany me today, but I assured him that Elliot would be here to help so he could go back to sleep.

“Will said you hurt your foot, but he didn't mention the crutches”. Elliot's soft voice has me turning to face him in the kitchen doorway. I can't help but snort a laugh at his wild mess of blonde hair sticking out in every direction. He's looking at me with concern written across his face. “I figured if you were really hurt, you would've texted me, but Will said you might be too busy with the *new man* in your life”. He moves to my side when I don't respond, stepping between the coffee maker and me. “What are you doing with King, Ellie?”

“We’re friends,” I shrug, lightly bumping Elliot out of the way so I can grab a coffee mug.

“Honey, there’s no ‘friends’ with someone that looks like King.” Elliot laughs at my eye roll. “You think I’m joking, but I just finished a novel with this exact plot. The woman became friends with this super hot rich guy. Next thing you know, they’re going on fake dates, and they had to share a bed in Vegas, and—” I choke on my coffee, steaming hot liquid spraying across the counter in front of me. “Oh, my God!”

“Nothing happened.”

Elliot points an accusatory finger at me. “I call bullshit. You slept with him!”

“No, I didn’t! Well...technically, I did, but we didn’t have sex. It was actual *sleeping*,” though I’m not sure that makes the situation sound any better.

“What the fuck does that even mean?”

I huff, grabbing a towel to wipe up my mess. “We slept in the same bed, but nothing *at all* happened.”

“What were you doing in his bed?”

“I couldn’t get up the ladder.”

Elliot stares at me silently for a moment before he bursts out laughing. “It might just be the lack of caffeine, but I don’t know what the fuck that means.”

“I broke my stupid fucking foot, and I live up a ladder!” My laughter joins his, and I quickly explain Sam’s offer to let me stay in his apartment.

“Oh, I’m sure it was a total accident that he lives in a studio apartment where there is *literally only one bed.*”

Elliot wiggles his eyebrows at me, and I slap him with the towel. “It was! He was going to sleep on the couch”.

“And what had him sleeping in the bed instead?”

I fight to control the blush creeping up my neck. “Oh, uh...”

“Elizabeth Jane, did you proposition that man?”

“It wasn’t a proposition!” My voice carries through the kitchen, bouncing back at us from every side. “We were arguing about who would sleep on the couch, and he said it was too uncomfortable for me to sleep on with my foot. All I did was suggest we could share the bed since it’s big enough for both of us.”

Elliot stares at me with wide eyes, not saying anything at all.

Damn him.

“I do hear how it sounds.”

“Do you?”

I roll my eyes and decide it’s time to change the subject. “Do you want to go to Target this afternoon?”

“Of course,” he rolls with the subject change, and I have to stop myself from sighing in relief. “Do you need something in particular?”

“No, just general shopping.”

“So...sex stuff.”

“I fucking swear,” Elliot throws his head back in laughter as I chuck the balled-up towel at his head.

If he’s laughing this hard at the idea of me buying “sex stuff,” I can only imagine how much shit he’s going to give me when he sees that all I’m buying are matching pajama sets.

I bought more than just pajama sets.

In my defense, that really was all I was planning to buy, but then Elliot had to go and make a stupid fucking joke about “sex stuff,” and I realized my vibrator was still stuck in the attic.

So I bought a new one.

It’s a fancy new one with several intensity settings that my old vibrator lacked. Just pulling the bright purple toy out of the package has my body heating up, but I don’t have time to use it before Sam is due home. Besides, I still need to charge it before it will even—oh.

Apparently, this particular sex toy comes precharged, and a soft buzzing sound fills the air in the bathroom. I press the button two more times, and the buzzing intensifies. When I reach the fifth setting, it sounds like an electric razor is humming in my ears.

It’s twice as loud as my old one, and I hope it’s twice as good. Since I won’t be using it when Sam is home, the vibrations’ volume doesn’t bother me. I click the button again,

and the vibrations cut just in time for me to hear the elevator doors chime.

Panic fills my chest as I look for anywhere to hide the obnoxiously purple sex toy. Why are these things always the brightest possible colors? It makes them impossible to stash away in dark corners.

Ha.

Focus, Ellie.

My duffel bag is still sitting open next to the bed. If I can just get to it, I can hide the vibrator at the bottom and hope to all that is holy that Sam doesn't see me do it. Shoving the vibrator in the waistband of my jeans, I reach for my crutches before taking two deep breaths and opening the bathroom door.

Chapter Nine: King

Crack.

She was in my arms this morning.

Crack.

Wearing those adorable sleep shorts, her long legs tangled in my sheets.

Crack.

That tight little shirt leaving nothing to the imagination.

Crack.

“How’s the slippery slope?” I roll my eyes at Miller’s comment, lining up my stance to swing at the next ball hurtling toward me from the pitching machine.

Crack.

The ball flies into the net at the far end of the batting cage, and I know it would’ve been a home run. It’s the last ball for my round, and I step out of the batting area, letting Miller take over.

“You’re awfully quiet this morning,” Miller’s voice trails off as he slaps a helmet onto his head. He’s clearly waiting for me to say something, but I refuse to give in that easily. “Anything happen that I should know about?”

We hadn't planned on batting today, but I'd still been full of energy after our practice and managed to talk Miller into coming with me. We've both changed back into our jeans and sweatshirts, though Miller's look more like something you'd wear to the batting cages than mine.

I have a taste for the finer things in life, and I know my cashmere sweaters look ridiculous, but I can guarantee they're more comfortable than the scratchy wool ones. Miller would disagree, though. He takes great pride in wearing his itchy old sweaters until they're threadbare.

"Nothing happened."

"Oh, I see," Miller's smile is bright as he moves past me into the batting cage.

I sigh, leaning with my bat on the ground beside me. The batting cages are as dead as the rest of the stadium this time of year, and I'm glad for our lack of audience.

"Nothing happened," I repeat as Miller takes his position over the fake plate.

Crack.

"Why don't you just say what's on your mind?"

I narrow my eyes at his back, weighing the odds of him responding well to this. The odds aren't great, but I've seen worse. "If I tell you, will you help me figure out a solution?"

Crack.

"Lay it on me, big man."

Sighing, I tell Miller everything that happened between Ellie and me, starting with a general overview of the first night

and only leaving out my internal monologues of how fucking perfect she is. By the time I'm finished, Miller is leaving the batting cage, pulling his helmet off and dropping it on the bench beside me.

“I don't see how any of this is a problem.”

“The problem is that if I sleep with Ellie and it goes south, it will create a whole lot of problems that I'm not prepared to deal with,” I slide the zipper shut on my bag, just as Miller does the same on his.

He huffs, hefting the bag onto his shoulder. “Like what? You go back to *not* visiting the bakery on your street?”

“More like you and I spend the entire next season on the fucking bench.” Miller's eyes widen as the full meaning of my words sets in. “Let's say I sit Ellie down and explain that I would like to be more than friends with her. What's she going to say?”

“Hell yeah, let's get it on.”

I shake my head, beginning to walk through the stadium training area toward our cars. “Try something like, ‘oh, so you had me move in with you under the guise of being “friends” when really you just wanted to sleep with me the whole time? That's fucked up.’ Then she goes to the media, and we get benched”.

“I hadn't thought of that,” Miller admits, waiving to the janitors as we pass the maintenance office. “Do you really think that Ellie would go to the media?”

Do I? I try to imagine Ellie running to do a tell-all, and I just can't picture it. “I have no idea. My gut says no, but my

gut has been wrong in the past.”

Miller nods, pushing through the door into the parking garage. “I bet you could do the Litmus Test to see if she’s trustworthy.”

“What Litmus Test?” I narrow my eyes at him, unsure if he’s fucking with me or not. We learned about litmus tests in high school, and Miller has used the term in place of the word “test” ever since. Sometimes he gets it right, but other times...

“The one I use every time I start hooking up with someone new. I’ve told you about it before.”

I generally zone out when Miller starts talking about the women he’s “hooking up with”, mostly for my own sanity. Somehow, I know I’ll regret my next words before I’m even done saying them. “Explain it to me again.”

Miller’s laugh echoes off the walls in the nearly empty parking garage. “I knew you weren’t fucking listening to me.”

“Just fucking tell me about your stupid test.”

“The Litmus Test isn’t stupid. It’s a foolproof way to gauge if a woman is getting too serious. However, I think it can be changed to fit this situation.” Miller scrunches his face in thought, dropping the tailgate on his truck to throw his bag in the back.

“You will eventually have to *actually explain* the Litmus Test to me,” I huff at him, throwing my bag in the trunk of my Escalade.

Miller laughs, crossing his arms and leaning his hip against the tailgate. “It’s not an exact science,” a litmus test *is* an exact science, “but you have three things you to watch for,

and if she checks all three boxes, you get the fuck out of there. Or, I would get the fuck out of there, but I guess you would be getting *in* there.”

I very much want to hit him right now. “You’re at the end of my patience, Miller. What kind of things would I be looking for?”

Miller holds up three fingers, ticking them off as he explains each point. “First: does she introduce you to her family? Not her friends, her *family*. There’s a difference.”

I can’t remember any of the women who went running to the Cadence Chronicles introducing me to their families, so he might be onto something there.

“Second: Does she initiate things? Is she texting you first? Does she reach for you whenever you’re close? Is she constantly coming up with ways to spend time together?” Miller visibly shivers, and I can’t help but roll my eyes at his dramatics.

“And the third?” So far, all of this makes sense, but I wouldn’t put it past Miller to have a ridiculous third test.

“Well, in my test it’s: Does she talk about ‘the future’? Anything more than a week, and you’re fucked. For your test, it should probably be: Does she talk to the media?” Miller’s brows pull to the center of his forehead, and I swear I can hear him thinking. After a moment, his face smooths, and he turns his megawatt smile on me again.

“Either way, that’s the foolproof Litmus Test,” Miller snaps the tailgate closed on his truck, proudly puffing his chest out. “Works every time.”

We walk through the doors of Betty's Diner a little after six and are immediately greeted at the door by Betty's daughter, Sarah. She's been operating the diner for as long as we've been coming here; she welcomed us into her family with kind eyes and an easy smile. Sarah's always the first to shut down anyone who tries to talk to us about baseball, good or bad. She once confessed to me that she wasn't sure we would come back if people were gawking at us, so she swore all her regulars to secrecy and told them she would stop serving them if they tried to "talk shop" with any of us.

It worked. Betty's has become a regular spot for us in the off-season. It's nice to go somewhere and know that people won't stop you with questions or take your photo when they think you aren't looking. Plus, the food is incredible.

"My boys!" Sarah greets us with open arms, pulling us into a group hug in the middle of the cramped diner entryway. Betty's isn't a large restaurant, and every available inch of wall space is covered in historical photos, making it feel even smaller. With the entire left wall taken up with booths and the right side dedicated to the permanently-sticky diner counter that faces the open kitchen, there's hardly room to breathe, much less move.

It's one of my favorite places.

There used to be more of us who came to these off-season dinners, but over the years, people have had families or

been traded to teams in other cities.

“Hey, Sar,” Miller squeezes one arm around her, dropping a kiss on the top of her head. Sarah is a good foot shorter than us, but that hasn’t ever stopped her from bossing us around.

“I have new girl starting tonight,” she begins leading us to the back of the diner toward a table already inhabited by our first baseman, Matthew Grady. “She’s still learning, so be easy on her.” Sarah turns a narrowed gaze toward Miller, “and no flirting”.

Miller brings a hand to his chest dramatically. “I would *never*,” he gasps, but we all see his eyes darting around the room, trying to catch a glimpse of the new server. “Just out of curiosity,” here it comes. “Is she single?”

Sarah slaps at Miller’s arm, giving him a stern look. “Don’t start with me, mister. Now, sit”. She points at our table before walking purposefully toward the kitchen.

She’s probably on her way to warn this poor new woman about Miller’s playboy reputation.

Grady is sitting on the table’s far side, his blonde hair and suntanned skin making him stand out in bleak winter atmosphere. Grady is always quick to laugh, and he’s currently trying to hold one in at the exaggerated look of shock on Miller’s face as he watches Sarah walk away.

A chuckle manages to escape Grady’s lips, and Miller instantly rounds on him. They stare each other down, each trying not to be the first to blink, like the children they are.

This game never lasts long, and Grady almost always loses because he can't stop laughing.

“A staring contest already?” I forcefully slap Miller on the back, making him step forward. The motion breaks his concentration, and Grady throws both arms in the air, shouting triumphantly at his victory.

“That was cheating,” Miller drops into his seat next to me, and I try not to roll my eyes at the pouting look on his face.

“Where's Steal?”

“He said he'll meet us here,” Miller shrugs, reaching for a menu even though we all have it memorized. We meet here two or three times a month in the off-season, depending on everyone's schedules, and most of us order the same food every time.

“Y'all just can't be without me, huh?” Steal's southern drawl alerts us to his arrival as he slowly approaches our table. Everything Steal does is slow until he's on the field. Grady kicks Steal's chair slightly away from the table, pushing the seat into Steal's outstretched hand. He spins the chair, sitting in it backward while shooting each of us a big smile.

Steal is your typical country boy, always in boots and Wranglers and recently with a curly brown mullet on his head. He and Miller “jokingly” participated in No-Shave-November, but neither got rid of their mustaches when the month ended. Miller's came in fully and is meticulously cared for, being kept to a specific length that best compliments the perfectly groomed stubble he has grown in the last few months. Steal's mustache is thin and refuses to connect to his equally patchy

beard. It didn't stop him from marrying out of his league, though, something we have all poked fun at once or twice.

“Glad you could finally join us,” Grady shoots an amused gaze at Steal, sliding a menu toward him from the stack in the middle of the table. Steal opens his mouth to respond, but our waitress chooses that moment to make her appearance. She looks to be in her mid-to-late twenties, with long brown hair and big brown eyes, and her name tag reads “Lexi!” Miller takes one look at her before turning a wide-eyed face toward me.

Fuck.

Being friends with someone for your entire life means you get to know things about them that you'd prefer to forget. For example, Miller once drunkenly told me his ideal type is a brunette with “fuck me eyes,” and I've never been able to wipe that particular piece of information from my brain.

“Dude,” I catch Miller's eye, shaking my head at him. Sarah specifically said no flirting, and I am not about to let Miller break that rule. Miller's shoulders slump, and he turns back to Lexi with a subdued smile. She takes our drink orders, promising to return soon, and isn't three steps away from the table when Miller rounds on me.

“Please?”

“Absolutely not. You will not ruin Betty's for us.” Miller is frowning at me, his hands clasped in front of his chest as if he's about to pray. He can pray all he wants; he isn't hitting on the waitress.

Turning my attention to Steal, I change the subject.
“How’s married life?”

He starts telling us about his wife’s recent handbag purchases and has just finished describing the new shelves he had to install in the spare bedroom closet to hold them all when Lexi comes back with our drinks. She walks around the table, stepping between Miller and me when she puts my water down. I catch Miller’s eye around her arm, and he wiggles his eyebrows at me. I hold in my groan, narrowing my eyes at him.

We order our food, then catch up on each other’s lives. When it’s my turn, I tell them about the “fight”, if you can call it that. Grady asks about the tabloid response, and I tell him there was an increase in reporters hanging around my apartment building for a few days, but they seem to have forgotten me already.

“Is that the only new thing in your life, King?” Miller raises a challenging brow at me, his message loud and clear. Tell them about Ellie, or let me flirt with the waitress.

“Sarah told us not to hit on her, Miller.”

“King moved a woman in with him.”

Lexi arrives with our food just in time to distract everyone from the bomb Miller has just dropped. The table bursts into a flurry of motion, all of us helping pass plates and grabbing condiments. When Lexi brings the tray to our end of the table, she steps between Miller and me again, leaning into my personal space this time, and I lean away automatically.

“Is there anything else I can do for y’all?” She’s looking directly at me, but it’s Miller who answers.

“Actually, yes.” Hearing the flirtatious tone, I narrow my eyes at him, but he only asks for more syrup. There’s something to be said about breakfast for dinner. It’s even better when it’s from a diner. Eggs, bacon, hash browns, and RedBeards hot sauce. All the trappings of a perfect meal. I wonder if Ellie likes breakfast for dinner? Is her eating schedule different since she gets up so early?

“Tell us about your girlfriend, King.” Grady is watching me curiously over the top of his breakfast sandwich.

“Ease up, guys. We aren’t dating. She’s a friend who needed a place to stay.” I take another bite of my hash browns as if to prove a point.

“You don’t want to be ‘just friends’ though?” Steal’s low drawl is full of quiet knowing, and I shoot Miller another murderous glance.

“No comment.”

The table erupts into laughter, and I know I’ll never hear the end of this when Spring Training comes around. Miller is such a shit.

Chapter Ten: Ellie

Unknown Number: *Hey Ellie, it's Sam. I will also be in New Heights tonight, so let me know if you need a ride home.*

I read the text two more times before Elliot interrupts my train of thought.

“What’s got you making that face?”

“Sam text me,” I mumble, reading the text for a fourth time. I’d left him a note this morning with my number, letting him know I wouldn’t be home until late because I was going to New Heights to have dinner with my family for my dad’s birthday.

“That is causing you to make that face because...?” Elliot looks sideways at me, quickly turning his eyes back to the road. The drive to New Heights isn’t long, but the road gets curvy when you leave Cadence, making it easy to miss animals lurking around corners.

“He’s going to be in New Heights tonight,” I press the button, shutting off my phone screen so I’ll stop obsessing over the words written there. “He offered to drive me home.”

“So, you’re worried about him picking you up from dad’s house with all the brothers there?”

I laugh, realizing I didn't even think about that. "I'd be more concerned about dad being there."

"Why? Dad knows about King."

My brain does an honest to God record scratch. "What do you mean 'dad knows about King'?"

Elliot shrugs, slowing the car to turn into dad's neighborhood. It's half-developed, with empty lots filling the spaces between houses, but eventually, it will be a bustling area full of small mansions. The restrictions to build here are insane, and anything less than a mini-mansion is unacceptable. "He was in the group text."

"What group text? I wasn't in any group text that told dad about Sam."

Elliot groans as if it's physically paining him to explain this to me. "The day you broke your foot, Will told everyone you were dating King in a group text. I think he was just excited to meet one of his idols and sent the text without considering the consequences."

"I'm not dating Sam." Elliot rolls his eyes, clearly not believing that Sam and I are just friends.

"Well, you better prepare yourself for what you're about to walk into then. All four brothers and dad know something is happening between you two. Whatever that may be," he hurries to say over the start of my objection.

Huffing in annoyance, I cross my arms over my chest. "I love that you all have a fucking group text about my life."

We pull into dad's driveway, and I look at the house grimly. It isn't the house we grew up in, but our parents moved

into it just after Elliot and I left for college. The house was filled with love and laughter for the last years of our mother's life.

When she was alive, our mom was the heart of the family. She was always doing everything for everyone, and she never complained. She cooked, cleaned, and kept my dad sane and all of us kids in line. After she passed, it left a void in our family that could never be filled, but I've been trying my best to at least make it bearable.

The problem is no one thinks I can handle the task. It's not that I'm trying to do everything; I'm just trying to do some things, like cooking dinner tonight. That isn't an impossible task on your own, but I know that the moment I step into the kitchen someone will be there trying to "help" me with every little task. I started my bakery from the ground up, running it most days entirely on my own, and my family still thinks I need assistance making dinner.

It would be less humiliating if they weren't so obvious about it.

The house lacks the telltale signs of dinner cooking as Elliot and I approach the kitchen, and I'm grateful they haven't started without me. They've done that more than once. I tell them I'll make everything and show up to half of it already done.

Elliot goes to find our brothers, and I start pulling out all the ingredients necessary to make steak, potatoes, and roasted vegetables. It's the same meal we have for dad's birthday every year.

“Ellie Bug!” My dad shouts as he crosses from the dining room into the kitchen. He’s bursting with enthusiasm, his arms thrown wide and a bright smile on his face. He isn’t a tall or particularly thin man, but he is the happiest and kindest person I’ve ever met. People have always told me I take after him, and I consider it the highest compliment.

“Hi, dad,” I set down the knife preparing myself to be pulled into a bone-crushing hug. He drops the lightest kiss on my forehead before pulling away to assess me critically.

“Should you be standing on that foot, Ellie Bug?” His question is quiet enough only to be heard by the two of us, even though we’re alone in the kitchen.

Forcing a small laugh, I smile reassuringly at him. “It’s fine, dad. I promise”.

“Tell me what’s new, Bug.”

I can’t tell if he’s fishing for information about Sam or asking a general question, but I’m saved from having to answer by Will, Colin, Elliot, and Matty all entering the kitchen like a herd of elephants.

It’s rare for all of us to be in the same room these days, and it’s shocking to see how much Will, Matty, and Elliot look like each other. Then there’s Colin, trailing behind them with his dark hair sticking out among all the blondes in the room.

Matty is all smiles, coming over to hug me and asking about the bakery. When he asks about my foot, Will joins the conversation, making comments about how I need to be trying to stay off of it. I assure them both I’m fine. “I kept off it for most of the day.”

“No, she didn’t.” *Damn.* I didn’t notice Elliot standing behind me. Spinning to face him, I narrow my eyes threateningly at him. He raises his eyebrows in response, calling me on my bluff.

“Let me help so that you can sit down,” Matty reaches for the colander of vegetables next to my cutting board, and I turn my death glare on him. “Or not.” He raises his arms in surrender, moving to the opposite side of the kitchen island and taking a seat next to our dad.

As soon as there’s a lull in the conversation, Colin can’t seem to help himself from breaking the implied silence on the subject of Sam. “No boyfriend tonight?”

“Is there any point in saying that we aren’t dating?” All four brothers shake their heads, and I sigh dramatically.

My dad shifts in his chair, an uncomfortable look on his face. I’m about to ask if he’s alright when he finally speaks. “I was hoping you would bring him tonight, Ellie Bug. I’ve wanted to meet the man for several years, but even more now that he’s...whatever he is to you.”

“Not you, too.” My shoulders slump at my father’s apologetic shrug. Is anyone in this family on my side?

“Actually,” uh-oh. Elliot is speaking again and I do not like the smug tone of his voice. “It isn’t too late for him to come to dinner. He’s in New Heights tonight, so Ellie could still invite him.”

I have never wanted to murder my twin before, but tonight is proving to be full of firsts for me. My eyes cut to Elliot, the smile on his face just large enough that I want to

punch him in it. Why did he have to say that? The absolute last thing I want to do tonight is run interference between Sam and my overbearing brothers. Or my father, for that matter.

“Oh,” my dad turns a beaming smile on me. “Could you do that, Ellie? For your old man’s birthday?”

No, sorry. I draw the line at introducing my *friend I very much want to have sex with* to my *entire fucking family*. I need out of this, desperately, but I know a losing battle when I see one, and the look on my father’s face says this is a done deal.

“I’ll text him,” I relent, having to shout the rest of my sentence over the round of cheers and high-fives between Elliot and Matty. “But I can’t guarantee he’ll come, so don’t get your hopes up.”

“At least you’ll have tried,” My dad smiles again, getting up from his seat to pull me into another hug. It would be nice if he wanted something easy for his birthday, like golf balls or new t-shirts.

On the way to my purse, I pass Colin standing by the pantry. He’s the only one who doesn’t seem thrilled that I’m inviting Sam to dinner, though I can’t imagine why. Colin is a huge baseball fan. He’s constantly talking stats with dad, and I know he goes to several Cougars games every season.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“He’s going to break your heart, Ellie.”

Colin’s words are serious, but they make me laugh.

“No, he isn’t. Do you know why?”

“Because you are under the delusion that he is a good guy, and you think he really just wants to be your friend?”

“Wow,” I reach for my purse on the counter next to him, trying to keep my face as neutral as possible against the rage Colin’s words sparked in me. “You don’t seem to think very highly of him.”

Colin shakes his head, pushing off the wall to face me fully. “Me and half the country, Ellie. He doesn’t have a good reputation.”

“Yeah, but that’s all bullshit,” Matty interrupts my response from where he’s standing by the sink. “I’ve known him for a few years now, and he’s never gotten in a fight that wasn’t to protect another person or defend himself. He isn’t the drunken idiot the media makes him out to be.”

“And the women?” Colin prompts, rounding on Matty now. “Are they lying about them too? Do you want to see Ellie’s name splashed across the papers like all the others?”

It’s Will’s turn to come to Sam’s defense. “I’m pretty sure all those women put their own names in the papers. Ellie wouldn’t do that.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Dude, fuck off. It’s Ellie’s choice,” Elliot reminds him, pointing to me over Colin’s shoulder. “She’s the only one who gets to decide if he’s good enough for her.”

Collin huffs, shaking his head at us all. “When this goes south, and our sister’s life is ruined, I want you all to remember this moment.”

The silence lasts exactly two seconds before Matty and Elliot burst into laughter. “That was a bit dramatic, Col.” Matty wipes a tear from his eye, though I’m pretty sure it’s fake. Colin rolls his eyes but playfully bumps shoulders with Elliot, who is walking toward my corner of the kitchen.

“You gonna send that text?” Elliot’s voice is low, and I know what he’s really saying. Even though he is the reason I’m in this mess to begin with, he will back me up if I don’t want to send it.

Do I want to send it? As much as I don’t want Sam to be near my idiot brothers, I have missed him all day. I wouldn’t mind getting to see him before it’s time for bed.

I take a moment to save Sam’s number in my contacts while deciding what I should say if I text him back. When I begin typing, Elliot peaks over my shoulder to read the message.

Ellie: *I think I will take you up on that ride. Also, if you finish your errands early, my father said you’re welcome to come and have dinner with us.*

I raise a questioning brow at Elliot, and he nods. Taking a deep breath, I hit send before I can talk myself out of it.

I’m not sure if I want him to say yes or no.

Chapter Eleven: King

What the fuck am I doing here?

I hadn't expected to check off box one of the Litmus Test so soon after talking to Miller about it. I quickly sent a text letting Ellie know I would gladly come to dinner and asking what I could bring. Surprisingly, I made it all the way to her dad's driveway before I panic-texted Miller.

King: *Ellie invited me to her dad's birthday dinner.*

Miller: *Damn. Litmus One = Positive.*

King: *I think you mean "yay! Litmus One = Positive!"*

Miller: *Oh, yeah. Old habit.*

Miller: *Yay! What now?*

King: *Now I have to meet her entire family. How the fuck am I supposed to act?*

Miller: *Fuck if I know. I've never met a woman's family before.*

That doesn't surprise me, considering a positive Litmus Test One for Miller would result in him dumping the poor woman. When my phone buzzes again, it's a text from Miller, but this time he sent it in a group text with Grady and Steal.

Miller: *Our boy needs help! He's about to meet the girlfriend's family.*

Damn it, Miller!

Grady: *That's a big step, King.*

Steal: *My old lady said, "don't show up empty-handed"!*

Great. Let's just tell everyone in the county that I'm about to embarrass myself royally. I hate it here.

King: *I am not empty-handed, and this isn't a big deal. I should have known better than to ask Miller a simple question.*

Miller: *You really should have.*

The chat stays silent for a moment before Grady finally comes in with genuine advice.

Grady: *Be yourself. They'll be able to tell if you're faking it. Try talking baseball if you can. You're comfortable with it, so it will help you relax. Also, remember to breathe.*

Steal: *I agree with everything he said. If you're not sure how to be yourself, just try not to be Miller. That will impress anyone's parents.*

Miller: *You're all jealous.*

King: *Thanks, guys.*

As annoying as it was, bringing Grady and Steal into the conversation helped calm my nerves enough to get me out of the car. Now I'm standing on her father's front porch, holding a bottle of whiskey with my heart in my throat. I've never met a woman's family before, and this one feels more important than any of the others would have been.

I try to come up with an excuse not to ring the doorbell. The most I can manage is, *Sorry, Ellie, my errands ran late.*

What errands, Sam?

Oh, you know. The ones I made up so I would be in New Heights at the same time as you, just in case you needed a ride home.

I ring the doorbell, the soft chime meeting my ears before I can talk myself out of it. If I drove all the way to New Heights just to get thirty minutes with Ellie, then I should be willing to meet her entire family to get an evening with her.

Of all the people I anticipated meeting this evening, the man opening the front door wasn't one of them.

“Matty?”

Matty, the bartender from MB's who I've been casually acquainted with for the last ten years, smiles broadly as he opens the door the rest of the way.

“Hey, man!” I continue to stare at him for a long moment, unsure of what to say. Matty steps back and waves me into the house, but I don't move. “You're not in the wrong place. Ellie is my sister.”

The universe fucking hates me.

“Don't worry, King,” Matty pats me on the shoulder as I pass him, closing the door behind us. “I'm on your side of this whole ‘you dating my sister’ thing.”

Uh, what? Not only does he think I'm dating his sister, but it's a conversation he's been having with other people.

“Who is against the idea of me dating your sister?”

Matty laughs softly, leading me down a large hall.

“My brother, Colin.”

“What about your dad?”

Matty stops, turning to smile at me again. “He’s a big fan of yours on the mound,” he pauses, seeming to think for another moment before continuing. “We’ll see how much he likes you as the man dating his only daughter.”

“Matty, you know we’re not—”

He interrupts me with a laugh, turning to lead us into an enormous kitchen at the end of the hall. Several people are standing around, all but one with matching blonde hair. Will is sitting at the kitchen island, and he nods in our direction when Matty and I walk through the doorway.

Standing beside him, leaning casually against the wall, is a man with dark brown hair and harsh features. The only thing I can see that marks him as a Bennett are his eyes, the color matching Ellie’s exactly.

Another young man who looks exactly like Ellie is standing next to her, resting his arms against the counter behind him. He has a concerned look on his face as he watches Ellie reach for a bowl above her head. I see several of the men around her wince, and I realize it’s because she’s just brought her weight down on her booted foot. Ellie doesn’t wince, though. She keeps moving like nothing happened.

“Hello, there!” The man sitting at the island with his back to the door has finally turned to face us, and I’m unsurprised to be looking at yet another blonde-haired

Bennett. His eyes are a soft blue, and his skin is far more wrinkled, but I can easily see the resemblance between him and Ellie. He stands, taking several quick strides toward me and extending his hand. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Martin Bennet.”

“A pleasure, sir. Thank you for inviting me.” He waves a hand as if it were no problem, and I pass him the whiskey Ellie told me to bring. His laugh booms through the kitchen, drawing everyone’s eyes toward us again. They don’t watch us for long, each of her brothers turning their attention back to Ellie.

Ellie keeps her eyes on me. I can feel the weight of her gaze across the room, and I can’t stop myself from staring right back.

The moment there’s a break in the conversation with her father, I make my way to Ellie’s side. She smiles up at me, her entire face shining with it. I’m so distracted by her that I nearly give in to my desire to pull her to me. I catch myself right as my hands get to her waist, and I quickly redirect them to the underside of her arms. Her smile drops as I gently begin to push her away from the island. “You have a lovely home, Mr. Bennett,” I continue speaking to her father over Ellie’s small protests as I maneuver around the island and force her to sit in one of the chairs.

“Oh, you can call me Martin,” her father sounds distracted, but I’m too busy making sure Ellie stays seated to care. I know she’s been on her feet all day, and I can’t stand by and watch her continue to do this much when I’m able to help. Ellie sighs as I move the pile of vegetables and paring knife

over to her, and I can't stop the small smile that pulls across my lips. She rolls her eyes like she can't believe I've forced her out of the kitchen, but when I point to the bag of potatoes, she mouths the word 'mashed' at me.

Remembering Grady's advice, I decide to fill the silence in the kitchen. "Are you a fan of baseball, Martin?"

When he doesn't answer right away, I look up from my task of opening the five-pound bag of potatoes to find every man in the kitchen staring at me with wide eyes. I'm not sure what I've done, but I think I may have already fucked this up somehow. Is it because I touched Ellie? They all seemed to want her to sit down as much as I did, so I didn't think they would mind me stepping in.

"I certainly am," Martin mumbles once he's gathered himself again. The next half hour passes quickly, with Ellie and I finishing up dinner while we all talk baseball. Her father seems to know everything there is about baseball, and even her brothers have something to say. Everyone except Colin, who I catch glaring at me more than once through the evening.

As soon as dinner is ready, Ellie tries to grab one of the trays from my hands as we all prepare to move to the dining room. Thankfully, I'm spared from arguing with her about it by her brothers all descending on us at once. They each grab a plate of food and begin herding Ellie toward the dining room, ignoring her protests the entire way. I follow behind, laughing when Ellie starts yelling at one of them to be careful.

"King," Ellie's father is standing next to the bay of kitchen cabinets, his arms folded over his chest and an

unreadable expression on his face. “Let me talk to you for a minute.”

Shit.

I step to the side of the doorway so we’re far enough from the dining room that no one will overhear whatever is about to happen.

“I want to thank you.” That...isn’t what I was expecting. I almost ask him to repeat himself since I’m certain I just had an auditory hallucination. My confusion must show on my face because he laughs lightly, reaching a hand out to pat me on the shoulder. “Ever since her mother passed, Ellie has struggled to accept help from anyone. She wants to do everything by herself, no matter how many times we tell her she doesn’t have to. She’s a strong woman, but I think she’s shouldering too much when it comes to this family.” Martin sniffs, and I can see tears threatening to spill from his eyes. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen my daughter willingly allow someone to help her. I don’t know what is going on between the two of you, but I know I’m grateful for it.”

His watery smile threatens to bring tears to my own eyes. I can’t think of anything to say that won’t give him the wrong impression of who Ellie and I are to one another, so I stick to the truth.

“I’m grateful for it, too.”

—

I'm not sure if it's by accident or design, but the only seat left at the table is the one next to Ellie. She had laughed when I asked if it was alright for me to sit next to her, the sound lighting up my brain in all the best ways.

We keep up a steady flow of conversation throughout dinner, her brothers sometimes joining in, other times loudly having their own discussions. It's pure chaos and reminds me of Thanksgiving at the Miller's. There are people everywhere, the food is to die for, and at least one person is staring angrily at me across the table.

Yeah, this is exactly like Thanksgiving.

"Sam," Ellie whispers my name, and I have to suppress a shiver at the sound of it. Turning, I see her looking up at me with a serious expression. "I want you to know that I have repeatedly told them we aren't dating. They just...don't listen to me."

She gestures to the table at large, and I see more than one of her brothers hold back a smile. Even in a whisper, our conversation isn't private. "I believe you."

Ellie smiles again, and I'm glad that seems to be the extent of it. "Can you pass that?" She points to the bowl of mashed potatoes on the table in front of me, and I'm about to lean forward when she seems to change her mind. "Actually, I'll get it."

I'm fully prepared to argue that I can get it for her when I snap my mouth shut. Her hand is sliding along the outside of my leg. I'm not sure it's intentional until she puts a small amount of weight onto her palm, flattening it on top of my thigh as she reaches across me to grab the bowl. Ellie is

touching me. Granted, it isn't like she's grabbing my dick or anything, but I can feel the warmth of her palm through my jeans.

Fuck.

Elizabeth Jane Bennett is going to be the death of me.

Chapter Twelve: Ellie

The car ride is quiet but not uncomfortable as I think over the evening.

Initially, I was hesitant about inviting Sam to dinner, but he fit surprisingly well with my family. My father and brothers are all big baseball fans, so it wasn't as if they wouldn't have something to talk about. I had mostly been worried that Colin would say something snarky, but I never even saw them interact with one another.

Apparently, what I should have been most worried about was keeping my hands to myself. I can't believe I did The Thigh Touch. My brain is still trying to process how I could have been so bold *in front of my family*.

We're pulling into the parking lot of Sam's building when I finally work up the courage to say, "Thank you".

Sam raises his eyebrow at me questioningly. "You're... welcome?" I can't help but laugh at his response.

"Thank you for coming tonight. Thank you for dealing with my brothers being nosey and for winning over my dad. Thank you for letting me move in with you and being there for me so often over the last week. The list goes on and on, and I just realized I hadn't thanked you for any of it yet".

Sam sits patiently, listening intently to my ramblings like always. "You're very welcome, Ellie. But just know I've

enjoyed all of it. Even the nosey brothers”.

He helps me out of the car, moving quickly to the passenger side to open my door before I can do it myself. He even grabs the bag of leftovers so I don't have to try and carry them while maneuvering myself around with the crutches.

Opening the door in the lobby, Sam waves a silent hello to the man behind the front desk, who smiles at us both. It's the same man I saw here this morning, though he appears to be just beginning his shift this time.

As we're waiting for the elevator, Sam leans over and whispers in my ear, “Do we actually plan on eating these leftovers?” I look up at him, confused by the question and distracted by the feel of his breath against my ear.

“I hadn't planned on eating them.”

Sam nods, quickly turning on his heel to make his way over to the front desk. I can't hear what he's saying, but I see him talk to the man standing there for a few moments before he hands over the bag of leftovers. The man smiles brightly, and I can tell he's thanking Sam profusely for the food. Sam waves off the thanks, wishing the man a good night as he makes his way back over to the elevator, just in time for the doors to slide open.

I can't hide my smile as I wobble over the threshold, turning to press the button for the penthouse and entering the code Sam gave me.

“What's got you smiling like that?”

“You,” I admit. “Just...you.”

“Mind telling me what it is I’ve done so I can do it again in the future?” I’m glad that the doors are sliding open again before I have a chance to react. I’m not sure exactly what I would’ve said in response to his flirtatious tone.

He makes his way into the apartment ahead of me, shedding his coat and revealing the broad span of his back through his tight sweater. I swear that Sam taking off his coat is the eighth wonder of the world.

I damn near dropped the knife I’d been holding when he walked into my father’s kitchen with every fucking muscle visible beneath his gray cashmere sweater. As much as I want to make fun of him for the cashmere aspect, I never want him to stop wearing those sweaters.

“Do you wanna watch some TV before we go to bed?”

“Honestly?” I crutch my way over to the end of the bed, staring at it longingly. “I’m fucking exhausted.”

Sam nods, moving to my side. “I would be too if I had been on my feet as long as you were today. And I don’t even have a broken foot”. He raises an eyebrow, accusingly. As if I could have forgotten my damn foot is broken, and I’m supposed to be taking it easy.

Moving toward the bathroom, I grab my new fake-silk pajama set from the top of the duffel bag next to the bed. The smooth material is easy to slide on and off over my boot, so I’m back out of the bathroom in no time. Surprisingly, Sam is already in bed; one arm stretched behind his head while he scrolls through something on his phone.

He looks up right as I make it to the edge of the bed, smiling as I slip under the covers on my side. For the most part we still stick to our sides, though I've woken up in Sam's arms the last two mornings. Not that I'm complaining, mind you.

I shuffle deeper into the bed as Sam shuts off the lights, allowing the darkness to envelop me. It was such a long day, but I'm not nearly as tired as I thought I would be now that I'm in bed with Sam again.

The look on Sam's face when I touched his leg at dinner plays on a loop in my mind. He was shocked at first, but then his eyes grew darker. The spot on his neck where you can see his heart beat began to thump harder. I hadn't meant to start something like that at the dinner table, but I wanted to touch him—needed to touch him. I was desperate for a point of contact between us that would satisfy the need that's been humming through my body since the day I met him.

Turning to face Sam's side of the bed, I adjust the covers over my shoulders, trying to convince my mind that it's time to sleep. It is not time to daydream about the feel of Sam's thigh beneath my palm.

Sam moves in the dark, and I feel the bed dip as if he's moving closer to me. I hold my breath, waiting for something to happen. Will tonight be the night he finally reaches for me? Does it count as breaking the 'now women' rule if it only happens once, and we never tell anyone about it?

What if—*BUZZ*.

The sound of a vibrating phone cuts through the air, startling me back onto my side of the bed. I reach for my phone, but it isn't the one going off.

BUZZ.

“I think your phone is vibrating,” I whisper to Sam, leaning back onto my pillows to try and get comfortable again.

BUZZ.

“It isn’t my phone. Are you sure it’s not yours?”

BUZZZZZZ.

“Yeah, I just checked it.”

BUZZ. BUZZ. BUZZ. Whatever it is that’s vibrating, it sounds like it’s getting angrier the longer we go without finding it.

“It sounds like it’s coming from your side of the bed, Ellie.” I can’t think of anything that would be vibrat—OH NO. No, no, no!

I dive for my duffle bag, feeling the vibrations as soon as I touch the fabric. My hand plunges straight to the bottom of the bag, but the vibrator isn’t there. I can feel the vibrations, I can *hear* the vibrations, but the vibrator isn’t there. I begin desperately shuffling through the clothes, hoping the toy simply rolled to a different part of the bag, but I can’t find it anywhere.

What in the actual fuck? Has this thing turned into a *ghost*?

Finally, I find the buzzing sex toy and pull it triumphantly from the bag. *Not today, demon vibrator!* I quickly press the button to stop the angry vibrations.

Nothing happens.

That's not true. Something does happen. The vibrating sound gets even angrier. I press the button again, hoping it has cycled through all five settings and will finally shut off—no such luck. I'm still frantically pressing against the toy's base when I feel Sam move in the bed next to me.

To my absolute horror, he turns on the lights. I don't have time to hide the bright purple sex toy before Sam sees it in all its glory, buzzing like a swarm of angry bees.

“Uh,” Sam can't seem to take his eyes off the vibrator, and I don't blame him. I wouldn't know what to do if I turned on the lights and found him fighting with a sex toy, either. “What do you have there?”

“Vibrator,” I whisper, hoping he won't hear me over the obnoxious buzzing.

The quirk of Sam's lips tells me he heard me just fine. “I can see that. Are you going to shut it off?”

“Can't.” Apparently, my brain can only manage one word at a time right now because the only other thing I can think to say is “haunted”.

“It's haunted?” Sam's eyebrows raise, his eyes dropping from mine to stare at the vibrator again. “I'm no doctor, but I don't think you should put anything haunted near your vagina.” Sam is on the verge of laughter, but he's a good man, and he's trying his best to hold it in. A few chuckles manage to escape, and he clears his throat to cover the sound. “Why don't you take the batteries out?”

I groan, throwing an arm over my eyes. Maybe if I can't see him, all of this will end. “You can't.” Sam is fully

laughing now, and I can't help but join him. "This isn't funny! It's mortifying!"

"Let me see it."

Nope. No, absolutely not. I will not be *handing my vibrator* to Sam. Granted, I haven't used it yet but it's the principle of the thing! I press the button on the bottom of the vibrator again, hoping against all hope that it will actually shut off this time.

The buzzing gets louder again.

"Ellie," Sam laughs, reaching over to me to grab the vibrator from my hand. I watch as he goes through the same motions I had, pressing the button repeatedly to no avail. He frowns, turning the toy over several times before looking up again. "This thing is haunted."

"I know!" Throwing my arms in the air, I can't help the slightly manic laugh that comes out of me.

Sam gets up, walking to the kitchen with the vibrator still buzzing in his hand. It shouldn't be hot watching him move through the kitchen opening drawers while holding a sex toy, but it absolutely is. Clearly my libido has lost its damn mind, just like the rest of me.

He finally finds whatever he's looking for and hunches over the vibrator doing something I can't see. After a moment, the vibrations stop. My entire body sags in relief as Sam turns to smile brightly at me.

I start a slow clap as he makes his way back to the bed, purple sex toy held proudly in front of him. "How did you get it to stop?"

“There’s a reset on the bottom.” He shrugs, handing the toy back to me.

“Thank you,” I take it carefully from his hand, my embarrassment returning now that the relief has faded. Turning away from Sam to hide the blush creeping across my cheeks, I drop the vibrator back into my duffle bag. After a moment, I settle back into the bed and stare up at the ceiling waiting for Sam to turn off the lights. When he doesn’t, I turn to face him.

He’s lying on his back, staring up at the ceiling with a strange look on his face. He must feel me looking at him because he turns his head in my direction. We watch each other for several minutes, and I’m not sure what has shifted between us, but something is decidedly different.

“Goodnight, Ellie.”

“Goodnight, Sam.”

Chapter Thirteen: King

Ellie isn't in bed when I wake up the next morning. It's probably a good thing since I spent half the night dreaming about her and that fucking sex toy. I was so shocked to see it, my mind racing with questions. Where did she get it? Did she have someone else go into the attic to get it for her? Or did she go out and buy it? How desperate must she have been for an orgasm if she went out and bought a brand-new sex toy?

Am I the one making her desperate?

Please let it be me. I want to know that I'm the person she imagines when she fucks herself with that toy. That she pictures my cock making her feel that good, my hands spreading her open, my mouth pressing against her clit.

My thoughts return to my dreams from last night. Every time I blink, I see Ellie. Her cheeks flushed, the pulse pounding in her neck as she gasps my name. Her perfect body before me as I press that ridiculous purple toy into her so slowly she's nearly weeping with desperation.

Without conscious thought, my hand finds its way into under my waistband. The first touch against my aching cock has me suppressing a groan. I can't help but imagine what it would feel like if it was Ellie's hand gripped around me. Ellie's heavy breaths filling my ears, her body pressed against mine.

Would she be whispering dirty things in my ear like Dream Ellie had? Or would she be too busy screaming my name with my face buried between her thighs? The idea of Ellie with her hands in my hair, her legs around my shoulders, her head thrown back as my name is called from those perfect fucking lips tips me over the edge.

It takes longer to catch my breath than I care to admit, and I spend the rest of the morning relaxing in bed. I fall back asleep more than once and finally have to force myself out of bed and into the shower before I become one with the bed.

Halfway through a scalding hot shower, my mind turns to Ellie. Specifically, how tired I am of stopping myself before anything happens between us. There is a light at the end of the tunnel, though. Litmus Test One is done, and it was positive. Ellie invited me to meet her family, and I like to think it went well. The next step won't be as easy as the first, but I don't imagine it being too complicated.

Miller said Test Two is all about Ellie initiating things. Does she text me first or start conversations when there's silence? Does she reach for me when we're close? Does she go out of her way to spend time with me?

I can't forget about Test Three, though. It's hanging in the back of my mind all the time. 'Does she talk to the press?' I haven't heard anything about Ellie online or anything that seems like it might have come from her. In fact, I haven't heard much about myself at all lately, which is strange. We're about a month out from Spring Training, so this is the time of year when things usually start heating up for the players. Our

names and stats are all over the internet, but I have barely seen anything in the last week.

Maybe I've reached the point where I'm only worth talking about if I'm fucking up.

This is my first time being less than one hundred percent ready for Spring Training. The idea of being gone so much doesn't hold the same appeal now. I think I'm just getting old.

My phone vibrates against the counter as I'm walking out of the bathroom, and I stop to see who it is. Just in case it's Ellie.

Miller: *Boy's night.*

King: *Where?*

Miller: *Your place.*

Fuck. There's no way I'm having all the guys here tonight. Not with Ellie living here.

King: *No.*

Miller: *Too late.*

I sigh, but it comes out more like a growl. There's no changing Miller's mind once it's set. If he's determined to have the guys here, then I need to warn Ellie.

King: *Who and when?*

Miller: *Just Grady and Steal. I wouldn't want to scare Ellie away with the whole crew. I do like her, you know.*

King: *When, Miller.*

Miller: *Now.*

I have exactly thirty seconds to sprint to the laundry room before I hear the elevator doors ding. “This is the morning, you assholes!” I shout from behind the laundry room door. I hear all three of them laugh and can’t help but smile in return. The nice thing about all our free time in the off-season is spending as much time as we want hanging out together.

“It’s actually the afternoon,” Grady yells back, and I hear them rummaging through my fridge. What a bunch of savages. I dress quickly in jeans and a long sleeve t-shirt, grabbing my coat in case we go out.

My kitchen is full of beer and bros; my three best friends are making themselves at home around the island. Normally when we do a guy’s night, it’s...at night. We go bar hopping or gambling, and at least one of us goes home with a woman we’ve just met. All those things are off the table for me, though.

“Why are we ‘guy’s night’-ing in my kitchen at one in the afternoon?”

“Cause you can’t ‘guy’s night’ in public anymore.” Steal’s helpful reply is said around a mouthful of potato chips.

I round on Miller, narrowing my eyes. “What is this really about.”

“It’s about bonding,” Miller’s fake affronted look isn’t fooling me. “This is about the true meaning of friendship, King.”

“We want to meet Ellie,” Grady admits, shrugging his massive shoulders. He doesn’t look ashamed of the admission. It’s just a fact.

Miller winces when I slap him on the back of the head on my way to the fridge, pulling out my own beer. If everyone else is day drinking, so am I. “She works until two,” I let the sentence hang, waiting for someone to fill in a suggestion of something to do in the meantime. We all look at each other, unsure of what to do when we can’t leave the apartment.

“You got any games?”

—

“Fuck you!” The sound of everyone’s laughter immediately drowns out Miller’s shout.

I didn’t have any games, but I did have several old decks of cards. Miller’s dad used to put them in our stockings every year, and I always kept them, even though I never used them. I’m grateful for them now.

I’m even more grateful that Miller is losing every round.

“How are you this bad at Rummy?” I can barely ask the question through my laughter as Miller slams his cards down.

He glares at me across the table, but I can see the laughter in his eyes. Miller has never been great at losing but rarely gets truly angry. It’s more like he’s annoyed with himself than anything. “This game doesn’t make any sense.”

We’re all laughing again; this time, it’s loud enough none of us hear the elevator ding. I see Ellie out of the corner

of my eye, and I wince. I got so caught up with the guys I forgot to warn her what she was walking into.

The sound of her crutches draws everyone's attention, and I see her fighting a blush. *Damn it.*

"I didn't mean to intrude," oh fuck no. I'm on my feet before she's finished talking, moving toward her with purpose. I will not allow anything to make Ellie feel out of place in her home, much less my own forgetfulness.

Stepping between her and the guys forces Ellie to look at only me. "I meant to text you, but I forgot. They showed up unannounced because they're heathens," I shoot the words over my shoulder, smiling when I hear Miller scoff. "We're just hanging out, but we will leave if you want us to. I know you're probably tired."

Ellie is shaking her head before I've even finished talking. "I'm fine with you guys being here. As long as you don't mind me hanging around."

"Actually."

"We came here to meet you, ma'am." Steal's drawling voice breaks the silence around us.

"To meet me?" Ellie's surprised look brings an instant smile to my face. "Why would you want to meet me?"

"Well," Grady stands, looming over us even from this distance. I see Ellie's eyes grow impossibly wider. "We're both very interested in the woman who has captured King's... attention." He deliberately pauses before 'attention', and I glare at him over my shoulder. When I turn back to face Ellie, she looks shocked by Grady's comment. The man is about as

subtle as a bus, and she picks up on it instantly. “I’m Grady, by the way.”

“And I’m Steal! Though, my real name’s Conrad Stealman.”

“The fuck it is,” Miller huffs a laugh, but Steal isn’t laughing.

“That’s my name, Miller.”

Silence fills the air around us, and I have to keep from laughing at how surprised Miller looks. “Really?”

“Really.”

“Well, Steal,” Ellie comes to Miller’s rescue like the goddess she is. “I’m Elizabeth Bennett, but you can call me Ellie.”

Thankfully, Grady is the only one to raise an eyebrow at her name, but he doesn’t comment on it. Ellie hops over to the table, grumbling about her crutches the whole way.

“Are they hurting you?” Grady’s voice is full of concern, and Ellie smiles softly back at him. If I were a jealous man—which I am not—I would be concerned about the big man/teddy bear personality that always attracts women so easily.

I decide to continue not being a jealous man when Grady offers to help adjust her crutches to a better height. That’s something I should have noticed.

“What do you do?” Steal directs the question at Ellie, and I can see the pride in her eyes when she tells him about her bakery. “That’s pretty fucking cool.”

It is pretty fucking cool. It's also a shitload of work. I think people overlook that sometimes.

"It's my dream job," Ellie admits, reaching for the deck of cards in the middle of the table. "What were you guys playing?"

"Nothing good," Miller grumbles from his end of the table at the same time I say, "rummy".

He's been suspiciously quiet this entire time, and I realize he's texting beneath the tabletop.

"You're just upset because you lost eight times in a row."

"Fuck off."

"No," I say instinctively, smiling when it makes Ellie laugh. "Who are you texting, Miller?"

"Nell."

"Oh?" Ellie's eyes light up at the sound of another woman's name. "Is she a *friend* of yours?"

Miller's laugh is loud, his hand slapping against his chest as if he's trying to hold back the sound. "I don't have '*friends*', Ells. Nell is my best friend."

"Fuck you", I grumble from my seat next to Ellie, but I take no real offense. I know what he means.

"You've never dated?"

"Oh, we've dated. Lots of times. I think we've even been engaged a few times."

“You guys were married in Texas once,” Grady reminds him.

“And divorced in New York,” I add.

Ellie stares at me with wide eyes, and I can’t help but laugh gently at her confusion. Miller puts her out of her misery before I can, though.

“Nell occasionally pretends to be my significant other when women get too....”

“Clingy?”

“Serious?”

“Human?”

Miller rolls his eyes at my suggestion before finishing his sentence, “attached”.

“Miller is very against women growing too fond of him,” I explain when Ellie still looks confused. “And Nell is very against men. In general.”

Ellie laughs at that. “Nell sounds fun.”

“She is,” Miller waves his phone in the air. “She says ‘hello everyone’, and she’s sorry she couldn’t meet you tonight, Ellie.”

“You’ll meet her soon,” I promise Ellie before she can open her mouth.

She smiles, nodding her head slightly. “Good. Now, teach me how to beat Miller at Rummy.”

Chapter Fourteen: Ellie

“You met Matthew Grady?” Elliot’s eyes are wide as he turns to face me. It’s just after five am, and we’ve started measuring the first batch of cookie dough. Tomorrow is Cookie Day at Bennett’s Bakes, a tradition that takes place on the second Sunday of each month. Cookie Day is immediately followed by the only day of the month that Bennett’s Bakes is closed.

They get half-price cookies, and I get to sleep in the next day. It’s a win-win.

“He didn’t say Matthew, but his name was definitely Grady.”

“It’s appalling that *you* are the one who gets to hang out with all of *my* heroes.” Elliot shakes his head, turning his attention back to the tub of cookie dough in front of him.

“Since when are baseball players your *heroes*?”

“Since they look like Matthew fucking Grady.”

I laugh, rolling out another ball of cookie dough before placing it on the scale. “That’s fair. He is a very...impressive man.”

Elliot laughs loudly in the silent bakery, stopping immediately when he accidentally snorts. “Who else have you met?”

“That’s all so far. Just Miller, Steal, and Grady.” I shrug, moving the full tray of rolled and measured cookie dough from the counter in front of me to the empty island top behind us. It will be full of trays before we’re done this morning. We try to prep as much ahead of time as possible, but we still spend at least one hour balling up dough the morning of cookie day.

“Are you and Sam still pretending to be just friends?”

Sighing, I pull another empty tray toward me. “We *are* just friends. That’s all we can be.”

“I don’t understand why you’re fighting against this. You’re clearly attracted to each other.”

It’s a fair point. I never did explain the entire situation to Elliot, but now seems as good a time as any since we’re going to be here awhile. “You know that Sam ends up in the media a lot, right?” I see Elliot nod from the corner of my eye, so I continue without waiting for a response. “Well, what you might not know, is that those articles and photos get him in trouble with the owners of the Cougars. Apparently, they’ve been tired of it for a while, and they’ve suspended him in the past, but now they are threatening to bench him *and Miller* for the season if Sam ends up in the headlines again. Sam’s exact words were ‘no bars, no fights, *no women*’.”

I turn a meaningful look on my brother, in case he wasn’t aware that I fall under the category of ‘women’.

“So, Sam doesn’t want to break the ‘no women’ rule because it could get him in trouble?”

“Basically, yes. I am also unwilling to break the rule because I don’t want to be the reason Sam and Miller get benched. Baseball is the thing they love most in this world, and I couldn’t bear to be the reason they lose it. Plus,” I can’t help but sigh dramatically before saying the next words. When I do manage to say them, it’s through gritted teeth. “Colin is right.”

“Wow,” Elliot’s laugh booms through the kitchen, bouncing happily off the walls around us. “That felt like it cost you something.”

“It did,” my laugh joins his, and we spend a minute giggling over the ridiculousness of it all. “Don’t you ever tell Colin I said that.”

Elliot holds up three fingers, but I know it’s meaningless because he was never a Boy Scout. “What was Colin right about?”

“Sam and I getting involved. If it got out we were together, it would end up all over the internet. Then he would get benched, and it wouldn’t take much for people to realize I was the reason. Can you imagine the outrage if people in this town found out I was responsible for their star pitcher having to sit out an entire season?”

“They would drag you through the streets.”

“Exactly.” I sigh heavily, turning to put another tray of cookie dough next to the one Elliot just finished.

Elliot turns to face me, his task momentarily forgotten. “I’m hearing a lot of logic here, and you know I love it, but the real question is: how do you *feel* about the situation?”

“I fucking hate it.” The words are out of my mouth before he’s even finished asking his question. “It’s awful. It’s like I’m losing my mind! Sam is so incredible. He’s everything I’ve ever wanted in a partner.” I sigh again, giving up on weighing out the dough. “He’s attentive, kind, and generous. He’s also so fucking hot I can’t even look at him sometimes.”

That gets another laugh out of Elliot, and he nods in agreement. “He really is.”

“I’m literally sharing a bed with him, Elliot. Every fucking night I get into bed with the most amazing man I’ve ever met, and I *can’t touch him*. Even worse, I wake up wrapped in his arms every morning, and I have to pretend like it has no effect on me. That I’m not going out of my mind with the need to reach for him. My life is a fucking—”

“Romcom.”

“Disaster.” I roll my eyes at Elliot’s insistence that my life is anything like a romcom. Nothing is feeling romantic *or* comedic right now.

Elliot reaches out to stop me from physically turning away from him. “Listen to me. Your life is a literal romance novel right now, and you’re completely missing it.” I start to object, but he raises his voice over mine. “I will die on this hill! Now shut up, and answer one more question for me. How would anyone know you’re together?”

“People would know.”

“People would not know. You guys have been living together for almost a month, and no one has said anything

about it. How would they know if you two start sleeping together in the privacy of your own home?”

I hate to admit it because it feels like false hope, but Elliot might be right.

“I can guarantee, if you bring it up to Sam, he will agree with me. Then you two can fuck like bunnies, and everyone is happy.”

“The risk is too great, Elliot.”

“I don’t believe that. This isn’t about the risk; it’s about the logic. The logic is too present in your mind, but I’ve got news for you, babe,” he smiles brightly at me, turning to start weighing out dough again. “Your life is a romcom now. Logic is no longer relevant.”

—

We’ve just finished getting the first round of cookie dough in the ovens when my phone begins to ring. I quickly hop to the island, my crutches forgotten on the other side of the kitchen.

“Morning,” I chirp at Will, knowing he isn’t a morning person. The fact that he’s calling me before six is shocking.

“I hate you,” Will grumbles back, causing me to laugh. Elliot furrows his brow at me, and I mouth “Will” at him. He nods, pushing his way through the kitchen door to start getting the lobby ready to open. “How are you a morning person?”

I laugh again, leaning my hip against the counter. “I’m not. It’s a coffee-fueled illusion.”

“Well, it’s annoying.”

“Did you call just to complain about me being a morning person?”

Will sighs into the phone, and I can’t help but roll my eyes. He’s so dramatic sometimes. “Yes, I called for a reason. How is your foot feeling?”

“Annoying.”

“I need a real answer, Elizabeth.”

If he’s calling me ‘Elizabeth’, he must be really annoyed. I decide to humor him. “It’s good. No real pain or soreness anymore. My leg still gets tired from holding up this boot all the time,” I shrug at the admission, knowing I’m not giving him the whole truth. My leg gets tired because I’m not using my crutches like I should be.

“That’s good,” Will sounds distracted, and I realize I could have said just about anything, and he would have gone with it. I wonder if he would have reacted if I told him my foot had turned into a yellow frog. “You’re at the point where you can start putting some weight on it. Start walking on it without your crutches *like I know you definitely have not been doing up to this point.*” His tone is sarcastic, and I smile at the phone. My brothers really do know me too well.

Elliot comes back into the kitchen just in time to hear me say, “Oh, yeah. I definitely haven’t been walking without the crutches. I would never do that, William.” Elliot raises one eyebrow at me, clearly pointing out that I’m standing in the

middle of the kitchen without said crutches. I flip him off, and he laughs loudly.

“I know you’re lying, even without Elliot giving you away.” Will sighs again, and I hold my breath, waiting to hear what else he has to say. “Well, now you have your doctor’s clearance to do it *occasionally*. Do you hear me, Elizabeth? Occasionally and in moderation. Never if your foot hurts or if your legs get tired. Please continue to use your crutches the majority of the time.”

I am no longer listening to him. I’m too busy hopping my way around the kitchen in celebration. “Yeah, yeah. Crutches only sometimes—got it.”

“No! Crutches *most of the time*—”

“I gotta go, Will. Love you, byeeeeee!” I hang up before he can lecture me about the crutches again, spinning on Elliot with a broad smile.

“You’re a menace,” Elliot laughs, shaking his head.

I nod, giggling as I pull up Sam’s contact in my phone. We haven’t been texting much, but there are a few messages there, and I quickly tap out a text telling him that Will approved no crutches “sometimes”. I pause before sending it, though.

When my foot heals, there won’t be any reason for us to live together any longer. What if this draws attention to that fact? I don’t want to start his day with that slightly depressing fact...assuming it’s as depressing for him as it is for me.

I delete the message but continue to stare at our text thread. Now I want to talk to him. Looking up, I see Elliot

move the first batch of cookies out of the oven, and it gives me an idea.

Ellie: *Elliot is jealous I got to meet Grady.*

I'm not expecting him to text back for a few hours, but the three dots immediately pop up.

Sam: *Really? He wasn't jealous when you met me. What's so special about Grady?*

Ellie: *You don't want to know, trust me. My ears may never recover from the things they heard this morning.*

Sam: *Damn. Be honest with me: It's because he's a giant, isn't it?*

I can't stop the giggle that escapes me at that. Sam has made more than one comment to me about Grady's size, and I'm starting to think he might be jealous.

Ellie: *You sound jealous. You're tall too, Sam.*

Sam: *I'm not jealous that he's inhumanly tall. I might be a little jealous that you and Elliot spent the morning talking about how hot he is.*

Ellie: *Don't worry, we talked about you too.*

Sam: *Really?*

Ellie: *Really.*

Sam: *Anything in particular?*

I could be honest with him in this moment. He would have a serious conversation with me about us sleeping together in secret, and it would end with us spending the night in bed,

not sleeping. I can't bring myself to do it, though. There's just too much that could go wrong, and I'm not willing to risk it.

Ellie: *You snore. It's very cute.*

Chicken.

Sam: *Grady is a sex God, and I snore "cute"? This sucks.*

Ellie: *Sorry, Sam. You're just going to have to try and be sexier.*

Sam: *Be careful what you wish for, Ellie.*

A shiver runs up my spine as I read the words.

What the fuck have I just started?

Chapter Fifteen: King

“The fuck do you mean ‘a rookie’?”

I don’t mean for the words to sound as angry as they do, but there’s little I can do to avoid it at this point. I’m too worked up, too annoyed with the whole situation.

“I think you know the definition of a rookie, King.” Coach Maggert sounds tired, probably from having this conversation with the three other pitchers on the team before me. There’s no way he called me first. “This is happening.”

“Why?” It’s a demand, and we both know it.

“Why the fuck do you think, Kingston?” He’s yelling now, and I regret ever opening my mouth. “If you had cleaned up your act a fucking *decade* ago like you were fucking supposed to, then this wouldn’t be happening!”

I know he’s right, but that doesn’t mean I like it. In fact, this is the last thing I want to deal with right now. My morning had been so perfect. Ellie texted me right after I woke up, and I mentally marked ‘she initiates conversations’ off the list. I spent the rest of the day planning a fun night in for us. Partially to apologize for my friends yesterday, but also because I want to cook with her again.

This time without her brothers breathing down our necks.

Now I’m standing in the kitchen, surrounded by half-washed vegetables, being told that the Cougars are officially

soft-launching the end of my career. They're pulling in a rookie, some kid out of North Virginia, and putting him straight into the pitching rotation.

The Cougars are a World Series winning team with a four-man pitching roster. We don't need a fifth man unless one of the others is on the way out.

It's me. I'm the 'others'.

"Is there anything I can do?"

Maggart sighs into the phone, and I swear I can feel his exhaustion from here. "You can do your best to stay out of trouble for the rest of this season, King. They might let you stay on next season if you can do that."

"But I'll be bumped from starting."

"Yes."

Fuck.

Two minutes later, we hang up, and I'm left standing alone in the heavy silence of my apartment. My life, as I've known it for the last twelve years, is over. I will never be a starting pitcher in the Majors again. This is my last season pitching the season opener. It's probably my last season pitching, period.

I always thought I would age out of the game long before I was kicked out. Looking back on it, that was pretty fucking naive of me. There hasn't been a single season that I haven't spent at least two games I was supposed to pitch sitting on the bench.

What the fuck am I going to do with my life?

Most guys who retire end up working for the teams on their support staff, but that seems like a long shot for me. There's no way the Cougars would take me on, not after they're essentially firing me for my shit reputation. I can't think of a single team in the League willing to take on a risk like me.

There's always announcing, but I will run into the same issue there. No one will want to take on a risk like me when they could have their pick of hundreds of other athletes who aren't as much of a shitshow as I am.

It might be different in another city since I never have as much trouble with the press when we travel as I do at home. Would I be able to move away from Cadence? This has been my home my entire life, and I never imagined I would leave. Miller and Hazel are here. Ellie is here.

I couldn't leave Cadence.

Maybe I don't need to stay in the sports world. Ellie could use help at the bakery; that is more than obvious, even without her admitting it. I could spend my days running around the bakery with her, then spend my evenings wrapped in the woman I love.

Where in the ever-loving *fuck* did that thought come from?

Ellie consumes at least seventy percent of my thoughts daily, and that's the first time I've thought those words. Do I love Ellie? Is that what this really is? Can I see us being together forever?

Yes.

Damn. I'm failing Miller's Litmus Test so hard right now.

The elevator dings, and I can't help but smile at Ellie as she exits the elevator. She is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. Her entire face lights up with a smile, and I nearly can't stop myself from crossing the distance between us to kiss her senseless.

"What's this?" Ellie comes to a stop next to the island, gesturing to the food spread across the countertop.

"It's dinner," I say the word slowly, causing her to roll her eyes at me.

"Very funny," she moves around me, and I hear the sink turn on. A few moments later, Ellie is standing at my side, looking at the spread of vegetables in front of us. "Did you have a particular meal in mind?"

No. I went to the grocery store and picked anything I thought she might like, which was everything I saw. I did some frantic googling on my way home and decided on a chicken stir fry that I had all the ingredients for.

Ellie doesn't question my ability to make the stir fry, following my lead through the food preparation. It isn't until I turn to move to the stove that I notice it.

"Where are your crutches?"

She beams at me, popping her booted foot out to the side as if proudly displaying it to me. "I talked to Will today, and he said I can start walking on it without the crutches."

Something about the way she says it makes me instantly suspicious. "Did he really?" I narrow my eyes, and

Ellie's smile gets even brighter.

"He definitely did," she turns away from me, and I hear her mumble something under her breath.

I decide to leave it at that. She clearly doesn't want to get into it, and she's a grown woman who can make her own decisions about her body and its needs.

Not that I wouldn't love to be responsible for giving her body exactly what it needs.

We fall into another comfortable silence for a few minutes. It isn't long before Ellie turns to me, asking where I learned to cook.

Mentally, I scan the list for Litmus Test Two and proudly check off 'does she initiate conversation?'. I want to check off 'initiates time together', but I'm hesitant. There are several situations that I would count under that category, but I'm not sure if that is just wishful thinking on my part. I decide to ask Miller the next time I see him. He will be more objective than I can be.

"Did you and Miller get to practice with the rain this afternoon?" Ellie asks the question around the mouthful of carrot she's been happily munching on. It's fucking adorable.

"We did," I move around her, reaching for two bowls off the shelf above her head. Ellie freezes, her eyes going wide as I brush against her. I have to turn away so she doesn't see the smile spreading across my face. "We spent most of the day in the batting cages, though." *Burning off all the excess energy in my body.*

Ellie nods as if that makes perfect sense to her.
“Sounds fun.”

“It is fun,” I hesitate but decide there’s no harm in offering. “You could come with us sometime if you want.”

“Oh,” Ellie’s face lights up, and I’m glad I brought it up. “I would love that.”

“Good,” I smile down at the pan on the stovetop, surprised to see the stir fry looks ready to eat. I quickly move it from the heat and scoop some into each bowl on the counter next to me. “How was your day?”

“Busy,” she sighs, running her hand along my lower back as she moves past me. She grabs her crutches, using them to walk to the dining room table. I don’t comment on it, even though every part of me wants to ask if she’s in pain or if she’s just tired.

“Busier than normal?”

“No, just regular Cookie Day busy.”

That sentence makes no sense. Is she so tired she’s delusional? “What is ‘Cookie Day’?”

“It’s half-price cookies at the bakery,” Ellie laughs, shaking her head when my eyes widen. “You don’t need half-price cookie day to get cookies, Sam. You can come over for cookies any time you want.”

Why does that sound sexy? Cookies are not sexy food.

“We do Cookie Day every month, then close the bakery the next day.”

“You’re off tomorrow?”

“I am,” Ellie scoops a heaping forkful of stir fry into her mouth, humming appreciatively. “This is good, Sam.”

I’m only half aware of what she’s talking about because my brain has gone into overdrive. Ellie is off tomorrow. Tomorrow is Bed Day. Could I...? No. Maybe?

“What are you doing with your day off?”

Ellie frowns, thinking over her options. “I’m not really sure. I don’t have anything major that I need to do, surprisingly. I’ll probably just hang out around here if that’s okay?”

“That’s more than okay. In fact,” here goes nothing. “Tomorrow is Bed Day, so I’ll be around.”

“Bed Day?” Ellie looks confused, her nose scrunching up adorably. I want to kiss it.

I clear my throat, nodding. “Every year, the week before Spring Training, I spend one whole day in bed. I call it Bed Day, and it’s my favorite day of the year. Other than Opening Day, of course.”

Ellie laughs, shaking her head at me. “You don’t get out of bed at all?”

“I do, but not much. Having an entire day of nothing is nice when you have to spend eight straight months on the go.” Ellie’s laugh fades, her deep green eyes assessing me across the table.

“Aren’t baseball players superstitious?”

Her question surprises me, but I roll with it. “Yes, very. Why?”

“Well,” she takes another large bite of her stir fry, chewing for a moment with a thoughtful look on her face. “I wouldn’t want to mess with your tradition by crashing your Bed Day. It would be bad luck.”

Fuck.

She is right; it will be bad luck. Do I want to jinx my last season before it even starts? Actually, fuck that. If it were up to me, this wouldn’t be my last season, so I don’t give a fuck if it’s good or bad.

That isn’t true, but right now, I care more about spending a full day in bed with Ellie than I do about the team that is actively phasing me out.

“It wouldn’t mess with my tradition because the day isn’t about me being in bed alone. It’s about me spending a day doing nothing in the most enjoyable way possible, and I can promise it will be more enjoyable with you there.”

I can tell my words have surprised her, but I’m not sure why. She should know by now that I enjoy spending time with her.

“I’ll think about it.”

That isn’t a no, and I’m damn proud of it. Even if she doesn’t spend the entire day with me, she will at least be around the apartment through the day tomorrow. It will give us more time together before I have to leave in a week.

I’m willing to take any time with Ellie that I can get.

Chapter Sixteen: Ellie

How do I keep ending up in this position? Having to choose whether or not to get in bed with Sam. Or, more accurately, whether or not to stay in bed.

Of all the things I expected when I got home last night, Sam standing in the kitchen chopping vegetables wasn't one of them. I know I said he needed to up his sexiness, but I hadn't expected him to come through so quickly.

What is it that makes men who cook so fucking hot?

Now I'm supposed to spend the day in bed with him and just...not do anything? How the fuck is that going to work? I can barely keep my hands to myself when we're in the same room, much less the same bed.

Rolling over, I grab my phone off the nightstand immediately pulling up my text thread with Elliot.

Ellie: *MAYDAY*

Elliot: *What happened?!*

Ellie: *He invited me to spend the day in bed with him.*

Elliot: *He agreed to have secret sex?! This is going on the trope list.*

Ellie: *No, he didn't. We never talked about that. This is just...a friendly day in bed.*

Those three little dots appear and disappear several times before a message finally comes through.

Elliot: *There is no such thing as a 'friendly day in bed'.*

Ellie: *I know.*

Elliot: *Why didn't you talk to him?*

Ellie: *I panicked! He was cooking, Elliot. COOKING.*

Elliot: *Damn. He's got your libido on lock.*

Ellie: *His thirst traps are oddly specific to me.*

Elliot: *It's almost like the two of you are made for each other.*

I scoff, freezing when I realize how loud the sound is in the silent apartment. Sam's face scrunches in his sleep, but he doesn't move otherwise.

Ellie: *Shut up and help me.*

Elliot: *How am I supposed to help?*

Ellie: *I don't know.*

Elliot: *I don't know, either. Looks like you're stuck in bed all day with a super hot guy who wants to fuck your brains out. You poor thing.*

Ellie: *Fuck off.*

Elliot: *Love you too, shithead.*

Sam shuffles in the bed next to me, and I feel his fingers brush against my side. His eyes open slowly, locking immediately on me.

“You’re still in bed.” It’s a statement, not a question.

“I am.”

“Are you staying in bed?”

Taking a deep breath, I push the logic aside and go with my gut. “Yes.”

Sam’s smile is blinding, even in the early morning light. “Good.” He pushes into a sitting position, the blanket sliding down his bare abdomen is almost too hot to watch, and I have to physically pull my eyes from the movement.

“Are you ready for the rules?”

“There are rules?” Sam nods enthusiastically, lifting one hand to tick the rules off on his fingers.

“You can get out of bed to do things like go to the bathroom and get snacks from the kitchen, but that’s it. You cannot get out of bed to do things like laundry, dishes, or anything that is considered a chore. Work also counts as a chore today, so our phones have to be turned off. There’s no outside world on Bed Day.”

I reach for my phone again, texting Elliot that I’m turning my phone off so he doesn’t freak out if I don’t answer later. Powering down my phone, I turn my attention back to Sam. “This feels like a lot of rules for a day centered around laying in bed and doing nothing.”

“There have to be rules, or I won’t properly relax. I learned that the hard way.”

“Okay, what are the rules on coffee? Because I could use some right about now.” As if Sam’s apartment hears me,

something beeps in the kitchen. Sam smiles brightly at me, and I hear the familiar sound of percolating coffee.

“Oh, my God. Do you have an automatic coffee maker?! How did I miss that?”

Sam’s laugh fills the space between us, and he leans against the headboard so I can see around him into the kitchen. Sure enough, tucked in the very back corner, I can see a small coffee machine bubbling away. “You’re always gone before it starts.”

That’s true. This is the first time I’ve been in the apartment during sunrise, and it’s proving to be my favorite time to be here. The morning light over the city is breathtaking, but sleep-mussed Sam and an automatic coffee maker are even better.

“What else are you hiding in this apartment?” I whisper the words, and Sam laughs again.

“Today? Lots and lots of snack foods.” Sam continues at my look of confusion, “another rule of Bed Day is no preparing food. Everything has to be low-to-no prep, meaning I can’t really eat full meals. I went to the grocery store yesterday and restocked on snacks so I wouldn’t go hungry.”

“What kinds of snack foods?”

Sam’s smile is devious, and I can’t take my eyes away from it. “I can show you. Are you hungry?”

“A little,” I admit, realizing it’s about two hours past my normal breakfast time.

“Coffee and breakfast, coming up!” Sam jumps from the bed, moving into the kitchen with the kind of ease I could

only dream of having. Everything Sam does is mesmerizing, and I find myself unable to look away when he starts pulling items out of the fridge.

It's a fucking *spread*. There are fruits, meats, cheeses, jellies, and jams. I can see premade croissants and a box of crackers being poured out onto the tray in front of him.

“This is what you eat on Bed Day?”

Sam nods, bringing the tray over to the bed. He sits down, easily balancing the tray in one hand while folding himself into a seated position. If I had tried that, I would have broken an ankle and dropped the whole tray.

“Uh-huh. And there's more where this came from.”

“I think I *love* Bed Day.”

Sam's laugh is loud, the sound echoing around the room as we dig into the breakfast board.

—

“Who is that?”

“Carson.”

“He's one of the rich ones?”

“No, he's the Butler.”

“Who's that?”

“Thomas.”

“Is he a bad guy?”

Sam's questions come so fast I almost can't keep up. Halfway through breakfast, we decided to turn on the tv. After a lot of mindless scrolling, I saw Downton Abbey on his recently played list. It surprised me since Sam doesn't strike me as the kind of guy to watch something like this on his own.

It turns out I'm right. He has clearly never seen this show in his life.

"Sam, why did we start in the middle of season four if you've never seen the show before?"

"I didn't think it would matter this much," he huffs, popping another grape into his mouth. I snatch the remote from his hand, backing out of the episode we're ten minutes into and scrolling up to season one.

"Who was watching this on your tv?"

"Miller," Sam says it like that fact should be obvious, and really it should be.

I press play on episode one, settling back against the headboard and reaching for a handful of grapes. This is already the most enjoyable morning I've had in a long time, and we've only been awake for an hour.

Sam is quiet for a few minutes, watching the show intently as if he's afraid he might miss something. I watch him from the corner of my eye, trying not to giggle at his intensity. Today is going to be fun.

"Who is that?" Sam points to the screen where Sybil has just made her first appearance.

The morning goes on in much the same fashion; Sam asks questions about the show while we snack on the

enormous food tray. Sam gets up to refill our food tray sometime after noon, and I take my first nap. It's been years since I've gotten to nap, and I wake up nearly two hours later, groggy but happy.

Sam is still sitting in bed but is watching *Field of Dreams* now. "Couldn't stick with *Downton*, huh?"

"Actually, I was really enjoying it. It just wasn't as fun when you weren't answering my questions anymore."

"And today is all about fun?" I say the words around a face-splitting yawn, and Sam chuckles lightly.

"Exactly."

—

"What do you mean you've never seen *The Sandlot*?"

"I mean, I've never—"

"No, Ellie. Please don't say it again." Sam shakes his head dramatically as if this really is the worst news he's ever heard. "We're watching that next."

"Do we have more cheese?"

"Yes...?"

"Then fine. We can watch *The Sandlot*."

Sam raises a brow at me but doesn't ask any questions.

—

“It’s my turn, and you know it.”

“Fine,” Sam huffs, handing the remote over. I try to contain my squeal of delight, but I don’t think I’m very successful. “What are we watching now?”

“Have you seen *The Notebook*?”

“Do not do this to me, Ellie.”

“Did we, or did we not, just watch two baseball movies in a row?”

“Where are the grapes?” I hand him the bowl, smiling as I press play on the remote.

—

“I think that’s the last movie I have in me,” Sam yawns, stretching his arms over his head. I have to agree with him. We’ve been watching tv for the entire day, and even with my midday nap, my brain is fried.

“I don’t think I can go to sleep in this bed now.”

Sam laughs, throwing the covers off his legs and pushing to his feet. I take a moment to admire his backside, determining it to be almost as good as the front. “I have a solution to that, too.”

“Really?”

He nods, walking toward the laundry room. “I washed some sheets yesterday and left them in the dryer. I’m going to

set a refresh cycle, then hop in the shower. You can shower after me, and I'll make the bed. Then, we can get in a bed with fresh sheets and clean bodies, and it'll be like the first time getting in bed all day."

I'm genuinely impressed by how much thought he's put into this. Down to having the sheets already in the dryer. He really does take his day in bed seriously. Sam disappears into the laundry room, and I hear the dryer kick on. Moments later, he's making his way past the bed again on his way to the bathroom.

"I won't be long."

I'm not sure if that requires a response, so I simply nod. I can't believe we made it the whole day without anything happening. There were a few lingering touches, but nothing that led anywhere we wouldn't have been able to come back from.

Now it's the end of the day, and I'm a little bit sad it didn't get out of hand. Maybe if I had taken Elliot's advice and had the conversation with Sam last night, then I could have spent the day having earth-shattering orgasms in-between 90's baseball movies.

I could have the conversation with him now.

Am I bold enough to actually do it, though? Or will I chicken out again? If I did manage to bring up the subject with Sam, am I prepared for the consequences? As much as I love to think his exact reaction will be, 'fuck yeah, Ellie. I'm attracted to you, too. Now get on my dick.' there's a real possibility it will be more like, 'sorry, Ellie. The risks are too

great. I could lose my career, and I'm unwilling to chance that on a mind-blowing lay'.

The sound of the shower cuts out, and I realize Sam is already done. Okay, Bennett, this is your chance. Just...do it. When he comes out of that bathroom, tell him you're attracted to him, and you know that causes a lot of issues for him and his career, but if he's willing, you would like very much to have crazy, sweaty sex with him.

Fuck.

I can do this. *I can*. Even if he does turn me down, it's Sam. He will do it in the nicest way possible, and everything will be—

The bathroom door swings open, revealing Sam in a cloud of steam. He's. Naked.

Okay, he has a towel around his waist, but it's not a very big towel, and it's doing very little to hide everything beneath it.

All words leave my mind.

My eyes trace a water droplet as it makes its way down Sam's neck. Dripping between his pecks and sliding down his abs before disappearing behind the fluffy white towel. His hand flexes where it's holding the towel closed, and for one breathless moment, I think he might drop it.

"I forgot my clothes," his voice is so deep it's almost a growl, and I'm so instantly turned on that I can feel my heartbeat in my clit. I can't form words around the lump in my throat, but Sam doesn't seem to need me to say anything. "The shower is all yours."

He strides past the bed, making a beeline for the laundry room, and I watch the perfect sway of his hips until he's through the other door.

Fuck. Me. DEAD.

I all but sprint to the bathroom, snapping the door shut behind me. I almost told that man I was attracted to him. What the fuck was I thinking? People that hot don't have sex with their funny fat friends. They have sex with literal Supermodels.

That isn't true, Elizabeth Jane. I mentally chastise myself as I turn on the shower, slipping out of my oversized t-shirt and bending to undo the straps on my boot. *You are beautiful, funny, smart, and kind. You have a lot to offer, and any man worth having can see that.*

"Yeah, well," I mumble to the empty room as I step into the shower, careful not to put any weight on my foot. "I wasn't previously aware that there were men that hot."

The image of Sam's thigh sticking out of the towel has me groaning, dropping my head back to let the scalding hot water wash over me.

I need an orgasm. Now. How thick are these walls? What are the odds Sam will hear me in here, fucking myself to thoughts of his body? If he did hear me, would he come to check on me? God, just the idea of Sam coming into the bathroom has my body temperature rising.

That's it.

I'm taking care of this myself.

Chapter Seventeen: King

I ruined everything.

If I had been thinking, I would have grabbed my clothes out of the laundry room when I was in there turning on the dryer, but I'm so used to being able to walk across my apartment in just a towel that it never occurred to me.

When I first stepped out of that bathroom, I could have sworn Ellie was going to eat me alive. She looked at me with such intensity, and I had to fight not to go to her. I told myself I wouldn't start anything between us without talking to Miller first though. As much as I trust Ellie not to fuck me over, it isn't just me she would ruin if she ran to the press.

I wasn't sure if I would be able to keep my hands to myself, especially if Ellie kept looking at me like that, but she didn't. Half an hour later, she wouldn't even look at me when she came out of the bathroom. She hobbled straight to the bed, curled up beneath the covers, and turned Downton Abbey back on. We barely spoke the rest of the night.

Ellie went to sleep around ten, but I spent the rest of the night tossing and turning. Everything had been so easy today. I had the perfect day with the most amazing woman, and in typical King fashion, I fucked everything up.

This is the Bed Day equivalent of a night out with Miller: We have a great time, but I end up punching someone in front of the paparazzi.

I didn't think being almost naked would end with Ellie not being about to look at me anymore. Honestly, I always imagined being almost naked with Ellie would end in both of us being naked. Together.

Just after one in the morning, I decide I can't keep staring at the ceiling all night. Getting up, I change into my running gear and slip out of the apartment as quietly as possible.

I just need to clear my head with a run. Everything will make more sense after that.

I've been sitting at Betty's for almost half an hour, waiting for Miller and Grady to show up for our last off-season dinner. It's my own fault for being so early, I was going out of my mind being in the apartment alone all afternoon.

"What do you look so deep in thought about?" Grady drops heavily into the seat across from me, a goofy smile stretching across his face. Fucking, Grady. I bet Ellie would have kept looking *him* in the eye after almost seeing his dick.

The idea of Ellie being anywhere near Grady's dick has me grinding my teeth.

"Uh, oh," Miller's voice draws my attention away from my spiraling thoughts. "How have you already pissed him off?"

“I didn’t do anything!” Grady holds up both hands, playing the innocent. He is innocent, but that doesn’t matter in my jealousy-filled brain. I try to shake the thoughts away, knowing they have no basis in reality.

“He didn’t do anything. I’m just...”, what? Emotionally exhausted? Sexually frustrated? “Tired.”

“Well, you better get it together,” Miller flops into the seat next to me, slapping me with the back of his hand. “We leave in six days, and you have to be at the top of your game.”

I nod, choosing not to point out that I am always at the top of my game. Not that it will matter anymore.

“Are you guys ready?” Grady grabs a menu. I swear we all look at the menus just for something to do. It’s not like we need to see if there’s something new to try. There’s nothing new at Betty’s, ever. We like it that way.

“I am. I’ve got a few more arrangements to make for the week and a half we’re in Philly, but other than that, I’m set.”

“Miller,” I sigh, making eye contact with Grady across the table. He smiles knowingly at me, and I smile wryly back. “Are your ‘arrangements’ of the female variety?”

Miller scoffs but doesn’t deny it. “How is *your* ‘arrangement of the female variety’?” He shoots back at me, kicking one of my chair legs so my seat scoots farther from him. I roll my eyes, but I’m smiling in earnest now.

“She’s good. I think,” my brow furrows, and I don’t miss the look passing between Grady and Miller.

“You think?”

“Yeah, well,” I sigh, my momentary good mood forgotten. “Things were really good all day yesterday. We did Bed Day, and—”

“Hold, please,” Miller physically raises his hand to stop me. “She spent Bed Day with you? You never let *me* spend Bed Day with you.”

“You don’t have tits, Miller.” Grady helpfully points out, making Miller scowl. I don’t have the heart to tell Miller the reason I let Ellie join Bed Day isn’t only because she ‘has tits’. I still haven’t told him about the new pitcher and don’t want to. Miller will be devastated when he finds out this is my last season, so I want to keep that fact from him as long as possible.

He’s an idiot, but he’s got big emotions, and I know this will crush him.

“Do you want to talk about Bed Day, or do you want to talk about how I ruined it?”

“How did you ruin it?”

I sigh, settling into my seat and launching into an overview of the day. When I explain what happened when I came out of the bathroom, I see the guys share another look across the table. “Then she was in the shower for a really long time, and when she came out, she wouldn’t look at me. We barely spoke the rest of the night, and she went to bed early.”

“Let me get this straight,” Miller looks thoughtful, but I can see a smile pulling at his lips. “You walked across your apartment butt ass naked, then Ellie took a long shower and couldn’t look you in the eye anymore.”

“Basically.”

Both men burst into laughter at the same time, drawing the attention of several people around us. “I think you might be too close to the situation, King.” Grady chuckles, giving me another knowing smile.

“You are an *idiot*.” Miller slaps at my shoulder, wiping a tear from his eye. “How do you not see it?”

“Not see what?” This isn’t as funny as they think it is. They weren’t there. They don’t know how awkward it was.

“Let me take this one, Mills. I’m less likely to get punched,” Grady clears his throat, and Miller laughs again. “King. Sometimes when a woman is confronted with a naked man that she is already attracted to, she gets...feelings. In her lady bits—”

“I don’t know that you are less likely to get punched,” I growl across the table. They both laugh again, but Grady doesn’t continue. “You think Ellie was—”

“Unbelievably horny, yeah.” Miller quickly pushes his chair away from me, just in case I try to hit him, but I’m too distracted by what they’ve said to care.

Is that what happened? Did I turn Ellie on so much that she had to take care of herself in the shower? Why wouldn’t she tell me?

Okay, that’s a stupid question. We’re still just friends. You don’t just tell your friend, “Hey, you make me so horny I can’t breathe. Wanna lend me a hand?”

I would have lent a hand, though. I would have lent both hands, my mouth, and any other part of me she wanted,

enthusiastically and without asking for anything in return. The thought of Ellie touching herself in the shower has me shifting in my seat. I would give anything to have been able to give her that orgasm. To be the one to bring her pleasure instead of that purple vibrator or her own fingers.

The guys start having their own conversation, seeming to realize I need a minute to think this over without their constant interruptions. What can I do to make it clear to Ellie that I want to be the one to give her orgasms? I want to give her every orgasm she has for the rest of her life.

I still don't have a clear idea of what to do by the time I make it home. Ellie is curled up on the couch watching some terrible reality show. She smiles at me the moment I step off the elevator, and I smile back. At least she's making eye contact with me again. I move to the fridge pulling out a beer before leaning around the door to ask Ellie if she wants one.

"Yes, please." She chirps back without taking her eyes off the guy talking on the TV. I slowly make my way to the couch, a plan forming in my mind. It's clear I can't tell Ellie that I want to change our relationship into something physical, but maybe I can just show her.

Handing her the beer, I sit on the cushion beside her. Her eyes widen in surprise, but she doesn't say anything. More importantly, she doesn't move away. If anything, she seems to melt into my side, her body fitting perfectly against mine.

We watch the show for half an hour, while I think over my next move. Is there a chance that she would be receptive to physical advances? If I leaned over and whispered in her ear would she shiver against me like she did the other night? If I

ran my hand along the inside of her thigh, would she spread them for me? Would she let me feel her in all those places that I've been dreaming of? Would she already be wet for me?

I have to adjust my position on the couch, my pants growing uncomfortably tight at that line of thought. The movement puts Ellie head against my shoulder, and I use the opportunity to lift my arm, letting her rest her head against my collarbone.

This is a cuddle. There's no other word for it. We're cuddling on the couch, and I know exactly what to do now. I start slow, letting my fingers brush against her arm a few times before making the motions more deliberate.

My hand runs up the length of her arm, cresting her shoulder, and I feel her shiver at the motion. Biting my lip to keep from smiling, I do it again, this time allowing my hand to run the length of her shoulder and brush against the back of her neck. Ellie groans audibly, and I have to hold in a shout. My excitement is short-lived, though.

Ellie pushes away from me, using both hands to press against my abdomen as if she needs her full strength to put the space between us.

"I have to go."

Uh, what? What the fuck?

"You—"

"There's a uh...recipe. In my brain. And it just," she trails off, clearly unsure where she's going with that sentence. There's no way she actually has a recipe in mind right now. "I have to go."

She repeats the words as she stands, reaching for her crutches where they're leaning against the window by the couch. I want to ask her what's actually happening in her brain right now.

Why is she panicking? Did I come on too strong? Does she not want to be with me the way I want to be with her?

Has this all been in my head?

I watch, helplessly, as Ellie runs from me, the sound of her crutches snapping against the floor echoing in my brain.

She's running from me.

The elevator doors slide closed between us, and I swear I hear her whisper "I'm sorry".

What in the fuck just happened?

Chapter Eighteen: Ellie

What in the fuck just happened?

I feel like I'm going crazy. It's been a month since I met Sam, and I have lived with him for most of that time. I've managed to keep my head for the most part when I'm around him, maintaining the line of 'just friends' and never crossing into anything more, but I hadn't realized how much I depended on Sam to keep that line from his side as well.

The moment he touched me, my entire body lit up. It felt like I was on fire, burning from the inside out from a simple touch of his hand against my arm. At that moment, I either needed him inside me, or I needed to put distance between us.

Naturally, I took the cowardly option.

I physically ran from him. Well, as close to running as I could get with this stupid fucking boot slowing me down. I know Sam didn't believe me about the recipe, but I couldn't think of a better excuse to get out of there.

Something about Sam shuts off the rational part of my brain. The part that allows you to have serious conversations or function like an adult. He makes me want to throw caution to the wind and do whatever I want. Consequences be damned.

The consequences aren't solely mine to deal with, though. I'm not the one who will lose my career if we let this go any further, but it will be my name in the papers. The finger

will be pointed squarely at me, and there won't be any doubt that I am responsible for Miller and Sam getting benched. The city will turn on me, and I'll be unable to defend myself. Colin has made that more than clear in the texts he's been sending me every day since he met Sam.

I hobble across the street, unlocking the bakery door with fumbling fingers. It's still below freezing outside, made all the more frigid by the biting wind. I can't wait for Spring when the occasional sixty-degree day will break up the bleak midwest winter.

The bakery is warm, and I move deeper into the building, pushing my way into the kitchen. There. Now several doors, an empty street, and an elevator separate us.

It isn't helping.

I can still feel the press of his body against mine, his hand ghosting up my arm and across my shoulder. Groaning into the silence of the kitchen, I begin to make my way around the room, gathering ingredients for my favorite double chocolate brownie recipe.

The calming motions of baking soothe my nerves, and I begin to be able to think clearly again. I don't think the issue is that I don't know how to bring the subject of "more" up to Sam; it's that I physically can't think when I'm in his presence. It's like looking into the sun. You can do it, but only for a moment. I have precious few seconds of mental clarity around him.

The brownie batter comes together perfectly, and I pour it into a lined pan, tapping out the bubbles. I just need to

talk to Sam without looking at him. Maybe I can just close my eyes and say everything quickly?

That might be the dumbest thought I've ever had.

Sighing, I slide the brownie tray into the oven and start the timer. I need a second opinion. I could call Elliot, but he had a date tonight, and I don't want to interrupt them in case it's going well.

I wonder if Matty would answer his phone. The bar is open tonight, but he sometimes manages to take calls when—

Call.

How the fuck didn't I think of this before? If I call Sam, I can talk to him without watching his face fall—without looking him in the eye when he tells me that I'm not worth the risk.

Or when he tells you that he wants you too and has been trying to come up with a way around the rule as well.

That is wishful thinking, but I allow it to push me forward. Pulling my phone from my pocket, I quickly dial Sam's number. The phone rings twice before he answers, and I realize we've never spoken on the phone before.

His voice is just as deep and pleasing in my ears, and for a moment, I think I might not be able to get through this.

"Ellie? Are you okay?"

"I don't know," I admit, rubbing a hand across my forehead. "I'm sorry I ran."

He sighs, and I hear him moving around in the apartment. A cabinet opens and closes almost immediately,

and I can't help but picture him standing in the kitchen. Nervously fiddling with the cabinet doors. "I'm sorry I made you feel like you had to run from me."

"Oh, no. Sam, it wasn't like that at all." Shit. I hadn't considered that he might think he had done something wrong. "I just needed to put some space between us before...." I sigh, taking a deep breath to steel my resolve. "Before I did something we would both regret."

Sam is quiet for a moment, and I swear I stop breathing. This is it. This is when he tells me that it would have been a mistake, and he's glad I didn't do anything. "Who says I would have regretted it, Ellie?"

That...isn't what I thought he would say. I pinch my arm to make sure I'm not hallucinating.

Ouch. Definitely conscious.

"Well," I try to get my brain back on track, remembering the list of reasons why I've been trying to keep my distance from him. "I heard you talking to Miller that day at the hospital. I know that your coach said no more bars, no more fights, and *no more women*. Then, you told me they would bench you and Miller if you broke the rules again. I don't want to be responsible for that. I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if I were the reason you and Miller got in trouble."

Sam is quiet again, and I swear I can feel his stillness through the phone. After a moment, he asks, "Is that the only thing stopping you from wanting to be with me?"

It feels like an odd question, as if he started to say something else but changed his mind halfway through. “Of course, there are other reasons, Sam.”

“What reasons?”

“All the usual ones,” I laugh, but Sam doesn’t. Sighing heavily into the phone, I begin to list all the things holding me back. “We’re from different worlds, Sam. You’re a hero to the people of the city, and I am a nobody. Not to mention the way the people would react if they found out about us.”

Sam scoffs, and I can hear him moving around the apartment again, more cabinets opening and closing in quick succession. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“People would take one look at you and me, and they would wonder what the hell you’re doing with me. What happens when people find out that you and I are together and you’ve been benched for an entire season? Not just you, but you and Miller? They’ll come for me, and it won’t be pretty.”

“I think you’re giving the people of this city too much credit. They don’t care about me unless I’m doing something scandalous, and living with my girlfriend isn’t exactly a scandalous move.”

I’m so ready to refute whatever he says that I almost miss the words that he actually says. “Did you just call me your girlfriend?”

“Is that not where this is headed?” I can hear the smile in his voice, and I can’t help but smile in return. It doesn’t last long, though.

“You can’t just assume this won’t all go wrong, Sam.”

“Ellie, I have been assuming that this will all go wrong from the moment I met you. Do you know what Coach Maggart meant when he said ‘no women’?”

“That you’re not allowed to date anyone.”

“No,” Sam’s voice sounds different, almost like he’s moved into another room of the apartment. “He was saying that I can’t end up in the press for breaking another woman’s heart. He was worried about it happening again because it doesn’t matter how well I treat women; they all seem to run to the media to say that I am a monster.”

“I would never do that to you.”

“I know that, Ellie.” Sam huffs a laugh, his voice going soft. I swear I hear a small ding on his end of the line. Is he using the microwave while we’re having this conversation? This isn’t a ‘think I’ll just microwave a burrito real quick’ kind of conversation.

The thought of the microwave reminds me of the brownies in the oven, and I rush over to check them. Thankfully, I pull them out before they burn.

“If you’re able to be in a relationship, as long as it doesn’t end up in the press, and we both know that I won’t go to the press...where does that leave us?”

Sam huffs into the phone again. At the same time, I swear I hear the bell above the bakery door. Did I lock the front door? That would be just my luck, another strange man walking into the bakery in the middle of the night.

Though it would appear that the last strange man to walk into my bakery was more of a threat to my heart than my

health.

“That leaves us as two consenting adults, desperate to get their hands on one another and lucky enough to be in the same place at the same time.”

I don't have to ask what the last sentence means because Sam pushes his way through the kitchen door at that exact moment. We stand ten feet apart, staring at one another with a newfound realization.

We don't have to keep our hands to ourselves anymore.

I'm unsure which of us moves first, but Sam is faster. He presses into my space, his hips pinning mine to the island as his hands find their way into my hair.

Fuck, he's a good kisser. His lips are firm but give way to every demand I make of them. The way he nips at my lower lip before sucking it into his mouth has me arching against him, desperate for anything else he's willing to give me.

I moan into his mouth as his hands move down my sides, lifting my hips onto the counter behind me. I have exactly one thought about the health and safety rating of fucking on this countertop before all thoughts leave my mind and need takes over every part of me.

“Sam, please.”

Chapter Nineteen: King

I press myself between her thighs, crushing our mouths together again. Ellie goes soft in my arms, her body melting into mine as I begin to kiss down her neck. Gently, I move her body away from mine to strip her sweater over her head. I'm shocked to find she isn't wearing a bra beneath the sweatshirt, and if I weren't already impossibly hard, that would have done it.

"You are perfect, Ellie." The words fall from my lips without conscious thought as my eyes move across her body. I have no idea if she says anything in response, as my focus narrows on how I will get her jeans off without removing her boot.

I quickly remove them from her left leg, prompting her to lift her hips before resting them back on the island. "Ellie," I'm not sure what I want to say, everything crashing over itself in my mind. I want to tell her I will take my time with her. That I will touch and kiss every inch of her body. That I will worship her the way she deserves, but I know that isn't true. Not this time, when my body feels like a live wire, and I'm crawling out of my skin with need.

"Sam," she whispers back, seeming to understand what I'm not saying. Ellie sits up, reaching for me with both hands. Our mouths come together again, and I bite gently at her lower lip before sucking it into my mouth, causing her to whine high in her throat.

I can't stay still any longer.

Working a hand between us, I press two fingers between her thighs. "Are you wet for me, Ellie?" Another small whine, and her hips begin to rock against my fingers.

"Sam, please." It's the second time she's begged for me, and I don't think I'll ever get used to the sound of it.

"Please what, Ellie? What do you want, sweetheart?"

"Fuck," she hisses, grabbing my shoulders for balance as I pull her hips to the edge of the island.

"Do you want my fingers, Ellie? My mouth?" I continue to tease her as I breathe the words against her ear. "Tell me what you need."

"All of it. Please, Sam. All of it." Her voice cracks against the plea, and I give in to her.

I will always give in to her.

Sliding my fingers into her feels like heaven, and I carefully crook them to touch the spot that has her rolling her eyes back in her head. My thumb grazes her clit, and Ellie's hands tighten against my shoulders. I love that I get to see her like this. Her thighs spread and her head thrown back as she works herself against my fingers, shamelessly taking her orgasm from me. She's beautiful.

"Sam," she sighs my name, her body shuddering as her face goes slack with pleasure. I carefully pull my hand from her, gently brushing against her sensitive clit just to see her shudder again. Ellie watches me intently as I raise my fingers to my lips, licking them clean. She tastes like she was made just for me, and I'll never get enough of it.

I want more of it.

I start to drop to my knees, but she surprises me by gripping my shoulders to stop the movement. She pulls me into a devastating kiss. It's messy and needy, and I'm so distracted by it that I almost miss her unbuttoning my jeans.

“Now, Sam. I need you right fucking now.”

Who am I to deny her anything? Thankfully, I had the forethought to put a condom in my pocket before leaving the apartment. It had seemed like a long shot at the time, but I can't remember why.

Ellie takes the packet from my hands, deftly opening it before pulling my hips toward her again. The feeling of her hands on me as she carefully rolls the condom in place has me hissing through my teeth. She runs her hand down my shaft again, and I step back, putting space between us before I do something embarrassing, like come from a two-stroke hand job.

“Lay down” I don't mean for it to sound as commanding as it does, but I'm losing all control. Ellie's quick to obey, stretching across the island, and I realize her body is even better in person than it had been in my imagination. I tease the tip of my cock against her pussy as I kiss a line down her chest. I can tell she's losing her patience, and just as she's about to say something, I give into the need to be inside her.

“Fuck!” Ellie arches her back off the counter, her hands grabbing for purchase against the marble surface. I don't give her time to adjust, pulling out before slamming quickly back in. Her body slides away from me, and I pull her back by her hips. Ellie moans, and I tighten my grip on her, grinding

my hips into her for a moment while I catch the breath she's knocked from my lungs.

“Is that what you needed, sweetheart?”

“Yes,” is her breathless answer, forced from her lips by my cock slamming into her again. God, she feels amazing.

Ellie was made for me and no one else. Made to be spread open by my hands, speared on my cock.

Her hands move above her, gripping the opposite edge of the island, arching her back, and giving me an unobstructed view of her perfect tits. My low moan sounds more like a growl as I begin to fuck her in earnest, my hands pressing bruises into her hips as I hold her in place.

Ellie's breathy pleas for more fill the air between us, and I give her everything she asks for. By the time I reach one hand between us, she's all but weeping my name.

“Come on, Ellie. Come on my cock, sweetheart.”

My perfect girl doesn't need to be told twice. The sight of her shattering sends me over the edge, my own orgasm taking the breath from my lungs. I take several deep inhales, my eyes raking over Ellie's body where she's still laid out for me, and my heart squeezes.

I don't know what I did to deserve this, but I'm willing to do it over and over again for the rest of my life.

Ellie tries to sit up, and I see her wince. I instantly reach for her, helping her to sit up fully. “Are you alright? Did I hurt you?”

“I’m fine,” she assures me, running a hand down the front of my shirt. I suddenly realize that I’m still completely clothed, while Ellie is entirely naked other than her jeans hanging from the boot on her right foot.

Quickly, I zip my jeans back up, stepping away to help her down from the island. Ellie pulls her jeans and underwear back on, and I find her sweatshirt from where I’d thrown it onto the counter behind me. Once she’s dressed again, we stand there staring at each other.

Ellie’s soft laugh soothes the panic beginning in my chest. For a moment, I thought she was regretting what just happened.

“What’s so funny?”

She shakes her head, moving toward me again. Ellie wraps her arms around me, pulling my body into hers. My arms move around her shoulders automatically, and I drop my head to rest against hers. We stand like that for several long moments, breathing one another in.

“I made brownies.” It’s such a strange thing to say that I almost ask her to say it again, sure that I’ve misheard her. Sure enough, she takes a step back, gesturing to a tray on the island, less than a foot from the spot Ellie was just spread across.

I don’t think I’ll ever be able to look at this island in the same way.

“Would you like some?” Ellie walks to the tray, her booted foot thudding across the floor, and I’m reminded of the

sound of her crutches across the apartment when she ran from me earlier tonight.

“Is this the recipe that you just had to make earlier?” I keep my words light, trying for a teasing tone now that I know she wasn’t really running from me.

Ellie laughs, an embarrassed blush spreading across her cheeks. “I really wasn’t that subtle, was I?”

“You were not,” I move behind her, realizing I don’t have to keep my hands off her anymore. If I want to touch her, I can. Sliding my arms around her waist, I drop my chin onto her shoulder, watching her cut the brownies into squares.

Ellie holds one of the brownies up to me, and I bite it without taking it from her hand. She laughs, holding the brownie for me until I take the last bite, closing my lips around her fingers more than is strictly necessary.

She sucks in a breath, and I can feel her squirming against me again. “Are you ready to go home?”

My voice has dropped significantly, and I feel her shiver. If I don’t get us across the street soon, I’m going to fuck her over the counter for a second time, and she deserves better than that. Ellie deserves to be worshipped properly. In a bed. With *both* of us naked this time.

We quickly close up the bakery, though it takes a bit of convincing to make Ellie leave the brownie pan in the sink. Our progress across the street is slow, Ellie’s crutches proving to be more of a hindrance than a help. By the time we make it into the elevator, I’m over them entirely. When the elevator doors ding open, I stop Ellie with a hand on her shoulder. I

pull the crutches from her hands, resting them against the wall inside the apartment.

She seems to realize what I'm about to do moments before I do it, and her eyes go wide, a protest on her perfect lips. I scoop her into my arms, her words turning to a helpless shout. She throws her arms around my neck, quickly bringing her legs around my waist. I try to hold in my laugh, but I'm not very successful, and she turns an angry gaze on me. "Samuel Everett Kingston,"

"The second," I remind her, walking us across the apartment toward the bed.

"You don't just pick a woman up! You warn her. You allow her the chance to protest. You—" We reach the edge of the bed, and I raise my eyebrow at her. She knows exactly what I'm threatening and narrows her eyes again. "You do *not* drop her."

I laugh loudly, lifting my legs to crawl onto the bed with her still in my arms. We don't make it far before I place her gently across the mattress, allowing her to unfold her legs from my waist. When I lean back, Ellie is stretched in front of me for the second time tonight, and I can't help but take a moment to appreciate it this time.

Even fully clothed, she's so beautiful it hurts, and I have to force myself to keep my movements slow. I reach for her boot, taking it off with careful hands. I make a mental note not to throw her around too much since her foot won't be protected. I'm still focused on gently pulling her jeans over her foot when Ellie loses her patience. She sits up, slamming her mouth onto mine, and I lose myself in the demand of her kiss.

Fuck, I love this woman.

Chapter Twenty: Ellie

Sam's kiss is like fire against my skin. He begins to kiss along my jaw, his lips dragging against my skin as he moves down my throat, and I feel him tug at the collar of my sweater. I've never been so grateful not to be wearing a bra as I am when he pulls my nipple into his mouth the moment it's bared to him.

I can't help the cry that escapes my lips as I slip my legs around his back again, doing my best to grind against him.

"Fuck, Sam", I whine in response, his hard cock rubbing against my clit through his jeans. I want them gone. Now. It's unfair that he kept all his clothes on in the bakery. I want to see him and feel his skin against mine.

All coherent thoughts slip from my mind as my body melts into a puddle of want and desire beneath him. Sam is moving above me, continuing to rub himself against my clit in that perfect way as he sucks my nipple deeper into his mouth. Sam groans deep in his throat, the vibrations spreading through my body.

I reach for his shirt, pulling against his collar until he gets the message. Sam laughs, sitting up to strip the fabric over his head. It doesn't matter how often I see him like this; I will never get over it. His lean body and bold tattoos demanding

my attention. I'm so focused on looking at every part of his chest and abs that I almost miss him removing his pants.

Damn.

I'm very certain the sight of Sam leaning over me, completely naked, has changed my brain chemistry.

I can't trust my voice to form words in this moment, but I nod my head in appreciation. Sam's loud laugh has me laughing too, and I reach for him, but he stops me. His eyes trace over my body in a way that can only be described as carnal.

"Ellie, I need to taste you." The words rush out of him, and I whimper in response. I want him to taste me. I get one more quick view of long, lean muscles and thick, corded thighs before he's bending over and burying his face against me.

I gasp, digging one hand into his hair, the other bracing against the headboard as I rock against his face. Sam is like a starving man. His lips and tongue press against every part of me that needs him, gently brushing against my clit before moving away again. My hand tightens against his scalp in a silent demand for him to press against my clit again.

"Fuck." It's the only thing I can think, the only thing I can say with my brain melting under Sam's ministrations, and it seems to spur him on. He devotes his tongue to my clit, rubbing circles against the edges as his fingers snake their way between us, teasing at my entrance. I begin to tense, and Sam chooses that moment to press his fingers into me.

The world shatters around me, release slackening every part of my body. As my awareness returns, I realize Sam is kissing his way up my body, stopping to brush feather-light kisses against each of my breasts before continuing up my neck. I pull him against me, demanding to know what I taste like on his lips.

“Hi.”

“Hi,” he murmurs back to me, and I smile up at him, unable to decide if I would rather thank him or ask him to do that again. Sam adjusts his body weight onto his right forearm, bringing his left hand up to rub one thumb along my bottom lip. His shifted weight has brought his hips closer to mine, and I can feel the heat of his erection pressing against me.

“I want a taste.”

“A taste of what, sweetheart?”

I hadn't meant to say that out loud, but I'm glad I did because it means I get to see the look on Sam's face when I reply, “your cock”.

Within seconds, Sam has us flipped over, and he groans deep in his throat. “Did I hurt you?”

“No,” he shakes his head vigorously, but his eyes never leave mine. “You haven't hurt me. You might have ruined my life, though.”

I can't help but laugh at that. “How have I ruined your life?”

“Because I'll never know another day of peace. Not now that I know what it looks like to have you begging for my cock.” His voice dips, and I feel his hips flex beneath me.

“You thought that was begging?” I raise a challenging eyebrow at him, and Sam groans again, his fingers pressing into my hips. “Are you going to give it to me then? Now that you know how much I want it?”

I use both hands against his chest to slide myself down those thick fucking thighs of his. One of these days, I’m going to take the time to lick and bite every inch of them. I stretch out flat along his legs, resting my tits just below his straining cock. Looking up at him through my lashes, I whisper, “Please, Sam. Let me suck your cock.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Ellie,” Sam grips both hands in my hair as I take the tip in my mouth. The slide of him across my tongue and the way he fits against the roof of my mouth has me writhing against his legs. Sam moves his legs, slipping one out to the side, so I’m straddling the other. “Take whatever you need from me, sweetheart.”

His voice is deeper than I’ve ever heard it, and I moan around him as I start to move. It takes a few tries, but soon I’m bobbing my head in motion with the grind of my hips. Sam’s panting breaths are ringing in my ears and I can feel my second orgasm building already. Sam’s hand suddenly tightens in my hair, pulling gently against my scalp and encouraging me off his dick.

“I don’t want to come down your throat,” he explains at my look of confusion as he gently encourages me to sit up again. “Come here,” he pulls me toward him, my knees inching up either side of his leg until I’m hovering over one massive thigh. “Sit.”

Fuck, I love when he does that. My body immediately follows the command, wiggling my hips until he's pressing exactly where I need him. "You gonna come on my thigh, Ellie?" Sam's hands move to my hips, following the motion but not trying to change it. "That's right, sweetheart." He growls, his fingers tightening as I start to move in earnest. Sam snakes a hand up my side, cupping my breast and pinching my sensitive nipple. My head tilts back, a long sigh of pleasure hissing through my lips as another orgasm pulses through me.

"You're so fucking beautiful," Sam mutters, and it's so quiet I'm not sure he meant for me to hear him. I smile, my brain high on endorphins but clear enough to know what I want next.

"Sam," I all but purr his name, shifting my weight onto his abdomen again. The flex of his muscles beneath my splayed fingers has me clenching between my thighs. "I need it."

His eyes grow wide, his breath hitching in his throat. "I need your cock buried in me, Sam. Please, can I have it?" He hesitates for the first time all evening, and I try to think what I might have said that would give him pause. He doesn't leave me in suspense for long, though.

"I will give you anything you want, sweetheart. Unfortunately, you're gonna have to let me up first because the condoms are in the bathroom." I can hear the relief in my laugh as I shift off of him. Flopping onto the bed, I poke him in the side and nod toward the bathroom.

"You better hurry, or I might just have to give myself my next orgasm."

“Is that meant to persuade me to go faster?” Sam’s hand slides down my side, coming to rest against my pubic bone. He deftly slides two fingers over my clit, and I hold back a moan. “As long as I get another orgasm, I don’t care how fast or slow you go.”

“I’ll remember that for later,” he pulls his hand away, shooting me a wicked smile as he slides out of bed. He’s in the bathroom before I can roll onto my back, and I hear him rummaging through the drawers.

I know it won’t take him long to get what he needs, and I decide to reward him for his efforts. Spreading my legs across the bed, I let my knees fall open, my hand drifting down between my thighs.

“Was I not quick enough?” Sam asks, and I moan softly at the sound of his voice combined with the soft pad of my fingers rubbing against my clit. He moves quickly to the side of the bed, rolling on the condom before crawling on top of me to spread my knees even farther apart with his thighs. He watches me continue to rub slow circles, his hands absently mimicking the motion against my thighs.

Suddenly, he surges forward, crashing our mouths together, our tongues fighting for dominance. “Are you going to let me give you this orgasm?”

I tip my head back, allowing Sam to kiss his way down my neck again, replacing my fingers with his own. I’m just about to beg him to either move faster or put his dick in me when he presses into me in one quick motion, burying himself until we’re both groaning in pleasure.

It doesn't take long to push me to the edge again, and I explode at the first touch of his fingers to my clit, the pulse of my orgasm reaching every inch of my body.

Sam collapses onto the bed next to me, his panting breaths filling the air between us. I turn onto my side, feeling unbelievably lucky. I can't help but add 'multiple orgasms' to the long list of reasons why I'm falling in love with Sam.

"You did not!" Elliot's gasp is loud in the quiet bakery, and I have to suppress the urge to shush him. No one will hear us this early in the morning, but it still feels wrong to shout about it.

"I did."

"Elizabeth Jane!" Elliot turns wide eyes on the kitchen island I've been scrubbing for five minutes. I hoped to have it done by the time Elliot arrived, but he was early.

I finish wiping down the countertop and move things around the kitchen to prepare for the day ahead.

"Tell me everything," Elliot pulls the stool away from the kitchen cabinet, sitting down heavily before fully turning his attention to me.

"I'm not telling you anything," I laugh, shooing him off the stool with the towel in my hand. "We've got work to do."

Elliot scoffs, getting off the stool to move to the other side of the kitchen and start turning on the ovens. It's quiet for exactly two minutes before I can't hold it in any longer.

"Okay, fine." I sigh dramatically as if he's tortured the information out of me rather than giving me the silent treatment.

Elliot spins around with a massive smile on his face, bending over to prop both elbows on the island top and resting his face in his hands. "Spill."

I tell him about Sam coming home last night and me getting freaked out that I was going to ruin everything. When I explain that I called Sam from the bakery, Elliot correctly guesses that Sam came after me.

"I knew I liked him."

"Me too," I admit, piping my last batch of macarons onto a tray.

"Are you guys dating now?"

I furrow my brow, realizing I don't have an exact answer. Sam called me his girlfriend at one point last night, but we never talked about it again. "I'm not sure."

"Well, you might want to find out," Elliot laughs, putting the tray of macarons into the oven. "Doesn't he leave for Spring Training soon?"

"In five days."

"Sounds like you've got a busy week ahead of you then." Elliot dances away from me, expertly dodging the towel I throw at his back.

Chapter Twenty-One: King

It's just after six on Thursday night, and I'm standing in the kitchen making dinner. I can count on one hand the number of times I've cooked meals from scratch in this kitchen, and two of them have now been since Ellie started living with me.

Speaking of, the elevator doors ding, and Ellie hops her way into the kitchen.

"Why aren't you naked?" She sounds disappointed, and I can't help but pull her into me to place a kiss between her furrowed eyebrows.

"Sorry, sweetheart. That's only on Wednesdays," I place a soft kiss against her lips that immediately gets out of hand. Something about kissing Ellie shuts off all other parts of my brain. I can't think of anything but the taste of her lips against mine, of getting more—taking more.

I have her backed against the island, my mind filled with thoughts of bending her over this counter when the oven beeps, letting me know it's finished preheating.

"We can't do this right now," I mumble against her lips, putting some much-needed space between our bodies. "I'm cooking you dinner."

"That can't wait?"

I try to hold back my laugh, but I fail. “No, it can’t wait. We need to eat before we start anything tonight.” I raise a meaningful eyebrow at her, and she blushes. She was barely through the door last night before we were on each other, but we both fell asleep after only half the amount of orgasms I had planned for the evening.

Unfortunately, when I woke up in the middle of the night for round three, I found the bed beside me empty. Ellie was digging through the kitchen, looking for something to eat, but we didn’t have anything that wasn’t junk food.

I made it my mission to feed her before sex tonight and even went to the grocery store today to get better late-night snacks for her.

Ellie sighs but moves away from me, going to sit in one of the chairs on the other side of the island. “How was your day?” She settles both elbows against the counter, resting her chin against her hands and looking at me expectantly.

“It was good. I went to practice with Miller, and then we ran out to New Heights to see Hazel. Miller worries about her while we’re away.” I do, too. Ever since Wayne passed, Hazel has been alone in that big house. We got her a dog for Christmas two years ago, but even that hasn’t helped ease our worry that something could happen when we are both hours away from her.

“Maybe we could introduce her and my dad? He’s in New Heights too, and I know he would be happy to check in on her for you guys. Plus, I think he could use a friend. He doesn’t leave the house much anymore.”

“I think that would be really nice, Ellie. I’ll talk to Miller about us all getting together this weekend.” She smiles brightly, and I add ‘worried about her dad being lonely’ to the ‘Things That Matter to Ellie’ list I have going in my head. “How was your day?”

Ellie launches into a story about their dishwasher breaking and how frustrating it was having to hand wash the dishes for the rest of the afternoon. I’m about to ask if she has someone coming to fix it when my phone rings.

Pulling it from my pocket, I plan to silence it and put it back, but the name on the screen makes me pause.

“Who is it?”

“Nell.”

Ellie frowns at me, clearly trying to figure out why the name sounds familiar to her. “Miller’s friend?”

“And the head of PR for the Cougars, yeah.” I’m still staring at the ringing phone, unsure if I want to answer it. If it’s Cougar’s bullshit, I don’t want it ruining my dinner with Ellie, but—

“Something could be wrong with Miller,” Ellie voices my concern, and I swipe my thumb across the screen before I miss the chance to answer it.

“Nell?”

“Hey, King. Sorry to bother you,” she sounds like she’s in full business mode, and I immediately relax. I like Nell, she’s a straightforward, no-nonsense kind of woman, and there isn’t anyone better to have in your corner when shit goes south. I’m glad she and Miller are as close as they are because

there's no way he could have stayed out of trouble this long without her.

"It's alright. What's up?"

"Nothing good, unfortunately." She sounds tired, and I wonder when her last day off was. "The flight to Arizona got changed."

"Changed?" I make eye contact with Ellie across the island, and she furrows her brow at my tone. "When?"

"Tomorrow morning. Six am departure, be there by five."

FUCK.

"Why?"

"Can't get into it."

"Nell."

"I'm sorry, King," She sighs heavily, and I believe that she really is sorry. "Five am. I'll see you then."

The line goes dead, but I continue to stand there, holding the phone to my ear like she might come back on the line and tell me it's a joke—that she hasn't really just cut my time with Ellie short by three days.

"What's wrong?" Ellie is standing at my side, but I don't remember her getting out of the chair. I can't leave *tomorrow*. Things just started with Ellie, and we're still getting to know one another. This can't be happening.

There has to be a reason for the early flight. I can't think of a single time in the last decade when they pushed the flights up, especially not by entire days. The games don't start

until Tuesday. We have no reason to be there on Friday unless something happened.

“The flight to Arizona got moved up.”

“When is it?” Ellie wraps her arms around my waist, pulling me into a hug. I try to memorize the feel of her in my arms.

This isn't the end. I won't let this be my last night with Ellie *ever*. This is just my last night with her for a while. There's a difference, and I need to focus on that. “Tomorrow morning.”

“Oh,” she whispers the word against my collarbone, and I feel her arms tighten around my back.

There will be time for sadness tomorrow. Tonight, I have to make the most of our last night together. I have to give her a reason to wait a month and a half for me to be home again, and I have plenty of ideas for just how to do that.

“You know what that means, right?” I take a step forward, moving her between me and the kitchen island. She must feel the shift in my mood because she looks up at me in confusion.

“It means you're leaving tomorrow?”

I chuckle lightly at her obvious answer as I cage her against the island with my arms. Bending my knees, I put us face to face, so all she can see is me. “It means this is my last meal at home. And I plan to make it a damn good one.”

She has no time to react before I scoop her onto the counter. Her eyes widen in surprise when my hands move to

her waist, quickly sliding her yoga pants down far enough to remove them from her left leg entirely.

Ellie gasps when I bend forward, pressing my mouth against her through the thin layer of cotton between us. “Sam!” Her hands fist in my hair, pressing me closer against her. This is what I love most about Ellie, her enthusiastic participation no matter the situation.

I can’t believe I’m about to go six weeks without this.

I’m still awake when my alarm goes off at three am.

Ellie is asleep on my chest, her arm and leg draped over my body as if she couldn’t get close enough to me last night. I know the feeling.

I move out of her grip as carefully as possible, doing my best not to wake her. She has another hour to sleep before she has to be up, and I don’t want to take that from her. My shower is quick, and I’m glad to see Ellie is still sleeping when I pass the bed to grab my clothes from the laundry room. I pack a bag for the next six weeks, quickly picking as many t-shirts and jeans as possible from the shelves. Even in early March, Arizona is warm, but I grab two sweaters just in case.

It’s just before four when I take final stock of everything. I’m completely packed; I even remembered to get everything out of the bathroom and pack my chargers. The only thing left to do is say goodbye to Ellie.

I don't want to do it.

I can't do it.

“Sam?” Her voice is rough from sleep, though I like to think the way she was screaming my name last night hasn't helped the situation.

“Good morning,” I move across the room, sitting on the edge of the bed when she reaches for me. “I thought you were still asleep.”

“I thought you left,” she whispers the words, and I swear my heart breaks a little.

“I would never leave without saying goodbye to you.” She nods, but I can tell her brain is still halfway in sleep mode. “I was about to wake you up, though. I have to leave soon.”

Another nod, this time a small sniff accompanies it. Oh, fuck. If she starts crying, I won't be able to leave her. “Okay,” she pushes into a sitting position, pulling the sheet with her to stay covered. The move sticks in my brain, and I realize it's the first time she's hidden herself from me.

“I'm going to miss you.” She looks up at me through lowered lashes, and I can see the vulnerability in her eyes. Fuck the Cougars for doing this to me. I had plans to talk to her about all the big stuff before I left. Most of it will have to wait, but there is one thing I need to speak to her about before I go.

“I'm going to miss you too,” I pull her hand into mine, bringing it to my lips to press a kiss against her knuckles. “I want you to stay here while I'm gone, okay? Even after you get the boot off.” Her brow furrows, but she nods, and I sigh in

relief. She might have fought me on that one if she were more awake. I won't let her take it back now.

I don't remember getting out of bed or making my way to the elevator, but I will never forget the sight of Ellie sitting there, wrapped in my sheets and nothing else, watching the doors slide closed between us.

This isn't the last time I will see her.

I repeat the words in my head the entire drive to the airport.

—

“Where the fuck is everyone?”

It's just after five, and I've walked onto an empty plane. Well, Miller and Nell are here, and Grady pulled into the lot just behind me, but we're the only ones here so far.

“I told you to come a bit early because we need to talk.” Nell's voice is serious, and my heart begins to pound in my ears. The last time Nell and I ‘needed to talk’ was the first time a woman did a tell-all with the press.

“What happened?”

“We're not sure,” Nell admits, leaning against the side of the seat next to her. She and Miller are standing in the aisle near the front of the plane, both watching me with weary expressions. “There's going to be an article, King.”

The sound of Grady crashing up the steps into the plane nearly drowns out her words, but I know what she's

saying. I know what she means.

“That’s impossible. I haven’t been with anyone since Jasmine.”

Grady goes still behind me, and Miller’s eyebrows raise in surprise. They both know that things have changed with Ellie, but neither of them says anything.

“You’ll have to excuse me for finding that hard to believe, considering the fact that you have a woman living with you right now.”

“How the fu—” *Miller*. I glare at my best friend, and he raises both hands quickly, feigning innocence.

“I have my sources, King. Leave Miller alone.” She lets out a long-suffering sigh like she’s beyond over us and our bullshit. Well, I’m over her bullshit too. “Just tell me about the girl. How bad is this going to be?”

“It isn’t Ellie.” I turn my angry gaze on Nell. How dare she accuse Ellie of this? She doesn’t even know her.

Miller finally speaks up, coming to Ellie’s defense. “I don’t think it was her, Nell. She wouldn’t do that to King.”

“She loves him,” Grady’s soft voice joins the conversation. “Anyone who’s been around them can see that.” His words surprise me, but I try not to let it show. I won’t give Nell any reason to doubt that fact.

“That’s all well and good, but someone talked to the press.” Nell reminds us, successfully cutting off any further arguments we might have. “Whether or not it was Ellie, we have to run damage control. I don’t know what the article is or how bad it will be, so I need you in the air when it releases. It

isn't a guarantee, but it's the best chance of keeping you two off the bench."

I make eye contact with Miller again, and he shrugs helplessly. She isn't wrong. If this article is bad, it will be the final strike against me.

The sound of car doors closing and guys laughing fills the plane around us. The rest of the team is arriving, and this conversation is over. I move toward my seat, sliding into the row next to Miller. He's watching me with a concerned expression, but I shake my head at him.

I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to *think* about it.

Ellie wouldn't do this to me.

She wouldn't.

—

Three excruciatingly long hours later, I swipe through the settings on my phone, turning off airplane mode. It takes a second to connect to cellular, and for one breathless moment, I think Nell might have been wrong.

She wasn't, though.

The second my phone connects, it begins to vibrate with Google Alerts, notifying me that my name is all over the internet. Miller reaches a supportive hand out, squeezing my shoulder as I open the first alert linking to the article.

The headline makes my heart stop.

King finds Queen?

Chapter Twenty-Two: Ellie

This is a terrible idea.

I look through the photos again, each showing me in a different exaggeratedly sexy position, with the pretense of showing off my newly de-booted foot.

There are a few where you can't even see my fucking feet.

It's been three weeks since Sam left, and I've hated every minute of it. It got off to a rocky start with that stupid fucking article. If you can even call that an 'article'. It was basically a long list of rumors and assumptions based on the fact that Sam hadn't been seen going out for a few weeks.

Since then, there have been more articles, but none with any real information about the 'mystery woman' in Sam's life. They aren't even sure if there *is* a woman, but that hasn't stopped them from speculating about who she might be.

Unsurprisingly, all of the 'potential candidates' are rail-thin supermodels.

Those articles have nothing to do with this terrible idea, though. This is all Elliot's fault.

He insisted we go out tonight to celebrate getting my boot off (and to let off some steam from the last few weeks), and now I'm sitting in the apartment in a very low-cut navy blue dress and sensible chunky heels.

The ‘sensible’ part is debatable. It sort of feels like I might rebreak my foot before the night is over.

If I hadn’t worn the dress and heels, I wouldn’t have been tempted to take the sexy photos. Now that I have the sexy photos, I’m tempted to send them. I know it’s a terrible idea, though. Sam is in the middle of a game, and while I know he won’t check his phone right now, he might check it as soon as the game is over.

In the dugout. With all his friends there.

Why is that idea so hot?

No, Ellie. We aren’t sexting Sam while he’s working. Or at all, apparently. It’s been three weeks, and we’ve barely even had a “how’s your day been” conversation, much less anything sexy.

I sigh, taking one last look at my hair and makeup. I didn’t get too fancy since we’re just going to MB’s to hang out with Matty tonight. It isn’t far from the apartment, but Elliot agreed to pick me up so I wouldn’t have to walk much in these heels. Plus, Elliot has been sober for the last few years, and I think he likes being able to drive everyone home at the end of the night.

My phone vibrates, and I get a text from Elliot saying he’s outside. I make my way to the elevator, already wincing at my choice of shoes. Maybe tonight won’t get too crazy, and I’ll be back home at a decent hour.

Then I can change into my pj’s and send Sam a sleepy selfie instead of a sexy one.

“Another!” Matty shouts the moment his empty shot glass bangs onto the bar between us.

I giggle, already tipsy from the shots we’ve taken. “No, Matty! I have to work tomorrow.”

“I have to work right now! You don’t see me complaining.” A woman to my left lets out a tittering laugh, and Matty winks at her.

“He’s a rake,” Elliot whispers, causing me to laugh loudly. He is absolutely right. If this were the 1800s, Matty would be wooing all the virgins into giving up their innocence. Luckily for him, women are decidedly more open to one-night stands these days.

The thought reminds me of something Sam said about Miller; that he would be wholly devoted to one woman if he ever found the right one. I feel the same way about Matty, and I find myself hoping that all of the people in my life will eventually find their person like I did.

Thinking of Sam has me pulling out my phone, and I frown when there aren’t any texts from him.

Ellie: *What’s your drink of choice?*

Unsurprisingly the text goes unanswered for several minutes, so I slip the phone back into my purse, turning my attention back to Elliot. “Tell me about the book you’re reading.”

“Who says I’m reading a book?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I wave a hand in the air as if the very room might be filled with reasons. “Because you’re you. Because you’ve been staring at your phone all night, scrolling far too slowly to be looking through social media. Because you just used the term ‘rake’ like it’s a common phrase.”

Elliot laughs loudly at that, and I know that I’ve guessed correctly. “It *is* a regency.”

“Knew it.” I triumphantly boast, smiling as Matty sets another drink in front of me. Malibu and Gatorade might sound disgusting to most, but it’s been my go-to since my 21st birthday. We went to a bar that served literal buckets of alcohol, and this was their cheapest choice that night. I like it because the Gatorade helps with hangovers, though I doubt I’ll be escaping one of those if Matty keeps putting shots in front of me all night.

I listen as Elliot describes the positively wild plot of the romance he’s reading, smiling the whole time. He has always loved reading anything he could get his hands on, and we were in college the first time he read a romance novel. He called me the moment he finished it and described the entire plot to me in detail. It’s been our tradition ever since, though now he usually tells me while we’re elbows deep in flour at the bakery.

“Wait, she just stole the horse?” Matty asks, dropping a fresh soda in front of Elliot.

My phone vibrates in my bag, and I nearly jump at the feel of it against my hip. I’d already forgotten about the text I sent Sam.

Sam: *Can't say I have a favorite. I drink a lot of beer.*
Why?

I smile at my phone, recalling every time Miller showed up with beer or Sam offered me a beer from the fridge. I should have guessed that on my own.

Ellie: *Just wondering.*

Sam: *What's yours?*

I pull up the camera on my phone, quickly taking a very close-up photo of my electric blue drink against the dark bar top.

Sam: *What is that? Are you at MB's?*

Of course, Sam would recognize MB's from just that photo. His face was intimately acquainted with this very bar top the night we met. Instead of responding with a text, I spin on the barstool, opening my camera again.

"Say Cheese!" My brothers turn on instinct, each pasting on a quick smile and leaning in so they're fully in the photo. I laugh, turning back to the bar before hitting send on the slightly blurry photo. Even in the darkened bar, you can clearly see it's Matty and Elliot with me. You can also see a whole lot of my tits, which I'm counting as a win in my slightly tipsy brain.

"King?" Matty nods at my phone, and I nod back.

"He must be done for the night. Which means it's way past my bedtime." Sure enough, it's after eleven. I have to be up in just under five hours, and I'm already regretting it.

“You ready to go?” Elliot asks with raised eyebrows, and I can tell he’s hoping my answer will be yes.

“Definitely.” We slide off our stools in unison, each throwing our money down on the bar and ignoring Matty’s protests that we shouldn’t pay. My phone vibrates again, but I don’t check it until we’re bundled in the car. A late winter cold snap has descended on Cadence, and I’m grateful Elliot remembered to start the car while we were still in the bar.

Sam: *Jesus, Ellie. You look incredible.*

I smile at the phone, and my tipsy brain takes over again. Instead of replying with “thank you” or “I know, right?” I send him two of the sexy selfies I took earlier tonight and a text asking, “Do I look better or worse without the boot?”

Overall, the photos I choose are relatively tame. The first is a full-body shot from the massive standing mirror in Sam’s closet. It’s a side profile of my body, and the sexiest thing about it is simply that it shows off all my curves.

The second is slightly sexier. I’m lying on my stomach in the bed, and my boobs are pushed up between my elbows. I have my back arched with my feet crossed at the ankle, floating just above the exaggerated curve of my ass.

I quickly lock the screen on my phone, dropping it back in my purse before Elliot accidentally sees what I’ve done. The phone vibrates two more times before we make it to the apartment, but I don’t check the messages.

I’m assuming Sam will either take the high road and tell me I look beautiful or he will say something that will make me wish that I was alone.

“Have a good night,” Elliot calls after me as I brace against the frigid night air. I wave back at him, pushing into the warmth of the lobby with a shudder. “Good evening, Miss Bennett,” Ralph calls from behind the desk in the corner of the lobby.

“Good evening, Ralph. Working the night shift again?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he smiles at me as the elevator doors slide open, and I step inside.

“Then I’ll see you in a few hours.” I wave goodnight as the doors close behind me, and I’m digging in my purse for my phone when I feel it vibrate again.

Sam: *Fuck, Ellie.*

Sam: *What are you trying to do to me, sweetheart?*

Sam: *It’s a crime that you sent me these photos when you’re out with your brothers, and I can’t do anything about it.*

I smile at the messages, dropping my purse on the island as I move toward the bed.

Ellie: *What if I told you I just got home?*

Ellie: *And I’m all alone in this big bed.*

If we’re doing this, then we’re doing this.

Ellie: *Just me and this vibrator...*

It feels like my phone is ringing before I’ve even hit send on the message. Sam must have been staring at his phone, waiting for my response.

“Please tell me you’re actually home.” He skips over saying hello, his mind clearly somewhere else entirely.

“I’m actually home.”

“Good.” I’m about to ask what he plans to do with that information when my phone starts ringing again.

Sam is FaceTiming me.

Chapter Twenty-Three: King

It's a good thing I didn't see Ellie's texts until I walked into my room for the night. She sent me a few earlier in the day, letting me know that she'd gotten her boot off and that Elliot wanted to go out to celebrate. Then one significantly later, asking what my favorite drink is.

I would never have imagined that conversation ending like this.

Who knew my Ellie gets bold when she drinks?

The photos are what did me in. There's nothing overtly sexual about them. You don't see anything you wouldn't if she were walking down the street, but they're sexy.

Not for the first time, I find myself wondering if she is as desperate for a release as I am. I think about her every day, and I have yet to take a shower since I got here that doesn't end with my dick in my hand and Ellie's name on my lips.

More than anything, I want to be home with her. I want to be buried so deep in her that my hips ache with it. I want her pressed so tightly against me that our bodies become extensions of one another.

Three more weeks.

Sam: *It's a crime that you sent me these photos when you're out with your brothers, and I can't do anything about it.*

I send the text without intent, knowing the only thing I'll 'be doing' about these photos is rubbing my dick raw again. I like the idea of her knowing what she's done to me, though.

Ellie: *What if I told you I just got home?*

Ellie: *And I'm all alone in this big bed.*

Ellie: *Just me and this vibrator...*

My fingers move of their own volition, and before I know what I'm doing, the phone is ringing in my ear.

"Please tell me you're actually home."

"I'm actually home." I can't believe I've gone three weeks without hearing that voice, rich as honey in my ear.

"Good." My hand drops to the button of my jeans as a new idea sparks in my brain. I pull the phone from my ear, quickly pressing the video call button.

I've been well on my way to painfully hard since she sent me the photos, and hearing her voice isn't helping the situation. The moment I see her, leaning against the headboard of our bed, I have to squeeze the base of my dick to stop this from ending before it begins.

"Fuck, Ellie." She smiles the same way she does every time I say her name like that, and I want nothing more than to bury myself between those lips. "Sweetheart, I've missed you."

"You have a beard," her words are breathless, and I realize she's also getting her first look at me in almost three weeks. It feels good to laugh with her again. We've both been

so busy since I left, and the two-hour time difference hasn't made it any easier for us to get time together.

"I do," I admit, running a hand over the lower part of my face. "Do you like it?"

Ellie nods, but she doesn't say anything. She's staring at me with wide eyes, and I have a feeling I know what's going through her mind right now. Something very similar to the thoughts going through mine.

"How much do you like it, sweetheart?" Her breathing speeds up, but still, she doesn't say anything. Apparently, my girl is going to take a bit of convincing here. "Are you thinking about it, Ellie? Are you imagining what my beard will feel like against your skin? Between your thighs?"

"Sam," my name is a whisper on her lips as her head tilts back. Fuck.

"Oh, sweetheart. Are you touching yourself?" I can't hold back my groan when she slowly nods, her eyes fixed on mine through the phone. "I wanna see you, sweetheart. Take off your dress for me." Ellie starts to sit up, her hand reaching for the back of her dress. I can see the nightstand behind her and remember the text she sent me earlier. "Do you have your vibrator, Ellie?"

"It's under the bed," she pauses, watching me as if waiting for me to say something else.

I know exactly what she wants to hear. "Get it."

Ellie drops the phone on the bed, scrambling out of view. I take a moment to get more comfortable, removing my jeans and shirt before settling into the center of the bed. I want

to work my hand into my underwear, desperate to relieve the pressure, but I know better than to touch my dick when I'm this hard. Any amount of touching will end with cum all over my chest.

There are a lot of movements happening on Ellie's end of the phone, and I'm about to ask her if everything is alright when she lifts the phone off the bed again.

Ellie sets the phone up on the nightstand, and I'm not sure what she has it propped against, but I have a full view of the head of the bed. She has a small mountain of pillows on the opposite side of the mattress, and I can see her bright purple vibrator lying in the middle of the sheets.

Ellie moves into the camera's view, and I swear I stop breathing. She's fucking perfect. Completely naked, crawling across the bed, she comes to a stop in front of the phone, sitting back with a small smile.

I love her.

"Are you going to lay down for me, sweetheart?" Ellie nods, quickly adjusting herself across the bed. I can tell she's nervous and hesitates once she's on her back, keeping her knees closed so I can only see her shins. "Ellie?" She lifts her head, looking at me questioningly over her kneecaps. "You don't have to do this if you don't want to."

She nods, laying her head back on the pillow for a moment. I can see her take a deep breath before she lets her knees drop to the sides.

"Fuck." It's just like that first night when I had her spread across the bakery island, but I can't touch her this time.

This time, I get to watch her take what she needs from her own hands. Speaking of, I see her hands twitch at her sides, and I can't stop the smile from spreading across my face. My beautiful girl is waiting for me to tell her what to do.

“Do you want to touch yourself, Ellie?” She moans, nodding her head enthusiastically against the pillow. “Show me how you touch that pretty pussy, sweetheart.”

Ellie groans, sliding a hand between her thighs. Her back instantly arches off the bed, pressing her head into the pillow and giving me a perfect view of her chest. Fuck, I want to come on her tits.

I let her have a moment, but as soon as I see the slow circular motions of her fingers begin to speed up, I cut in. “Are you going to show me your vibrator, sweetheart?” She stops moving immediately, and I feel my dick throb in appreciation. I hadn't realized how much it turns me on when Ellie listens to my directions, but there's no denying it now.

She grabs for the toy, pressing the button at the base. If I remember correctly, this one has several different intensity settings, and I hear Ellie click through the first two. Her movements are quick, bringing the vibrator between her legs to press against her clit.

My eyes are glued to the spot where the purple toy slides against her. She seems to be building her way up to pressing the toy inside her, and I'm not sure if it's for her own benefit or mine.

“Are you teasing me, sweetheart?” Ellie's laugh is breathy as she moves the toy against her clit again. She knows what I want, and she's going to make me ask her for it.

She's going to make me demand it.

"Do you miss me, Ellie?" She nods, a small whimper escaping her lips when the edge of the toy presses against her needy cunt. "Can you show me? Show me how much you miss having me in that pussy, sweetheart."

I press my palm against my throbbing cock as Ellie pushes the toy into her, her hips damn near coming off the bed in her eagerness to get it all the way inside her. "That's it, sweetheart. Fuck yourself with it."

"I want," Ellie moans, the toy touching a spot inside her that takes her breath away. I want it to be my cock pressing into her, my hands touching all the places that make her go limp. Fuck, at this point, I would settle for just being the one to operate the toy that has her toes curling like that.

"What do you want, Ellie?"

"I want to see you." She's moving the toy again, sliding it in slowly as she adjusts to its size.

Damnit.

I adjust my position on the bed, looking for something to prop my phone against. I have no idea what Ellie used to keep her phone on the nightstand, and I don't want to ask at this moment. It looks like she's going to have to settle for me holding my phone in one hand.

Stripping my underwear off, I settle against the headboard again, holding my phone far enough away that Ellie can see down to the middle of my thighs.

"Sam, please."

For the first time, I have no idea what she's begging me for. She said she wanted to see me. Is that not what I'm—

Oh.

Tentatively, I reach out, gripping the base of my cock. It jumps in my hand, and I groan at the feel of the too-hot flesh against my palm.

“Oh, fuck,” Ellie's breath pants out of her, and I know she's about to come.

“Ellie, stop.” She jumps, pulling the toy out of her with a whine, her wide eyes on mine.

Fuck. Fuck. *FUCK.*

“Sam—”

“No,” I shake my head, still trying not to come all over my chest. God, I need her. “We're going to come together, sweetheart, but not until I tell you. Do you understand?”

She nods, but I'm not looking at her face anymore. I can see her pussy clenching at the loss of the toy, and I groan again, closing my eyes. “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” she whispers the word, but I hear it easily.

“Fuck yourself *slowly* for me, sweetheart.”

I slide my hand down the length of my shaft in perfect timing with the toy pressing into Ellie. I hear her suck in a breath, and I know she's watching me as closely as I'm watching her. She pulls the toy out again, leaving just the tip inside her, and I groan, wishing I had my other hand. I realize Ellie has both hands available, but she's only using one. That means she almost came from just having the toy inside her.

The thought makes me stop stroking, and I'm surprised that Ellie also stops. "Oh, sweet girl. Are you following my lead?" She nods, and I give up all pretense of drawing this out. My girl deserves an orgasm, and I'm going to give her one.

I move my hand down my shaft again, watching the toy disappear into Ellie's perfect pussy. There's no way I'm holding out long enough to come with her unless I speed this up on her end.

"Fuck, Ellie. Look what you do to me, sweetheart. I'm about to come from a handful of strokes, and the sight of those perfect legs spread wide for me. Are you thinking about me? Imagining that's me, pumping into you just like that, sweetheart?" Ellie whines again, and I see her hips twitch up to meet the motion of the toy. "That's it, Ellie. Now, come for me, sweetheart."

She doesn't hesitate, her free hand moving instantly to the exact spot she needs it between her thighs.

Fuck.

The very first arch of Ellie's back, her tits pressing up between her arms, and I'm done. "Ellie," I hiss her name, unable to stop my orgasm from pulsing through my body. My perfect girl isn't far behind me, though. Her wide eyes stay locked on the phone screen as her body tenses, her mouth dropping open in the shape of a small 'o'.

We stay like that for several long moments, breathing heavily and watching one another.

"I miss you, Ellie."

“I miss you, too.” She sounds close to tears, and that’s the last thing I want. I’ve never felt as desperate to hold someone as I do now. As fucking incredible as this was, we probably shouldn’t have done it.

It didn’t take the edge off as I had hoped. Instead, it seems to have made my need for her stronger.

We stay on the phone until she falls asleep, curled beneath the comforter with the phone propped on the pillow next to her. I spend too long watching, and I have to force myself to end the call.

The next three weeks can’t pass fast enough.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Ellie

I can't sleep.

Sam gets home tomorrow, and I am nervous, excited, and slightly overwhelmed. I missed him so much over the last few weeks, and we've barely gotten a chance to talk outside of the occasional text.

Well, and the phone sex.

Phone sex has become a regular thing and has ruined my sleep schedule.

Worth it.

This is my last night sleeping alone in this bed, though. Tomorrow night, Sam will be here with me, and I won't have to imagine the feel of his hands on my skin—the taste of his lips, the crush of his body against mine.

I settle deeper into the bed, willing myself to fall asleep.

—

I wake with a start, unsure why my heart is suddenly pounding in my ears. Then I hear it.

The elevator doors ding, sliding open and filling the far end of the apartment with light. Scrambling to sit up, I force

my eyes to focus through the darkness, trying to see who might have found their way into the penthouse in the middle of the night.

His silhouette is broad through the shoulders and narrow at the waist. I'd know that body anywhere.

“Sam!” I refuse to classify the noise that came out of my mouth just now, but if I had to label it, I'd call it something like a squeal. Shooting out of bed, I nearly trip over the sheets still tangled around my legs, but I don't care. He takes two steps out of the elevator, dropping his bag onto the floor with a thud before reaching out to catch me as I launch myself into his arms. “You're home!”

I breathe him in, pulling his body even tighter to mine and wrapping my legs around his waist.

“Should you be running on that foot?”

I laugh into his neck, burying my face deeper to hide the sound so he can't tell how close it is to a sob. “I don't fucking care.”

It's Sam's turn to laugh, the deep sound of it rumbling through my whole body. He's really here. “I thought you weren't leaving until tomorrow?”

“I talked Nell into an earlier flight.” I pull back, realizing he's still holding me to his chest, my legs wrapped around his waist and one hand firmly under my ass.

“You should've warned me.”

“And missed a homecoming like this?” He smiles blindingly down at me, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Never.”

Sam begins to walk us across the room, and I try to protest, unwrapping my legs from behind his back, but he holds me closer to him. “I haven’t touched you in over a month, Ellie. If you think I’m putting you down right now, you’re fucking delusional.”

I immediately stop fighting it, pressing my lips to his and drowning in the feel of him. “How much time do we have?” He asks the question against my lips, crawling onto the bed with my body still koala wrapped around his.

“As much time as we want. The bakery is closed tomorrow.”

Sam stops moving, his eyes going wide as they track over my face. “Really?”

“Really.”

We spend all night wrapped around one another, our bodies re-learning the feel of each other after so many weeks apart. It’s like my body physically can’t get enough of his, and even in the moments between orgasms, we laugh together. We smile, sharing secrets and stories, learning all the little details about one another that we haven’t been able to share for the last month and a half.

By the time the sun comes up, I’m unsurprised to find that I am completely and utterly in love with Samuel Everett Kingston II.

“Oh shit,” I turn wide eyes on Sam as he expertly flips another pancake. “I don’t have anything to wear tonight.”

Sam laughs, moving his spatula beneath the next pancake, preparing to flip it as well. “There isn’t a dress code, Ellie.”

“Of course, there’s a dress code!” I mentally sort through my entire wardrobe, annoyed to realize I don’t own a single navy blue item other than my birthday dress, and I refuse to wear that to Opening Day. “Maybe there’s time for me to buy a Cougars T-shirt.”

Another huffing laugh from Sam, and he turns to face me leaning against the counter, his bare chest temporarily drawing my focus away from my dilemma. “You are not buying a Cougars T-shirt.”

I frown at his tone, unsure what part of that sentence he took offense to. “Why not? I’ll stick out like a sore thumb if I’m not at least wearing Cougar’s colors on Opening Day.”

Sam shakes his head, pushing off the counter and walking toward the laundry room. I’m not sure what he’s doing, but he soon returns to the kitchen with a white shirt in his hand. He tosses it at me over the counter, returning to his task of flipping pancakes.

I hold the shirt up in front of me, noticing it looks old but in good condition. The crisp blue lines stitched in the fabric and the easily recognizable logo on either side of the open buttons tell me this is exactly what I think it is.

“Sam, I can’t wear one of your jerseys today.”

He makes eye contact with me over his shoulder, dropping two pancakes onto a plate. “You’re not.”

I turn the jersey around, surprised to see he isn’t wrong. The name Kingston is stitched across the top in navy blue letters, but beneath that, where I expect to see the number twenty-nine, is the number fifteen. “Sam...” I watch him over the top of the jersey, unsure how to say what I’m feeling. “You want me to wear your dad’s jersey?”

“Lots of people will be wearing number fifteen jerseys. It’s sort of a tradition on Opening Day.” He doesn’t look at me as he says it, but I can hear the emotion rising in his voice. I can’t imagine losing my father as young as Sam did, only to grow up and be reminded of him every day when I go to work.

“You’re sure about this?”

“I’m always sure when it comes to you, Ellie.”

—

“Where the fuck did you get that?” Matty points at my jersey, worn loosely over my favorite pair of blue jeans.

“From Sam.”

Matty’s eyes widen, and he lets out a surprised scoff. “The man must love you.”

His reaction surprises me, and I spin on my heel to face him. “Why do you say that?”

“That jersey has to be worth a small fortune, Ellie.” Elliot pipes up, coming to stand behind me with a surprised look on his face as well.

“Sam said it was tradition to wear his dad’s number on Opening Day. He didn’t mention anything about this jersey being worth something.”

“It is tradition to wear a Kingston jersey on Opening Day, but they’re all fake jerseys. Or Cougars T-shirts that say Kingston on the back. *That,*” Matty points a finger at my jersey, his eyebrows raised meaningfully. “Is a genuine Samuel Everett Kingston I jersey. One he would have worn while pitching. You’re wearing a piece of history, Ellie.”

I look down at the jersey, even more nervous about wearing it now than before, but for a different reason. Initially, I’d been afraid that wearing a Kingston jersey would draw attention to me. Now I’m more worried I might spill something on it. “Nobody lets me eat or drink anything that might ruin this.”

“Agreed,” my brothers chime in unison.

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“I should have three tickets for Ellie Bennett,” I smile at the woman inside the glass booth, but she does not smile back. She raises one perfectly manicured brown brow, taking to exaggerated chew on the wad of gum in her mouth, before quickly clicking my name out on her keyboard.

She stops, raising her other eyebrow to stare at the screen before her eyes dart to mine. “*You* are Ellie Bennett?” I nod, unsure why she’s put so much emphasis on *you*. She takes another obnoxious chew on her gum. “Who left these tickets for you?”

“Sam,” I didn’t think her eyebrows could get any higher, but she immediately proves me wrong when they all but disappear into her hairline.

“Sam?”

“I mean Samuel Everett Kingston II. You know,” I try to keep a blush from spreading across my face. I refuse to be embarrassed by this situation. “King?”

She narrows her eyes at me, clicking the mouse across her screen without looking at it. I hear the tickets begin to print and sigh in relief.

It isn’t that I thought Sam had forgotten to leave the tickets for us, more than I was worried this woman wouldn’t give them to me. She shoves the tickets through the opening at the bottom of the glass window, still eyeing me suspiciously.

“Thank you!” She doesn’t say anything in return, but I swear I see her roll her eyes as I step away.

The stadium is massive, complete with three of the largest staircases I’ve ever seen as soon as you’re through the gate. Our tickets are for Section C, Row 4, Seats 14, 15, and 16. After a quick scan of the signs hanging above the staircases, I direct my brothers up the middle one and am greeted with my first view of Carriage Field.

It is beautiful, a large stretch of bright green grass surrounding a perfect dirt diamond. The field is full of employees rushing around repainting lines, dropping bases in place, and ensuring that everything is perfect for the very first pitch of Opening Day.

Elliot pulls my attention away from the field with a nudge to my arm. I turn to face him only to see he's already several feet away from me, following Matty through the crowd. I'm quick to catch up, not wanting to get left behind, but I'm surprised we don't have far to walk.

"This can't be right." I stare down the steps before us and find myself looking directly at home plate.

"Apparently, he wanted you to have a really, really good view of him doing what he does best."

"And for him to have a really, really good view of you seeing him do what he does best." My brothers exchange a look before bursting into laughter. I ignore them, pushing my way down to our seats.

It turns out "Row 4" is a lie.

"Row 4" is not, in fact, four rows back from the net, as one would expect. It is actually the very front row. I'm glad to see the location of our seats has shut my brothers up since they're both standing behind me with equally shocked looks on their faces. I don't think either of them has ever sat this close to the field, much less directly behind home plate.

"I'm not crazy. These are really fucking good seats, right?"

“One might argue they’re the *best* seats,” Matty laughs loudly, clapping his hands together and moving past me to get to his seat. Elliot and I share a look before following Matty down the aisle.

I have a perfect view of the pitchers’ mound, even with the ump and catcher standing at home plate. The catcher must be for the opposing team because his uniform is black and red rather than the distinctive Cougar’s white and blue. I can’t see the name of the team on his jersey, but I am aware that it says Avalon’s since that’s the team Sam told me they were playing today.

I’m about to ask my brothers if either of them sees Sam when two distinctive figures move into my line of sight. Miller and Sam are walking up out of the dugout, and I hear a round of cheers as people recognize them.

Sam looks *very good*.

I didn’t have a chance to see him in his uniform before the game since he changed at the stadium, and it’s probably a good thing because I doubt we would’ve ever made it out the door. The jersey sits tight across his shoulders, drawing attention to the breadth of them, but it’s the pants that really catch my attention.

I’ve heard people talk about tight baseball pants, but I was unaware of how tight they could be. Sam’s leave little to the imagination, and while my eyes have always been drawn to his thighs, I find myself staring at a different set of perfect muscles on his lower half.

“Jesus.”

Elliot huffs a laugh beside me, shaking his head at my whispered praise. “Is this the first time you’re seeing him in uniform?” I nod hard, not trusting myself to form words at this moment, as I watch Sam saunter onto the mound. His back is still mostly toward us, though he turns slightly, giving me the perfect view of his strong jaw. “Do you see why he’s so popular now?”

I definitely get why so many of his fans are women. It’s not just that he’s attractive; it’s like the uniform was made for him. He was born to stand on that small hill in the middle of the field—built to throw balls at bats and look damn good doing it.

I’m so busy memorizing every cut of Sam’s body in the uniform that it takes me several moments to realize he’s looking back at me. I smile, hoping he’ll be able to see it from this distance, but not wanting to draw any attention to myself by waving or calling out to him.

He nods at me before turning back to his conversation with Miller. When we spoke last night about my coming to the game today, Sam admitted that he wanted to be in the stands with me. I reminded him that my brothers would be there to explain all the rules and anything I didn’t understand. Besides, I wanted to see him pitch.

I was right. As nice as it would have been to have Sam in the stands with me, there is nothing like watching him pitch. I am shocked more than once by the speed of the ball, the accuracy of it, and how quickly and easily he and Miller silently communicate with one another.

When I finally manage to pull my eyes from Sam, somewhere around the fifth inning, I'm surprised to see more familiar faces around the field. I've seen Miller, his back facing us the entire time they're on the field, but I can also see Grady at first base and Steal standing between second and third. Elliot helpfully informs me that Steal is the shortstop, a term I had heard before but didn't realize was a position on the field.

Before I know it, the game is half over, and the Cougars have taken to the field as the first Avalon player comes to the plate. I see the man say something to Miller before settling into position, but it's too quiet for me to hear, even from this distance. I watch as he strikes out on the first two balls. His bat clips the third ball, sending it flying up and back into the net directly above my head.

I'm so busy watching the ball that I don't notice Miller moving toward us to catch it. Our eyes meet, and I see his eyebrows raise through his catcher's mask. He watches me for a long moment, less than ten feet separating us. Suddenly, Miller throws his head back and laughs.

I settle further into my seat and attempt to avoid the prying eyes now looking at me from every direction—so much for not drawing any attention to myself.

The game ends soon after, and the Cougars win seven to three.

Sam and his teammates all disappeared quickly after the game, so I didn't get a chance to see him before we left the stadium. I send him a quick text while we're waiting in traffic outside.

Ellie: *Bring the uniform home.*

Chapter Twenty-Five: King

The concierge at the Rosemore gives me a bored look as he passes over my room keys. There isn't even a spark of recognition in his eyes, and I couldn't be happier. This is my favorite part about traveling outside of Cadence; no one cares who I am. Especially in towns like Forest Falls, Colorado, where everyone knows everyone and strangers are just that: strange.

For a town hosting a Major League team, they care surprisingly little about baseball. That might be why many players who retire from the Forest Falls Diamonds stay in the area.

“Ready?” Miller pops up behind me, bouncing on the balls of his feet. I still have my bag thrown over my shoulder, and I roll my eyes at him.

“Can you give me a minute to put my bag up, at least?”

“Can you hurry?”

I laugh at his excitement, shaking my head when I realize he still has his bag as well. “Come on, fuckstick. We'll put our bags in the rooms and head straight out.”

“I knew we were best friends for a reason,” he throws an arm around my neck, pulling me sideways so he can kiss the top of my head as we make our way toward the elevators.

Five minutes later, we're back in the lobby. "How close is it?"

"Walking distance." I direct us out of the lobby, taking a left toward Downtown Forest Falls.

Peaks is a sports bar in the middle of the town, so small I almost walk past it. Miller grabs the back of my shirt, pointing at the bar entrance to our left, set into the side of an old wood-faced building. This place is surprisingly nice for a sports bar. Every surface appears clean, the music isn't overpowering, and the TVs are muted. Even the decor is subtle, not leaning toward any particular sport or team.

We spot Grady the moment we're through the door and make our way across the room toward the table he's sharing with a man I've never met before.

"About fucking time," Grady laughs, kicking out the chair opposite him so that Miller can drop heavily into it. "This is my buddy, Callum," Grady gestures to the other man at the table. "We've known each other forever, but he recently became a medic for the Diamonds."

"Try not to hold it against me," Callum laughs, reaching a hand out for me to shake. He and Grady are a study of opposites. Grady is an overly animated personality wrapped in a wall of muscle, but Callum is lean and relaxed, his easygoing nature instantly drawing you in.

Before he can say anything else, another familiar voice comes from behind us. "Looks like I found the party."

"Nell," Callum smiles at her, making his way around the table to fold the woman into his arms. "I've missed you."

I can count on one hand the number of times I've seen Nell in something other than a pant suit, so I'm surprised that she's in jeans and a sweatshirt today. Her short brown hair is down around her shoulders, and I can't help but note that she ticks off a lot of Miller's 'perfect woman' points. It's probably a good thing Nell is only interested in women, or Miller might have fucked up their friendship by now.

"I can tell," she laughs, patting him on his broad shoulders. "I missed you too, Cal."

Nell takes her seat, explaining to the rest of us that she interned with the Diamonds years ago, and met Cal 'through the organization'.

"What can I get you guys?" The bartender has made his way to our table, and I'm surprised to see his face looks familiar. He's a few inches shorter than Callum, though significantly broader through the shoulders, but standing side by side, you'd think they were twins. Callum quickly introduces the man to us as his older brother, Merrick.

We each order a round of local beers, trusting Merrick's opinion on what's worth drinking. He nods, moving easily behind the bar again. "He doesn't speak much, huh?"

"Not really," Callum agrees, shaking his head as he watches his brother prepare our drinks behind the bar. "If you're looking for a talkative MacAlister, that would be Merrick's twin brother, Miles."

My thoughts immediately move to Ellie, her twin brother Elliot, and their bar-owning brother, Matty.

“What’s that goofy ass smile for?” Nell pokes me in the side, her smile matching mine.

“Ignore that, Nell. He does it all the time now,” Miller cuts in before I can say anything. He isn’t quick enough to avoid a punch to his shoulder.

“Oh yes, the infamous Ellie Bennett,” she nods knowingly, her brows pulling together between her eyes. “I never apologized for assuming she was responsible for that first article. I am sorry, King.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I wave away her apology, giving her a small smile. It all worked out fine. There has only been one article so far that got close to naming Ellie. A photo surfaced of her and I leaving Carriage Park after our last game. It didn’t say who she was, but you could clearly see her face, so I’m sure it won’t be long now. I worry about how people will treat her when it eventually comes out. I know how vicious people can be, and I don’t want Ellie to ever deal with that, especially not when I’m away.

I can see Callum’s look of confusion across the table, but he’s too polite to ask. “Ellie Bennett is my girlfriend,” I explain to him, and he nods in understanding. There’s a moment of silence before everyone else at the table erupts into cheers.

“I never thought I’d see the day,” Grady beams at me, and even Nell smiles. I take a pull from my beer, that Merrick set in front of me while Nell and I were talking. He’s already back behind the bar, and I envy his ability to escape the conversation that I know is coming.

“So, how did you meet her?” It’s not the question I anticipated from Nell, and I shrug, expecting Miller to cut in with the answer like he usually does when someone asks about something embarrassing. Miller loves to tell embarrassing stories about me.

When he doesn’t say anything, I turn to find him staring at me with his brows wrinkled. “How did you meet her?”

His question surprises me, and I realize that when I explained Ellie to Miller, I simply told him, “I ran into her at her bakery,” but didn’t explain anything further than that.

“I broke into her bakery in the middle of the night, covered in blood and hiding from the cops, and she patched me up.” My statement is met with silence, and I’m aware that everyone at this table is trying to decide whether I’m lying. I let them struggle for another moment, before giving in.

“Fine. I *accidentally walked* into her bakery in the middle of the night, bleeding from a fight I’d gotten into, and I was hiding from the paps, not the cops. She did patch up my eyebrow before sending me on my way, though.”

Another moment of silence from my tablemates, but this time it’s charged with unasked questions. “Well, don’t everyone talk at once.” The words are hardly out of my mouth before questions begin to explode at me from every direction.

“When you say ‘the middle of the night’, do you mean before or after midnight?”

“How did you ‘accidentally walk’ into a closed bakery?”

“You were bleeding from the head?”

“Why were you anywhere near her bakery in the middle of the night?”

“If she ‘sent you on your way’ how did you end up dating?”

“Where the fuck was I when you were running around ‘in the middle of the night’?”

Miller’s main sticking point seems to be the timeframe of the meeting since he asked three questions in a row about it.

“Jesus, people, one at a time,” I try to sort through the questions answering them in as logical an order as possible. “It was after the last fight Miller and I got into at MB’s, the one that damn near benched me.”

“Uh, damn near benched *us*,” Miller interrupts me to correct the point, and I roll my eyes at him.

I launch into the fastest version of our meeting I can manage, grateful that Miller lets me tell the story without interruption. He manages to make it all the way to the part where I mention going back to see her a few days after we met.

“Oh, I know this part,” the smug look on Miller’s face tells me it’s better to allow him to tell the story because he will interrupt me otherwise. I wave a hand, permitting him to finish the story. “She broke her foot and needed a place to stay that would be close to the bakery. Obviously, our boy offered to let her stay with him because asking a total stranger to move in with you is a completely normal thing to do.”

“You asked her to move in with you the second time you met her?” The question comes from Callum, and I hear no judgment in it. He’s genuinely curious about why I thought that was a good idea.

“At the time, it made sense,” I shrug, taking another sip of my beer. “It all worked out in the end.”

We talk for a while longer about Ellie, and right when I’m about to get annoyed with all the questions about my life, Grady comes to my rescue.

“Moving on from King’s potentially poor life choices,” Grady shoots a small smile at me across the table, and I smile gratefully back at him. “You up for a Club Bet, Miller?”

“I never thought you’d ask, dumbass.”

“Fifty bucks?”

“Deal. Same list as always?”

Grady smiles brightly as he pulls out his phone, opening his notes app where he has compiled a list of new suggestions for their game. They do a Club Bet in every city we visit, but no one ever wins the money because it always ends with the two of them arguing over who actually won. “I added a few new ones, including getting the DJ to play *Barbie Girl*.” Grady looks particularly proud of that.

“Oh, I’ll take that bet,” Miller smiles broadly, holding his hand out for Grady to shake.

“Can we at least add ground rules this time?” Nell shoots a look at each of them, “maybe something that will keep you two from ending up in the news again?”

Callum laughs under his breath, taking a sip of his beer. “How do I get in on this?” He gestures to our friends, who have turned their handshake into an arm wrestling match that Miller is quickly losing.

“You want in on the game?” It surprises me that Callum would want to participate in a game based on talking to strangers. I don’t know much about the man, but he doesn’t strike me as the type.

“Absolutely not. I just want to bet against Grady.”

“Count me in,” Merrick shoots a look at his brother as he slides two new beers in front of us. “What’s the bet?”

“We have a club scavenger hunt. The first one to check off all the items gets fifty bucks. Most of it is basic stuff: someone in a red shirt saying coconut, a dude wearing sunglasses at night, things like that.” Miller explains while shaking out the arm Grady pinned to the table.

“I wouldn’t bet against me. I win every time,” Grady smiles broadly, taking his Jack and Coke from Merrick before hardily slapping him on the back.

Merrick must have been braced for the impact because he doesn’t move an inch when Grady’s large hand cracks against his shoulder blade. He simply rolls his eyes, reaching into his pocket to pull out a handful of bills. Merrick slaps them down in front of Callum before walking away without another word.

These MacAlister brothers are growing on me.

We spend another hour and a half at Peaks, and I’m surprised when no one approaches us for autographs. This has

to be the strangest sports bar I've ever been in. It doesn't escape my notice that Callum draws the most female attention of everyone at our table, another oddity of this place. More than one woman greets him by name, not paying any attention to the three famous baseball players sitting with him, which Miller has started to take personally.

“Dude, what's with all the women?”

Callum's brow furrows as if he's genuinely confused about what Miller means. “What women?”

“The MacAlister brothers are famous around here,” Grady throws a dart absently at the board near our table, frowning when it hits the wall next to the target. “Every woman in this town knows them all by name.”

That gets Miller's full attention. “Why?”

“We're hot,” Merrick drops our checks on the table, propping an elbow on his younger brother's shoulder. He shoots a playful grin at a table of women to our left, and their flustered tittering can be heard across the room.

Callum shoves Merrick away with a dramatic eye roll. “Some of us *think* we're hotter than we are.”

Merrick shrugs as if it can't be helped. “It's a small town, and we've lived here our entire lives. We grew up being the boys next door to many of these women. It's just one of those things.”

“Don't listen to him,” Grady throws his debit card into the pile forming before Merrick. “I grew up here too, and even I am invisible next to the MacAlister brothers.”

“But,” Miller starts, only to be interrupted by Nell placing a hand on his shoulder.

“Come on, Mills. Let’s get you into a proper city before you have an aneurysm.”

—

The ride into Denver passes quickly, with Miller and Grady spending half the time playing some insane rhyming game. Poor Callum is sitting beside them, looking as if he wants to be anywhere else in the world. I catch myself holding in a smile when Grady shouts, “ANTELOPE!” to win the game. The rules don’t make any sense to me, nor to Nell, apparently.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” she points out, turning to face the men in the back seat.

I pull up outside Ash & Pine (the only club worthy of the scavenger hunt, according to Grady), finding an open parking spot close to the front doors while listening to Miller try and explain the rules to Nell for the hundredth time.

The club is on the edge of town but is popular enough to have a line out the door wrapping around the building. Getting out, I pull my jacket tighter around myself. It’s got to be close to freezing out, but I see more than one woman in line wearing nothing but a small dress and heels.

Grady is pushed from the car by Miller, and he springs to his feet just behind me with a booming laugh. As always, he

turns several heads, and I see more than one person pointing at him in surprised recognition.

Luckily, we don't have to stand in line because Grady knows the bouncer at the door. The club is loud, the music thumping through the crush of bodies in the room. There are two levels, the first floor is mainly dedicated to a dance floor, but there is a bar along the far wall next to the DJ booth. The upper level is a balcony full of tables and a second bar. We decide to grab a table on the second floor but lose both Miller and Grady before we even make it to the stairs.

There are two empty tables near the railing, and we opt for the larger one, assuming our party will grow from five to seven before the night is over.

Callum, Nell, and I are approached more than once by women in varying stages of drunkenness. One of them goes so far as to "accidentally" fall in my lap, wiggling herself against my crotch before finally getting to her feet. She and her friends eventually leave when I don't respond to her obvious advances. Between Callum's kind refusals, my blatant indifference, and Nell flashing her engagement ring at anyone bold enough to look at her, everyone on the second floor quickly gets the message that we're not interested.

The club is loud, but we're able to carry some conversation over the thumping bass. I learn that Callum has four brothers, all of them still living in Forest Falls except the oldest brother. Callum graduated from the University of Northern Colorado a few years ago and moved right back to Forest Falls to intern with the Diamonds.

Nell tells him about her fiancée, Diana, and they talk at length about planning the wedding. Callum seems to know a lot about the process, but he isn't wearing a wedding ring. I don't ask any questions in case it's a sore subject.

“So,” Callum shouts over *Barbie Girl* as it blasts through the speakers around us. One of the guys must be nearing the end of the list. “Why did you really ask Ellie to move in with you?”

“She needed a convenient place to stay,” I shoot back, giving the same answer I gave Miller when he first asked. Callum laughs into his beer.

“I have enough brothers to know what a man looks like when he's in love, King.”

“What makes you think I'm in love with her?”

“Your face,” Nell points at the face in question, her finger hovering inches from the end of my nose. “And the fact that you talk about her all the time and you brought her to a game.”

Before I can say anything, we're interrupted by Miller crashing into a chair at our table. The woman he's pulling behind him falls heavily into his lap, taking just enough time to introduce herself as “Catie, with a C” before shoving her tongue down Miller's throat.

“I win, by the way,” Miller states as soon as he comes up for air.

“Not so fast, shortstop,” Grady shouts, dragging a chair away from the table before pulling his own woman onto his

lap. Why did we get the larger table if they're just going to share chairs?

"Catcher," Miller corrects with an eye roll, knowing full well Grady was making a short joke, not mislabeling Miller's position on the team. I'm surprised that Miller can respond at all with Catie attempting to devour his neck.

"Either way, *I* won."

Miller scoffs, adjusting the woman in his lap without dislodging her from his neck. "How do you figure?"

"*She* doesn't count," Grady points at the vampire-wannabe.

"She does too!"

"She doesn't. That guy was harassing her at the bar, and you got between them. *You* approached *her*. Doesn't count."

Miller huffs, "yeah, but she was looking at me with 'save me' eyes. She was asking me to approach her."

"Doesn't matter."

"Dude," Miller turns an annoyed look at me over the woman's head. "Help me out here."

"How? I don't know what you're talking about."

Apparently, that is not the answer Miller was looking for, and he throws his hands up in exasperation. "Nell?"

"Absolutely not," Nell shakes her head, moving to stand. "Are you guys ready to head out?"

We make our way down the stairs, Miller and “Catie with a C” leading us across the dance floor, when something catches my eye. A large man with a nasty look is making a beeline for Catie. It doesn’t take much for me to realize this must be the man who was harassing her when Miller swooped in, and it’s clear the guy doesn’t mean to let her leave without shooting his shot a second time.

He reaches us through the crowd, and two things happen in quick succession. First, Catie yells in pain as the drunk man’s grip closes tightly around her bicep. The second, and more surprising, is Callum moving between the man and Catie. He does something I can’t see, but it causes the man to release Catie immediately.

“The fuck are you doing?” The man shouts at Callum, his face scrunching in pain as he shakes out his hand. Whatever Callum did must have hurt.

Good.

“I’m giving you a friendly reminder that you never touch a woman without her consent,” Callum calmly explains over the thumping music. “If you would like, I can give you a less friendly reminder. Though I will warn you, that ends with you in the hospital.”

The man steps forward, coming toe to toe with Callum, and I feel Grady tense at my side, ready to jump in if needed. “I’ll crush you.”

“Go ahead and try,” Callum’s voice is low and even, and I have no doubt he would put this man in the hospital without hesitation. There’s something volatile beneath Callum’s carefully controlled surface, and I wonder if he got to

be so intense from growing up with four brothers or if there's something else at play here.

Thankfully, the bouncers make it to us before any punches are thrown, and Nell congratulates us all on keeping our hands to ourselves.

She immediately takes her words back as soon as we all pile into the car. Callum is the only one in the backseat keeping his hands to himself. He presses his body tightly against the door, trying to avoid the damn-near orgy happening in the seat beside him. At one point, I'm fairly sure I saw a hand disappear entirely from view, and Callum's annoyed sigh tells me he knows exactly where the hand went.

I decide to keep my eyes solely on the road for the rest of the drive back to Forest Falls.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Ellie

Sam is out of town for two days before everything falls apart.

I'm getting into bed when my phone rings. It's a bit early for Sam to call me since it's Sunday night, but I just assume he made it to the hotel earlier than expected.

"Hey, you." I smile, sinking under the covers with a sigh.

"Are you alright?"

The sharp tone of Sam's voice has me sitting up again. "I'm fine. Why?"

"I saw the article. I'm so sorry, Ellie."

"What article?"

A text comes through with a link to the Cadence Chronicles website. The headline makes my heart sink.

Queen of Hearts and...cakes?

The article lists my full name and the bakery name, address, and phone number. Thankfully, they don't mention the bakery being across the street from Sam's apartment or the fact that Sam and I are living together, but it has everything else about my life written out line by line.

“Where did they get all this information?”

“I have no idea, but I plan to find out,” Sam sounds murderous, and I know he means it. He doesn’t need to be worrying about this, though. We can deal with it when he gets home on Thursday.

“It’s probably fine, Sam. We might have a few more customers at the bakery, but I doubt it will come to more than that.”

I spend the next half hour reassuring Sam that I’m fine and promising to tell him if things get bad. We finally end the call around the time my yawns become so persistent I can’t finish a sentence.

Sleep comes quickly, and my last coherent thought is that Sam doesn’t need to know anything unless it gets really, really bad.

—

This isn’t ‘really, really’ bad, but it’s not great either.

Elliot and I prepared as much as we could this morning, but neither of us anticipated this many people coming to the bakery today. The number of customers isn’t the worst of it, though. It’s the fact that each one of them has something to say about my relationship with Sam.

Many of the men seem to think Sam isn’t good enough for me. Not only is he not good enough, but *they* would treat me better than he ever could.

The women all have the opposite view. *I* am not good enough for Sam, and *they* would be the far better choice.

I can't decide which group of people is worse. At least the women don't feel like they're allowed to reach out and touch any part of me they want. I will take the bitchy comments and angry glares over *that* any day.

We sell out before noon, and I take my first breath of the day when Elliot locks the doors behind our last customer.

The peace doesn't last.

Not two minutes later, my cell phone is ringing. I almost don't hear it over the sound of the bakery phone, which has been ringing non-stop since six o'clock this morning.

"Hello?"

"Did you see it?"

Sighing, I move into the kitchen, needing to put space between myself and the mountain of dirty coffee mugs on the counter. "Yes, Colin. I saw it last night."

"And?" My brother demands as if I have some magic answer for him.

"And, what? It was bound to happen."

Colin scoffs dramatically, and I can't help but roll my eyes. "It wouldn't have happened if you stayed away from him, Ellie."

"Well, that wasn't going to happen. Are you calling me for a reason other than being a dickhead?"

He's silent for a moment, and I swear I can hear him inventing any other reason for calling. The sad part is that he

could have just said he was calling to check on me, and it would have been enough. “I’m coming to help you tomorrow since Elliot will be in class.”

It isn’t an offer; it’s a statement. I don’t have the energy to fight with him, and the list of things that need to be done tonight is growing by the minute. “Fine. Be here at four.”

I hang up without saying goodbye.

“Who was that?” Elliot pushes his way into the kitchen with a tray full of dishes.

“Colin,” I sigh, moving out of his way. “He wants to help tomorrow since you’ll be in class.”

Elliot raises an eyebrow at me, and I shrug. “That’s surprisingly nice of him.”

“I think his true motive is getting to say ‘I told you so’ to my face.”

“Ah,” Elliot nods, placing the dishes carefully in the sink. “That sounds more like our brother.”

—

I haven’t been this tired in years.

Elliot and I spent the entire rest of the day preparing three times our usual amount of pastries for tomorrow, and my arms are so sore they might fall off my body at any moment.

Falling face-first into the bed, I groan when the soft mattress catches me. I need a shower. And I have to call Sam

back. He called when we were in the middle of a massive batch of macarons this afternoon, and I had to hang up with him before I even got to ask about his day.

I will get off this bed, call Sam, hop in the shower, and sleep for a year.

I'm totally going to do all of those things.

I am.

—

My alarm going off just before four is the last straw for my phone's battery life. I fell asleep fully clothed on top of the bed last night and forgot to plug my phone in. Rolling out of bed, I stumble toward the shower. I need to get everything done and be out of the apartment in the next ten minutes.

Twenty minutes later, I'm fully dressed and throwing my dripping wet hair into a bun while rushing across the street to meet Colin at the bakery door.

"I know, I'm late. Sorry!" I push the front door open, letting Colin in before locking it behind us. I learned that lesson, thank you very much.

"It's fine. I haven't been here long." I narrow my eyes at his words, not sure I can trust their genuine nature. "Don't look at me like that, Ellie. It's too fucking early for us to be at each other's throats."

"We wouldn't be 'at each other's throats' if you would just ease up on Sam." Stopping at the coffee pot, I quickly

start the machine, grateful I loaded everything into it last night.

Colin clears his throat, following me into the kitchen. “I know, and I’m sorry. It’s just,” he sighs heavily, and I can tell he doesn’t like being the bad guy in this situation. “I don’t want this for you, Ellie. The articles and paparazzi, they’re just the beginning. This won’t end well for you or King.”

“Why are you so sure about that?”

“I live in the real world, Ellie. I’m not locked away in a bakery seven days a week, barely checking my phone. I’ve seen what people say about King on social media. I know how they treat the women he’s with. I do not want that for you.”

We stare at one another for several long moments before I nod. “You’re right. I don’t know what people say on social media. I also don’t care. They can say whatever they want. That shit doesn’t have anything to do with me.”

The coffee maker beeps, and I push my way past Colin again. I desperately need caffeine if we’re going to continue this conversation. “That’s where you’re wrong. It will end up affecting everything you have. It will affect the bakery. In fact, I’m willing to bet it already has.”

I pull two coffee mugs from the shelf, quickly filling them to the brim. I hand Colin one without anything added to it. He’s the special kind of sociopath that drinks black coffee because he likes it and not because it’s the only option.

Pouring two spoonfuls of sugar into mine, I bring it to my lips with a heavy sigh. The only thing better than coffee is sex. Speaking of sex, I need to charge my phone.

Those things should not be related in my head. All that phone sex with Sam has ruined my brain.

I make a mental note to plug it into the charger in the kitchen before we open today.

“The bakery was busy yesterday, and I’m sure it will be busy again today, but I don’t see how selling out of food and making record-breaking profits is *bad*.” I turn to face Colin, who is still blowing on his coffee like an amateur. He needs to learn to enjoy the burn.

“That’s nice for now, but what happens when public opinion turns, and no one will come within a mile of the bakery? You’ll lose your livelihood.” Colin keeps talking, but I’ve stopped listening. Someone is standing on the street outside the bakery, and I swear they’re watching us.

“Who do you think that is?” I nod toward the window, and Colin turns to face the street beyond. The person moves, and I swear I see them fiddling with something in their hands. Before Colin can answer, they move farther down the street.

“Probably a stalker.”

Scoffing, I push off the counter and move into the kitchen. I don’t want to give Colin any credit, so I refuse to agree with his comment, but I think putting a solid wall between the person on the street and us is probably a good idea.

“Ellie, wait!” Colin pushes through the kitchen door, following me into the bakery. I stop, turning to face him with an impatient glare. We’re already five minutes behind schedule for opening the front doors, and I can see a small line forming outside.

“What?”

“There’s another article.” Colin moves to my side, turning so we can both see his phone screen.

Queen Finds New King?

The photo beneath the headline makes me laugh harder than I’ve done in days. It’s a picture of me handing Colin a cup of coffee this morning.

To anyone who doesn’t know we’re siblings, I can see why this photo might look like we just rolled out of bed and are having a post-sex coffee together. It’s dark, and my hair is a mess that could easily have been from a wild night in bed. Unfortunately, that’s precisely what the article claims has happened.

“They wouldn’t be calling us ‘lovers’ if you looked like a fucking Bennett,” I tease, slapping Colin in the chest before turning toward the front door.

“I don’t think you can laugh this off, Ellie.”

I force another laugh just to make a point. “I can, and I will. This will blow over as soon as people realize you’re my *brother*. Not everything ends in disaster, Colin.”

Famous last words.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: King

Something is wrong.

Ellie hasn't responded to my texts all day. I tried calling her before the game, but she didn't answer then either. I had to stop myself from leaving a third voicemail asking her to call me back.

Now I'm standing on the mound, trying to pull my focus away from Ellie and put it on the man standing across from me. Two curveballs and a changeup later, and the inning is over. There's no moment of relief for me, though.

Nell is standing in the dugout.

Nell is *never* in the dugout.

Miller and I make eye contact, both having seen Nell at the same time. We break into a run, reaching the dugout within moments of one another.

"What happened?"

"Is anyone hurt?"

We ask the questions over one another, and Nell holds up both hands to stop us from asking anything else. "I'm not sure."

"You're not sure what happened, or you're not sure anyone is hurt?" There is no keeping the edge out of my voice. I haven't heard from Ellie in seventeen hours; I don't have any patience left.

“I’m not sure what happened,” Nell clarifies, talking over my next question. “There was an altercation at the bakery today. Apparently, there was some damage to the bakery, the police were called, and someone was injured. I don’t know any more than that.”

My heart stopped beating the moment she said ‘bakery’. I can’t form words to ask the questions screaming through my head.

“How is that all you know, Nell?” Miller asks, reaching a hand out to steady me, and I realize I’m swaying on my feet.

“I wish I knew more, I really do. My sources are limited, and no one is answering the bakery phone.”

The phone.

My knees nearly give out on my way down the three steps into the dugout. The guys move quickly out of my way as I dive toward my bag. Where the *fuck* is my phone?

I’m dialing Ellie’s number the moment it’s in my hand.

It rings for nearly a minute before her voicemail picks up.

‘Hi, you’ve reached Ellie!’

I hang up, pressing on her contact to call her again.

“Breathe, King.” Grady’s massive shoulders are in my line of sight, but I can’t focus on him right now.

Right when I’m sure the call is going to voicemail again, I hear the telltale silence. Someone answered the phone.

“Ellie?”

“Hello, King.” *Colin.*

I saw the article this morning showing the two of them in the bakery. He isn't my favorite of her brothers, but I'd been glad she wasn't alone since Elliot is in class today. Apparently, I should have been more concerned.

“What happened?”

Colin scoffs, and I feel my hand clench at my side. This is Ellie's brother, Sam. You can't punch him, even if he's intentionally being an asshole. “You happened, King.”

“Just tell me if she's alright.” I have no desire to deal with his dramatics.

“She's not 'alright', you fucking ass. There was basically a riot here. Half the bakery is smashed up, and several of the windows are busted out. She was crouched in the kitchen corner *calling the police* when that crazy bitch got on the table. So, no. She isn't 'alright'.”

Someone pushes me into a sitting position, but I'm not sure who. I'm aware of Miller standing at my side, but I can't see much beyond him. There was a *riot*. Ellie's bakery is *ruined*.

I did this to her.

“Is she hurt, Colin?”

Another long-suffering sigh. “She is not physically injured.”

Oh, thank fuck.

I take my first real breath in several minutes and realize my tunnel vision was actually a lack of oxygen. “Can I

talk to her?”

“Fuck, no. She doesn’t want to talk to you, King. She’s done with you.”

That isn’t true. I know that isn’t true. Ellie would never leave me, not without talking to me first, not without saying goodbye.

We don’t leave without saying goodbye.

“Let me talk to her, Colin.”

“You just don’t get it, do you? I guess it doesn’t take *brains* to play baseball.” He laughs at his own stupid joke, and I desperately wish he was within punching distance. At this point, I wouldn’t care if he’s Ellie’s *favorite* brother; the fuckstick deserves to have his face caved in. “If she wanted to talk to you, she would. She *doesn’t*. She’s done. with. you.”

“No, she isn’t.”

“Yes, she is. Lose her number, Kingston. You won’t be needing it.”

Colin hangs up before I can say anything else, not that I had any desire to keep talking to that douchebag. I pull the phone away from my ear, visually confirming that the slimy shit hung up on me.

I look up into Miller’s face, surprised he isn’t the only one crowded around me. The entire team is crammed into the dugout or hanging over the fence. I have twenty-four people staring me down, waiting for an answer.

“Ellie isn’t the one who was hurt,” I can feel the relief pouring from my teammates, most of whom haven’t even met

Ellie. “I think it might have been a woman who climbed on a table. Colin wasn’t clear about that.”

“Colin is the one you talked to?” Steal’s question is gentle but prodding. He’s standing next to Grady, a concerned look on each of their faces.

“Yeah, he’s Ellie’s brother. The one from the article this morning.” We’d all had a good laugh over that article. None of us thought it would come to this. “He said she—”

I can’t say it. I know it isn’t true, but I still can’t say it.

“Can we play some fucking baseball, now?” Coach Maggart’s voice cuts through the dugout, and I expect my teammates to scramble, but none of them move. They’re all still standing with me, even the rookies.

“Fuck off, Maggart,” Miller snaps, not taking his eyes from my face. “What can we do, King.”

I can’t answer him. There is no answer. Ellie is in Cadence, and I’m in Forest Falls.

“What happened?” The question comes from somewhere above my head, and I recognize the voice as Callum. Grady takes a step back, looking over the back of the dugout into the stands.

“There was a situation at Ellie’s bakery. She’s fine,” he quickly adds, and I’m sure Callum must have looked stricken. He doesn’t know Ellie either, but he cares about her well-being. All the people here care about her because I care about her.

I love her.

I need to tell her that I love her.

I'm standing again with no idea where I'm going. My eyes scan the crowd around me, landing on Nell. "Are there any flights to Cadence tonight?"

She shakes her head, holding her phone up so I can see she's already been checking. "The first one isn't until tomorrow morning."

Grady speaks up again, drawing my attention away from Nell. "It's a six-hour drive."

"Are there any rental cars?" I shout back toward Nell, looking down at my phone again to see what time it is. I would get to Cadence around ten this evening if I left right now.

"I don't know, give me a sec—"

"Take my car." I step back, looking up at where Callum is still leaning over the top of the dugout. He's already digging in his pocket and quickly pulls out a small keyfob, tossing it toward me before I've even responded to his statement.

"I can't—"

"You can," Callum leans back, physically moving away from me as I try to hand his keys back. "It's the Range Rover in the employee lot."

"We're gonna circle back to why you drive a Range Rover," Miller pipes up from his spot at my side, and I have to hold back a slightly hysterical laugh. That's exactly what I was thinking. "But he'll be happy to take it. Thank you," Miller accepts the car on my behalf, and I narrow my eyes at him.

“Miller.”

“Sam,” The name stops anything else I’d been planning to say. Miller has never called me Sam. He is the one who started the nickname King. I’ve been through the worst moments of my life with Miller by my side; through it all, he has called me King. Something about him calling me Sam grounds me. “I’m gonna say the sappy shit, so get ready.”

“I’m ready,” Grady mumbles from behind me, and I almost laugh.

“Baseball isn’t your forever, Sam. It isn’t anyone’s forever, as much as we want it to be.” The guys around us have gone so quiet I think some of them may have stopped breathing. “*Ellie* is your forever, Sam, and she needs you. You’re taking the Range Rover, you fucknugget.”

Miller reaches out to shove a hand against my chest, but I dodge the movement, pulling him into a hug. *Big idiot with big emotions*. “You’re still a dickhead.”

He laughs, slapping me on the back multiple times before pushing me away. “Go, dude. The rookie will take over. Actually, where the fuck is the rookie?” Everyone begins looking around, all eyes finding the kid at the same time. He’s smashed into the corner on the opposite end of the dugout, his wide eyes darting between Miller and me.

“He’ll do great,” I nod at the kid, holding in a smile when he visibly relaxes. “Now, someone move so I can get the fuck out of here.”

—

It's worse than I thought. All the lights are off in the bakery, and two massive plywood sheets cover the front windows where they've been broken out. I can't see what other damage has been done inside, but I know it won't be good. Standing on the sidewalk outside, I stare at the entrance to Bennett's Bakes.

I tried calling her phone several more times on the drive back from Forest Falls, but I got a message saying the number was no longer available every time. Someone blocked my number in her phone. I don't want to accept the idea that it was Ellie. It had to have been Colin.

At least, that's what I keep telling myself.

If it wasn't Colin, if Ellie is the one who blocked my number, then she won't be in my apartment. I have no idea where she would be—hopefully not in the bakery since it clearly isn't safe anymore.

Maybe she went to her dad's in New Heights.

Or maybe she's at home, sleeping in our bed. I force myself to have the thought as if I'm wishing it into reality. I don't know what to do if the elevator doors open to an empty apartment. If Ellie is—

Gone.

The apartment is quiet, the only light coming from the living room lamp that I never shut off. She isn't here.

She isn't here.

I had been so sure Colin was lying. That she wouldn't leave me without saying goodbye. That she would be—

Walking out of the bathroom, wrapped in only a towel.

“Ellie?”

“FUCK!”

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Ellie

It's been a long fucking day.

I am still trying to figure out what happened at the bakery this afternoon. I don't know why that woman got on a table or who tried to pull her down.

I remember calling the police when people started shouting, but I don't know what they were shouting about. I don't know who started breaking things or what got thrown through the front window.

I don't know why I haven't called Sam.

All day I kept telling myself I would call him as soon as I had a break, as soon as everyone left, as soon as I was done with the cops. Every time I thought about it, I came up with another excuse not to.

It isn't that I didn't want to talk to him because I do. I really fucking do. I want him to tell me everything is going to be alright, and that he misses me, and that he will be home soon.

I want him to be home soon.

Shutting off the water, I reach for the towel on the hook at the back of the walk-in shower. I fucking love this shower. It's big enough for Sam to join me in here.

I have to call Sam.

I don't allow myself time to make more excuses, wrapping the towel around my chest and walking out of the bathroom with purpose. I will call him and explain everything. I will tell him about the whole day, and he will tell me everything is—

“Ellie?”

“FUCK!” I scream at the sound of my name, my wet feet sliding across the wood floors and almost coming out from under me entirely.

Sam is here.

He's standing ten feet away from me, watching me with wide eyes.

“You're home.”

“*You're* home,” he says it like there's anywhere else I would be at ten thirty in the evening. I frown at him, taking in the awkward way he's holding himself.

“Are you hurt?”

“Are *you* hurt?”

“This is a weird game we're playing here.” I motion between us, a smile pulling at my lips. I'm not sure why he's acting so strange, but I'm really fucking glad he's home. Wait. “Seriously, what are you doing here? I thought you had a game today?”

“I did,” he nods, his eyes never leaving my face. It's like he's trying to commit it to memory. “I left.”

“You...left?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

He huffs a laugh, but there’s little humor in it. “I found out my girlfriend’s bakery had been vandalized. That the police had been called, and someone had been injured.” Sam takes a step toward me, his eyes dropping from mine to run the length of my body. I shiver, but it isn’t from the cold. “That news alone would have been enough for me to leave, but the fact that I had to learn it all from her *brother* was particularly distressing.”

“Colin?”

“Yes, Colin. Ellie,” Sam takes another step toward me, and I can feel my heartbeat speeding up beneath my skin. I take a step back, bumping into the cold glass of the windows. “Did you tell Colin you never want to speak to me again?”

“What? No,” I can’t help but scoff at that. “I would never say that.”

“Good.” Another step. “Don’t ever do that to me, Ellie.”

“I wouldn’t,” my voice isn’t more than a whisper, but it doesn’t need to be. He’s so close to me now.

“Promise me.” Sam takes the last step between us, pressing his body into mine and pinning me against the wall of windows.

I have to force the words to form in my brain when everything is melting with Sam this close to me. “I promise.”

“I was so scared, Ellie.” Sam reaches up to touch my jaw, his hand resting against the side of my neck. “You could have gotten hurt.”

“I’m not hurt,” I remind him, moving my hands to his waist. My hands twist the fabric there, balling it up until his t-shirt is pulled tight against his abs. “I’m not hurt, Sam.”

“I left the game, Ellie.”

It takes me a moment to realize what he’s talking about. He walked out of a game because of me. Because he thought I was hurt. Because I needed him. “I’m sor—”

“No,” he shakes his head, his forehead brushing against mine. “I’m not sorry. I wanted to do it. This is where I want to be. In my home, with the woman I love.”

With the woman I love.

I crash our mouths together, needing to taste the words on his lips before he says anything else. Those words are mine now. His heart is mine. He is mine.

Mine.

“I love you, Sam.”

“I love you too, Ellie.” He smiles against my lips, pressing our bodies even closer together. I feel his hands bunching in the fabric of the towel, pulling it out from between us. “Now, let me show you how much I love you, sweetheart.”

Sam pulls the towel from my body in one quick motion, spinning me to face the windows that look out on the city below us. I know these windows are mirrored, but that doesn’t make me feel any less exposed like this. “Sam,” I breathe his name, the word fogging up the glass in front of me.

“Your fucking body, Ellie.” Sam groans behind me, and I can’t stop myself from looking over my shoulder. He’s watching me intently, his eyes taking in every part of me. “How did I get so lucky?”

I don’t get a chance to answer before Sam is behind me again, wrapping his arms around me. One hand dips between my thighs, pressing gently against my clit, while the other snakes between my breast, coming to rest against the base of my throat. I make eye contact with Sam’s reflection in the window, and his hand flexes against my throat.

We both feel my clit throb in response.

“Jesus, Ellie.” Sam’s breath ghosts across my ear, and I shift my hips, desperate for him to move the fingers resting between my thighs. “You’re already so wet for me, sweetheart.”

I move again, holding in a whine of frustration when his fingers stay put. “Sam, please.”

“Since you asked nicely,” Sam moves quickly, pressing two fingers deep inside, his thumb rubbing slow circles against my clit. “You’re going to come for me, Ellie. You’re going to come with my name on those perfect lips. Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” I sigh, bracing my hands against the window. Sam stops moving his hand, making eye contact with my reflection again. “Yes, Sam.” I correct, and I’m instantly rewarded with another brush of his thumb against my aching clit.

It doesn't take long before the tension breaks, my orgasm rushing through me. "Fuck, Sam." I hiss the words, resting my forehead against the cool glass in front of me.

"You want more, sweetheart?" It's a genuine question, and I know he would stop if I asked him to. I don't want him to.

"Yes."

Sam strips off his shirt and jeans almost simultaneously, his underwear following quickly behind. Once he's completely naked, he reaches for me, gripping my hips tightly and forcing them back. The position arches my back, and Sam runs his hand down the curve before resting it against my ass.

I'm not expecting the slap or the resulting throbbing in my pussy. "Fuck, Sam. Please, I-I-"

"I know, sweetheart. Hang on." Sam takes the three steps to the bathroom, not even bothering to turn on the light when he reaches through the door, opening the top drawer to fish out a condom. When he turns back to face me, he stops. "You're so fucking perfect, Ellie."

I can't help but think he's wrong about which of us is perfect as I watch him slide the condom over his impressive erection. My mouth is literally watering at the sight of it.

Sam steps behind me again, our eyes meeting in the glass. "I'm going to fuck you until the only word you know is my name." He slams into me without warning, and my knees nearly give out from the shock of it.

Sam wraps an arm around my waist, his fingers instantly finding my clit. Before I know it, I'm on the edge again. "Come on, sweetheart," Sam growls in my ear, his back pressed against mine as his hips slam into me. "Come on my cock, like the good girl you are."

Fuck.

I come so hard my vision tunnels, and I know the only thing still keeping me on my feet is Sam's arm around my waist. I must say something about him holding me because he laughs softly in my ear.

"I've got you, sweetheart. Now and forever."

Now and forever.

Epilogue: Two Years Later

The drive to New Heights has never felt longer. Ellie is sitting beside me, humming along to the radio, utterly oblivious to how our lives are about to change.

I've been making a lot of decisions lately, each one bigger than the last. The first was to retire from baseball. When I walked out of that game in Forest Falls, I assumed my career was over, but surprisingly Coach Maggart called me the next day. He told me that I was excused for a "family emergency" and that they expected me at the first game back in Cadence. I finished the season with the Cougars and threw my last pitch in the World Series.

We won. Obviously.

As much as I miss taking the hill eight months out of the year, I felt overwhelming relief when I told them I wouldn't be coming back. Sitting in the stands last season wasn't as bad as I thought it would be, not with Ellie by my side asking a million questions about the game. It's nice getting to share something I love with the woman I love.

The next decision I made was to buy a house in New Heights. Ellie and I are on our way to it now, though she thinks we're heading to dinner at her dad's house. That was the easiest excuse because the house is on the same street. I know she's been wanting to move closer to him for a few

years now, and I couldn't let the opportunity pass when I heard his neighbor was putting their house on the market.

“Uh, Sam?” Ellie points out the window as we pass her father's house. I simply smile at her, reaching out to grab her hand in mine. Pulling it to my lips, I press a kiss into her knuckles, trying not to laugh at the confused look on her face.

We're pulling into the driveway before she has a chance to ask me where we're going. I hop out of the car quickly, moving around to her side to open the door for her. It's a beautiful, sunny day, the spring air full of promise. Ellie slips out of the car, still looking at me suspiciously.

“Come on,” I grab her hand, pulling her toward the front door. When I open it without knocking, Ellie pulls against the hand holding tightly to hers.

“This is breaking and entering, Sam!”

“Technically, it's only entering. We haven't broken anything.”

“Sam!” She whisper-shouts as I pull her through the door with me. It's the middle of the day, and the house is clearly empty. It's adorable that she's this worried right now. “Where are you going?”

“The kitchen,” I smile at her over my shoulder, unable to stop my laugh at the look on her face.

“We can't just storm into someone else's kitchen!”

“We aren't,” I spin around, pulling her chest against mine and pressing a kiss against the tip of her nose. “We're storming into *our* kitchen.”

Ellie gasps, shoving her hands against my chest to separate us enough to look into my eyes. “*Our* kitchen?”

“*Our* kitchen. In *our* house. Right down the street from your dad.” I smile down at her, rubbing a soothing hand against her back. “It’s not just a house, though.”

“Damnit, Sam. I feel like ‘just a house’ is more than enough for me to process right now.”

“Too late.”

The suspicious look has returned to her face, and I take a deep breath before stepping away from her. “Oh,” her eyes go wide as I drop to one knee. I had a whole speech planned, but now that I’m here, looking up at her, I can’t seem to talk around the emotions in my throat.

“Ellie—”

“Yes!” She doesn’t wait for me to ask. She barely even lets me pull the ring from my pocket before she’s launching herself at me. Her body wraps around mine as we fall to the ground. My laugh is cut short by her lips pressing to mine, her hands gripping my hair to hold me against her.

Her words are a breath against my lips, but I hear them just fine. I feel them in my very bones, in every beat of my heart.

“I love you, Samuel Everett Kingston II.”



About the

Author

I hate this part. Uh, hi. I'm Suzanna, and I'm a Romance Author. That's all I've got for you.

I hope you enjoyed reading **Hey, Batter Batter** as much as I enjoyed writing it! These characters were so sweet and fun. I can't wait to write more in the Cadence Cougars Universe!

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