

IF YOU WERE  
*Mine*

What happens  
when the bad boy of  
football ups his game?

*USA Today Bestselling Author*  
**JENNIFER SUCEVIC**

# ***If You Were Mine***

**By**

**Jennifer Sucevic**

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**Kindle Edition**

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***Confessions of a Heartbreaker***

***Don't Leave***

***Friend Zoned***

***King of Campus***

***One Night Stand***

***Stay***

A quick note from the author ~ *If You Were Mine* is a spinoff novel from the Barnett Bulldogs Series. For those of you who read *One Night Stand*, you met Claire, Liam's fifteen-year-old sister in that novel. This story is set six years in the future, so you'll get a peek at how life is turning out for Liam and Gia. Since JT isn't a Bulldog, it didn't seem right to have *If You Were Mine* be part of that series. As always, this novel is a standalone and can be enjoyed without reading the Barnett Bulldog Series.

Also, a big thank you to my beta reader Allison Michaels. She helped make this novel shine!

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## **Chapter One**

*Claire*

Narrowing my eyes, I watch him from my covert position inside the house. Even when we're nowhere near each other, the man is still able to burrow his way deep under my skin. Like an itch I just can't scratch. It's irritating as hell.

No... *he's* irritating as hell.

Someone needs to explain to me why he even bothered showing up today.

This is hardly his scene.

At this very moment, he's lounging on the patio in a pair of vibrantly colored board shorts. His long, thickly muscled legs are stretched out lazily in front of him. Even though there's a small smile curving his lips upwards, he can't possibly be enjoying himself. He's probably bored out of his ever-loving mind. This is, after all, some G-rated, Disney-esque family barbecue. This is hardly some wild, drunken orgy where women are going to be abandoning their bikinis in an hour or two because they're so liquored up.

Just in case you were wondering- JT Higgins is more of a drunken orgy kind of guy. Trust me, my conclusions haven't been drawn from a few questionable lapses in judgment on his part. Oh no. It's taken *years* for him to cultivate this kind of reputation. He was already making a name for himself at whatever Big Ten university he attended before being drafted by Green Bay three years ago. He may play professional football, but he's even more notorious for his alcohol induced antics, bar brawls, and of course, the females who flock to him in droves.

For the life of me, I can't figure out why any self-respecting woman would actually *want* to be with him. Let alone broadcast it to the world at large. It's a well-known fact that the guy dips his wick in anything that moves. *Gross*. The only possible upside I can see to all his *activity* is that he's probably keeping some clinic in business with penicillin and swab tests.

And it's not just groupies who lose their minds over him either. He's been linked with his fair share of actresses and models as well. I think he was even seeing two chicks from the US Women's National Soccer Team last year.

At the same time.

From what I read online, it didn't end well.

“Why is *who* here?”

Not realizing that I must have muttered those words out loud, my brother's wife, Gia, steps beside me before slowly scanning the backyard as if she can pick out who I'm talking about. Gently she bounces four-month-old baby Max in her arms.

Yanked right out of my thoughts, I try covering my slip up. “Hmmm? What? Did I say something?”

Since her arms are full of baby, she nods towards the patio where about seventy people are enjoying the early September sunshine. It's definitely a loud, boisterous group. All football players and their wives or girlfriends and offspring. People are lounging in the pool or playing bocce ball in the sand pit. A volleyball net has also been set up on the wide, expansive back lawn. Others are just hanging out at the many tables that have been scattered around the brick paver patio.

This is the fifth year that my brother, Liam, has hosted a Labor Day party at his place. Everyone from the team is invited. Since it's always more or less of an open house, friends and teammates will drop by throughout the day. The party starts around two, lasting well into the night before ending with a professional firework display.

This is my fourth year attending. It's something I look forward to all summer long. Everyone always has a good time. Liam and Gia are gracious hosts and go out of their way to make everyone feel welcome and included. Plus, there's

plenty of food and drinks being served. If you walk away hungry at the end of this party, it's your own fault.

Gia gives me a knowing look before asking again, "Who were you talking about?"

A slight blush creeps its way up my cheeks as the fib slides right off my lips. "No one. Just mumbling to myself."

Narrowing her blue eyes, she gives me one of those deep speculative stares that under normal circumstances would leave me squirming on the spot. Thankfully she doesn't push the issue.

As far as I'm concerned, JT is a complete ass. He's definitely not worth wasting my breath on. Especially when there's a party in full swing. I'm just going to ignore him. Should be simple enough. It's not like I haven't had lots of practice.

Out of all the players on the team, why did my brother have to take an interest in JT Higgins? It was bad enough having to run into him every so often at team events and functions, but now he seems to be hanging around all the time. It probably wouldn't be so bad if he weren't always trying to strike up a conversation.

But that's exactly what he does.

Even though he knows perfectly well that I don't care for him.

This is JT's fourth season with Green Bay. Fingers crossed, it might just be his last. It seems as though the powers that be of the organization have finally had enough of his shenanigans.



JT was told at the end of last season to either shape up, or he was getting traded. That's unfortunately when my brother decided to step in. I think the GM and coaches see my older brother as being settled and mature even though he's only twenty-seven. Liam has been married for almost six years now and has three small kids. Ty who is five, Charlotte who is three, and baby Max. I think the higher ups were hoping that Liam would miraculously rub off on the younger man.

I narrow my eyes again.

Because it's entirely possible that he has.

It's been at least eight months since JT was involved in any kind of fight. He's still photographed with women, but it doesn't seem to be at the crazy extent it once was. And it's never with the same woman twice. There's a revolving door of them as if he just can't choose one.

He even bought a house in the same gated community as my brother about six months ago. Which means that he is forever dropping by unannounced. Thankfully I don't live here, so I miss a lot of that. But I usually have dinner with Liam, Gia, and the kids every Thursday night. It's a family thing we've been doing ever since I moved out here to attend college three years ago. I'm all too aware that at the end of the day, family is all you have.

When I was ten years old, my mother just disappeared from our lives. One day we came home from school to find a note propped up on the kitchen table. My father couldn't deal with her leaving and spiraled into his own abyss. Drinking. Job loss. Gambling. Eventually, we lost our house. My dad's

unreliability forced Liam to grow up fast and take responsibility for everything.

My other brother, Cullum, who is two years older than me, took her leaving the hardest. He also got the shortest end of the stick. To keep us financially afloat, Cullum ended up quitting wrestling and football so he could get a job and help financially support the family.

So yeah... I don't take family lightly. I know exactly how important we are to one another. And Gia is now part of that family, too. She's the sister I never had, but always wanted.

So getting together for family dinners on Thursday night is kind of our thing. Except for Cullum, who doesn't live here, it's a chance for us to all be in one place at the same time and talk about everything that's going on in our lives. Even though school can get pretty busy, I make a point to never miss them.

What doesn't make sense is that JT has started showing up to our Thursday night dinners. The first time, I thought it was merely a fluke. But then it happened the following week and the week after that. I have a difficult time even being civil to the guy. I'd prefer for our worlds to *not* collide, but apparently my wishes don't matter because I swear he's around more than ever before. So I do the only thing I can and grit my teeth all the while pretending he doesn't exist.

Which is rude, I know.

But I don't particularly care.

When JT first arrived in Green Bay, I was eighteen years old. I'd just moved here to attend the University of

Wisconsin- Green Bay because my brother had been drafted as a quarterback three years earlier. And I wanted to get out of the city I'd grown up in. I could have easily gone to Barnett University like my brother, but I didn't want that. I wanted a fresh start some place new. Plus, I'd wanted to be near Liam and his growing family.

So really, JT and I came here at the same time.

At that point, I knew absolutely nothing about him. Just because Liam plays football doesn't necessarily mean I follow it.

I'll freely admit that when I first glimpsed JT in person, I was completely bowled over. Say what you want about him- he's absolutely gorgeous. Tall and muscular with a face that is angular and chiseled. All of that coupled with his shaggy blond hair that usually gets pulled back with one of those headband thingies that some guys wear for sports. I'm not into that kind of look, but he wears it well. Add in a blindingly white smile, unusual light green eyes, and a sexual magnetism that's hard to resist and you have JT Higgins wrapped up neatly in a package with a bow.

Needless to say, he made my heart go pitter-patter the first time I caught sight of him. And I hadn't had that kind of thing happen very often. If at all. Because academics have never come easy for me, I spent most of high school focused on my studies and little else.

Since JT was part of the Green Bay organization and I ended up attending a lot of team functions with Gia and Liam, I found myself coming into contact with him upon occasion. Almost all of the guys on the team treat me like something of a

little sister. No one has *ever* hit on me or made me feel uncomfortable in any kind of sexual way. I don't think they would dare mess with their QB's little sister. Plus, I think they all know just how crazy protective Liam is regarding his family.

The exception to that, of course, would be JT.

Apparently, he didn't get that memo.

Or he just doesn't care.

The first time he came on to me, we were at some season opener party. He was actually there with a date. A tall, stunning model. But still... I could feel his eyes lingering on me as I floated around the room. Numerous times throughout the evening, he joined the same group of people I was talking to. As the event wore on, I noticed him becoming progressively drunker until he finally approached me, asking if I was interested in leaving with him.

And his date.

Ummm... no thanks.

And just like that, JT Higgins didn't seem quite so great anymore. I have zero interest getting involved with, or even befriending, a guy like him.

The second time it happened was at a wedding. Since it had been about six months since I'd seen him last, I let the entire incident go. Chalked it up to him being young and new to the team.

But just like before, I could feel his eyes on me. As unaffected as I wanted to be, I wasn't. His gaze felt like a physical caress. Gooseflesh continued to break out across my

skin. When he finally approached, it was to offer me a drink and an elevator ride up to his room for the night. That's when I knew my initial impression of JT Higgins was spot-on. The guy was a major player. Not to mention a jerk. And I wasn't interested. No matter how spectacular looking he was.

You'd think at some point he would get it through his thick skull that it wasn't going to happen between us, but no. The last three years have played out much the same. He has constantly hit on me, and I have continually shot down his offers.

Because I'm a big girl, and I can handle some guy who is nothing more than an irritant, I've never said one word to Liam or Gia about JT's persistent pursuit of me. It's more irksome than anything else. It's not like JT has ever touched me or gotten handsy. I'd deck him if he did.

If Liam ever found out that JT was trying to hustle me into bed, he'd have a freaking cow. And I don't want or need that. I'm trying to get the guy to loosen up where I'm concerned. He takes overprotective big brother to a whole new level. Plus, I really don't want to be the cause of any problems between him and a teammate.

So I just let it go.

And steer clear when we're thrown together.

Even though JT has apparently cleaned up his act, I secretly think it's all a PR sham so that the organization doesn't trade him at the end of this season. Although, I will say that ever since he stopped drinking, he's also stopped hitting on me.

I'm so lost in thought that I don't realize I'm still staring until clear green eyes collide with mine. A jolt of electricity spears through my entire body as my breath instantly becomes lodged at the back of my throat before I have the good sense to rip my gaze away.

Gia points towards a group of football players. "Looks like Ryan is here."

Careful to avoid those unique green eyes, I cautiously glance back out the window only to find my boyfriend standing in the midst of all that testosterone.

He looks... completely awed by the company he's keeping.

I'm not sure if I should be miffed or not that he didn't bother finding me first to say hello.

I met Ryan freshman year. His dorm was situated next to mine, so I would see him frequently in the cafeteria or walking to and from class. He introduced himself after the first few weeks of school and occasionally we'd get together to study. Sometimes he would invite me to parties, but I always declined.

Ever since I could remember, school has always been a challenge for me. I'm not one of those people who can cram for a few hours and sail through a test with an A. In fact, that's a surefire way for me to flunk an exam. I've always had to work harder and longer than any of my friends. And I knew college was going to be even more rigorous than high school. So instead of getting caught up in all the social stuff, I concentrated on my studies.

I've wanted to be an elementary school teacher since I was twelve years old. I've never even considered another career path. I also knew that getting into the program would be challenging. So I kept myself focused and sophomore year, I applied to the elementary education program and was accepted.

This year I'll actually be student teaching. I'm excited to finally get into the classroom. Now that I'm in the program and have the first three years of college under my belt, I feel like I can finally loosen up on the reins just a smidge. Maybe even have a little more of a social life than I've allowed myself up until now. I have no plans to lose my head and go crazy, but maybe I can ease up just a bit and enjoying myself.

Which is precisely why I finally caved after three years of having Ryan hound me to go out with him. We've been seeing each other for about two months now. Although we are definitely not the kind of couple who has to spend every single waking moment together. Because we're both busy, we usually see each other a few times a week. We go out to dinner, grab coffee, see a movie, or hit a few parties.

That kind of thing.

I've yet to invite him to stay over at my place now that I finally have an apartment off campus, even though he keeps hinting around at it.

I almost snort.

Alright, he does way more than hint around.

Up until this point, I just haven't been ready to take our relationship that far. I don't know what's been holding me

back, but something is. Maybe it's just first time jitters.

I hate to admit that I'm a twenty-one-year-old virgin, but...

Yeah, I'm a twenty-one-year-old virgin.

It's not like I planned for this to happen. I didn't set out to save myself for someone special. I guess I've just been so focused on school and spending time with my brother and his family, that it hasn't been a priority for me.

But now, suddenly, I'm a senior in college. And I'm *still* a virgin. It's like I blinked and realized that I'll be graduating this spring. When I confided in Holly, my roommate, she just about died before telling me that kids graduating from high school aren't even virgins anymore. She claims I would be hard-pressed to find a junior or senior *in* high school who was still a virgin.

I think she might just be right about that.

So, yeah, I guess what I'm trying to say here is that I'm finally ready to be de-virginized.

Is that even a word?

Anyway, with the way things are going, I'm pretty sure Ryan and I are headed in that direction.

Just as I'm about to answer Gia, my eyes once again become ensnared by green ones. Another shiver slowly slinks its way down my spine as I yank my gaze away yet again.

I really wish he would stop watching me.

Forcing a bright smile, I say, "I'm going to head out and say hello to Ryan." I tickle the baby still being held within



Gia's arms. At this point, Max's eyes look to be a gorgeous deep gray. Even though they could still change at this point, I don't think they will. Both Liam and I have the exact same shade of eye color.

"Want me to take Max?" There's nothing I love more than being with my niece and nephews. The two older kids are bundles of boundless energy. I don't know where they get it from. They're exhausting, but in a good way.

Almost as soon as the words are out of my mouth, she's dropping the baby into my arms. "Sure, why don't you give him to Liam so I can get more food out onto the table. Looks like things are running low."

"No problem." I cuddle his soft little four-month-old body close to mine before inhaling a great big breath of baby in the process. As I do, everything within me instantly settles, just like it always does.

Max is like taking a handful of Xanax.

Totally addictive and completely necessary.

Especially when JT Higgins is in the vicinity.

## **Chapter Two**

*JT*

I bring the bottle of ice-cold water to my lips before taking a nice long swig. Not once do my eyes deviate from her. I don't think I could yank them away even if I wanted to.

Which, just to be clear, I don't.

Now that I've pulled on a pair of aviators, I can just sit back and stare at her.

Kind of like a creeper.

I should probably be a bit more careful about that. Liam would kick my ass right out of the state of Wisconsin if he knew I was sitting here with dirty fantasies of his little sister rolling around in my head.

What the hell is she wearing anyway?

A teeny-tiny bikini, by the looks of it.

My brows draw together as my eyes slowly lick over the upper portion of her body. The bottom half is submerged beneath the crystal-clear water. She shouldn't be wearing something like that in front of all these dudes. That notion has me pooking up, glancing around to see if anyone else is scoping out her hot little body. Realizing that no one is paying any attention to Claire, all of my muscles instantly loosen.

You'd think her brother would have something to say about what she's got on, but apparently not. Liam seems completely oblivious to the fact that his sister is practically naked in front of his teammates. Of course, the guy does have three kids running around here. So yeah, I guess he's got his hands full with that.

At the moment, Claire is in the pool with Charlotte. She's got floaties on and is splashing around like she just might be drowning. There's a wide circle around Claire and the child because some of the women hanging out in the pool don't want to get their blowouts wet.

Guess they shouldn't be in the water then.

I'm half tempted to climb in myself. It's hot as balls out here. Even though I'm relaxing in the shade, the sun continues to beat down. I don't think there's a single cloud in the azure colored sky today.

I glance over at the guy who I've only recently learned is Claire's boyfriend. I'm not just saying this because I'd hate any guy who Claire brought around, but this one specifically has *tool* written all over him.

For one, he's not paying any attention to Claire. At the moment, he's busy yapping with some of the guys from the offensive line. I almost snort. He looks like a child standing next to them. We're talking three hundred pound dudes who could stop a freight train in its path. I'm guessing Claire's boyfriend weighs a whopping buck ninety.

Soaking wet.

I think if Collin McTavish or Grady Bradford asked him to lick the dirt off their shoes, he wouldn't hesitate before dropping to the ground and doing just that. If I wanted to be a real dick, I'd go over there and mess with him.

I can't say that I'm not tempted, because I am.

Sorely.

But I won't.

It's just too damn hot out to put forth that kind of effort.

If that guy had any brains whatsoever, he'd be glued to Claire's side. Not yipping and yapping the ears off those guys.

If she were my girlfriend, that's exactly where I would be. Stuck to her side. I sure as shit wouldn't be hanging out

with a bunch of dudes who won't even remember my name in the morning. Hell, McTavish won't remember his name thirty minutes from now, if he even knows it to begin with. Which I'm willing to lay odds that he doesn't.

I glance over at him again. Yup, still transfixed. I almost shake my head. There's nothing sadder than seeing a grown-ass man getting all fangirl. I'm more tempted than ever to get in the pool before trying to strike up a conversation with Claire. Except I know exactly how that will go.

Which is precisely why my ass is still firmly planted in this chair.

I've never met anyone who despises me more than Claire Garrison. I can't be totally sure about this, but I'm willing to bet that hitting on her over the last few years could be the reason behind it. Quite honestly, I'm not sure what the big deal is. In my experience, women enjoy it when I hit on them. Claire is the only one who has ever said no to me.

I'm not going to lie- in the past I've usually been pretty shitfaced when I've finally worked up the courage to approach her. It's an unspoken rule on the team that everyone stays away from Liam's sister. Which is precisely why I end up hitting on her when I'm drunk off my ass. Because I know all too well that Liam would beat the piss out of me if I ever laid one solitary finger on her.

That knowledge alone should be enough to keep me from eyeing her up.

It's not.

When my ass was in a sling at the end last season, it was Liam who stepped up and offered to help me out. And you know what? The last eight months have gone surprisingly smoother.

When I first got drafted by Green Bay, I went a little crazy. Okay, the entire city went nuts. It was like the prodigal son had finally returned home. And I'd already earned quite a reputation the four years I played in college.

My family is Green Bay royalty. My father, Joe Higgins Senior, played for the team back in the day. My older brother, Joe Jr., plays for Minnesota. He's the golden child of the family while I'm more of the black sheep. Which suits me just fine. My parents expect me to fuck up and I certainly hate to disappoint them.

Sitting down with Stu, the GM of the organization, at the end of my third season was a real kick in the balls, to say the least. Since I had another year left on my contract, they begrudgingly agreed to give me one more season to pull my shit together. If I wasn't able to do it, if I couldn't stop creating a PR nightmare for the team and being a constant source of embarrassment, they were cutting ties and trading my ass.

Which is exactly when Garrison, our QB, decided to take me under his wing. He kept me out of trouble, and invited me over for family dinners. I don't think he meant to, but he's given me a glimpse into what I could have for myself if I controlled all of the bullshit in my life.

I can't say that what he has isn't attractive.

It is.

The man is settled in a way I can only imagine. A beautiful, supportive wife. Cute kids. A rising career. Nice home. Comfortable lifestyle. For all intents and purposes, he's living the dream.

For whatever reason, Claire's face pops into my head whenever I think about settling down. Which is... yeah... it's utterly ridiculous. In case I haven't mentioned it before- that chick hates my guts. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that she hates every damn thing about me.

Fuck it- I'm getting in that pool.

Just as I stand up, ready to peel off the T-shirt that's sticking to my back with early September heat, Garrison plops himself down in the chair next to me. He's not alone. He's got a baby in his arms.

The newest Garrison.

Max.

I can't help the disappointment that surges through me as I lower myself back down again.

"It's freaking sweltering out here, man."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure my sweat is sweating at this point," I say in response.

He glances down at the little man in his arms.

I do the same before taking another slug of water. "So, this one do it for you? You finally gonna let your wife relax for a while?"

Not taking offense to my words, a huge grin lights up his face. Almost as if we're conspirators, he closes the distance

between us. “I’m gunning for at least one more.” He gives the infant in his big tattooed arms a gentle kiss on his downy head. “Usually right around the one year mark, Gia starts missing the newborn stage. So for now, I’m just biding my time, waiting for the right moment to spring it on her.”

Yeah, I’ll admit it... Watching them together has something loosening within me. I’m not made of stone after all. That being said- does it make me want to go out and impregnate the first woman I see?

Hell no.

I snort. “You’re freaking nuts. Look around you, dude, you’re already overrun with kidlets. They’ve outnumbered you. Mark my words, you have any more and you’ll have a coup on your hands.”

He glances at Claire in the water with his daughter and Ty, the five-year-old, who is running around with a water gun. “One more,” he muses, “maybe two.”

Five freaking kids...

That’s some craziness right there. I can’t even begin to imagine it. Total and utter chaos.

Unable to stop myself, I change the subject by nodding nonchalantly towards Claire’s boyfriend. I have zero idea what his name is. “Looks like your sister has caught herself a cleat licker.”

A cleat licker is precisely what you’d imagine the euphemism to mean- someone overly impressed with footballers. A groupie. A person who wants to hang with us simply because of who we are.

Obviously, calling someone a cleat licker is in no way a compliment.

And just like I suspected it would, that has the smile dropping clean off Liam's face as his gray eyes arrow to the guy in question who is still, as we speak, chatting it up with a few of our teammates. I haven't seen him give Claire more than five or ten minutes of his attention the entire afternoon.

I can only shake my head at that. Seriously. The guy must be a real idiot.

The longer Liam watches him, the more his lips flatten.

I'm not going to lie, I'm kind of loving it.

Does that make me a terrible person?

Probably.

But guess what?

I don't care.

Claire can do way better than that dude.

Needless to say, Liam is crazy protective of his sister. Just as he should be.

Claire Garrison is stunningly beautiful. Long straight mahogany colored hair that flows down her back like a thick, rich curtain. Piercing gray eyes that I seem to get lost in whenever we come into contact. Legs that start somewhere in the general vicinity of her armpits. They're ridiculously long. I'd be lying my damn ass off if I didn't admit to wondering how they would feel locked around my waist as I pump in and out of her.



She's got curves, but they're more subtle than a lot of the other women I'm used to going out with. And she's tall. If I had to guess, I'd say around five foot nine. Rather surprisingly, I like the height.

It's sexy.

Especially since I'm six foot three. I kind of like that when she looks at me, she doesn't have to get a crick in her neck to hold my eyes. Mine may burn hot when I'm gazing at Claire, but hers are usually stone cold.

Liam's voice is decidedly grumbly when he finally mutters, "Yeah... I've met him a few times. He seems to like Claire well enough. Treats her alright from what I can tell."

Ummm, why wouldn't he? She's absolutely perfect. There's no reason on God's green earth for him to treat her any other way.

Although I'm smart enough not to voice that opinion out loud.

The guy would absolutely flatten me if he caught me looking sideways at his sister. He's let it be known to everyone on the team, *repeatedly*, not to mess around with her. And me... well... needless to say, I don't have the best reputation. I may be trying to rectify that, but it takes time.

Looking a little conflicted, Liam's voice drops to a hushed whisper. "She, ah, doesn't have much dating experience. So, I'm kind of hoping this guy doesn't stick around for long. She could do a lot better than him. I wanted to say something to her, but Gia told me that I'm not to open my mouth about it. Apparently who Claire sees is *Claire's* business. Not mine."

He shoots me a look. One that says- *can you believe this crap?*

Those last words are muttered as if they're stuck on repeat inside his head. But I'm not thinking about them. I'm more interested in the whole- *doesn't have much dating experience* part of what he just said.

I can't help but raise a brow.

Not much experience?

What *exactly* does that mean?

Just because I personally have never seen Claire with anyone in the last three years doesn't necessarily mean anything. Up until six months ago, I only saw her sporadically when we were at team functions, or when Liam invited everyone over for a get-together.

I just assumed she'd been dating people all throughout college. The woman is absolutely gorgeous. She must have a legion of guys trying to get with her on a daily basis.

Alright...

We're going to shut down that particular line of thinking because it'll just piss me off.

Even though there are about a thousand questions I'd like to bombard him with, I don't. Nope. I've got to play this cool and not give myself away. The last thing I need is Liam catching a whiff that I'm into his sister. That would definitely be bad for business. Can't imagine the guy would be extending any more invitations if he knew just how much I wanted to bone her. Plus, Claire can barely stand to be in the

same room with me, so... there seems to be very little point in trying to get anything going with her.

But I'll tell you this, if that douche does anything to hurt her, I'll break both his legs. Then Stu can bitch about what a real freaking PR nightmare looks like. I can't help but snort at that thought.

Liam cocks a questioning brow in my direction. I have to clear my throat as I try remembering what we'd just been talking about.

Right.

Claire's dating habits.

Or lack thereof.

Can't say that thought doesn't leave my cock twitching.

"That's, er, hard to believe." There. Perfectly executed, if I do say so myself. A completely innocuous statement. Nothing that reveals my true thoughts or feelings.

Liam is quiet for a long speculative moment. I can't tell if he's picked up on something in the tone of my voice or if he's just mulling over my comment. After a while he says, "Claire has always been focused on school to the exclusion of almost everything else. Up until this point, she hasn't allowed herself to have much of a social life." Then he's nodding his head towards Jackwad.

Hmmm.

*Jackwad* seems like a damn good name for him. And personally, I think it fits him to a T. From here on out, we'll simply refer to this guy as Jackwad.

“I think this is the first guy she’s ever seriously dated.”

I can’t help but frown at that.

*This guy* is the first guy Claire has dated?

*Ever?*

What the hell does that even mean?

Like... are we talking *ever-ever*?

I’m doing my damndest not to leap to conclusions here, but is he seriously suggesting that Claire Garrison is a... *virgin?*

I mean... she’s gotta be like twenty-one years old.

Nope.

Uh-uh.

There’s no way in hell that girl is still a virgin.

My cock stirs at the idea as my eyes narrow again on Jackwad.

If what I *think* Liam is trying to say is the truth, then it’ll be over my dead fucking body that the cleat licker is her first.

*Over.*

*My.*

*Dead.*

*Body.*

### **Chapter Three**

*Claire*

“Did you have a good time today?”

Why am I even bothering to ask this?

I know that Ryan did. He was totally in his element, standing around all afternoon with some of the guys from the offensive line. Needless to say, Ryan is a *huge* Green Bay fan. He grew up about an hour and a half away. His family are season ticket holders and have been for two generations.

Ryan grew up playing football and even played at UW-Green Bay for the first two years before deciding to call it quits. He said it was because he needed to devote more time to his studies, but I kind of think it's because he wasn't getting much in the way of playing time.

Being part of a college athletic team is both grueling and time-consuming. You have to absolutely love it and be a hundred percent committed otherwise there's just no point. I saw that with my own brother when he was playing at Barnett University.

Football was his life.

Well, it was until he met Gia his junior year, a few months before the NFL draft.

Then she became his life.

Glancing over at me, Ryan squeezes my hand as we continue driving towards my apartment near campus. Liam lives in a high-end, gated subdivision on the outskirts of Green Bay where each house has a few acres of land. When I decided to move out of the dorms at the end of junior year, Liam *suggested* that I consider moving in with them.

Alright, it was way more than a suggestion.

I was, for all intents and purposes, browbeaten.

In the kindest, most loving way possible, of course.

As much as I adore spending time with all of them, I need my own space. And with a five-year-old, a three-year-old, and a four-month-old- it's crazy time all the time at their place.

After spending nearly ten hours over at their house, I'm sweaty and tired. Most of the day was spent helping Gia with food preparation and making sure everyone had what they needed or in the pool with Ty and Charlotte.

The party was a huge success. Just like it always is. And it turned out to be a gorgeous day. Everyone had a great time playing the lawn games that my brother set up or hanging out in the pool. Both Ty and Charlotte were mesmerized by the fireworks show at the end of the night.

The only fly in the ointment, sort to speak, was JT.

For the most part, he kept to himself and didn't bother me. Sure, he tried striking up a little bit of conversation, but I quickly shut that down. I think what bothers me most about JT Higgins is the way my body comes to attention whenever he's in the vicinity. Especially when I feel that green-eyed gaze of his on me. I think I could brush off the entire situation, just like I have in the past, if I didn't find myself now responding to him.

Squeezing my hand, Ryan's brown eyes drift towards mine as if he's waiting for an answer. Which makes me suspect that I probably spaced out for a moment or two and didn't catch what he was saying.

*Damn JT Higgins!*

Even when I'm nowhere near him, he's still able to mess with my head. It only leaves me gritting my teeth in frustration. Because I don't want to feel this way about him. Shaking away the irritation, I admit, "Sorry, I didn't catch that. Guess I'm more tired than I realized."

Those words have him slanting a sly look my way. And just like that, I know exactly what direction this conversation is going to veer in. I can't help but mentally sigh. It's a conversation we seem to be having more and more often of late.

And it's getting old.

"Does that mean you're too tired to hang out for a bit?"

I almost snort but rein it in at the last moment.

Apparently *hanging out* is the new euphemism for having sex.

Interesting.

I'll have to remember that.

"Ummmm..."

When I don't say anything more, I see an annoyed expression flicker across his face.

I brace myself for a fight, but instead, he just stares soundlessly out the windshield. Because the strained silence doesn't sit well with me, I start twisting my fingers together in my lap. It doesn't take long for the word to come tumbling quietly out of my mouth, "Sorry."

The fact that I even feel the need to apologize irritates me. I shouldn't feel bad about not being ready to take that

next step with him. So I go with the most plausible excuse. Which is actually the truth. Whether he wants to believe it or not. “I’m just really tired. It’s been a long day.”

Weaving through traffic, he continues staring straight ahead. “Yep.”

That one word stated rather succinctly leaves me fidgeting on the seat next to him. Even though it’s just the pair of us in the car, I still drop my voice. “It’s just that... I haven’t gone to the clinic yet.”

The annoyed expression that had merely flickered across his face a few moments ago now settles there permanently. “I thought you were going to take care of that last week?”

Feeling uncomfortable, I shrug. I hate the way it’s starting to feel like I’m being forced into this. Which is stupid, I know. Because I really do want to sleep with him. I don’t even know why I’m dragging my feet on this. I should be throwing myself at the guy. I’m a twenty-one-year-old virgin, for crying out loud. I’m more than ready to get this over with. And I’ve been seeing Ryan for two months now. It couldn’t be more perfect.

And yet...

“I didn’t have time,” I finally mumble into the yawning silence.

Actually, I had plenty of time.

Like I said before, I’m dragging my feet on this and, for the life of me, I can’t figure out why. After the first month, Ryan made it perfectly clear that he wanted to have a sexual



relationship. Because he was getting so aggressive about it, I finally told him about my... er... lack of experience.

Which bought me a few more weeks.

But he seems to be running out of patience with me. Unfortunately, the more I sense his annoyance, the less inclined I am to actually go through with it. Which is seriously counterproductive to the end result.

I wish he would just chill out and let the whole thing happen naturally. Is that really so difficult? Honestly, I've taken a few psychology classes since I've been here and a little reverse psychology would go a long way right now. It would certainly be better than him getting all pushy.

“So when are you going to make the appointment?” His deep brown eyes skewer mine before he adds with just a hint of acid, “Or are you not going to?”

“I will.” When he merely raises a dubious brow like he no longer believes me, I add hastily, “This week. I'll call this week and set up an appointment.” I hoist a small smile hoping that we can put this conversation to rest.

I'm tired and not in the mood for it.

But no...

Apparently, he's not quite ready to let it drop.

*Sigh.*

“Look, if this isn't something you really want, just level with me. Don't keep stringing me along, telling me that it's going to happen and then it never does.”

*Stringing him along?*

He's acting like we've been together for years.

Decades even.

It's been two months, buddy. Eight weeks to be exact.

I didn't realize I was simply expected to fall onto my back and spread my legs right away. Foolish me thought we could take our time getting to know one another before we decided to become more intimate.

His words have a spark of exasperation igniting within me. "Look," I say with a bit more bite, "I just didn't have time this week. I'll call tomorrow and make the appointment. There's been a lot going on with the start of classes and moving into my apartment."

He nods but still says, "I'm just trying to make sure that you still want this, Claire. If you're not ready for an adult relationship with this level of intimacy, you need to be straight with me. I don't want to push you into it. I'm not that kind of guy."

*Adult relationship?*

Really?

I arch an eyebrow.

Like I'm some baby because I've never slept with a man before? Is he seriously implying that having sex makes you a grown up? That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard in my life. And maybe I'm not going to say it because I don't really want to get into it with Ryan at eleven o'clock at night when I'm already wiped, but that's the way I feel.

And as far as him not wanting to be pushy. Ha! Because sometimes that's *exactly* the kind of guy he is.

Sucking in a deep breath, I try settling all my thoughts. Today was really nice, and I don't want to ruin it by getting into an argument with Ryan over the fact that we haven't slept together yet. "Look," I say softly with far more patience than I'm currently feeling, "I do want this. I'm just trying to make sure it's right, that's all."

As soon as the last sentence is out of my mouth, I realize that I shouldn't have uttered it out loud. Because, quite naturally, that's exactly what he latches onto.

"And you're not sure if it is?" He pauses. "*Right?* With me?"

*Grrrr.*

Any moment I'm going to lose it. Immediately I shake my head. "No, that's not what I meant. I just want to make sure I'm ready for this. It has far more to do with me than you."

Although, if I'm being completely honest, there's a tiny voice inside my head that wonders if what I'm saying is altogether true. Seemingly satisfied with my answer, Ryan gives my hand a small squeeze before bringing my fingers to his lips and laying a kiss on my knuckles.

Although that gesture would normally melt my heart, I'm still peeved about this entire conversation.

"You know I'm going to make it perfect for you, right?"

I hoist my lips. "I know." And I do think he will try being, I don't know... *gentle*.

“I want your first time to be good.”

Everything within me that had become strung impossibly tight finally begins to loosen with his words and the softly intimate look now filling his eyes.

For the first time since this conversation began, I feel like we’re both on the same page. My exasperation finally begins to thaw in earnest, and I’m once again reminded what it is about Ryan that attracted me to him in the first place.

Maybe he was just surprised that I hadn’t called the clinic yet and scheduled an appointment for the pill. Of course, I’m still going to make him wear a condom. I want to be doubly safe. I may not have any firsthand experience with sex, but I’ve heard plenty of horror stories while living in the dorms. Not only pregnancy scares, but STD’s as well. In fact, I took a health class last year that pretty much terrified the crap out of me. The photographs they showed were entirely too graphic.

If you’re looking to be scared straight off sex, just take Sexual Health (yup, it’s really a class). Can’t say that I didn’t learn a lot that semester. Although sometimes I have to wonder if maybe I didn’t learn a little *too* much.

## Chapter Four

*JT*

It wasn’t all that long ago that I was out every night, partying my ass off. Even during the season. Hell, *especially* during the season. And yet, no matter how shitfaced I got the night before, I was still able to haul my ass out of bed every

single morning and get to practice on time. And I'd perform well, too. Sure, on the inside I was dragging, but I still looked better than half the dudes out there.

But that was then, and this is now.

I no longer pick up random chicks and go home with them.

I don't have a table reserved at my favorite club.

And I've stopped trying to drown myself in alcohol.

It's a very quiet life I'm leading these days. I've turned into something of a homebody.

You know what the highlight of my week is now?

Thursday night dinner at Garrison's place.

I'm not even screwing with you right now. I'm being completely serious.

I look forward to it all week long. Sure, I could pretend and tell myself that it's because I don't get home cooked meals very often, but I think we all know that would be a huge lie.

Ever since I bought a house in the same development as Liam, I've been invited over for Thursday night dinners with the family. I can't say that I don't enjoy it.

And Gia's cooking is just one of the reasons.

I do legitimately enjoy hanging out with Liam, his wife, and their kids. It's a chaotic, happy mess most of the time with lots of laughter. Which is a far cry from the stuffy dinners with my own family.

Those are to be endured.

Never enjoyed.

Even at the ripe old age of twenty-five, I still dread being summoned home like an errant child. Although, since I've been keeping my nose clean, it doesn't happen with nearly the same amount of frequency as it once did.

For whatever reason, my father and I have never seen eye to eye. There was a time when I desperately wanted his love. Tried my damndest to earn it by impressing him in school or out on the field. But that proved to be an impossible task. Once I finally realized that, I stopped seeking out his approval and just started doing what I wanted.

Alright, fine... I'm not going to lie- I'd actually get off a little when I pissed him off. Every time he lost his temper was a point scored for me. Needless to say, the four years I spent in college, plus the first three of my NFL career were spent racking up a shitload of points.

It took me a long time to realize that in my father's eyes there was only Joe, my brother.

His little mini-me.

Joe can do no wrong.

As much as I wish I could hate Joe for feeling pitted against him, I don't. The issue I have is with my father, not my brother who is two years older. Most of the time, I have the feeling that my dad doesn't want Joe and I getting along. It irritates him that we have something of a comradery between us. I think he would be quite happy to forget I existed.

Most of the time, I long for that as well.

I get along fine with my mom, but she doesn't go against my father. No matter what he says or does, she stands quietly by his side. I spent a lot of years being pissed off that she didn't do more to protect me from his wrath or try harder to even things out between me and my brother.

But I'm over it.

All I feel now is sorry for her for being married to such an asshole.

So this, the Garrison household... yeah, it's a far cry from how I grew up. And I love it. Revel in it. Secretly long to be a part of the madness. It has me believing that relationships, marriage, families can be far different from the way I grew up.

Which brings us to Claire.

Even though she barely gives me the time of day, I just like being in the same room with her. I like hearing her talk about her week and the classes she's taking along with her student teaching placement. I could listen to her talk all night long and never grow tired of the sound of her voice.

I'll admit that I was kind of hoping she might unbend a little bit with the more time we spent together. Maybe even forget about my past douche behavior. But that has yet to occur.

Even though Liam and I live in the same subdivision, our houses are spread out. I'm a couple miles down the street from his place. Each plot of land is a couple of acres, so there's a healthy amount of privacy. Liam and I aren't the only football players who live here. There are about four other families who call this subdivision home.

Instead of walking over, I take my Porsche.

Rapping my knuckles on the front door, I wait for someone to let me in. Already I can hear the chaos unfolding inside. There's never a dull moment over here, that's for sure. But that's also part of the charm. Even standing outside on the front porch, I hear the kids yelling. Laughing. Running around.

A few moments later, Ty finally opens the door. That kid is the spitting image of Liam. Dark hair and large gray eyes framed by thick eyelashes. Although he thankfully doesn't have his head shaved on the sides like his father does. I'm expecting that'll come soon enough because he seems to want to be just like his dad.

A huge delighted grin lights up his exuberant face when he sees me. Before I can even blink my eyes, he's hurtling his solid little body into my arms. The Superman cape he has on fans out behind him.

Apparently, he won't take the damn thing off. Will only do it to go in the pool and even that's a battle. Gia had to tell him on Monday at the barbecue, that if he wore it in the pool, it would end up in the washing machine and he wouldn't be able to wear it for a couple of hours. You should have seen the indecision flicker across his small face. It took a good five minutes of internal debate, but he finally opted to part with it for the sixty minutes he was splashing around in the water.

“Hey, Superman. Any problems with Batman?”

“Nah.” Looking completely serious, he shakes his head. “Just Charlotte.” Then he deadpans, “Mom says she's a real pain in the butt sometimes.”



His words bring an easy grin to my face. Charlotte, at three, is nothing short of a handful. And she does her damndest to keep up with her older brother. Which he alternately loves and hates. Sometimes he likes having a cohort to get into trouble with and other times he just wants to be sneaky and get into trouble all by his lonesome.

Shutting the massive eight-foot front door, I carry him in my arms to the huge kitchen with all its white cabinets, white marble, and stainless steel appliances where it sounds like everyone has gathered. Unlike my own home growing up, the Garrison kitchen always seems to be where the hub of activity is. Kind of like a bee hive.

Gia enjoys cooking, and it seems like the kids are usually munching away on something or other. Although I've noticed that it's mostly fresh fruits and vegetables. Gia has a big garden out back, and the kids enjoy going out with baskets and picking whatever produce they're growing.

I think I like hanging around here because you can tell just how much they all love one another. Gia and Liam seem to genuinely enjoy their growing family. Again, far different than the environment I was reared in. I spent more time with our housekeeper than anyone else. The woman is like a second mother to me... or maybe a first.

· Just like always, my eyes are instantly drawn to Claire as I walk into the brightly lit room. I'm guessing that's why it takes me a moment or two to notice that there's someone else here in the kitchen besides the normal Garrison bunch.

*What the hell...*

This is just supposed to be a family thing.

And, you know... me.

Who invited the interloper?

“Hey man, want something to drink?”

I glance at Liam. “Sure, water’s fine.”

He tosses me an ice-cold bottle from the fridge. I catch it with one hand. Because Ty is still wrapped around my upper body like a barnacle, I’m unable to open the bottle.

“Here, buddy. Can you use some of that superhuman strength and pry the lid off for me?”

He grins before snatching the bottle out of my hand and practically ripping off the plastic cap.

“Thanks,” I laugh, “you better tone that down a bit. You might end up hurting someone.”

Ty flexes his arms before grunting like some of the dudes do when they’re bench pressing a ton of weight. Everyone laughs. The kid has personality in spades, that’s for sure. When he starts to squirm, I let him down and he shoots out of the room like his ass is on fire.

Gia watches him go with a speculative gleam in her eyes before walking towards me. “He hasn’t been that still all day. Kindergarten will hopefully be good for him.” When she’s close enough, she reaches up on her tiptoes before pressing a small kiss to my cheek. I grin at Liam before wiggling my brows.

Sometimes I like to poke the bear.

Instead of getting all fired up, he just rolls his eyes at me.

Those two are almost disgustingly in love. There's nothing Liam wouldn't do for Gia or his kids. Or his sister, for that matter. Family is everything to these people.

I'm not jealous, but sometimes I think it might be nice to have a family to come home to at the end of the day. People of my own. People who actually care about what happens to me. All this chaos and activity bursting at the seams is a far cry from my own quiet home.

Just like Liam's house, mine is five thousand square feet. With the finished basement, it's somewhere in the vicinity of seventy-five hundred. When I'm there alone, which is all the damn time, especially since I'm no longer going out and filling time with women, parties, and hanger-on's, it's so quiet that I can actually hear myself think.

I'm not sure what compelled me to purchase the place, but it's a nice retreat. Even if Green Bay ends up trading me at the end of the season, I wanted something more than the apartment I had been renting downtown. I'd needed to get away from the clubs and bars that were a stone's throw from my front door.

Thinking about a family of my own has my eyes once again arrowing to Claire. And just like always, she studiously avoids my gaze. Sometimes I get the feeling that she's trying to look anywhere *but* at me.

Jackwad is at her side.

Before I can even greet her, he's stepping forward, thrusting his hand in my direction. Eyes looking like they just might pop out of his head.

Fucking cleat licker.

Why is she even with this tool?

“Hey, man. Nice to see you again. I’m Ryan, Claire’s boyfriend.”

In that moment, I’m hoping Liam is right about this guy, and he won’t be around for long. There’s just something about him that rubs me the wrong way. Although the fact that he’s with Claire and more than likely trying to get in her pants is probably what’s doing it.

For the next thirty minutes, Jackwad proceeds to yap my damn ear off. Hitting me up with all sorts of invasive questions. Regaling me with story after story of his glory days playing ball at Green Bay.

Seriously, dude?

Mentally I’ve shaken my head so many times that I’ve actually lost count.

Once he starts bringing up some of my more noteworthy brawls along with some actress I was apparently dating last year, is precisely when I decide that I’ve had my fill of this guy before excusing myself to use the john. There’s not much that drives me to drink now-a-days, but a minute more in his company just might do the trick. I’m seriously contemplating the merits of finding Ty and hanging out in his room playing with his superhero collection until dinner is ready.

I’d been less than impressed with how he spent all his time at the barbecue talking with some of my teammates, and I’m even less impressed having just spent the last thirty minutes of my life with him.

Which is, by the way, thirty minutes I will never get back again.

So, yeah... thanks for that, buddy.

The entire time he was pelting me with questions, Claire was in the kitchen with Gia, helping her get dinner together. I would catch little glimpses of her every now and then from where I strategically placed myself. Liam was playing with the two older kids and keeping an eye on the baby.

So that, unfortunately, left me and Claire's boyfriend to fend for ourselves.

I huff out a relieved breath as I step into the long cheerfully painted hallway that is decorated with pictures showcasing the Garrison clan. Since I'm in no rush, I take my time, looking at each one. Anything to burn time. I find a few of Claire taken years ago and can't help but study them. She looks exactly the same. Long dark shining hair, slender build, smile curving her lips upwards, wide gray eyes staring straight into the camera.

Although granted, I don't get to see that smile very often. Only when she's talking with someone else.

The bathroom is located at the far end of the hallway. The further I get from Claire's boyfriend, the looser everything within me becomes. Not that I necessarily have to take a leak, but my plan is to hide out in there until I'm able to come up with a better one.

I'm just making a grab for the door handle when it swings open. I'm not sure who's more startled- Claire or me. Although I'm willing to bet that it's Claire. She stifles a small

yelp before jumping almost a foot. Without thinking, my hands go right to her slender shoulders in an effort to steady her. Even when she comes to a complete standstill, I don't let go.

In the three years that I've known Claire, I have never once laid my hands on her body. Some irrational part within me actually feels irate that the guy she's chosen to date gets to do it any damn time he pleases.

If I were Liam, I would definitely be putting the kibosh on that.

Once the surprise wears off, her face morphs into the cool mask of indifference she usually wears in my presence. Needless to say, I've seen that look at least three dozen times. In fact, now that I think about it, I have some very fond memories of that stony expression aimed in my direction.

When it becomes obvious that I'm not going to be releasing her anytime soon, she finally grits out, "You can let go of me now."

Why I find her irritation amusing, I have no idea. But I do. Which is precisely why one side of my mouth hitches at the starchiness weaving its way through her voice. "Just trying to be a gentleman and make sure you don't fall." That may not be altogether true, but it's close enough.

She snorts with about as much derision as she can muster which is actually quite a bit.

"Yes, you're always the perfect gentleman." Her gray eyes flash with mockery. "Now let go of me."

I give her shoulders a gentle squeeze, my thumbs gliding over the silky soft skin left bare from the tank top she's wearing. Her eyes flare wide at the leisurely caress. Unfortunately, there's no longer a reason for me to keep touching her. So, even though it's the last thing I want to do, I reluctantly relinquish my hold.

But I don't want her leaving just yet. The woman will barely give me the time of day. This is the most conversing we've done in months. So, just as she's getting ready to walk around me, I hear the words shooting out of my mouth before I can stop them.

“Is that guy really your boyfriend?”

Just as I knew she would, she halts in her tracks. Her eyes swing back to mine. “Excuse me?”

I'm tempted to call him *Jackwad*, but I know that will only piss her off more. And I'll freely admit that I enjoy seeing the way her eyes spark and flare when she gets angry, but I'm honestly not trying to rile her up.

It just so happens to be a natural byproduct of my company.

I tip my head towards the living room where I assume he's still sitting, patiently awaiting my return. “Are you seriously dating him?”

Looking annoyed, she crosses her arms in front of her chest before narrowing those icy gray pools at me. I probably shouldn't mention just how much that turns me on.

But, yeah... it does.

I'm going to be completely honest here, there isn't much about Claire Garrison that doesn't turn my crank. Apparently, that's just a natural byproduct of her company.

“Yeah, I am. Why are you asking?”

I shrug my shoulders. “Because he seems way more interested in the people you know rather than you.”

Is that an asshole thing to say?

Probably.

Unfortunately, it's the truth. And I don't want to see her get hurt by some dude who's just out to use her. It happens all the time when you're someone famous. Or related to someone famous. People want to get close, and they'll use whoever they have to in order to do it. “Every time I see him, he's talking with everyone *but* you.”

She rears back as if I've slapped her. I didn't think it was possible for her tone to become any frostier, but it does.

“That's not true at all.”

I raise a brow in askance because I think we both know that it is. She just doesn't want to admit it. And certainly not to me. Unable to stop myself, I inch closer, stepping into her personal space. It's just enough to catch a subtle hint of the beachy scent she's wearing. Needless to say, it goes straight to my head.

Umm... my other head.

“Listen, Claire, you should be with someone who likes you for you. Who doesn't give a damn about who you're related to or the people you're friends with. *You* should be the



most important person in the room. No one else.” When I’m around her, she’s the only one I’m conscious of.

I can’t imagine any other guy feeling differently. I really can’t.

Hands going to her slim hips, her dark brows lower even more. “Not that it’s any of your business, but he does like me. He just so happens to be a huge football fan. Last time I checked, that wasn’t a crime and honestly,” she shakes her head, her eyes heating up even more, “it’s really none of your business who I go out with.”

She’s right.

It isn’t.

But a minute detail such as that isn’t going to stop me.

“I’ve seen this guy twice now, and both times, he’s been more interested in talking to your brother’s teammates than spending any real time with you. That’s not how I would treat a girlfriend.”

Scoffing, she rolls those big gray eyes of hers. “Like you’ve ever had a girlfriend. I don’t think so.”

Well, she’s got me there.

I’ve been linked to a ton of women, but most of it has been long-distance relationships that had the lifespan of a gnat. And they only lasted that long because we weren’t in the same city... hell, most of the time we weren’t even in the same state or time zone.

When I say nothing in response, she actually advances on me before ramming a finger into my chest. “Exactly! So

don't you even try doling out relationship advice when you've never been in one! You have no idea what you're talking about."

With her sudden nearness, I find myself unable to resist laying my hands on her upper arms before hauling her lithe body towards mine. I must be having some kind of psychotic break because there is no way this is going to end well for me.

Looking surprised, Claire's eyes flare impossibly wide until all I see are the different flecks of gray that make up her irises. I'd be lying if I didn't admit how her closeness has the blood thrumming almost violently through my veins. Her delicate scent surrounds me, cocooning me in familiarity. I just want to suck in a great big breath of her. Or maybe snort her like a line of coke although I can't imagine that going over well.

"What I know is this," my eyes continue piercing hers, refusing to relinquish them even for a moment, "if you were mine, there's not one damn person who could pull my attention away from you." Hell, she's not even mine, and I have a hard time pulling my attention away from her. She eclipses everything and everyone. She always has.

Time suddenly stumbles to a halt. I can practically feel her thundering heartbeat as we continue staring at one another. Her eyes fall to my lips, and it takes everything I have inside not to simply throw her over my shoulder and leave the house with her in tow like some kind of caveman. I just want to get her away from Jackwad before he touches her in all the ways I've fantasized about doing.

I have no idea just how long we stand there staring at one another before she finally whispers, “I’m not yours, JT.” Her voice is so low that it sounds as if it’s been roughed up with sandpaper. But it continues gaining strength as she adds, “I will *never* be yours.”

With those words, she wrenches out of my arms before inhaling a shaky breath and tearing down the hallway. She doesn’t bother glancing back before finally turning the corner.

Even after she disappears, I stand there with my fists clenched impotently at my sides because there’s absolutely nothing I can do. I have no idea what it is about Claire that tugs at something deep within me. I really don’t. Over the years, I’ve tried my damndest to figure it out. Or, more accurately, snuff it out. Because there’s nothing worse than pining for someone who doesn’t want anything to do with you.

But I can’t.

And in all honesty, I don’t think I want to.

## Chapter Five

*Claire*

For the first time ever, dinner with my family feels like torture.

And it’s all *his* fault.

I’m to the point of wanting to scream in aggravation because those green eyes of his always seem to be directed my way. I can practically *feel* them crawling over my person.

Watching every single rise and fall of my chest. I have never, not in my entire life, been so completely aware of another human being as I am of JT Higgins.

And it's driving me freaking nuts.

What is it about him?

Why is he able to pull such a reaction from me? I should just be able to ignore him like I've done for the past three years, but that feels impossible now.

At least before- and when I say *before*, I mean when he had been drinking, ho-ing around, and getting into fights every other weekend, he wasn't bothering me. Yes, when we saw each other, he would proposition me, but it was ridiculously easy to brush him off. There were so many other distractions that he wasn't ever one hundred percent focused on me. He was like an unconscious person fading in and out.

That no longer seems to be the case anymore.

Actually, it hasn't been that way for the last six months.

Now when we're in the same vicinity, I feel his gaze on me constantly. Which leaves me feeling like a nervous, fidgety mess. It leaves my insides tied up in intricate little knots.

No matter how many times I brush him off, he never fails to try striking up a conversation between us. It's maddening. I liked it better when he was drunk, and I could simply sidestep his attention and advances.

With Ryan sitting next to me, JT has positioned himself directly across the table from me. Gia and Liam are on the ends. They each have a child by them, and Max is down for a

nap. I wish JT hadn't touched me earlier in the hallway. Right now his fingers feel all but singed onto my skin as a reminder. It's as if I can still feel the imprint of those wide hands on my shoulders and arms. And the way he grabbed me, hauling me towards him. Rather surprisingly his fingers hadn't been rough or punishing.

For just a moment, I'd been frightened that he was actually going to kiss me.

Or maybe I'd been afraid that he wouldn't.

I don't ever remember wanting to be kissed more by a man.

My fork stalls on its way to my mouth as that thought resonates throughout my brain.

*Oh my god. How can I want that? No. I don't want JT kissing me.*

The guy is a total ass.

And yet...

And yet...

I can't deny the spark of energy that ignited when I was staring into those beautiful green eyes of his. Or when he pulled me close to his big, powerful body. A little shiver of need snakes its way down my spine as I unconsciously lift my eyes to his in confusion.

I don't understand how I can want him touching me when I can barely stand to be in the same room with him. It doesn't make sense. Not to mention that I'm going out with Ryan.

He's my boyfriend. If there's anyone I should be feeling little zings of attraction for, it's him.

Right?

As soon as our eyes collide, JT's spear right through mine. Almost as if he had been sitting there biding his time, waiting for me to finally glance his way. The breath becomes wedged in my throat as our gazes continue to lock and hold.

Over the last couple of months, his watchfulness has grown. It's like a physical caress I can all but feel skating over me. Although it's never been quite so... *blatant* before. He's usually more careful about it. Especially around Liam and Gia. But Ryan is talking to Liam, who is preoccupied with trying to get Ty to eat his dinner. And Gia is focused on Charlotte, who is making a huge mess of things.

Which leaves just the two of us.

All of a sudden my skin feels hot, and I can't help but fidget uncomfortably under his intense scrutiny. And that's exactly what it feels like, too. Not sure what to do with myself, I continue pushing food around on my plate. Even though I was all but starving when Ryan and I arrived earlier this evening, I've completely lost my appetite.

The only defense I have against him is to yank my eyes away and keep them pinned to the plate in front of me. I just want to get out of here. I need to get away from him and the strange feelings he's starting to rouse within me. I don't understand them. Nor am I sure that I want to either.

They feel dangerous.

A Pandora's Box I shouldn't be opening.

Quite frankly, I hate that he's ruining something I spend all week looking forward to. I love spending time with my family, and now I don't even want to be here. I just wish I could ignore him. I want everything to go back to the way it used to be between us. I don't really care for this new JT. And I definitely hate just how physically aware of him I now am.

“So when do you start student teaching?”

Unable to help myself, my eyes lift to his. Even though no one seems to be paying us any particular attention, I can't just sit here and *not* answer him. I think he realizes that as well. If we were alone, he would barely get a one-word answer from me in response. Now I'm being forced to converse politely with him from across the dinner table.

It makes me want to bare my teeth and growl.

But you know what?

I actually think he would like that.

Doesn't he get that I just want him to leave me alone?

Apparently not.

“In a few weeks.”

“And you'll be working at an elementary school?”

Jeez. Who the heck gave him the low down on my life?

Stupid question...

I'm sure it was my brother. Liam couldn't be more proud that I'm actually making my dream of becoming a teacher come true. He tells everyone and anyone who will listen. I

think all the guys on the team know what my GPA is and what classes I'm currently enrolled in.

I nod. My eyes keep flickering towards his. Every single time they do, his capture mine, holding them ensnared for long moments of time. He's not even pretending to look away. It's as if all the pretense between us has been stripped away. I shift uncomfortably in my seat as heat curls in the pit of my belly. "Yes. I have a placement this fall at one of the local elementary schools. Next semester I'll be working at a different one."

I'm really hoping that this will be the end of our polite discourse and we can just go back to eating in stifling silence. It's not like I'm trying to keep the conversational ball rolling over here. I glance at Ryan feeling suddenly annoyed that he's not paying attention to what's going on. He is completely oblivious. In fact, he's still peppering Liam with question after question about playing pro ball along with pointless football trivia. Even though my brother's attention is divided between Ryan and Ty, he's obviously trying to get Ty to eat his dinner instead of simply playing with it.

For whatever reason, JT's words from earlier creep back inside my head before echoing uncomfortably.

Which is completely ridiculous considering that Ryan's interest in Liam or any of the other guys from the team has never bothered me before. So why am I reading more into it now? Simply because JT, who doesn't know Ryan at all, threw out a few crappy comments?

Why am I even listening to him?

But still...



Even though I don't want them to, it's like his words have taken root inside my mind. When my gaze unconsciously meanders back to JT, there's a knowing smirk filling his eyes before one brow arches up ever so slightly as if to say- *See? Exactly what I told you.*

*Grrrrr.*

I don't think I've ever met anyone who infuriates me quite so much.

“Claire has wanted to be a teacher ever since I met her when she was fifteen years old. She was just a freshman in high school at that point.” Looking thoughtful, Gia pauses for just a moment before continuing, “Seems like it was just yesterday and yet here we are, six years later.” Slowly she shakes her head. “I don't know where the time has gone.”

My sister-in-law glances over at me, a small smile playing around the edges of her lips. Something instantly softens within me at the memory. Gia is the whole reason I was able to turn everything around for myself in high school. She spent a lot of her spare time tutoring me. The year after Liam was drafted to Green Bay, Gia stayed behind to teach second grade. And she continued working with me as well. Without all of her intervention, I wouldn't be on my way to graduating this May with a bachelor's degree in education.

JT's light green eyes arrow to Gia as she helps Charlotte scoop up some of her vegetables with a spoon.

“You've obviously known Claire for quite a while. What was she like?”

“Claire has always-”

Not wanting Gia to delve into our past, I quickly cut her off. “I don’t think JT’s really interested in hearing about all that.” Nor do I particularly want him knowing anything more than what he already does.

A slow smile curves his lips upwards. “Of course I’m interested.” He flicks a lazy glance towards my boyfriend. “Aren’t you, Ryan?”

But Ryan isn’t paying the least bit of attention to our conversation. He’s in the middle of telling Liam a very detailed story regarding his glory days at UW- Green Bay from the sounds of it. Something about running the ball into the end zone and blah, blah, blah.

I can’t help the hot blush that stings my cheeks as I quickly elbow Ryan in the ribs. Even though I’m trying to be discrete, I know by the grin on JT’s face that it hasn’t gone unnoticed. Looking completely oblivious, Ryan turns towards us, brows drawn sharply together as if he’s annoyed at having been interrupted. For just a moment, his eyes bounce between JT and mine.

“Huh?”

Even though JT clears his throat, he sounds like he might burst out into laughter at any moment. If one damn chuckle manages to escape, I think I might actually leap across the table and throttle him with my bare hands. I’m not even kidding right now. Although, in all honesty, I’m tempted to strangle Ryan as well. All he’s doing is proving the point JT was trying to make in the hallway earlier.

“Gia was just saying that she met Claire when she was fifteen years old.”

Ryan looks slightly confused. “Oh, really?” Nor does he seem all that interested in the conversation either. Which he proves by turning back towards Liam before picking up the threads of his previous conversation.

Ignoring Ryan, my sister-in-law continues. “Yup, even then she wanted to be a teacher.”

“Sounds like you’ve always known what you wanted out of life. Not many people realize that at such a young age.”

I shrug, not really wanting to be drawn into some kind of earnest conversation with him. I have no desire whatsoever to get to know JT better or see him in a different light.

“When she was a sophomore in high school, she would get a ride to the elementary school where I worked after she was done with classes for the day and she’d help with the kids in my classroom. They loved her. Claire has always had a great deal of patience with children. She’s a natural teacher. And she’s worked so hard to get into college and the elementary education program. You might think that it’s easy, but it’s not. There are always so many people applying, that it’s actually quite competitive. Not everyone makes it.”

Oh my god. I just want to bury my face in my hands at this point. Gia is practically gushing. I have no idea why she’s telling JT all of this. Does she actually think the guy cares about anyone other than himself?

Ha!

He doesn’t.

At this point, I’m hoping Charlotte will cause some kind of ruckus so Gia will have to go back to focusing all her

attention on the three-year-old. Who, darn her, seems to be managing quite well on her own.

“What grade will you be teaching?”

“Student teaching,” I quickly correct before softening my tone. “First grade. I want to work in lower elementary. I wouldn’t mind teaching kindergarten. Once I have a few years under my belt, I’m going to apply for a master’s program in reading intervention. I’d like to become a reading specialist down the road.”

That’s the plan anyway. We’ll see how it goes.

He nods. I hate to even acknowledge that JT is a lot more focused on what I’m saying than Ryan. Who, by the way, is *still* talking about playing college ball. I’m starting to feel exasperated here. “You must be pretty excited to be getting into the classroom.”

Feeling suddenly self-conscious to have all of his attention directed my way, I glance down at my plate hoping that we can finally drop the subject and go back to simply ignoring one another.

“Come on, Claire, you’ve been looking forward to this since you moved to Green Bay.”

Of course I have. I absolutely adored being in the classroom when I worked with Gia sophomore year in high school, and then I was able to help out during my senior year as a teaching assistant. That was another great experience.

But still... there’s no reason we have to discuss all that with JT, is there? I’m guessing by the amused look on his

face, that he knows exactly what thoughts are running rampant through my head right now.

Unbending just a bit, I finally admit, “Yes, I’m really looking forward to getting back into the classroom. After I get acclimated, I’ll be able to start coming up with my own lesson plans.”

He nods. “How many classes are you taking this semester?”

“Three. It’ll be a light semester for me.”

His eyes never once relinquishing their hold on mine. I get the feeling that he sees way more than what’s on the surface. Like I said before, I’m not sure how much I like this new JT. There’s a whole different level of intensity about him now. One that I find completely unnerving. And I’m not sure what to do with all the feelings he keeps rousing within me. Especially considering that my boyfriend just so happens to be sitting next to me the entire time it’s happening.

“Sounds like it’ll be an easy semester.”

“For the most part.” Even though I agree, I know it’s not going to be a cakewalk. One of the classes I’m taking is a statistics course, and I’ve heard that the professor can be a real stickler. Since it’s a requirement for graduation, he’s not afraid to flunk people.

“Aren’t you taking stats this semester?”

I flash Gia a small smile. We’re still very close. She’s like a sister to me. I tell her everything. Well, almost everything. I haven’t mentioned just how much JT bothers me. “Yep.”

She makes a face before adding, “I always hated stats.”

A little sigh escapes from between my lips. “I’m not looking forward to it either.” Math has always been a real struggle. Sometimes I have a hard time wrapping my head around the equations and breaking them down into understandable terms. I’m certainly no stranger to the math tutor lab on campus.

They know me by name there.

“Well, if you ever need help, all you have to do is ask.”

I can only imagine the look on my face because almost immediately the edges of his lips bow upwards into a smile. “I actually aced stats. I like math. It’s something I’ve always been good at.”

Before I can think better of it, the words are flying out of my mouth. “And here I’d thought you would have been much too busy partying to actually attend classes in college.”

“Claire!”

Looking amused rather than offended by my rude comment, JT simply grins. “Nope. Made it to all my classes and was still able to find the time to party.” He winks. “I’ve always had excellent time management skills as well.”

I wince at Gia’s chiding tone.

She’s right. I shouldn’t have voiced that comment out loud.

And normally, I wouldn’t have either. It’s not who I am. All I can say is that this is the first real conversation that JT and I have had that hasn’t revolved around him hitting on me.

Maybe I'm uncomfortable having an honest to god discussion with him.

I don't know.

I just know that I'm feeling...

Crap... I don't even know what I'm feeling. A little bit confused maybe. I don't like all these feelings I've been having lately where he's concerned. And this conversation... It's a little too...

*Pleasant.*

There.

I said it.

For just a moment we were actually having a friendly conversation. Maybe it's the way he's been focused so intently upon me... it's unnerving. And yet the guy who *should* be paying attention is still ignoring me, talking to my brother about the season and the team's prospects.

I don't know... maybe I just wanted to ruin whatever this is that's happening between us. Even though I don't particularly want to apologize, I know it's the right thing to do.

"Sorry," I say somewhat begrudgingly, "I didn't mean it like that."

I absolutely meant it that way.

And by the amused look lighting up his eyes, he knows it as well.

Come on, it's not like we all haven't heard about how much partying and trouble JT caused at the university he played ball at. I think I even remember hearing that he was

almost kicked out at one point. By the time he was drafted to Green Bay, his bad-boy reputation preceded him. And the last three years have only solidified it. I have zero interest in getting tangled up with that.

Continuing to hold my eyes, he leans forward, somehow managing to close the distance that separates us. Even though he's sitting across the table from me, I still feel his nearness. It's as if those seafoam green eyes of his have all but swallowed me whole.

"You don't have to be sorry. I fully admit to partying. I had a good time in college and yet I still managed to do well in my classes. Especially statistics. So if you ever need help, the offer still stands." His gaze continues burning into mine. Looking away feels impossible. "I'm more than willing to give you some one-on-one attention."

His words have my eyes flaring wide because I get the feeling that he's not just talking about stats anymore. For all I know, he hasn't been talking about statistics at all.

It's stiffly that the words leave my mouth. "Thanks, but I'm sure the professor can help if I have any questions."

He shrugs. "Up to you."

The way his eyes continue piercing mine, the soft cadence of his voice, it all sends a delicate shiver racing across my spine.

Naturally, Ryan takes that moment to finally break free from his conversation with Liam to say, "Babe, if JT wants to give you a little personal tutoring, you should take him up on that offer."



JT's smile only grows in response.

All of a sudden it feels as if everyone here is conspiring against me.

## Chapter Six

*Claire*

“Just call if you need anything, okay?”

Anxiety threads its way through Gia's normally mellow voice as she presses one last kiss against Max's chubby little cheek before sweeping a loving hand over his downy head. “We'll both have our cell phones on the entire time, so don't worry about interrupting anything. And we're sticking close to home. We'll be no more than twenty minutes away. And we can always cut the evening short if we have to. It's not a big deal.”

My brother, who is standing behind his wife, meets my eyes before slowly shaking his head and mouthing, “*Do not call.*”

Reining in a gurgle of laughter, I simply smirk before shifting my gaze back to Gia. She's floating around the foyer like a high-strung butterfly. I kind of feel bad for her. This is the first time since Max was born that Liam has been able to get her out of the house for a date night. And the only way he managed to do that was by planning the entire evening himself. He surprised her with reservations at her favorite restaurant and a night out on the town. Something she couldn't say no to.

They haven't even left the house yet, and already she looks stressed out. I think Gia would grasp onto any flimsy excuse to cancel their plans and just stay home. It's not very often that she leaves Max with anyone and when she does, it's only with Liam. Or me.

And it's more like thirty minutes.

An hour at the very most.

"I just pumped, so there's fresh milk in the fridge if Max gets hungry. Although he shouldn't need to eat for another two hours. I'm hoping that he'll just sleep for you the entire time we're gone. I tried keeping him up this afternoon."

Not only is Gia starting to ramble with her nervousness, but she's also wringing her hands. Already Max is fast asleep in my arms. He'll probably be sacked out until his next feeding, so watching the kids this evening should be fairly easy. I'm not anticipating any major problems. I've been helping out with them since Ty was born.

I'm an old pro at this.

Gia has absolutely nothing to worry about.

Wanting to put her at ease, I smile. "Don't worry. I'll call if I have any problems or questions."

Her blue eyes finally lift to mine, and I see the deep concern etched within them. Although I can hardly take offense. I know she trusts me. Just as I know that this is difficult for her. In one of my child development classes, we talked about separation anxiety. Seems like it goes both ways.

For parents as well as kids.

“I’m going to take good care of them, Gia.” I show her Max. “See? He’s already sleeping. I’m going to lay him down, and then I’ll play some games with Ty and Charlotte. We’ll eat dinner, watch a show or two, and then it’ll be off to bed. Everything will be fine.”

At this very moment, Charlotte and Ty are running around with their superhero stuff. Naturally, Charlotte has her own Wonder Woman paraphernalia. They don’t even seem to realize that their parents are on the verge of walking out the door. Those two are way more interested in whacking each other with foam swords to care about anything else.

After another five minutes, Liam finally wraps his arms around his wife before steering her gently towards the front door. “Come on, sweetie, our reservations are in thirty minutes.”

Worrying her lower lip, she asks one more time, “You’re sure you’ll be alright?”

“I’ll be fine. And I’ll call or text if there are any problems. No worries. Really.”

Nodding again, Gia grabs her purse off the credenza in the front hall. It takes another five minutes for Liam to actually hustle her out the door. Once their truck is rolling down the long drive, I drag in a great big breath before smiling down at Max who is still sleeping soundly in my arms.

I should probably lay him down in his crib so that the kids don’t wake him. Ty and Charlotte are laughing and shouting as they run around the first floor. I’m hoping they’ll tire themselves out so that they go down a little easier.

Even though Max is completely sacked out, I whisper, “We’re going to have a good time tonight, aren’t we little man?” I can’t resist giving him a gentle kiss on the forehead. Just as I do, I hear a thwack and then loud noisy tears. Ty comes running into the foyer holding his head. He searches the front entryway with watery eyes.

“Where’s Mama?”

It’s quietly that I say, “Mama and Daddy just left for dinner. Remember? They won’t be gone long.”

As soon as he realizes that his parents are gone, he starts crying even harder. Just by the sound of his voice, I can tell that he’s getting himself all wound up.

“Why don’t you tell me what happened.”

Tears continue running down his chubby little face.

“Charlotte hit me on the head with her sword!”

When I don’t immediately respond with outrage, he adds indignantly, “*On purpose!*”

Because Ty is practically wailing now, Max starts squirming in my arms before letting out a loud howl. I jostle him around, trying to bounce him back to sleep.

“Let me take care of Max and then I’ll look at your head, okay buddy? But I think you’re okay. And then I’ll talk to Charlotte. Maybe you guys shouldn’t be playing with the swords anymore.”

“She’s not supposed to hit me on the head.” Then he yells, “Mama says no whacking each other on the noggins!”

I can’t help but smile. “That sounds like a pretty good rule.” Trying to distract him, I say, “Go tell Charlotte that I

would like to talk with her, please.” Because, I suddenly realize, she’s conspicuously absent. It’s not uncommon for Charlotte to go into hiding when she finds herself in trouble. Which probably means that she hit him on purpose.

Tears immediately drying up, he races from the room. “Charlotte! You’re in big trouble with Aunt Claire! *Charlooooooootte!*”

Ty’s loud bellowing only leaves Max crying harder. Shifting him around, I hold him against my shoulder all the while trying to bounce his small body because he seems to like that the most. Unfortunately, it does absolutely nothing to soothe him. After about five minutes, Ty finally runs back into the kitchen where I’m now trying to calm the baby.

“I can’t find Charlotte.”

Even though my heart hitches just a bit at the news, I nod. She does this. I’m not going to freak out.

*At least not yet.*

There’s no way she could have snuck outside. But still... I want to know where she is. Ty and I walk through the entire house with a still screaming Max held in my arms. Slowly we move from one room to another, checking each one as we go. Ty gets down on the ground, looking under the beds. We peer in all of the closets. There are five bedrooms on the second floor along with a playroom. We can’t find her anywhere.

“Charlotte,” I call out feeling a little more concerned than I was a mere ten minutes ago, “you need to come out now. You’re not in trouble, sweetie.”

Ty's dark brows snap together at that. "Yes, she is! She hit me." He points to the spot where she whacked him. "She almost broke my brain."

A small smile tugs at the corners of my lips. "She didn't break your brain, buddy. You're perfectly fine."

Very seriously he tells me, "She *almost* did."

"And I will definitely talk to her about that. But we need to find her first." As we walk back downstairs to the first floor, I ask, "Any other ideas where she could be?"

He ponders the question for a minute. "In her closet?"

"We looked there, sweetie. Anywhere else?"

He shakes his head.

The last thing I want to do is call Gia or Liam. If Gia finds out that we can't find Charlotte, she'll have Liam turning the truck around before she's even off the phone with me, and I don't want to ruin their evening. As much as she didn't want to leave, she needs to get out and enjoy herself.

But it's been about fifteen minutes now, and I still don't have a clue where Charlotte is. And Max hasn't settled down like I had hoped he would. The doorbell rings, and Ty races off towards the front entryway.

"Don't open the door until we know who it is!" I shout the words after him but he doesn't respond. Because I have Max in my arms, I can't chase after him. "*Ty?*" Even if he heard me, he'll still open the door.

A few months ago, Gia hopped in the shower while both Charlotte and Max were down for naps and she turned on a

TV show to occupy Ty. She wasn't gone more than ten minutes. When she came back downstairs wrapped in a robe, she heard Ty talking to someone and found the UPS guy standing in her front entryway. Ty had brought him inside and was plying him with oatmeal cookies and juice. Now they use an alarm system anytime they're in the house, so they know if Ty opens the door. I hadn't activated the system when Liam and Gia left about twenty minutes ago.

By the time I make it to the entryway, Ty already has the front door flung open and is chattering away. Proudly showing off his owie to whoever is on the other side.

“And then she hit me on my brain!”

Skidding to a sudden halt, I realize that JT is standing at the door. His big hands are in Ty's thick hair sifting around for a wound. He must sense my presence because his seafoam green eyes immediately lift to mine.

“Seems like you're going to live to see another day.”

Max continues to wail in my arms.

“Charlotte's in big trouble. We can't find her.”

JT's brows jerk together at that little bit of unsolicited information right before his eyes skewer mine with concern.

“Charlotte's missing?”

Sucking in a deep breath, I try minimizing the situation. “Sometimes she hides when she thinks she's in trouble.” I'm hoping that I can simply shoo JT out the door. Things are crazy enough as it is right now. I really don't need to add him into the mix.

Looking concerned, he inclines his head towards Max.  
“Is he okay?”

“Yeah.” I glance down at the squalling infant before laying a gentle kiss on his head. I hate to admit that my nerves are starting to fray. The kids are usually so good for me. But Gia is always here, and she has a way of handling them. “I think he’s just overtired. Gia kept him up so that he would sleep when I got here.”

Since JT doesn’t seem to be leaving, I try hastening his departure by adding, “Liam and Gia aren’t here. I’m babysitting.” I step towards the door, ready to shut it in his face. “I’ll be sure to let Liam know that you stopped by.”

Frowning, he continues to eye the crying baby squirming around in my arms. “Maybe I should stay for a while. You look like you could use a hand getting things back under control.”

Even though he’s right, it feels like all hell is breaking loose, I say with just a bit of a snap, “Everything’s fine. I can handle it.”

He’s the absolute last person I want to accept assistance from. Didn’t he get that the other night when he told me that he could help me with stats? I don’t like the way he makes me feel. I would much rather contend with all this by myself than spend any time alone with him.

Still not budging, JT raises a dubious brow. I’m starting to really hate when he does that.

“How long has it been since you’ve seen Charlotte?”

That question has me biting my lip.



Fine... Point taken.

Apparently, I don't have a whole lot of choices at the moment. I can either let JT in to help with the kids. Or I can call Liam and Gia.

Conceding to him feels suspiciously like rubbing salt in an open wound.

And by the look in his eyes, he damn well knows it.

*Grrrrr.*

## Chapter Seven

*JT*

She may not want me here, but right now, she *needs* me. Can't say I'm not going to take full advantage of that situation.

"Why don't you take Max up to his room and try to get him to sleep while Ty and I look for Charlotte." As much as she hates the idea of me actually being helpful, I can see the relief flooding through her gray eyes that I'm taking control of the situation. That she's no longer alone in this. "I'm sure by the time you get him down, we'll have found Charlotte."

There's a halfhearted moment of indecision that flickers across her face before she finally capitulates. Nodding her head, she takes Max upstairs to his room.

I can't resist watching the sway of her hips as she walks up the curved staircase in the front entryway. Once she reaches the top, she hesitates before spearing me with a quick glance. It's one that reveals the inner turmoil burning through

her where I'm concerned. I picked up on the undercurrents of it the other night. Our eyes lock and hold for a heartbeat or two before she finally disappears down the hall on the second floor.

That one look arrows straight through me in the most unexpected way. What is it about Claire Garrison that gets to me? I've never had a woman affect me the way she does. Sucking in a deep breath, I glance down at Ty, who is still standing at my side.

“Alright, little man, let's go find that sister of yours.”

It takes roughly ten minutes, but we finally find Charlotte curled up, sleeping behind the couch in the playroom. It was her slight snores that alerted us to the fact that she was there. Scooping up her small body, I carry her downstairs with us. Within a few moments, she's waking in my arms. Brows drawing together, she blinks those big blue eyes at me in confusion.

“Heard you've been a naughty girl,” I say teasingly.

With a tiny smile curving her lips upwards, she buries her face against the curve of my neck. I feel her warm breath fanning against me before I set her down carefully on the couch in the family room. Since I can still hear Max wailing from the second floor, I know Claire won't be down anytime soon.

It makes me doubly glad that I stuck around to help.

“Alright, guys, what should we do now?”

Charlotte lifts her head, jet black curls tumbling around her face, before pointing a small finger at the oversized TV

mounted to the wall above the massive stacked-stone fireplace. “Georgie!”

Brows drawing together, I look to Ty for clarification.

*Who the hell is Georgie?*

“*Curious George*,” he says as if I should already know this. As if *everyone* and their mother knows this.

“Okay.” Grabbing the remote off the coffee table, I flick on the TV. “Do you know what channel it’s on?”

“Mama records them.”

“Well, that certainly makes things easier, now doesn’t it?”

I press *Recordings* and a shitload of *Curious George* shows pop up. I click on one, and within moments, the theme music is playing.

Since it’s right around five o’clock, I ask, “Did Aunt Claire already feed you guys dinner?”

Oddly enough, Charlotte seems physically unable to rip her wide blue gaze away from the television screen. She appears to be in some kind of monkey-induced coma right now even though her eyes are wide open. I’m not going to lie, it’s a little disturbing. Although I do like that they’re both quiet and staying in one place. Somehow I doubt that I’ll score any points with Claire if I happen to lose one of them before she even makes it back down again.

Ty shakes his head as I scratch mine, considering the possibilities.

I have no idea how long Claire will be upstairs with Max. I can still hear him howling angrily. As much as I want to

help, I have zero experience with babies. Actually, I have zero experience with kids. So, I'm kind of flying by the seat of my pants here. My guess is that I should probably stay put and hold down the fort until reinforcements arrive.

Going to the fridge, I open the bottom freezer door before digging around.

Hmmm.

*What do kids like to eat?*

Even better question- *what do kids like to eat that I can actually prepare?*

Then I hit pay dirt. I pull out a bag of organic frozen chicken fingers and smiley fries.

I think we just might have a winner here.

Walking back into the family room, I hold up a bag in each hand. "Who wants chicken fingers and fries?"

They both cheer.

Chicken fingers and smiley fries, it is.

I set the oven to four hundred and wait for it to heat. Then I dig through the cabinets until I find a cookie sheet and dump a quarter of each bag onto it. When the oven dings, I shove the silver pan in there before setting the timer and heading back into the family room to keep an eye on Ty and Charlotte.

Interestingly enough, they don't look like they've moved a single muscle since I turned on the show. I glance at the TV screen. There's a little monkey who looks to be causing mischief. And the narrator... damn, but he has a soothing

voice. I can literally feel my muscles loosen as I continue watching.

“Good show?”

Neither of them answer. We’re talking completely riveted here.

It’s kind of crazy.

And a bit scary.

Not necessarily in that order either.

Taking a seat, I watch the monkey wreaking havoc wherever he goes and the man in the yellow hat frantically trying to clean up after him. It seems like only a few minutes have slipped by when the timer goes off. Frowning, I wonder if maybe I didn’t set it right. Barely taking my eyes from the TV, I head into the kitchen to check out how the chicken and fries are coming along. Peeking in the oven, I’m a little surprised to see that they’re done.

Awesome.

Grabbing two oven mitts, I take the metal sheet out of the oven before setting it on top of the stove. Waiting for it to cool, I grab two plates before divvying up the chicken and fries. I’m wondering if maybe we should eat at the kitchen table but... then we can’t watch the rest of the show. Actually, we’re already on the second episode.

Don’t tell anyone, but I’m kind of liking this little monkey dude. He’s hilarious.

So I carry their plates into the family room before setting them down on the coffee table.

“Okay guys, we’re going to have a little picnic dinner.”

Charlotte and Ty look positively thrilled with this pronouncement. They both pull themselves up to the table before digging in. Ten minutes later, they’ve finished eating and are back to sitting on the couch watching George. We’re just wrapping up the third show.

When it finally ends, the pair looks at me expectantly.

“Another one?”

They both nod in unison. I’m so into this monkey show that I don’t even notice when Claire makes it back downstairs.

It’s the sound of her voice that finally penetrates the George haze that has fallen over me. “You fed the kids?”

George is doing something crazy, and I find myself unable to rip my eyes away from his amusing monkey shenanigans. Even though I’m completely distracted, I say, “Um yeah, I thought they might be hungry.”

She goes silent for a moment before finally asking, “Are you actually watching *Curious George*?” I hear the bemusement riddled throughout her voice.

It’s unapologetically that I snort. “I’m not going to lie, it’s completely addictive.”

She takes a seat next to the kids on the couch. They’ve yet to even glance her way.

“Yup, they love it.”

“I can see why. That narrator’s voice is like taking a Xanax.”

She chuckles. “Pretty much. Why do you think Gia has so many of them recorded?”

It finally occurs to me that Claire- *Claire Garrison* who pretty much hates my guts is actually laughing in my presence. Okay. It may not be a full out laugh, but it’s damn close. And it’s all because of something that has come out of my mouth. It takes a Herculean effort, but I finally tear my gaze from the show only to pin her with my stare. The smile tilting her lips upwards instantly has something prickling to life at the bottom of my gut.

Clearing my throat, I say, “Gia’s a smart woman. I’m going to have to find out when this show is on, so I can watch it sometime.”

The small smile trembles before blooming into a full blown one.

And I love it.

“JT Higgins watching *Curious George*.” She shakes her head. Her mahogany-colored hair flutters around her shoulders. “Now that I would like to see.”

Unconsciously, my body strains towards her. The little monkey on the TV screen is totally forgotten. “I can arrange that.”

Those softly murmured words have the grin slowly falling away from her face. Yeah... in hindsight, I probably shouldn’t have said that. Sometimes I just can’t seem to help myself where Claire is concerned. The look now filling her eyes is decidedly wary. It’s one I’ve come to know well. I could really kick my own ass for putting it back on her face again.

Pulling her gaze from mine, she glances at her niece and nephew before clearing her throat. Her voice becomes a little more formal, as if we're nothing more than strangers.

"Thanks for feeding them. That was really helpful."

Instead of continuing to move forward, I've sent us tumbling backwards. "It was no problem," I tell her quietly, willing her to look my way again. There's just something about having those liquid gray eyes on me that I thoroughly enjoy.

Needing to put her at ease again, I ask, "So, Max is finally down?"

That's when I notice the exhaustion seeping into her eyes. "Yeah. I think he's just overtired. Once he finally closed his eyes, he was out like a light. I'll have to wake him to eat in a little while, but hopefully, he'll go right back to sleep again until Gia and Liam return."

After a few moments of silence, she says quietly, almost as if it's agonizing to push the words out, "Thanks again for staying and for all your help."

I can't resist teasing her just a bit. "Ouch." I pretend to wince. "That sounded painful."

Her eyes narrow but there's another small smile simmering around the edges of her lips. "You have no idea."

"Oh, I can imagine." Then I go and say what we both know to be the truth. "Normally, you can barely stand to be in the same room with me."

Almost instantly, heat ignites within her cheeks. Instead of holding my gaze, she quickly glances away. "That's not



true,” she mumbles under her breath.

I give a hoot of laughter. “Come on now, Claire, you can be honest. We both know that I’m one of your least favorite people.”

She picks at a thread on her jeans before spearing me with those gorgeous gray depths of hers. “Fine, I’ll admit it, you’re not one of my favorite people. There.” The look she sends my way is rife with challenge. “Happy now?”

Am I happy to have her admitting just how much she dislikes me?

Ummm, not really.

It only confirms what I’ve suspected for years.

Instead of answering that question, I say rather conversationally, as if only now thinking of it, “You know this is probably the first full-on conversation we’ve ever had.”

That has her falling silent before finally shrugging. “Well, every time we ran into each other, you were always acting like a jerk. Guess we never had very much to talk about.”

A smile curves its way around my lips before I fully agree with her words. “You’re absolutely right. I was a jerk.”

That admission leaves a bit of surprise crossing her pretty face. She looks as though she’s considering something.

“Go ahead,” I prod, “just say it.”

Again she looks startled before simply shrugging her slender shoulders. After a quiet moment, she tucks her feet beneath her. The position makes her look even younger than

she is. “Why were you always...” her words trail off as if she’s not quite sure how to push them out.

But I know what she’s thinking. I can see it in her eyes. So I say it for her. “Asking you to come home with me?”

Glancing sharply at her niece and nephew, she makes sure they’re fully engaged in their show before jerking her head in a tight nod.

Sucking in a deep breath, I give her question some thought before folding my hands behind my head. “I’ve always liked you, been attracted to you. I guess I went about trying to get your attention the wrong way.”

For a long moment, she doesn’t respond. Just holds my eyes with her own. A little bit of nervousness hums in the pit of my gut. Believe it or not, I’ve never said that to a woman before.

Pretty crazy, huh?

I’m a twenty-five-year-old man, and I’ve never once told a female that I liked her or was attracted to her. I don’t want to sound like a total jackass, but I never had to. Since I hit puberty, females have been all over me. And I’ve never had the urge to tie myself down to one specifically. Back in high school, I was way too busy trying to piss my father off. Plus, what was the point in getting attached when I knew I’d be leaving in a few years? And maybe I wasn’t willing to open myself up to anyone else hurting me either.

I got enough of that crap from my parents.

In college, I was focused on making my way to the pros, having a good time, and finally being free of my father. I

didn't slack off at school. Even though Claire has been operating under the assumption that all I did was party, I graduated from college with a three-point-seven grade point average. So, no... there just wasn't time for relationships.

Nor was there any interest.

Then I returned to Green Bay and back to my parent's realm. If I'd thought that I partied a lot in college, it was nothing compared to what it was now like. Too many people wanting to roll out the VIP treatment and way too many beautiful women throwing themselves at me.

Claire is the first woman I've ever found myself interested in. And that attraction hasn't waned in the three years that I've known her.

Our eyes continue to hold and something shifts in the air between us. The tension suddenly becomes palpable. Just as Claire clears her throat as if she's on the verge of saying something, Ty interrupts, "Auntie Claire, can you read me a story?"

I catch her swift intake of breath, as if she's relieved at the timely distraction. Without answering me, her eyes cut away from mine before settling firmly on Ty. "Of course, sweetie. Why don't you run upstairs and pick out a few books."

Jumping off the couch, we hear his feet pound up the back staircase before thumping down again with a thick stack of books he's barely able to hold in his arms. Curling up on her lap, he hands her the first one. As she starts reading, Charlotte soon migrates to her other side. Seeing that they've both lost interest in the show, I quietly click off the TV. For the next thirty minutes, Claire reads story after story to them. The

entire time she's doing it, I sit in the chair across from them simply listening to her. To the way she uses her voice to insert inflection and suspense into each book.

Barely am I able to take my eyes off her.

She really is great with Charlotte and Ty. They obviously love her.

By the time she plows her way through the stack of books, it's almost eight o'clock. Claire ruffles their hair before telling them that it's time to head upstairs, brush their teeth, and go to bed. Just as she says that, we hear Max start squawking through the baby monitor.

"Why don't you take care of Max and I'll get these two settled in bed."

She actually sends a grateful smile my way. The sight of it arrows clean through me as she goes into the kitchen before pulling out a bottle from the fridge to warm.

Clapping my hands together, my gaze bounces between the pair of them. "All right you two, let's get moving."

They both run up the back staircase to their bedrooms. Once they've brushed their teeth and I'm shown their pearly whites to inspect, I hustle their little butts into bed. They cajole me into reading one more story, as if they haven't heard enough, and then I'm tucking them into bed. Just as I'm about to head back downstairs to wait for Claire, Charlotte is out of bed.

"I have to go peepee."

"Ummmm, okay."

She races into the bathroom. After a moment or two, she's back again before giving me an adorable smile, asking if I'll tuck her in again. Exactly how am I supposed to say no to a face like that? I can't. So I follow her into the room and re-tuck her into bed.

I'm thinking that girl is going to be real trouble when she's older. Once I tell her goodnight again, I'm just starting to head back downstairs when Ty comes out of his room.

"I'm thirsty. Can I have a drink of water?"

I nod and we both head into the bathroom. I fill up a small glass with about two inches of water. Giving him any more than that seems like a bad idea. Then I'm walking him back and tucking him in all over again.

This time I wait silently in the hallway for a few minutes making sure no one else is going to pop out of bed. Just as I'm thinking it's safe to head down, Charlotte is out of bed again.

"I need some water, too."

I give her a hard look but all she does is bat those big blue eyes at me. They may not be the same color as Claire's, but they still remind me of her, so it doesn't take long for me to fold like a cheap house of cards.

"Alright," I grumble, "but this is it. No more getting out of bed. Got it?"

Once she's re-settled, I wait another five minutes before creeping slowly down the stairs and collapsing on an overstuffed chair. These kids are exhausting. Not that I've been thinking of having children anytime soon, but the last

twenty minutes have me contemplating the merits of a vasectomy.

No lie.

As the silence settles around me, I realize that I can hear the soft strains of Claire singing. It takes another moment to realize that it's coming from the baby monitor in the kitchen. Everything within me stills as I lean my head back and close my eyes, listening to the melody float through the device. Once her voice trails off, I hear a door open and close on the second floor before she's padding softly down the stairs.

I've been asking myself for three years now what it is about her that gets to me, and as of yet, I haven't been able to come up with an answer. I just know there's something about Claire Garrison that has totally sucked me in. When I'm around her, all I want is to be closer. I want her looking at me with something other than disgust and disdain in her wide gray eyes.

Today is the first time that's ever happened in the three years I've known her. As that thought rolls through my head, I realize that I don't want tonight to end. I don't want to leave and see her again only to have everything shift back to the way it's always been between us.

Just as she reaches the last step, our eyes catch. It's slowly that she halts in her tracks as if unsure about joining me in the family room.

"I didn't know if you were going to stick around or not."

## **Chapter Eight**

*JT*

Ha!

Like I was going to just slink away.

Not bloody likely.

She should really know me better than that.

Needing to ease some of the tension, I shrug all casual-like. “Just wanted to make sure everything was okay.”

She nods before her feet start moving again. Almost guardedly, her eyes continue watching mine as she takes a seat on the couch across the room. Not relaxing onto the cushions, she weaves her fingers together in front of her as if she’s not quite sure what to do with them. “I just want to say thanks again for all your help.”

I shrug. “It was no problem. I actually enjoyed it.”

Looking slightly uncomfortable, her eyes finally slide away from mine. “Well, I’m sure you’ve got plans. So, if you want to take off, that’s cool. I think all three of them are down for the night.”

“Nope, I don’t have anything going on,” I say quickly. Then I’m clearing my throat, hoping this doesn’t turn into some kind of epic fail. “So I was thinking that maybe we could watch a movie.” Before she’s able to respond, I hastily tack on, “That way if Max gets up again and there’s an issue with Charlotte or Ty, I’ll be here to give you a hand.” Just a bit of a smile curls my lips. “I don’t know how Gia does it all day long by herself. Those three are definitely a handful.”

Claire's surprised eyes arrow back to mine before her mouth hitches at the corners. "I think it's better now that Ty is in school. And once Max is a little older, it won't be so bad."

I arch a brow at that. Is she forgetting that we couldn't find Charlotte for a good twenty-five minutes? Or that Max was wailing earlier for a solid hour?

Easier my ass...

I don't freaking think so. Those three should come with a warning label or something. So you know exactly what you're getting into. They may look all angelic, but they'll give you a run for your money.

"If your brother has his way, there'll be another Garrison joining the ranks in about a year and a half."

Claire actually bursts out laughing at that. I can't help but grin in response. God, but I love when she smiles.

Especially when it's at me.

Which admittedly, isn't very often.

Or, like, ever.

"Yeah, he mentioned that to me, too. He loves having a big family. I think he'd have as many kids as Gia is willing to give him."

I like Claire when she's like this. Smiling and laughing. Eyes sparkling with humor. Looking relaxed with her guard lowered. I don't want to do anything to ruin this moment. This has to be the first time that she's not dismissing me.

Pretending I don't exist.



But then her face sobers, a shield quickly falling over her eyes. She goes back to looking a bit uncertain. “You really don’t have to stick around. I’m sure this whole domesticated thing is a huge bore for you.”

“Have I looked bored at all this evening?”

Of course, I’m going to attribute that to the hooligans now sacked out upstairs. Tonight has been oddly... enjoyable. Don’t think I’m not equally surprised by the realization as well. But I also think that has a lot to do with just wanting to spend time with Claire.

I’ve spent the last seven years going out, being surrounded by groupies, fans, and so-called friends. Hanging out in nightclubs and at rowdy parties. Even before I turned twenty-one, I had no problem getting in wherever I wanted. VIP rooms with models and actresses hanging on my every word. The fights that would inevitably break out. Dudes who just wanted to goad me into throwing a punch so they could have their fifteen minutes of fame by loading a video onto YouTube before threatening to sue for pretty much nothing. The paparazzi looking for me to do something crazy or illegal so they could sell their pictures to the highest bidder. Not to mention the hangovers and waking up with random women in my bed the next morning.

That lifestyle, it may have been a blast in the beginning, but it isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. It gets old real fast. Not to mention expensive. It’s like you’re always trying to up the ante to get the same kind of rush. It doesn’t take long to realize that even though there are all these people gathered around you, you’re still alone.

You're still isolated.

Getting hauled into the GM's office at the end of last season was probably the best thing that could have happened to me. It forced me to take a good, hard look at what I'd been doing and finally get my shit together or lose everything I'd been working for. Which was something I hadn't been willing to do on my own.

But I'm doing it now.

I've been walking the straight and narrow since last January.

I haven't had a drop of liquor. And I've never been one to mess around with drugs. Not even steroids. I've never touched the shit. I believe in getting big the old-fashioned way- by building muscle mass in the gym. Plus, working out has always been an outlet for me.

Nor have I stepped foot in a club since before the playoffs last year.

And the women... haven't been with one in months. It kind of sucks when there's one specific girl you're hung up on. It ruins all the others for you.

When she says nothing, I add, "I could really use a movie night. You know, just chill out for a while..."

I can tell by the skeptical look on her face that she's contemplating what to do. We've never spent any real time alone together. And without the kids and their chaos acting as a buffer, it's just the two of us.

I can't do anything more than sit on the edge of my seat waiting for her to make a decision. Is she going to kick my ass

out or let me stay? I feel like I'm sweating bullets over here while she takes her time with an answer.

"Ummm, okay," she says slowly as if she's still not completely certain about agreeing to this, "if you're sure."

"I am." The words shoot out of my mouth before I'm able to rein in my excitement. Needing to dial it down a bit and act a little more chill about the whole situation, I add as if us hanging out is an everyday occurrence, "It'll be fun."

Claire shoots me a dubious look in response. Can't exactly say I blame her for it.

Picking up the remote, she tosses it to me. I catch it with one hand, my gaze never once releases hers. Relaxing just a bit, she smirks before rolling her eyes at me. Thankfully that move seems to break the escalating tension between us.

"Why don't you pick out the movie and I'll make some popcorn." With that, she hops off the couch before heading into the kitchen.

I nod before turning on the TV and pressing *Demand* to see what new movies have been released.

Hmmm.

This is going to be tricky.

I don't want anything with a lot of nudity because I don't want Claire to feel uncomfortable. So we'll definitely be foregoing any adult movies this evening. And I'm not going to pick anything too gruesome, because I have no idea how squeamish she is.

Now... I could go with a chick flick, but I'm not sure if that seems too date-night. I don't want her thinking that I think this is a date even though- depending on how this evening turns out- that's *exactly* what I'm going to consider it.

So that leaves a good old fashioned psychological thriller. I think that will fit the bill rather nicely.

I rattle off something that looks brand spanking new.

"Is it out already? I've really been wanting to see that. I didn't get a chance to when it was in the theaters."

I almost pump a fist in the air, but restrain myself at the last moment.

*Houston, we have liftoff.*

*I repeat- we have liftoff.*

When Claire comes back into the family room, she's carrying two large bowls of popcorn. Handing one to me, she sets hers down on the coffee table before heading back into the kitchen.

"What do you want to drink?"

"Water's fine."

Now that I'm not drinking alcohol anymore, I'm trying to watch what I put in my body. I'm not as fanatical as some of the dudes on my team who are into the whole- *my body is a temple and I treat it thusly*, but I am trying to be more conscious about what I stuff in my piehole.

That's a start, right?

But I'll be making an exception for popcorn tonight.

When she comes back again, she hands me a bottle of water before picking up her bowl of popcorn and settling onto the couch.

I don't think I've ever seen Claire look so comfortable in my presence. Which is precisely why I keep my ass firmly glued to the chair I'm sitting on and don't try setting myself up on the couch. Even though I would much rather be sitting closer to her, that's not going to happen.

Clearly, we need to ease into this whole relationship. And I can do that. I can take this slowly. I had no idea when I headed over here this evening to discuss some team bullshit with Liam that Claire would be watching the kids. We're talking total jackpot score. Even better, her boyfriend is conspicuously absent.

Double jackpot.

Once she's settled, I hit *play*. We're both quiet as the movie unfolds. Although I have to admit that my attention is distracted throughout the entire film. Claire, on the other hand, is completely immersed in it. Yup, another pat on the back for choosing this particular movie. It was a good pick on my part.

When we hear Max start squawking mid-way through, I hit pause while she runs up and checks on him. Luckily he settles back down again within moments, and we're able to get through the entire flick. By the time the credits are rolling, I could tell you the general plot, but the finer nuances are lost on me because I was too distracted to actually get into it.

Just as I'm clicking off the TV, her cell rings. Picking it up, her eyes jerk to mine for just a moment before she leaps

off the couch, quickly walking into the kitchen. I can tell by the tone she's using that Jackwad is on the other end. It takes about three minutes for her to wrap up the conversation.

How do I know this?

Well, for starters, I keep glancing at my phone, checking the time. Plus, I'm doing my very damndest to eavesdrop on their conversation. The only thing I can be completely sure of is that she didn't say I love you before disconnecting.

Which is a huge relief.

It's something I can definitely work with.

My eyes arrow right to hers when she finally heads back into the family room again. After a silent moment, it becomes obvious that she isn't going to mention the call. As much as I'd love to play this cool, the question is already out of my mouth before I can stop it.

"Was that the boyfriend?"

Too late, I realize that the course of our evening has been irreversibly derailed by those four little words. An invisible shield, one I've become all too familiar with over the last three years, instantly falls into place between us. I could seriously kick my own ass for opening my mouth.

"Yeah... he was hoping I would be done babysitting by now."

Logically, in my head, I know I should just let this entire conversation drop, but it's like I've suddenly got Tourette's, and the words are practically exploding from my mouth.

Holding them back feels impossible.

I can't-

“Did you happen to mention that you've had company all night?”

Something flares within her eyes before she quickly glances away. Pressing her lips together, she doesn't say a word. Which tells me everything I need to know. Although I'm fairly confident that if she had indeed mentioned that I was here, he would already be on his way over so he could continue yapping my damn ear off.

That guy is a real tool.

“I'll take that as a no.”

She crosses her arms tightly against her chest before full out glaring at me from her spot on the couch. “You helped out with the kids. That's it.”

I point to the TV. “We just watched a movie together.”

*Fuck.*

I seriously don't know when to shut my damn mouth. I really don't.

Her face fills with color, which is yet another sign that I've totally messed this night up. “You stopped by to see Liam and then stayed to help with the kids. We watched a movie and hung out.” Her voice is flat. “It was nothing more than that.”

“You're right,” I concede, “it was nothing more.” Because, contrary to what it looks like, I'm really not trying to start some kind of argument with her. Hell, the time we've spent together tonight is more than we've spent together

collectively in the three years that I've known her. So I'm really not looking to undo all the painstaking progress I've made this evening. But I have a few points to make about Jackwad that she needs to hear.

Whether she wants to or not.

And it starts with this-

“Why are you even with that guy? You can do so much better than him, Claire.”

At first, she looks surprised before her expression quickly morphs into anger. “Excuse me? You don't even know him.”

I snort. “Trust me, I've seen more than enough to know exactly the type of guy he is.” And because I haven't dug a deep enough grave for myself, I tack on, “All the guy does is talk about himself.”

Face heating, her next words are practically gritted through clenched teeth. “He's just nervous around you guys. He was trying a little too hard to impress you. That's all.”



I give her a flat, disbelieving look. I can't tell if she actually believes the excuses she's making for him or not. "He shouldn't be worried about impressing anyone other than you."

For a long moment, she stares stonily at me before finally shaking her head as if to clear it. Exasperation colors every single word that rockets out of her mouth. "Look, my relationship with Ryan is none of your business. There's no reason for you to involve yourself in it." She tosses a hand up in the air before adding, "I certainly don't involve myself in any of yours."

"I'm not having any relationships."

"Fine." Looking defensive, she continues glaring at me with chips of gray ice from across the room. "You won't hear anything from me regarding whoever it is you're sleeping with."

"I'm not sleeping with anyone, Claire." My eyes continue to pierce hers. I lean forward, wanting to somehow get closer. "In fact, I haven't slept with anyone in months."

Everything about her stills. Her voice becomes eerily quiet. "Why are you telling me this?" I shrug, but there's nothing casual about the gesture. "I want you to know."

Every muscle in her body tenses as if going on high alert. I wonder if she even realizes it. She looks like a startled animal whose fight or flight instinct has only now kicked in. "Why?"

“Because,” I say honestly, probably a hell of a lot more honest than I should be at the moment but I’m tired of holding back with her, “there’s only one woman I’m interested in sleeping with and half the time, I think she hates me.”

With those words, it feels as if all of the oxygen in the room has been sucked from it. The silence that suddenly engulfs us becomes even more stifling before she whispers in a strangled voice, “It’s way more than half the time.”

That has my lips bowing up at the corners. “Yeah, I figured. I was just hoping you’d be too polite to point it out.”

The anger of moments ago seems to drain away leaving confusion to settle in its place. “You shouldn’t be telling me any of this. I have a boyfriend.”

“He’s not right for you.”

She scoffs. “And you are? Is that what you’re trying to tell me? The guy who has *never* had a relationship? Do you really think you can just sleep with me, get me out of your system before moving on to someone else? I mean, isn’t that how you usually operate, JT?”

In the past?

Yup... that’s *exactly* how it’s worked.

I’ve never wanted the complication of a relationship to deal with.

But there’s something about Claire. I’ve never had a woman stuck in my head for three damn years. And the funny thing is, I knew right from the start that she was unlike anyone I’d ever met before. I knew that I wanted to get closer to her. I’ve spent the last three years trying to do just that. But I kept

going about it the wrong way. Even though I knew she was different, I kept approaching her as if she wasn't.

Instead of answering her questions, because there's nothing I can say that she's going to believe, I change the subject instead. "Have you slept with him yet?"

Eyes flaring, her mouth tumbles open before practically hitting the floor. It wouldn't surprise me in the least if she threw my ass right out of the house. But she doesn't. In fact, she doesn't move a single muscle. She just sits there staring at me in shock.

I know she's embarrassed by the question, but I don't care.

"That's none of your business," she finally whispers.

It doesn't stop me from digging deeper.

My grave, that is.

"Have you ever slept with *anyone* before?"

Because after listening to what Liam had to say, although granted he doesn't know everything about his sister's personal life, I'm willing to bet that she's still a virgin. At this point I want- no... I *need* to hear her say the words.

Her teeth are back to being gritted. Color rides high on her cheekbones. She really does look beautiful all flushed and angry. But then again, Claire always looks beautiful. "I'm not answering that."

Feeling like a dick, I say softly, "It's nothing to be ashamed of, Claire."

“I’m not,” she bites out, “it’s just none of your business whether I have or not.”

Continuing to study her, I tilt my head just a bit to the side. “Is he pushing you to have sex with him?” Because I swear to god that I’ll beat the shit right out of that little punk if that’s the case. She shouldn’t even be considering sleeping with that douche. He doesn’t deserve her.

My words have her suddenly jumping off the couch. Fists bunched together. Body whipcord tight. She’s practically shaking with anger. Even though I’m the one who’s upset her, all I want to do is take her in my arms and soothe her.

“I’m not having this conversation with you.” She jerks her chin towards the front entrance of the house. “I think you should leave now.”

Within seconds, I’m on my feet, stalking towards her. Even though I don’t want to admit it, she’s probably right. I should walk my ass right out the door so I can salvage just a few remnants of this evening.

But I can’t seem to stop myself.

Even more than that, I don’t want to.

For the first time in three years, it feels like everything between us is finally coming to a head. And there’s no way in hell I’m going to walk away from that.

Or from her.

## **Chapter Nine**

*Claire*

It only takes him a few steps until he's standing in front of me. Until there's no more than a foot separating us. Even at this distance, I feel the thick waves of tension radiating off him. The barely suppressed power harnessed within.

And I hate it.

Hate just how much he's able to affect me.

It's been like this from the very beginning. From the first moment he captured my fingers in his larger ones and shook my hand. His eyes piercing mine, staring unabashedly until my skin flushed with heat and color. Even though I've tried tamping it down, it continues to simmer between us. Just one look flicked in my direction breathes new life into it.

Which is precisely why I go to such great lengths to avoid being anywhere in his vicinity. Because there's just something about JT that pulls at me even though I don't want it to. The man is ridiculously tall. Taller than most. He sticks out in a crowd. I never have any trouble unconsciously seeking him out when we're thrown together for an event. Plus, he's usually surrounded by females. They adore him.

When he's standing this close to me, invading my space, I have to tilt my neck just a bit to hold those seafoam colored eyes of his as they drill into me. Which they always seem to be doing.

The sheer breadth of his shoulders is amazing. He gives new meaning to the words "well-defined" and "sculpted, sinewy muscle". All those hard slabs of strength rippling and tensing. It makes my belly flutter just thinking about it.

And don't even get me started on that mop of tousled blond waves...

I just want to sift my fingers through it. The thick strands look silky-soft but I've never dared touch him. I'm afraid of just where it would lead.

I think every woman in America has had the same fantasy somersaulting through their heads regarding JT Higgins. But that's all it is. That's all it will *ever* be. I'm simply admiring something pretty. A gorgeous specimen. A handsome face. Amazing pectorals and biceps. Thick thigh muscles and tight glutes.

I have zero intention of doing anything about these persistent thoughts.

Getting involved with JT would be the very definition of insane. He's a womanizer. A heartbreaker. The man doesn't *have* relationships. He has sex before moving on to the next warm, willing woman. And so on and so forth. I've been around long enough to know that JT Higgins will never change.

Why should he?

Plus... the man completely rubs me the wrong way. He always has. Right from the start. He thinks he's god's gift to women and I just don't have time for that. So when he tells me that he hasn't slept with a woman in months and that he wants *me*, of course my heartbeat stutters and hitches at the very idea.

What woman wouldn't want to hear those very words falling from his full, sexy lips?

The real question is- *do I believe him?*

That would be a negative, Ghost Rider.

So, for him to saunter in here tonight, lower all my defenses by helping out with the kids, be so damn cute about it before hitting me with all this utter and total bullshit. It pisses me off.

His deep voice breaks into my chaotic thoughts when he says, “You never answered my question.”

Sucking in a deep breath, I slowly force it back out again all the while trying to get a firm handle on my emotions. “Actually, you asked me several questions, and I told you that I wasn’t going to answer any of them.”

His hand comes up before settling under my chin. The gentle way he touches me is something of a surprise. You would expect someone with such large hands, someone who uses them to crush their opponents on a weekly basis, to be much rougher. Maybe a little unaware of just how much power and strength he possesses.

But he’s not.

His touch feels possessive yet tender. And I hate the way it makes my heart hammer with new awareness. I hate that my first impulse is to close my eyes before sinking into his touch. I should be pulling away, distancing myself, not thinking about getting closer.

“My guess is that you’re still a virgin. I don’t like the idea that he might be pressuring you to do something you’re not ready for.”

When I open my mouth to protest, he quickly cuts me off. “I’m not trying to embarrass you. I think you should be proud of the fact that you’ve waited. That you want it to be with the right person.”

I can’t help but snort because it honestly doesn’t feel like some kind of amazing achievement. More like a hindrance. One I’m ready to relinquish. “And when did you lose your virginity?” I ask. “Hmmm?” Because I’m willing to bet that it was quite a while ago. Maybe when he was sixteen or seventeen?

Or god forbid, younger.

Saying nothing, his eyes simply skewer mine in place until it becomes almost impossible to breathe. “I wish I had waited for someone special. But I didn’t. There’s been a long string of nobody specials in my life.”

Even though his words have something delicate fluttering to life within me, I squash it down before muttering, “So what you’re really saying is that all you’ve done is sleep around, and yet you’re now trying to tell me not to have sex with someone I’ve been going out with for two months?”

His answer is swift and to the point. There’s just a bit of a growl to his voice. “That’s *exactly* what I’m telling you. That guy isn’t right for you. And he sure as hell doesn’t deserve something so special from you.”

Feeling annoyed with this entire conversation, I snap, “It’s not special.”

His face sobers. “It’s more precious than you know.”



Frustrated that he's managed to drag me unwillingly into a discussion regarding my sex life, I bite out, "It's not your decision to make, JT. It's mine."

"True." Slowly his eyes drop to my lips. "But I can give you something to think about, can't I?"

Before I'm able to process the meaning of those words, his mouth is suddenly cruising over mine. Knowing that I'll be lost if I give in to him, I press my lips firmly together not allowing him entrance. Pulling away just a bit, his low chuckle hits my ears before his mouth is back, exploring with a renewed energy. When that still doesn't get him what he wants, he starts nipping and licking almost feverishly at my flesh. Devouring it. Devouring me until I can't stand a single moment more of it. Until I'm opening for him so that his tongue can slip easily inside my mouth to mingle with my own.

As I do, his other big hand snakes around me until he's able to cradle the back of my head in the palm of his hand. Anchoring me to him. Any moment he's going to start plundering my mouth. I wait for it, prepared to fight him, but it never happens.

Instead, it's all slow and sensual strokes of his velvety soft tongue against mine. Every once in a while he changes his position. Angling one way or the other as if he wants to taste me every possible way there is. I have no idea just how long we stand there like that. Our lips teasing and savoring one another.

After a while, I realize that my arms are entwined around his neck, and I'm pressed up against him. My breasts are

flattened against the wide hard muscles of his chest. Licking at my mouth one last time, he finally puts just a bit of distance between us before staring into my eyes.

“Unless he can put that look on your face, Claire, he has no business being with you.”

That being said, he untangles himself from me. Just as he’s about to step away, he mutters something under his breath before his lips are crashing back down on mine again.

Remember what I said about being surprised that his kiss wasn’t more controlling, more forceful? Well, this one is *exactly* that. It’s precisely how I imagined JT would kiss. I feel as if I’m being plundered in the best sense of the word. This time, I don’t even pretend not to want it. Because I do.

Good god, do I.

I let his lips and teeth and tongue ravage me until every single thought flees from my head. Until it’s just me and him and nothing else. When he finally tears himself away again, I can’t help but bring my trembling fingers to my swollen lips.

My wide eyes slowly rise to his.

“Here’s my advice to you- when you finally give yourself to someone, make sure they’re completely worthy of you. And unless they can make you feel exactly like that, don’t even bother with them.”

When I simply continue staring, he says in a perfectly conversational tone, “I’ll show myself out.”

I hear the front door open before closing softly behind him. For long moments afterward, I stand there rooted in place as everything that just happened between us swirls

madly through my head. It's only when Max starts making noise through the baby monitor in the kitchen, does the spell JT wove around me dissipate and I'm finally able to release a shaky breath.

## Chapter Ten

*Claire*

Making my way to the counter, I don't bother glancing at the black menu board written in chalk behind the counter. I stop in here most days and order the same exact thing each time. "I'll have a latte with a shot of vanilla, please."

"Make that two- thanks."

Instantly recognizing the deep voice, I spin around, surprised to find JT standing next to me. Before I can do anything else, he's handing a twenty to the barista who took our order.

"Keep the change."

She stares at him for a long moment as recognition dawns across her face. Even though he's wearing a ball cap pulled low over his forehead, those soft green eyes are almost impossible to conceal. Not to mention the blond waves. And he's huge. Both broad and tall. Even if you're not a football fan, just one look at him would have you suspecting that he was an athlete of some sort. He just has that look about him. His sheer size along with the way he carries himself.

With excitement jacking up her voice, the girl leans towards him, looking as though she might just crawl right across the counter to get at him.

“Aren’t you JT Higgins? *Ohmygod.*” Her words are smushed all together, barely distinguishable.

*“Itotallyloveyou! You’re my absolute favorite player!”*

Feeling bemused by the situation, I simply stand there watching the exchange as it unfolds. I’m actually surprised when he shakes his head in denial. I thought for sure that he would eat this kind of thing right up. He’s an attention whore, right?

“Sorry, darling, not me.” He gives her a little wink to soften the blow of his words. “But I get that all the time.”

Her eyes narrow as if she’s trying to decide whether he’s telling the truth or not. Sounding disappointed, she finally asks, “You’re really not him?”

JT looks apologetic. Sort of. “Nope. Not him.”

“Oh.” She deflates before our very eyes. Dismissing us, she turns to the next customer in line.

JT slips an arm around my waist before steering me to the side, away from the long line of customers. Some of whom heard the exchange at the counter and are now eyeing him with piqued interest. He pulls the brim of his hat a bit lower as if that will make a difference. Because he’s well over six feet tall, I’m still able to see his eyes as they continue piercing mine. The feel of his gaze never fails to make me nervous and ridiculously aware of him.

It’s disconcerting.

Pulse racing, I finally ask, “What are you doing here?” I haven’t seen him since Saturday night, and quite frankly, I would rather not think about that humiliating conversation ever again. Or the kiss we shared. Although, truth be told, I haven’t been able to get either one out of my head. I was really hoping to avoid him until my embarrassment faded.

He shrugs his wide shoulders before saying offhandedly, “I was in the area.”

I raise a brow at that. “Really?” Skepticism is riddled throughout my voice. This coffee shop is about midway between my apartment and campus. I stop here practically every day before heading to school. Not once have I ever run into JT. It’s nowhere near his house or the stadium where he practices.

In response, he smiles, revealing straight white teeth. Something unwanted pings at the bottom of my belly. I tamp it down right away. “Sure.”

When our lattes come up, JT grabs them before nodding his head towards a small table buried in the back corner.

“Do you have a few minutes?”

Feeling indecisive, I glance quickly at my cell phone. Class starts in about forty-five minutes. So... yeah, unfortunately I do. “Yeah... but I can’t stay long.” After what happened between us Saturday night, I can only imagine what he wants to discuss.

As we both settle in, him across from me, his long legs brush against mine. Every time he touches me, a little zing of energy sizzles through my body, leaving me to feel strangely

fidgety. Not sure what to do with myself, I pick up my coffee, blowing on it before taking a small sip. It's scalding hot. Just the way I like it. As I take another swallow, everything slowly begins to loosen within me.

Just like always, those light green eyes of his are solely focused on me. As if I'm all he sees. And just like always, even though I don't want to, I feel very much aware of him. I can't help but shift uneasily in my seat. Nor can I stop the memory of his mouth sliding its way over mine from careening unwantedly through my head. Unconsciously my gaze falls to those full, generous lips of his.

How did I never realize just how sexy they were?

I don't think I've ever been kissed quite so... *thoroughly* before. Say what you want about him, but the man definitely knows what he's doing in that department. Although, I suppose he's had lots of practice. Unlike me.

No more than a few seconds could have possibly slipped past when a low growling noise rumbles up from deep within JT's chest. My eyes snap back to his in question. Straining forward, he closes the distance between us.

"You keep eyeing me up like that and I'm going to throw you right over my shoulder, and anything I have to say at this point will be completely moot. Do you understand?"

Even though it's on the tip of my tongue to deny what he's saying, I don't.

Because I know *exactly* the way I was looking at him.

Dropping my gaze to the coffee cup in front of me, I clear my throat, feeling even more uncomfortable than before.

Whatever he has to say to me, I just want to get it over with. The less time I spend with JT, the better off I'll be. There's all this weird ramped-up attraction flowing between us right now, and I don't like it. I don't understand it, and I really don't want to feel it. I have a boyfriend. Not to mention that I don't even like JT. But apparently my body doesn't care about things like that.

Ignoring his words, I ask instead, "What did you want to talk about?"

"Eyes on me."

Jerking in my seat, my gaze slices instantly to his in question. "Excuse me?"

I feel the low tones of his voice reverberate at the very bottom of my belly, strumming something deep inside. Something that leaves everything within me clamoring. Even though I don't want to, I can't help but acknowledge that no man has ever affected me the way he does. It's maddening. I don't want it. And yet he's the only one capable of doing so.

"I want your eyes on me when we're talking."

I feel just a hint of color bloom in my cheeks as my eyes once again settle on his.

"Better." He practically grunts out the word.

Shifting uneasily, I repeat myself, "What did you want to talk about, JT?"

I used to avoid him because I thought he was an asshole, now I'm wondering if I spent so much time eluding him because of the attraction that has always been simmering right

under the surface between us. It feels thick and heavy.  
Undeniable.

And quite honestly, it scares the freaking hell out of me.

Ignoring my question, he asks one of his own instead.  
“Have you slept with him yet?”

Oh my god... *seriously?*

My mouth tumbles open before I quickly snap it shut again. It's through clenched teeth that I hiss, “Please tell me you didn't come all the way down here so we could discuss *that* again.” It's almost a relief when my temper ignites, dousing all the attraction that has been smoldering uncomfortably in the air between us. I find myself leaning forward, straining to close the distance between us. “You need to get it through your thick skull that whether or not I'm sleeping with *my boyfriend* is none of your damn business.”

He sweeps his tongue slowly across his teeth as he sits there contemplating me. “I'm making it my business, and that's exactly what I'm here to talk about.”

*Grrrrr!*

His sheer audacity makes me want to scream.

You know what?

I'm not doing this with him. Just as I shoot to my feet, his hand snakes out and wraps around mine, halting any other movement. My icy cold eyes snap to his before I growl, “*Let go of me. We're done.*”

Even though I'm on the verge of storming out of the coffee shop, his green gaze pins me in place.



“Just hear me out.” His voice dips, the deep timbre of it reverberating throughout my entire body. And for reasons I can’t possibly fathom, I find myself unable to move a single muscle. Almost as if I’m paralyzed. I hate this strange hold he seems to have over me. “Please?”

“I don’t want to talk about this with you. I’ve already told you that it’s none of your business.” As I grind out the words, I find myself slowly sinking back down on to my chair. Even though there’s a voice inside my head that is screaming for me to run, to get as far away from him as I can, I don’t budge.

“Your boyfriend- you don’t belong with him. He’s all wrong for you.”

I really wish he would just knock all this crap off. Nothing JT says is going to change my feelings for Ryan. Feeling exasperated, I shake my head. “How can you say that? You don’t even know him.”

He spears me with a hard-edged look. “I know enough. I also know that you don’t have much experience when it comes to men.”

My brows soar across my forehead at this pronouncement. “*Excuse me?*” For just a moment it makes me wonder if there’s a flashing neon sign across my forehead that reads *virgin*. I honestly don’t think I could feel any more mortified than I do right now. I just want to sink through the floor and disappear.

Ignoring my embarrassment, JT simply shrugs his broad shoulders. That smoldering green-eyed gaze of his continues holding mine captive. The fact that I feel so completely mesmerized by him is infuriating. “Am I wrong?”

I press my lips tightly together, torn between flat out lying and simply agreeing with his statement. I suddenly become aware of the fact that his fingers are covering mine when he gives them a little squeeze. My eyes drop to our joined hands as something unwanted ripples through me again.

He whispers, “Just tell me if I’m wrong.”

The soft, imploring way he asks the question has the fight going right out of me. Sighing, my shoulders fall as I quietly admit, “You’re not wrong.”

Why is he doing this to me?

Why is it so important for him to know if I’m a virgin or not?

This whole conversation leaves me wanting to cringe. I’m starting to suspect that JT Higgins simply enjoys humiliating me.

Leaning closer, he says quietly, his words meant for my ears only, “You should be with someone who is willing to make you his first priority. Who is going to make sure that your first time is special.” He cocks his head to the side. “Do you really think Ryan is that guy?”

“I wouldn’t be with him if I didn’t feel that way.”

Even as I force out the words with conviction, deep down, I’m none too sure. Everything JT threw at me Saturday night has continued to roll around like marbles in the back of my mind. Even though I haven’t wanted to, I’ve spent more than a fair amount of time comparing the kiss JT and I shared to the ones I’ve experienced with Ryan.

Unfortunately, there is no comparison.

If I'd hoped those words would dissuade him from delving headlong into this conversation or maybe even shake the confidence I feel radiating off him, it doesn't. Not even a little. My words have his lips pulling up into a slow smile that continues to simmer around the edges as if he doesn't believe me. A slash of white cutting through the sun-kissed color of his face. I wish to god that I didn't find him so attractive.

“Come on, Claire, we both know you're lying. That guy is a complete tool bucket.”

I roll my eyes at his choice of insult. “He is not a... *tool bucket*.”

He raises a brow. “Yeah, he is. If you were my sister, I wouldn't allow you to date him.”

I piker up in my seat. The idea of someone trying to tell me who I can and cannot date rankles me to no end. I fully welcome the anger and irritation bubbling up within. It's so much better than feeling all this attraction that keeps pounding its way through my body. “I'm not your sister,” I fire back quickly.

“No, you are definitely not my sister. What I feel for you isn't sisterly in the least.”

Even as the words shoot out of my mouth, I have a feeling that I already know what the answer is going to be.

“What is it that you want, JT?”

## Chapter Eleven

*JT*

Reaching across the table, I slip my fingers under her chin until those gray depths are focused solely on me. Until I have her complete, unwavering attention. I've been going round and round in my head about this. And no matter how much I tell myself to let it go, to move on and forget about her, I just can't.

Trust me, I've tried.

"Let me be the one," I say softly.

That statement is met with a deafening silence. One that blankets us until she's finally able to choke out a response.

*"What?"*

It would be almost comical if I weren't dead serious about it. Unable to help myself, I lean just a bit closer. Well, as close as the table between us will allow. "I want to be the one, Claire. Let me be your first. I'll make it good for you. You know I will."

By the stunned look in her wide eyes, I'm guessing that I've taken her completely by surprise. For almost one full minute, she simply stares at me in shock and bewilderment. Finally, as if waking from a trance, she frantically starts shaking her head. But my fingers remain firmly under her chin, holding her in place. Not allowing her to distance herself physically from me. I like touching her. I like being this close. Normally she doesn't allow me in her space. Now that I'm here, I want more of it.

"No." The word is nothing short of a croak.

“Why not? It’s obvious that we have chemistry.” There’s so much energy sparking between us. And the more I’m with her, the more of a draw I feel towards her. There’s no way in hell that she’s oblivious to it.

Unsure just how to respond, she licks her lips. Is it terrible to admit that I’m all but mesmerized by that small pink tongue darting out to moisten those lips that are in the perfect shape of a cupid’s bow? Damn, but there’s just so much I want to do to her. So many different ways I want to spread her out and explore that gorgeous, lithe body of hers. That thought alone leaves my cock stirring with anticipation. I actually have to shift in my chair to release the growing pressure in my jeans.

I don’t think I’ve ever wanted a woman the way I want Claire Garrison. We’re talking three years worth of pent-up longing.

Even though she sounds annoyed, there’s something else buried deep within her trembling voice as she hisses, “That’s not a reason to sleep with someone.”

“Actually, it’s an excellent reason to sleep with someone. In fact,” I continue, warming to the notion, “it’s one of the best damn reasons I’ve ever heard.”

“I have a boyfriend,” she reminds me.

But it’s weak.

And we both know it.

Ryan isn’t anything special, and he certainly doesn’t treat her the way he should. I honestly have no idea why she’s even

with the guy. “Cut him loose, Claire. He’s not worth your time. He really isn’t.”

“I’m not going to break up with someone I’ve been seeing so I can sleep with you instead.”

I probably shouldn’t enjoy riling her up half as much as I do. There’s just something about the way her gray eyes flash and her fair skin flushes with heat and embarrassment. The way her pulse riots beneath the fragile flesh of her throat.

“He doesn’t deserve you. At all. He’s way more concerned with the people you’re connected to. Trust me, you don’t need someone like that taking up space in your life.”

Pulling away from me, she says, “And you just want to sleep with me because I’m a virgin.” Her words are low and shaky. Heated.

“That’s not true.” I shake my head for added emphasis. “I’ve *always* wanted you. From the very first moment I saw you, Claire, I wanted you. I think you know that.”

“There’s a difference between wanting to be with someone and simply wanting to sleep with them. You just want to sleep with me.” Anger continues to swirl and roil through her voice. “You’re no better than what you’re accusing Ryan of. You just want to use me.”

That being said, she jerks out of her seat for the second time. “I’m not interested in sleeping with you, JT. I’m not interested in doing *anything* with you.”

Because I know she’s seconds away from flying out the door, I say, “Give me your phone.”

She laughs as if I'm completely crazy. Which at this point, maybe I am.

“You're the last person I would ever want having my number.”

Feeling desperate, I turn to the girl studying alone at the table next to us. “Can I borrow a piece of paper and a pencil?”

Looking annoyed by the interruption, she glances up from the computer screen she's been focused on. The irritated look melts away the moment her eyes lock on mine.

“Sure.”

Ripping out a piece of notebook paper, she hands it over along with a pen. My eyes jerk back to Claire, thankful that she hasn't stormed away just yet. She's gathering up her purse and steaming cup of coffee from the table. I don't want to push her any further. At least not right now. Quickly I scribble down my number before thrusting it at her.

Raising a brow, she snorts. “No, thank you.”

When it becomes clear that she isn't going to take the piece of paper willingly, I fold it up before shoving it into the front pocket of her jeans. She grits her teeth as her eyes flatten. I think if she could hiss at me, she probably would.

Straightening her shoulders, she growls, “I don't want to see you again, JT. Don't contact me. Don't talk to me. And stop coming to dinner on Thursday nights. I won't tell Liam about this because, for some strange reason, he seems to like you. But if you continue bothering me, I'll have no choice in the matter.”

I have admit, this isn't exactly how I imagined our conversation unfolding. After Saturday night and the way she responded to my kiss, I thought maybe she would be more open to what I was suggesting. Apparently, that's not the case. The woman can barely tolerate me. But still... it feels as if something has shifted between us.

Maybe if I actually thought the dude she was dating was into her for the right reasons, I might step aside-

Nah.

I realize that I wouldn't be backing off even at that point.

I want Claire Garrison.

I have since the first moment I laid eyes on her.

Unwilling to just let her walk away, I stand up, ready to follow her outside onto the street. Her eyes narrow, piercing mine with anger, right before she says in an overly loud voice that cuts through the buzzing noise in the small coffee shop, "JT Higgins is right here, folks, and he wants to sign autographs and snap a few pics!"

For just one moment, her announcement is met with utter silence. Kind of like the calm before a storm. I swear, as soon as those words leave her lips, every single pair of eyes swivel towards me as I continue staring at her.

"Bye, JT." Smirking, she gives me a little wave with her fingers before disappearing out the glass door and onto the street.

*"I knew it! I just knew that was JT Higgins!"*



And then all hell breaks loose as every single person in the coffee shop converges on me.

## Chapter Twelve

*Claire*

*Ohhhh, the nerve of that guy!*

Telling me to break up with Ryan just so I can sleep with him instead! I'm surprised he even wanted me to break up with my boyfriend. It's not exactly like he wants me for himself. He just wants to...

To...

*To pop my cherry.*

I almost flinch as that disturbing thought slides through my head.

Men are pigs.

Hmmm. Maybe it's just JT who is the pig.

*I'll make it good for you.*

I almost snort. Well... I don't doubt that. After experiencing his kisses firsthand, I wholeheartedly believe that JT is extremely well versed at sex. And pleasure.

But still...

There's no way I can sleep with him.

More than that, I don't want to.

I may not have much experience in regards to sex, but I know enough to realize that men and women are very, very different. We think about sex differently. Men can pick up a random woman at a club, sleep with her, and never think about her again.

Women... well, most of them, don't operate that way. There usually has to be some sort of emotional connection for a woman to sleep with a man. For us, it's not just a biological function. An itch that needs to be scratched.

I'm not saying all women think that way, but a good many of them do.

Exactly how many times has one of my friends cried on my shoulder because she hooked up with some dude at a party, who then wouldn't give her the time of day when she ran into him on campus?

Way too many times.

And I know myself.

I can't sleep with someone and then move on the next day without a second thought. Not only don't I have that kind of sexual experience under my belt, but I'm just not built that way. I always pictured that my first time would be with someone I cared about. Someone who cared about me in return. I'm not delusional enough to think that I'm going to marry the first guy I sleep with but, I'd like there to be some kind of affection between us.

Something meaningful.

And the feelings I have for JT are *definitely* not like that.

“He really said that to you?”

Holly looks just as stunned, if not amused, as I’m currently feeling.

“Yeah, he really did.” It’s mind boggling, right? This isn’t just me overreacting because I’m inexperienced... right?

Holly, who has a lot more knowledge when it comes to the opposite sex, even shakes her head in slo-mo. Which makes me feel better. “So what are you going to do?”

*What am I going to do?*

Ummm... nothing.

That’s what I’m going to do.

“Well, I started off by telling him that I never wanted to see him again and then I ended it by sicing a bunch of crazed fans on him. I’m thinking that drove home the point in regards to where I stand on the issue.”

Pursing her lips, she raises a dark brow. “Do you really think so? This is JT Higgins we’re talking about. He doesn’t strike me as a guy who’s easily deterred.”

Holly has tagged along with me to a few parties over the years. She’s met JT. And drooled over him. Knowing Holly, she probably even threw herself at him a time or two. I wouldn’t put it past her. She’s a flirt.

“Honestly?” Her eyes lock on mine. “I’d be surprised if he just dropped it.”

My shoulders fall just a bit as her words churn inside my head. She’s probably right about that but still...

All I have to do is mention one little word to my brother about JT harassing me, and the guy would be in traction for the rest of the season. Although that's the last thing I want to do. I'm perfectly capable of handling my own issues. I don't need my big brother swooping in and solving my problems for me. Which is precisely why I never told Liam about all the times JT has propositioned me. I'm trying to get Liam to ease up. To give me a little space, a little more independence. The last thing I need to do is rile him up.

Plus, it was never that big of a deal.

And it certainly isn't one now. I won't let it be. My plan is to continue ignoring him just like I've always done. I'm sure sooner or later he'll get the hint and move on.

"Once I sleep with Ryan, JT will lose interest."

Well... that's my hope.

I just wish he had never kissed me. I hate that it's always there rattling around in the back of my head. And that I'm constantly comparing Ryan to JT. Every time I do, Ryan somehow comes up lacking.

My roommate doesn't look nearly as confident about that statement as I'm feeling. "I don't know, Claire." She glances down at the toenails she's carefully painting. Her brows are furrowed in deep concentration. "Kind of seems like he has a thing for you."

The words aren't even out of her mouth before I'm shaking my head in denial. "I think what you meant to say is that he has a weakness for sleeping with anything with a vagina."

Grinning, she glances up from her handiwork. “Well, I can’t deny that but still...” She pauses before sending me a sly look from beneath her lashes. “I’ve always thought there was a chance you two might get together.”

I can only stare. Holly has never said anything of the sort to me. “*What?*” I practically sputter out the rest of the words. “Are you being serious right now?”

Lifting her dark eyes, she pins me with them. “Yeah, I kind of am. He’s hot, and he wants you. And sometimes I think all that dislike you feel for him is longing you’ve channeled in another direction.”

My jaw falls open. Because I’ve only recently started to suspect the very same thing myself. But I’ve certainly never said anything about it to Holly. Her intuition, if that’s what we’re calling it, is a little disconcerting.

“Maybe what you really need to do is just go for it.”

Pulling myself together, I finally ask, “Are you forgetting that I have a boyfriend?”

“Nope, I’m not forgetting. Just wondering if he’s really the one you want to be with.” She shoots me a searching look from beneath her lashes. When I say nothing in response, she continues as if we’re simply making polite chitchat about the weather. “It’s okay if he’s not. You two haven’t been together all that long.”

I really can’t believe she’s questioning me about this. Practically telling me that I should sleep with JT. Has she lost her mind? “Ryan is the only one I want,” I tell her staunchly. I’m not going to change my mind about this.

She shrugs carelessly as if it doesn't really matter one way or the other before her eyes immediately drop to the nails she's polishing. "I just don't want you thinking that you have to sleep with him if you're having doubts. You're not locked into it," she adds softly.

For just a moment I stand there in the middle of her room unsure exactly how to respond. All of a sudden it feels like Holly is trying to talk me out of having sex with Ryan. Is... that what's going on here? Or am I misreading the situation? Her words leave me feeling confused.

Why would she think that I'm having doubts? Or that I feel locked in? Of course, I can change my mind at any time. I know that. Sure, Ryan can be pushy sometimes, but ultimately, the decision is mine to make.

I can't help but reiterate, "I want to sleep with Ryan. In fact, I was planning on doing it this weekend."

Studying me for a long moment, she finally nods. "Okay. If you're sure that's what you want to do."

"I am." I huff out an irritated breath. Honestly, I'm tired of thinking about this all the time. Overthinking it, actually. It seems ridiculous that so much of my time and energy is being focused on sex. Flopping onto her desk chair, I stare up at the ceiling. "In fact," I reveal, "Ryan invited me to a party at his fraternity house Friday night. So I was planning on doing it Saturday." Part of me just wants to get it out of the way so I can move on with my life. Maybe it's not the best reason for wanting to have sex, but so what? I've waited this long. I'm tired of waiting. I just want it over with. And I'm sure Ryan will do the job nicely.

“Ryan must be thrilled.”

Feeling like we’re finally back on track with this conversation, I add, “He doesn’t know.” Mostly because I just decided this about sixty seconds ago.

Screw JT.

Well... Obviously, I will *not* be screwing JT.

“I haven’t told him yet.”

Talking out loud, I muse, “We can go out to dinner on Saturday and then come back here, and I’ll surprise him.” It sounds like as good of a plan as any. I just need to get this whole virginity thing out of the way.

Her big brown eyes light up with an idea. “We should get you something sexy to wear.”

I groan at the notion. It seems so... I don’t know. Unnecessary. “No. I don’t need anything like that.”

Ignoring me, she says, “Yes, you do.” Putting the finishing touches on her fingernails, she waves her hands back and forth before blowing on them. “Just give me a minute to let these dry, and then we’ll run over to the mall. I bet we can find something Ryan will like over there.”

Again I shake my head before whining, “Please, don’t make me go.”

She laughs. “You’re going.” Then she gives me a little wink. “And if it doesn’t get used with Ryan, you can definitely use it on JT.”

Just as I open my mouth to blast her, she laughs. “Just kidding! Come on, it’ll be fun.”

Yeah... trying on sexy little scraps of lingerie doesn't sound fun at all. In fact, it sounds downright painful.

## Chapter Thirteen

*Claire*

“Hey, babe!” Grabbing my hand, Ryan leans in before planting a kiss on my lips. It's really nothing more than a quick brush of his mouth across mine. “Glad you could make it.” Looking happy and completely in his element, he glances around. “This place is crazy, right?”

He's not kidding. Their house is packed with people wearing sheets. Or togas. It's totally cliché, but the first Delta Sig party of the year is always a toga party. I think they feel it heralds back to their origins or some nonsense like that.

Ryan has a white linen sheet draped across his body that shows off his light summer tan and muscles rather nicely. I can't say that he doesn't look good. He does. He may not be built like JT but-

I almost wince as that unwanted thought pops into my head.

JT Higgins is the absolute last person I should be thinking about. Especially when I'm with Ryan.

“So where's your costume? You were supposed to dress up.” He looks bummed.

I shrug, hoping that he'll just let the whole thing drop. I'm sure if I told him about my plans for tomorrow night he



wouldn't utter another peep about me not being wrapped in linens. But I don't, because I want it to be a surprise. Even now I feel nervous excitement coursing through me at what tomorrow will bring.

And I did let Holly drag me to the lingerie shop in the mall, and I bought not one, but two wispy, ridiculous little scraps of material that reveal a whole heck of a lot more than they conceal.

Which, Holly informed me, is the point.

I'm not going to lie- trying them on, I actually did feel pretty sexy. The first one is a practically see-through pale pink confection that hugs my slender curves and has garters and a matching thong. The other one, because Holly insisted that I needed more than one, is a short black babydoll. It has silky black cups that conceal my breasts, and the rest is a sheer material that falls in gauzy waves to my upper thighs.

I hold my arms up before glancing down at the simple outfit I picked out for tonight. "I'm pretty sure the ancient Greeks wore T-shirts and jeans."

He raises a skeptical brow before pulling me close and nipping at my neck. "I have a sheet or two upstairs." He wiggles his eyebrows at me. "How about I assist you with changing into something a little more appropriate?"

I snort. "Nah, I'm good." Somehow I doubt we would make it back down to the party if I allowed that to happen. Ryan has been ratcheting up the pressure for the last week or two. I know he's tired of waiting. And I get it. Which is precisely why I have big plans for us tomorrow. Plans I know he's going to enjoy.

“Are you sure?” He gives me those heated bedroom eyes as if that will sway me.

Because I know exactly what’s going through his head, I send a smug smile his way. “Yup, pretty sure.”

“Hi, Ryan.”

Holly, on the other hand, refused to leave the apartment until she was perfectly outfitted in something she picked up from the costume shop at the mall. I have to admit, she looks stunning. One shoulder has been left completely bare, and there is a gold braided rope cinched around her waist. Her long brown hair has been pulled up on both sides only to be left free to cascade over one shoulder. A woven golden band sits on her head like a crown. Gold eye shadow and golden-hued bronzer applied to her high cheekbones accent her face. Strappy gold sandals that lace their way up her calves complete the look.

She’s a vision in gold and white.

Since I spent more money than I’d anticipated on scrappy bits of lace, I opted out of wearing a costume for tonight’s festivities. Ryan may not appreciate that decision at the moment, but he will tomorrow night when he sees me in the black babydoll. That thought has another little prickle of nerves blooming in the pit of my belly.

Rather comically, Ryan does a double take before his eyes slowly run down the length of my roommate.

A lot of people here seem to have thrown sheets around themselves and voilà- they have an instant costume. But not Holly. That girl never half-asses anything. Even though

Ryan's eyes linger over her, it doesn't bother me. Why would it? The three of us have been friends since freshman year, and he's never paid her any more attention than he does other girls. For just a moment it makes me wish I had bothered dressing up instead of just throwing on a T-shirt and jeans.

Pulling his eyes from my roommate, they once again settle on me. "How about a beer?"

I glance at Holly with a raised brow. Although I don't really have to ask. Holly likes to cut loose. Her social life has been way more active than mine. She's better at balancing school and play than I am.

"Sure, we'll have one."

Tonight I'm going to have fun. I don't go out very much and with classes just starting to gear up along with my student teaching placement, I don't see that changing anytime soon.

But I'm not a big drinker. Never have been. Growing up, my dad suffered from his share of alcohol related issues. And it took him a really long time to get them under control. Because of that, I've always been a little leery of the stuff. I saw just how much it controlled him. The bad choices he made and the things we ended up losing.

Within minutes, Ryan returns with red plastic cups for the pair of us. Holly gives him a grin before tossing back half the drink. I take a small sip, trying not to wince as it goes down my throat. An hour later and Holly is completely immersed in a game of beer pong. Two of Ryan's fraternity brothers are vying for her attention. Ryan is steadfast at my side. My hand is clasped in his as he drags me from room to room, greeting and talking with people along the way.

When it's finally just the two of us, he leans towards me, whispering, "I have a present for you."

"You do?" I can't help the small smile that lights up my face. "Really?"

A matching grin curves his lips upwards making him look especially handsome. "Yeah, it's upstairs."

Awww, that's so sweet. He's never given me anything before.

See? Ryan really is a nice guy. And he likes me for *me*. He's not the guy JT keeps trying to imply he is. Ryan wanting to date me has absolutely nothing to do with Liam or the team he plays for. Nor is he simply trying to get in my pants. That thought has me snorting because you know who *is* doing his best to get in my pants?

Yeah... JT.

Ironic, huh?

He must think I'm a real idiot to fall for his smooth lines and smiles. What did he really think? That he could simply tell me that he wanted me and I would sigh before falling onto my back and spreading my legs for him?

Not going to happen, buddy.

*Ever.*

Focusing my attention once again on Ryan, I smile happily before nodding. I'm glad that tomorrow will be the night. It's going to be perfect. And not because he's giving me a gift right now, but because we've spent the last three

years as friends and the last two months going out, getting to know one another on a deeper level.

So yeah, I finally feel ready for this.

With my hand held firmly in his, we make our way towards the front of the house where the staircase is located that leads up to the second floor. The Delta Sig house is massive. There have to be about ten bedrooms upstairs and a few more in the basement. Because Ryan is a senior, he has a room all to himself. I've stopped by and hung out a few times. Although I normally try to avoid his bedroom because, in the past, he gets kind of handsy when we're alone.

There's a pledge standing guard at the bottom of the curving staircase. Once he sees Ryan, he removes the rope before allowing us upstairs. As we climb to the second floor, the noise of the party raging below gradually fades. Okay, maybe it doesn't fade away completely, but it's no longer ringing in my ears.

Ryan's room is at the far end of the hallway. Taking out a small brass key, he unlocks the door before pushing it open, allowing me to enter first. Once I'm inside, he follows me in, closing the door behind him.

Even though he doesn't make a big deal out of it, I still notice when he twists the lock before leaning his body against the door and staring silently at me. As his eyes continue holding mine, a little prickle of unease begins to dance at the bottom of my belly. I'm kind of wishing he had left the door open.

Or, at the very least, not locked us in.

As soon as those thoughts hit me, I immediately dismiss them before wrapping my arms around my middle. His lips slink up into a smile before he finally pushes away from the door, sauntering slowly past me to the desk on the other side of the room.

As he leaves the door, everything within me instantly deflates. I can't help but chastise myself for being a ninny. *What exactly did I think was going to happen?* But still, I feel better now that he's no longer barring the only way out of the room.

Opening the middle drawer, he pulls out something before closing his fist around it. Then he's turning towards me. Placing both hands behind his back.

No one has ever bought something for me. And I don't think Owen Mathers sliding a ring pop on my finger for Valentine's Day in third grade counts either. Although he was very sweet and we were together for one whole recess.

"I saw this and thought of you."

As he says those words, he holds his hand out in front of him before opening his fingers. Something shiny and metallic catches my eyes as it drops from his fingers before catching and dangling in the air between us.

Stepping closer, I reach out, gently picking up the pendant in the shape of a C on a thin gold chain. Along the outline of the letter are sparkly gems. They could be tiny diamonds or some other little glittery stones.

I don't really care.

The necklace is absolutely stunning.

My eyes arrow to his in surprise.

“Thank you,” I whisper, my voice full of awe, “it’s beautiful. You didn’t have to buy me anything.”

The smile on his face continues to brighten. “I wanted to. I really like you, Claire. I hope you know that.”

His soft words leave everything melting inside me.

Ryan really is a good guy.

“Turn around, and I’ll put it on you.”

A huge smile blooms across my face as I give him my back before gathering up the long strands of my hair. His fingers brush against my bare neck as he sets the *C* gently against my chest before clasping the lock. It takes him a few attempts to get it. Just as I’m about to release my hair, he presses his lips against the column of my exposed neck. The gesture sends goose bumps skittering down my spine.

“It looks good on you,” he whispers, placing another lingering kiss against my flesh.

Sucking in a deep breath, my eyes feather closed as he continues licking and nipping his way across my shoulder. Then his arms are banding around me, pulling me closer. That’s when I feel his erection pressing against my lower back.

“I want you so much, baby.”

I gulp, wanting that too. Not because he just gave me a beautiful piece of jewelry but because Ryan is the right one. At least the right one for now. And tomorrow I’m going to show him that.

Slowly his hands slide from my hips up my sides until they're able to cup my breasts. The unexpected movement has the breath catching at the back of my throat. When I don't protest, he gently starts kneading them. When I still don't say anything, his hands glide down my belly before slipping under my T-shirt and arrowing right back up to my breasts. Then his fingers are delving into the silky material of my bra until he's able to cup my naked flesh in his warm palms. Growling in my ear, he continues fondling me.

Even though I'm not sure about letting him go much further, what he's doing feels good. His lips are still nipping at my neck as his fingers continue stroking my breasts. Every once in a while, he plucks at my stiffened peaks. I still hear the music from downstairs and the voices, but with the door closed, it's muffled.

As his mouth works its way up the side of my neck before trailing across his my cheek, I turn my head until his lips are able to find my own. Then his tongue is plunging into my mouth. I have no idea just how long we stand there kissing. In fact, I don't even realize that we've moved until he's breaking the kiss and my back is hitting the mattress as he falls on top of me. Almost instantly his tongue plunges inside my mouth again. Rocking his hips, his erection grinds against my pelvis.

A few more moments pass before Ryan rips his mouth away just long enough to mutter, "God, but I want you. I'm tired of waiting, Claire. Aren't you?"

Apparently, that question is more rhetorical in nature because he doesn't give me a chance to answer before his lips



are once again crashing back down onto mine. Only this time, it's more demanding. Certainly more demanding than what I'm used to when we're together.

Yes, Ryan can be a bit pushy at times, but I've never felt like I was being overpowered. And I'm not completely sure I feel that way now. But I want him to slow down a bit. Everything is starting to feel frenzied. I'm afraid that I won't be able to stop him. I just need to feel as if I have some control over the situation and right now, it's slipping through my fingertips.

Which leaves me feeling panicky.

When his fingers slide over the button of my jeans, flicking it open before tugging down the zipper, I know I have to say something. Before I'm even able to open my mouth, his hand is slipping inside my underwear. As his fingers touch me, I twist my head away, so that he's no longer kissing me. The words come pouring out of my mouth in a rush, "*Ryan, you need to slow down.*"

Instead of answering, he tries finding my lips again, but I turn my face all the way to the side. His weight suddenly feels heavy. *Too heavy.* I push at his chest. I just want him off me. I can't suck in a full breath with his big body pinning me to the mattress.

I feel like we both got carried away and we need to take a moment to rein it back in again. I'm not about to lose my virginity at some frat house. It's not like I'm expecting to be whisked away for a romantic weekend at some over the top bed and breakfast in the country where there's champagne, candlelight, and a roaring fire. But it sure as hell isn't going to

be at some crazy toga party where there are literally hundreds of drunk people downstairs.

His fingers bite into my cheeks as he swivels my face towards him. His eyelids are at half-mast. I see just how turned on he is.

His voice is deep and low, strained at the edges as if he's already annoyed with me. "What's the problem, Claire?"

Trying to buy just a little bit of time, I inhale another shaky breath, needing to slow everything that is crashing through my body. I wish I could say that it's lust and longing that are rushing through me right now, but it's not.

I feel trapped.

Like I can't breathe.

He hasn't moved, and I can tell by the expression on his face and the tone of his voice that he wants to continue messing around. I'm just afraid that if we do, he's not going to want to stop. And I don't want to go too much further than this. His hand down my pants is far enough.

"There's no problem," I lie softly. Even though I try to keep my voice from wavering, it still does.

The edges of his lips slide upwards as he continues staring down at me. Slowly lowering his mouth to mine, he kisses me gently before pulling back again. "Good. I'm tired of holding back. Aren't you?" He thrusts his hips into my pelvis so that I feel the hardness of his cock against me. "Doesn't that feel good? Don't you want me inside you?"

His words send little alarm bells ringing throughout my head.

“Yes,” I gulp, “but not tonight.”

He rocks against me again as his lips drop to mine. When I twist my head away, his mouth lands on my cheek instead. I feel his warm breath feathering against me as he starts licking and sucking at my skin.

“You’re so beautiful, Claire. I’ve wanted you since freshman year. Three years I’ve been after you. And I’m tired of waiting.” His eyes bore into mine. “I’ll make it good for you, babe. I promise. You just have to trust me.”

And just like that, my fight or flight response kicks in. Using all my strength, I push against his chest, trying to dislodge him. But he doesn’t budge. Ryan may not be a mountain of muscle, but he’s still strong.

Much stronger than I am.

“I can’t breathe, Ryan,” I gasp. “Get off me.”

He tries soothing me with quiet words. “You just need to relax, baby. I’m not going to hurt you.”

But it doesn’t work. He’s not listening to me at all. Realizing that I’m stuck and he can do whatever he wants, panic sets in. *Calm down, Claire. You need to calm down and think. Getting crazy isn’t going to help this situation.*

“Please, Ryan, just get off me. I need a few minutes to think.”

“Shhh, what you need to do is relax. You should have had a few more drinks. I think it would have loosen you up a bit. You’re making this way more difficult than it has to be.” As he says those words, his hand delves back into the front of my jeans. And then I feel his finger pushing inside me.

He chuckles. It's low and deep, full of triumph. "See?" He thrusts into me again. "You're already wet for me." Leaning down he kisses me on the mouth. "I knew you wanted this. You're just nervous because you're still a virgin. But I promise, I'll be careful. You just have to calm down and let this happen."

*No, no, no, no, no!*

I don't want this happening.

And certainly not like this.

I squeeze my eyelids tightly together. I'm not sure what to do. He's too heavy for me to budge from his position on top of me. And I feel... confused, not to mention, mortified because he's right.

*I am wet.*

He didn't have any problem sliding his finger inside me.

But I don't want this anymore.

Maybe, in the beginning, I wanted his kisses and I was enjoying the way he was touching my breasts, but I don't want to have sex with him. No matter if my body is telling a different story or not. I just want to get the hell out of here. Feeling paralyzed, I lay there beneath him as Ryan continues to rhythmically thrust his finger inside me.

"You're so fucking tight, baby. God, but I can't wait to bury my cock deep inside you."

Even though I want to scream, I continue sucking in breath after breath, trying to come up with a way to slow him down. To get him off me. When I finally come up with a

plan, I lay there for another moment, allowing myself to relax into the mattress. I stop trying to dislodge him as he continues stroking me. Almost immediately Ryan notices the change in my behavior.

“See?” The arrogant note filling his voice sets my teeth on edge. “That feels good, baby, doesn’t it? You want more of that?”

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Widen your legs. I need to stretch you a little bit more. I’m pretty big. I don’t want to hurt you any more than I have to.”

*Right...*

That comment almost has me rolling my eyes because I’ve touched his penis. Several times, in fact. And I didn’t find him to be gargantuan or anything like that.

Even though I don’t necessarily want to, I spread my legs as he thrusts two fingers inside me before scissoring them, slowly moving them in and out. There’s a little bit of a burn, but it’s not altogether unpleasant.

“I can’t wait to taste your pussy on my lips.”

Since I’m not sure exactly how to respond to that comment, I don’t say anything at all. Luckily he doesn’t seem to be looking for a response.

After a few more minutes slip by, I ask, “Do you have a condom?”

Pulling away, he stares down at me with lust-filled eyes. “Yeah, in my desk drawer. I’ll get it.”

And just like that, he's off me.

As soon as his heavy weight disappears, I suck in a huge gulp of air before quickly zipping up my jeans and rolling from the bed in one swift motion. Shutting the drawer, Ryan looks back towards me with a condom clutched tightly in his hand. For just a minute, he seems confused as to why I'm no longer sprawled out on the bed. He was probably hoping that I would have already shimmied out of all my clothes.

Asshole.

"Claire?" His eyes narrow as if only now realizing that he's been tricked.

Tearing the necklace from my throat, I hurtle it in his direction. Even when it goes whizzing past his head, his eyes never deviate from mine.

"I told you to stop," I accuse, "and you wouldn't."

Looking irritated but not remorseful, he drags a hand through his disheveled sandy brown hair. "Are you being serious right now? I mean... *really?*"

I jerk my head in response.

What does that even mean?

He folds his arms across his chest. "How long do you really expect me to wait? I've been more than patient with you, Claire. You're twenty-one years old." His eyes harden into icy chips. "It's not like you're fifteen, for god's sake. You really need to grow up. This behavior shows just how immature you still are."

Eyes flaring wide, I take a step towards him before slamming a finger into my chest. “*I* decide when I’m ready to have sex. Not *you*. *Me*.”

His appearance is one of boredom. “I’m tired of waiting,” he says by way of explanation. “And I’m really tired of jacking off in the shower.”

His lack of regret is almost disturbing.

“I don’t want to see you again,” I say quietly.

“Fine.” He shrugs his shoulders as if he couldn’t care less. And maybe he doesn’t.

Not saying another word, I spin towards the door, unlocking it before disappearing out into the hallway. Then my feet are pounding down the carpeted stairs. The need to get out of this house and away from Ryan whips through me. Stopping halfway down, I survey the thick crowd of students. Most are dressed in sheets or Greek costumes like Holly. In the dim lighting, everyone looks the same.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, a little slip of paper falls out with it. Reaching down, I scoop it up before opening it.

Ugh.

JT’s number.

The one he shoved into my pocket before I left the coffee shop the other day. Even though I should just wad it up and throw it into the crowd, I don’t. Instead, I find myself pushing it back inside my pocket before opening up my home screen and firing off a quick text to Holly. The guy manning the

staircase lets me pass. Then I'm pushing and shoving my way through the thick crowd, craning my neck, searching for her.

When a couple minutes slowly slide by, and I still don't hear from Holly, I try calling instead. After four rings, it goes to voicemail. Disconnecting, I try one more time. Again it goes to voicemail. I'm sure Holly is around here somewhere, but I have no idea where that could be. The Delta Sig house is a sprawling old building, and it looks as though the party has spilled out into the backyard.

At this point, I just want to get out of here. I don't want to run into Ryan. I'm liable to deck that asshole right in the face if I do. But I can't just take off. Holly drove us here in her car, and our apartment is a good two miles away. There's no way I can walk home alone at this time of night.

And calling Liam is out of the question.

He'll only end up grilling me relentlessly and I don't want him finding out what happened with Ryan. Which means that I can't call Gia either because she won't keep something like this from her husband. Not that I blame her, but that doesn't necessarily help solve my predicament.

Feeling frustrated, I blow out a breath.

So who does that leave?

Angie.

Maybe she can-

Oh. Wait. Angie was going to visit her boyfriend at UW-Madison this weekend. She left yesterday.

Shit.



*Shit!*

I look around, searching the face of every single person in the vicinity. At this point, I'll take anyone who looks even remotely familiar. But there's no one.

So I'm stuck.

Sucking in another deep breath, my shoulders collapse as I tip my head back before staring blindly up at the white-painted ceiling. Even though I don't want to, I pull out the wadded up paper from my pocket.

JT is the absolute last person I want to call right now. But I'm fresh out of options. I can't stay here. Cringing, I tap in the numbers and wait for it to ring. He's probably out. Or he won't recognize my number. I never pick up unless I know who's calling.

“Lo?”

My eyes widen in surprise. For just a moment, my mind goes blank as the breath stalls in my throat.

“Hello?”

I shake my head before clearing my throat uncomfortably. “JT?”

Almost instantly his voice changes. Every drop of laziness disappearing. “Claire?”

I blow out another long slow breath before getting straight to the point. “Would it be possible for you to pick me up?”

I expect him to rapid fire some questions at me.

He doesn't.

Instead, he says, “Text me the address. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Even though he can’t see me do it, I nod my head as relief floods through every nuance of my body.

When I say nothing, he snaps, “*Claire?*”

“Yeah, sorry. I’ll text it right now.”

He pauses. In a softer voice, one filled with concern, he asks, “Are you okay? Are you safe?”

Again I nod before glancing around the party that continues to rage around me. “I’m fine. I just need a ride home.”

Something instantly loosens in his voice. “I’m getting into my car right now.”

“Alright. I’ll wait outside.”

Hanging up, I text the address. Just as I’m firing off the message, a strong hand wraps around my arm before spinning me around.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

*JT*

I don’t think I’ve ever felt so jacked up in my life. Not even the first time I walked out onto the field in Green Bay did I have a pit the size of a lemon sitting in the bottom of my gut.

I have no idea what’s going on.

I just know that I need to get to her.

I'm all too aware of the fact that Claire wouldn't have called me unless there were absolutely no other options available to her. I had to be dead last on her phone-a-friend list. Maybe I should have asked a few more questions when I had her on the line, but all I could think about was jumping into the car and getting to her.

Making sure she was safe.

With the way I'm driving, it takes about ten minute for me to find the college. I glance at the GPS. Should be turning onto the street she gave me in a minute or so. I take two more turns before slowing my Porsche to a crawl. There are a ton of students milling around. Clearly, there's a party in progress. Actually, there look to be quite a few of them. Drunken students continue to spill out onto the front lawns and are walking in large groups on the sidewalks.

I keep my eyes on the addresses, although I'm willing to bet that it's the big white house with the Greek letters displayed prominently on the front. Seems like most of the people are pouring out of there.

Even though my eyes are slowly sweeping the area, I don't see Claire anywhere. I'm just about to reach for my cell when I catch a glimpse of long dark hair. My brows jerk together because her boyfriend has his hands on her. I don't even bother parking the car along the side of the street, although there doesn't appear to be any spaces for at least a block. I hit the hazards before turning off the engine, and then I'm out of the car, barreling towards her.

It aggravates me to no end to see him manhandling her like that. The look plastered across her face only pisses me off

more. Clearly, something happened between them. As soon as I'm close enough, I rip his hands off her body. It takes everything I have inside not to throw a punch. But I don't. I keep it contained.

Although, I'm not going to lie, it's hard.

“What the fuck, dude?”

As soon as his eyes land on me, something instantly changes in his face. Although this has to be the first time he doesn't look overjoyed to see me. Right away, his narrowed gaze slices back to Claire.

“You called him?”

Not looking cowed in the least, she straightens her shoulders. “Yeah, I need a ride home.”

“I said I'd drive you.” His hands fist impotently at his sides. I can tell that he wants to grab Claire again but won't because I'm now standing next to her. And he sure as hell isn't going to try getting in my face. Although I would dearly love for him to try. I almost smile at the thought.

“I don't want to be alone with you right now.”

That comment has my eyes narrowing. Because he must have pulled some real crap for Claire to say that.

For her to call *me*.

“Claire,” he gives me a side eye before whining in a lower pitched voice, “come on. I already apologized. Can't you just let it go?”

“No.” Abruptly she dismisses him before turning those big gray eyes on me. “Can we get out of here, please?”

She doesn't need to ask twice.

“Absolutely.”

I wrap my arms around her just in case Jackwad gets it in his mind to try and stop her. He'll have to go through me to do it. I have no idea what happened between the two of them, but I plan on finding out as soon as I have her tucked safely inside my car.

“I'll call you tomorrow, Claire.”

“Don't bother.” She tosses the words coldly over her shoulder. “I told you before that we were through and I meant it.”

His lips flatten as he continues glaring but smartly doesn't open his yap to say anything more. I lead Claire to my car before opening the front passenger door and helping her inside. Then I'm jogging around the hood before sliding in beside her. Within seconds, we're taking off down the tree-lined streets near campus.

Having her sit next to me has everything that had once been strung tight instantly loosening. I glance over at her, but she doesn't say a word. Her lips are pressed firmly together as she stares out the windshield.

Clearing my throat, I finally ask, “Are you alright?”

Even though I'm not sure where I'm going, I just keep driving. I want to get her as far away from here as I can. As far away from that knucklehead as possible on the off chance she changes her mind. Although quite honestly, Claire doesn't strike me as the kind of girl to flip-flop on a decision.

Whatever he did, it pissed her off.

For a long moment, she doesn't say a word before finally turning her head just a bit and staring at me. "I'm fine." Her shoulders slump with that soft admission.

All I really want to do is pull the car over before tugging her into my arms. I want to comfort her, but I don't think that will go over very well, so I keep my hands to myself.

"Something happened with," I pause, unable to remember his name, "your boyfriend?" I'm sure that referring to him as "Jackwad" will only aggravate her. And I don't want to do that.

"He's not my boyfriend anymore."

Yup, that has most definitely been noted.

Glancing over, my gaze spears hers again. "Did he hurt you, Claire?" My voice is dangerously low. Rough. Because if that's what happened, I'll be turning this car around right now and going back to break both his goddamn legs.

Again her eyes slice to mine before she slowly shakes her head. "No."

"Are you sure?" For some reason, I don't quite believe her. There's an odd look filling her eyes that I'm having a hard time deciphering.

"Yeah, I'm sure."

Even though she doesn't seem very forthcoming with information, I ask, "Did you have an argument?"

"No."

Before I can drill her with another question, she sighs, "Look, I really appreciate you picking me up, but I don't want

to talk about this right now.” All of a sudden she looks exhausted by everything that’s happened tonight. “Do you mind if we just drive?”

Fine.

I’ll stop pushing.

But at some point, she’s going to tell me exactly what went down between the two of them. She’s the one who pulled me into this by calling for a ride.

After a couple of miles, I realize that we’re heading back to my place. Or Liam’s. Since we both live in the same sub. Maybe I should drop her off there. I don’t really want to take her back to her apartment. Who knows if that asswipe will show up at two o’clock in the morning all wasted and wanting to work things out. If Claire were mine, there’s no way I would let her go without one hell of a fight.

As we roll up to the gate, I give the guard a nod before he silently waves me through.

“Should I drop you off at your brother’s house?” Maybe she needs to talk with Gia. Or Liam. Although I still don’t understand why she just didn’t call them in the first place.

Looking indecisive, she bites down on her lower lip before slowly shaking her head. “I probably should have just had you drop me off at my place.” Lifting her fingers, she rubs her temples as if there’s a headache brewing behind them. “I wasn’t thinking.”

I’m not sure how this is going to go over, but I say the words anyway. “You want to hang out at my place for a bit?” The best I can come up with is, “We could watch a movie.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind?”

I shake my head. “Nah, I wasn’t doing anything.”

She snorts. It really is the cutest sound imaginable.

“That’s twice now that you haven’t been doing anything on a weekend. Have I somehow become trapped in a parallel universe? One where nothing makes any sense?”

I shoot her a smirk. “I told you- I’m trying to lay low. No more parties. No more drinking. No more women. No more fights. No more bad press. Welcome to the new JT Higgins.”

She makes a little noise at the back of her throat as if she’s not one hundred percent convinced that I’ve turned over a new leaf. “You must be extremely bored. Aren’t those all your favorite vices?”

I chuckle because she’s absolutely right. I definitely have a checkered past.

Blowing out a long breath, I take a few moments to consider her words. “I really don’t miss it.”

Without all those other distractions taking up my time, I’ve discovered that I don’t have anything better to do other than work out. Which is precisely why I’m in the best shape of my life right now. I’m lifting at least two hours a day and running on the trails through the woods out back. I’m also swimming in my pool. Plus, it’s kind of lonely at my house, so I find myself showing up at Liam’s door more often than not.

Which allows me to see Claire. I’m finding that the more I’m around her, the more drawn to her I feel.



Clicking the garage door opener, I roll my Porsche slowly inside. We both exit the car at the same time before going through the door that leads into the mudroom. Claire toes off her shoes before we head into the massive kitchen. Flicking on a light, I watch as her eyes travel slowly around the room. I don't even realize that I'm holding my breath, waiting for her reaction until she says, "It's nice."

The floor plan is very similar to Liam's, but there are a few subtle differences. With the finished basement, I have about seventy-five hundred square feet. It's a lot of house for just one person. I wasn't really thinking about that when I bought the place.

Honestly, it was the heated pool out back and the amount of land that sold me on it. I wanted my own space. Plus... I love to swim. Now I can do it any damn time I want. And it's private. No one is going to bother me when I'm trying to get a workout in. Not to mention that it's heated so I was able to open it in April and will probably close it down for the winter in late October.

"Are you hungry? Want something to drink?"

"Sure, I'll take a water."

I walk over to the massive fridge. The face looks like cabinetry, blending with the rest of the dark cherry wood in the kitchen. I pull two bottles from the shelf before handing one over.

"Thanks."

Still looking subdued, she twists off the cap before taking a long swig.

I can't help but silently watch her as she does. I'm not used to seeing Claire like this. She's either ignoring me or shooting darts at me with her eyes. And she's usually perfectly put together. Not just clothes-wise, but her entire person. The way she conducts herself. She seems to know what she wants out of life and exactly how she's going to achieve it.

She also sees right through my bullshit.

She's not bowled over by my careless smiles or my status as a professional athlete. Maybe that's because her brother is one as well. Although, I kind of don't think that's the reason. Claire just doesn't seem overly impressed with that kind of thing. She's not into hanging out with the wives or girlfriends. Nor have I ever seen her flirting with the players. I can't say that I don't like that about her.

But tonight is different.

Claire seems almost... *vulnerable*. Unsure of herself. A little lost maybe. It pisses me off that her boyfriend did something to leave her feeling this way. That he has shaken the confidence she normally exudes. And it pisses me off even more that she won't tell me what happened.

Even though I don't want her leaving, I need to do what's best for Claire. "Are you sure you don't want to go to your brother's house?" I shift uncomfortably before adding, "Maybe talk to Gia or something."

I glance at the clock on the microwave only now realizing that it's after eleven. I guess everyone is probably sleeping over there.

The moment those words are out of my mouth, her entire body stiffens. “Do you want me to leave?”

“No!” Unsure what to say or how to proceed in this type of situation, I run my hand through my hair. “That’s not what I meant at all.” More than anything, I want her to stay with me. “It’s just that I can tell something’s wrong and you don’t want to talk to me about it. I’m just trying to make sure you’re okay. That’s it.”

Glancing away, Claire slowly pads over to the French doors that line the wall overlooking the pool. When she simply stands there, staring out into the velvety darkness, I move quietly beside her.

After a long moment, she finally admits, “I was going to sleep with him tomorrow. I had it all planned out.”

Something in my heart clenches.

Not once does she glance my way. Only continues staring out into the night. Like Liam’s yard, mine butts up to the nature preserve. I have woods in the back and to a small extent on the sides to give me extra privacy from the neighboring estates.

She rubs her forehead with one hand before continuing quietly as if she’s muttering to herself, “He said he had something for me, so we went up to his room.” As if remembering me next to her, her eyes finally dart towards mine. “He lives at the fraternity house where you picked me up tonight. They were having a big party.”

As she says the words, I suddenly remember that there were people wearing ridiculous looking sheets and costumes.

It didn't register before because I was so intent on Claire.

Even though I want to ask what happened next, I don't. I have the feeling she's going to tell me on her own. I also have the feeling that I'm not going to like what she has to say.

"He gave me a necklace." Again she falls silent. "No one has ever given me anything before."

I can't help but think that whoever she's with should be showering her with trinkets every damn day of her life. Claire is special. I felt it from the very first moment I met her. Hell, I hadn't even met her. Just caught sight of her from across the room. I couldn't take my eyes off her.

Then I realized she was only eighteen.

The younger sister of a teammate.

And not just any old teammate, but Liam Garrison, our QB.

The very same guy who has now taken me under his wing and helped me turn my shit around. There were more than a few guys on the team who didn't give a rat's ass about what happened to me. If I crapped out or got traded. They'd grown tired of my antics off the field.

And I can't say I blame them for it either.

My behavior was total bullshit.

I know that.

So I owe Liam a lot.

"He put it around my neck and then started kissing me."

At the sound of her voice, my mind snaps back to the present. To Claire, the woman I haven't been able to vacate from my mind in three years. Her eyes are once again focused on the pool, which is illuminated by lights. The water, the way it sways gently under the moonlight that spills across it, seems almost mesmerizing in the utter quiet of the moment.

“Before I knew it, we were on the bed. It felt good... what he was doing. I'm not going to say that it didn't.”

Her brows draw together just a bit. It's not a full-out frown. Almost as if she's having a hard time understanding the thoughts running rampant through her own head.

“When he unbuttoned my jeans and started touching me,” she gulps, “I knew that I wanted him to stop... or at least slow down a bit.”

Her words leave my hands fisting at my sides. I want to reach out, pull her towards me, but I don't. I'm not sure if I should. The uncontrollable urge to jump in my car and zip back down to that fraternity house roars through my blood. I want to find that little prick and beat the piss out of him.

“I told Ryan that I wanted to stop. I tried pushing him away, but he was too strong.” She shakes her head. “He kept telling me to calm down. That I was just nervous because it was my first time.”

I've never wanted to punch my fist through something more than I do at this very moment. But I can't do that. I need to take care of Claire. Make sure she's alright.

“You didn't do anything wrong. You know that, right?”

Straightening her shoulders, her eyes latch onto mine again. “I know. I asked him to stop, and he didn’t.” Her voice strengthens. “What happened is on him. Not me. I realize that.”

Something immediately loosens within me at her words. It would be so much worse if she blamed herself for him being an asshole.

“Did he...”

My words trail off. I’m not quite sure how to ask if he raped her. Because that’s exactly what it would be. *Rape*. Even if she went upstairs with him willingly. Even if she was okay with what was going on in the beginning. When she told him to stop, he should have pulled back. Given her space.

And he didn’t. Instead, he forced himself on her.

Shaking her head, she sucks in a big breath. “No. I pretended to be into what he was doing. I told him to get a condom. When he rolled off me, I jumped from the bed before ripping off the necklace and throwing it at him. Then I told him that we were through.”

Another silence falls over us.

Thank god she stayed calm and was able to think her way out of the situation. That’s not always easy to do.

“When I couldn’t find Holly, I called you.”

Even though I don’t say the words, the realization of what could have happened to her washes over me. It leaves a sick feeling sitting in the pit of my gut. The urge to pull her into my arms continues to pound its way through me. I just want to wrap her up in my strength and never let go.

But I don't.

Oddly enough, nothing has really changed between us.

"You did the right thing," I finally tell her.

Looking just a bit confused, she says, "I didn't expect him to do that."

"You trusted him."

"Yeah," she sighs, "I did."

"Not all guys are like that."

She spears me with a dubious look. "All you seem to care about is hustling someone into bed as quickly as possible." She pauses. "That's always been your M.O., hasn't it?" Even though she laughs, there isn't a trace of humor in the sound. "Isn't that what you've tried doing to me every time we ran into each other?"

Alright... when she puts it like that, my past behavior sounds pretty lousy. And maybe I have been guilty of hustling women into bed. Actually, there's no doubt about it. I've done more than my fair share of hustling. In my defense, the only thing I can say is that women have been throwing themselves at me since before I can even remember. Half the time, I was the one being hustled.

But still...

"The difference is that when someone tells me no, I stop right there." Stepping just a bit closer, I slide my hand under her chin, lifting it until her eyes are able to lock on mine. Softly I continue, "I would never force a woman into bed. When you said no- I backed off right away."

“Every time we saw each other, you hit on me.”

“That’s called persistence.” The corners of my lips tug upwards. “Nothing wrong with that. Plus, you might have changed your mind.”

She returns my smile. It’s nice to see some of that vulnerability fading away. “You were annoying.”

“Yup, definitely guilty of being annoying.” I flick the tip of her nose with my finger. “But nothing more.”

Since she seems to be feeling better, I ask, “How about we check if there are any good movies on demand. Then we can decide what you want to do afterwards.”

She nods, and even though I don’t want to break the physical contact between us, I allow my hand to fall away from her face.

Within ten minutes, we’re both settled on the couch. Believe it or not, Claire is actually right next to me. I sat down first, wanting her to have the choice of where to sit. After everything she’s been through tonight, the last thing I want to do is make her feel uncomfortable. We decided on some rom-com that just came out. It’s funny and lighthearted. Exactly what we need. She’s laughing. The tension slowly ebbs from her body as she continues to relax. We’re sharing a big bowl of popcorn. What happened with Jackwad seems to be forgotten.

At least for the moment.

When the credits finally roll, I turn to Claire, surprised to see her curled up, sleeping soundly next to me. I didn’t even realize she had dozed off. I click off the TV before deciding



what to do. By now it's well past one o'clock in the morning. There's no way that I can just dump her at Liam and Gia's house at this hour. Nor do I want to take her back to her apartment.

Making a hasty decision, I scoop her up into my arms before carrying her upstairs. She doesn't even stir. Not once. I like the solid feel of her in my arms. I have three guest rooms. Walking past the first two, I put her in the one closest to the master bedroom.

Because she's in my arms, I'm unable to pull back the covers. She's sleeping so damn soundly. So I lay her on top of the comforter before padding quietly to the closet and pulling out another blanket to drape over her.

Once she's tucked in, I stand in the darkness for just a moment. I can't deny that I don't like seeing her in my bed.

Well, my guest bed.

But close enough.

Beggars can't be choosers, right?

Leaving the door slightly ajar, I walk out into the hallway before heading to the master suite. It may be after one in the morning, but I have all this pent-up energy careening through my system, and I have no idea why.

Okay, yes I do.

I have Claire Garrison sleeping not forty feet from me.

Even though she's safe, tucked away in one of my beds, I still can't stop thinking about what that asshole tried doing to

her. Giving her a piece of jewelry to soften her up before trying to fuck her...

Even thinking about it has me bunching my fists together.

I'm half considering throwing on a T-shirt and shorts and heading down to the gym in my basement, but I don't think I'm quite up for a full on workout. Maybe a swim instead. The more I consider the idea, the more it takes root. Yeah... a swim will settle everything that is rampaging within me and then maybe I'll be able to fall asleep.

## **Chapter Fifteen**

*Claire*

I wake with a start. Even in the darkness that surrounds me, I know I'm not in my own bed. Everything just feels... different. And I'm not at my brother's place either. Because I stay there a few times a week, I'm familiar with the surroundings.

So... where am I then?

Sitting up, I realize that I'm still wearing my T-shirt and jeans from this evening. That notion has the breath rushing from my lungs. At least I can cross sexual assault off the list. Tiredly I scrub a hand over my face trying to jostle my brain into action before I start freaking out.

Holly and I went to a toga party at Ryan's fraternity.

All at once, everything within me deflates as I remember what happened with Ryan.

He really is an asshole.

Then I called JT to pick me up.

Even though I've never been to JT's house, somehow I know that's where I am. We were watching a movie and... I must have fallen asleep, and he carried me up to bed. I quickly glance over at the other side of the mattress. It's still perfectly made. In fact, I'm not even under the covers.

Heart slowing now that I know where I am, I relax back onto the pillows, willing myself to go back to sleep. There's no point in waking JT to take me to my apartment. I'll just stay here for the night, and he can drop me off tomorrow morning. For about ten minutes, I toss and turn trying to find sleep again, but it feels impossible.

My mind is spinning.

As much as I don't want to dwell on what happened tonight, my thoughts continue to circle back to Ryan. To what he tried pulling. I honestly think I was in shock after it happened. It was like I was operating on autopilot. I knew that I had to get myself out of the situation and away from him. There wasn't time to get emotional. But now... thinking about it... it just pisses me off. I just want to find him and punch him in the face.

A few times.

Thank god I didn't end up sleeping with him.

He's not worth my time. Looking back, I can see that I was dragging my feet about going through with it. And it was more than just nerves which is exactly what I kept trying to convince myself of.

It was *him*.

Our relationship.

It just wasn't right.

For a long time, I didn't allow myself to have a social life. My need to be successful took precedence over everything. I wanted my family to be proud of me. To see that I was capable of far more than they'd ever imagined. More than *I* had ever imagined. Liam has been footing the bill for my college education, and I didn't want to let him down.

And now I'm in my last year of school.

I have a three-point-five GPA. But none of it has come easy. I've worked my ass off to get where I am. To maintain it. I've had to enlist tutors and drop in regularly during my professor's office hours for extra help.

It was Gia who helped me during my freshman year of high school to come up with an organizational system and way to study that worked best for me. And I've always stuck to that. I've learned over the years that there are no shortcuts. I have to put in the time if I want to see the results.

But now there's a light at the end of the tunnel. I'll be finished with college at the end of this year. For the first time in my life, I feel like I can lighten up. Just a little bit. Maybe even have some fun. Which is precisely why I finally gave in to Ryan.

And I liked him.

But I didn't have anything to compare him to.

I've never really gone out with anyone else before. A few dates here and there that led to nothing because I wasn't interested in putting in the time or effort. Even in high school, I was afraid of backsliding into the land of low grades and getting caught up in a cycle of late work. Once I finally got myself on track, there was no way anything was going to distract me.

Which is exactly why I'm a virgin at twenty-one. It certainly wasn't by design. I wasn't holding out for the perfect guy. More like a failure to think about the ramifications of not dating or having an active social life.

But what Ryan tried to do... that was an asshole move on his part.

He tried taking something I wasn't willing or ready to give.

Even though I've been trying to fall back to sleep, I know that it's not going to happen. I'm way too jacked up to even close my eyes. Throwing off the cover, I pad to the open door before stopping and looking down the hallway. Everything is quiet and dark. JT's house seems to be the same configuration as Liam's, so his bedroom should be the one to the right.

Since the door isn't closed, I tiptoe over before peeking my head inside. I'm not sure if he'll be awake or not. I just... need to talk. The curtains haven't been drawn, allowing silvery moonlight to pour in through the windows. My eyes fall onto the king-sized bed, but it's empty. In fact, it's still perfectly made. Maybe he's downstairs watching TV? Although, even in the darkness, I can see that there's a large flat screen hanging from the wall.

Like my brother's house, there are two staircases. I head down the one that will lead to the kitchen rather than the front of the house. There's a small light over the sink that illuminates the room enough for me to see that it's empty. The TV in the family room is off, and everything around me is silent. It's weird roaming around someone else's house in the middle of the night. I can't help but wonder where JT is. I don't think he would have just left me here by myself. That thought has a prickle of unease slithering its way down my spine.

I know he was angry about Ryan.

It's strange. I met JT three years ago. And over the course of that time, we've run into each other every couple of months. I can't say that I ever liked him or even gave him a chance. His obnoxious behavior was such a turn-off. He was always drinking. Wrapped up in women. A new one on his arm every time I saw him. And the fights...

He was most definitely the bad boy of football.

Tarnishing the great Green Bay name.

Not to mention his family's name as well.

And then, at the end of last season, he did a complete one-eighty. Cleaned up his act and started hanging out with Liam. Even though I've continued to keep my distance, I can't deny that I'm attracted to him.

What woman wouldn't be?

He's utterly gorgeous. Thick messy blond hair. Unusual light green eyes. And muscles. The man is a veritable mountain of muscle. Somehow, he seems even more muscular

now than he was before. It's like he's channeling every last drop of energy into working out.

But this past week, when he helped me out with babysitting and now tonight...

This is the first time that I'm starting to think that maybe he's not the guy I assumed he was. Or maybe he is, and I'm just seeing what he wants me to see. I'm not really sure yet. But part of me wants the chance to figure it out.

Just as I'm about to head to the basement, to see if he's down there, movement catches my eyes from outside on the darkened patio. My heart kicks up a little bit because I'm not sure what I saw. Slowly I creep towards the French doors that line the back wall of the kitchen overlooking the yard. The lights from the pool are still illuminated. It's only when I'm standing in front of the doors, scanning the darkness that I realize someone is swimming in the pool. Doing laps. Everything within me instantly loosens as I realize that JT didn't leave me here by myself.

Grabbing the handle, I open the door before heading out onto the stamped concrete patio. It's early September. The days are still warm and full of sunshine, but it's not unusual for it to drop down to the low sixties or high fifties at night. Goose bumps break out across my flesh as the light breeze wafts gently over me.

The water must be freezing.

I walk to the edge of the pool just as JT surfaces. Even though he looks surprised to see me, he doesn't say a word. Merely leans his thick muscular arms against the tiled ledge

before resting his chin on stacked hands. I squat down in front of him so that we're somewhat at eye level.

“You always swim during the middle of the night?”

Shrugging, he grins, piercing me with those gorgeous green eyes of his. As he does, something arrows clean through me. I don't think I've ever had all that charm aimed my way before. I've been so good at shutting him down over the years and ignoring his advances that we never quite make it to that point.

“That's the beauty of owning your own pool. You can swim anytime you feel like it.” Before I can ask any more questions, he says, “I figured you would be sacked out until morning. Seemed like you were pretty tired.”

Now it's my turn to shrug. “I woke up and didn't know where I was.” I pause before adding, “When I couldn't find you, I thought maybe you'd left.”

The smile slowly falls away as his eyes stay latched onto mine. “I wouldn't have done that to you, Claire. I wouldn't have left you here alone after what happened.”

In that moment, something indescribable passes between us as we continue holding one another's gaze in the darkness. There's a sizzle, a snap of energy. Needing to shake off the strange sensation, I blink before clearing my throat, “You must be cold.”

“Nope. Heated pool.”

“Oh.” I trail my fingers gently through the water. It's warm. Like bathwater. The temperature must be somewhere



in the mid-eighties, if not higher. It feels a lot warmer than the cool night air wafting around me.

“Wanna come in?”

My eyes fly back to his, and I say the first words that pop into my head. “I don’t have a suit.”

He shrugs. “Keep your underwear on.” One dark blond brow slinks upwards when I say nothing. “I saw the bathing suit you had on at the barbecue. It can’t be any worse than that.”

Almost instantly my cheeks fill with color. “There’s nothing wrong with that suit.”

His eyes glint with humor and possibly something more. “I didn’t say there was.”

Under normal circumstances, I would never consider taking off my clothes and getting into a pool with JT but...

Things are slowly starting to shift between us.

Before I can overthink my decision, I’m standing up from my crouched position in front of him. My fingers go to the hem of my T-shirt. Sucking in a deep breath, I tamp down any nerves that are trying to hurtle their way to the surface, before whipping it over my head.

Then I’m letting the soft cottony material slide from my fingertips as they settle at the button of my jeans. JT’s eyes are still locked on mine. He doesn’t say a word as I unbutton them before pulling down the zipper and shimmying the material from my hips until it becomes pooled around my ankles. Pulling it from my leg, I hop on one foot, then the other until my jeans are heaped on top of the shirt.

Then I'm standing in nothing more than pink and black polka dot panties and a matching bra. His eyes haven't deviated from mine once. I don't know why that has everything suddenly settling within me, but it does. Moving to the side of him, I drop down, sitting on the cerulean-colored tile ledge before slowly lowering my legs into the water.

*Ohhh, that feels good.*

The air is chilly. It makes the water feel positively heavenly. Not wanting to waste another moment, I arrow feet first into the water, ducking down until it's covering my shoulders. It's about four feet deep where we're standing.

"Want to swim to the other side?"

"Sure."

Without another word, we both take off towards the deeper end of the pool. The warm water feels amazing as I cut through it. And even though being with JT like this should feel strange or at the very least, awkward, it doesn't.

It feels oddly comfortable.

For about ten minutes or so, we both paddle around. Reclining onto my back, I find myself gazing up at the stars. Out here in the country, they're just so bright. The velvety dark sky seems littered with thousands of them. I can understand why JT would enjoy coming out here late at night. It's very peaceful.

"You're not thinking about getting back together with him, are you?"

Startled by the sound of his deep voice cutting through my thoughts, my eyes instantly slice to his. He watches me

intently from about ten feet away. He hasn't crowded me or tried getting into my space once since I've been in the pool with him. Actually, thinking back, he didn't do that either when he helped me Saturday night when Gia and Liam went out. Other than the kiss we shared right before he left, he never touched me. I've dwelled on that kiss way more than I should have this past week. I'm embarrassed to say just how many times I've had to push it from my mind.

Shaking away those thoughts, I say, "No."

I have no intention of even talking to Ryan again. As far as I'm concerned, we're finished. I really don't know what he was thinking when he tried pulling that crap. He's never acted like that before.

Yes... he's gotten a little handsy but nothing that would ever have me thinking that he would actually try forcing himself on me. I wish I could say that he was completely drunk and didn't know what he was doing (although honestly, that wouldn't make it any better) but I can't even use that as an excuse. He knew *exactly* what he was doing. And he wasn't the least bit remorseful about it either.

"Good. You deserve better than him. I tried telling you that before."

Now that has me rolling my eyes. The last thing I need to hear right now is- *I told you so*. Especially from JT.

I'm not sure what prompts the words to roll off my tongue, but they do before I can rein them back in. "Why do you care? What does it matter who I date?"

For a moment, he looks surprised by the questions. “I don’t want to see you get hurt, Claire.”

Narrowing my eyes, I tilt my head as I continue contemplating him from the distance still separating us. “Really? Because, if I remember correctly, you spent the better part of three years trying to talk me into bed. So...” I raise my brows at him.

“You’re right,” he admits. “The first couple times I did, but after that, I knew you would end up saying no.” He shrugs those big broad shoulders of his. I can’t help but notice how they gleam with wetness under the moonlight. “That, more or less, became how we greeted one another.”

A gurgle of laughter slips from my lips. “So, you thought it would be a good idea to just keep hitting on me even though you knew I wanted no part of you?”

A small smile tugs at his full sexy lips. “Yeah... it wasn’t exactly a good choice on my part.”

It occurs to me that I’ve spent more time conversing with JT in the last week or so than I have the entire time we’ve known one another. Stranger than that, it’s been, for the most part, enjoyable.

“You seem to be in a better place now,” I admit. He seems focused. More clear minded. I like this JT a lot better than the one I first met.

“Your brother has everything to do with that,” he says quickly. “He’s the only one who stepped up and offered to help pry my head out of my ass.”

That admission doesn't surprise me. "Liam is a really good guy." The very best. I may have been dealt a crappy hand in the parent department, but my brothers totally make up for it. I don't know what I would do without them.

He nods. "He is."

Apprehension fills my voice. "You're not going to tell him about what happened with Ryan, are you?"

Something hardens in his eyes before he slowly shakes his head. "As long as you're not going to work things out with him, then there's no point in cranking Liam up. Because we both know that he'd want to kick Ryan's ass." Looking pissed off all over again, he snorts. "I'm tempted to go kick his ass right now for what he did."

I shake my head because I don't want that. "Nothing happened."

He swims a bit closer. His eyes stay locked on mine the entire time he's closing the distance until we're no more than two feet apart.

"It's not for his lack of trying." His voice deepens, becoming harsher. "If he'd had his way, tonight would have ended much differently." His stare is heated and angry. "You realize that, right?"

The scary part is that I *do* know that. I can't get it out of my head. "Yeah."

Ryan wasn't going to stop. I'd asked him several times to back off, to slow down. I'm lucky that I was able to stay calm and pretend to go along with it until I was able to get away.

Otherwise, JT is right... tonight's outcome would have been much different.

"I don't want you forgetting that, Claire. You have to be careful."

But that's the thing- I didn't think I needed to be careful with Ryan. We were going out. I had been planning to sleep with him the very next day. *The very next day!* If he hadn't pulled that shit up in his bedroom, I would have gone through with it.

A little shiver skates down my spine.

It goes without saying that I'm relieved. Of course I am. Ryan would have been one gigantic mistake on my part. But the fact remains that I'm still a twenty-one-year-old virgin. And going out to a bar, finding some random dude to take home for the night... I just don't think I can do that. Not my first time. I just always imagined that I would have a boyfriend. Someone who actually cared about me.

The funny thing is that I did.

Or... well... I *thought* I did.

Apparently, Ryan didn't care enough to wait until I was ready.

Without thinking, the words are tumbling out of my mouth before I can stop them. "I'm really tired of being a virgin."

Something flashes in his eyes. For a long moment, we simply stare at one another before he says softly, "Then let me be the one."

He swims a bit closer.

“I’ll make it good for you, Claire, I promise that I will. We can take things as slow as you want. I’m not going to rush or force you into something you aren’t comfortable with.”

I bite my lip in contemplation.

How is it possible that a few days ago, I told him that I would never sleep with him? In fact, I told him that I never wanted to see him again and here I am actually considering his offer.

Wait... is that what I’m doing?

Am I seriously considering having sex with JT?

I think I am.

I mean, why shouldn’t I?

*Us* sleeping together isn’t going to change anything. It’s not like we’re getting together or I’m suddenly going to be JT Higgins’ girlfriend.

I almost snort at the utter ridiculousness of that thought.

JT Higgins doesn’t *do* girlfriends.

It would be more of an... *arrangement* of sorts. And maybe... maybe that’s the way to go. It would definitely be more cut and dry. Here’s a guy who has been with his fair share of women, right? He’s someone who can probably make it really, *really* good for me. And there wouldn’t be any feelings to get tangled up in. I could just get it over with, and then I wouldn’t have to worry about it anymore.

Eyeing him warily, I find myself asking, “It would just be straight up sex, right?”

## Chapter Sixteen

*JT*

“Yeah, of course it would be.”

The lie rolls easily off my tongue. The last thing I want to do is scare her away with the truth. I see the indecision flickering in her gray eyes. She’s not totally on board with this. Not yet anyway. Needing to be near her, I swim a bit closer. In all honesty, I’m blown away that she’s even considering my offer.

I wasn’t expecting that.

Hell, the last time I saw her, she was telling me that she never wanted to see me again. Now she’s actually entertaining the idea of sleeping with me.

Nodding, she continues to look contemplative. As if she’s truly weighing the idea of us having sex.

*Together.*

A more shocking turn of events I could never have imagined.

“You can trust me, Claire. I’m not going to hurt you.”

It’s slowly that she releases a pent-up breath. “I didn’t think Ryan would hurt me either, but he did.”

“I’m not Ryan,” I cut in swiftly, “I would never force a woman to have sex. That’s not who I am.”



Unable to help myself, I continue inching closer. When she doesn't immediately back away, I lean forward, capturing her lips with my own. My hand slides slowly to the back of her neck, pulling her towards me. The kiss is soft, gentle almost.

Tonight isn't a night to be forceful.

Leaving her mouth, I lick and nip a trail down the column of her throat before finally pulling away.

"I want you. I've wanted you for three long years, but I'm not going to force you into doing something you don't want." I press another tender kiss against her collarbone. More than anything, I want to pull the silky cups of her bra away from her high, tight breasts. When a small whimper leaves her mouth, I do it again. "The decision has to be yours."

*"JT..."*

The way she groans my name leaves my cock stiffening. Unable to help myself, I kiss her warm flesh again. I'd kiss every damn inch of her body if she'd let me.

"Okay," she finally whispers, "I want to do this. I want you to be the one."

*Thank fuck.*

That's the only thought spiraling through my head. I don't think I've ever wanted anyone more than I want Claire. The way I've *always* wanted her.

"Good." I press another kiss against the shallow valley between her breasts. Her fingers immediately thread their way through my hair as if to hold me in place.

“I think we should probably head inside now. It’s late.”

As soon as I say the words, her breath hitches. The sound leaves me chuckling.

*Almost.*

“To sleep, Claire,” I clarify. “We’re going in to sleep. Nothing more. We’re not going to start anything tonight, okay? I still want you to think it over. And then we’ll talk.” My eyes hold hers in the darkness. She’s absolutely gorgeous with moonlight spilling over her and the backdrop of stars dotting the velvety night sky overhead. “And if you change your mind, it’s okay. I won’t be mad.”

Disappointed, most definitely.

But never mad.

Looking a little relieved, she finally nods. “Okay.”

Then she’s swimming for the other side, and I’m trailing behind her. Claire hauls herself out of the pool before immediately wrapping her arms around her middle as the cool breeze rushes over her. As she stands there shivering, I point towards a teak cabinet near the back of the house. “There are towels in there. Grab one for me, too.”

Making little *brrrrr* noises, she quickly scampers over to the cabinet before wrapping herself in an oversized plush towel. Then she grabs one for me as well. Returning to the side of the pool, she gives me a look as if wondering what I’m waiting for since I haven’t budged from the water.

When she finally quirks a brow, I decide- *What the fuck. I guess she should see what she’s getting, right?*

Using my arms, I haul myself out of the pool. Her gasp is audible as I stand before her. Clutching the towel tightly to her body, her eyes slowly lick over my naked form. Neither of us utters a single word. I simply allow her to eat me up with her wide gray gaze. If I'm being perfectly honest, I've had a boner almost the entire time we've been swimming together. And the cool night air now swirling around us is doing absolutely nothing to diminish that fact.

Like at all.

I didn't think it was possible, but I'm actually getting harder.

My eyes stay glued to hers. For some reason, I want to see every nuance of expression that crosses her face.

I've always been in excellent shape. Staying out until the wee hours of the morning and getting loaded, it never affected me. I still worked out and it was enough to keep me in tip-top condition. But now that I'm not partying anymore, now that I've dedicated myself to a disciplined workout regimen and am trying to feed my body a healthy mix of proteins and carbs, I'm in the best damn shape of my life.

Every sinewy muscle I have is ripped and cut. Perfectly honed. And if the look in her wide eyes is any indication, then my newfound dedication has paid off.

When her gaze finally locks on mine, she whispers, "How is it possible that you're even more beautiful than I imagined?"

And... my cock just stiffened up even more.

All I want to do is scoop her up into my arms and carry her to my bedroom. I want to remove the sexy bra and panties, dry her off, and lay her out on my bed so that I can enjoy every single luscious inch of her body. I want to show her exactly how pleasurable sex can be.

Instead, I hold out my hand. “Can I have the towel?” My voice is low, scraped raw with pent-up need.

Silently her eyes fall to my cock again. I can’t help the smirk that curves my lips upwards when she simply continues staring before finally handing over the towel. Taking my sweet damn time, because she seems so infatuated with my body, I dry off a bit before wrapping the plush material around my waist. Hell, had I even an inkling that she would react this way, I would have taken off my clothes years ago.

Holding out my hand, I say, “Ready to go inside?”

Shaking her head as if to clear it, she finally places her fingers in mine. As soon as she does, I close mine around hers as if she might just try escaping from me. At this point, there’s no way I’m letting her go.

Whether she realizes it or not, Claire Garrison is mine.

Jackwad opened the door this evening for me to saunter right on through and finally have what I’ve spent years pining after. I’m not going to throw away this opportunity. I’m all too aware of the precious gift I’ve been given.

Stopping in the kitchen, we make a light snack. A roast beef and cheddar sandwich on whole wheat bread that we end up splitting. Before she found me earlier, I’d been out in the pool for about forty-five minutes or so trying to swim off this

pissed-off, restless feeling that has been brewing within me ever since I found Claire outside the fraternity house. Even though pushing myself through a good thirty laps burned most of it away, it's still there, gnawing at the pit of my gut.

The only thing I have to console myself with is the fact that Claire is here with me now where I can keep her safe. Her ex-boyfriend is never going to get his hands on her again.

After we devour the shared sandwich, we head upstairs. By now it's after three in the morning. When we arrive at the door to the guest bedroom, I linger at the threshold. She turns those big gray eyes on me expectantly.

I know what she wants, and it's not happening.

Not tonight.

“Are you coming in?”

Looking resolute, I shake my head.

As difficult as this is, I'm trying to be a gentleman here.

It's a first for me.

But Claire is different.

And what happens between us matters.

“I told you earlier, I want you to take a few days to think about it.” Unable to resist, I pull her fingers, towing her slowly towards me until I'm able to wrap my arms around her before laying a gentle kiss upon her lips.

Of course I want to take it deeper.

But I don't.

“I already told you that I want to do this, JT. I want you to be my first.” She tries pulling me into the room, but my big body doesn’t budge. I’m at least double her weight. But her enthusiasm is freaking adorable.

It really is.

“Trust me, I want that, too.” You better believe I do. “But we don’t have to rush into anything. Let’s just take our time with this. The last thing I want is you regretting anything we do together. And a lot,” my words trail off as Ryan’s face morphs in my head and my resolve to treat her carefully re-solidifies, “has happened tonight. I think you need to take a little time and process that.” I kiss the tip of her nose. “Trust me, I won’t be changing my mind anytime soon. But if you do, it’s cool.”

Apparently realizing that she isn’t going to be talking me into what she wants, the breath leaves her lungs as her shoulders fall. Finally, she nods her head. “Okay. I’ll take some time to think about it.” Tilting her head to the side, she narrows her eyes. “But I won’t be changing my mind, if that’s what you think is going to happen.”

“I hope it doesn’t,” I say honestly, “but I want you to be sure.”

Standing on her tiptoes, she presses her lips against mine.

And that...

That I’m not quite able to resist.

The moment her soft, sweet lips are coasting over mine, I open to her tentative exploration. How is it possible that I’ve screwed more women than I can possibly remember and yet

it's this one, this one with practically no experience whatsoever, who drives me absolutely out of my mind?

Once she slips her tongue inside my mouth, I'm done for. A low growl of need falls from my lips as my arms snake their way around her body, hauling her closer. Until her softness is perfectly aligned with all my hard lines. Until my hard cock is pressing against the apex of her thighs.

When she moans, I scoop her up into my arms, carrying her towards the bed. Her long legs wrap around my waist.

This right here...

This very moment...

How many damn times have I thought about her just like this?

Imagined her long, lean legs wrapped around my waist, squeezing me tight?

It's gently that I lay her on top of the covers. Her towel is still wrapped around her. With my eyes locked on hers, I slowly unwrap the towel like I would a much-anticipated Christmas gift. Which is exactly how this feels. Like it's Christmas, my birthday, every damn gift I've ever received all rolled into one. What's revealed beneath is the pink and black polka dot panties and matching bra set that she's wearing.

They're still damp from our midnight dip in the pool.

My eyes slowly sweep over her as I gently tug her up, unfastening the bra. Her breath catches as I pull the silky material away from her body. I expect her to try covering her breasts with her arms, but she doesn't. She simply lies there,

allowing me to look my fill. Much like she did just twenty minutes earlier out on the pool deck.

Her breasts are high and tight. And yet there's an unexpected softness to them. Her nipples are sharp little points that beg for attention. Even though I shouldn't, because playing with her body is a slippery slope, I find myself unable to resist.

And so I lean down, tonguing the one closest to me before sucking it deep into my mouth. Groaning, she immediately arches her slender back as if needing to get closer. My free hand goes to her other breast. Plucking and tugging at the nipple before palming the softness in my hand.

Another incoherent little sound falls from her lips. It's music to my ears. Her fingers slide through my hair, holding me tightly to her chest.

I tongue the other breast before kissing and licking a delicious path to the middle of her rib cage, across the soft contours of her belly before finally arriving at her panties. Hooking my fingers into the damp fabric, I glance up at her, needing to see the consent in her eyes. I won't do anything that makes her uncomfortable. Tonight Claire has allowed herself to be more open and vulnerable with me than she ever has before. I don't want to do anything to jeopardize the tentative relationship that is being forged between us.

She gives me just a hint of a nod. There's a fire burning brightly within her gorgeous gray eyes. I've never seen her look like that before. Sexy. Turned on. What I love more than anything is that I'm the one who made her this way. My



eyes fasten onto hers as I slowly slide the material from her slender hips before slipping it down her calves and off her feet.

And then she's completely bared.

As my gaze falls from hers, she continues lying there, not moving a muscle. Barely daring to breathe it seems. My eyes slide from her dusky-tipped breasts to the hollow of her belly to the slight patch of dark curls above her pussy.

“You're absolutely perfect, Claire.”

And she is.

Amazingly so.

I don't think I've ever seen a more beautiful woman in my entire life and I've seen my fair share over the years. Hundreds of them. And yet, it's this one who does it for me.

Gulping, she asks quietly, “Are you going to make love to me?” There's a faint tremble weaving its way through her voice.

I want to.

God, but I do.

I don't think I've ever wanted anything more in my entire life.

Licking my lips, my eyes stay fastened onto that pink little pussy of hers. So badly do I want to explore her body. I want to find her clit and suckle it gently with my mouth. I want to scrape it lightly with my teeth until she's moaning, writhing, spreading her legs further apart.

Regretfully I shake my head. “No. You need to take a few days and think about it.”

Her brows snap together as the haze in her eyes clears. “I don’t want to think about it. I’ve already made my decision.”

“After everything that’s happened tonight, the last thing I want is for you to feel as if I’ve taken advantage of you.”

Amusingly enough, Claire rolls her big gray eyes at me. “You haven’t done that at all. And you could have so many times already.”

“That’s right,” I agree. “I haven’t, and I don’t plan to. Not tonight.”

She growls.

It’s almost impossible to resist the smile that springs to my lips. I freaking love that she wants this so badly. That she wants *me*. It’s just the balm I need for the last three years of her shutting down every single conversation I’ve tried engaging her in. Before I can say anything else, she allows her legs to fall slowly to the sides.

My eyes slide back down to her pussy, now spread wide for me to admire. A low groan rumbles up from deep within my chest as my eyes feast on every single hidden inch of her.

“Claire, what the hell are you doing?”

Fuck.

I can’t rip my eyes away from her.

“Trying to tempt you into doing what I want.” Her voice is soft, and even though there’s absolutely nothing funny about this situation, she snorts. “You have to see the irony here, right?”

Yup, I do. This situation is rife with it.

“I’ve...” Her voice trails off.

When she says nothing more, I whisper, “Tell me.” I’m still unable to tear my eyes away from all that perfection.

Clearing her throat, she pushes out the words, “Ryan and I never did *that*.”

Once the meaning of those words sink in, my eyes snap to hers in both question and surprise.

Sure. I knew she hadn’t had sex before. But I’d figured that they had messed around a bit. I mean, there are so many other delicious ways to give and receive pleasure without actually engaging in intercourse.

“He didn’t go down on you?” I’m trying really hard to rein in my amazement, but it feels impossible. “*Ever?*” Lightly my fingers trail over her sensitive flesh. Every delicate part of her is silky smooth and open for me.

Her teeth sink into her plump lower lip as she quickly shakes her head. “He wanted to. I just...” Again she shakes her head. Although it’s slower this time. “I don’t know why I didn’t let him. It just never felt right. For some reason, doing that feels even more intimate than having sex.”

I never really thought about oral sex like that, but I suppose she’s right. It’s a lot more intimate.

Tilting my head just a bit to the side, I ask softly, “But you want me to?”

Hesitating for barely a second, she jerks her head into a tight nod. Her eyes stay locked on mine. I’m surprised at the trust I see shining within them. Surprised and humbled. “I do.”

How am I supposed to resist that?

How am I supposed to resist knowing that no other man has ever laid his lips against her flesh? And that for some odd reason she wants me to be the first?

I can't.

Claire is my kryptonite. Having her ask something of me that I've been fantasizing about, something she's never asked another man to do is my complete undoing.

Settling between her legs, I lean down, laying a gentle kiss upon her heated flesh. A wispy sigh falls from her lips as I do before she arches, pushing herself against my mouth. And because I've wanted her forever, because I've imagined this moment a hundred times before, that's all it takes to break me. Before I know it, my mouth is coasting over the delicate lips of her pussy.

Needing more, I slide my tongue inside all that softness before slowly licking over her slit until I'm able to nibble at that tight little bundle of nerves. As I do, she moans, her body bowing upwards in response. She's so damn responsive to my every touch and stroke.

"I just want to eat you up until you're screaming my name," I mutter against her warmth.

"Please, JT," she whimpers, "please don't stop."

Her husky words only spur me on. She's so close to coming unhinged, and I want to give her that. I want to hear her scream because of the pleasure I'm giving her. As difficult as it will be, I won't take it any further than that.

I love the feel of her fingers tunneling through my hair, holding me in place as I continue nibbling and licking my way across her. She's just so damn perfect. The way she moves her hips, spreading her thighs wide, trying to tug me as close as she possibly can. As if she wants my lips and tongue and teeth against her as much as I do.

I never, not in my wildest dreams, imagined that I would be experiencing a moment like this. That she would be spread out naked and I would be taking my sweet time loving her with my mouth. Spearheading into her soft, warm body over and over again with my tongue. Suckling her clit with my mouth.

When Claire finally comes, she screams my name and it's the best fucking sound I've ever heard in my life. Her hips continue to gyrate against me as I hold her firmly to the mattress. When she thinks about this moment between us, I want her remembering every single drop of pleasure I showered upon her.

When her body finally goes lax, I lay one last gentle kiss upon her pussy before sitting up and wiping the sides of my mouth with my thumb and forefinger. Damn, but she was so creamy. I could eat her up all night long. I really could. Her taste feels instantly addictive.

Looking slightly dazed, she continues to lay there, a sprawled-out mess. A contented smile curves her lips upwards. Her gray eyes are all soft and full of wonder.

"That was..." Her words trail off as if she's unable to think of a suitable adjective to describe what just happened.

Eyes dancing, it's lazily that I fill in the blanks. "Fucking amazing?"

She laughs. It's a low chuckle that does funny things to my insides. "Yeah. *Fucking amazing.*"

I can't help but respond in kind.

I've never seen Claire like this.

All mussed up.

Loose. Arms and legs akimbo. She looks as though she could sink right into the mattress with her utter contentment.

And the look in her eyes...

I love it.

I want more of it.

I want more of *her*.

Shit.

I haven't even fucked this girl yet, and already I can't get enough.

## Chapter Seventeen

*Claire*

It's slowly that I come awake. Just a little bit at a time before stretching my arms high above my head. Unlike last night, I know exactly where I am.

JT's house.

In one of his guest rooms.

I wanted him to spend the night with me, but he refused.

Yeah... Seriously.

The guy who has been trying to hustle me into bed for the last three years refused to have sex with me. And not only wouldn't he sleep with me, but I couldn't even cajole him into spending the night in my bed.

It was like he had suddenly grown a conscience.

Or morals.

But still... what he did... it was pretty freaking fantastic.

I mean, I never imagined a guy going down on me would feel so good. Okay, better than good.

*Amazing.*

Completely and utterly amazing. Like you could reach out and literally run your hands through the stars in the dark, velvety sky.

It's only when I throw off the covers, do I realize that I'm still naked. And my clothes... they're still out on the back patio where I shed them before getting into the pool. Even though my bra and panties have to be around here somewhere, I don't immediately see them. Wrapping a blanket around my shoulders, I get out of bed before padding to the door and then taking off down the hall towards JT's bedroom. It's still early. The sun is just starting to peek over the eastern horizon with its pink and purple hues. I'm tired, but feel oddly exhilarated.

I don't want to be alone.

JT's door is cracked open. As soon as I'm over the threshold, my eyes all but fall on him. Eating him up. The

sheet is covering the lower portion of his body, which leaves his chest and abs exposed.

I always knew he had a nice body. Why wouldn't he? The man works out for a living. His livelihood depends on him being conditioned within an inch of his life. But I never imagined him being so impossibly hard and muscular. As if every part of him has been chiseled from granite.

He makes Ryan look like a soft, barely developed teenager.

JT is just so big and bulky. Every sinewy muscle is cut before being stretched taut across bone. I just want to run my fingers over every single delicious inch of him. Hell, I want to lick my way across his body. From head to toe.

And when he climbed out of the pool last night... it never even crossed my mind that he would be naked. A light blush stains my cheeks remembering how I couldn't rip my eyes away from his cock. I didn't expect him to be so completely stunning. But he is. Sure, I might not have much to compare it to, but that doesn't mean that I'm totally ignorant.

And he's huge.

Long.



Thick.

Hearing his light snores coming from the bed, I clutch the blanket tighter as I creep closer. What I really want to do is crawl right in beside him and snuggle up. Biting down on my lower lip, I contemplate what to do for one silent moment.

Screw it, I quickly decide. I've spent the last six years walking the straight and narrow. Focusing every bit of my attention and energy on school so that I could achieve my goals and make my family proud. And I've done that. Well, I'm close to doing that. I've sacrificed a lot of potential relationships along the way, and I'm not going to do it anymore.

This isn't something I ever expected to happen.

I mean... *JT Higgins?*

Come on now.

Up until a week ago, I could barely stand to be in the same room with him. And yet... here we are. If I have my way, he'll be the one who takes my virginity. After last night, and the way he made my entire body come alive, I have absolutely no doubts about going through with this.

Letting the blanket slither to the floor, I carefully climb onto the bed. JT is lying on his back. One heavy arm is thrown over his eyes. His chest is powerful and broad. And so completely mesmerizing as it ripples with thick muscles and definition. A smattering of blond hair covers it. Everything about him is ridiculously masculine. For the first time, I truly understand why women fall all over themselves trying to gain and hold his attention.

He continues sleeping soundly as I slide in next to him. I have no idea how he's going to react when he wakes up and finds me in his bed. He was so adamant about keeping his distance last night. About giving me time to mull things over. I can't say that what he's trying to do doesn't touch me.

It does.

Deeply.

Especially in light of what Ryan tried doing when I didn't willingly offer myself up on his timetable. My entire body stills as it occurs to me that the motivation behind him giving me a piece of jewelry last night wasn't simply to gift me with something pretty I would enjoy, but rather to give me something that would soften me up before trying to get what he wanted in exchange. It makes me doubly glad that I ripped off the gold chain before hurtling it at him last night.

What an asshole.

And then there's JT...

Who is somehow turning out to be so very different from the guy I always assumed him to be. Because here I am, practically throwing myself at him and he's holding back. He's not trying to rush me into a decision. He wants me to take my time, to think it over. He wants me to do what's right for me.

The thing of it is... I'm going into this with my eyes wide open.

I'm not delusional enough to think that this is some sort of relationship.

But you know what?

If last night is any indication, then I think JT will be exactly what I need.

And I'll enjoy it for what it is.

Sex.

Pure and simple.

When you go in with that mindset, it feels surprisingly cut and dry. No messy emotions or expectations or complications getting in the way. It's just a physical act. And JT obviously knows what he's doing. Without a doubt, he'll make this experience good for me.

He asked me to think it over, and that's exactly what I've done. JT, believe it or not, is the perfect man to take my virginity. There's absolutely no chance of me getting emotionally involved because I know exactly what to expect from him.

Which is very little.

Plus, I imagine that he'll lose interest quickly enough once the deed is done.

And then we can both move on with our lives.

The more I think about it, the more sense it makes.

As I settle in next to his big body, I allow my eyes to roam freely over him.

The only downside to this arrangement is that I can't ever imagine anyone living up to him. JT Higgins is absolutely stunning. I never thought that I would be a girl into super athletic men, but, all those muscles... I find them impossibly sexy.

I wasn't kidding about wanting to run my fingers and tongue over him.

I do.

I'm actually surprised that he doesn't have a tattoo. Or maybe a few of them, but his flesh is surprisingly unmarred. It's sexy. What I like is that there isn't anything to distract the eye from all that gorgeous muscle.

His shoulders are broad. His chest powerful and wide. Hair swirls across the center of it, tapering down his rock-solid abs before arrowing under the sheet. I nibble at my lip, eyeing the part of him hidden by the cottony material.

I certainly got an eyeful last night.

And he let me look, too.

Just stood there in front of me like he wasn't completely naked. Like it was no big deal.

That being said, it wasn't nearly long enough. I could have stared at him in fascination all night long. And it took everything I had inside not to reach out and stroke my fingers across him. He was so impossibly hard. And smooth. And beneath his cock were heavy-looking balls. Strange as it seems, I'd wanted to stroke my fingers over them as well.

Bringing my fingers to the edge of the sheet, I pull it gently from his body. Slowly revealing more and more of his sun-kissed flesh. It seems to take forever until I'm finally uncovering the thick length of his cock. Edging closer, I try getting a better look.

Even though he's completely flaccid, it's still rather impressive in size. It's just lying there across the taut skin of

his lower abdomen. Well... it's not like I was expecting it to do some tricks or to start a kick line. I snort at the very idea. JT makes a little bit of noise and my eyes fly to his. His eyelids are still feathered shut. Even his eyelashes are ridiculously gorgeous. Long. Dense. Women would kill for lashes like that. I almost shake my head before my eyes drop to his chest. His breathing is still deep and even.

Okay.

Good.

I'm not ready for him to wake just yet.

I'm still busy taking him in.

When I glance back down, JT's cock is rock-hard. Not to mention erect. Eyes narrowed, I glance back up at his face. Now his eyes are slitted, and there's just a bit of a sleepy smile curving his full, generous mouth.

When exactly did I start thinking that his lips were full and generous?

I'm willing to bet that it was probably around the same time I became preoccupied with his cock.

“Good morning.”

One side of my mouth hitches in response at being caught ogling his goods. “Morning.”

He lifts a brow. “Find something interesting down there?”

I shrug somewhat coyly, but clearly, I've been busted. “Maybe.”

Before I can blink, he's lunging. I shriek in surprise as he rolls his big, hard body on top of mine. Because it feels so

impossibly right, I don't even think about spreading my legs to accommodate his girth. I just do. His thick erection presses against my opening, and a little sigh of pleasure falls from my lips as I arch against him, wanting to get closer. Realizing what I'm doing, he pulls away just a bit so that his cock doesn't enter me.

“JT,” I complain, “come on.”

Wait a minute... Am I actually whining? Practically on the verge of *begging* for sex? How the heck did this happen? Has the earth somehow fallen completely off its axis? Because this seems pretty damn crazy.

“I want you. I haven't changed my mind, and I'm not going to.”

He groans, swearing harshly under his breath before saying in a much firmer tone, “I want you to take a few days and think about it without the haze of sex and naked cocks clouding your judgment.”

I snort. “Come on, stop playing so hard to get. It's very unlike you.”

“Hey!” He grins before thrusting his hips rather deliciously against me. “I'm actually trying to be a good guy here.” The contact has a little sigh escaping from my lips. “And you're making it really difficult.”

This side to him... playful and sweet... I'm kind of hating just how much I like it.

With one hand, he gently strokes my cheek all the while gazing into my eyes. He really does have the most beautiful eyes. The green is such a soft yet brilliant color. I don't think

I've ever seen that particular shade before. "I just want you to be sure. That's all. The last thing I want is for you to look back at something we did and decide that it was a mistake. I've wanted you for three years. *Me* wanting *you* isn't going to change, Claire. It's just not. No matter how much time you take."

I know what he's saying makes perfect sense. There's no reason for us to rush headfirst into something.

"Okay," I agree softly.

As soon as the word is out of my mouth, he grinds his thick cock against me, and I whimper with pleasure. "Does that mean we can do *other* things?"

He arches a brow although I suspect he knows exactly what I'm angling for. "Other things such as..."

I groan. "You're going to make me say it, aren't you?"

That has him unleashing a devilish grin. "I would dearly love to hear you say the words, sweetheart."

Meeting his stare head on, I whisper, "I want you to eat my pussy."

Groaning, he smacks a light kiss against my lips. "I thought you would never ask."

And with that, he slides his way down my body, raining soft little kisses along the way until finally settling between my legs. Spreading them wide, I sigh as his warm breath feathers across me.

## Chapter Eighteen

*JT*

Have I mentioned just how much I hate being summoned home by my parents?

It doesn't happen very often, but when it does, it turns my whole day to shit. Because of that, I avoid them as much as possible. It's not so much my mother as my father, but they're a package deal. He's a real blowhard who is impossible to please. I should probably clarify that statement with- there is absolutely nothing *I* can do to please him. My older brother Joe, on the other hand, can do no wrong.

He's the golden child to my black sheep.

Joe is two years older than I am and plays for Minnesota. He was drafted as a first round pick and is a rising star within the NFL. I know my parents were hoping he would go to Green Bay. I don't think they gave a damn where I ended up.

Since my father played in Green Bay and later became involved in the organization, they've always kept a house here. Their place makes mine look like a complete shithole.

So ponder that for a moment.

My family comes from old money. Generations of it. I have no real idea how the first Higgins made his fortune. Might have been railroads or banking. I'm quite certain my father has yammered on about it over the years, but I really couldn't tell you what he said. I have a habit of tuning out whenever he's talking.

Call it a coping mechanism.



Because I haven't heard from them in a while, I guess it was only a matter of time before I got one of the dreaded phone calls. A definite upside to not making headlines every other week is not being on the receiving end of a berating phone call from my father reminding me of what a disappointment I've turned out to be. And how my mother is too ashamed to show her face at the Junior League and Historical Society meetings she presides over.

Now I only receive a call when I'm told in no uncertain terms to hightail my ass home.

For what exactly?

I have no idea.

But I'm sure it won't end well for me.

It never does.

Inevitably my father and I will end up in a shouting match over something ridiculously unimportant. My mother will sit there staring at the pair of us all the while wringing her perfectly pampered hands. And I'll finally get fed up with all of it and take my leave until I'm once again summoned home.

It's an ugly cycle.

I suppose that would be one good thing about getting traded.

No more of that bullshit.

As much as I hate going there, at least I can check in and see what Bess is up to. We don't get to see each other all that often, especially during the season. Although, every once in a while, I'm able to cajole her into meeting me for lunch.

The thought of spending an entire afternoon in my father's austere company is mentally exhausting. Amusingly enough, I seem to be the only one who rubs him the wrong way. I can't think of one damn thing we agree on other than the fact that we can't seem to agree on anything.

I roll my Porsche up to the wrought iron gate at the bottom of the drive before punching in the security code and driving on through. There's about a mile-long winding drive that leads to a massive stone house. Tall oaks and willow trees are scattered throughout the well-manicured property. There's a circular drive where I park the car before heading up wide stone steps to the front door and hitting the bell.

Even though I grew up in this house, it doesn't really feel like home. It never has. Shoulders hunched, muscles tensed, I shove my hands into the pockets of my khakis. It only takes a moment before the heavy mahogany door is being thrown open.

"Jameson!"

I can't resist flashing a devilish grin before wrapping my arms around Bess's thick body and pulling her in for a big hug. She squeals as I lift her off her feet. When I have her midair, she starts swatting at me. Bess may pretend to hate when I do that, but I know otherwise. She secretly loves it.

"How you doing, Bess? Long time, no see."

"Well, maybe if you would come home occasionally for a visit, I'd be able to see my darling boy a bit more often." Her wrinkled hand flutters up to affectionately pat my cheek.

Bess was like a mother to me growing up. Had she not been here, taking care of us, life would have been completely unbearable. I'd like nothing more than to move her into my house. In fact, I've tried several times to entice her away, but for some reason, she refuses to leave my parents. I think she must be a glutton for punishment.

I shrug. "Been busy. Hard to find the time." It's not a complete lie. But it's not the truth either, and we both know it.

Hands going to her wide hips, she tilts her head to the side. "Even to see old Bess, huh?"

"Well, if you would just take me up on my offer, then we could see each other every day. I barely get a home-cooked meal anymore. I'm living on take-out." That's not altogether true either. I have a meal service that preps healthy food for me. But I know the thought of me living on restaurant food might just kill her.

Eyes narrowing, she slides them slowly over me. Then she makes a disbelieving noise deep within her throat. "You're looking better than ever. And the last thing you need is an old woman bustling around your house. You need to settle down and find yourself a wife. A woman who will take care of you."

Right on cue, an image of Claire flashes through my mind. Fortunately, now isn't the time or the place to examine that. I'll just tuck that away for later.

Almost immediately she grins. "Ahhh, you've finally met someone, I see."

My mouth tumbles open before I have the good sense to snap it shut again and risk revealing anything more. This whole thing with Claire is much too new to dissect. I've always suspected that Bess might be part witch. She's always had a real knack for knowing exactly what mischief I was intent upon. Sometimes before I even got the notion in my head.

When I remain stubbornly silent, she simply chuckles. "You come see me in the kitchen after you've greeted your parents properly and old Bess will get it out of you." She nods as if it's already been decided. "One way or another."

I rock back on my heels. "Would one of those ways include snickerdoodle cookies?"

She smiles smugly as if she has an ace up her sleeve. "It very well could."

It's the click of high heels against marble that has me turning. The scent of Chanel precedes my mother's arrival.

She sends a small smile my way before her eyes go to the older woman at my side. "Is dinner set for three?"

"Yes, ma'am, it is."

"Good." My mother inclines her head ever so slightly. "Thank you, Bess."

Understanding when she's been dismissed, Bess gives me just a bit of a cheeky wink before heading off to the kitchen. Her rubber soled shoes don't make a sound as she moves through the long corridor.

Once we're alone, my mother gives me her full attention. Her light green eyes travel slowly over my person as if she's

inspecting a parcel for damage before sliding back up to my face. Moving towards me, I briefly wrap my arms around her before she's once again stepping away, distancing herself.

And that, my friends, is precisely what a warm, cozy embrace looks like in the Higgins household. Honestly, it's a wonder I'm not more fucked-up than I already am.

“You're looking well, Jameson.”

I incline my head before returning the compliment. “As are you, Mother.”

Rather amazingly, the woman never seems to age. She always looks exactly the same. Not a single blonde hair out of place or a wrinkle bracketing her eyes or mouth. Even though it's Saturday afternoon, she's dressed as if she's heading out to some society function instead of a simple family dinner at home. My great-grandmother's pearls are clasped around her slender neck, and her makeup is impeccable.

“Your father is waiting in the library.”

God forbid he actually gets off his ass to greet me himself.

I say nothing to that. In fact, I have to hold back the grunt that wants almost desperately to roll off my lips.

I do a few quick mental calculations. It's around two o'clock right now. Apparently, dinner will be served at three which means that I'm probably stuck hanging around until at least four. Maybe even five. Unless, of course, my father and I get into some kind of heated exchange. Even thinking about spending the next two to three hours of my life trapped here has me tugging unconsciously at the starched collar of the pressed button-down shirt I'm wearing because it suddenly

feels as if I'm being choked to death. I would much rather be sitting in the kitchen with Bess, enjoying the snickerdoodle cookies she bakes solely for me.

Linking her arm through mine, I allow my mother to lead me down the echoing corridor until we're reaching the wood-paneled library. There's a large window overlooking the back lawn and gardens. Too bad the view is more idyllic than the people in this house.

I come to a halt realizing that my father isn't alone.

My brother Joe is sitting on the brown leather couch at the far side of the room. Looking perfectly at ease, he lounges against the antique leather with his ankle resting casually across his knee. His dark hair is swept across his forehead. He's the spitting image of my father. If you were to look at an old photograph of my father when he was Joe's age, you would hard-pressed to tell them apart.

I wasn't even aware that my brother was visiting. Although, I guess it makes sense considering that Minnesota has a bye week. So he has some time off.

With a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, Joe stands before meeting me halfway across the room and clapping me heartily on the shoulder. Out of the three of them, he's the only one who looks genuinely happy to see me.

"Glad you could make it, man."

"I didn't even know you were in town."

"Just got in yesterday. Can only stay a few days, then I'm heading back to Minneapolis."

Maybe this dinner won't be so bad after all. Usually, my father is a lot more jovial and forgiving when my brother is around to soften him up. One would think I'd resent Joe for being the light of my father's life, but it's quite the opposite. He's an expert at drawing attention away from me. And I'm all for that.

Although my father has always had high expectations for the pair of us, Joe seems to exceed them enough for both of us. I, on the other hand, never seem capable of coming anywhere close to meeting them. Or if I do, it's still not good enough for the likes of Joe Higgins Senior. He's always able to find some flaw or another in whatever I accomplish. No matter how minuscule. Once I realized the pattern of his behavior, I gave up trying to please him at all.

Do you have any idea just how freeing that was?

"Thought I'd come see the game tomorrow." He waves a big hand towards our parents. "Actually, we're all planning on being there."

That knowledge sinks to the pit of my gut like a large heavy stone.

Great.

I hate when my parents are at the stadium. Absurdly enough, it's all I can focus on. Which is stupid, I know. I'm not a freaking child anymore and yet...

And yet... these damn people have a way of making me feel like some sulky fourteen-year-old punk who will never quite live up to the illustrious Higgins name and all it represents.

Even though my gut is now churning, I keep a smile plastered firmly across my face because there's zero point in trying to talk them out of their decision. It already sounds like a done deal. I'm sure they'll be using one of the boxes.

My family may live in Green Bay, but they only make it to a few games a year. Most notably, the ones where my team is pitted against Joe's. Yeah... we're kind of like the Manning brothers in that regard. Trust me, the broadcasters thoroughly enjoy playing up the rivalry. Except my parents are clearly rooting for one of us.

And it isn't me.

Well, this day just keeps getting better and better.

I'll tell you one thing, it sure started out a hell of a lot nicer than it'll be ending. There's no finer way to wake up in the morning than with Claire Garrison warming my bed. Actually... it was more like waking up to Claire staring at my cock like it was the most fascinating thing she's ever seen.

Can't say I didn't enjoy that.

"Would you like a drink, dear?"

Before I even have a chance to decline the offer, my father snaps, "He'll take a water, Margaret. Have you forgotten that there's a game tomorrow? Jameson needs to be clearheaded. He shouldn't even be drinking alcohol during the season."

Biting her lip, my mother quickly nods in agreement. "Of course. How could I have forgotten? I'll have Bess bring a bottle of water for you, Jameson."

I glare at my father before gritting out, "You know what, Mom, I'll take that drink instead. Make it a scotch on the



rocks.”

My father’s jaw locks as his brown eyes narrow in aggravation.

For just a moment, my mother stands rooted in place, unsure what to do. I probably shouldn’t have allowed her to get in the middle of our pissing match. Honestly? I was going to turn down the drink and ask for something else instead. But I will not allow Joe Higgins Senior to make decisions for me.

I’m a twenty-five-year-old man, for Christ’s sake.

I’ll make my own damn decisions.

I almost snort.

I’m a twenty-five-year-old man who is now going to pour himself a double simply to goad his father into reacting. What is it about these people that make me revert to being a surly teenager hell-bent on disobeying them?

And I know damn well that it’s happening. That I’m all but playing right into it. It’s like I’m looking at this farce of a visit from high above, shaking my head at how my dad continuously pulls my strings like I’m nothing more than a marionette.

Hands stuffed into my pockets, I saunter over to the minibar that lines one of the mahogany-covered walls. “Never mind, I’ll get it myself.” Even though my back is to him, I can practically hear my father gnashing his teeth.

“Do you really think you should be drinking the day before a game, Jameson?” The man is practically frothing at the mouth. Hell, this must be a new record for us. I usually

make it through at least twenty minutes of polite small talk before we're at each other's throats.

Even though I'd only planned on holding the liquor in my hands and not consuming it, his words have me bringing the heavy crystal tumbler to my lips before taking a healthy swallow.

“Yup.”

The rest of the afternoon only slides downhill from there.

## **Chapter Nineteen**

*Claire*

Something's wrong.

JT isn't playing like he normally does. There's an aggressiveness that I'm not used to seeing from him out on the field. It's like he's on the verge of exploding. One of the assistant coaches has already pulled him aside at least twice now. And when he's been on the sidelines, he just seems sullen and angry. Pacing back and forth like a caged animal.

When he dropped me off early yesterday afternoon, it seemed like everything was good between us. Better than good. And the kiss he gave me when he pulled up in front of my apartment building was enough to curl my toes. In fact, if I could have, I would've crawled right onto his lap. Come to think of it, I did try crawling onto his lap, but it's pretty much impossible in the Porsche he drives.

Normally I attend every home game with Gia and the kids. We sit in a private box, so the kids can run around without disturbing anyone. Ty alternates between watching his father on the field and playing with his iPad. There are other wives or girlfriends who bring their kids as well. So, it's fun for everyone. Kind of like a playdate. Over the course of the last three years, I've gotten to know quite a few of the ladies as well. It's a nice group. Down-to-earth.

Not that I suddenly expected JT to acknowledge me is some way, but...

Okay, I guess maybe somewhere buried way deep down in a place I don't particularly want to acknowledge, that's exactly what I was expecting. But he hasn't glanced this way once. It's like he doesn't even know I'm here.

Ugh.

I really have to remember that this relationship is strictly about sex. We're not dating or going out. I am not his girlfriend. It's nothing like that. I can't allow myself to go there or I'll just end up with bruised feelings.

I mean, this is JT Higgins we're talking about.

*Mr. I've-slept-with-more-women-than-I-can-possibly-remember.*

*Mr. I'll-throw-a-freaking-punch-at-a-club-any-time-I-want-thank-you-very-much.*

*Mr. I-can-drink-like-a-fish-and-still-dominate-out-on-the-field-the-next-day.*

*Mr. Nothing-fazes-me-so-bring-it-on.*

I almost scrub a hand over my face at my own stupidity for allowing this to happen. And all it took was one night with him! Sheesh. I know better, I really do. I think that's one of the reasons I spent the last three years keeping a safe distance from him. Although I'd like to point out that he made it incredibly easy with his behavior.

But still...

I think I've always felt the sexual energy simmering between us. I simply turned a blind eye to it. It was all too easy to ignore when he was being a total ass.

Trust me, if I could stop this train in its proverbial tracks, I would do so in a heartbeat. Unfortunately, last night pushed us way past the point of no return. Like by a mile. So, for better or worse, JT and I are a done deal. We're going to happen. He's going to be the one.

But the thought of him breaking my heart leaves me cringing.

Pushing those thoughts from my head, I focus on what's happening out on the field. JT doesn't fare any better during the rest of the game. Even from up here in our box, I can practically feel the pent-up aggression rolling off him in thick, heavy suffocating waves. Sure, he's dodging his way through the other team's offensive line, and Green Bay is able to keep racking up yards, but he normally plays with a lot more finesse. If he continues like this, he's going to end up being carried out of the stadium on a stretcher. So it's nervously that I sit on the edge of my seat, unable to take my eyes off him the entire time. I'm actually relieved when the game finally ends with our team bringing home another win.

Holding Max in her arms, Gia leans towards me, before whispering, “I wonder what’s going on with JT.”

Shrugging my shoulders, I keep my mouth firmly zipped.

I have to pretend like this is any other game and I could care less about what’s going on with JT Higgins. It’s not like I can tell Gia about the plans we have to sleep together.

Although part of me does wish I could sit down with her and discuss how everything has suddenly changed between us. Gia and I have always been close. Like sisters. She’s usually the first person I turn to when I need to hash something out.

But I can’t do that with this.

I can’t tell her about JT.

I’m sure she would think it was a humongous mistake on my part. And I’m not altogether certain that I would disagree with her.

When I remain silent, Gia asks, “Is everything okay, Claire?”

Tugging my lips into a smile, I lie through my teeth. “Just thinking about classes next week.”

“And your student teacher placement?”

“Yep, that too.” It’s what I’ve been focused on since I was twelve years old. It may not seem like much, but it’s a dream come true for me and I’ve worked hard to make it happen.

“You’re going to be great.”

The smile on my face warms under her praise. “Thanks.”

Now that the game is over, fans are exiting the stadium en masse. There are several sports reporters in the process of interviewing players out on the field, doing their best to get sound bites to run on the air.

Scanning the field, I don't see JT anywhere. My guess is that he's already made his way into the locker room.

There's some kind of meet and greet taking place after the game here at the stadium. One of the restaurants on the concourse has been reserved for the event. Because I still have some work to finish up before class tomorrow, I won't be staying at the party long. Since Liam is the QB, he usually has a press interview afterward along with the head coach and a few other key players. So I know he'll be one of the last guys to arrive.

I bite my lip wondering if I should just skip this thing altogether. It's just so weird the way everything felt so great when JT dropped me off yesterday, and now, for reasons I can't quite put my finger on, it feels like I should go back to keeping my distance.

I haven't even spoken with JT and yet...

It's just a feeling I have.

"You ready to head down there?"

"Ummm," I hedge, "I was thinking that I might take off instead."

Gia's dark brows slide together in confusion. "What?" Those all-seeing blue eyes of hers immediately start scouring my expression for insight as to what's going on. What I'm trying to hide from her.

“Yeah,” I clear my throat because I am, admittedly, a terrible liar, “I have a ton of stuff to finish up. I should probably get on it while it’s still early.” The only thing holding me together is the fact that I’m not totally lying. I really do have work to finish up for the upcoming week.

“How about you come grab a quick bite to eat and then you can sneak out.”

My shoulders fall just a bit. Honestly, I was hoping to avoid JT until I have a better understanding of what’s going on between us. “Yeah, fine,” I finally mutter, “But I can only stay for about thirty minutes, then I have to go.”

She looks pleased to have secured my acquiescence so easily. In a way, Gia is kind of like a mother figure to me and I have a difficult time saying no to her. Especially when I’m not being completely forthcoming with her in the first place.

Call it guilt.

By the time we gather up the children and make our way to the concourse, another fifteen minutes have slipped by. As we enter the restaurant, Gia stops to greet several people she knows. Because I’ve been hanging around for the last three years, I know them as well. I’ve become quite adept at making small talk regarding the season and the team.

Unconsciously my eyes scan the immediate vicinity until they’re landing on JT and a group of people who I don’t immediately recognize. After a few moments, I find myself asking, “Do you know who JT is with?”

I’ve been watching them somewhat covertly for the past couple of minutes, and I still can’t place them. There’s an

older couple along with a dark-haired man. Actually, it seems obvious that the two men are related. They're practically carbon copies of one another.

I narrow my gaze trying to place the younger man. He looks suspiciously familiar, and by his build, I'd have to guess that he also plays football. He just has that look about him. Like working out and pumping iron is his life's work. Although I know he's not with this organization.

He's extremely good-looking.

I would have remembered if he were.

Unfortunately, I'm still staring, trying to figure out just who they are, when his deep brown eyes collide with mine. A small smirk immediately hoists his lips upwards. I'm pretty sure my face flushes before I hastily rip my eyes away, pretending that I didn't just get caught checking out some random guy.

"That would be his family."

Whatever I was expecting, that wasn't it. My brows shoot up across my forehead in response. I've heard a lot about his family. Not from JT, of course, but anyone who knows Green Bay history knows that his father spent the majority of his career playing and coaching here. Which means that the younger, dark haired man would be none other than-

"Hello, ladies. I don't believe we've been introduced yet."

Joe Higgins.

JT's older brother. The one who plays for Minnesota. The very same one who has taken the league by storm. He's



made quite a name for himself, and none of it has been through bad press. Joe is the golden boy of the NFL. He has numerous multi-million-dollar endorsement deals, from underwear to toothpaste. His name and face seem to be plastered just about everywhere right now. I should have immediately recognized him. But I guess when JT is around I have trouble seeing anyone but him.

Thank goodness Gia is still standing next to me with all three kids. Max is squirming around in her arms. Charlotte is decked out in a fancy, over-the-top tulle skirt and Ty looks like a little mini Liam with his Garrison jersey and eye black smudged under his eyes.

Even though Joe's attention is focused solely on me, Gia clears her throat before saying, "Gia Garrison. Nice to finally meet you."

His dark eyes immediately swing to hers. Taking in the three kids, his smile only broadens. Just as he opens his mouth, Liam slides a protective arm around Gia before hauling her and Max closer.

Whatever Joe had been about to utter gets cut off when Liam says in a no-nonsense tone of voice, "This is my wife, Higgins. Stay far, far away from her. In fact, don't even bother looking in her direction."

Not taking offense, Joe merely chuckles before taking Gia's hand and then shaking Liam's.

"Great to see you, man. It's been awhile."

"Not nearly long enough," Liam grumbles in response. "What, we play each other in three weeks? That's good

enough for me.”

When my brother says nothing more, Joe’s deep brown eyes finally slide back to mine. “And you would be?”

“My sister, Claire.” Liam answers before adding, “I probably don’t need to say this but, I will- stay away from her as well.”

There’s just a little bit more of a growl to his words this time as if it’s an actual warning.

Apparently not put off by my brother’s rude behavior, Joe grins good-naturedly. “Nice to meet you, Claire.”

Shaking my hand, he keeps a light hold on my fingers until I find myself tugging them free. A smile continues to grace his lips.

I’ll say this- Joe Higgins is incredibly handsome. Rather strangely, he looks nothing like his brother. Where Joe has short dark hair and deep espresso-hued eyes, JT has long golden blond hair and unusually vivid light green eyes. Although both men are big. Tall and broad in the shoulders. Not to mention, muscular.

For just a moment, my eyes wander back to JT. The breath catches at the back of my throat when I find his gaze already piercing mine. Joe tosses a look over his shoulder at his brother before his gaze swings leisurely back to mine.

“So that’s the way of things, huh?”

I quickly glance at Liam to see if he’s picked up on what Joe just murmured, but his attention seems to be completely wrapped up in his family.

“No.”

“Good.” He steps just a bit closer before whispering, “He’ll break your heart, sweetheart. And I’d really hate to see that happen.”

Everything within me stiffens at his words. Probably because those exact same thoughts have crossed my mind a time or two while watching JT out on the field this afternoon. And I don’t want that to happen either.

Raising my chin, I say, “We’re just friends.”

His lips pull up, revealing bright white teeth. I’ve seen him on TV, endorsing some whitening toothpaste.

“I think we both know that JT doesn’t have women friends.”

“Then we’re more like acquaintances.”

Stepping closer, he invades my personal space. “Can I get you a drink or something?” I have the feeling he’s more interested in the *something* else.

I quickly shake my head before hastily moving away from him. My quick scramble backward seems to amuse him.

“If you’ll excuse me...”

That’s all I say before darting towards the restrooms. I don’t have to go, but I need to get away from him. It felt like JT’s brother was hitting on me and under normal circumstances, I would have been flattered. But not now. Not when I’m feeling messed up inside over his brother and certainly not with JT watching us from across the room. I

could practically feel his eyes on me. It was difficult not to squirm under their liquid intensity.

I splash a little cold water on my face before deciding that I should probably get going. I'll say a quick goodbye to Liam, Gia, and the kids before heading out. With an escape plan firmly in mind, I step out of the bathroom before heading down the short hallway that leads back into the crowded restaurant. There have to be at least two hundred people here. Everyone is milling around, laughing, making small talk with one another.

Just as I'm beelining for my brother and sister-in-law, I catch JT and his father out of the corner of my eye. I can't help but stumble to a halt before staring openly at them. They look as if they're having some sort of argument. JT looks pissed. His father has his back to me, so I'm not able to see his expression.

I have absolutely no idea what propels me to change directions, but that's exactly what I find myself doing. It only takes a few moments before I'm closing in on them. Just as I'm about to approach, JT's eyes suddenly cut to mine. Only then does his expression change. His green gaze widens just a bit. Every line of his face becomes whipcord tight. Even though he doesn't say the words, I get the feeling that he wants me to turn away, to leave them alone. But I'm not going to do that. He may not want it, but he looks like he needs rescuing and that's exactly what I'm going to do.

Stepping closer, I immediately wrap my arm around JT's solid waist before reaching up on my toes to press a quick kiss against his cheek. There's just a bit of scruffiness covering his

jaw. I've always found that look to be sexy. It's even more so on JT. Whatever his father had been saying quickly gets cut off as I paste a bright, friendly smile on my face. Looking surprised and just a bit thrown, his gaze bounces silently between the pair of us as if he doesn't quite know what to make of me.

When neither of them acknowledges my presence, I thrust my hand out in his father's direction. "Hi, it's nice to meet you. I'm Claire Garrison."

His dark brown eyes narrow as he quickly turns my name over in his head. You can almost see the wheels turning, wondering if I'm someone worth knowing or just some random hanger-on. I don't know this man, but already I don't like him. "Garrison, you say?"

"Yes, sir. Liam is my brother."

The anger that had been brewing on his face instantly clears. Now it's all sunshine and rainbows. Suddenly he's reaching out, wrapping his larger hand around mine before pumping it heartily as if we're old friends.

"Joe Higgins. Nice to meet you."

Even though I've only been standing with these two men for a matter of moments, already I can feel the thick, suffocating tension sitting between them. It's stifling and uncomfortable. It makes me doubly glad that I decided to interrupt whatever was going on between them. I'm almost surprised when I feel JT's thick arm slide its way around me before hauling me just a bit closer.

Taking a large swallow of his drink, his father continues to eye me speculatively before finally asking, “And what exactly is it that you do, Claire?”

“I’m a student at UW- Green Bay. I’ll be graduating this spring with a degree in elementary education.”

Slowly he nods his head. His eyes are hooded as he continues studying the pair of us, as if trying to figure out what exactly is going on. “We had no idea Jameson was seeing someone.”

*Jameson, huh?* I didn’t realize that’s what the J in JT stood for.

His eyes flick towards his son. There is absolutely no fondness within his expression. Only cool disdain. That knowledge arrows clean through my heart, leaving it to throb for JT.

“In fact,” he continues to muse, “I didn’t think he was capable of it. The only thing he seems rather adept at is wreaking havoc in a woman’s life before tossing her aside.”

His ugly words, said in such an offhanded manner, leave my eyes widening. Before I can say anything- even think of a scathing retort, he’s leaning towards me before imparting a piece of unsolicited advice.

“I’d be careful if I were you, my dear. You don’t seem like my son’s usual type. I’d hate for him to sully your good name.” He gives me a little wink before adding, “Don’t say that I didn’t warn you.”

For just a moment, I stand there wondering if his father really just said that when I feel JT’s fingers bite into the skin at

my waist. I almost wince, but don't. I know he's unconscious to the pain he's inflicting.

“JT and I are just friends.”

The man snorts as if that's the most far-fetched thing he's ever heard before excusing himself to talk with someone across the room.

Feeling stupefied, I silently watch him go before finally refocusing my attention on JT. I'm almost scared at just what I'm going to find. Already his gaze is fastened on me, those beautiful soft green eyes bore into mine. Even though I don't want them to, they somehow manage to steal my breath away.

Quite honestly, I wish they didn't. Every time I'm around him, I feel myself falling a little bit harder. A little bit deeper. Becoming a little more ensnared. And I don't want that. I want whatever this is between us to remain uncomplicated.

Unfortunately, it feels anything but.

“Are you okay?”

He nods. “Yeah. Believe it or not, you actually caught him on a good day.”

I cringe, hoping that he's simply exaggerating, but somehow, I don't think so. Quite honestly, JT's father seems like an jackass. And I've had just about enough of those already.

Now that his father is gone, I pull out of his arms, needing some distance. A strange sort of silence falls over us as I do. It's only after a few seconds that feel like minutes slowly drag by that I shuffle uncomfortably from one foot to the other before pointing unnecessarily towards the exit.

“I should really get going. I still have some studying to do before tomorrow.”

Not once do his eyes release mine before he’s shoving his big hands into the pockets of his khakis. “I have to stay a bit longer.” He throws a look full of longing at the exit. “At least another hour or two.”

My eyes slide around the room until they’re once again settling on his father. For some reason, I don’t like the idea of leaving JT alone when he’s still here. Which is crazy, I know. It’s not like we’re involved in each other’s lives. If all goes well, JT will be the one who takes my virginity. That’s it. End of story. And then we’ll both move on with our lives as if nothing ever happened between us.

That’s the plan.

I take a quick step back, only wanting to flee at this point. The way he continues watching me leaves my body feeling all tingly. “Well... okay then.”

He nods, but doesn’t stop me from leaving. And so I take another step before turning towards the exit that leads to the concourse. I’m about five feet away when his deep voice slices through all the chatter surrounding us, making it feel as if we’re somehow alone.

“Want me to pick you up in an hour or so?”

Glancing over my shoulder, I catch his eyes.

I really shouldn’t.

In fact, it would probably be for the best if I took a few days to clear my head after the last forty-eight hours.



“Sure.”

His entire body loosens as that one softly spoken word leaves my mouth. Something unexpected flips in my belly at the possessive look that now fills his eyes.

“I’ll text you when I’m on my way.”

I nod just once before turning and swiftly walking away from him.

## Chapter Twenty

*JT*

Bringing the bottle of ice-cold water to my lips, I watch Claire as she hugs her brother and his wife before kissing each of the kids goodbye.

“What the hell have you gotten yourself tangled up in now?”

Whatever had just begun to loosen within me tenses right back up again.

“That girl seems a little too innocent for the likes of you.”

Wiping all expression from my face, I rip my eyes from Claire before tossing a quick look at my brother, who has sidled up beside me. Which shows you just how out of it I am because the guy weighs a solid two fifty. He’s not exactly light on his feet. No matter how stealthy he’s trying to be.

I mutter under my breath, “We’re just friends.”

He snorts. “Funny, that’s exactly what she said.” He pauses before adding, “Hmmm, I sure wouldn’t mind having a friend like that.” Elbowing me in the ribs none too gently, he scratches his chin before continuing with, “Think she would be interested in befriending me as well? I’m definitely the more handsome Higgins brother.”

The words are shooting out of my mouth before I can even think to rein them back in. “Stay the fuck away from Claire. And you’re right, she’s too damn innocent.” This last part is more or less mumbled because it’s the truth and I damn well know it.

I have no business doing anything with Claire Garrison.

But after picking her up from that fraternity party Friday night and hearing her recount what that douchebag tried doing to her, I feel all kinds of protective where she’s concerned. Which is crazy because it’s not like I don’t want to get her just as naked as that jackass ex-boyfriend of hers.

Unlike him, though, I’m sure as shit not going to force her into something she doesn’t want. Or isn’t ready for. Hell, Friday night when I tasted her flesh and then told her to think everything over... you can be damn sure that’s the first time those words have ever slid from my lips.

But Claire is different. I’ve *always* known that she was different. And she’s worth taking my time with. No matter how long I have to wait. I’ve never wanted anyone the way I want her. Nor have I ever wanted to protect someone the way I want to keep her safe.

“So that’s Garrison’s little sister, huh?”

His reminder has my lips instantly pulling down at the corners. “Yeah.” I have no flipping clue what’s going on between the two of us. Is this simply a... *deflowering*, for lack of a better word? Or are we starting something up here?

I wish I had a better handle on the situation.

But I don’t. I’m flying by the seat of my pants right now.

“And he’s cool with whatever’s going on between the two of you? Because he told me- in no uncertain terms, I might add- to stay the hell away from both his wife and his sister.”

“Yup, that sounds like Garrison alright.” Then I shake my head before saying once more, as if repeating it out loud will somehow make it true, “I told you, we’re just friends.”

Apparently, he doesn’t believe the load of crap I’m shoveling his way because he grunts rather obnoxiously in response. “How old is she anyway? Just tell me that she’s not jailbait.”

I can tell by the tone in his voice that he’s eyeing her up as we speak and it immediately sets me on edge. When Joe and I were in high school, even in college, we would hit on each other’s women. There were a handful that I showed up with that ended up leaving with him. And there were a few of Joe’s that I swayed away from him. Not one damn time did I ever feel jealous or angry. It was a game. Nothing more. These women didn’t mean anything to either one of us. But that’s not how I’m feeling right now. His words leave my hands fisting at my sides. Part of me would like nothing more than to grab him by the collar and...

“Twenty-one.”

“Hmmm. Good to know.”

All he’s doing is trying to get a rise out of me.

And I know it.

“Well, if you’re not interested, then maybe you wouldn’t mind putting in a good word for your big brother?” He continues to grin. “She sure is pretty. And tall.” His whistle is long and low. Just enough to claw its way under my skin. “Would you just look at those long, lean legs.”

Okay, now he’s *really* starting to piss me off.

“Stop looking at her damn legs,” I finally grumble.

Looking pleased with himself, he elbows me again. “I’m certainly not the only one checking her out.”

Narrowing my eyes, I slowly glance around us. Sure enough, there are about seven different dudes checking her out. I squeeze the bottle of water in my hand until the plastic crumples like paper. My brother just continues to chuckle. Clearly, he knows that my feelings for Claire aren’t as platonic as I’d like him to believe.

“I’ve never seen you into a woman before. It’s actually a little disturbing.”

I thrust my hand through my still damp hair before deciding to level with him. “Look, I don’t know what’s going on with her. Up until a week or two ago, she couldn’t stand being in the same room with me. But things have changed.” My eyes arrow back to Claire as she leans down to speak with her niece. Since she’s bending at the waist, her perfect heart-shaped ass is now on display for every guy in the near vicinity to ogle.

Fuck.

My brows snap together as a few men openly admire her backside. It takes everything I have inside not to stalk over and drag her out of the restaurant. None of my teammates have ever dared to approach her, but that's only because Liam has put the fear of God into them. Otherwise, there are probably at least ten dudes from the team who would be all over her.

Thankfully I see Liam shoot a few hard glares around the room and that's enough to have a couple of the guys abruptly turning away. Although there's at least two who continue rather stealthily giving her the side eye.

What a bunch of douchebags.

I don't think I've ever wanted to grab a woman and haul her ass out the door just so other men would stop gawking at her. But that's exactly how I feel about Claire. Those thoughts are enough to leave me plowing an agitated hand through my hair.

"She's a virgin," I suddenly blurt.

Shit.

I didn't mean to say that out loud.

Or maybe I did.

Maybe what I need is for my older brother to knock some damn sense into me before I do something both Claire and I will end up regretting. For just a moment he looks surprised. With widened eyes, he continues staring at her.

“Shut the fuck up.” He pauses before adding, “You said she was twenty-one.”

“She is.”

His brows lower. Now he looks genuinely pissed off, which in a way, is kind of comical. “What the hell are you doing with a virgin? Not to mention that she’s the younger sister of a teammate. You just can’t fuck her and throw her away like you’re used to doing.” Looking frighteningly similar to our father, he shakes his head. “You’ve really stepped in it this time.”

Sucking my lower lip into my mouth, I continue contemplating Claire for another long moment. “She just wants me to, you know, do the deed. She’s tired of being a virgin.”

Voice rising, he throws an arm in her direction. “That girl can’t get laid on her own?”

I quickly slap his arm down before whispering harshly, “Lower your voice! She’s been focused on other things like school. She hasn’t dated much.”

Looking confused, he folds his arms across his wide, barrel-like chest. “*Why you?*” Then he shakes his head. “You just said that until recently, she couldn’t even stand your guts.”

“I didn’t say that she couldn’t stand my guts,” I mutter. Although I think that’s probably a fairly accurate description of her previous feelings for me. “I kind of told her that I would make it good for her.”

He stares at me for a long moment before rolling his eyes. “You know this is going to end disastrously, right?”

Yup... *completely* aware of it.

“Getting involved with a virgin can be messy. They get attached. You’re not going to be able to just shake her loose. Not without repercussions.”

I don’t say it, but... I don’t think I want to shake Claire loose. At this point, I’m more worried about what Liam will think than anything else. And then there’s the fact that Claire only sees this as a short-term deal. At this point, I’m thinking more than that but I can’t exactly tell her that, now can I? I don’t want to spook her. I need to ease Claire into thinking of this as more of a relationship.

When Claire finally takes her leave, she sends one last look over her slender shoulder as if she knows precisely where I’m standing and that I’ve had eyes on her this entire time. She gives me just a hint of a smile before disappearing through the exit.

I forget that my brother is even standing next to me until he claps me on the shoulder. “You’re fucked, dude.”

Yeah... tell me something I don’t know.

## **Chapter Twenty-One**

*Claire*

Using my key, I open the door to the apartment I share with Holly. I haven’t seen her since we were at the frat party Friday night. She wasn’t home on Saturday when JT dropped me off, nor was she around before I left this morning for the

game. So I haven't had a chance to tell her about everything that happened with Ryan.

My guess is that she's going to flip out.

Stepping inside the apartment, I notice that her door is shut. Holly only holes up in her room when she's sleeping or studying. Setting my purse down on the kitchen table, I go to her door, knocking softly on it.

"Hols? You in there?"

Blowing out a breath, I realize that I could really use her advice regarding the whole JT situation. Holly has a ton more experience than I do. She's had a slew of boyfriends over the last three years. So if there's anyone who can help me navigate these choppy waters, it's my roommate.

I'm almost surprised when I hear hushed voices coming from within her room. Holly is in between boyfriends right now, and she's not one to bring strangers back to the apartment. At least she never has before.

"Holly?"

"Ummm, yeah... I'll be out in a minute."

Leaning towards the door, I hear the rustling of covers. Then there are more muted murmurs again. Yup, she's definitely got a guy in there. A moment later, the door cracks open. Instead of swinging it wide, she squeezes her curvy body through before closing it again so I can't see inside.

She's wrapped up in a short robe.

At four thirty on a Sunday afternoon.

Yeah... pretty obvious what's been going on in there.



Her long, dark hair is mussed.

Color is riding high on her cheeks.

And her eyes are all bright and shiny.

Not to mention totally satisfied.

Hands going to my hips, a smile curves my lips upwards before I shake my head. “Why you little hussy! You’ve got a man in there!”

All of a sudden, she buries her face in her hands. I can’t help but laugh at her embarrassment. Laying my hand on the doorknob, I pretend to twist it open. “Who is it, *hmmm?*”

She practically leaps at me, knocking my hand away from the handle. “No! Don’t do that.”

Eyes widening in astonishment, my brows slowly draw together. “Settle down, Hols, I was just kidding. I wouldn’t do that to you.” I nod my head towards her room. “Do I know him?”

She bites her lower lip. “Umm, yeah.” Nervously she rakes both hands through her long strands, gathering up the thick mass in her fingers before lifting it away from her face. “I wasn’t expecting you home so early. I figured you would probably hang out at your brother’s place for a while.”

Yeah. Sometimes I do that. But I’ve got some work to finish up.

And then... well... I guess JT is swinging by to pick me up. Argh... I have no idea what’s happening on that front. I wish Holly didn’t have some dude here. I’d really love to sit down and talk this out with her.

But I guess it can wait for another time.

One when she's not so busy...

Wait just a minute... *I know this guy?*

Lowering my voice, I whisper, "Please tell me that it's not the guy from across the hall who keeps bothering you." I shake my head. "What happened to your rule about not shitting where you eat?"

Just as she opens her mouth, Holly's bedroom door swings wide open. Ryan stands there in nothing more than a pair of tight black boxer briefs. There's a huge smirk wreathing his face as he leans casually against the doorframe as if what's happening between the three of us is a normal everyday occurrence.

My mouth tumbles open, hitting the carpeted floor in the process, as my eyes flare wide in shock. I wish I could say that my mind isn't somersaulting and that I take all this in with a grain of salt, acting like it's no big deal that my roommate and best friend has apparently slept with my ex-boyfriend of oh- *approximately thirty-six hours*, but that kind of reaction feels impossible. I'm nowhere near sophisticated enough to pull off something like that.

I can tell by the smug look in his eyes that what happened between him and Holly was a calculated move on his part to hurt me. Considering his behavior Friday night, maybe I shouldn't be so surprised, but... I am. It hurts that Ryan would deliberately pull this kind of bullshit. Yeah, we were only seeing each other for two months but, we've been friends for three years.

Doesn't that mean anything?

More than that, it stuns me that Holly would stab me in the back like this by sleeping with him. Literally within days of us breaking up. What the hell was she thinking?

When I texted her Friday night, I simply told her that I was leaving the party. I hadn't wanted to get into the specifics regarding what happened with Ryan in a text message. I can only imagine that my ex-boyfriend gave her some twisted version of the events.

And just like that, I feel sick to my stomach.

I don't even bother looking at Ryan. Honestly, he's not the one who matters in this situation. It's Holly's betrayal that cuts me to the bone. I really thought she had my back. That our friendship was solid. Obviously, I was wrong. In fact, I'm not sure when I've been *more* wrong about something.

Well, except for Ryan.

I was *definitely* wrong about him.

I keep my eyes focused on Holly who now looks as though she wishes the floor would open up and swallow her whole. *Well, that's tough shit, sweetheart.* This is a mess of her own making, and she's going to have to deal with it.

With me.

My voice, when I'm finally able to push out the words, sounds incredulous. As if I still can't wrap my mind around what I'm seeing. And you know what? I can't. I'm tempted to rub my eyes and hope it all goes away. But I know that it won't.

I jerk my thumb in Ryan's direction. "You really slept with him?"

Her normally pretty face turns an even brighter shade of color as her eyes quickly slide away from mine. Clearly, she's embarrassed to be caught in the act.

Just as she should be.

When she says nothing in response, Ryan decides to add his own two cents to the conversation. "Yup, she did." Smirking, he continues to lounge against the door frame with his arms crossed over his chest. "And guess what? She didn't make me wait two months for it either."

Reaching out, he strokes his fingers over the curve of my jaw before I quickly bat his hand away.

"Don't touch me," I hiss.

He snorts. "Now there's a familiar refrain."

Those words feel like a knife slicing unexpectedly through my heart.

Finally snapping out of her trance, Holly spears Ryan with a hard-edged glare. Although he doesn't seem bothered by it in the least. "Get in my room." Her dark brows lower when he doesn't budge. "*Now.*"

Shrugging nonchalantly, he steps back inside before shutting the door, once again leaving Holly and me alone in the hallway. Holding my eyes, her shoulders collapse.

I shake my head because I can't imagine what she could possibly say to make all this okay. "Why would you sleep with my boyfriend?"

“Ex-boyfriend,” she cuts in swiftly as if that somehow absolves her from any culpability.

My eyes widen right before I start laughing. “*Riiight*. And exactly how long were we broken up before you screwed him?”

Since I ended things with Ryan Friday night and it’s now Sunday afternoon, it couldn’t have been all that long. The blush that had already been stinging her cheeks deepens a few shades. The air between us grows thick and uncomfortable.

“Well, it was after you took off with JT.” The way she says the words makes it sound like this is somehow my fault. Like *I* did something wrong. “I hadn’t checked my phone, so I didn’t even know you’d left the party. I saw Ryan downstairs, and I asked him where you were. He told me that you two had just broken up. He was really upset about what had happened.”

I almost roll my eyes at that. I can’t imagine Ryan telling her what really transpired between us. That he asked me up to his room for the sole purpose of having sex. When I didn’t just go along with it, he then forced himself on me.

“And so you decided that out of all the guys here, you needed to hook up with my ex-boyfriend of an hour or so?”

Shifting awkwardly from one foot to another, she admits, “It wasn’t like that.”

I arch a brow.

Actually, it sounds *exactly* like that.

As all this tumbles through my head, I realize that I’m hurt, but not as angry as I probably should be. Right now, I

just feel kind of numb. And disappointed.

“What exactly was it like then?”

For a long silent moment, she simply gnaws on her bottom lip. Feeling impatient, I continue staring at her, willing her to give me some sort of reasonable explanation that I can make sense of. Just when I think she isn't going to respond, she slowly forces out the words, “I've liked Ryan ever since I met him freshman year but he's always been so into you.”

When I open my mouth to blast her, she quickly cuts in with, “Look, I know this was a really shitty move on my part. I'm a crappy friend, no doubt about it. But I've liked him for a really long time.” She shrugs. “And I'm not sure you ever did.”

Her words knock the breath right out of my lungs. That she would have the audacity to say that to me. As if that rationale makes everything okay.

Holly draws herself up to her full height. “Why did you call JT to pick you up Friday night?”

I'm not the one who needs to be defending my actions. But still... her question leaves me feeling defensive, and so I cross my arms tightly across my chest. “What does it matter who I called? I needed to get out of there, and I couldn't find you anywhere.”

Ignoring my words, she bulldozes onward. “I thought you didn't even like him.” She raises a skeptical brow. “And yet he's the first person you call to pick you up from some college party at eleven o'clock at night?” She gives me a look like she

doesn't believe it for an instant. As if there's more going on between JT and myself than what I've told her.

Opening my mouth, I quickly slam it shut again.

"You didn't come home Friday night. Did you stay over at his place?"

"Nothing happened," I whisper harshly. How exactly did this get turned around on me? I'm not the one who did something wrong. And yet Holly is treating me as if I did.

Her eyes narrow with disbelief. "Are you sure about that?"

"Yes," I hiss automatically. Although, as my mind cartwheels over Friday evening and Saturday morning, I realize that what I'm saying isn't precisely the truth. Something most definitely happened between us.

Just as those thoughts settle in my mind, I shake them loose. She's trying to turn this whole thing around on me. Like I'm somehow to blame for her being a crappy friend. Not once did Holly ever tell me that she was into Ryan. I would have *never* agreed to go out with him in the first place if that had been the case.

"You know what? It doesn't matter if anything happened with JT or not. Ryan and I were going out for two months. You *knew* that I was planning on sleeping with him this weekend. *You knew!*" Stepping just a bit closer, I whisper, "Did he tell you why we broke up, Holly? Did he tell you what happened up in his room?"

She eyes me for a long silent minute. There's absolutely no change in her expression. My heart riots almost painfully

against my chest as I wait for an answer. Finally, she says, “He told me that you two were messing around and that you freaked out over nothing.” Looking unaffected, she shrugs. “You got scared and then ran out of the room.”

Even though I expected something along those lines, it still hurts to hear what he almost did to me summed up to sound so benign. And for the words to slide so emotionlessly from her lips. I can’t help but laugh. “Yeah... that’s not *exactly* how it went down. I told him to stop what he was doing and he wouldn’t.”

Slowly she arches a brow. Each question she pummels me with feels like a physical blow. “Was he holding you down? Do you have bruises? Were you screaming for help? If he *raped* you, did you go to the hospital or call the police?”

Her questions suck the air right out of my lungs making it painful to breathe. I can only stare speechlessly at her. “No,” I whisper, “I was able to get away. But not for lack of his trying.”

As soon as the words slip from my mouth, I know she doesn’t believe them. She doesn’t *want* to believe them. Sighing, she slowly shakes her head as a look of pity fills her eyes. “You just freaked out, Claire. You’ve never had sex before, and you got scared. End of story.”

My throat feels as if it’s closing in on me. “Do you really believe that?”

Looking slightly apologetic, she shrugs her shoulders. “You’ve waited a really long time to finally sleep with someone. And you’ve been so nervous about going through with it.” I told her all that in confidence. I never expected that



she would use my own words against me. “You have zero experience where men are concerned. So, yeah, I kind of believe that you made a huge deal out of nothing.”

I honestly don’t think I could feel more betrayed or hurt than I do at this very moment.

She raises her hands as if surrendering. “Look, I’m sure it felt like a really big deal when it was happening. Maybe it even *felt* like he was trying to do something you didn’t want him to. But it didn’t happen the way you think it did. Ryan wasn’t trying to hurt you or force you into having sex. He was just trying to calm you down. And you overreacted.”

She pauses for a minute before lowering her voice. “For god’s sake, Claire, he was just fingering you.” Leaning closer she adds, “He told me that you were wet. That you *wanted* it. But you tensed up and started freaking out.” She tilts her head just a bit to the side before adding, “You weren’t even undressed. Your jeans were still all the way on.”

Her words are like a verbal assault, and I can’t help but gasp before my now trembling hand flies to my mouth. Hearing them fall from her lips is actually more shocking than seeing Ryan emerge from her bedroom with that terrible smirk dancing across his face.

“*Are you being serious right now?*” I realize that not only are my fingers shaking, my entire body is quivering. “I told him to stop, Holly. I wanted him to get off me and he wouldn’t.”

The more I talk, the more nauseous I feel. Hot tears prick the back of my eyes. I can’t believe she’s saying all this to me. That she would side with Ryan over me. She wasn’t

there. She doesn't know what happened and yet she's trying to tell me, *the one who was actually there*, how everything went down.

She's taking his word over mine because she likes him.

It makes me sick.

Holly and I have been friends ever since we met first semester of freshman year. I've confided in her about my family and my lack of experience when it comes to guys. Hearing these words fall from her lips is like being punched in the gut over and over again.

If anything, she should have my back right now. It blows my mind that she doesn't. In fact, she's actually trying to tell me that because my body responded to his touch, that what he tried to do wasn't wrong. Or that what happened didn't occur the way I remember it.

Nausea roils through the pit of my belly until I think I might just be physically ill. I band my arms around my middle only wanting to get away from the pair of them. I can't stay here another minute.

## **Chapter Twenty-Two**

*JT*

I text Claire just as I'm leaving the stadium to let her know that I'm on my way.

She doesn't reply.

On the drive over, when I'm sitting at red lights, I continue shooting texts her way. But still, I don't get anything other than stereo silence in return. By the time my tires are screeching to a halt in front of her building, I'm in a near state of panic. I've texted her three more times and called just as many, and still, there's no answer from her.

Where the hell could she be?

Why isn't she responding?

Making a hasty decision, I get out of the Porsche before jogging towards the front entrance of her apartment. I glance quickly through the directory of names which are located next to buzzers of the residents who live in the building before finding hers.

Apartment two-seventeen.

I hit the button a few times.

But just like her phone, there's no answer.

Luckily there's a couple leaving the building as I continue standing outside. They're so wrapped up in one another that they don't even pay attention when I grab the handle before slipping inside. Then I'm hauling ass through the lobby. It's oddly silent in here as I push the call button for the elevator. Actually, I press it about six times before looking around impatiently for a stairwell. The last thing I want to do is stand here waiting for the damn elevator to arrive. It's taking forever. I need to figure out what the hell is going on here.

Just as I'm searching for the stairs, I see a pair of shoes sticking out from behind a chair about twenty feet down the

hall. It's a little sitting area with two chairs and a small end table much like the one by the front entrance.

But those shoes... I narrow my eyes contemplating them for just a second. They look exactly like the pair Claire had been wearing Friday night and again today at the game.

Abandoning the elevator, I stalk towards the sitting area. The breath becomes wedged in my throat as I finally peek around the second chair to see Claire huddled up on the floor next to it. Her face is pale and streaked with tears. She has this strange glassy eyed look that I've never seen before.

It leaves my heart rioting harshly against the wall of my chest. What could have possibly happened to her in the hour or so from the time she left the party to now?

"Claire?" My voice is low, strung tight with the need to understand what's going on. Even I can hear the thick shards of concern threading their way through it. "What happened? Why are you sitting here by yourself in the hallway?" Once again my eyes slide over the wetness staining her cheeks.

I don't even wait for a response before gathering her up into my arms and pressing her tightly against me. When she doesn't immediately answer, something painful squeezes my chest. All of a sudden, she's curling into me, burying her face against the hollow of my throat.

"Can you just get me out of here?" Her voice is so small and fragile-sounding that if I weren't listening so intently, I would have missed it. *"Please?"*

Turning my face towards her, I lay a gentle kiss against her forehead. "Yeah, sure."

It takes only a moment for me to secure her in my car before we're taking off down the tree-lined street. This time I don't bother asking if she wants to be dropped off at her brother's house. The only place I'm taking her is back to my place.

My gut is a tangle of knots because she hasn't said a word since leaving the apartment building. This feels like déjà vu all over again. When we finally pull into my garage, I cut the engine before jumping out and hustling around to the other side of the car. Then I'm opening the door and pulling her back into my arms.

Whatever happened must have been pretty bad because Claire doesn't even protest when I lift her off her feet, carrying her into the house. She simply lays her head against my chest as I walk through the kitchen, up the back staircase, and straight into my room. With her still cradled in my arms, I sit down on the bed. She feels like nothing more than a lifeless rag doll. And that scares me. More than I'm willing to admit. Claire is usually so feisty where I'm concerned. I've never seen her look this hurt and vulnerable.

So broken.

Not even when I picked her up on Friday night did she seem this upset.

"Tell me what happened, Claire." Her silence is ripping me apart inside. I can't take much more of it. It's almost mind-boggling just how much she's come to mean to me in such a short amount of time. All this riotous emotion careening through me right now...

I feel like I'm drowning in it.

When she remains silent, I gently lift her chin until her gaze is finally able to pierce mine. The tears swimming around within her gray eyes twists my heart into painful little knots.

“Baby, you need to tell me what happened.” I add in a harsh whisper, “You’re scaring me.”

Squeezing her eyes tightly shut, she inhales a deep, unsteady breath before finally releasing it. “Please... I don’t want to talk about it right now.”

“You need to tell me what happened.”

She’s silent for a long moment before finally sighing. Her shoulders slump in the process. “After I left the stadium, I went back to the apartment. Holly’s door was shut. After I knocked on it, I realized that someone was in there with her.”

I have no idea where she’s going with this. And so it’s slowly that I draw out the word, waiting for her to continue. “Okay.”

Hesitating, she simply holds my eyes. “It was Ryan. She slept with him.”

Sucking in a surprised breath, my brows slowly slide together. “Let me get this straight- your roommate just *slept* with the guy you broke up with?”

Nodding, an unexpected gurgle of laughter falls from her lips. But there’s not a shred of humor within the sound. “That’s not even the worst part.”

I raise a brow. “Really? Because I’m thinking that seems pretty bad.”

“I guess they got together Friday night after I took off with you.” She pauses, allowing that to sink in before continuing. “She told me that what Ryan did... I wanted it.” She squeezes her eyes tightly shut as if she can’t bear to see my reaction to her words. “He told her that I was... turned on. That I just freaked out because I’m a...” she gulps before forcing out the rest, “*a virgin.*” Crystal-like tears fill her eyes. “She made me feel like I’m just some stupid inexperienced-”

Not wanting her to continue, I gently press my finger against her lips. “Shhh. No more. We both know that’s not true, Claire. Your roommate is just trying to make herself feel better for fucking over a friend. That’s all.”

She removes my finger from her lips. “I don’t know, JT,” she whispers. “I sat there in the lobby going over and over everything that happened Friday night.” Confusion flickers across her pale face before she finally shakes her head. “Maybe she’s right. Maybe what Ryan told her is the way it happened. Or at least how he saw it. Maybe I did freak out and run away because I was scared.”

Fire ignites deep within my gut. It pisses me off that she’s even questioning her own recollection of the events. That her roommate and ex-boyfriend have managed to make her rethink what she knows to be the truth. “Come on, Claire, you know that’s not how it went down. You told him to stop, and he didn’t. What happened is on *him*. Not you.” I pause, trying to regain some semblance of calm. “What he almost did to you... fuck, Claire. I’d like to rip his damn throat out for it. You know that?”

She bites her lip but still, I see the doubt as it fills her big gray eyes.

“You said *no*,” I reiterate sharply.

Finally, she nods. “I told him to stop.”

“He’s an asshole. As soon as you asked him to stop, he should have backed off.” Pulling her to me, I lay a gentle kiss against the top of her head. All I want to do is hold her in my arms until she understands that she did absolutely nothing wrong. She trusted the wrong people, and they fucked her over.

I’m just glad that she’s here with me now. That she’s safe. I don’t want to let her go. All I can think about is the panicky feelings that had surged through me when I couldn’t get a hold of her. When I had no freaking idea where she was or what was going on. “Why didn’t you answer your phone when I texted and called?”

She shrugs, her soft, warm body pressed up against mine. “I turned it off. I just needed some time to think.”

My voice lowers. “You scared the shit out of me, Claire.” I don’t think I’ve ever felt like that before in my life. But that’s not something I want to dwell on. Right now, I just need to take care of Claire. Make sure she’s okay.

“I’m sorry. I just...” she shrugs helplessly, “I just wanted to be alone.”

Her words have me pressing another soft kiss against her head. Even though all I want to do is hold her close, I decide that maybe there’s a better way to comfort her.



“How about I run a nice hot bath for you to soak in? Then we’ll get dinner figured out.”

She lifts her eyes until they’re able to impale mine before nodding her head.

“Okay.”

Gently I rearrange her until she’s lying on the bed before dropping another kiss on her lips. Then I go to the massive master bath and start filling the tub. I’ve lived here for about six months now, and I’ve yet to use the jetted tub. If I’m wound tight, I usually swim laps or sit in the hot tub out by the pool.

And I’ve never brought a woman back to the house either. By the time I bought this place, I was already trying to clean up my act. I’m suddenly glad that Claire is the only woman I’ve ever shared my home with. Somehow it just feels right having her here with me.

Once the huge tub is filled with steaming water, I turn on the jets before going back for Claire. She’s exactly where I left her lying on the bed. Once again something painful twists in my chest. I hate to see her hurting like this. It makes me want to go find that freaking punk and beat the shit out of him.

And that roommate of hers...

I’m not one for abusing women, but she deserves to be slapped upside the head for her part in this. What a backstabbing little bitch.

Again I scoop Claire up into my arms before carrying her into the white Carrera marble bathroom. I sit her on the edge

of the tub before slowly kneeling on the floor so that I can slide off her shoes and socks. “You want me to leave?”

The last thing I want to do is make her uncomfortable. She’s been through enough already this weekend.

I’m actually surprised when she shakes her head before slowly rising to her feet. Sucking in a breath, she picks up the hem of her shirt before lifting it over her head. Then she’s dropping it onto the marble-tiled floor. Her eyes stay locked on mine as her fingers go to the button of her jeans before flicking it open. Lowering the zipper, she slides the material over the gently rounded curve of her hips, down her supple thighs before it’s pooling at her ankles. She steadies herself against the tub as she kicks her way free of them.

I blink my eyes, and she’s standing in nothing more than her bra and panties. This time they’re leopard print. A matching set. Reaching around, she unsnaps the bra. The straps fall away from her arms, sliding down, revealing those perfect dusky-tipped breasts of hers. She lets the silky material drop from her fingers before it joins both the shirt and jeans on the floor.

Her gray eyes stay fastened onto mine. The breath gets wedged in my throat as I continue watching her. She’s just so damn beautiful.

“Take off the rest?”

It’s not even a question I have to think about. Already I’m reaching out, dipping my fingers beneath the stretchy material before slowly sliding it down her hips and thighs until the silky little panties have joined the pile of clothing and she’s completely bare.

God, but I just want to press my face against the softness of her belly. I want to stroke my fingers over every single gorgeous inch of her. I want to kiss and nuzzle her inner thighs until she's spreading them wide for me. I want to stab my tongue inside her until her breath catches and she's moaning out her pleasure.

But I don't.

Can't.

She needs time to herself.

As much as I don't want to, I find myself slowly backing away from her. My eyes are still cradling hers as I jerk a thumb towards the door. "I'll go downstairs and order a pizza or something for us, alright? You stay up here as long as you want and relax."

Just as I'm about to sprint through the doorway into the bedroom, her voice stops me cold.

"JT?"

I turn back. "Yeah?" My voice is gruff. Seeing her standing there naked like that... It's the stuff dreams are made of. How someone can look so damn innocent and vulnerable all the while standing naked like that is beyond me, but she does.

"Stay with me?"

Fuck.

I'm hard as steel over here. And she doesn't need that right now.

Because I want to reach out to her so badly, I shove my hands into my khakis. “I should... ah... really go downstairs. Get dinner figured out.”

“Please?”

Her voice is nothing more than a softly pleaded whisper. One that arrows right through the heart of me. One I’m not able to refuse.

But still... “Are you sure that’s what you want?”

She simply nods her head before holding out her hand. With quick movements, I strip off my shirt and jeans, sliding the boxer briefs over my thighs before kicking them free.

And then I’m just as naked as she is.

I pause.

We stare at one another for a long moment before I take her hand, towing her slowly towards me until I’m able to wrap my arms around her. Until I’m able to protect her with my strength. Because that’s all I really want to do. For just a moment, we stand there, our bodies pressed together. All my hard edges tightly aligned with her softness.

I don’t think my cock has ever been more painfully hard in my entire life.

Finally pulling away, I step into the steamy water before carefully lowering myself. My back is pressed against the edge of the tub. Once I’m settled, I hold my hand out for her to join me. She steps between my legs before turning her back to me. My eyes arrow right to that heart-shaped ass of hers before Claire slowly lowers herself into the water. She sucks in a sharp little breath as her body becomes fully submerged.

Until she's sighing, leaning her slender back against my chest. Resting her head on my shoulder, her eyes finally feather closed.

Wrapping my arms around her middle, I pull her closer. Something finally settles within me as I realize that I'm exactly where I want to be. I'm not thrilled with how we ended up here, but I'm happy to have Claire in my arms, in my tub, in my house.

Over the course of the next few minutes, her entire body loosens, limb by long, lean limb, relaxing into mine as if her bones are melting. Her breathing slowly becomes deep and even. I kiss the side of her neck before my hands come up to caress her breasts. A soft little sigh of contentment escapes from her mouth as I stroke her nipples before cupping the soft mounds of flesh.

"That feels nice," she murmurs. Her voice sounds as if she's on the cusp of sleep.

"It does," I agree lazily.

"I could stay here all night."

So could I, I realize.

After another ten minutes, I pick up her hand, lifting it from the water so we can inspect it together. "You're turning pruney."

Slowly she turns her head until her eyes are able to catch mine. For a long moment, she remains silent as if contemplating me.

"How is it that you've turned out to be so very different from what I thought?"

Her question is completely genuine as if she can't quite understand how the two of us have arrived at this place. How we went from her barely being able to tolerate me to lying naked in my arms in a matter of weeks. I'll freely admit that I'm not quite sure how it happened either. Because in all honesty, I never thought I could be like this. There's never been a woman who's made me *want* to be different from the guy I've always been.

No one has ever made me yearn to be *better*.

But I find myself wanting to be that for Claire. I'd happily turn myself into a pretzel if it would make her happy.

"You always seemed like such a jerk... but you aren't one at all." She blinks before adding softly, "At least I don't think you are." As she shakes her head, I see the sharp shards of bitterness that slowly seep their way into her eyes. "Then again, apparently I'm not a very good judge of character when it comes to men or friends."

I really fucking hate that they've made Claire question herself.

Even though her warm, pliant body is already pressed against mine, I pull her even closer. As I do, I realize that it's still not close enough. I'm starting to wonder if it will ever be close enough.

Over the last couple of weeks, I've gotten to know Claire on a surprisingly deeper level. It only has me realizing that there is so much more I still want to discover about her. More than anything, I want to protect her from the assholes out there who would take advantage of all the goodness and innocence that radiates so intensely from her.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Claire. You trusted Ryan, and he broke that trust.”

“How could I have ever thought he was the right one... and you were the wrong one?”

I sigh before admitting softly, “Because I was the wrong one, too. At least at that point, I was. But I’ve been getting my shit together. I spent a lot of time letting things from my past dictate the future and that was stupid and self-destructive.”

Biting her lower lip, she asks softly, “What happened out there on the field today? You weren’t playing like you normally do.”

My body tenses beneath hers. The last thing I want to talk about right now is my family. I don’t want to invite them into my relationship with her. Half the time, I just want to pretend they don’t exist.

When I say nothing in response, she suddenly sits up. Water sloshes against the sides with her movements. I almost panic, thinking that she’s leaving the tub, leaving me, but she doesn’t. Instead, she turns, her slippery skin sliding erotically against mine as she straddles my waist, repositioning herself so that we’re now facing one another. She wiggles just a bit closer until my erection is nestled perfectly against the lips of her pussy. I can’t help but hiss out a strained breath in response.

*Fuck.*

This situation has become entirely too dangerous. I was okay when her delectable little backside was pressed against

my front. But this? Her soft, sweet pussy now cradling my thick length? All I have to do is flex my hips, and I'd be able to slide right inside her warmth.

A knowing grin slowly curves its way across her face as she takes in my pained expression. My hands wrap around her waist, holding her still so that she can't continue squirming around on top of me. I'm already hard as steel. She's way too much of a temptation for me to resist. I'm trying to do the right thing here, and she's making it nearly impossible. When I say nothing, she tilts her head to the side before closing the distance and taking my lips with her own.

After a minute or two, she finally pulls away before asking breathlessly, "Are you going to talk to me? This is a two-way street here. You want me to tell you what's going on with me, but you won't open up at all?"

I didn't think it was possible for anything to deflate the boner I have going on. Especially with the way Claire's body is pressed against mine.

But I was wrong.

Thoughts of my parents do it in fifteen seconds flat.

I shake my head, not really wanting to think about the debacle out on the field today. How I started questioning and second guessing every single move I made until it felt like I was paralyzed with indecision. How they tear me up inside. How it's just better to distance myself from my family rather than allow them to get inside my head and fuck up my thinking.



It's almost begrudgingly that I say, "My family was at the game today. And I let them get inside my head. Especially my dad." Even though that's a fairly simplistic explanation of the problem, I'm hoping she'll just accept it. There are way more interesting things that I can think of-

"Has it always been like that with them?"

Of course she doesn't.

Even though the answer to that question is an unequivocal *yes*- I shrug. There's a tightness growing between my shoulder blades. "You met my dad today. What did you think of him?"

She doesn't even blink her eyes. "That he was an asshole."

I snort. "And here you thought you weren't an excellent judge of character."

Her lips pull up at the corners just a bit. "Has he always been like that?"

"Since the day I was born."

"Why do their thoughts and opinions matter so much to you?"

*Boner?*

*What boner?*

Because that erection is now long gone. I'm totally flaccid. If she notices, she doesn't say a word about it. She simply waits patiently for me to continue.

"My brother has always been the one who could do no wrong." I shake my head remembering what it was like

growing up in his shadow. And yet I didn't resent him. I wasn't jealous of him. Hell, I wanted to be *exactly* like Joe.

But my father made that all but impossible. Everything I did was wrong. Or not good enough. *I* was never enough. Again my eyes find hers. "And I was the one who could never do anything right." Shrugging my shoulders, I try reeling everything back in that I've unwittingly exposed. I fucking hate talking about them. I hate the way it makes me feel.

Like my dad is right... I'm not good enough.

I will *never* be good enough.

Claire knocks me out of my thoughts by laying a gentle hand against my cheek. "That must have been difficult. Never feeling like you measured up."

I don't care for this feeling of laying myself bare. Like someone has cut my belly wide open and is standing there inspecting my insides. I've spent so much time burying all of my feelings. Burying all the hurt and pain caused by them over the last two and a half decades. It's almost painful to allow it into the light when you've let it linger in the darkness for so long.

"Once I got older, it didn't matter so much. I tried not to put much stock in what my father thought." But it's never that easy. No matter how much you might want it to be. Even now, sometimes I think I'm still waiting for the day when my father will turn to me, praise me for *something* I've managed to do right even though, deep down, I know that will never happen.

The need I feel for his approval is pathetic.

And I hate him for creating that need within me.

Sometimes I hate myself for not being able to let it go.

For not being able to walk away from them and never look back again.

“You’re a good man, JT. It doesn’t matter what they think.”

My voice is low, scraped surprisingly raw with all the emotion she’s hell-bent on dredging up within me. After all these years, it finally feels as if someone might just see me for the person I truly am. “I haven’t always been a good man.”

Her eyes continue piercing mine. I get the feeling that Claire sees way more than I want her to. “I think you’ve finally allowed yourself to get out from beneath your brother’s shadow and your father’s image of who he thinks you are. I think the man you are today is the one you were always meant to be.”

Her words have something stilling within my heart. Because that’s exactly what it feels like when I’m with her. I’m tired of rebelling against them. I’m tired of letting them get to me, allowing them to push my buttons while I react like I’m still some fucked-up teenager with a chip on his shoulder. I’m done with that. I’m a twenty-five-year-old man. It’s time I started acting like one.

Hearing Claire say it so succinctly- stripped bare of all the emotion and history, what I’ve only begun to realize for myself... it’s strange how she can see it so clearly when I’ve spent my entire life trying to wrap my head around all the family dynamics.

Needing to distract her from the insights of our conversation, I slowly let my hands meander from her waist to her perky little breasts before carefully stroking over the hard tips of her pretty pink nipples. Almost immediately she arches her body as her head falls back, a soft sigh of contentment whispering from her lips.

I love just how responsive she is.

“You’re beautiful, Claire.”

As I continue playing with her breasts, she brings her head up until she’s able to meet my gaze again.

“I’ve thought about it, JT. Just like you asked me to, and I still want you to be the one. I want my first time to be with you.”

My cock stiffens before pressing against her soft warmth. It wouldn’t take much for me to slip right inside. But I don’t. When we finally make love, it’s going to be slow and thorough. I’m going to take my time with her beautiful body spread out on my king-sized bed.

It takes a herculean effort to tamp down my rising excitement. “I don’t want this to be some knee-jerk reaction to what’s happened this weekend. This isn’t something that has to be decided today to even tomorrow. We have all the time in the world.”

She cups my cheeks with her hands. “My decision was made before I found out about Holly and Ryan,” she murmurs softly. “And I’m not going to change my mind about it either.” She continues searching my eyes. “I want you to be the one.”

Even though I want her more than anything, I feel it's only fair to say at least one more time, "You can change your mind at any point. I'm not going to force you into doing something you don't want to."

Her lips lift. "I know. That's the difference between you and Ryan. I think that's what was always holding me back with him. I wanted to go through with it and yet I just couldn't. It never felt like I was making the right decision. But this does. Being with you feels right. I want my first time to be with you."

Before I can utter a single word in response, she continues with, "And I know that this is just sex. I know we're not a couple or anything like that. I don't want you worrying that I'm going to suddenly become clingy or start stalking you."

The entire length of my body tenses.

Slowly the smile falls from her lips. "I just don't want you thinking that I'm going to fall for you or that it'll be awkward afterward. It won't be. I promise. I think we're kind of," she pauses, "friends now."

Her words feel like an unexpected blow.

"JT?"

I jerk my head into a tight nod before hoisting my lips into a careless smile. It takes a moment for everything within me to finally settle. She may think this thing between us is casual, but it's not. And if this is the only way I can have her right now, then so be it.

"You about ready to get out?"

She releases a long, slow breath before dazzling me with a relieved smile.

“Yeah. I’m famished.”

Me, too.

But not for food.

## **Chapter Twenty-Three**

*Claire*

We order a pizza that gets delivered to the house before curling up on the couch afterward to watch some bizarre reality TV show. I’ve seen it a few times, but it’s mostly like watching a horrific car accident which is precisely how it draws you in.

It’s all shock value.

With my belly full of cheese pizza and my eyes drowsy, I’m wrapped up rather cozily in JT’s big arms. Right now, there’s no other place I’d rather be. He doesn’t seem to want to let me go even for a minute.

And I love it.

When we got out of the tub about an hour and a half ago, he grabbed a towel from the brushed nickel rack before thoroughly drying off every single inch of my body. It was such a turn on to have him on his knees, patting me, dropping soft little kisses onto my flesh.

I love the way he touches me. Stroking his fingers over my skin. It leaves me constantly wanting more. And yet he won't give it to me. It's utterly ridiculous.

I've told him three or four times now that I want him to be the one and yet he keeps holding me at arm's length, telling me to wait. To slow down. To think it over. Doesn't he get that I've already thought it through? I'm ready to do this. It would actually give me a complex except that he's always hard whenever I'm near.

So... I know he wants me.

The man is a conundrum.

That's for sure.

In the three years that I've known JT, I never imagined that he would treat me this carefully. Almost as if I truly mattered to him. He's constantly putting me before himself. Which only makes me want him more. It also shows me just how different he is from Ryan, who I always thought was a good guy but turned out not to be.

And yet JT... the one I could barely stand, has turned out to be someone I want to get to know better. He's done everything within his power to help me. To be there for me. He doesn't want to take advantage of me. It doesn't make sense just how wrong I was about him.

It's the feel of his fingers sliding under my chin, gently maneuvering my face towards his that breaks me from my thoughts. I'm guessing that he wants more kisses. He seems to want them all the time.

Which I'm not going to lie- I love. The man definitely knows how to kiss.

Instead, he surprises me by asking, "What are you going to do about your apartment?"

Everything within me stills before instantly deflating. I haven't really thought that far ahead yet.

"I don't know," I say slowly before sucking my lower lip into my mouth. The thought of staying there and carrying on like nothing happened seems impossible. Obviously, Holly and I can't rewind our friendship. Nor do I think that I can forgive her for what she said and did.

How can I just let all that go?

How could I possibly trust her again?

"I don't think I can live with her anymore. Not after what happened."

His deep voice turns decidedly gruff. "I don't want you there either. *Especially* if that jackass is going to be hanging around."

Again... hadn't even thought about that possibility.

There's no way I can be in the same apartment with either one of them. But I'm locked into our lease for the rest of the school year. Thinking out loud, I say, "Maybe I can sublet my room and find something else. But that'll take some time. Plus, Holly would have to agree to finding another roommate."

Although... she can't want me around any more than I want to be there. Rubbing my forehead, my mind continues to whirl. "I could probably stay with Liam and Gia. I'm sure



they wouldn't mind." Actually, my brother would be all too happy if I moved in for a while. "But I can't tell them about what happened with Ryan."

We're both quiet for a moment before JT clears his throat. "You could always stay here until you find something else."

And just like that, a strange silence settles over us.

I'm not sure what to say to that.

I'm not even sure if he's serious about the offer. Except that his face is perfectly sober. And he's watching me as if he's waiting for an answer. It suddenly occurs to me that he's not simply throwing out some half-hearted, token invitation.

His offer is genuine.

"I..." my words stall because I'm not sure if staying with JT is a good idea. "I don't know." I don't want whatever this is between us becoming complicated. And moving in here... even for a short amount of time feels... well, it feels all sorts of complicated.

"Look, you need a place to stay, and I have this entire house all to myself. It won't be a problem."

I'm grasping at straws. I just want to slow this down and think it through. "I don't want to get in your way."

"Are you in my way right now?"

"I don't think so, but-"

Rather quickly he silences any further protest by planting a kiss against my lips. "Then it's settled. You'll stay here until you find another place to live."

Brows drawing together, I shake my head. I have no idea how we just arrived at this arrangement so quickly. I need some time to think about it. Maybe explore some other avenues. “But-”

“Do you have any other options?”

I haven’t really thought it through. He’s not giving me time. “No, it’s just-”

His gorgeous green eyes take on even more intensity as he pushes me back against the couch before slowly crawling on top of me. Almost instinctively my legs wrap around his thick waist before I unconsciously squeeze them, trying to alleviate some of the pressure now throbbing at my center. The feel of his long, thick erection pushing against me has a small groan leaving my lips as he thrusts against me.

Even though my mind has turned decidedly foggy, I can’t help but ask, “What about Liam? We both know there’s no way he’d ever let me stay here.” That thought leaves me cringing. My brother will definitely blow a gasket if he finds out I’m messing around with JT. Liam is super protective. He always has been. Ever since he was fifteen years old and our mother walked out on us. I may be a twenty-one-year-old grown woman, but he doesn’t necessarily see me that way. No matter how old I am, I’ll always be his little sister.

I also know exactly what would happen if I moved in with Gia and my brother. He wouldn’t see it as a temporary situation. He hates that I moved out of the dorms and into my own apartment. At one point, he even tried pulling rank by telling me that if I didn’t live at the house with him or in the dorms, he wouldn’t pay for my last year of college.

Thankfully it was Gia who slapped him upside the head, reminding him that his money didn't come with strings and that she would foot the bill for school this year if she had to.

Liam caved within seconds.

But that doesn't necessarily mean he was happy about it. Nor does it mean that he wouldn't seize any little opportunity to get me under his roof. He enjoys his family being close.

So, in all honesty, I would rather *not* mention any of this to him.

It's just easier that way.

What JT and I have isn't a relationship.

It's more of an arrangement.

JT licks and nips his way down my throat as all of these thoughts continue circling around within my mind. For just one fleeting moment, I wonder if he's simply trying to distract me, but I can't understand why he would do that. He can't possibly want me staying with him. Wouldn't that cramp his style?

Playing house with him...

It feels dangerous.

But he's right.

I don't have a lot of options open to me right now. Staying with Liam wouldn't be a problem. But I'd have to give him some sort of reasonable explanation as to why living with Holly is no longer working out.

"You're a grown woman, Claire. You're old enough to make your own decisions."

I groan as his mouth continues doing the most delicious things to my body.

I hate lying to my family. Not to mention that I'm a terrible liar. I feel like Liam will see right through whatever bogus story I concoct. And then he'll ferret out the truth. He's good at that sort of thing.

"Yeah," I murmur feeling distracted by the play of his mouth over my skin, "you'd think that would be the case, but it's not."

"Then we won't tell him. We'll just see how things go. You might not even be here for very long. A week or two. No point in upsetting him for that, right?" He pushes my shirt up to my neck. Since I'm not wearing a bra, there's nothing to get in his way of zeroing in on my breasts. Within moments, he's sucking my nipple into his mouth, and I'm arching my back as intense feelings flood through my entire body. I can't help but squirm against him wanting only to alleviate some of the throbbing pressure.

"Umm, right."

I'm so jacked up right now, I can't even remember what I'm agreeing to.

Even though I don't want to think about Ryan, I can't help but compare the two men. Actually, there is no comparison. I never felt a tenth of this when Ryan was touching me. Maybe that was part of the problem. Maybe that's why it never felt right between us. All I know is that JT stirs everything to life so very easily.

And I absolutely love it.

Love that it feels so explosive between us.

Addictive.

He spends his sweet time on one breast before kissing and licking a path to the other. Then he's lavishing attention on that stiffened peak. Unable to help myself, I tunnel my fingers through his thick blond hair trying to pull him even closer.

When he finally releases me, I feel as though I'm on the verge of exploding. His eyelids are heavy as he pierces me with his green-eyed gaze.

“So you'll stay?”

I suck in a deep breath as he leans down, kissing me again.

His voice drops a few octaves. “What's it going to be, Claire?”

“If you're sure that's what you want.” I gulp as his warm breath feathers across my exposed flesh.

“I'm sure.”

“Alright... then I guess I'll stay.” Quickly I tack on, “But just until I find a new place.”

Moving up my body, he presses his lips against mine. Almost immediately I open to him until his tongue is able to tangle with my own.

Pulling away, he searches my eyes. There's a satisfied smile tugging his lips upwards. “Good. I'll drive you to school tomorrow, and then I'll pick you up afterward. We'll go to your apartment and get your stuff.” His expression hardens. “I don't want you going back there alone.”

Ummm... I'm still in the throes of passion over here, and he's suddenly talking logistics? I don't know how he's able to shift gears so quickly, but he has. As I narrow my gaze, he chuckles. A moment later, he's off me and tugging down my shirt before pulling me back into his arms. For some strange reason, I get the feeling that I've been played but I'm not exactly sure how or why.

Brows drawn together, I can only stare at him, wondering why we just stopped fooling around. When it becomes obvious that he's not going to continue, the words are shooting out of my mouth before I can stop them. "Sooooo, that's it? You heat me all up only to leave me hanging?"

A huge, delighted smile spills across his handsome face. The man looks ridiculously pleased by my reaction.

Jerk.

That was so not the response I was looking for. Needless to say, it only has my frustration skyrocketing to the surface. "You're a real tease, you know that?"

He laughs before pulling me onto his lap and attempting to kiss me.

Even though I don't necessarily want to, I turn my face away from his. My voice is all grumbly. "Yeah... I wouldn't be starting something you obviously have no intention of finishing."

Before I can blink my eyes, I'm flat on my back again, and he's looming over me. Unlike Ryan, it never crosses my mind to be frightened or nervous. Because somehow I know that JT won't hurt me. In fact, he's done everything in his

power *not* to hurt me. Which, a few months- even weeks ago, would have surprised the hell out of me.

His voice is deliciously low when he finally murmurs, “When we finally make love, it’s not going to be when you’ve been hurt or are nursing some pain inflicted by another man. Tonight you’re going to sleep in my bed, and I’m going to hold you in my arms.” Leaning down, he takes my lips with his own before slowly pulling away again. “Now, if you want me to lick that sweet little pussy of yours because I’ve got you all riled up, I’d be more than happy to do it.” His eyes kindle with heat as if he loves the idea just as much as I do. “Is that what you want, baby?”

The images he paints are enough to leave me on the verge of self-combusting.

“Yes,” I whisper, barely able to push the words out, “that’s what I want.” Unable to help myself, I squirm beneath him wanting it right this very minute.

“See how easy that was?”

Again he takes my lips in a kiss that very nearly singes my insides.

“You about ready to head upstairs or are you still watching this ridiculous show?”

“What show?”

He grins down at me. “Good answer.”

And like he’s done since he found me in the lobby of my apartment building a few hours ago, he picks me up with ease before carrying me up the back staircase that leads to his bedroom.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

*Claire*

“So... you’re not going to tell me what the surprise is?”

Gia grins over at me as she continues prepping vegetables for dinner. “Your brother would kill me if I did.”

Fat chance of that happening. Liam loves his wife more than almost anything else. The *almost anything else* being his three ridiculously adorable kids. “Come on, just one small clue? You know I hate surprises.”

Because nothing good ever seems to come from them.

*Surprise- Mom walked out and is never coming back.*

*Surprise- Dad gambled away the mortgage money, and now we’ve lost the house.*

*Surprise- Holly slept with my ex-boyfriend.*

I could go on, but I won’t.

Looking resolute, she shakes her head. Hmmm. I don’t think I’m going to be able to drag whatever is going on out of Gia. Knowing that Liam has something up his sleeve only sets my nerves further on edge. Feeling fidgety, I play with the glass of water sitting on the marble island where I’ve pulled up a stool.

Tonight is the first dinner that JT and I are having at my brother’s house since I’ve been... well, since I’ve been staying



at his place. Although, just to be clear, it's not like we're living together. This is strictly a temporary arrangement.

We're really more like... roommates.

Roommates who just so happen to sleep together in the same bed.

Roommates who cuddle and kiss and do all sorts of wickedly delightful things to one another.

That being said, every chance I get, I find myself reiterating that this set up is short-term. The very last thing I need is for JT to think that I've suddenly become delusional in regards to what's going on between us. Nope. Not going to happen. I've got my eyes wide open when it comes to JT Higgins. Although, strangely enough, he doesn't seem bothered in the least and usually ends up changing the subject whenever I mention looking for a new place. He certainly doesn't seem to be in any hurry to get me out of there.

Because I want the situation with Holly rectified as quickly as possible, my ex-roommate and I have been sending somewhat stilted texts back and forth. Gone is the easy relationship we used to enjoy. Which just seems sad. Not only did I lose my boyfriend, but my best friend as well. After what she said on Sunday, I told her that I couldn't continue living with her and that I'd like to find someone to sublet my room for the rest of the year.

She seems perfectly fine with that arrangement.

I hate to admit it, because it makes me sound really pathetic, but I had actually been holding out just a little

glimmer of hope that maybe she would come to her senses and apologize for hooking up with Ryan.

That hasn't happened.

There is zero remorse on her part. Clearly, Holly doesn't see anything wrong with what she did. Or what she said. We've been friends for more than three years. I have no idea why she would choose to believe Ryan over me.

But that's exactly what she did.

I haven't bothered asking what her situation is with my ex-boyfriend. As far as I'm concerned, those two can have each other.

So we've placed an ad through a university website and will hopefully get some interest soon. I'm not going to bother looking for another apartment until I have someone lined up for this one. I've already decided not to mention the fact that I'm moving to Gia and Liam until it's a done deal.

The less they know at this point, the better.

"How's school going so far? We haven't seen much of you this past week."

Which is ironic, when you think about it, because I'm just a few miles away. "It's fine. Just trying to stay on top of everything." I have three classes this semester along with my student teaching placement which starts in less than two weeks. I've already met with the first-grade teacher I'll be working with. She seems super nice. I'm excited. At first, I'll simply be observing the classroom to learn their patterns and schedules before I slowly start taking over more and more of the teaching responsibilities.

“How’s the apartment? Do you and Holly need anything? The three of us could go shopping next weekend if you’d like.”

I almost wince as the words slip right off my tongue. “Ummm, no. We’re good right now.”

“Maybe the kids and I can swing by during the week before things get really busy with student teaching and we can grab some lunch. I know Liam would love to take you out. We can eat somewhere near campus.” She grins. “Wouldn’t that be fun?”

Trying to sound nonchalant, and not like I’m in the throes of panic, I agree, “Yeah, that sounds great.”

“After dinner, I’ll look at my calendar, and we’ll set something up. Otherwise, it’ll never happen.”

And wouldn’t that be a shame?

“Okay.”

The smile on my face is so forced that it’s beginning to hurt my cheeks. I can only hope that everything will work itself out and I’ll find someone to take over my lease within the next week or so. Then I can look for another place to live. After that, I can break it to Liam and Gia that the arrangement with Holly didn’t work out. My plan is to tell them that we had a big fight, couldn’t resolve our differences, and I ended up moving out.

Which is pretty darn close to the truth.

Gia continues chopping peppers, carrots, and green beans as I glance into the family room. Max is down for a late afternoon nap, and Charlotte and Ty are watching *Curious*

*George* on TV. Just like always, they seem totally captivated. I'm kind of wishing they were running around, acting crazy. I think Gia could use the distraction. I don't want her asking any more questions about the apartment.

Or Holly.

Or that jerk-

"So what's up with Ryan? He wasn't able to make it last week for dinner. Is he stopping by tonight?"

I almost groan.

Yeah... I probably should have already mentioned the fact that we broke up. Right now it feels like I'm keeping all sorts of secrets from Liam and Gia. And I hate it. I've always had such an open and honest relationship with them. But within the last week or so, that's changed.

"No, he won't be coming."

She's silent for just a moment before asking, "Is something going on, Claire? You seem a little off today. Not your usual self."

Her blue eyes continue flicking back and forth between me and the veggies she's prepping. I shift uncomfortably on the stool that's pulled up to the massive marble island where she's working.

All of a sudden my throat feels parched. Unsure what to say, I bring the glass of water to my lips before practically draining the entire thing. Gingerly setting it back down again, I glance over at my sister-in-law hoping that she's once again engrossed in getting dinner ready.

Nope.

Not at all.

In fact, she's holding the knife in one hand while continuing to stare at me questioningly. When I hesitate, her eyes narrow as if she's somehow able to ferret out the truth just by looking hard enough. Which honestly, wouldn't surprise me in the least. Gia is good. *Really good.* Sometimes she's able to get me to cave just by giving me one penetrating look. And then I fold like a cheap house of cards. Those kids of hers aren't going to stand a chance when they're teenagers. The woman seems to have some kind of sixth sense where her family is concerned.

When it becomes apparent that she won't be letting the subject drop, I decide that maybe I should throw a little breadcrumb her way. Inhaling a deep breath, I decide to tell her about Ryan. Not everything, of course. I need to be careful about what I say because this whole mess with Ryan, Holly, and JT feels impossibly intertwined and difficult to separate.

"I probably should have mentioned it sooner, but Ryan and I broke up."

She looks shocked as her dark brows all but slam into her hairline. "*What?* When did this happen?"

I shrug like it's no big deal. "About a week ago."

Disbelief, followed very quickly by hurt, spills its way across her face. "*What?* A week ago? Why am I only hearing about this now? Why didn't you say something sooner?"

In all honesty, it never even occurred to me that she might feel wounded that I didn't tell her what was going on. My eyes

widen as I fumble inarticulately over my words, “I, ah, I’m sorry. I guess... I guess I just didn’t want to talk about it. I wanted to put it behind me.”

Thankfully her expression clears, shifting to one of sympathy. “Oh, I’m so sorry, kiddo. I know how much breakups can hurt. Are you doing okay with it?”

“Yeah, I’m good,” I shrug. “We were only together for about two months. It wasn’t a big deal.” Oddly enough, that’s exactly how I feel about the situation. I haven’t thought about Ryan in days. And I certainly don’t miss him or wish we were still together.

Honestly?

I feel like I dodged a major bullet by getting out when I did.

It’s slowly that she nods her head as if weighing my words for the truth. Finally, she sighs. “Well, I’m sorry to hear that. Are you sure that you don’t want to talk about it?” Pausing, she casts a meaningful glance my way before adding more softly, “I know Ryan was the first guy you’ve really been serious about. First loves- first boyfriends, can be especially hard to get over.”

Well... she’s right about one thing.

Ryan was the first guy I really allowed myself to get close to. But I don’t see getting over him posing any kind of problem. I still think he’s an asshole for giving me a piece of jewelry and then expecting something in return.

I don’t see that opinion changing anytime soon.

“No. It’s better this way. I don’t think he was the right guy for me.” Which he then proved by sleeping with my best friend. I almost start laughing when I think about all of this actually happening. JT was right- the guy is a major tool bucket.

“That’s a good way to look at it, Claire. You certainly are handling this like a champ,” she marvels before setting down her knife and coming around the island to where I’m still sitting. Tugging me into her arms, she holds me against her curvy form. “You know that I love you, right?” She waits until I nod before continuing with, “And when you’re finally ready to talk, I’ll be here to listen.”

I can’t help but hug her tightly to me. Not only is Gia like a mother to me, but a big sister as well. Gia fills a lot of roles in my life. I have memories of my actual mother, Beverly, but they’ve faded over time. And since it was just me, my dad, Liam, and our brother, Cullum- I was the only girl in the house. Gia came into our lives when I needed a woman the most, and I’ll always be thankful for that. I’ve spent the last six years pouring my heart out to her, seeking advice, and crying in her arms. She’s always been one of my biggest advocates and supporters. I know that no matter what happens in my life, Gia only wants the best for me.

“Thank you. But really, I’m okay. I don’t think I liked Ryan as much as I thought I did.” Then I add, “Maybe I liked the idea of him more than I actually liked him.” Funny how I’m only now starting to realize that.

Pulling back, she searches my eyes. “Well, I’m just glad you’re handling this so well. Breakups can be painful.” She

gives me a little wink. “You ever need to talk over a pint of Chunky Monkey, I’m your girl.”

That comment brings a smile to my face because we’ve shared more than one pint of Chunky Monkey over the years.

A little more quietly, she adds, “I’m guessing that you and Ryan didn’t end up sleeping together. I think you’d be more upset about this whole situation if you had.”

A bit of color stings my cheeks as I quickly shake my head. I know she’s right about that and it just makes me doubly glad that I took my time with him rather than allowing Ryan to push me into something I wasn’t ready for. I’m glad that I held my ground with him and didn’t give in.

Looking satisfied, she nods her head. “I’m glad you waited. When you finally find the right person, Claire, you’ll know it. You won’t have to second-guess yourself. It’ll just feel right.”

Which is, I realize, exactly how it feels with JT.

God knows that it shouldn’t.

But it does.

“Why do I get the feeling that there might be someone else you’re involved with?”

I’m pretty sure my face loses whatever color had been filling it before I quickly shake my head in denial. “I’m not seeing anyone right now.”

Technically this is true.

JT and I are certainly not *seeing* one another. In fact, we’re not together at all. He’s simply giving me a place to



crash until I can find a new one. And, well... he'll be the first guy I sleep with.

Continuing to eye me, she cocks her head just a bit. "Is there someone you're interested in?"

Thankfully the doorbell rings interrupting our conversation. So I'm off the hook for the time being. I have the feeling that it wouldn't have taken Gia long to sniff out the truth. Jumping off the stool, I fly towards the front entryway. Rather surprisingly, I don't have to fight Ty for the honors.

I'm pretty sure that JT is on the other side.

Funny how I used to wish he would stop showing up for family dinners and now I couldn't be more excited to see him. Plus, this will probably be the only private moment we're able to grab until later this evening when we head back to his place.

Separately, of course.

Flinging open the door, I'm barely able to contain the smile that's spreading its way across my face. I've really missed him today. All I can think about is throwing myself into those big strong arms of his.

But it's not JT that I find standing on the other side of the door.

Sucking in a breath, my hands fly to my mouth in surprise.

## **Chapter Twenty-Five**

*JT*

My entire body feels like it's been hit by a Mack Truck. I worked myself over pretty good in practice just like I've been doing all week long. I think having Claire at the house is going to be the death of me.

I want so badly to be buried balls-deep in her. It's like I'm waging an internal struggle every single night when I pull her sexy body into my arms. Even though she's told me numerous times that she's ready to take things further, that she wants me to make love to her, I keep finding excuses to back off from taking that final step with her. She's waited this long already, so what's a few more days in the grand scheme of things?

Except that I think it's entirely possible that my dick just might explode.

I've never had anyone make me so damn hard before.

And the way she plays with me...

The way she gazes at me so intently, petting my cock, sucking and licking it. It's the sweetest torture I've ever experienced in my entire life, and that's saying something. I haven't exactly led a chaste life up until this point.

There hasn't been one damn woman who has ever affected me the way Claire does.

Strangely enough, that doesn't scare me.

Maybe it should, but it doesn't.

For the first time in my life, I finally feel like I have some real clarity as far as my career and relationships go. I'm sure being sober probably helps with that. But I'm also willing to bet that it has a lot to do with Claire. I've wanted her since the

first time I saw her. And now... well, now I have a shot at having her in my life.

I think that's the real reason I'm so set on taking this slow. There's no way I want us sleeping together and then her waking up the next morning full of regrets. Plus, I think her getting to know me- *the real me*- will only smooth the way when I finally break it to her that what we have between us is the real deal.

Once I make her mine, she's not going anywhere.

I may not have fully spelled that out for her yet, but it's the way I feel.

Rolling up to the guardhouse, I wave to the woman sitting behind the window before she gives me the go-ahead to enter the subdivision. Instead of stopping at home to change, I head straight over to Liam's for dinner. After being away from Claire all day, the need to lay eyes on her pounds through me like that of a steady drumbeat. It goes without saying that I want to lay more than just eyes on her. I want to wrap my arms around that girl before crushing her against me.

Except... I won't exactly be able to do that at Liam and Gia's house. We're going to have to pretend that nothing has changed between us.

Which sucks.

And the more I think about it, the less I like it.

Yeah, yeah, I know Liam is overly protective. *Everyone* on the damn team knows that but, sneaking around like this just doesn't sit right with me. And I sure as hell don't want to pretend that we're barely on speaking terms.

Catching sight of Liam's house, I turn into the long, winding drive. As I pull up, I see Claire and Liam standing at the front door. My eyes widen in surprise before narrowing because there's another man with them and he's got his arms wrapped around her. He's lifting her right off her sandaled feet.

*What the fuck is going on here?*

No one touches my woman.

Possessiveness rushes through me as I cut the engine before exiting my Porsche.

They're so wrapped up in one another that no one even notices me until I'm standing there, clearing my throat. I'm guessing that there's a pissed off expression on my face, because Claire's deep gray eyes widen when she finally catches sight of me.

Even though she quickly tries pulling away, the dude holding onto her doesn't let go. Not even a little bit. I feel my hands ball into tightened fists. I'm moments away from throwing a punch. I haven't hit someone in more than eight months, and here I am, losing my shit right outside Liam Garrison's front door.

It's like the guy finally notices that Claire is trying her damndest to put a little distance between them because he finally turns, meeting my stare head-on. Almost immediately his eyes narrow as if he somehow knows what I am to her and doesn't like it one damn bit.

It's only when Liam claps me on the shoulder that I'm able to rip my gaze away from them. "Hey, man. This is my

brother, Cullum.”

Everything within me instantly settles as I realize that the guy holding Claire is her brother. It’s almost ridiculous just how jacked up I got there for a moment when I thought someone was trying to take her away from me.

Claire isn’t even mine.

Well, not technically speaking.

Although, for all intents and purposes, the girl is mine. And everything flooding through me right now only slams home that realization.

“Cullum, this is JT Higgins.”

Even though his arms are still draped around Claire as if to keep her away from me, I hold out my hand. He stares at it for just a second before reluctantly shaking it.

“Nice to meet you.”

My guess is that he doesn’t really feel that way.

Somehow, even though Claire’s other brother has only just arrived on the scene and we’ve never met before, I think he knows *exactly* what my intentions are with his sister and he doesn’t like it.

*Well, that’s too fucking bad, buddy. Get used to it because this is happening.*

Again I notice Claire subtly trying to pull away from Cullum, but he’s having none of it.

“Oh!” Suddenly running her hand over his face, she says, “You must be the surprise Gia was talking about!”

Now that his focus is back on his younger sister, Cullum's expression softens before his lips tilt up into just a bit of a half-smile. I get the feeling that Cullum Garrison isn't someone who smiles easily.

"Yep, I'll be in town for about a week."

This information has her swatting at him with her hand. "Why didn't you say something? It's been so long since we've seen you, Cullum!"

Even though he hoists his lips a little more, it seems forced. Although no one else seems to notice this.

Claire has told me bits and pieces about her childhood. Just little snippets really, but it's been enough for me to piecemeal together what growing up must have been like for her. I may have had a financially secure upbringing, but my guess is that Claire and her brothers did not. I'd also take a stab and say that their mother walking out when she did and never looking back again has something to do with the dark shadows lurking in Cullum's blue eyes.

"Well, should we all head inside? I'm sure Gia and kids will be excited to see you."

The brief look Cullum spears me with says- *beat it, dude, you don't belong here.*

Yeah... that's not happening. Wild horses couldn't drag me away from his sister. So he's just going to have to deal with it.

The three of them enter the house ahead of me. Since I'm the last one in, I close the heavy mahogany front door. As I do, I hear Gia and the kids greet Cullum with shouts of joy and

laughter. For some reason, it makes me think of how different my own family is. Other than Bess, no one seems particularly pleased to see my face when I show up.

I quickly brush that thought aside as I enter the kitchen. The moment I walk in, Gia kisses me on the cheek, offering me something to drink. I tell her just like I always do that I'm more than capable of getting my own beverage before pulling a glass from the cabinet and filling it up with ice-cold water from the dispenser on the fridge.

One- I really can get my own water. I'm not some caveman who expects a woman to wait on me hand and foot. And two- I'm kind of hoping that Cullum will notice just how comfortable I am in the Garrison kitchen.

I may not be one of the family, but I'm treated like one.

I'm just starting to think about migrating over to where Claire is standing when Cullum slings an arm casually around her shoulders, hauling her close. The sly look he aims in my direction says- *checkmate, asshole. You didn't think it was going to be that easy, did you?*

I tip my head just a bit in acknowledgment before taking a sip from my glass.

Yup, I have a feeling that this is exactly how the rest of the evening is going to play out.

An hour later, I wish I could say that I was wrong.

But I'm not.

Cullum monopolizes all of Claire's attention until dinner is being served. Occasionally, she shoots me an apologetic look when no one is looking. Hey, I know she doesn't get to

spend much time with her brother, and I'm more than happy to stand in the shadows and just watch her.

Hmmm.

I'm thinking that might have come off sounding a little creepier than I intended it to.

Regardless, I'll be even happier when we can finally take off, and I can have Claire all to myself.

Since I don't have anything better to do, I help Gia ferry platters out to the dining room. Because I'm so finely attuned to Claire's every move, I notice right away when she excuses herself to use the bathroom. I give her approximately two minutes before silently disappearing down the hallway to wait for her.

As soon as she opens the door, I pounce before dragging her towards the ceramic tiled laundry room right across the hall. Before she's even able to open her mouth, my lips are crashing down on hers. She makes this sexy little noise- kind of like a sigh- deep in her throat as if she's missed me just as much as I've missed her. It only spurs me on. I've been aching to do this ever since I first pulled up in Liam's driveway. And the fact that her brother has been cock blocking me the entire time is driving me fucking nuts. But when she's in my arms like this, everything rioting within me goes eerily silent, and I can once again think clearly.

I'm not going to lie, it's the strangest thing.

But that doesn't make it any less true.

"Missed you." Groaning out the words, my lips trail over the soft curve of her jaw before meandering down the column



of her throat. I feel like I could eat her up in just one bite.

“Missed you, too.”

I’ve never wanted to drag a woman back to my place more than I do at this very minute. I want to throw all my good intentions out the window and take her like I’ve been dreaming about.

But I can’t do that.

The moment I’m stealing right now is going to have to suffice until we’re able to wrap up this family dinner and I can hustle her sweet ass back to my place.

Attempting to distract myself from all the things I want to do to that delectable little body of hers, I ask, “How was your day, gorgeous?”

“It was good.”

She practically moans out the words. It only reminds me of the breathy little sounds she makes when I’m devouring her pussy. Which, by the way, I could do for hours. God, but I love those little purrs of pleasure she unconsciously makes.

Wanting to hear more of them, I continue nibbling at her neck. “Just tell me that we can leave right after dinner.”

“My brother is visiting. I won’t be able to leave for a while.”

That’s not the answer I was looking for. I can’t help but growl out my displeasure. The sound rumbles up from deep within my throat. All I want to do is get her alone. That it won’t be happening anytime soon leaves me feeling frustrated.

“We should probably get back out there before someone notices that we’ve both disappeared.”

Damn it, I know she’s right. We stay here any longer, and her brother Cullum is bound to come sniffing around.

Again I have to wonder why we’re doing all this sneaking around. Claire is a grown woman. She can make her own decisions regarding who she gets involved with. Whether it’s a relationship or straight up sex.

We don’t need anyone’s permission.

Before I have the chance to really think over the words, they’re shooting out of my mouth. “Maybe we should just tell them what’s going on.” Using my teeth, I nip at her chin. My eyes stay latched onto hers trying to gage her reaction.

“JT...” Unfortunately, the way my name slides from between her lips says it all. She doesn’t want to go there. And for some reason, that just pisses me off.

No.

Not just for *some reason*.

There’s a very *definite* reason.

I want Claire to acknowledge that there’s something going on between us. Something more than me being the one to take her virginity. Our relationship is so much more than what it was a mere month ago. I’m tired of pretending that it’s not. And I really fucking hate the way her brother Cullum keeps eyeing me up like I’m not good enough for her.

Or worse... like she needs protecting from me.

He’s eyeing me the same damn way I was watching Ryan.

“What, Claire?” My voice whips out sounding harsher than I intend it to.

But she doesn't answer. Instead, she continues peppering my mouth with kisses before nibbling at the corners of my lips.

*Gahhhh.*

Yeah, I know what she's trying to do with this maneuver. I *invented* this maneuver. It's exactly what I do to her every single time she starts talks about finding a place of her own.

Well... it's not going to work.

It's...

*Damnit.*

It's working.

Her little pink tongue darts out, licking at the seam of my lips until I'm opening. Until I'm groaning. Until my tongue is dancing and mingling with hers. And then whatever the hell I'd been so focused on disappears without a trace, and there's just her and the need she stokes so easily to life within me.

## **Chapter Twenty-Six**

*Claire*

As we sit down to dinner, Cullum quickly parks himself next to me. It's almost comical the way he throws himself down as if we're playing a game of musical chairs and the music has just stopped.

JT gives me a flat look before sitting directly across from me. It doesn't escape me that Cullum is trying to keep me away from JT. I'm a little surprised that he's only just walked into the situation and is somehow more attuned to the undercurrents swirling between the pair of us than either Liam or Gia.

I can only imagine the kind of inquiry that will be launched once Cullum manages to get me alone. Questions that I'm in no way prepared to answer. If either one of my brothers figures out that I'm staying at JT's house, they will have the shit fit to end all shit fits.

That's a given.

Gaze sliding to JT, my mind tumbles back to what happened in the laundry room. I mean... what the heck was that all about?

Now he wants to tell people, *my family specifically*, about what's going on between us?

I think the bigger question is- *what the hell is going on between us?*

Because I don't have any flipping clue. Other than I plan on sleeping with the guy. And let me be completely honest when I say that there is no way on God's green earth that I'm telling Liam and Gia that.

Or Cullum.

Is JT having some kind of psychotic break from reality?

Liam has made it perfectly clear that he doesn't want me anywhere near his teammates. The last thing he wants to overhear is some dude talking trash about his sister in the locker room. He doesn't want rumors flying around. Nor does he want to have any problems with his teammates.

I totally get it.

And I've never had an issue with his no-fraternization rule either.

Honestly?

It made things a lot easier. I didn't have to worry about shutting guys down, and they could look at me as the team little sister and nothing more. It worked for everyone involved.

All Liam has done since he was fifteen years old is take care of me. Take care of all of us. He busted his ass in high school and then left college early so he could start earning money in the pros. I don't want to do anything that will hurt him or break his trust in me.

I'm so lost in thought that I don't realize the entire table has gone silent. Everyone except for Ty and Charlotte. They're still being their loud, boisterous selves. It takes another moment before I become aware that the three other adults at the table are now staring at Cullum.

As I study the brother closest to me in age, I realize that something is wrong. My brows slowly draw together as I quietly wait to be filled in. For just a moment, my eyes shift, catching JT's green ones. He's just staring at me from across the table. There's an odd look on his face.

Sympathy, maybe?

But there's no time to question it because Liam suddenly bellows from his seat at the head of the table-

*"You've got to be fucking kidding me! How long has this been going on for?"*

Mouth tumbling open, my gaze snaps to my oldest brother in astonishment.

Gia gasps before saying in a calm voice belying the thick tension now filling the dining room, "I'm going to take the kids into the kitchen." With that, she gathers up their plates. "Come on. You two can sit in here, and we'll turn on a show."

It's like both Ty and Charlotte understand that their father is angry because it's silently that they follow their mother into

the other room. Usually, Liam takes care not to swear in front of them. Before I can push out any questions, Cullum grabs my hand enfolding it within his larger one before giving it a gentle squeeze.

“She’s been back for about a month now.”

“Why is this the first time we’re hearing about it? You should have called us the moment she showed up at your door.”

I still don’t understand what they’re talking about. But the pit sitting at the bottom of my belly continues to grow as my eyes dart back and forth between my brothers.

Looking tense, Cullum shrugs as his eyes stay locked on Liam’s. “Because I knew this is exactly how you would react.” His voice drops just a bit as he adds, “And I wanted to make sure that she was actually going to stick around. There didn’t seem much point in riling everyone up if she was just going to take off again.”

Those words leave me feeling like I’m suddenly in freefall. It takes a moment for me to catch my breath. I don’t know why everything suddenly becomes crystal clear, but it does. When I finally realize why Liam is so angry, I can’t really say that I blame him.

Far more calmly than I’m feeling, I ask, “What does she want, Cullum? Why is she back after all this time?”

Sucking in full breaths of air actually feels painful. Surprisingly more painful than I expected. After my mother left, I sobbed into my pillow every single night for almost six months. And I prayed. Prayed that she would come back to

us. She never did. Being just ten years old, it was unfathomable to me that she could just turn her back and walk away from us.

No explanation.

No goodbye.

Nothing.

After a while, I did what I had to. I buried all the pain and questions somewhere deep inside and moved on. There were far more important things to worry about. Once she disappeared, my dad checked out. At least mentally. Maybe he was there physically, but that was about it. He had his share of drinking and gambling problems. Eventually, we lost our house.

It took a while, but my dad finally seems to have his shit together. The last thing we need is for her to sweep back into our lives and mess everything up again. Because that's exactly what she'll do. She doesn't care about us. How could she possibly? You don't walk away from the people you love.

You just don't do that.

For the first time since everything became quiet, Cullum glances down at his half-finished plate before finally spearing me with his wary blue eyes.

"She wants to talk with you." He shoots Liam a glance as well. "With both of you."

"But why?" I shake my head. "Why *now*? She's been gone for eleven years."



Sucking in a breath, he releases it slowly. Like a balloon with a slow leak. “That’s for her to tell you, not me.”

Leaning forward, Liam’s eyes flash with unspent anger.

Anger that has been brewing for more than a decade.

“I’m not interested in anything she has to say.” He stabs his finger towards the kitchen where Gia, Ty, and Charlotte are finishing up their dinner. “I have a wife and three kids, just like she did. And there is no damn way I could just pick up and leave them.” Pounding his fist on the table, the plates and silverware rattle against the polished wood. I jump, my eyes flaring with shock. Liam has never scared me, but he does now. I’ve never seen him like this. “There is nothing in this world that could tear me away from them. Nothing! I don’t want that woman in my life and I sure as hell don’t want her anywhere near my family. You be sure to tell her that!”

Cullum remains silent as he continues staring at Liam. When it becomes apparent that our brother isn’t going to budge from his stance, Cullum’s eyes slowly shift to mine. The question is written clearly within them.

“I’m sorry, Cullum. I don’t want anything to do with her either. There’s nothing she can say that will make what she did okay.”

Without any further words, Cullum pushes away from the table before leaving the dining room altogether. I know he’s angry with us. But there’s nothing I can do about that. If he wants to let Beverly into his life, that’s up to him. I won’t open myself up to that kind of pain ever again.

Liam scrubs a hand tiredly over his face before he rises as well, silently heading into the kitchen. I hear Liam and Gia's subdued voices but can't make out the words being spoken between them.

And then it's just the two of us sitting silently in the dining room. I have to say, I did not see any of this coming. I'm almost in a state of numbness and shock regarding the whole situation. I never expected Beverly to suddenly reappear in our lives again. Not after all this time. I can't even begin to imagine why she would come back. But one thing's for sure, whatever the reason- I don't care. It no longer matters.

“Are you okay?”

Nope.

Not at all.

There is so much emotion rushing through every fiber of my being. I find that I can only shake my head in answer.

Abruptly he stands. In eight long strides, he's on the other side of the table. Grabbing my hand, he silently tugs me into his arms. Then he's holding me close, dropping light kisses on the top of my head before whispering, “Come on, let's go home.”

I can only nod as thoughts of my mother, the woman who abandoned us, tumble unwantedly through my head.

## **Chapter Twenty-Seven**

*JT*

I wake with Claire cradled in my arms. I'm starting to think I could do this every single day for the rest of my life. How crazy is that?

Pretty damn crazy, I know.

But I love having her here in my home. I like that it no longer feels so empty. I enjoy coming home at the end of the day, after practice, and finding her puttering around in the oversized kitchen, throwing something together for dinner.

Know what else I love?

Seeing her curled up on the couch as she pours over a textbook. She's so damn studious. It probably shouldn't be so hot. But it is. I can barely keep my hands to myself. It doesn't take long before I'm sliding them between her thighs, maneuvering my way into her panties before stroking her soft, wet heat.

It's almost adorable how she'll initially resist my efforts only to give in after a moment or two before spreading those long gorgeous legs of hers and letting me do whatever the hell I want.

God, but I really do love that.

I love just how much she enjoys being touched.

And touching her... It's like nothing I've ever experienced before. I find myself wanting to give her everything. And then some. I want to make every single flick of my fingers amazing for her. Even if I'm walking away with blue balls at the end of the night. The way she sighs my name, her soft moans that fill the air... it all makes me hard as steel.

Know what I don't like?

When she starts talking about finding a new place.

Yup... I usually shut that down right-quick. Apparently running my soft tongue over her pussy is the perfect distraction. Can't say I don't enjoy it.

But that's the thing... I can't say that I don't enjoy *any* of it.

I'm in no rush to see her go. It's almost disturbing just how much I want her to stay. Whatever this is between us, I want to keep it going for as long as I can.

I know she worries about what Liam will think, but I'm not concerned. He'll get over whatever qualms he has against me being with his sister once he sees just how serious I am about her.

And I know we haven't exactly talked about what we're doing here, but it seems fairly obvious to me that we're growing closer. This is more than me just getting her off. At least it is for me. I care about Claire. I've always cared. But now those feelings go way deeper.

I want her to be part of my life.

At the moment, her curvy ass is exactly where I like it, which is snug against my iron-hard cock. I swear to god, anytime I'm touching her, I can't help but rock some major wood. Hell, just catching a glimpse of her has me stiffening up.

She sighs as I palm her breast, strumming the nipple. She's got the most perfect breasts. I've been out with a lot of women over the years, and I've fucked a good number of

them. I've always preferred women with generous breasts. Big, beautiful titties that I could play with for hours. But Claire isn't built like that. She's slender. Everything about her is slight. From her hips and belly to her breasts, I find myself utterly fascinated by her.

She's a perfect handful.

And all that hair...

Sometimes I imagine what it would feel like if she trailed it across my body. It's as dark as a raven's wing and just as silky-soft, falling in a thick rich curtain down her back. I fantasize about her straddling my hips until I'm buried balls-deep within her so that I can wrap the length of it around my fist, pulling tight so that she has to arch her body as she rides me hard.

Those images are enough to leave my cock feeling as if I just might blow the tip right off as it settles at the juncture between her legs. Stroking my erection against her is sweet torture. She moans softly in her sleep. Damn, but she's adorable. It's nothing more than a breathy little sound leaving her lips.

Over the last two weeks, I've lost track of all the orgasms I've given Claire. But I've yet to make love to her.

It's gotten to the point where I don't know if I can hold back any longer. And I find, as her breast fills my palm and I press sweet kisses against her neck, that I don't want to. In the beginning, I wanted to give her time. Time to be sure about what she wanted. But in the last week, she's been the one who has been coming after me. Trying to seduce me, if you can believe that.

Plus... maybe I just wanted to drive her a little bit crazy.

Maybe I wanted her to want me the way I've always craved her.

Maybe I just needed to draw this out between us.

Maybe I wanted her to finally realize that she actually likes being with me.

That we can make this work if she would just give it a chance.

It's slowly that I trail my hand down her rib cage until I'm gliding over her belly before my fingers are able to slip between her slender legs and find her warmth. Even in her sleep, she opens for me. It's gently that I move them in and out of her before dragging the digits across her lower lips until I'm able to circle her clit.

The sound she makes is low and throaty.

Music to my ears.

Her breathing picks up its tempo as her eyelids flutter open. Widening her legs, her hips rotate to the rhythm of my fingers.

"You like that, baby?"

"You know I do." She lifts her hips just a fraction.

"Please..."

"Please what?"

Using my hands and mouth, I stroke her, playing with her body until she's on the cusp of falling apart. Just as she teeters on the brink, I pull back because I love hearing her beg. I love

the desperation that fills every thread of her voice for something only I can give her.

Maybe I need to hear her say the words out loud, to admit that it's me she wants touching her, stroking that sweet little pussy until she's falling apart. I haven't exactly figured out this deep need that I have for her. I just know it's there. And it doesn't appear to be going away anytime soon.

“I want you inside me, JT. *Please...*”

Almost leisurely I press my finger inside her until I'm buried deep. She gasps as I fill her. She's so fucking tight. And hot. It's like being cocooned in rich, decadent velvet. I can only imagine what she'll feel like wrapped around my throbbing cock. Slowly I pump my finger in and out of her body. She's so damn slick. And creamy. I just want to bury myself to the hilt within her.

And then stay there for days.

“Okay, baby. I'll give you what you need.”

After she rolls onto her back, I kneel between her legs. Staring into her eyes, I lean down, taking her lips as her arms snake around my neck. She tries pulling me down as her long, slender legs wrap tightly around my waist like a vise until her pussy is able to rub against my thick erection. I growl into her mouth as my tongue pummels hers.

“You're so fucking sexy, Claire.”

“I want to feel you inside me.” Her gray eyes plead with mine. “I'm ready, JT. I don't want to wait anymore.”

I kiss those full pouty lips of hers knowing that I'm finally going to give in to her demands. I want her just as much, if

not more. I always have. “Okay.”

Her eyes widen in surprise. I don't think she was expecting me to yield quite so easily. She has absolutely no idea just how difficult it's been to continually resist her. To have her lying naked in my bed each night. So warm and inviting. Begging me to take her.

This is the first time I've ever held off on making love-well, fucking someone. Because that's exactly what it was. Pure and simple fucking. Dipping my wick. It's not like I didn't make sure that each woman walked away completely satisfied. But still... that's all it was. Tapping some ass so I could get off.

But this...

With Claire.

It's so much more than that.

Exactly what?

I don't know. It's too soon to tell. But there's no reason we have to rush what's happening between us. We've got time to figure it all out. In this moment, all I want to do is make sure that when Claire finally gives herself to me, I make it the best possible experience I can.

Her expression leaves me grinning as I nip playfully at her chin before skimming down her body. It's gently that I lay kisses against her collarbone. Sliding down further, I suck each dusky nipple into my mouth before continuing my descent until I'm arriving at those gorgeous, pouty lower lips. Already they're so wet and plumped from playing with them.



As I settle between her thighs, she widens them without me saying a word.

Her lips spread until I'm able to see every bit of her lush pinkness. Claire has the most beautiful pussy I've ever seen. And the fact that she's waited so long to do this. To give herself to a man brings every protective instinct I have surging to the forefront. I've never considered myself someone who cared just how much experience a woman had under her belt. Hell, I enjoyed when a woman knew exactly what she liked and what she was doing.

The funny thing is, in the past, I've steered clear of virgins or women who were inexperienced. I didn't want them getting all clingy or becoming overly infatuated. I wanted someone who understood that this was nothing more than a little bit of fun. Mutual satisfaction and gratification for one night only. There wouldn't be any exchanging of numbers or midnight booty calls down the road. This wasn't going to turn into some quasi-relationship.

But this... with Claire.

The fact that no man has ever touched her... well, I'd be lying through my teeth if I didn't admit that it turns me on like nothing else. It makes me want to pound my fist against my chest and stake a claim.

I don't want anyone else touching her either.

Hell, I don't even want them looking sideways at her.

As I stare down at all that glossy perfection, I already know that I'm going to be taking my sweet time with her.

We're not rushing anything. I want to draw out all this delicious pleasure until she's dizzy with it.

And then I want to do it all over again.

When my lips finally settle on her glistening flesh, her back instantly bows off the bed as the breath catches at the back of her throat. God, but she's so damn responsive. As I start nibbling at her clit, I slide one long, thick finger inside her. After a few lazy strokes, I add a second finger trying to prepare her for what's about to happen. I want to make this as painless as possible.

Instead of shying away, she widens her legs, pressing herself against me. A soft sigh of pleasure falls from her lips as I continue caressing her with both my fingers and mouth. I know she's getting close. I can tell by the way her breath hitches, the way her body is strung impossibly tight, the throb of her softness as it surrounds me.

Just as she starts dancing closer to the edge, I pull back. Not because I want to tease her, but because when she finally comes, I want my cock buried deep within her heat. She groans as I lay one last kiss upon her. The way she continues to writhe is so fucking sexy.

Moving up her body, I finally settle myself against her, arranging my erection at the entrance of her lower lips. I think it's entirely possible that my damn cock might just explode before I even get all the way inside her. I'm so freaking worked up right now. Knowing that I'm finally going to claim her sends every primitive instinct within me hurtling to the surface.

I've never wanted to bury myself inside someone more than I do at this very moment. Even though I want to fuck her, it's more than that. Whether she realizes it or not, it is. Claire is giving herself to me. Giving me something infinitely precious. The asshole she was with before may not realize what a gift this is, but I certainly do.

I'm not about to fuck it up.

As I press forward, her eyes hold mine as if we're the only two people in the world.

"It's going to be okay, Claire. I won't lie and say that it's not going to hurt. It will. But I'll be as gentle as I can."

She nods before sucking in just a bit of a nervous breath. Her long, slender body tenses beneath mine.

"Relax, baby. You just need to leave everything to me." Somehow I know that it will only hurt more if she continues tensing up. I need to keep her loose. Focused on the pleasure. So, even though I want nothing more than to thrust into her, to bust through the thin membrane of her virginity and bury myself to the hilt within her warmth, I don't. I hold myself up on my elbows so that my weight doesn't feel crushing. Then, very slowly, I slide my dick in and out of her tight sheath. Nice shallow strokes that give pleasure rather than pain.

Around the sixth one, I feel her slowly begin to relax her muscles. She arches her body, trying to get closer. Wanting more of my cock to fill her. With each slide, I go a little deeper until I'm butting up against that thin barrier.

As my cock hits it again, I almost lose control. So badly do I want to plow right on through so that I'm completely immersed within her soft heat. It's fucking killing me to take things so slowly.

But I have to. There isn't a choice in the matter.

It's almost as if all the other women I've been with were just a precursor of sorts. Practice for this very moment when it would take every ounce of self-control I have within me to make this as good as I possibly can for her.

Her pussy... it's like nirvana. A tight, velvety fist clutching the tip of my shaft. I fucking can't wait to feel all of her pulsing around me. Squeezing me tight until I explode within her.

Which is precisely when it dawns on me that I've forgotten one very important detail.

Oh fuck...

*A condom.*

I always wrap it up.

*Always.*

I've never gone bareback in my life.

As much as I don't want to, I hastily pull out. Her fingernails dig into my back as she tries tugging me back down again.

"JT?" The question is woven though my name.

"I'm not wearing anything."

She sucks in a deep breath before slowly releasing it.  
“I’m on the pill.”

I pause so that the tip of my cock sits at the entrance of her tight pussy. So badly do I want to stroke myself back inside her.

“I’ve never been in a woman without a condom.” I have no idea if she believes that or not. If she’s smart, she’ll tell me to get something on before ever allowing me back inside her body. “I have some in the drawer.” I jerk my head towards the nightstand. “It’ll be quick, I promise.”

For just a moment, she studies my face before slowly shaking her head. “I trust you. You haven’t lied to me yet. You’ve done nothing but take care with me. I want to feel you inside me. I want to feel you *come* inside me.”

Her words leave me groaning as I surge back into her body. The breath catches at the back of her throat as I gently knock against her barrier again. As I pull out, ready to slide back inside, I ask one more time before I lose control, “Are you sure, Claire? I’ll use a condom. I don’t want to put you at risk.”

She nods her head, her nails biting into my back as she tugs me towards her, keeping me in place as if she’s afraid I might pull out again.

“I’m sure. I want to feel you. It’s so good, JT.” She arches her body. “*Sooooo good.*”

“Yeah, baby, it is.” Leaning down, I take her lips before whispering, “It’s never felt like this before. Not ever.”

I continue taking short, shallow strokes, priming her body. My cock is now coated with her cream and it's the best fucking feeling in the world. When she finally begins to tighten around me, her soft cries filling the air- I thrust, breaking through her virginity until I'm buried to the hilt within her body.

Because her pussy is still throbbing and she's so hot and tight, I totally lose it. I'm only able to stroke in and out a few more times before spending myself inside her. Holding her body against mine as her name falls from my lips, I continue thrusting.

I don't think I've ever come that hard in my life. Wrapping my arms around Claire, I roll to the side so that she can collapse on top of me. I feel her heart beat wildly against my own. Unable to wrap my mind around any one specific thought, I simply run my fingers through her hair.

*Fuck.*

That's the only word I can grasp onto right now.

That was...

That was freaking fantastic.

I almost snort.

No. It was so much more than that.

As I'm basking in the afterglow, I feel a drop of wetness hit my chest. It's enough to have me crashing back to earth with a painful thud. With my heart stuttering, I grab Claire by the shoulders, lifting her from me until I'm able to frantically search her eyes.

I wasn't wrong. She's crying. Her eyes are filled with glassy-looking tears that twist my heart.

*Fuck!*

“Did I hurt you? I'm sorry, Claire. I tried to be as gentle as I could.” And here I'd thought I was being so careful, but apparently not. A teary-eyed woman in your bed is never a good sign.

Is she having regrets already?

I'm just starting to go into full blown panic mode when a soft little smile curves her lips upwards. Leaning towards me, she presses her love-swollen lips against mine before whispering, “No, you didn't hurt me. It was wonderful. You made everything perfect, JT. Thank you.”

My entire body goes limp with relief as her words wash over me.

“Are you sure?”

She nods before snuggling up against my chest. Then I'm wrapping my arms around her, holding her tightly to me.

“It was absolutely perfect. I'm glad that I waited.” She's silent before finally whispering, “I'm glad that it was you.”

Every drop of air filling my lungs rushes out of my body. Because I'm glad that it was me, too.

## **Chapter Twenty-Eight**

*Claire*

It's the dinging of my phone that wakes me from the slumber I must have fallen into after JT and I had sex. Picking up my head, I blink until everything once again comes into sharp focus.

Holy crap.

That was...

Yeah... that was completely and utterly amazing.

Not in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine that sex could be like that.

*Especially with JT.*

Unable to help myself, my eyes slide to him. He's still sacked out right beside me. Snoring ever so lightly.

God, but he's beautiful.

I mean *really* beautiful.

Even though he's a man, there's something ridiculously beautiful about him. Must be all that thick blond hair paired with those unusual green-hued eyes. Not to mention that gorgeous smile. I've heard his smile described as panty-melting. Whoever said that wasn't wrong.

I may have kept my distance from him for the last three years, but that doesn't mean I was in any way immune to his finer points or charm. I think what I like best about JT is that he's completely different than what I had always assumed. For goodness sake, he held out for almost two weeks before finally sleeping with me.

And you know what?

It was well worth the wait.



I can't imagine my first time being any better than this.

He made it perfect.

Shaking myself out of my thoughts, I reach for my phone. As soon as I have it in hand, my brows draw together when I see a new text from Holly.

*Can u meet at George's around three? Have a roommate lined up. Need to sign paperwork.*

Nibbling at my lower lip, I fire off a quick response letting her know that I'll be there. I'm relieved that Holly found someone to take over my part of the lease and that I'll be off the hook for living with her. But it also means that I should probably start looking for a place of my own in earnest now.

I can't stay here with JT indefinitely. It's not like this is a permanent solution. Once again my eyes settle on the man lying next to me. I startle just a bit when I find those seafoam green eyes quietly watching me.

"What's going on?" His voice is all deep and raspy as he stretches that big, powerful body of his. The sheet slides down his length revealing a perfectly sculpted sun-kissed chest.

"Holly found a new roommate, so I'm going to meet up with her at three to sign the paperwork."

His reaction is almost comical. It's like someone just threw a bucket of cold water on him. All of sudden he looks wide awake. He quickly glances at the clock on his nightstand.

"I've got to head over for practice, but I'll be done at three. Set it up to meet with her at four. I don't want you

going there on your own.”

Even though I kind of want to argue that I’m perfectly capable of meeting my former roommate by myself, I don’t. In all honesty, I don’t want to see Holly alone. Thankfully we don’t have any classes together this semester. When we were first setting up our schedules, I was bummed that we couldn’t align any of our classes, but now it feels like a blessing in disguise.

“Okay. I’ll text her and see if that works.”

I don’t realize that he’s holding his breath until it comes slowly hissing out from between his lips. I notice his eyes narrow just a smidge as he continues to study me.

“I was expecting more of a fight. That was almost too easy.”

I can’t help but chuckle before pressing a quick kiss against his lips. His arms immediately snake their way around my body before hauling me even closer.

“I wish I could spend the rest of the day in bed with you, but I can’t. I have to get moving.”

“Me, too,” I admit, wishing we could do just that.

Laying a sweet kiss against my neck, he asks, “Are you sore at all?”

I shake my head because rather surprisingly, I’m not. I think he was just so gentle, making sure that I was completely ready before he went any further. “Nope. Not at all.” But I can’t resist teasing him just a bit. “Don’t take it personally. Not everyone can be hung like a stallion.”

His mouth tumbles open as his eyes flare wide before they're narrowing in response to my words. "What the hell are you talking about, woman? I'm fucking massive."

I start to laugh before holding up my pinkie and wiggling it around. "Itty bitty."

A deep growl rumbles up from within his chest. In the blink of an eye, I'm flipped over, and he's on top of me, caging me in before thrusting his hips against my center.

"Itty bitty, my ass!" He grinds his hips against mine again, and I can't stop the low groan of appreciation as sensation after sensation ricochets through me. "I'll show you exactly what massive looks like."

Since we're both still naked, his hard length slides deep inside me. God, but I love the feel of him filling me up to the very brim.

"Mmmmm," I sigh in contentment.

"You're damn right!"

He continues thrusting, his rhythm driving me closer and closer to the precipice. This time there is no gentleness whatsoever. And I love it. Love the roughness of it. Just as I feel myself slipping over the edge, my body coiled tight with impending release, JT pulls out completely.

I gasp, trying to drag him back down towards my body, arching my hips so that he can slide easily back inside my wet heat. As my eyes find his, an arrogant smirk fills them. Leaning down, he kisses me firmly on the lips before leaving me sprawled out naked on the bed.

I can't help but screech, "*Are you being serious right now?*"

His cock is completely hard. In fact, it's pointing right at me. I leap towards him, intent on getting my hands on it but he twists away at the last moment.

"Hey, what are you complaining about?" He arches a brow. "The last thing you want is some teeny-tiny dick."

Shoulders shaking with mirth, he saunters into the bathroom. Feeling frustrated, I throw a pillow at him before flopping back onto the bed.

A moment later, he sticks his blond head out from the bathroom. "Why don't you get that sweet little ass of yours in here and I'll finish you off in the shower."

Poetic it's not, but I don't care. I'm horny as hell right now.

As soon as the words leave his mouth, I'm scrambling off the bed and racing towards the bathroom. He could have left me hanging, but he didn't. And just as he promised, he takes care of me in the shower until we're both finding our release.

## **Chapter Twenty-Nine**

*JT*

We're sitting in some diner near campus waiting for Claire's bitch of an ex-roommate to show up. Like there was any way in hell that I was going to let Claire come here all by herself. I was kind of expecting her to put up a fight, but

rather surprisingly she didn't. I kind of think she was relieved when I insisted on accompanying her.

I'm just glad she gave in so easily.

Because... what was I really going to do if she didn't?

It's not exactly like we're a couple.

I have zero pull where she's concerned. The girl is completely free to do what she wants.

Which is exactly why I'm thinking that it might be time to have ourselves a little *come-to-Jesus* meeting about the state of our relationship. Especially after what happened this morning. I'm tired of just coasting along. I need to know what's going on between us.

Is this just a casual thing for her?

A sexual experiment of sorts?

I haven't a clue. I just know that what I'm feeling for Claire seems to be growing stronger with the passing of each day. And I want more.

Sitting across from her, I continue playing with her slender fingers. A soft smile hovers around the edges of her lips.

I've got a ball cap pulled low over my eyes. I don't want people recognizing me right now. I don't want to be bothered. Not when I'm with Claire. Normally I don't mind going out, shaking a few hands, snapping a few pics, signing some autographs. But like everything else, that feels different too. I just want to be alone with her. I don't want any distractions.

As soon as we're finished here, I'm hustling her back to my place so we can sit down and hash out all these questions I've got floating around in the back of my head. Amusingly enough, I've never been one to need a label slapped on a relationship. Hell, I've never really wanted a relationship before, but Claire has changed all that.

She's all I can think about.

I just want to lock her ass down tight.

I want to know that she's mine.

I want to know that she feels the same way I do. Maybe then I'll finally be able to sit back and chill out a little bit. Then we can fill Liam in on what's going on between us. There isn't going to be any more sneaking around and hiding.

I'm done with that.

And I sure as hell didn't like the way her brother Cullum was staring at me like I had no business being anywhere near her. I wanted to tell him that I've done way more than just look at his sister. But somehow, I don't imagine that would have gone over well with anyone. *Especially Claire.* So I just sat there and kept my trap shut.

"After this, I thought we could go back to my place and talk."

One dark brow rises across her forehead as she continues fiddling with the straw in her drink. "What do we have to talk about?"

"Well, I was kind of thinking that maybe we should discuss what's going on between us."

She just stares at me. Her mouth opens as if she's going to say something before her eyes suddenly lock on someone behind me. In the very next moment, every drop of color is draining away from her face as she snaps her mouth closed again.

I swing around willing to bet that the ex-roommate has just walked in. And by the look on Claire's face, I'm thinking she's brought Jackwad with her.

Everything within me flattens.

Those two are the biggest fucking asshats I've ever met in my life. It's like they're just looking for ways to inflict as much pain as they can. I honestly can't figure out why they'd want to do that. Jackwad maybe. I'm sure he's bitter about losing her.

But the roommate?

No. Sorry. I just don't get it.

It only makes me glad that I insisted on accompanying her. She may not need my protection. I'm all too aware that Claire can handle herself. Hell, I've had a front-row seat to just how scrappy she can be. But I'm here for support. I've got her back. And I'm not going anywhere.

Since I'm sitting across from Claire, I decide to take a seat next to her instead. I don't want her ex anywhere near her. And I know Claire doesn't want that either. Standing up, my eyes slice to his. He stumbles to a halt for just a moment before straightening his shoulders. Keeping an eye on him, I slide in next to Claire before wrapping one arm around her body and pulling her close.

Her former roommate slips in across from us. Jackwad takes a seat next to her, directly across from me. All I know is that he better keep his fucking mouth shut. I haven't felt this torqued up in a long time. The fact that he even dared to show his face here has me wanting to take him out. It makes me wish I'd gone back to that party and beat the shit out of him right after he tried raping her. Because that's *exactly* what his intent was. Whether she got away or not.

The motherfucker tried taking something that Claire wasn't willing to give.

Apparently, we're way past pleasantries because, without a single word in greeting, Holly pulls out the paperwork from her purse before immediately sliding it across the table towards Claire.

"Her name is Sydney, and she's planning on moving in on the first of November. She'll pick up your share of the rent and utilities and will keep the lease until the end of May."

As Claire picks up the sheath of documents and begins reading through them, I notice that her hands are trembling. Without any further questions, Claire digs out a pen from her purse before signing the papers and sliding them back towards her ex-roommate. Hopefully, after this, Claire will never hear from her or Jackwad again.

"I'll let you know when I'm going to move the rest of my stuff out."

Holly nods but other than that, there's absolutely no emotion on her face. She's obviously not sorry for anything she said or did. Apparently, Claire's friendship didn't really mean all that much to her. Wanting to protect her, I pull Claire



just a bit closer. She's better off without the pair of them in her life. I hope she realizes that.

When I lift my eyes, I notice that Jackwad is staring right at me. There's an ugly twist to his lips.

Everything within me tenses. "Is there a problem?"

He shrugs nonchalantly, but the sneer doesn't falter from his lips. "Just curious if you've fucked her yet." His glittering gaze slices to Claire who now sits immobilized besides me. "Is he the reason you wouldn't sleep with me?" When she remains silent, he continues in that same snide tone of voice. "Were you putting out for him? Spreading those pretty legs?" Then he laughs before smacking his forehead. "What the hell am I talking about? Of course you're not." Eyes once again on me, he jerks a thumb in Claire's frozen direction. "Don't waste too much time on her, man. She's one frigid bitch. Better take care so that your dick doesn't get frostbitten."

Before I can even suck in a breath, I'm out of my seat, grabbing him from across the booth. I'm not cognizant of anything but my fist slamming into his face.

Once.

Twice.

Three times in rapid succession.

The feel of my knuckles plowing into the flesh of his face, cracking bone, is a completely satisfying one.

It's only when I hear Claire screaming, frantically yanking at my arm, do I even glance in her direction. There's a dazed expression marring her face as if she can't quite believe what just happened in the blink of an eye. As I once again become

aware of my surroundings, I realize that a crowd has already gathered around us. People have their phones out and are taking video. I swear viciously under my breath before looking down at the asshole I just punched. He's on the floor holding his face. Blood drips from his nose. It's all over his shirt and scuffed-up linoleum.

Fuck.

*Fuck!*

## Chapter Thirty

*Claire*

I stand silently off to the side as JT continues talking with the police. Holly and Ryan are speaking to another officer about twenty feet away. With one hand, Ryan holds a towel filled with ice against his nose. His other hand is waving around wildly.

I still feel like I'm in shock.

All I did was blink my eyes, and suddenly there was complete chaos unfolding around me. There's no doubt about it, JT shouldn't have gone after Ryan. But I can't deny that Ryan was looking for a reaction.

Well...he got one alright.

Even though I didn't want to, I explained to the officers what happened with my ex-boyfriend a few weeks ago and exactly what he said to me in the restaurant. I don't want JT getting into any trouble over this, but already I have the

feeling that fallout is inevitable. There were too many people with cell phones shooting video and taking pictures. If they hadn't realized who JT was when the fight first erupted, they certainly know who he is now.

It's only a matter of time before the video goes viral.

If it hasn't already.

There's a thick crowd of onlookers that have gathered on the sidewalk. Even though the cops keep telling people to move it along, most of them haven't budged. I'm just hoping a news van doesn't roll up and start shooting footage.

That would make an already terrible situation even worse.

More than anything I just want to get out of here. But I can't leave without JT. I'm the reason he's in this mess to begin with. I should have never mentioned that I was meeting up with Holly. Although the thought of facing Ryan without JT at my side makes me sick to my stomach.

*"Claire!"*

I almost cringe when I hear that deep voice. Whipping around, I watch my brothers pull up before immediately jumping out of Liam's pearl white Cadillac Escalade.

Seeing them here has my mind going completely blank. I open my mouth to say something- anything, but nothing comes out. JT glances over at me before his eyes once again snap back to the cop he's talking with. Nodding, he pulls off his cap before plowing a big hand through his thick blond hair. A moment later, he's making his way towards me.

The three of them arrive at just about the same time.

Feeling ill at ease, I glance cautiously between Cullum and Liam. “What are you doing here?”

Liam’s brows snap together before he gives me a look like I’m completely crazy. “What happened between JT and Ryan is all over the place.” He jerks his head towards one of the cops. “The police called me. They recognized your name and thought you should have family come down and get you.”

Not sure what to say to either one of them, I simply stand there silently. Liam’s eyes narrow before slowly bouncing between me and JT.

“Liam-”

My brother’s suddenly eyes cut to his teammate as he takes a step towards him. “What the hell is going on, JT? What are you doing here with Claire?”

My heart clenches. JT doesn’t even glance at me before saying, “There was a problem with her roommate. She’s been staying at my place.”

I blanch.

*I can’t believe he just said that!*

Liam’s gray eyes widen, and for just a moment he continues staring at JT as if the words haven’t quite computed within his brain. As if he very possibly misheard them. I think he’s probably hoping that he misheard them. But then Liam shakes his head, his expression turning thunderous.

“What do you mean- *Claire’s been staying at your place?* Why would she do that?”

Now Liam's flashing gray eyes are swinging back towards me. Almost as if he's waiting for me to refute what JT just said. Exactly how did this situation become an even bigger mess than it was a mere five minutes ago?

Why did JT have to open his mouth?

This is hardly the time or place for this conversation.

"What's he talking about, Claire? Why would you move out of your apartment?" Almost roughly, he runs a hand through his hair. "The last time I checked, you could barely tolerate being in the same room with JT. And now, all of a sudden, you're staying with him?" When I remain silent, his gaze impatiently bounces between the pair of us, looking for someone to finally fill him in. "What the hell is going on around here?"

I bite down on my lower lip until the metallic taste of blood seeps into my mouth. "I-" but absolutely no sound comes out. I have no idea what to say. Not looking at JT, I whisper pleadingly, "I don't want to do this out here on the street. Can we just go home and talk?"

Ignoring me, Liam's eyes arrow back to JT before drilling into him. "Did you sleep with her?"

JT sucks in a harsh breath before slowly expelling it back out into the world. "It's not like that, Liam."

*"See? I told you something was going on between them!"* Looking vindicated, Cullum folds his arms across his broad chest. He might not play professional football, but he's still big and muscular.

A mixture of annoyance and anger stains Liam's face. "Shut the fuck up, Cullum! You're not helping!"

Turning towards my brother, I whisper, "Something happened with Holly, and I couldn't continue living at the apartment anymore. JT was just letting me stay there until I found a new place. That's it." Almost apologetically, I shoot a quick glance towards JT.

Silently he stares back at me. For just a moment, I wonder if he's going to tell Liam the truth.

But then his wide shoulders drop, and he finally mutters, "Yeah man, that's all there is to it. I was just doing her a favor."

Liam's eyes slowly shift between JT and myself as if he doesn't believe either one of us. But he wants to. I see it in his eyes. He wants to believe that nothing happened between us.

"So why didn't you just tell us what was going on in the first place? Why go to JT?"

I really hate lying to him. But this feels like the easiest way to smooth over at least part of this mess. I don't want to ruin the friendship that Liam and JT have. Especially over something that was, from the very beginning, just about sex.

So I go with bits and pieces of the truth. "I just wanted to handle everything on my own. Ryan and I broke up and then he started dating Holly. I couldn't stay there anymore."

Liam's eyes widen as he slowly shakes his head. Looking confused, he holds up a hand. "Wait a minute, you and Ryan broke up? When did this happen?"

I gulp. “A few weeks ago.” I’m just hoping he doesn’t ask about the circumstances surrounding our breakup. I can’t go there with him right now. Especially with Ryan standing no more than thirty feet from us. Liam will literally kill him. And Cullum will happily hold him down while he does it. I can’t let that happen. Ryan isn’t worth it.

It takes a few moments, but his face finally begins to soften. “Why didn’t you tell us what was going on? You didn’t have to handle all this on your own, Claire. We’re family. We’re supposed to be there for one another.”

I sigh. “Because you would have wanted me to move in with you guys.”

He looks affronted. “And that would have been so terrible?”

His words leave my shoulders slumping. “No, of course not. But I knew that it would make it more difficult to move back out again and get my own place. And I really like having my own apartment, Liam. You didn’t want me leaving the dorms to begin with. Once I moved in with you guys, you would have wanted me to stay put.”

Thinking over my words, he slowly strokes his jaw with his fingers. It’s begrudgingly that he admits, “Maybe.” Then he’s folding his thick tattooed arms across his chest. “You still should have told me the truth.” As if suddenly remembering that JT is still quietly watching us, Liam’s eyes narrow. “That doesn’t explain how you ended up staying with him.”

I suck in a big breath before throwing the smallest of glances towards the big blond man. From that one quick look

speared in his direction, I know JT is pissed at me for not coming clean and just telling Liam the truth.

But what *exactly* is the truth?

We're not together.

We're not involved in any kind of a relationship.

I asked him to take my virginity.

And, as of seven o'clock this morning, I'm no longer a virgin.

So where does that leave us?

I'm not about to tell my brothers that JT and I have been fooling around. That we've actually had sex. It's none of their business.

"We ran into each other and got to talking. He offered to let me stay in one of his guest rooms for a few weeks until I got everything worked out." I point towards the restaurant behind us. "That's why I was here. Meeting up with Holly to sign the sublease agreement."

Again Liam's eyes slide to his teammate. Instead of thanking JT for his hospitality, he grunts, "You better not have taken advantage of her."

JT's voice is completely devoid of emotion when he replies, "It's just like she said, man. We've gotten to be friends over the last few weeks. Nothing more." JT flicks a cold glance in my direction. "You know I'm not into relationships. I was just doing you a favor by letting her stay. That's all it was."



His words cut through me like a knife, but there's nothing I can do about them right now. It's better this way. For everyone involved.

“Well, now that I know what's going on, you can just stay at the house with us until you find another apartment.” He adds, “And I fully expect that you'll be finding your own place soon.”

I hoist a small smile. “I've already started looking.”

“Good, I'm glad that's settled.” Liam jerks his head towards one of the cops. “I'm going to make sure that everything is taken care of and that we can take off.” Finally, he claps JT on the shoulder. “I appreciate you looking out for her. Claire means everything to us. So, thanks.”

“It was no problem.”

“Alright, I'll be back in a minute. I don't want to just leave you here. You're in this mess because you were defending Claire.” Looking serious, he says, “I'm glad you didn't let her come here by herself.” Again he glances between the pair of us. “I just wish you had filled me in on what was going on.” His eyes stay locked on mine. “We're family, Claire. We don't keep secrets from one another.”

Heat fills my cheeks.

“You're right,” JT says. “I should have let you know right away that she was staying with me. At the time, it didn't seem like a big deal. I'm sorry about that.”

I can't help but wonder if that's how JT truly feels.

Was he simply doing me a favor by letting me stay at his house for a few weeks?

I mean, I'm the one who practically begged him to sleep with me. Sure, it was originally his idea but... I certainly latched onto it.

After another moment, both of my brothers go to speak with one of the police officers which leaves JT and I to stand awkwardly on the sidewalk by ourselves. For the first time in weeks, I'm not quite sure what to say to him. I feel at a loss for words. He must feel the same way because he does nothing more than shove his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. Even though his eyes are holding mine, I have no idea what he's thinking. His expression is completely shuttered.

Suddenly everything feels different between us. The easy comradery has disappeared.

Clearing my throat, I force myself to say the words. "I'm sorry." Feeling self-conscious, I gesture awkwardly to the restaurant behind us. "I don't want you getting into trouble over this."

His light green eyes stay fastened onto mine before he shrugs those broad shoulders of his.

"Everything will be fine. It doesn't sound like Ryan is going to press charges."

No, I don't think that will be happening either. Not since I threatened to press charges of my own against him if he didn't back down. It's a huge mess, but somehow, in the end, it seems to be working out. No one is getting hauled down to the police station. So... there's that, I guess.

But there's this huge yawning gulf between us and I don't know how to bring us back together again. Just as I'm about

to open my mouth, to try clearing the air between us, I see both of my brothers heading back towards us.

There's nothing I can do at this point.

"Alright, Claire, let's get going." Liam turns to a still silent JT. "They're releasing you. No charges are being pressed." He glances towards Ryan and Holly.

I can't help look their way as well. My ex-boyfriend looks pissed off.

"For some reason, I have the feeling there's more to the story than what you've told us."

My gaze flies to his. When he continues staring at me, I say instead, "I'm really tired. Can we get out of here, please?"

For just a moment, I'm not sure if he's going to press the issue or not. But then he shrugs. "Yeah, let's go before the press catches wind of this." Shaking his head, Liam mutters under his breath, "Not to mention the front office. Your ass is in enough of a sling. This will definitely push them right over the edge."

JT's only answer is to shrug.

At this point, he won't even look at me. Something twists painfully under my breast.

I hate whatever this is that's now happening between us. I wish I could ask Liam to give us a few minutes alone so that we can talk, but I know he's already suspicious of our relationship. My gaze flicks towards Cullum. The way he continues to watch the pair of us with that knowing expression... as if he's just waiting for the opportunity to be proven right regarding my involvement with JT. And until I

know exactly what we are, if anything, I'm not saying a word to them. I'm not going to make this situation even worse than it already is.

Sucking in a big breath, I say, "Maybe I should ride back with JT so I can get my clothes and books." I don't even look at JT. I have no idea if he even wants me riding back with him, but we need to talk. And if it's not now, then I don't know when it will be.

"How about we swing over on the way home, Claire-Bear?" Cullum's sparkling blue eyes drill into mine. "Then you can pick up all your stuff."

Well, shit.

There's really nothing more for me to say. Not without rousing anymore suspicion.

"Sure, okay," I reluctantly agree, "that works."

Again I glance at JT hoping for some kind of insight, but his expression remains closed. I have no idea what he's thinking or if he even cares that we seem to be over. Maybe he's glad that I'll be moving in with Liam. Maybe I was nothing more than a passing distraction, and now that he's taken my virginity, he can move on.

I hate just how much pain that thought brings to me.

"Alright man, we'll see you back at your house." Liam claps JT on the back. "Thanks again for everything."

Not once does JT's guarded green gaze touch mine. It's like I'm no longer even there. "I told you, it wasn't a problem."

That being said, JT takes off, and I stay with my brothers. Although I can't stop my eyes from trailing wistfully after him, wishing that I were leaving with him instead. The further away he gets, the more torn up I feel about the way everything ended.

Because I think that's exactly what happened.

*We ended.*

As the three of us walk towards Liam's Escalade, Cullum slings an arm around my shoulder before hauling me close. I almost stumble when he whispers in my ear, "You sure know how to pick them, don't you?"

To those words, I say nothing because he's right.

I certainly know how to pick them.

## **Chapter Thirty-One**

*JT*

Coach throws the newspaper down in front of me as I sit on the other side of his desk. I don't have to glance at it to know what I'm going to find. Unfortunately, I've already seen the photograph.

Actually, there are several photographs now circulating.

It didn't take long for the video to explode all over the internet last night. Every entertainment and gossip website had it splashed across their home page, not to mention all the sports channels that have picked up the story and are now running with it.

I almost snort at that.

*Story...*

What freaking story?

Although try telling Claire's ex-boyfriend that. I think that douchebag has been interviewed on five different stations already. And that was at eight o'clock this morning. It's probably more by now. Every time he tells the tale, it becomes even more embellished. Even more outlandish. You can totally tell that he's soaking up all the attention this is bringing him.

What a piece of shit.

All I can say is that I never liked that motherfucker. Not from the first moment I laid eyes on him. Although it's a little hard to feel vindicated when the progress I've made in the last eight months has been blown to total shit. Especially when all you see on the twenty-second video clip is me attacking some kid half my size, punching him over and over in the face.

Yeah... it may have felt good in the moment, but not so much anymore.

"*JT*," Coach snaps, "are you paying attention to one damn word I'm saying?"

The fact that he looks like he's on the verge of stroking out has me sitting up a little bit straighter. "Sorry, Coach." Not knowing what else to do, I run my hands through my hair. I've already apologized. Half a dozen times. But that doesn't stop the words from sliding off my lips again. "I'm really sorry about all this. The situation got out of control before I could think about what I was doing."

That's not exactly true.

I knew what I was doing.

Now... should I have hit that douchebag?

Especially in such a public setting?

That's a tough call.

Although I'm willing to bet the front office and the coach's staff would all unanimously agree that the appropriate response would have been to walk away like a pussy with my tail tucked between my legs.

Am I sorry that I lost my shit?

Yeah... I guess.

But hearing him talk smack about Claire like that had me totally snapping. Coupled with the fact that I'm *still* pissed about him trying to force himself on her. And then to tell her roommate, the one person who is supposed to be her best friend, that she just freaked out because she's inexperienced...

Even thinking about that little weasel has me fisting my hands together, wanting to knock him out all over again.

Looking disappointed, Coach shakes his head. "What the fuck am I going to do with you, Higgins?"

That sounds more like a rhetorical question to me.

At the moment, all hell is breaking loose around me. That freaking video- actually, there are several- is everywhere. The last time I looked, it had over a million hits on YouTube. A few of the stations and websites are playing up the angle that I went after some defenseless college kid. Not only stole his

girlfriend, but then attacked him when all he was trying to do was have a simple conversation with her.

Jackwad, of course, has tweaked his original story to fit that scenario. I've got to hand it to the kid. He certainly knows how to work a situation, that's for sure. Since my PR dude has told me not to respond- no matter what- I'm only being quoted as saying repeatedly- *no comment*. Which doesn't exactly paint me in the best light.

I'll tell you what, though- if I could get my damn hands on that punk again, I'd do a hell of a lot more than break his fucking nose. That being said, no one is happy with me at the moment. From the general manager of the team on down. Apparently, you screw up one time in eight months, and suddenly you're on everyone's shit list. Although I can't say that any of my teammates are pissed that I've once again managed to end up on the front page. Liam let it be known that I was protecting Claire.

So... at least there's that.

As of yet, I haven't reached out to her.

I just... can't.

Not right now.

I have no idea where we stand with one another. And listening to her tell Liam that we're nothing more than friends... that I offered her a place to stay and that's the extent of it... I'm not sure what to do with that.

I mean... that's exactly what she kept saying to me the entire time we were together.

That what we had was just sex.



That I was just taking her virginity.

Hell... how many times did I shut down her attempts to look for an apartment?

At least half a dozen.

So... yeah... maybe this *was* strictly about sex as far as she was concerned. How the hell do I know?

For the next five minutes, Coach continues reaming me out. I'm half wondering if this will be the final straw that breaks the camel's back and I'll end up getting traded at the end of the season. I can tell that he's just starting to wind up again when there's a knock on his office door. I don't bother turning around to see who it is. At this point, it doesn't matter. I just want this meeting over with, so I can move on with my day.

Coach waves whoever it is into his office. I sit up a little bit straighter when I see my father. I'm sure surprise is written all over my face. And none of it is pleasant. If I was already having a fucked-up day, it just nosedived. Apparently, I'm about to jackhammer to an all-time new low. Which, quite frankly, I didn't think was possible.

What the hell is he doing here?

"Hey, Jimmy. Do you mind if I have a few words alone with Jameson?"

Well, shit.

This doesn't bode well for me at all.

Honestly, my father has called six or seven times, and I've let them all go straight to voicemail. Awesome. Looks like he

brought the ass chewing to me.

“Yeah, sure. Maybe you can talk some sense into your boy.”

My father grimaces at those words as if they are actually painful. “Doubtful.”

Without another word, Coach quietly shuts the door behind him. For just a moment, my father glares at me as if I’m a piece of shit on the heel of one of his expensive wingtips before folding his big arms across his chest.

“Couldn’t be bothered to pick up the phone when I called?”

Keeping my eyes on him, I shrug carelessly. Once again, I’m reduced to being a sulky fourteen-year-old punk in his presence. It leaves me gnashing my teeth together. “Been busy.”

“Yes, I can see that. Your antics are plastered all over the papers and television.”

“Not to mention the internet.” Christ... I should really learn to keep my big mouth shut. All I can say is that he brings out the worst in me.

Eyes narrowing, he snaps, “You think this is funny?”

I sigh before admitting wearily, “No. It’s not funny at all.”

Before I can say anything else, he snaps, “Your damn right it’s not. I spoke with Stu today.”

Even though those words surprise me, I don’t let it show. Because that’s exactly what he’s waiting for. A reaction. Stu

Stermfield is the General Manager of the organization. They've been friends for years. Ever since my father coached here in Green Bay.

He allows those words to sink in for just a moment before saying in a careful tone, "I think it might be best for everyone involved if you cut ties after the season and looked elsewhere for a team."

My brows practically hit the ceiling at his audacity. My father really is a pompous asshole to think he still has that much pull around here. Even with all his clout, he's no longer in charge. He's a glorified old-timer who is trotted out for meet and greets. He waves to the fans and shakes a few hands. He signs a few autographs and tells a couple of stories.

That's it.

"All you've done since arriving in Green Bay is tarnish the Higgins name and make a laughingstock out of us. Quite honestly, your mother and I are fed up. We've had enough. It's high time you moved on."

"Excuse me?" I almost laugh. "You *actually* spoke with Stu about trading me? You want me out of Green Bay that badly?"

Not answering my questions, he sighs. It's a long, drawn-out sound. "You know, from the very beginning you were a difficult child. Always demanding so much attention from everyone. Always trying to keep up with your brother. Always wanting to steal the spotlight from him. You were such a goddamn nuisance." He shakes his head as if he can't understand any of it. "I'd hoped that once you were older, you might outgrow those childish tendencies and start acting like a

mature adult, but that has yet to occur.” He shakes his head. “Your career and how you’ve chosen to conduct yourself aren’t befitting to the Higgins name. It never has been. And clearly, it never will be.” He continues to glower. There’s not one single drop of emotion to be found within his expression. It’s as if we’re nothing more than strangers. Actually, he’d probably feel less animosity for a stranger than he does for me. “Your mother and I have grown weary of your antics. At this point, we feel it’s just best to walk away.”

*Walk away?*

What the hell does that even mean?

My mouth almost tumbles open, but I keep my jaw firmly locked. The last thing I want is to give him the satisfaction of seeing that his barbed darts have struck a chord with me.

I’ve never understood my father’s dislike of me.

I just know that I’ve always felt it. He’s made sure of that. It’s almost laughable that I spent so many years doing anything I could just to please him. Trying to be the best at everything just so he would give me one small, crumb of affection and yet he’s always stingily withheld it.

So clearly do I remember sitting in the kitchen with Bess after a game or when I would bring home an A on an exam. Without fail, she would make my favorite dinner and snickerdoodle cookies in celebration. We would sit at the kitchen island, just the two of us, and talk. She would tell me over and over again just how pleased my parents were with my accomplishments, but deep down I knew her words were a lie.

“Why?”

The word slips out of my mouth before I can rein it back in again. But then I realize just how tired I am of holding in all this poison, first trying to please him and then trying everything within my power just to piss him off. If I couldn't have positive attention, I was hell-bent on seeking out negative attention in its place. That turned out to be so much easier than trying to earn his accolades. In fact, it was ridiculously easy because the man always seemed to be lying in wait for me to fuck up.

Well... I'm done with that.

In all honesty, I should have washed my hands of him years ago. But I suppose, buried somewhere deep down, I've been holding out hope that at some point our relationship could be different. That maybe he would eventually soften up. That he would finally see me for the man I've grown into. The accomplishments I've worked for and earned over the years.

But that hasn't happened.

Today feels like the first time I've come to a place of understanding, of acceptance regarding what I've secretly been waiting for and the fact that it will never come to fruition. Furthermore, I don't need his love or approval. There's only one person who matters to me, and I've backed away from her because I was unsure of just where we stood with one another. I was afraid to put myself out there any more than I already have. Afraid she would turn away just as my parents have repeatedly done throughout my entire life.

"Why?" He seems genuinely puzzled by the word.

Realizing that it no longer matters, I come to my feet, ready to end this farce of a relationship. “Forget it, Dad.”

His brows draw together as he continues glaring. “Sit down, Jameson. I’m not finished talking with you.”

Ignoring him, I move towards the door. “Actually, I’m more than done talking with you.”

Gritting his teeth, he points towards the chair I’ve only just vacated. “Sit your ass back down right now!”

A gurgle of laughter escapes from my mouth. “Or what?” I tilt my head to the side. “What *exactly* are you going to do?”

His jaw goes a little slack as his fingers clench and unclench uselessly at his sides. I’m not worried that he’ll try taking a swing at me. My father may be a lot of things, but he’s never once laid his hands on me. He’s a lot more cowardly than that. He would much rather beat me down verbally than strike me with his fists.

And I’ve had enough.

Before he can answer, I take another step towards him. My words are quietly spoken because I want him to hear them. I don’t want anger and rage clouding my message.

“You know what, Dad, I think you’re absolutely right. Distance from one another is exactly what we need. All you’ve done my entire life is beat me down. Whatever happens from this point forward is none of your concern. I absolve you from all responsibility.”

His mouth starts working as if he’s gearing up to argue.

I can't help but snort. "That's what you've wanted from the beginning, right? Well, now you have it."

Realizing that I've said exactly what I needed to get off my chest, I head for the door. With each step I take, it feels as if the weight of the world is falling away from me. I've never felt so free. I'm suddenly wishing that I would have swept him from my life years ago.

Just as I'm about to step over the threshold, he calls my name.

I turn before cocking a disinterested brow in his direction.

"I'll have the rest of your belongings boxed up and sent over."

"Don't bother. There's nothing you have that I want anymore."

And then I'm gone.

A million pounds of weight fall away as I go.

## **Chapter Thirty-Two**

*Claire*

"Hey." Standing next to the lounge I'm sitting on, Cullum holds out a bottle of water. I take it before setting it down on the small wooden table next to me. "You've been out here for a while. Everything okay?"

I shade my eyes against the brightly shining autumn sun before staring up at my brother for just a moment. Even

though my life is in total upheaval, it's still good to have him here. With his work schedule and my course load, we don't always get a chance to see one another as often as we'd like.

Although thinking about that only reminds me of the reason behind his sudden visit. And since I don't really want to discuss JT with my brother, I decide to tackle that issue instead.

"So where's Beverly been all this time?" I can't even call her Mom. She isn't my mother. She walked away from that responsibility more than a decade ago. In fact, I never thought I'd see that woman again. It's strange to think that she's back after all this time and wants to be a part of our lives again.

What exactly does she expect?

That she can pick up right where she left off?

That we're going to just welcome her back into our lives with open arms?

I almost snort.

Because that is *so* not going to happen.

In fact, I can't even begin to imagine it. That's how far-fetched the notion is.

I guess what surprises me most is that Cullum is even willing to entertain the idea of having a relationship with her. Out of the three of us, he had the toughest time adjusting to her absence. You might assume that I would have been the one to suffer most because I was the only girl in a house full of men, but that wasn't the case at all. Even though Liam stepped up and took responsibility when our father couldn't, Cullum is the one who ended up working full time while he



was still in high school just so we could scrape together enough money to pay the bills. Life wasn't easy for him.

And for a long time, he was pissed off about that.

Most of the time, I think he still is.

Cullum sighs. It's a deflated sound that comes from deep within. "Just around, I guess."

Even though there's nothing funny about his answer, I can't help but laugh. "Just around, huh? Awesome."

Cullum slowly lowers himself onto the wooden lounge next to me. For a long, quiet moment, we simply stare at the crystal-clear water of the pool as it rocks gently beneath the breeze.

"What does she want?" Because she must want *something* from us. Why else would she bother showing back up more than a decade later?

That's when I feel the weight of his stare fall on me. "She wants a chance to get to know you again."

And just like that, everything within me shuts down. I shake my head. "It's a little too late for that, don't you think?"

"It doesn't have to be."

This time, when the words slide off my lips, I turn my head until my eyes can skewer his. "I disagree. I think it's *much* too late for her to simply pop back into our lives and expect that we've just been sitting around, waiting for her to return."

"She doesn't think that, Claire."

I shrug before reaching for the bottle of water. All of a sudden, my throat is parched. It's starting to ache. Unscrewing the cap, I bring the bottle to my lips before guzzling down a third of the icy cold liquid.

It does nothing to make me feel better.

"Well, I wouldn't know what she thinks, because I was just ten years old when she walked out of my life." Even though it's not necessarily true, I add, "I barely remember the woman."

"I remember her." His softly spoken words leave me feeling gutted. I want to reach out and take him into my arms. But I don't. Unable to hold his penetrating gaze, I shift my eyes back to the water. It just seems safer that way.

"She really wants to see you, Claire."

"Well, sorry to disappoint, but I have enough going on in my life right now. I don't need to complicate it any further by opening myself up to her again."

The woman certainly has some nerve showing up out of the blue. She leaves when I'm just a kid and then wants to waltz back in eleven years later like nothing ever happened?

No. Sorry. It doesn't work that way.

"Would JT Higgins be one of those complications?"

Rather than answer him, I compress my lips into a tight flat line.

Undeterred by my silence, he continues rather blithely, "I know something's going on between you two. Liam may be fooled, but I'm not. I see the way he looks at you." Leaning

towards me, he bumps my shoulder with his broader one before adding quietly, “And I see the way you look at him in return.”

Sighing, I mutter, “I don’t really want to talk about it, Cullum. Whatever *was* going on,” which is by no means an admission, “*isn’t* anymore. So you don’t have to worry about me getting involved with him.” Forcing out those words feels surprisingly more painful than I expect them to.

“Who says I’m worried?”

My eyes snap back to his. One brow is cocked as he continues holding my gaze.

“The night you arrived,” I trail off before adding, “it seemed like you were trying to keep us apart.”

He puffs up his already broad chest. “I’m your big brother, Claire. I’m supposed to keep guys away from you.” He gives me a look as if to say- *duh*. “It’s kind of my job.”

I can only blink at that.

“Plus,” he shrugs, “the media has made him out to be some kind of douchebag player.” His expression immediately sobers. “That’s not exactly the kind of guy you should be getting involved with.”

I shake my head trying to understand exactly where he’s going with this conversation. “Are you saying that you’ve changed your mind about him?”

Looking thoughtful, he finally shrugs. “Maybe. I guess from what I’ve observed in the past couple of days, it kind of seems like he cares about you.” He beams a crooked-looking

half-smile in my direction. “He certainly took care of the asshole you were involved with.”

Sucking in a breath, I rub my eyes with my fingers.

Ryan...

Labeling him as an asshole is being overly generous in my opinion.

Thankfully Cullum still doesn't know everything that happened between us. My older brother would probably kill him. That being said, I would dearly love to strangle Ryan myself. He's been all over the media.

Giving *his* delusional side of the story.

Playing up the injured victim part.

It pisses me off just thinking about it.

I can only shake my head and wonder for about the millionth time how I could have been so wrong about him. I've known Ryan for three years, and he's always been nice. Not once did I ever suspect that he would try forcing himself on me. Or that he would hurl such vicious words at me like he did at the restaurant. And now he's taking advantage of the situation with JT to get notoriety in the press.

It's disgusting.

I hate to admit it, but JT was completely right about him.

*JT*...

I feel like for the first time in weeks, he's completely backed off. I haven't heard one word from him since I packed up my stuff from his place with Cullum and Liam looking on.

And the press... they're happily tearing him apart right now. I hate that I did this to him. He wouldn't have been at the restaurant, wouldn't have gotten into a fight with Ryan, if it hadn't been for me.

"Do you care about him?"

Tired of lying to my family about my relationship with JT, I finally admit for the first time out loud, "Yeah, I do." No matter what happens, it feels good to finally come clean.

At least to one person.

"Then what are you going to do about it, Claire? Because you kind of shit all over the guy when all he was trying to do was protect you."

I stare at Cullum for just a moment because he's right. Instead of telling everyone the truth when all hell was breaking loose, I continued lying.

To JT.

To my brothers.

*To myself.*

Maybe I was afraid of admitting that I'd fallen for JT. Maybe I was afraid that he wouldn't feel the same way and that I would only end up getting hurt again. I mean, we are talking about JT Higgins here. He's not exactly a shining example of monogamy or relationship longevity.

Feeling confused, I finally sigh. "I don't know."

Leaning towards me, Cullum lays a big hand across my leg. My eyes immediately shoot to his in question. When he has my undivided attention, he finally murmurs, "You're a

smart girl, Claire Elizabeth Garrison. You'll figure out what's best. You always do." Then he gives me a little wink along with a cheeky grin before adding, "You didn't get this far by being a dumbass."

Even though there's absolutely nothing funny about what we've been talking about, I can't help but hoist my lips, giving him a small smile in return. I appreciate his vote of confidence, but it doesn't necessarily help me. Because really, there are only two directions I can move in.

One- I put all this behind me and forget about JT Higgins and what we've shared. We do exactly what we agreed upon from the onset and go our separate ways.

Or two- I tell him everything I've only now come to realize. That I care about him. More than I ever thought possible. Which really means that I put my heart in JT's big hands and hope he doesn't crush it.

### **Chapter Thirty-Three**

*Claire*

I'm not going to lie- it took a couple of days for me to finally work up the courage to come here. Fine, fine... I'll admit that I dragged my feet, hoping that maybe JT would reach out first so I didn't have to be the one to do it.

But that hasn't happened.

And the more time that slipped by, the more I realized that I couldn't just walk away from him.

So here I am, leaning ever so casually against his silver little Porsche in the nearly empty parking lot. It's just about three o'clock in the afternoon. Practice should be wrapping up any minute now. The more time that slowly slips by, the more my nerves start to fray. Which then has me wondering why I ever came up with this cockamamie plan in the first place. Maybe I should just go home.

But it feels much too late to turn tail and run at this point.

Plus, I kind of don't want to.

I need to do this.

I need to tell JT exactly how I feel about him. And if it doesn't turn out the way I had hoped it might... well then... I tried. Right? I put myself out there for someone I truly cared about.

Know what?

This is probably the scariest thing I've ever done.

At this very moment, my heart is thundering almost painfully in my chest, and my mouth feels dry and cottony. There's also a small swarm of butterflies trying to wing their way to life inside the confines of my belly.

So yeah... this sucks.

Big time.

But oddly enough, it feels exhilarating as well. Because I'm going after what I want. And what I want is JT.

After ten more agonizing minutes, guys finally start trickling out of the stadium. Recognizing me, a few wave before calling out hello. I've been around for over three years

now. So even without Liam, they know who I am. More than a couple of them see just whose car I'm leaning up against and shake their heads before giving me big, toothy grins.

*"Hey, maybe we should stick around so we can watch Higgins get the shit kicked out of him."*

*"Not like I haven't wanted to do it myself a time or two."*

*"Tell JT that it was nice knowing him."*

*"Guess we'll be looking for a new defensive end after Garrison gets a hold of him."*

*"Claire, you trying to get Higgins killed?"*

The more guys that walk past, giving me sly looks, yelling out smartass comments, the more jacked up I get. Just as I'm considering the merits of jumping back into my car and getting the hell out of here, is precisely when I catch my first glimpse of long blond hair. Even though he's about eighty feet from me, I feel the exact moment his eyes collide with mine because his feet grind to a halt for just a moment or two before he's once again moving towards me.

Unable to help myself, my eyes coast over his long lean body, taking in the navy T-shirt stretched tautly across his broad shoulders and wide chest. The way the cottony sleeves hug his bulging biceps leaves me nearly swooning. Have I mentioned just how much I love that man's arms? Even though it's only been a few days since I last laid eyes on him, it feels like forever. We spent the last couple of weeks getting to know one another. Falling asleep in each other's arms. Exploring each other's bodies.

And I miss it.



I miss *him*.

More than I even realized until this moment.

When JT is no more than five or six feet away from me, he stops. Not once do his eyes waver from mine. The intensity of them has every single thought suddenly fleeing from my head. I came here with a plan in mind. A whole speech worked out.

And now... now I can't remember a single word of it.

When I remain silent, just standing there like some kind of statue, my fingers twisting together nervously in front of me, one of his dark blond eyebrows slowly slinks upwards in obvious question.

Rather inarticulately, I blurt out the only thing my mind is able to grasp onto. "I'm sorry, JT."

Well, it's definitely not the long-winded speech I had mentally rehearsed, but it's what truly lies in my heart.

I *am* sorry.

Sorry that I hurt him.

It had never been my intention.

Eyes still piercing mine, JT silently cocks his head to the side. His blond hair gets ruffled by the gentle fall breeze blowing through the nearly empty parking lot. In that moment, all I want to do is close the distance separating us and run my fingers through the long golden strands.

A week ago, that's exactly what I would have done. I wouldn't have even thought twice about reaching out and touching him. But so much has changed between us.

“What are you sorry for?”

“For lying to Liam and Cullum about our relationship. For keeping it hidden.” I pause, hoping he’ll jump in and save me from my awkward verbal fumbblings, but he doesn’t. “And I’m sorry for not being honest with you about how I was feeling.”

His words are softly spoken when he finally asks, “And how do you feel about me?”

I suck in a great big breath knowing that I need to push out the words. Whether he breaks my heart or not, I need to tell him the truth. “I went into this arrangement just wanting to get rid of my virginity. At the time, I didn’t want it meaning anything more than that.” My eyes stay latched onto his, trying to gauge his reaction. But I can’t. His gaze is completely shuttered. I have no idea what he’s thinking. “But that’s not what happened. Even though I didn’t want to, I fell for you.” I pause before admitting, “Whatever this is between us, I don’t want it to end. I don’t want *us* to be over.”

There.

It may not be poetic or well spoken, but it’s exactly how I feel.

When he remains silent, a huge, painful lump settles in the middle of my throat, and everything inside me sinks to the bottom of my toes. Instead of telling me what I want to hear, what I so desperately *need* to hear, he reaches out, grabbing one of my hands before slowly towing me towards him until his arms are able to wrap their way around me, until I find myself all but crushed against his massive chest. Then he’s dropping a light kiss on the top of my head before I’m lifting

my chin so that I'm once again able to meet his green-eyed gaze.

“You and me, we're not over, Claire. Not by a long shot. I was just trying to give you a little bit of space. Some time to think things through, that's all.”

Those words have all my rigidly held muscles turning to mush. Thankfully he's holding me tightly against him, or I think I would collapse into a puddle on the pavement.

“You kind of left me hanging there for a moment,” I mutter.

Leaning down, he smacks a quick kiss against my lips. A sexy little smile hovers around the edges of his lips. “I needed you to finally open up and tell me how you were feeling. Because honestly, I had no idea. At every turn, you let me know that what we had was just sex. That you were moving out and moving on as soon as I took your virginity. So yeah, I was hoping that it wasn't true... but I didn't know.”

His words leave me feeling like a complete ass. Because he's right, that's *exactly* what I was doing. “I'm sorry about that. I think I was just trying to protect myself. I didn't want to end up getting hurt. Again.”

“I know, baby, I know. Trust me when I say that I'll do everything within my power not to hurt you.” Using his fingers, he lifts my chin until his eyes are able to impale mine. “You know that, right? For three years, it's been you. Now that I actually have a real chance at making this work between us, there's no way in hell I'm going to blow it.”

With those words, his lips crash down on mine. And then I'm lost. To everything around us. To every thought in my head. All that matters is JT and the fact that I'm once again in his arms. Where I belong.

After a few minutes- or maybe ten- I have no idea, we finally break apart when we hear someone clearing their throat. Turning at the same time, we find Liam standing with his tattooed arms crossed over his chest. I bite my lower lip as my brother's narrowed gaze slowly bounces between the pair of us.

Instead of waiting for JT to explain the situation, I jump right in, doing what I should have done from the very beginning when I first realized that I was starting to have feelings for JT.

Turning towards my brother, I say, "I lied to you, Liam and I'm sorry for that. JT and I have been seeing each other for a couple of weeks now." I gulp in a big breath before slowly pushing out the rest. "And we're going to continue seeing one another."

For a long, drawn-out moment, Liam doesn't utter a sound. I have no clue how he's going to react to what I've just said. He's always been so protective of me. I know it's because he loves me. And I appreciate it, I really do. As a family, we've always been close. But he can't continue trying to shield me from everything. Apprehension prickles in the pit of my belly as I nervously wait for his response.

"Okay."

My mouth drops open in astonishment. Here I had been bracing myself for a massive fight, and there's... nothing.

*Absolutely nothing.*

I have to admit, it all feels a little anti-climactic.

“*Okay?*” Eyes wide, I slowly shake my head. “That’s it? No screaming or yelling?” I jerk my thumb towards JT. “Or pummeling the shit out of him?”

One of his dark brows slowly wings its way upwards. “Is that what you want? Because it would certainly be my pleasure to oblige you with that.”

I can’t help but toss my hands in the air. “Of course not. But you’ve always made such a big deal about me staying away from your teammates. I just assumed you would have an issue with this.”

Liam’s gray eyes stay pinned to mine. “All I’ve ever wanted is for you to be happy, Claire. If JT makes you happy, then I won’t say a word about it. Plus, he’s a hell of a lot better than the other guy you kept bringing around.”

Again my mouth falls open. “You didn’t like Ryan? But you never said a word...”

Looking rather pleased with himself, his lips turn up at the corners before he taps his index finger against his head. “It’s a little something called *reverse psychology*. You should check it out.”

I roll my eyes before asking, “So you’re totally fine with us seeing each other?”

“Yeah, I’m fine with it.” Eyes shifting to JT, he suddenly smirks. “But that doesn’t mean I’m not going to pummel his ass out on the field every chance I get for going behind my back and seducing you.”

His comment instantly brings color to my cheeks. “He did not *seduce* me!”

Not looking intimidated in the least, JT snorts. “Just try it, old man.”

Liam chuckles. “By the time I’m done with you, you’ll be sorry that you ever looked sideways at her.”

Expression sobering, JT glances at me. “Not possible.”

Even though my brother grunts in response, he looks oddly pleased with the comment. “Alright then, I’m heading home for dinner.” Liam’s eyes touch upon both of us. JT now stands behind me with his arms wrapped around my shoulders so that my back is pressed against the strong wall of his chest. “I expect to see the pair of you for dinner tonight.”

We both nod.

It is Thursday, after all.

And tradition is tradition.

Especially in the Garrison family.

Just as he starts walking towards his Escalade which is parked a few rows over, he adds, “And don’t think that she’ll be moving back to your place, Higgins. That won’t be happening on my watch.”

I glance up at JT before sighing. “You know he’s perfectly serious about that.”

“Yep, I do.”

I can’t help but ask, “So, you still interested in dating me?”

He grins down at me. His brilliant white teeth slashing through the sun-kissed color of his face. “Sweetheart, it’s going to take more than Liam Garrison to get in the way of me being with you.”

I twist in his arms until my breasts are crushed against the powerful lines of his chest, and I’m able to twine my arms around his neck. Rising up on my toes, I take his lips with my own. Once again, I realize just how right everything feels between us. How right it’s always felt. Even when I was trying to keep my distance, fighting the deep attraction I felt, it was always JT that I wanted.

It was never my intention to hold off on losing my virginity. It wasn’t like I was waiting around for the perfect guy to come along and sweep me off my feet. And yet, that’s exactly what happened. Somehow the guy I had always thought was totally wrong for me, ended up being absolutely perfect.

## **Epilogue**

*JT*

The sun is just starting to peek over the horizon as I wake with my arms snaked around Claire. She’s still sleeping soundly. No matter where we are or what we’re doing, I have this insatiable need to be as close to her as possible.

We’ve been together for six months now. Contrary to what Liam said, she’s now spending every night at my place, in my bed, wrapped up in my arms. Which is exactly where

she belongs. Instead of looking for an apartment close to campus, she decided to stay with Liam and Gia, making it much easier for her to spend time at my house.

After about four months of her going back and forth, and tired of not holding her in my arms when I fell asleep at night, I finally pulled Liam aside and told him that I had every intention of marrying his sister. Not now. Not anytime soon since Claire just turned twenty-two and hasn't even graduated from college yet.

But that's my plan.

Rather surprisingly, he was cool with it.

I think he sees just how much loving her has changed me.

Which in no way means that he didn't keep his word about pummeling my damn ass out on the field that first month. Yeah... that motherfucker got me good a few dozen times. And I let him, hoping that it would help him get over any lingering objections he might have to us being together. After that, I started hitting back.

Something powerful contracts in my chest as my eyes once again fall on Claire.

Sometimes it blows my mind just how much I love her. I spent years hopping from one woman to the next, never bothering to get to know any of them. One was just as interchangeable as the next.

But Claire... she's different.

I have no idea why.

She just is.



The very first moment I laid eyes on her, I realized it.

Three years ago, this would have never worked between us. I was nowhere near ready for the kind of commitment I now have with her. Which only goes to show you that somehow everything worked out just the way it was meant to. I thank my lucky stars each and every day that she finally gave me a chance to prove that I could be a man worthy of her. That I could be different than the man she met all those years ago.

Unable to resist waking her, I start nibbling on her delectable earlobe until she's finally stirring in my arms. A little sigh of pleasure falls from her softly parted lips as I continue nipping and laving at her flesh. It goes without saying that I can't get enough of this woman.

Those sleepy gray eyes finally feather their way open before blinking at me. A small smile slowly curves her lips upwards as her gaze finally locks on mine.

"Hey, you." Her voice is all low and gravelly. Full of slumber. Sexy as hell. My cock had already been stirring to life, but that deep, raspy voice has it going rock hard in an instant.

"Did I wake you?"

We both know that I did.

Her smile widens. "I can't think of a nicer way to wake in the morning than your lips on me."

She turns her face until my mouth is able to coast leisurely over hers. It's Saturday morning. We've got the

whole day stretched out ahead of us and nowhere to go. Hell, we could laze about in bed for hours if we wanted.

Can't say that idea doesn't hold a certain amount of appeal.

Maybe we'll take a nice long soak in the tub...  
*afterwards.*

As I continue kissing her, she turns her willowy body towards mine until every soft curve is pressed up against all my hard lines.

Finally pulling away, I whisper, "You know I love you, right?"

My words have her eyes immediately softening. "I love you, too." Bringing her fingers to my face, they begin tracing over all the sharp angles and planes as if trying to commit them to memory.

For some reason, I want her to know what's in my heart. I don't want to take one single second with her for granted. "You mean everything to me, Claire. I can't even begin to imagine my life without you in it."

Quietly she searches my eyes before using her hands to push against my chest until I'm falling back onto the soft linens. Then she's climbing on top of me, seating herself so that she's straddling my pelvis with her long, lean naked body. Again her hands go to my face. Only this time she cups one cheek in each small hand.

"Baby, I love you more than anything. I'm yours, and you're mine, and nothing will ever change that."

Eyes holding hers captive, I reach up, brushing aside the long strands of her silky hair so that I can cup one beautiful breast in each hand. Gently I knead the softness as she moans before allowing her head to roll back.

“Mmmm, I love the way you touch me.”

“Not half as much as I love touching you,” I whisper in reply.

She shifts until my hard, throbbing length is able to slip deep within the warm, tight sheath of her body. Every single time I slide inside her, there’s this intense feeling of homecoming that reverberates throughout my entire being. A sense of rightness that I’ve never experienced before.

It’s as if being cradled this deep inside her is where I truly belong.

Where I was always meant to be.

Claire Garrison is my everything. She completes me in a way I never expected. Or imagined possible. She’s my other half, my home, the love of my life.

I spent three years watching her, wanting her. Yearning for something I could never have, something I was nowhere near ready for. But I’m not that guy anymore. Claire makes me want to be the very best man that I can. She makes me want to be a man worthy of her. And now that I am, now that I have everything I could possibly want, I’m going to hold her close and never let go.

**~The End~**

*I hope you enjoyed Claire and JT's story as much as I loved writing it. If so, please consider leaving a review where you purchased this ebook as well as at Goodreads. Thank you so much for your support!*

## **One Night Stand**

### **Chapter One**

*Gia*

It's just after eleven o'clock and already this place is completely packed. Standing room only. It may be some crappy little hole-in-the-wall dive bar, but I can't deny its popularity. Although I suspect that has a lot to do with cheap beer. Since it's not even half a mile away from Barnett University, and most of these people look young, my guess is that a lot of college kids have taken up residence here. I'm just glad Noah was able to reserve a small round high top table for the three of us to park ourselves at.

The lights are low, drunken voices push in from all sides, and the music- well, it's even louder than these students cutting loose on a Saturday night. The pulsing beat all but reverberates off the walls. Even though this isn't my usual

style of music or venue, my eyes are glued to the four guys performing on stage.

“I never realized how hot your brother was!” Not once do Harper’s eyes deviate from the stage. “It must be the whole musician vibe he’s got going on.”

Um, hello... no sister ever wants to hear about one of her friends panting after her younger brother. I scrunch my nose in disgust. “*Ewww*! You just can’t go around saying things like that about someone’s baby brother. It’s not right.”

In typical Harper fashion she grins, not taking my words very seriously. “Sorry, hon. But it’s the truth. He is *definitely* looking good up there.” Then she points to the horde of overzealous females who are crowded around them, looking as if they just might rush the stage before the performance is even over. “And I’m obviously not the only one who thinks so either.” A slow smirk slides its way across her pretty face. “Looks like little Noah Monroe is going to be getting laid tonight. And my guess is that it’ll be by more than one girl.”

As soon as those words are released into the air, I quickly clap my hands over my ears before shaking my head vigorously back and forth.

“That’s not a mental image I need or want. So thanks for that.”

Sophie and Harper exchange knowing grins. My brother suddenly belts out another lyric, his voice soaring clear as a bell over the guitars and drums. The acoustics may be total crap in here, but he still sounds ridiculously amazing. Another silence falls over the three of us as our attention immediately gets sucked back into the music.

“Hey ladies, can I buy you a drink?”

Ugh.

Not another one.

Seriously... where do these guys keep coming from?  
There is absolutely nothing about the three of us that screams-  
*trolling for dudes! Buy us a drink! We're looking to get laid!*  
*Come hit on us! Easy targets right this way!*

And yet, they just keep ambling over.

One right after another.

They're a persistent bunch. I'll give them that. Why do I keep forgetting this is some crappy bar with drunken college guys who are very obviously looking to get laid?

Even if I hadn't recently extricated myself from a three year relationship, I still wouldn't be interested in hooking up with some twenty-one or twenty-two year old.

I'm strictly here to watch Noah perform tonight.

Before I'm able to cut the guy off and send him packing, like I've done about four times previously, Harper gives him a quick once over before smiling prettily.

Uh oh.

I know that look.

“Of course you can,” still smiling, her eyes turn into hard little chips of green ice, “but understand that there's absolutely no obligation on our parts to do anything more than thank you politely for your generosity.” She bats her eyelashes at him as if to soften the blow of her words.

The guy seems momentarily surprised before an easy grin spreads its way across his handsome face. And yeah, he's definitely a cutie. But come on... he's much too young! I'm half tempted to reach over and pinch his cheeks with my fingers, he's so boyishly adorable.

"You got it, sweetheart." Flaggering down a harassed looking waitress, he whispers something in her ear before turning back to us. "This round is on me." He sends Harper one last sly look before leaning just a bit closer to her. "Feel free to thank me once you're done enjoying your beverage."

And then he's gone.

Harper's lips tremble as she continues to watch him disappear through the thick crowd back to wherever he came from.

When the three of us remain silent, the waitress slants a dark uninterested brow our way before asking, "You gonna order something or what?"

Normally when the three of us head out for a girl's night, it isn't to some low rent college bar where the clientele barely looks to be of legal drinking age. We head downtown to some of the more upscale bars and clubs that line the main drag. And we stick to chardonnay and cosmos.

But here, my guess is that they don't have a good house chardonnay or make specialty martinis. Everyone seems to be drinking bottles or mugs of pale looking beer.

Well... when in Rome, right?

So we order three bottles of import and go back to watching the final set.

Harper's not quite finished with her bottle when she suddenly rises to her feet. "As this group's self-appointed ambassador, I shall graciously take it upon myself to thank Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome for buying us our drinks."

I give her a look rife with meaning. "Just be careful as to how you thank him, Harp. For all you know, he's not even twenty-one."

I'm not saying that I saw peach fuzz but...

A wicked gleam fills her sparkling green eyes. "Oh, don't worry. I'm planning to do a little recon before I decide how best to express my gratitude."

That being said, she pushes and shoves her way through the thick rowdy crowd. Sophie and I silently meet each other's gazes from across the small table before bursting into laughter. "I wonder if we'll even see her again tonight."

I almost wince. "Please, these guys are like babies." They're so damn young.

Sophie makes a point of slowly glancing around before her eyes finally find their way back to mine again. "Yeah," she drawls, "most of them don't look like babies. *Like at all.*"

Silently I have to agree with her assessment. These guys may be young, but some of them are built. Not to mention ripped. I can't say that I haven't enjoyed the eye candy tonight.

But it's definitely been from afar.

I can just imagine the headlines now- *Nearly thirty year old elementary school teacher takes advantage of barely-out-of-high-school boy.*



Yeah... no thank you.

Sophie, Harper, and I all work at North Hill Elementary School. Sometimes it's hard to believe that this is my eighth year teaching second grade. I was extremely fortunate to snag a job in this district straight out of college. Because I love where I'm at, I've never even considered looking for a different teaching assignment.

Since the three of us are all around the same age, we just naturally banded together, forming a tight trio. Normally we eat lunch together and hang out quite a bit outside of school. Especially now that Tyler and I are no longer together.

Even though I hate leaving Sophie alone at the table, because I can practically see the sharks circling as we speak, I yell over the music, "I'm going to run to the bathroom. I'll be back in a few minutes."

With a wide smile, she waves me away before glancing around. "Don't worry, I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself."

"I never said you couldn't." Just as I'm about to turn away, I spin back around before adding, "Remember- these guys are like the kiosk salespeople at the mall, avoid eye contact at all costs."

She gives me a cheeky grin in return.

"You worry too much, just go. I'll be perfectly fine on my own."

With one last nod, I begin pushing my way towards the bathroom which is located on the far end of the bar. Because

of the crowd packed in tight tonight, it takes a good five minutes for me to even navigate my way to the restrooms.

Once I finally get there, I'm a little horrified by what I find.

Has anyone ever cleaned this place?

I can't help but press my fingers against my nose before inhaling another breath. The smell is enough to knock me on my ass.

I'm not going to lie... I actually do a little self-check and consider not using the facilities. But there's no way I'm going to be able to hold it for another hour or so. Apparently the two drinks I've consumed have run right through me.

Trying to touch as little as possible, I squat over the toilet seat. Once I make it to the sink, I practically scrub the fingerprints right off my hands before using a ripped off sheet of paper towel to open the door handle.

Once I'm out of the bathroom, I inhale, filling up my lungs with fresh- no, wait. It's definitely not fresh air, but it's a lot better than what was inside that bio-hazard of a room.

I'm just about halfway to the table, when someone steps in front of me, effectively blocking my path. Since this place is packed to the gills, I don't think too much about it. I simply try sidestepping him so I can make my way back to Sophie. Maybe Harper has already returned to the table by now. She may only be twenty-six, which really isn't all that much older than some of these college students, but I still can't see her going home with someone that young. Her last boyfriend was like forty.

And some stuffy lawyer to boot.

The guy quickly slides in the same direction which means I find myself blocked yet again. This time, my eyes immediately arrow to his. That's when I notice the small smirking smile plastered across his face and it suddenly occurs to me that this little dance we're doing is in no way accidental.

As our eyes catch, he offers me a roguish smile.

One that's meant to charm.

It falls short by like a mile.

"Hey there, beautiful."

Cue the mental groaning. I am so not into this. All I want is to head back to the relative safety of the table. Impatiently I give him a polite smile hoping this won't take too long.

Even though it's been two months since Tyler and I broke up, hooking up is the very last thing on my mind. When I finally am ready to jump back in there again, it won't be with some drunk college kid who has zero idea that women have a little something called a *clit*. Not to mention where this so called clit is located.

I dealt with that back in college.

I'm not interested in reliving that part of the experience all over again.

At this point, I'm only interested in men who have, at the very least, a rudimentary understanding as to how female orgasms are achieved. And are willing to take the time and prove it. Let's just say that Tyler had a working knowledge of

female anatomy but wasn't always willing to put forth the necessary time and effort into achieving those goals.

I met Tyler about three and a half years ago through a co-worker at North Hill. We were introduced at a summer barbeque and just seemed to hit it off. At the time, he ticked off all the standard criteria on my mental list.

Educated. Check.

Within the same age bracket. Check. I'm not into older men like Harper.

Same core values. Check

Not only had a job, but was career-focused. Double check.

Although here's where I've learned the difference between dedicated to one's profession (me) and damn near obsessed (Tyler). Over the years it finally became a point of contention between us and eventually was one of the reasons we decided to part ways.

Not wanting to waste this guy's time or, more importantly- mine, because what he's hoping might happen between us, is so *not* going to happen, I get right to the point.

"Sorry, I'm not interested." That being said, I quickly try maneuvering around him but just like before, he shifts his body, blocking my escape.

Again.

Even though he continues smiling at me, my brows lower over my eyes.

I've just told this guy in no uncertain terms that I'm not interested in whatever he's offering.

Shouldn't that be enough?

He holds up his hands in a gesture of surrender as if to show me that he's perfectly harmless.

Hey- know a better way to show me that you're harmless?

Actually try accepting when I tell you I'm not interested. That would actually go a long way towards proving your point.

Is that concept really so very difficult to grasp?

Apparently it is.

Because this guy doesn't appear to be budging anytime soon. Which is just plain annoying.

"Hey, I just wanted the chance to get to know you."

A snort slips out. "*Riiiiight*, I'm sure that's *exactly* what you're all about." Sighing, I try one more time to maneuver around him. I don't want to get nasty here, but I will if I have to.

Just like before, he blocks my escape route before giving me a knowing grin. My guess is that since approach one didn't work, he's going with a different tactic. "Come on, sweetheart, you can level with me."

Slowly his eyes rake over my body and even though I'm not wearing anything revealing- we're talking high neck sweater and jeans- he makes me feel like I'm standing in front of him completely naked.

“You’re obviously here looking to get laid. You’re a little too...”

Unconsciously my brows wing up because I know exactly what word is about to fly out of his mouth.

“*Mature*,” he finally says around a broad, patronizing smile, “you’re a little too *mature* to be hanging out in a bar like this if you’re not interested in finding someone to hook up with.” He shrugs as if he’s doing me a big favor by laying it all out on the table. “I’m just offering up my services, is all. Plus, I’m into cougars. Or MILF’s. Or whatever it is that you are.”

*Cougar?*

*MILF?*

I’m not even thirty! I’m twenty-nine. And some change. I’m nowhere near cougar age. Isn’t that like forty or something?

Instead of going off on him, I inhale a deep calming breath. “Exactly how old do you think I am?”

He scrutinizes my face. “Twenty-eight?”

Close enough.

Rather matter-of-factly, I ask, “Didn’t your parents ever teach you that it’s impolite to point out a woman’s age?”

He blinks in response.

“Well, I’m going to do you a favor, one you don’t deserve, and tell you right now that it’s incredibly rude to bring up a woman’s age. And you certainly don’t refer to her as a *cougar* or *MILF*.” Shaking my head, I add, “In the future, I wouldn’t

open with you trying to do any woman a favor by sleeping with her. That's just plain asinine. If you actually find a woman willing to climb into bed with you, especially after you've opened your mouth, she ought to be cherished and revered. Not to mention thanked. Profusely."

"So... just to be clear, you're not interested in hooking up with me tonight?"

Slowly I shake my head. "Not even for a minute. I'm just here to watch the band, not get laid. Now that we've cleared that up, you can kindly step aside."

When he still doesn't budge, my annoyance suddenly ignites in earnest. With a bit more exasperation, I bite out, "Look, I'm not interested. I just want to get back to my friend."

Instead of leaving, he glances in Sophie's direction before turning his attention back to me.

Another smarmy smile settles over his lips. I'm sure he thinks that it ratchets up his cuteness factor. It doesn't. The only thing it's ratcheting up is the likelihood of him getting smacked. I know at this point that whatever words are about to tumble out of his mouth are going to completely push me over the edge.

"Hey, if it makes you more comfortable, I'm cool with her joining us." His eyes rake over me yet again. "The more the merrier, I always say."

*Ewww.*

Guys like this are the absolute worst.

My eyes narrow. "Are you being serious right now?"

He looks hopeful and oddly full of confidence. Which is disturbing on so many levels. Especially after everything I've just said to him. "Well, that depends... are you into it?"

Um, no.

I point to all the unhappiness that is now settled across my face. "Does it really look like I'm remotely into *anything* you're saying right now?"

His look is contemplative.

Exactly how much has this dude had to drink tonight that he can't pick up on clear social cuing? Even my second grade students can understand that a frowny face aimed in their direction means that someone is unhappy with them.

Note to self- never step foot in another college bar again. No matter how much Noah begs and pleads. He's just going to have to step up the venues he playing at if he wants my ass in the audience.

Because *this* is so not worth it.

Just as I open my mouth to blast him, a thick muscular arm snakes its way around my body before I find myself hauled up against a hard male one. Blinking in confusion, I stare up into the most gorgeous gunmetal gray eyes I've ever seen in my life. They're crinkled with humor. He gives me a little wink as if we're co-conspirators rather than perfect strangers.

Even though his words are directed at me, he turns his attention to the idiot standing in front of me. "Hey babe, I've been looking all over for you. Where've you been?"



## Stay

### Chapter One

Shaking my head, I watch as my roommate, Brooklyn, busts out all her best moves on the makeshift dance floor. She's the tall blonde dancing with her hands twisting in the air almost as if she's doing a very sad Stevie Nicks impersonation.

I almost wince.

Yeah... it's that bad.

If I had to guess, I would say that Brooklyn isn't feeling the slightest bit of pain at the moment. I'm sure the liquid refreshment currently on tap is to be thanked for that. I'm hoping tomorrow will be a completely different story. She deserves the hangover-to-end-all-hangovers for dragging me to this God awful excuse to drink beer, get rowdy, and troll for a hook up or two.

My plan for the remainder of this evening consists of staying inconspicuously tucked away in the back corner and sipping my tepid diet soda because being a girl and walking around a drunken fraternity party is apparently an unofficial invitation to have your ass groped by some random dude. Or should I say random *dudes* because this has now happened twice. And a third time will very likely push me right over the edge of my douchebag tolerance limit for the evening.

The objective tonight is to keep an eye on Brooklyn and when the clock strikes twelve, drag her ass out of here... and I'm totally okay if it's kicking and screaming. Impatiently I glance at my cell phone for probably the twentieth time in the last two hours.

It's only eleven.

This has officially become painful.

I'm unfortunately snapped out of my dark thoughts on just how I will torture Brooklyn when a stray hand slides its way across my jean covered butt.

*Seriously?*

Even though I try to control it, my heartbeat hitches for just a moment before I spin around with tightened fists, ready to knock some unsuspecting jerk senseless.

"Excuse me," I all but snarl through tightly clenched teeth, "get your damn hand off my ass before I break every single bone in your fingers!" And contrary to what you might think, it's not an idle threat. I'll do it. As I turn, my eyes slam into probably the widest, burliest chest I've ever had the sad misfortune to inspect this up close and personal.

A sigh of disgust leaves my downturned lips before I can rein it back in.

*Perfect.*

Very slowly I crane my neck up, up, up until I'm finally able to glare into his eyes. The freakishly large oaf now standing in front of me has the audacity to smile lazily, his gaze happily blurred. "Hey sexy, want to dance?"

The guy barely looks able to stand up straight let alone move his gargantuan body out on the dance floor. If he goes down, it'll be like a massive tree falling. And I don't even want to think about the huge mark he'll inevitably leave on his potential dance victim.

My brows draw together in aggravation before I quickly shake my head. "No, I don't want to dance. What I'd actually like is for you to remove your hand from my ass."

Because, believe it or not, it's still there.

He actually has the nerve to widen his grin before squeezing my butt cheek in that massive paw of his. My eyes flare wide with shock and I think steam pours out of my ears.

Oh hell no- that did *not* just happen.

Wiping the disgust from my face, I give him my best come hither smile. Just because I never use these kinds of tactics doesn't mean I don't know how. His already dilated eyes widen like he's just hit the jackpot. Stepping a bit closer to the big knuckle dragging Neanderthal, I crook my finger kind of all sexy-like until he bends down. When our lips are close enough to touch, I drag my mouth to his ear. Then, before I can utter a single word, I clamp my fingers around his balls (which are, in case you're wondering, oversized just like the rest of him) in what I seriously hope is a death grip. Just for good measure, I give them a little twist. He hisses out a breath in response.

Now that I have his undivided attention, I growl, "If you don't get your damn hand off my ass immediately, I will continue squeezing until something pops. Do I make myself clear?"

“Perfectly,” he squeaks, sounding almost faint.

Not a second later, he releases my offended butt cheek.

And I, in return, release his still intact nuts. But not before I tighten my fingers one last time to drive home the gravity of the predicament this moron now finds himself in. For about ten seconds we glare at each other before he carefully backs away from me and my nut clenching fingers. As he does, his face gets all sad and mopey like I’ve done something wrong which is seriously laughable.

Frankly, I’m still pissed as hell.

“You’re not a very nice girl,” he mutters like a cross child before taking a huge gulp of what I assume to be beer from a big red plastic cup.

Rather unattractively I snort in response. “Nope. But hopefully you’ve learned a valuable lesson regarding the pitfalls of grabbing some unsuspecting girl’s ass.” Although, gaging from his unapologetic stance towards me, my guess is that he has not taken this lesson to heart. On second thought- “Just refrain from grabbing *any* girl’s ass. Contrary to what you apparently think- we don’t like it. *At all.*”

“Some girls do,” he pipes up still sporting an intense frowny face which is probably supposed to make me feel bad. It doesn’t.

Eyes narrowing, I shake my head. “No, we don’t. It’s degrading and just plain rude.”

He smirks before sneering, “No one’s ever complained before.”

Not only do I find that comment completely dubious but I can almost feel my blood pressure sky rocketing. Yep, Brooklyn is definitely a dead woman because this party has moved beyond painful to full out tortuous. “What’s your name?”

“Alex Mc-”

I hold up my hand effectively cutting him off. “That’s enough.” For just a moment, my eyes fly around the general vicinity we’re standing in. Luckily, as packed as this massive party is, it doesn’t take long to find exactly what I’m looking for. “Excuse me,” I shout over the pulsating music at a pretty girl walking past us. With a smile gracing her lips, she turns. The high wattage smile slips from her face once she realizes that she doesn’t know who the hell either one of us are.

Before she’s able to make a hasty get away, I quickly launch into my spiel. “Hi, what’s your name?”

Her gaze, which is slightly blurry as well (jeez, are there seriously no sober people at this party?), quickly bounces between Alex and myself. I can tell she’s hesitant to give me any information.

“Stacy.”

I give her my most reassuring smile. “Hi, Stacy, I’m Cassidy and this is,” I point to the obnoxious buffoon standing next to me, “Alex. We’re having a little disagreement that we need settled. Would you mind weighing in on the matter?”

With Stacy still looking uncertain, I barrel on. “My friend here thinks it’s perfectly acceptable to walk around a party grabbing the butts of girls he doesn’t know. And furthermore,

he's under the impression that we enjoy it. I'm just wondering if you might have any thoughts on the matter."

Stacy no longer looks hesitant or uncertain as her heated gaze swings back to Alex. Then, in a big sweeping gesture, she jerks her hands out in front of her. "What makes you think any girl would enjoy being touched by some random dude she doesn't even know?"

Alex opens his mouth as if he might actually have a rebuttal in mind, but Stacy has other ideas. Like screeching at him in a very high, potentially eardrum shattering voice. "Where do you get off thinking you can grope a girl simply because you're drunk at a party? Is there something seriously wrong with you? Do you have any concept that we're living in the twenty-first century?"

Alex snaps his mouth shut and even though it's fairly difficult, I do my best to suppress the smile that is desperately trying to spread its way across my face as she continues to berate him.

"That's called sexual harassment, buddy." Her hands fly to her hips as she continues glaring. "Do you know that I could call the police and have you ticketed? Or even arrested!"

Okay, I'm not exactly sure if that's true but I'm just going to roll with it.

As if finally realizing that this teeny tiny chick is going to go completely bat shit crazy all over his dumb ass, Alex's wide brown eyes shift helplessly to mine as Stacy pokes a slender finger at his massive, wall-like chest.

He kind of looks like he might want me to intervene on his behalf. I almost laugh because that is *so* not going to happen. I'm viewing this whole thing as a *teachable moment*. I only hope that Alex is teachable. Although, in all honesty, the jury is still out on that one... because from what I've seen tonight regarding Alex, my guess is probably not.

“How would you like it if some chick you didn't even know started groping you at a club or party?” Her eyes flash with hostility. It wouldn't surprise me in the least if she actually started foaming at the mouth. My guess is that Stacy has been manhandled one too many times before.

Hopefully Alex isn't stupid enough to answer that question.

“I'd be totally down with it.” For the first time in five minutes, he actually smirks.

Stacy's mouth drops open as her eyes flare wide. A moment later, her hand shoots out. I'm half afraid she's going to bitch slap Alex right into next week when she grabs a girl walking past us and yanks her over. The girl, wearing a pair of four inch super skinny heels, stumbles just a bit before recovering her balance. I have to give her some major props for remaining upright on that one. Not always easy to do in sky high skinny heels.

“Ally, this guy,” she waves her hand in Alex's direction as if that term is debatable, “thinks it's perfectly acceptable to grab a girl's butt at a party.”

If the sudden frown is any indication, then Ally is none too pleased by this information either. One of her hands instantly settles on her hip as her lip curls in disgust. “Why do

guys always think that's okay to do?" Even though this is posed as a question, I'm thinking it's more rhetorical in nature. "I am so damn sick and tired of that shit!"

Not saying a word, I merely shake my head before shrugging my shoulders. Alex's gaze shifts with even more unease between the two fuming girls who are all up in his face.

"Ahhh-"

He never gets a chance to finish that thought (I'm being overly generous with that assertion) before both Stacy and Ally steamroll right over him. "It is definitely *not* okay! You can't just walk around touching women inappropriately!"

"Ahhh-" Alex's mouth gapes open like a fish out of water. You can actually see the moment he finally grasps the severity of his current predicament.

"What's going on over here?"

A tall brunette shoves her way into the tight circle before glancing around at the four of us.

"Oh, hey, Ashley. Can you believe this jerk thinks it's okay to sexually harass woman?"

Now Ashley's brows are lowering as her eyes arrow straight to Alex. "No one in this day and age could possibly think that it's okay to touch a woman without asking first."

She waits for Alex to clear his good name. Unfortunately Alex merely stares at her... looking fairly perplexed and a little surprised that he is now the object of three hot girls' interest.



Of course that interest isn't exactly the kind he's been trolling for this evening.

Alex suddenly takes a hasty step backwards as all three girls crowd into his personal space. Every single one of them talking or shouting at the same time. Since Alex will be tied up for the foreseeable future, I decide my work is done here and take off in search of Brooklyn. I'm more than ready to go home before any more of these drunken louts decide that party time ass grabbing is a legitimate sport.

I'm no more than ten steps away from Alex and his irate entourage, who are currently, by the volume of their collective voices, giving him a major ass chewing, when I hear a male voice right at my ear. "I saw what you did back there."

Since I've filled my quota for inane conversations this evening, I ignore him and keep pushing my way through the thick press of bodies. I'm tired, a little bit cranky, and more than ready to take off. If I have to drag Brooklyn out of here, I'm more than willing to do it. And I certainly don't have the wherewithal, not to mention the patience, to deal with anymore hammered, frat boy-asshole-types tonight. Alex squandered the very last of it.

Not bothering to turn, I throw the words haphazardly over my shoulder as I continue weaving my way around clumps of drunken college coeds. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure you do."

I can all but hear the laughter simmering in his rich deep voice. Realizing this guy isn't going to leave me alone, I decide the best course of action is to stop and politely let him

know that I'm not interested in anything he might be offering up for the evening. Feeling exasperated to be held up when all I want to do is find Brooklyn and leave this out-of-control party, I wheel around towards the voice at my ear. As my eyes land on his face, I literally suck in a great big breath of air before almost choking on it.

### **About the Author**

Jennifer lives in Michigan with her husband, kids, a dog named Rocky and a cat named Lily. After pursuing a Bachelor's Degree in History, a Master's Degree in Educational Psychology, she spent five years working as a high school guidance counselor. Please contact Jennifer at [jmolitor6@hotmail.com](mailto:jmolitor6@hotmail.com). Connect with Jennifer on facebook <https://www.facebook.com/jennifer.sucevic> or check her out on [Wattpad- https://www.wattpad.com/user/jsucevic](https://www.wattpad.com/user/jsucevic).