



J U U S T

*A Phase*

K . C . E V E R L Y

# *Just A Phase*

K.C. EVERLY



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Thank you

Also By KC Everly

## *Author's Note*

There's nothing quite like first love.

Or first heartbreak.

Except second chances.

And maybe—*definitely*—a good slow burn. I hope you  
enjoy this one. Thanks for reading.

Xx KC

*Phase One*



## *One*

### *Maddie*

“**W**hat are you, chicken?” Mitch asked, a full smile showing off a perfect set of white teeth.

Our parents shelled out a lot of money to make sure Mitch’s teeth looked that good, and he was at risk of me knocking them out.

“I’m not a chicken. Leave me alone. I’m busy.” I tried to shoo him away with the wave of my hand, but Mitch was persistent.

“Come on, Maddie. It’s just a little cliff jumping. Max fifteen feet. You’ll be fine!”

He stood over me as I sat on the shoreline of the lake, a towel spread underneath me and a romance novel clutched to my chest. I’d been trying to get through the book this entire weekend. It seemed anytime I sat down, someone interrupted.

I shook my head, ignoring him and returning to my book. It was just getting good, with the main heroine getting naked for

the first time with her crush, and I tried to swallow my annoyance with Mitch's hovering. His presence really took me out of the mood.

He crossed his arms. "Maddie, what was the point of renting this house if we aren't celebrating? We graduated!"

There were a series of whoops and cheers from everyone nearby. A handful of our friends lounged around the pebbled sand of South Lake, taking in the afternoon sun as they sipped beer and danced to shitty early nineties pop music.

I rolled my eyes as Cassie, my best friend, shimmied in her bikini, threatening to take off her top. A group of guys stood barking at her. She wouldn't indulge them, not for real, but she still liked to torture them. I tugged at the shoulders of my kimono wrap, hiding a little.

I shrugged, closing my book *yet again*, and glaring at Mitch. "I thought it was to relax."

He smiled wider, reaching down to grab my hands and pull me up. "That's right, Maddie, and no better way than jumping off a cliff."

Mitch, being the older brother, was always the first to do things. The fearless one. The independent one. Me? Not so much. It was amazing how different we could be with a ten-minute age gap.

Having my twin brother with me at the lake house we'd rented to celebrate graduating wasn't usually as torturous as it felt at that moment. Most of the time, Mitch was great

company. Just the right amount of fun to offset my caution. In the last couple of years, his playfulness had rubbed off on me. I was better about saying yes when I really wanted to say no.

“Fine,” I huffed, trudging unhappily behind him. “But if I get knocked unconscious and drown, tell Mom and Dad it was your fault.”

Mitch nodded in earnest. “You have my word, Mads.”

We walked down the shoreline, finding a break in the trees and climbing up a dusty trail that weaved up to an elevation above the water that made my stomach lurch.

“I thought you said max fifteen feet.” I gulped, looking down into the emerald green water below. What animals lived in lakes, anyway? Surely there was something beneath the surface that was desperate to eat me. Something prehistoric? I hated water that wasn’t clear.

Mitch nudged me with his elbow. “Give or take. You’ll be fine. You go first.”

“What?” I cried. “Me? No way. I’m not going first.”

Mitch hid his nerves well. “Fine, I’ll go first.”

I held my hand out for him to step in front. He stood on the edge, looking down and swallowing. “I’ll go first,” he repeated.

There was a laugh behind us, deep and playful. “If you’re going to go, then go, Mitch,” Wes said.

Mitch shook his fist. “Dammit, Wes. I was just about to jump and you distracted me.”

Wes laughed again, shaking his head. I watched his thick brown waves move in the wake of his disbelief. His eyes, just as dark as his hair, alight with humor, and his full mouth turned upward in a smile. Wes was handsome, and there wasn't a moment since we were twelve years old that I hadn't known it.

He stood in his swim trunks, an aqua blue with bright fish painted on. While the other guys wore baggy, solid colored swimwear, Wes' trunks were fitted and colorful. He did that often—stood out just enough that I didn't think he was a feckless meathead like some of our friends. I looked at Mitch in his baggy black trunks and laughed.

“What?” he asked, turning to me. “You don't believe me?”

I shook my head, covering my mouth with my hand. “Of course I believe you, big brother. You'd never lie about your manliness and the depths of your courage. I know this.”

Wes laughed louder this time, patting Mitch on his bare shoulder with a *smack*. Wes reached his hand out to me. “Come on, Mads. Let's do this.”

My eyes went wide. “I'm sorry, what?” I retreated, creating more distance from Wes, though my body wanted anything but space from his.

“Come on,” he repeated, his hand seeming so much bigger as he took mine. “Let's do this. You and me. We'll show Mitch

how it's done.”

As I peered over the rock edge, the water looked a little more brown with the cloud cover passing over the sun. I shivered, likely from fear more than the sudden lack of sunlight. “I don't know,” I said.

There were cheers from the shore as our friends looked on. Cassie had stopped dancing, cupping her mouth from the dock and shouting something I couldn't hear from that distance.

Wes looked at me expectantly, and I blushed. Sometimes I hated how fair my skin was. It was always an emotional tell, and that emotion was often some form of embarrassment when Wes was around. It didn't matter that he was my brother's best friend, and I'd known him since middle school, or that he was one of my friends too. He always made me blush, and nothing I did seemed to allow my cheeks to recover.

To my amazement, or maybe horror, or even possibly joy—though I suspected it was all of those things—Wes reached for my kimono wrap, pushing it off my shoulders and tossing it to the side.

I stood in my high-waisted two-piece, wondering if I'd shaved all visible hair well enough for the daylight to not betray me. But Wes wasn't looking at my body anyway. He stared at my eyes, his look not wavering. “Come on, Mads.”

“Okay,” I mumbled, my heart racing as I looked down again. “But I'm scared.”

“Nothing to be scared of,” Mitch muttered behind us, kicking at the ground with a smile on his goofy face. Mitch had a winning smile, and it allowed for him to get away with more than he should.

Wes squeezed my hand. “I’m going to count to three, okay?” He kept his eyes on me. “We take a big step out, then go. Got it?”

I nodded, my teeth chattering. Adrenaline kicked in, and suddenly everything around me was vivid. The bright blue of Wes’ shorts. The high calls of the birds in the woods that surrounded the lake. The soft beat of a Spice Girls song from the dock. The warmth of Wes’ hand, as his fingers moved to lace with mine. I looked at him, my eyes going wider, and he winked.

“One... Two... Three!”

The weight of his body pulled me over the side with him as we fell feet first into the dark water below. The slap of the surface stung as I hit and our hands stayed clasped as we sunk deeper.

We both kicked hard, breaking the surface with a burst of laughter.

“Oh, my god!” I shouted, tossing my head back as I took a deep breath and treaded water. “That was amazing!”

Wes laughed with me, kicking his legs as he reached with one hand to brush the wet hair from my face. “Nice, Mads! You did it!”

I grinned at him, ecstatic with my courage before I blushed, realizing we'd just had this moment. We'd had many moments, really, but this was the first where he'd held my hand. While it was obviously in support of our jump and intending to keep us together during the fall, my heart still skipped wildly as we swam to shore.

Mitch stood on the cliff above, waving my kimono wrap. "I'll just bring this down for you," he hollered, turning to head back down the trail.

Wes shook his head.

"Guess I'm the fearless Sheffield now," I said with an awkward laugh.

Wes kept his eyes on mine, not laughing. His look was thoughtful. "I've always known you were the fearless one, Maddie." He handed me his towel.

I shook my head, passing his towel back to him. "It's fine. Mine is over by the dock. You keep yours."

Wes took his towel back as I dripped along the sand, the two of us returning to the beach party that had somehow formed in greater numbers since I left my comfortable spot on the beach. Someone had sent out an invitation, clearly, and it would not be a quiet evening.

"Wes!" Tanya Pinter shouted, clapping her hands as she jumped up and down in her tiny bikini. Cynthia Cromwell joined in, shaking off her t-shirt and standing in a triangle top and very short jean cutoffs. Maria Barnett joined the squad,

getting nearly naked as well. We may have graduated, but they were cheerleaders through and through.

I patted him on the shoulder and headed back to my towel and book. “Godspeed, Wes,” I mumbled, though I didn’t suspect he was unhappy about this enthusiastic greeting.

The women surrounded him as I sat down, not looking over again. I didn’t need to. I’d seen enough of it in high school.

Cassie joined me on my towel a moment later, her bronze skin shining in a way that made her seem built for year-round sunshine. Washington State wasn’t it, but she’d grown up here, like me.

She shook out her amber curls, running her hand through their tight coils and sitting down, crossing her legs. Cassie did not have to worry about daylight betraying her. There was no flaw on her body, no stray hair. Nothing but smooth skin and toned muscle.

I loved Cassie. She was my best friend, the sister I always wished Mitch was, and even though we didn’t agree on everything in life, we respected one another. Cassie was a woo girl—a call of excitement always prepared on her lips, ready for release when drinking, dancing, or anything, really. She loved life, enjoyed it, and wasn’t afraid to show it.

“Girl,” she said, running her hand through her curls. “You actually jumped.” She laughed and patted my leg. “This week is going to be the start of adventures to come!”



She looked at Mitch and Wes as they stood in a flock of women. “I can’t believe this is it, Mads. The end of an era.”

I saw the look of longing on her face as she watched Mitch. Cassie had loved him maybe longer than I’d loved Wes. Mitch knew, but he pretended not to. It broke Cassie’s heart a little. She wasn’t used to men not wanting her.

Cassie kept her eyes on Mitch. “At least you have your brother. You’ll never lose touch with him. Me? As soon as I’m in Florida, he’s going to forget we’re even friends.”

“You are friends. No way he’s going to forget about you. Plus, we’ll visit on spring break, okay?”

She nodded, pushing her hair behind her. “Yeah.”

Cassie had been accepted into a dance program at a university in Florida, but Mitch was staying to go to the University of Washington, where he’d been offered a football scholarship. I’d been accepted into Northwestern University, which thrilled me because they had a writing program I’d dreamed about since I was a kid.

And Wes? He’d been offered a football scholarship as well. In Eugene. Over two-thousand miles from Northwestern.

He and Mitch had hoped to get onto the same football team, but it looked like they’d be splitting up too. This summer felt like our last hurrah. I swallowed the thought, not wanting to get sentimental. Like Cassie, I worried we wouldn’t be as close.

This cabin had been a graduation present to ourselves. A week to hang out, party, and kick back before we moved out of state. Our remaining time wasn't meant to feel like a closing chapter. It wasn't supposed to be the last moment in our friendship. Yet it felt like it was.

Mitch and Wes' friends Matteo and Tony were staying at the cabin with us as well, which had been a fun first couple of days, but at some point one of them opened the party to the rest of the football team, which drew in the cheerleaders, and Wes' audience.

It disappointed me, but it wasn't anything new. When you're the star quarterback of the best team in the state, you're bound to have fans. I wasn't an athlete, though I enjoyed track, and I wasn't a cheerleader, though I'd gone to every game—home and away, but they always invited me to take part.

I tagged along, joining in, but sometimes I ended up on a towel, buried in a book while people danced on a dock as they sang some Usher songs and dropped low. Cassie got up from my towel, squealing as she ran to join them.

I picked up my novel, creasing the spine of the book as I found my place. It wasn't but a minute before someone interrupted again.

“What are you reading?” Wes asked, laying his towel next to mine and sitting down.

I tried to bury the book in my lap. Wes reached over, pulling the cover up higher.

“True Love Blooms,” he read slowly, his lips curving into a smile. “Can’t say this was on my summer reading list. What’s it about?”

He pulled his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms to hug them. His triceps flexed in a sexy horseshoe. I looked at my own undefined arms, like two pale, soft loaves of bread hanging off of my shoulders. *Maybe I’ll start lifting weights.*

I shrugged those doughy shoulders. “Just a silly romance novel,” I said, trying to sound casual instead of embarrassed.

He nodded, watching his feet as he buried them in the sand and wiggled his toes. “Do you like it?”

“I do,” I said, clutching the book to my chest.

“Then it’s not silly.”

Wes was a good guy. A *nice* guy, too. Contrary to the stereotype of a school jock, he’d always been thoughtful and inclusive. He wasn’t competitive off the field, and he didn’t put people down or make them feel bad about themselves. His teasing was playful, and he never punched down. He had a way of making me feel seen—like I mattered, and that’s probably why I’d had a crush on him all these years. Most boys our age weren’t like that.

“I like stories with a happy ending.” It was simple, but true. Happy endings made my heart feel full and were my favorite reads.

Wes lifted his head to look at me, squinting with the sun on his face. He nodded in agreement. “I do too, Mads.” He said

nothing for a moment, then said, “Happy endings are meaningful.”

He ran a hand through his hair. It was still slightly damp from our jump, but it always dried in waves that looked so soft. I wondered if I’d ever run my hands through that hair. *What if I never touch his hair?* He’d move to Eugene, drift into his own life without my friendship, and I’d never have touched it.

I’d known Wes since middle school. His family had moved next door to our brick Tudor in Montlake when we were on the cusp of becoming teenagers, tucking comfortably into a community of families that had kids about the same ages and phases in life.

There’d been neighborhood barbecues, Fourth of July firework displays, summer lemonade stands, bike rides, river floats, lake swims, fishing trips—even family camping trips.

Wes and Mitch were fast friends with their interest in football and dashing good looks putting them on a similar social footing. The two boys that all the girls wrote about in their diaries and whispered about behind their hands as they giggled, watching the boys walk down the hallway at school.

Wes was Mitch’s best friend, but he was my friend too, and I was going to miss him when he wasn’t part of my daily life.

Maybe it was the endorphins of the jump or the scent of him. Maybe it was the sweet Mariah Carey song drifting from the dock or the thought of saying goodbye to Wes in a couple of weeks. It could have been heatstroke, for all I know, but

whatever the reason, I reached out and ran my hand through his hair.

I didn't look at his face, just watched the waves as they filtered between my fingers, taking in the softness and committing it to memory. For when he was gone.

Wes' mouth dropped and his eyes narrowed slightly, as if he wasn't sure what to say, but I didn't wait for him to find the words. Saying nothing, I stood up and collected my things. There was no guessing about it.

Right then, I was the fearless Sheffield.

## *Two*

### *Maddie*

**I**f only I'd known that the best laid plans are merely ignorant blueprints.

I didn't know it, not when I was eighteen, but sometimes life puts us on a path that feels certain. So certain that it's impossible to imagine another route to get where you think you're going.

You're a goddamn fool if you think there won't be a detour.

My path was pretty clear. I had graduated, and now it was time to launch into the world. I'd go to Northwestern University, graduate, start my career as a writer, meet someone, get married, have kids, and be happy. There really weren't any other paths forward in my life that I could see.

That was *always* how it was going to go. It was how it had gone for my parents, though my mom was a doctor and my dad an engineer, but the order of things went: college, career, marriage, kids, happily ever after.

My order of things would be misaligned with my expectations. Greatly.

I didn't know that yet, though.

"Kieran is going to be here tonight," Cassie said, walking into the ensuite of our room and examining herself in the mirror. She ran a finger over her glossed lips and puckered, smiling at her reflection.

It'd been three hours since we swam at the lake and I jumped off a cliff with Wes, and my heart still hadn't settled.

"Who invited him?" I groaned. Apparently, invitations to that night's bonfire weren't exclusive.

Cassie smiled wickedly. "Me."

"Cassie, I don't want to see him."

Kieran and I broke up a few weeks before graduation, but Cassie had seemed to have conveniently forgotten this. Or, more accurately, ignored it.

"But he's so nice."

She wasn't wrong. Kieran *was* nice. He was cute too, and a friend from track, but he was also a little boring. I'd spent several dates politely listening to him talk about a range of topics from proper shoe fit and run strides to a near full rundown on the history of the MLB. None of it interested me.

Surface level and polite. Perfectly fine. Nothing offensive. Incredibly boring. That was Kieran.

"He is nice," I agreed. "And boring."

She rolled her eyes. “It’s not like you’ve given yourself many options, Maddie. There’s something wrong with *everyone*.”

“That’s not true,” I said defensively, though it probably was true. “There’s nothing *wrong* with Kieran. He’s just not my type.”

Cassie flopped on the bed, nearly exasperated at this point with the familiar conversation. “And what is your type, Mads?”

Tall, dark features, broadening shoulders, playful personality, deeply kind, thoughtful, handsome. A man who sees me. *Really* sees me.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Just a nice guy who is interesting, I guess.”

Cassie sat up, a knowing smile on her lips. “Maybe a handsome football quarterback? The most popular boy in school? The boy with all eyes on him?”

“Shut up,” I mumbled.

“Just tell him,” Cassie encouraged, forgetting that not only was Wes all the things she’d mentioned, making him out of my league anyway, but he was my friend.

Confessing anything could really put a damper on *that*. No matter how much my heart pulled toward Wes, I didn’t want to do anything that might push him away. I was already going to lose him to college, but we’d still see each other over the



holidays when we all came back home to see our families. I didn't want to make it weird.

“Nothing to tell.”

Cassie rolled her eyes again, and I was afraid they'd get stuck in the back of her head. She blew a hair out of her face. “Fine. Go to college a virgin with a broken heart because she was too chicken to tell her forever crush that he's special to her.”

Maybe I wasn't the fearless Sheffield after all.

I smirked and flipped her off. “I will, and I'm perfectly okay with it.”

Cassie couldn't get me with peer pressure. It was an annoying trait of mine, at least if you asked her. I happened to be proud of my impervious nature.

She sighed one more time before getting up and opening the door to our shared room, ushering me out and downstairs toward the bonfire. Though the sun hadn't yet set, people were already sitting around the fire and drinking.

The bonfire was lively, our friends chatting as music blasted from the house stereo, pushed up to the open kitchen window and turned outward. There was a lot of laughing and a lot of dancing from the cheerleaders vying for Wes' attention.

I tried to bite back my jealousy as I watched Wes and Mitch look on, amused expressions on their faces as the girls held their attention. Wes' attention to their moves broke my heart a little.

Wes had dated Tanya and Maria, as well as a dozen others in high school. Some relationships were brief, just a couple of dates, and others were longer, like several months.

I tried not to track them, but it felt impossible when I'd hear Mitch joking about sexual conquests and dragging Wes' exploits into it as well. To his credit, Wes had stayed quiet, but the cheerleaders hadn't. There were plenty of stories about Wes over the last few years.

"Hey, Mads. You want a beer?" Tony asked, handing one to me before I could answer.

"Thanks," I said, taking a pull from it and looking back at the dancing group.

"Are you ready to head out to Evanston?" Tony asked, drinking his beer and keeping his eyes on me.

"Yeah, I am," I said, though the thought of leaving made me sad too.

Tony continued to watch me, making me self-conscious, but I kept dutifully sipping my beer.

"You know, Evanston isn't that far from Chicago," he said.

Tony would be at The University of Chicago in the fall, and he'd mentioned this several times to me in the last few months.

"If you ever want to hang out or are just having a hard time adjusting and miss home, I'm happy to get together." He looked sheepish for a moment, his blue eyes holding a tinge of embarrassment. "I think I'm going to be homesick for a bit."

Tony grew up three houses down from me, and Montlake had been the only home he'd known as well.

Watching the girls with Wes, I handed my beer to Tony. "Sounds good, Tony. I think I'm a little tired. I'm going to head inside."

"I'll join you," he said, bouncing on the balls of his feet to follow, but I held up my hand.

"I'd rather be alone. Thanks though. Enjoy the bonfire."

I caught Wes glancing at me and Tony as I hastily left, heading inside. This party wasn't what I needed tonight, and I was fine sitting it out.

Fortunately, no one was in the cabin, and I grabbed a bottle of water and headed to my room. Shutting the bedroom door behind me, I kicked off my shoes and jeans, slipping into some sleeping shorts as I unclasped my bra and tugged it through the sleeves of my sweatshirt. I made my way into the bathroom, twisting my hair into a messy bun on the top of my head before washing my face.

Settling with my book, I put on my headphones to drown out the party while I read. It was difficult to let go of my annoyance with all of the interlopers, but after a few minutes I was deep in my story, waiting for the heroine to get her first taste of skin to skin contact with her crush.

Biting my lip as I read on, I didn't notice Wes was standing near the edge of my bed until he flattened his hand against my foot, tapping lightly.

“Jesus!” I cried, shooting up and tearing my headphones off. I closed my eyes, panting as I tried to catch my breath.

Wes’ amused face greeted me when I opened my eyes again. “Sorry, Mads. I knocked, but you didn’t hear me with those.” He pointed at my headphones.

“Kind of the point in wearing them. Drown everyone out, you know?” I gestured for Wes to sit, which he did, sticking to the end of my bed as I pulled my feet up and crossed them under me.

“Was it really that bad being down there?” he asked. “You ran away from the party pretty quick. Is everything okay?”

*I was just a little hurt watching you eye fuck a group of women you’ve actually fucked. Nursing hurt feelings alone, you know? It’s fine. Go on back to the party and choose who you want to bring to your bed. I’ve got my book for company.*

“Mads?” He interrupted my thought pollution, clearing the way for reason to return.

I sighed, shaking my head. “Everything is okay. Just not my scene tonight, I think.” I pointed at my book. “More this.”

His grin was just a tad lopsided. It made him more handsome, and it took me a moment to realize I was staring at his mouth. I blinked a few times and looked back at my book.

“More happy endings?”

This time, I grinned at him. My teeth weren’t perfect like Mitch, but my smile was one of my best features, like his.

When I was going through puberty, angry at my uncooperative skin and awkward body, I'd stare at my smile in the mirror, remembering that I did indeed like my face. Most of the time. My blue eyes were just a smidge too big, and I wished my nose wasn't comparable to a button, but overall I finished puberty pretty content with the outcome.

So when Wes looked at me with his crooked smile of amusement, dropping his eyes to *my* lips, I didn't doubt for one second the flash of desire I caught before he looked away.

*What was that?*

I thought of the way he'd weaved his fingers with mine as we jumped off the cliff earlier that afternoon. The second that he brought my hand to his lips. I thought he was being playful, but maybe there had been more to it?

I shook my head, trying not to let myself get too excited. Even if there were, he was leaving in two weeks to start training camp and I'd be leaving for Evanston soon after. Besides, we were friends, but moreover, we were teenagers. It wasn't unusual for teenage friends to horn dog it for each other sometimes, right?

"Yes. This has a happy ending. Call me crazy, but I like the idea of a connection between two people." I could feel my cheeks blushing with heat.

Wes' expression was too relaxed to read. "You're not crazy. You're a romantic, Maddie. That's nothing to be embarrassed about." His head tilted as if he were thinking something over. "Do you remember when Cassie's mom married her step-dad,

and you sobbed the entire time because you thought it was so beautiful?”

I smiled at the memory. We were sixteen, and I *had* blubbered my way through her mother’s wedding. I blubbered at any wedding. It truly worried me I’d be unable to get married someday because I would be a mess the entire time.

“Yes,” I said softly, remembering that night well.

Mitch, Wes, and I had attended as guests of Cassie, riding our bikes down to The Chateau, a beautiful inn along the lake. It was a perfect summer evening, the kind where the air was warm but not humid. Everything felt relaxed around us—calm.

Fairy lights ran through the trees and lanterns hung on tall posts around a platform dance floor as everyone let loose to celebrate. My parents were there. Wes’ parents, too, and it felt like everything you’d want a wedding to be. Relaxed, beautiful, peaceful, and filled with love and friendship. How could I not cry?

What I remembered most from that night had nothing to do with love or vows of forever. It was falling off my bike on the ride home, my front wheel catching a small pothole that hadn’t been filled after a summer storm eroded part of the asphalt.

I went over the front of my handlebars, lucky I didn’t smack my head on the concrete. Instead, I had a nasty scrape on my elbow, skinned knees, and road rash along my upper thigh. I’d torn my dress, a cute yellow summer frock that made my light hair look more like honey than dishwater, and I couldn’t stop crying.

Mitch panicked and went back to the wedding to get my dad to pick me up in the car and take me home. While I was prone to cry at anything romantic, Mitch was simply prone to cry. He sobbed the entire sprint back to the wedding.

Wes stayed with me, calm and reassuring, giving me his blue windbreaker to cover my torn up legs and the split on my skirt. He said nothing, not really. There were a few hushes or murmurings that it would be okay and my parents were on their way, but what I remembered most was his arm around my shoulder, squeezing tight like he was hurting a little too.

I was probably making up that last part, and that was okay. It was a memory I wasn't willing to let go, however much of a stretch my interpretation may be.

“You're not like other girls, Maddie,” he said quietly, his eyes not leaving mine.

There was nothing but admiration in Wes' observation, and it made my stomach dance wildly.

“I'm not?” I whispered, not daring to break eye contact.

This felt like a moment. *A moment.* We were having a thing at this moment. Like the windbreaker covering my skinned knees, I'd always remember this as something that somehow had more meaning between us than maybe he'd intended, but which I'd never forget.

The quiet softness of his words slipped quickly back to his normal playful intonation. “Nope. Not at all.”

My face fell, independent of my control, and he pushed himself to sit up straight, his back against the wall as he mirrored my criss-crossed legs.

“That’s not a bad thing, Mads, but you’ve been reading romance novels since we were fourteen. I can’t say I know any other friend of ours who does the same.”

And just like that, any *moment* had returned to normal interaction.

I shrugged. “My favorite author is Kurt Vonnegut, and romance isn’t exactly what he’s known for.” I said it, as if I were ashamed I enjoyed reading what I did.

Wes shook his head, his eyes alight in a way that told me he was about to make a point I’d otherwise missed.

“Mads, have you read *Love, Kurt?*” I shook my head. “You should. It’s a series of letters that Kurt Vonnegut wrote to his first wife, Jane. They were schoolmates who came back together when they were nineteen. They had a summer romance, and they promised to keep in touch at the end of it, even though they were heading to their respective colleges. It’s pretty sweet to read two people corresponding on the precipice of love.”

*Whoa.*

“Wes, are *you* a romantic too?” I squealed, covering my face with my hands because I didn’t know what else to do with them.



He laughed, tapping his finger on his knee. “Would it be so bad if I was?”

My hands dropped into my lap. “No, not bad. Just surprising, that’s all.”

“Why is that surprising?” His head cocked to the side.

If my face had returned to its normal shade in the last several minutes, it was now back to the familiar crimson that creeped up whenever Wes was near. “You—you just... I don’t know. You have a lot of girlfriends, I guess. And you’re a guy. So.”

“Are those things mutually exclusive to being a romantic?”

Suddenly, I was feeling silly. “No, I suppose they’re not.”

What did I really know about romance anyway? Everything I’d learned was from books. Why was I acting like I knew who was or wasn’t a romantic? What did it even mean to be a romantic?

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make assumptions about you. It’s just—listening to Mitch talk about girls... Listening to *any* of our guy friends talk about girls... I hear little romance there.”

Wes ran his hand along his jaw, tensing. “When have you heard *me* talk about girls the way Mitch does?”

I flinched, not so much at his question itself, but with the emotion behind it. I was lumping him together with Mitch, and he was definitely not happy about it.

“Maddie,” he said, just a step above a whisper. “How many guys have you been with?”

My jaw dropped, though the temperature in my cheeks rose. “What? How—how—I—” I fumbled for an answer, though the embarrassment on my face probably gave him an obvious answer to his question.

Wes sighed. “How many girls do you think I’ve been with?”

I bit the inside of my cheek at the thought. “I don’t know. Half a dozen?” A fifty percent ratio of girlfriends to fucks seemed conservative for someone as desirable as Wes, but I wasn’t sure if it was more offensive to under guess than over guess.

“More?” I added, wringing my hands and not really liking this topic of conversation. I may have conceptually known that Wes was with women, but hearing it from him felt painful.

“Would it surprise you to know that we’ve been with the same number of people?” He watched me, unblinking.

“*What?*”

He didn’t hesitate. “We’ve slept with the same number of people, Maddie.”

“Oh.” I shook my head furiously. “Then you’re greatly overestimating my prowess.”

“Or you’re greatly overestimating mine,” he shot back.

I adjusted for a moment, sitting up taller and clearing my throat, trying to figure out what to say to that, but Wes spoke

first.

“I’d like to change that, though. And I’d like your help.”

## *Three*

### *Maddie*

“Okay, so let me get this straight,” I said, preparing to run through a summary of the last few minutes. “You have spent the better part of high school letting girls talk like they’ve slept with you, all because you were too shy—”

Wes raised his hand to interrupt. “Not shy, Mads. Just discerning.”

“Fine,” I agreed. “All because you were too *discerning* to lose your virginity to one. And now you’re about to go to college and you’re scared about being a virgin?”

It may have been the first time I’d ever seen Wes blush. “Pretty much,” he mumbled.

“Right.” I nodded slowly, thinking it over. “And instead of just walking out to that party right now and taking one of those girls home with you...”

He shook his head, his lips tucked into a firm line. “I don’t want to just go find some random girl. I want it to mean

something.”

“Not love,” I repeated, thinking of his own words. *“I wasn’t waiting for someone I was necessarily in love with. Just someone that felt special to me somehow. None of the girls I dated felt special to me in that way.”*

“Not love,” he said, tapping his foot beneath him anxiously. “Just... Not someone I’m going to forget.” He hesitated. “And not someone I will want to forget.”

All of that surprised me. Wes was the handsome quarterback. The prom king. The center of attention. Girls threw themselves at him after football games, between classes, or at any social gatherings. He had no shortage of opportunities to remedy his circumstances, and yet he hadn’t. Because he wanted it to be special.

“Why not wait until you meet someone in college?” I asked. “Maybe you just haven’t met that person yet, and someone special is just on the other side of summer.”

“There is no shortage of men in college. I’ll be one of many, and I’ll be utterly, utterly clueless.” He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and then down, revealing more of his nerves than anything in his voice. “I don’t want to be the fumbling idiot.”

It didn’t seem like such a big deal to me, but I wasn’t him, and I certainly didn’t have pressure or expectations put on me like he did.

“You’re probably making it into a bigger deal than it needs to be,” I said. “But... I’m confused how I can be of help here. I’m going to be just as fumbling. I have no advice or tips to trade.”

It took me approximately three seconds after he exhaled sharply to connect what help he was hinting at.

“Oh,” I whispered.

He invited me to be a fumbling idiot *with* him. I wasn’t sure if I was flattered or offended.

Wes’ eyes got bigger as he watched my face sink. “Maddie, it isn’t like that,” he rushed to say.

“Isn’t like what?” I crossed my arms against my chest and gave him a sharp look.

I loved Wes. I was also *in* love with Wes. Right now, those facts were in contention with one another. The part of me that loved him wanted to send him away kindly, briefly offended at the thought of being someone’s practice, rather than an object of desire.

The part of me that was *in* love with him was eager to get started. The consequences of our friendship or my self-esteem be damned.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said. “You’re thinking you’d just be practice. Like a body I could borrow for my use and return the next day.”

I crossed my arms tighter and bit my tongue. He’d said it a tad more eloquently than I’d thought it, but it was, in fact, how

I felt.

Wes ran his hand through his hair. “This isn’t coming out how I’d planned.”

*Planned?* He’d been thinking of this?

He sat up straight, resting his hands on his knees and calming his face. “Let me try this again.” He took a deep breath. “Mads, you are one of my best friends and I love you.”

*But I’m not in love with you.* He didn’t have to say it.

“I trust you. I know I would never regret you being the first woman I was with, and I know you wouldn’t hurt me or make me feel bad about all the things I don’t know.”

He wasn’t wrong.

“I know that I’m one of your best friends, and that you love me too,” he continued.

*But I am in love with you.* He missed that part.

“You trust me, and you *can* trust me. I like to think you wouldn’t regret me being your first, but I know I wouldn’t hurt you or make you feel bad, not on purpose.”

He wasn’t wrong about that, either.

“Look,” he said after a moment of silence between us. “You don’t have to answer me. You can take time to think about it. I leave in two weeks. But if I’m being honest, I’ve thought of being with you for a long time.”

*What. The. Fuck.*

“What the fuck?” I blurted.

He gave a shy smile, ducking his head to hide from my glare, peeking out from one eye after a second.

“Yeah, Mads, it’s true. I didn’t want to say anything because you’re my friend and we’re scattering to the wind.”

He used his index finger to trace circles over his knee, and my eyes followed the pattern. “I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable, or lose you somehow. The thing is, I know that even after this, we’d still be friends. We’ll never not be friends.”

Like Wes, I’d never set a firm rule about love being involved with my first sexual experience. It would be nice to be in love, but I hadn’t expected it. I’d mostly considered it a hindrance.

The First Time.

Get it out of the way so I could move on with my life and relationships. If The First Time was with one of my closest friends, whom I adored and trusted, respected and liked, and who reciprocated these feelings—would that ever really be a regret in my life?

I suspected the answer to that question was no. In fact, I knew it. Deep down, I knew I wouldn’t regret it. Wes may not be *in* love with me, but there was love between us. Surely that was just as beautiful, even if not a conventional start to romance in my life?

“Think about it,” he said softly, scooting off the end of the bed. “You don’t have to answer, and there’s no cap to my offer.



Mitch is crashing at Cynthia's tonight. My door is open to you if you want to come. If not, that's okay, too. No matter what, you're still my Mads and I love you. Nothing changes between us, okay?"

My head moved in the pattern of a nod, though I hardly felt it. Before I realized it, Wes was standing next to me, looking down at my very bewildered face.

"Maddie?" He bent over and kissed the top of my head, hovering just a second longer than he should have. "There's something special about our friendship and I trusted you enough to tell you something I have told no one else."

"Oh, I won't say anything to anyone about you being a virgin," I assured him.

Wes chuckled, standing up and heading toward the door. "I appreciate that, but that's not what I meant. Call me crazy, but I like the idea of a connection between two people, too."



Wes left his bedroom door slightly cracked, and I walked by cautiously, surveying the dark hallway after the last embers of

the bonfire had extinguished.

*Is he asleep?*

I didn't know, and I didn't find out. Instead of making my way into his room and sliding between his sheets the way everything in my body screamed for, I went back to my room. Cassie's soft snores greeted my disappointment, and I fell into a restless sleep, wondering about what ifs.

The next morning, as everyone gathered around the coffee pot with groans and complaints, Wes smiled at me as I joined them.

"Morning," he said brightly, handing me a cup of coffee. "I'm doing a trail run soon. Want to join?"

Nothing about his voice showed upset, and nothing on his face betrayed friendliness. He was right. Things hadn't changed between us.

I gratefully accepted the coffee, feeling sluggish from poor sleep instead of alcohol, but feeling it all the same. "Sure," I said, taking a slow sip as I looked over the rim of my cup to meet his amiable brown eyes.

"Mitch? Tony? Matteo? You want in?" Wes chirped. All three guys groaned and shook their heads, having seen much better mornings and looking a little beat up. Cassie glared at all three of them, saying nothing as she sat with her hands rubbing her temples.

"Cassie?" Wes asked. The death glare she returned in response was all the answer he needed. Cassie was

cantankerous when hungover.

“Looks like it’s just you and me.” Wes shrugged. “Let’s leave in fifteen, okay?”

I took a longer sip of my coffee. “Sure.”

It was just enough time to finish my cup and pop upstairs to change into some running shorts and a tank top. The sun wasn’t fully in the sky yet, but it was already feeling warm out. The trees in the forest would give some shade, but I lathered up with sunscreen to be safe.

After lacing up my shoes, adjusting my sports bra, and with a spring in my step, I met Wes outside.

“There’s a trail just off the lake path, about fifty yards from here. It leads over the cliff side running north of the lake, and you can loop back. It’s only about two miles to the lookout, then another two miles back.”

I nodded, stretching my arm across the opposite shoulder and then changing sides. “Sounds good. You probably can’t handle much longer.”

There was just enough of a hint of humor in my voice to draw a competitive smile from him. I wasn’t much into sports or athletics, but I had enjoyed track, and long distance runs were my jam.

“I think I can handle more than you give me credit for.”

That made me blush, but I ignored his comment, pulling my foot into my hand as I stretched my quad. “Care to engage in a friendly wager?”

Wes grinned, bending over to tighten the laces on his running shoes, squinting up at me as he weighed the merits of my bet. “I could be convinced. What are your terms?”

It didn’t take me long to decide. “If I get to the lookout first, you jump into the lake. Shoes and all—you have to run back soaked.” It wasn’t my most exciting wager, but I couldn’t think of anything else at the moment.

Wes held out his hand. “I’ll take that bet.”

I reached my hand for his, hesitating before I shook. “And what are your terms?”

He didn’t let me pull my hand away, grabbing it before I could. “If I get to the lookout first, you jump into the lake—naked.”

“Wes—” He shook my hand hard and grinned.

“A bet’s a bet, Mads. I’m giving you a five second head start. You better run like the wind, because I think I might just win this one.”

“Wes,” I cautioned, shaking my head. “That’s not—”

“One,” he started.

I crossed my arms, my eyes narrowing. “Wes.”

“Two...”

“*Wes.*”

“Three...” His grin got bigger.

“*Fuck.*”

I took off as fast as I could, not letting the laugh on my lips slow me down. Though if I were being honest, I wasn't sure who I was betting on.



“This view sure is nice,” Wes said, a relaxed smile on his face as he took in the scenery at the lookout.

Tall Douglas firs and wide hemlock trees surrounded the shore of the lake, its dark, rocky sand meeting the cold water I was about to jump into.

I glared at him, kicking my shoes off. “Yeah, real freaking nice.”

“About to get better,” he mumbled, not dropping his smile.

Or his eyes.

“I didn't really agree to this,” I pouted, holding the hem of my shirt as I hesitated to take it off. “I mean, you made me shake before you'd even said your terms. That wouldn't hold up in a court of law, Wes. It's like... I don't know, false pretense or something.”

“Is it now?” He tilted his head, looking at me like when we were kids and he was waiting for me to answer a question, observing me.

“It could be,” I mumbled.

Wes gestured for me to take my shirt off, and I felt a sense of wild panic at the thought of being naked in front of him. Wes had seen me in a two-piece suit before. He’d seen bits and bobs of my body, but never my *entire* body. “Do I really have to do this?” I was huffing now.

Wes stopped smiling. “Of course not, Maddie. I hope you know that.”

I exhaled quickly through my nose. “I—I don’t *not* want to.” My cheeks went pink as I looked down at the ground in front of me. Dry dirt kicked up as I nervously dragged my foot along.

Wes took a step toward me, standing within reach, but doing nothing to touch me.

“You’re embarrassed,” he said softly, looking over my cheeks. “You don’t have to be. Not with me, Maddie.”

His words radiated through me, landing in my core and igniting a fire I hadn’t felt before. The heat moved through me, settling between my legs. I shifted uncomfortably, feeling myself with an unfamiliar wetness. I blushed deeper.

“I want to,” I whispered. “I mean, I think I do, but it makes me nervous.”

He stepped half a foot closer to me. I could feel the air from his breath, taking it in and inhaling as if I needed it.

“Has anyone ever seen you naked before? Like this?” His voice was smooth, rolling over me with a cadence that weakened my knees.

“Just Cassie,” I admitted.

Wes laughed, his shoulders shaking as he nodded along. “Would it help if I got naked too?”

*Oh god.*

How my legs were supporting the body attached was beyond me, but I worried they’d collapse and give in soon. I’d never really seen a guy naked before, not like this. Pictures, sure. Videos, yes. Real life? Flesh in front of my eyes? Skin tanned and taut, muscled and toned, so close I could run my hands along it? That was new.

“It wouldn’t exactly hurt,” I mumbled through a smile.

Wes nodded, taking his shirt off in one swift movement. I exhaled at the sight of him. His shoulders were broad and muscled, but not yet filled out. The biceps along his arms were strong and well carved from years of football and sports, but he still wasn’t yet a man. His stomach was flat, the muscles preparing to emerge with more training.

He looked good, but if I closed my eyes and imagined it, the man he would become would surely be stunning.

“Better?”

I swallowed and nodded. “A bit.”

He laughed, pointing to my shirt in an offer to assist. I nodded, and he lifted it over my head. When my eyes focused again, they found his smiling face.

“My chest is bare, so...” He trailed off, running his hand along the back of his neck.

Taking a deep breath, I pulled the tight spandex of my sports bra away from my ribs, trying to gracefully tug it over my head, but getting stuck halfway.

“Wes,” I groaned, tangled in the straps, elbows stuck over my head. “Help!” He laughed with me, giving a stronger pull until it came off.

This wasn’t exactly how I imagined it would go when a man saw my naked breasts for the first time, but Wes seemed unbothered.

He stood, his hands tracing along the waistband of his shorts as he kept his eyes on mine. Not once did his eyes look down at my breasts, and I swear the effort was why he had small beads of sweat above his brow.

“Let’s do it at the same time,” I said in a breathy voice I didn’t recognize. Wes smiled and nodded. I took a deep breath. “Okay. On three. One, two, three!”

Down I pushed my running shorts and panties, standing up and immediately moving to cover myself. Wes had pushed his own shorts down, standing only a breath away. His eyes,



politely focused on mine, had clearly seen my gaze drop to the lower half of his body.

Seeing a penis in a photo, or even in porn, had never caught my breath. But at that moment, my breath had most certainly caught. Perhaps more surprising than the size and allure of Wes' manhood was his arousal. Had I done that?

I shook my head, blinking twice before my eyes shot back up to his. There was an undeniable grin of recognition on his face. I'd seen Wes' dick, and I *liked* it. And now he knew it.

Clearing my throat, I pointed to the lake.

"Now we hump in." I gasped, throwing my hand over my mouth in embarrassment. "Jump in!" I screeched. "We *jump* in!"

Wes laughed and patted my shoulder, still keeping his eyes on my face. "Relax, Maddie. They're just bodies. Besides," he said, "I like the way yours looks, too."

He gave me a gentle push before following me into the lake.

I went down fast, my feet hitting the bottom with ease in the relatively shallow depth. I could stand, though it was up to my shoulders. Most of Wes' upper body was exposed, but he ducked his head beneath the surface to wet his hair. He popped up with a smile. "This is nice. I'm glad you suggested it."

"Call me crazy," I said as I leaned into the water and floated on my back. "But I believe in sticking to your word."

Wes shook his head, leaning back to float as well. "You're not crazy, Maddie. You're fearless."



“I’d be lying if I said I didn’t look at you while you were naked.” Wes bit his lip with a smile, looking ahead at the path. “I tried really hard not to, though. That should count for something.”

It was a purposefully slow walk back to the cabin, our shoes in hand as Wes and I strolled barefoot.

I smiled to myself, shaking my head at the thought that Wes wanted to see me naked. “Wasn’t that the point of getting my clothes off?”

“I suppose,” Wes said, taking my elbow to help guide me around a large stump that had fallen during the last storm to block most of the path. “I feel a bit like an asshole about it.” I wasn’t sure if he looked hurt or confused. “You’re my friend. I don’t want to cross a line.”

I thought of his naked body, the thickness of him, the way I responded to him from sight alone. My body was certainly easy to convince. As for crossing lines, well, wondering what he’d feel like inside of me seemed to have crossed *something*.

“Thanks, Wes,” I said honestly.

He nodded, keeping ahead of me. I expected him to ask about last night’s proposition, but he didn’t. I wasn’t sure if this disappointed me or not. By the time we’d made it back to the cabin, he still had said nothing about it.

“Why are you wet?” Cassie asked, pulling her sunglasses down her nose as she lay sunbathing in the yard. I blushed, walking along the path and thinking about being wet in places I was glad Cassie couldn’t see.

“Lake swim after our run,” Wes said with a shrug, taking his wet shirt and hanging it along the banister of the deck. He’d given it to me to towel off when I got out of the lake, letting himself dry in the sun.

“Mhm,” Cassie said with a side smile. “Your clothes dried fast, but your hair is still wet.”

My mouth dropped as my mind stumbled to think of an excuse, but Cassie continued on.

“The boys are out at the store, trying to convince Shawn Riddell to accept their fake IDs. I’m giving it a fifty percent chance of success. Said they’ll be back by lunch.” Cassie pushed her sunglasses back up and lay down, covering her head with a towel. “You want to join, Mads?” she mumbled from under it.

“No thanks, Cass,” I said, following Wes up the steps.

“Mhm.” She mumbled something after, but I didn’t catch it beneath the towel.

Once inside, Wes tossed his shoes down and headed to the fridge, pulling out a couple bottles of water and tossing me one. He opened his, taking down half of it at once. I sipped mine, watching him as he stood shirtless in the kitchen.

I caught myself licking my lips as my gaze took advantage of Wes' distraction while he looked out the window over the sink, wiping his brow.

"Um," I said, my voice meek and possibly apologetic. "Thanks for the run this morning."

Wes turned back to me, a lightness to his face that reminded me of all the moments we'd had growing up when life actually *was* light. Summers at the park or riding bikes around the neighborhood. Parties and school dances. Celebratory bonfires after football games. Driving around town at night on a weekend, aimless and wandering. Listening to music as a car full of best friends sang at the top of their lungs with abandon.

Now we were all packing our suitcases, loading up the weight of adulthood, leaving on journeys that would take us all away from one another. The lightness would soon be gone, and these last days felt fleeting.

"It was fun," he said, finishing his water and tossing the empty bottle into the recycling.

He crossed his arms over his bare chest, looking at me and saying nothing. I hoped he thought the blush on my face was sunburn. I wished I didn't give myself away so easily.

I nodded, feeling a bit frozen in the moment, but willing my mouth to cooperate with my brain. “I’ve thought about it, and we should.”

For a moment I worried Wes had forgotten his proposition and I’d have to explain what I meant. The thought was excruciating, and I sucked in a deep breath to keep from passing out. Then Wes smiled, grinned really, and I exhaled.

“Okay,” he said, a shyness in his tone that I wasn’t used to. His hand ran along the back of his neck absentmindedly. He did that when he was nervous. He’d always done it. Blush may be my giveaway, but even Wes had his own.

“But we need to talk first,” I said firmly.

“Okay, we talk first. You start.”

I cleared my throat. There was so much to say that I wasn’t sure where to begin. I didn’t get the chance. The boys shot through the door, boisterous and loud with hands carrying cases of beer as they interrupted.

“Bro.” Matteo laughed, slapping Tony on the back. “If you think that chick will be here again, you’re crazy.” He stopped and looked at us, his dark eyes alight with some sort of mischief. “Bonfire, part two,” Matteo said. He held up two cases of beer. “Refreshments.”

Wes and I looked at one another with a silent agreement. *To be continued.*

## *Four*

### *Maddie*

“**T**ell me every goddamn thing,” Cassie said, her eyes narrowed as she watched me through the mirror. Her eyeliner pencil pointed directly at me. “Every. Single. Thing.”

I groaned, flopping back on my bed before propping up on my elbows. “I told you. Wes and I went swimming on our lake run.”

I loved Cassie, and she was my best friend. We didn’t lie to each other, and I would not lie to her now. I also would not tell her everything. Omission wasn’t lying. Not exactly.

“You two didn’t mess around?” She closed one eye and began a perfect cat eye with her liner.

I traced a finger over my chest. “Cross my heart, we didn’t mess around. I think the only time Wes touched me was to help me over a stump.” He *had* touched my clothes when he helped me take them off, but that felt like a technicality.

She finished her right eye and looked at me skeptically. “And you didn’t tell him how you feel about him?”

“Nope.” I didn’t even have to omit any truths in that one. “For all he knows, he’s one of my best friends and that’s it.”

Cassie sighed, shaking her head. “I still feel like there’s something you’re not telling me.” *Quite a bit, bestie.*

“There.” Cassie shook her hair one last time before heading downstairs. It was only six o’clock, but people were already filtering in. By the time Cassie and I were ready, half of Fremont’s football team was standing in the kitchen, taking shots and swigging beer.

“Ladies!” a tall, blonde guy said, arms outstretched. Cassie grinned, reaching to accept his hand as he twirled her around. “Had I known we’d have a couple of models tonight I would have worn a better shirt.”

I looked at the white polo with blue stripes and a popped collar and rolled my eyes. Popped collar guys were always the worst.

Cassie was unfazed, absorbing into the group with hearty introductions and acceptance of a shot.

“Can I offer you one?” a soft voice asked from behind.

Turning, I was met with a comely pair of green eyes. When he turned his head to the side to reach for a shot and hand it to me, the light caught his eyes in just a way to make them more gray. I smiled without realizing it.

“Sure,” I said, accepting the shot. He held up his hand, signaling for me to wait as he reached for a lime to follow, offering me one. I took it in my free hand, waiting for him to prepare his own.

“Ready?”

I nodded, and we knocked them back. The tequila burned my throat as it made its way down, heating my chest. “Whew,” I said, fanning my face. “Strong.”

He smiled, his eyes lighting up. I may have noticed those eyes first, but the rest of his face was pretty cute too. He held out his hand. “Andy Lyon,” he said.

I shook it. “Maddie Sheffield.”

“Maddie,” Andy repeated, mulling it over for a second. “Tony’s friend?”

“Yeah, Tony’s friend.”

Andy’s blonde hair was longer than most of the boys at the party, hitting a few inches below his ears and nearly at the bottom of his neck. It was shaggy, but not sloppy. It surprised me how much I liked the look of it.

“I’m going to be Tony’s roommate in Chicago,” he said, pointing his empty shot glass toward Tony. “He said you’re going to be in Evanston.”

“I will be. I’ll be at Northwestern.”

Andy smiled at me, his teeth an impressive shade of white. “You must have worked hard in high school. Nice, Maddie.”



I blushed, which only seemed to make Andy smile wider. I smiled back at him until I felt a familiar hand on my shoulder.

“Hey, Mads,” Wes said, leaning closer to my ear. “Can we talk?”

Andy reached his hand out, offering it to Wes. Wes took it, giving a firm shake. “Andy,” he said. “Good to see you.”

Andy nodded in what felt like far too much formality for two eighteen-year-olds. “You too, Cohen. I was just introducing myself to Maddie. Tony says she’ll be just up the road in Evanston. I figure I’ll be seeing her around in the future.”

Something about the way he said it made Wes look uncomfortable. He shifted his weight, not letting his smile waver. “It’s like, what? An hour between cities?”

Andy’s smile didn’t drop. “Something like that. Fortunately, I’ll have my car with me.”

“Gas is expensive,” Wes said, his jaw clenching beneath his words.

“I’ve budgeted well.”

I looked between the two of them, sensing something, but not being able to make it out. Was this about me? Judging by the radiation of testosterone, I was sure that was part of it, but this seemed bigger somehow. Probably football rivals. I rolled my eyes.

“Andy, it was nice to meet you. I’m sure I’ll see you again. Can you excuse me for a moment?” I turned to Wes, pushing

him in the direction of the door.

Andy nodded. "Nice to meet you too, Mads."

Wes nearly choked. He opened his mouth to say something, but I tugged on his hand and pulled him away. "Come on, Neanderthal," I mumbled, leading him out of the kitchen and to the porch. "Let's go talk."

Wes said nothing, letting me lead the way until we were standing on the porch, staring at one another. He sighed, running his hand along the back of his neck. "You have to be careful with guys, Maddie."

I glanced at the cabin. "Was there something wrong with Andy?"

Wes clenched his jaw again, looking down at his feet. "No," he admitted. "He's fine, but some guys aren't, and you can't just take drinks from them thinking they're nice."

I groaned, pretending to collapse a little. "Wes, you're not my brother. Stop acting like it."

"No," he agreed. "I'm definitely not your brother, but I care about you." His face softened and his jaw relaxed.

Wes was right. He definitely was not my brother. That didn't mean he didn't look out for me, though.

Wes took my hand, walking me to the empty dock just downwind of the cabin. It was far enough from the party that we had privacy but not so far we had to hike there. We sat at the end of the dock, staring out at the lake as the water quietly lapped beneath us.

“Shall we continue our conversation from earlier?” he asked, nudging my shoulder with his and rocking me slightly.

My legs dangled from the edge of the dock, my feet barely grazing above the water. Wes sat criss-crossed, his long legs tucked under him. Music and voices from the party floated to the lake, but it was still peaceful down here. Calm. Maybe that had more to do with the fact Wes and I were alone than with the scenery.

“Where should we start?” I was hesitant to lead, although I’d been the one to suggest talking.

Wes let out a breath, resting his palms behind him and leaning his weight back. “Well, you wanted to talk about what I proposed, and I think you’re right to want to talk. So, let’s talk.”

“Right.” The sun had lowered significantly, but it hadn’t yet set in the summer sky. Golden rays fell through the gaps in the forest canopy, leaving imperfect slats of light running along the dock. Half of Wes was lit in a rich tan, and he looked so handsome. I tried not to stare, but I was finding it difficult.

“You asked if I’d consider being with you so you could go to college without being completely inexperienced. You’d prefer it to be with someone you care about, even if you don’t love them.”

Wes lowered his eyes. “I do love you, Maddie.”

I nodded, understanding why he felt conflicted. “You love me, but you aren’t in love with me.” His jaw clenched, and he

ran a hand over his face.

“Listen,” I said defensively. “It’s okay. I understand. I love you too, Wes. You’re such an important friend to me.”

He dropped his hand from his face, but his jaw was still clenched.

“Anyway,” I went on. “I get it. I think. I guess I’m flattered that you asked me and not Cassie.”

*Oh shit.*

“Did you ask Cassie?” The thought hadn’t crossed my mind until that moment, but with it came the fear that maybe he had. Or worse, that he would ask her after me if I said no.

Wes shook his head slowly. “No, I didn’t ask Cassie. If you say no, I won’t either, so you can let go of that.” He knew me well enough to know what I was thinking.

“What would you do?”

“I’ll just go to school and do as you suggested—wait to meet someone special, I guess. It’s bound to happen, right? We’re going to college. We’re going to start our lives, meet people, fall in love.”

I tried not to wince at his words, as painful as it felt to think of him falling in love with someone.

“If you don’t want to do this with me, I understand. A two-week romance isn’t exactly a thrilling idea, I guess.”

“A two-week romance?” He said *romance. Two weeks.*

Wes looked at me, confused. “Yeah. Did you think I was just asking you to be with me for one night?”

My jaw dropped. “Well, yeah, I did, actually. You weren’t very clear about any of this, other than the fact you want to lose your virginity before you go to college.”

He dropped his head, staring at his hands as they rested in his lap, his thumbs circling around one another. “Oh. Well, let me clarify. I was hoping we could take advantage of the time we have together to take advantage of one another. Is that better?”

*Much better.*

I swallowed thickly, nodding with wide eyes. “Yes,” I whispered.

He slid closer to me, the top of his knee pressing against my thigh before he uncrossed his legs and dropped them down to the lake. I heard the slow wake of his foot as he dragged it through the water.

I scooted closer to him, meeting him the rest of the way, our arms touching.

“I’ve thought of being with you before. Did you know that?” His voice was soft, sounding almost bashful.

I shook my head. “No, I didn’t.”

With his eyes fixed on the distant buoys of the lake, he nodded. “Yeah. I almost asked you out our sophomore year. Do you remember the spring fling dance?”

I remembered that dance. I'd gone with Clayton Sandiland, who had been a total asshole. He skipped the dancing to hang with his friends, refused to sit with me, and left before the dance was over without telling me. I'd been insulted, though not surprised. It was me who had paid for the dinner before and the tickets to the dance.

"Of course I remember," I said with a slight huff, crossing my arms. "Clayton was a total asshole."

Wes looked at me, nodding with a smile. "When I found you crying outside the gym, do you remember what I said to you?"

I squinted in concentration, trying to remember. "Some of it, but not clearly."

"I didn't forget," he said, leaning into me. "You asked me why he'd do something like that, and I told you that one day a real man—"

"Is going to be with me and I'd know when it's right. I'll look back at that moment and laugh at a boy like Clayton Sandiland, not cry over him," I finished. My smile was just a second behind the memory.

Wes moved his hand slowly, unfurling it and running a finger softly along the top of my shoulder and down my arm. Despite the warm evening, I shivered. Goosebumps followed the path of his finger, and my breathing quickened.

"It took all my best effort not to kiss you and tell you it was going to me someday, Maddie. That someday I'd be with you.

Because I knew it was going to be us sometime, at some point. You can call me crazy, but I just knew it.” His mouth lowered to kiss my shoulder, his finger still running along my arm.

“Why didn’t you just tell me then?” My eyes closed as I let my senses focus on the pressure of his finger on me, of his lips as they softly brushed against my shoulder.

It took him a moment to answer, but when he did, I knew he meant it. “I was afraid of what it would do to our friendship, and I didn’t want to lose that. Above all else, Maddie, I will protect our friendship. It has made my life better and losing it would be devastating.”

I looked at him, turning my body to face him. Taking in the softness of his eyes, the brown with gold threaded through, I reached and ran my finger along his bottom lip. The skin was smooth, and I thought of how easy it would be to kiss him.

“We’re friends? We’ll stay friends?” I kept my eyes on his lip, thinking about what it would be like to nibble on it.

“Always,” he whispered, reaching up for my hand and taking it in his.

I wanted so badly to kiss him. To lean in and take his mouth to mine, to feel those velvety smooth lips, suck his tongue and get lost in the moans of pleasure from a kiss that would no doubt be the best of my life. But I hesitated.

“What if one of us wants more?” I hoped my voice didn’t betray me, that he couldn’t tell I already did, but he wasn’t taken aback and I didn’t think he knew.

“Mads, we’re realistic people. We know we’re going to be on opposite sides of the country. We’re friends. We’re *eighteen*. We can love each other without needing more, don’t you think?”

*No.*

“Of course,” I whispered, squeezing his hand, not wanting to let go.

He leaned closer, his lips now a breath from mine, so close that I could taste the beer he had at the party. His exhales were soft, breathy, and I inhaled all of it like his air was the air I needed to breathe. Maybe it was.

“Can I kiss you?” he whispered, his mouth brushing ever so lightly against mine.

My eyes were wide as I looked at him, his face closer to me than it had probably ever been in our entire lives.

I could only nod, and with that slight movement, his lips pressed to mine. It was a gentle connection at first, but he wrapped his hand in my hair, tugging my head back and deepening the kiss.

It took me less than a second to know that two weeks wouldn’t be enough. It would never be enough.

I kissed him back anyway.



## *Five*

### *Maddie*

“Is this a sex inventory or something?” I asked, leaning back on my elbows as I watched the moon slowly rise over the lake. Wes and I had been on the dock for a couple of hours now. As much as I’d enjoyed our kissing, we had gotten little talking done in our time together.

Wes lay on his side next to me, his legs pulled up as he relaxed with his head in his hand and propped on his elbow. His finger traced lazy circles along my stomach.

“Yeah, or something. I want this to be enjoyable for both of us, Mads. I don’t want to just jump right in. I want to know about what you like. I want you to say what you want. What you need.”

He’d spent the last several minutes asking me about my experiences and expectations with guys. It was a little uncomfortable, but somehow comforting. Wes was invested in making sure this was a positive experience for us both.

“What I want? What I need?” I mulled it over, unsure how to answer. “There isn’t much information to go on.”

He leaned over, tugging my shirt up a few inches and moving his finger to the bare skin of my stomach. “You’re so soft,” he mumbled. “Has anyone touched you like this?”

The circling of his finger changed as he flattened his hand and smoothed it over my skin, running from one hip bone to the next.

I may have stopped breathing temporarily. “No,” I managed to whisper.

“Has anyone ever touched you at all?” The roughness of his calloused palms felt wildly different from any other hands that had been on my body before.

“Yes,” I mumbled, watching his hand on me. “Kieran would put his hand under my bra when we’d make out, but he wouldn’t take it off. Russell Thompson fingered me after the homecoming dance. Felt me up a bit, too.” It embarrassed me to acknowledge these things to Wes. Wes! My friend.

“Did you come? When Russell fingered you?”

I wanted to squirm with discomfort. “Um, no. I didn’t. He gave up after a while. To be honest, it was a little uncomfortable.”

Wes frowned, his hand stopping. “Then he didn’t do it right.”

“It could have been me,” I said quickly, not wanting to throw Russell under a bus of humiliation. “It was my first time

and maybe I wasn't doing something I should have been doing."

Wes chuckled. "You really don't have to do much of the work there, Maddie." His finger began tracing my stomach again, this time provocatively close to the button of my shorts. "Do you touch yourself sometimes?"

My hands shot up over my face. "I can't believe we're having this conversation, Wes!"

He reached up and pulled my hands away. "Why not? I want to know what you've done or haven't done."

I kept my hands down, but I was grateful for a dark night to hide my pink cheeks. "Fine," I mumbled. "Yes, I touch myself sometimes."

"Do you come?"

I wasn't sure if it was discomfort or arousal that followed his question, but something in me shifted. Without thinking, I pressed my thighs together. Wes smiled. He must have noticed.

"Yes," I whispered.

He groaned, dropping his head to my shoulder and bringing his knuckle to his mouth, biting playfully. "I bet you look beautiful when you come, Maddie."

"Do you touch yourself?" I asked, desperate to take the focus off me. The question felt nearly impossible to ask, but the thought of him pleasuring himself made me ache.

“Of course, Mads.” He sat up and ran his hands through his hair, grinning. “A lot.”

“What else have you done?” I wasn’t sure if I wanted to know, but I was going to ask anyway.

He thought for a moment. “I’ve touched girls. Though if I’m being honest, it’s only been the last couple who have seemed to enjoy it. One climaxed, which I guess is a success. Or a failure, if you consider the others who didn’t.”

“Has anyone ever...” I trailed off, looking at his dick.

Wes nodded. “Yeah, twice.”

I sat up, feeling uncomfortable again. “Did you like it?”

He laughed, throwing his head back. “Of course!”

I laughed, too.

He thought for a moment, his smile mischievous. “I’m guessing by your reaction to seeing me naked today that you haven’t done much reciprocating of touch.”

I sighed. “Nope, none, actually. So don’t expect any magic over here.”

“Do you want me to teach you how to do it?” He asked it so casually that he may as well have been asking if I needed some extra help with algebra. “I mean, guys are going to like different things, I’m sure, but I can tell you what I like and you can do with that information as you please.”

I gave his arm a playful punch. “You’d really take one for the team like that, huh? Be willing to let me try it out on you?”

He rubbed his arm. "I'm benevolent. What can I say?"

We sat grinning at one another. I closed my eyes, committing that moment to memory, and opened my eyes to a different look altogether. Wes' grin slid into a wolfish smile instead, his eyes dancing with an energy that I felt before I saw.

"I really want to kiss you, Maddie." His gaze dropped from my eyes, running along my neck, down my breasts, over my stomach, and continuing on past my thighs. "All of you."

The light in his eyes sparked something within me, alighting my core and sending a burning through my body that was difficult to differentiate between pleasure or pain. As if wanting him was both necessary and yet painful, an ache and longing like no other.

I'd never wanted someone like this, and I wasn't sure what to do with it. My mouth felt dry as I nodded again, searching for words that my brain could not find.

"Can I kiss you?" he whispered, leaning into me. "All over?"

I nodded again, dropping back onto the dock until I was flat on my back. I looked up, arching slightly to glance at the cabin in the distance.

"We're alone," he mumbled, moving to hover over me. "No one knows we're even down here."

"Okay." I swallowed, trying to relax, but I wondered if I'd be able to. When Wes' mouth found my neck, nuzzling in and

planting soft kisses as he ran his lips along my skin, everything turned to jelly and I moaned. Suddenly, I wasn't worried about being able to relax into this.

Wes licked his tongue along my skin, stopping just under my ear to bite gently. "Jesus. Your moan, Mads. It's going to drive me wild."

"Really?"

He reached for my hand, placing it against the zipper of his jeans. The thickening of his erection left no question about his enjoyment of whatever was happening. "Really."

"Oh."

I wasn't sure what to say. All the romance books I'd read had such sexy dialogue. People said the drippiest, sappiest, hottest things to one another. Yet here I was, hardly able to manage a feeble, "Oh."

Wes took his time, moving along my neck and shoulders to my lips and bringing heavy kisses to my mouth, his tongue roaming between our lips with ease. Mine met him, tangling together and caressing, sometimes gently, and at other times with a fervor that I hardly recognized to be my own. I didn't know kissing could be like that.

His body was heavy on mine, but he was careful not to smash me as he rested on his arms. My body rubbed against him, seeking a heat and friction I was desperate for, but uncertain how to get. My cutoffs were a heavy fabric, and

every thrust of my hips and every point of contact with his jeans felt rough with such a thick barrier between us.

Still, there was enough grinding to wet my panties in a way that embarrassed me.

“Can I?” Wes asked, tugging on the bottom of my t-shirt suggestively.

The thought of being without some of my clothing made my heart flutter, but when his mouth went back to my neck, I put up no fight.

“Yes,” I gasped, nipping at his earlobe and circling my hips slowly, my legs spread against his and his muscled thigh in my core.

Wes pulled up from the bottom hem, easily getting my shirt off.

I sat up, and he smiled at me, running his finger along the cup of my bra. “You’re lovely, Maddie. So lovely.”

*Lovely.* No one had ever referred to me, or anything about me, as lovely before. His finger delicately ran along the tops of my breasts, as if he were painting a careful picture of the landscape of my body.

Taking a deep breath, I reached behind me, unclasping my bra as I exhaled slowly. Slipping my arms from it, I dropped it in a pile with my shirt.

Wes inhaled sharply, running his finger down to my nipple and circling slowly. I dropped my head back, his light touch feeling like not enough and yet almost too much.

His hand was on my breast, but everything in my core ached for him. He pushed gently on my shoulder, encouraging me to lie down. I did, feeling the cold wood of the dock against my back and wiggling uncomfortably beneath it.

“Here,” Wes said, pulling his shirt off and laying it down. He pointed at it. “Use this. I don’t want you getting any splinters.”

I repositioned myself, shivering as the breeze picked up along the water. Wes smiled, no doubt at the pebbling of my nipples. “Body heat is a great way to keep warm,” he said, hovering over me.

He softly kissed my chest. His mouth blazed an agonizingly slow path to my breasts and his tongue circled my nipple before he pulled it into his mouth. I gasped at the delightful pressure, arching my back and moaning.

He chuckled quietly as he moved to take my other nipple in his mouth, eventually moving back and forth between them.

“Oh god, Wes. That feels really good,” I moaned.

Wes pressed against me, the firmness of his erection sending a shudder through me as the sensation of his mouth on my breasts and the grinding of his hips overwhelmed me. “I—I want it all.”

He circled my nipple again, his tongue working playfully as my body screamed for him. “We’ll get there,” he assured me. “Can I feel how much you like this?” His hand rested at the top of my shorts, one finger hooked in the waistband.



“Yes,” I said, nearly breathless.

“Remember,” he mumbled, making his way back to my lips, crushing his mouth to mine. “I’m still figuring this out. Tell me what feels good, okay? Say what you want.”

*Everything. Everything feels good with you.* Nothing came from my mouth as I opened it silently, pleading, as he unbuttoned my shorts and moved his hand into my panties.

“Oh, my god.” My hips instinctively raised, connecting my sex to his palm as he cupped me, his index finger moving to dip in my pussy before dragging back up to my clit. It took him a moment, but his finger found it with a steady circle.

“Fuck, Mads. You... You feel so warm. So good.” He kissed me harder, pushing himself against the side of my thigh. “So wet.”

These affirmations of my desire only made me want more of him. I pushed my hips up harder, bucking under his hand as his finger circled my clit, slowly at first.

“More?” he asked softly, his breath a near pant as he looked down at his hand in my shorts. “Say what you need.”

“Yes, please, yes.” I breathed. “More. Harder, I think. More pressure.” I wasn’t really sure what it was I wanted, but everything in my body was screaming for me to push toward him, to bring the pressure to my clit.

He pressed harder, and I moaned again. “Like that.” I licked my lips, feeling a building in me that was familiar. I’d come

before, but only with my own hand. Wes felt different—better, more intense.

“Faster?” he asked. “Or stay the same?”

*Jesus.* I felt like I was on fire. I burned for him. Could he tell?

“Faster,” I said, nearly choking on the words. “Harder. More pressure.” My stomach felt tight, and I flexed my thighs, constricting all the muscles in my legs from the building within me. “I think I might come if you keep doing that.”

He bit my earlobe gently, breathing hard against my skin. “I don’t think I can ever stop doing this,” he mumbled, his enjoyment clear in the tone of his voice. “I can’t believe I’m touching you. It’s probably my favorite thing in this world now.”

His words made me unravel. I reached out, gripping his shoulders as I pushed myself harder against his hand, panting. “I’m going to come, Wes. *Jesus.* I’m going to come.”

My fingers dug into him, grasping wildly as a tidal wave washed crashed with a force that could drown me. Like I would not be the same after that moment. My climax rode through me, washing away the girl that I was and leaving a woman who now knew the full joy her body could bring.

“Wes,” I whimpered, feeling everything in me quake beneath his hand. His movements slowed, but he didn’t take his hand off of me until my body stilled.

“Holy shit, Maddie,” he mumbled, his forehead pressed to mine as he shook his head. “You are beautiful when you come.”

My breath was still shallow for sometime after, and Wes didn't let go of me. He held me, saying nothing, pushing for nothing more as I got my bearings and adjusted to the world around me.

Everything felt... enhanced. The air was warmer, the humidity thicker, the lake quieter, and the moon brighter. I closed my eyes and opened them again, wondering if this had all really happened.

“Are you okay?” Wes asked, his voice quiet. “Does this feel weird? Do you feel weird? Are we okay?”

*Are we okay?*

With one question, I knew being with Wes wouldn't be a mistake. He wasn't looking for a one-night stand or a quick bang or even his own immediate release. I mattered to him, and he wanted *both* of us to enjoy the experience.

I thought of fumbling Russell Thompson, or even the stories my girlfriends told about losing their virginity in appalling or unimpressive ways. That would not be me.

“*Not someone I'm going to forget,*” Wes had said. He didn't want to lose his virginity to someone he would forget.

*“And not someone I will want to forget.”*

“I'm okay,” I answered honestly. “And we're okay too.”

Wes gave a relieved smile, kissing my forehead as he pulled his hands from my shorts. Part of me wanted to plead with him to keep it there—to never take his hands off of me, but I wouldn't. I couldn't. We only had two weeks.

I bit my lip. “So what's next?”



I'd read so many romance books—many going into great detail about sexy times between characters, but it still didn't prepare me for the reality of having sex. I'm not sure why I felt like it would, and looking back, it seemed naïve to make that assumption.

In the years to come, I'd right my perspective, but on the night I lost my virginity, I was still hopelessly hopeful that it was going to change my life only for the better. Sleeping with Wes did, in ways I couldn't fully comprehend at first, but the ramifications of those changes would become a catalyst for a shuffling of my life plans.

After my first orgasm, Wes and I sat chatting on the dock like a couple of casual friends. Which we were, but I wasn't sure how casual it was for a friend to touch you so intimately.

I was surprised how easy it was for us to slip back into a normal conversation with one another, and when Wes handed me my shirt to put on, I was disappointed. I had expected a progression of more physical contact.

Wes, to his credit, didn't want *everything* to happen on a dock. Once I was dressed, he took me back to his room. Mitch had disappeared with Cynthia again, telling Wes he'd left the room clear for him to enjoy someone from the party. If Mitch had known that Wes was going to bring me back to the room, he probably would have camped out there.

It was awkward at first—me and Wes alone in his room. He asked if I wanted the lights on or off, but I hardly heard him over the thumping of my heart.

After careful consideration, he turned off the lights but opened the curtains to let the moonlight in. There was just enough light that we could see one another, but not so much that we'd shock ourselves, either.

There was a lot of kissing, a lot of touching, a lot of dry humping for a while. Two uncertain teenagers trying to figure out how to put their bodies together and what ways felt good to do it.

Knowing we were intentionally working up to a grand finale of penetration made it difficult to stay in the moment with him, and all the arousal of our moonlight dock had seemed to slip away from us. After a while, I gently pushed against his chest, moving away from him.

“Wes?”

“Yeah, Mads?”

I hesitated. “This feels weird, right?”

There was a pause. “Yeah, it does.” He sat up, giving me space to follow.

His hair, a deep brown that had always seemed so earthy, was tousled. I tried to hold my laugh, but it came regardless.

“What?” he asked.

I shook my head, my lips pulled into a tight line. “Nothing.”

He narrowed his eyes, a half smile on his face. “I know you, Mads. You’re laughing at me. Why?”

“I’m not laughing at *you*.” I wasn’t. I was laughing at his *hair*. As if they were two separate entities in the room.

Wes grinned, shaking his head.

I thought he was going to kiss me. His eyes were intent and focused on mine, trying to read me, but he kept his distance. “Why is this weird, Maddie? When the dock wasn’t?”

I didn’t have an answer for him. I wished I did. Everything on the dock had felt electric. Sexy. Exciting. Now that we were alone in his bedroom, a house full of raucous and rowdy teenagers just a floor below, it felt off.

“I’m nervous,” I admitted.

He reached for my hands and tugged them from my face. “We don’t have to have sex, Mads. Not tonight, or not at all. I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

I dropped my eyes to the bulge in his jeans, and he laughed. “I didn’t say I don’t want you at all.”

Wes slid closer to me, running his hand along my thigh. “Is it okay if I do this?” I swallowed and nodded. His hand didn’t move higher, staying just beyond the hem of my shorts. He grinned. “You’re really soft, Maddie.”

That grin of his. It had always been so playful, so inviting, like he wanted to share his enthusiasm with others. When that grin was focused on me, it made everything in my stomach drop—like those amusement park rides that lift you hundreds of feet above the ground and then fall straight down.

Being with Wes made me feel that way. Like I was scared initially, unsure why I got on the ride in the first place. The moment at the top, waiting for the fall, knowing it was coming. Then the drop, and with it the sinking of everything. The ground rushing to meet you, the rapid rise of a heartbeat, and the sheer scream of instinct to panic.

Except once you’re back on the ground, you realize it was exhilarating, and you’re in line to do it again.

“Wes?” He looked at me, listening. “The thing that makes me feel most nervous is you.” It embarrassed me to say this, though I didn’t know why. “I’ve always wanted to be important to you. To... have part of you somehow, even if it’s just friendship.”

His hand squeezed my thigh. “You’ll always have a part of me, Maddie. We’re friends.” He stopped quickly, opening his

mouth like he wanted to say something else, then closed it, shaking his head. “Dammit,” he muttered.

“What?”

He sighed, running his hand over the back of his neck. “You’ll always have a part of me because we’re connected, Maddie. We’ve always been connected somehow. We always will be.”

I could only laugh nervously. “We’re about to be two-thousand miles apart. Not much connecting we’ll be doing then.” It was a joke, a dumb joke, but as soon as I’d said it, I regretted it.

Wes’ face fell. “That’s not true. The connection we have isn’t about whether you’re sitting on a bed next to me or whether my hand is on your body, and I think you know that.”

My throat tightened, and I dropped my eyes to the checkered flannel bedspread beneath us, suddenly aware of how small a twin bed really was. “I know that,” I whispered.

He nodded, satisfied. “Good. I don’t know what our futures look like, but that connection is real, okay?”

“Okay.” My breath was shallow, hardly filling my lungs enough to talk. *Why? Why couldn’t he have told me these things sooner?*

Except I knew why. They were the same reasons I hadn’t told him about my feelings. Our friendship was special, transcending anything that could break and fail. Like a romance. We were so young, with lives ahead of us. The



timing wasn't right for us, the circumstances were not ideal. The feelings were real, though, and I was grateful to get the time I could with him—before I couldn't get it any longer.

“Wes, I think I'm ready,” I whispered.

He kissed me, a motion so tender that I wondered if the fluttering of his lips had happened at all. “Let's just see where this goes, okay? There's no end point.”

But there was, and time would be sure of that.

## *Six*

### *Maddie*

“Get in the car, bitch!” Cassie called, holding open the door of her Subaru. “The airport waits for no one!”

“Hold on,” I grumbled, wrestling with my last suitcase as I dragged it down the porch of my house. No, not my house anymore, my parents’ house. The one I used to live in. The one I was moving out of.

“Let me help,” Wes offered, jumping up from the bench by the door, but Mitch was faster, pushing Wes out of the way.

“I’ll help,” he said pointedly. “She’s my baby sister.” He gave a huff as he lifted the heavy suitcase down the stairs. “Which means I want her out of here as soon as possible, so let’s get this stuff in the car!”

“Oh fuck off,” I grumbled.

“Maddison Marie!” my mom said. “Who raised you to speak that way?”

My dad came to join her on the porch, wrapping his arm around her waist and winking at me. “No idea where she picked that up.”

My mom looked up at him, her tiny frame tucked into his massive and imposing body. “I’m sure you have *no* idea.”

Moving to Evanston was taking a chance, and it scared the hell out of me. And now I was doing it earlier than expected after receiving an offer for an internship with the school paper. I couldn’t pass up the opportunity, especially as a freshman, but orientation was the following week, and I needed to get settled.

“You sure you don’t want us to drop you off?” my mom asked, a frown on her face. My parents had planned to fly out with me in another week but couldn’t adjust their work schedules with my new itinerary.

“Nope,” I said, shaking my head. “You guys don’t need to go out of your way. Besides, Dad will cry and it will get embarrassing.”

My dad shrugged, not disagreeing. Mitch finished loading my suitcase into the trunk and looked back at us. “Shotgun, assholes!” he called gleefully.

I flipped him off, ignoring my mom’s disapproving look.

“Looks like we’re in the back,” Wes said, brushing past me to get into Cassie’s car.

My best friends, the ones who had been with me for all the important moments of my life, were now about to drop me off

at the airport for the start of what felt like a new life altogether. A life without them.

“Picture!” my mom cried. “We need a picture of you four!” She shuffled us to Cassie’s car, lining the four of us up. We draped our arms along one another’s shoulders, smiling. The picture was taken, and that was it. Time to go.

My parents gave me tight hugs and sloppy kisses, my dad crying before I’d broken away. I got in the car without looking back, afraid I couldn’t actually leave them if I did.

“You’re lucky,” Cassie said as she pulled out of the driveway. “Your parents are the best.”

I wiped my cheek. “They are,” I agreed.

As soon as I dropped my hand to the seat, Wes reached for it. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I think so.”

He kept his eyes on me, even after I’d turned to look out the car window. Cassie and Mitch sat in the front, fighting over the radio and arguing about ambiance and soundtracks for goodbyes. Meanwhile, I kept my eyes focused outside of the car, thinking about anything I could to distract from the dread that was pooling in the pit of my stomach.

*This is it. This is goodbye.*

Cassie and Mitch finally settled on Pink Floyd, as *Wish You Were Here* blasted through the speakers.

“I haven’t even left yet,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

Cassie caught my eye from the rear-view mirror. “But you *will*, and then we’ll really wish you were here. Starting on the ride home.” Her eyes watered and she sniffed. I’d been so focused on the sadness of saying goodbye to Wes that I’d almost forgotten Cassie wasn’t coming with me.

In several hours, my plane would land in Chicago and I’d be on my own. No brother, no parents, no friends. No Wes.

We listened to the radio as we drove down the highway. Wes kept his hand on mine, tucking it into his lap as he ran his thumb over the back of my knuckle. My palm stretched along his thigh, clutching him and flexing my fingers deeper, as if anchoring myself meant I wouldn’t have to leave him. It didn’t matter if I stayed, though, because Wes was driving to Eugene the next day for training camp.

Cassie hit a pothole in the road, bouncing us all into a jumble. “Sorry,” she mumbled. “Fucking highways. Where are my taxes really going?” Cassie hadn’t had so much as a part-time job yet.

I laughed nervously, but not from her joke. My hand had bounced deeper into Wes’ lap, and the side of my hand brushed against his erection. I looked at him, eyes wide, wondering how he could be aroused in the back of the car like this. His eyes met mine, and he shrugged, not bothering to look embarrassed.

*“You do things to me, Maddie. Things I’m not sorry for.”*

I closed my eyes, feeling my stomach tighten at the memory of his words.

*“I could do things to you for real. If you want.”*

I felt so shy in his bedroom. So nervous and apprehensive as we relaxed back into a comfortable pattern of conversation that night we'd made love for the first time. We'd spent more time talking, reliving stories of times when we'd wanted the other or things we'd always remember about one another.

Wes told me we could see where things went that night. They'd started in friendship and conversation, but ended in pleasure and connection beyond anything I could have imagined when he'd first taken my hand and led me into the bedroom.

*“I could touch you, and feel your body, like you've felt mine.”*

I was so confident when I said it. I was ready, and my inexperience was no longer a hindrance. Wes had guided my hand along his jeans, helping me to unbutton them and bring his zipper down as I tucked my hand into his boxer briefs. He was erect, and the size of his cock in my fist felt more impressive than the feel of it beneath the fabric of his clothes. It surprised me how smooth he was. I gripped him in my hand, squeezing the base of him, but not knowing what else to do.

*“Like this, let me show you.”*

He held his hand over mine, stroking himself in firm, slow motions at first before picking up speed. I felt a wetness under

my palm as it crested the head of his cock and I pulled back slightly.

*“That’s normal,”* he assured me, using the bead of moisture to lubricate himself as he helped me run my hand along his length at a faster pace. His breath picked up, and mine followed quickly, shallow and broken as I watched my hand work him. Wes pressed his forehead to mine. *“Your hand on me feels so good, Maddie. I’m going to come if you don’t stop.”*

*“Do you want to come like this?”*

I bit my lip and looked out the car window, watching as we sped by cars, passing them and wishing Cassie wouldn’t drive so fast. I wanted every second in the back of this car, my hand tucked into Wes, and my memories so fresh that my body was responding to them as if they were happening at that moment.

*“No, I want to come with you.”*

*“What if I can’t?”*

*“You already know you can come with me, Maddie. If not during sex, then again after, okay?”*

*“Okay.”*

I hadn’t been able to come during sex, not that first time or a few more times after. That took a while. It didn’t feel disappointing, though, and when Wes laid me back on the bed, helping me take my clothes off and me helping him with his, the anticipation of his body blending with mine, I could have melted.

*“Is that okay? Does it hurt?”*

The feeling of him pushing inside me made my breath hitch.

*“Maddie.”*

The hiss of my name on his lips only heated my body, the roll of my hips more natural than I'd expected as my body prompted him to join me. He moved slowly, carefully. An inch before pulling back and starting over again until he was fully inside of me. My knees dropped to each side, leaving me open for him as I took a deep breath with each pass.

*“Look at me. Jesus. I'm inside of you, Maddie.”*

I closed my eyes.

*“Do you feel okay? Does it feel good for you, too? Do you want me to keep going?”*

*“I want you to never stop.”*

*“I don't know if I can last long.”* He'd said it with a laugh, but there was a twinge of pain behind it. *“You feel too good.”*

It was only a few thrusts before he came, his breath catching as he shuddered above me, dropping his head into the crook of my neck and apologizing for coming so quickly. I hugged him to me, enjoying the feel of him inside me.

*“That was perfect.”* I whispered it to him, meaning it. We clung to one another until he was soft. He held the base of himself with one hand, careful to make sure the condom didn't come off, and tossed it in a wastebasket in the corner of the room.



*“Let me help you come again. I don’t like that I came and you didn’t.”*

*“I did, Wes. Earlier.”*

*“Again, then. I want to see how many times I can make you come in two weeks.”*

We’d counted, at least the first few days. Then we stopped. It felt more sad than exciting, as if our days were limited. Probably because they were.

We made the most of it, though, sneaking off together at the cabin, later from our parents’ houses, bringing our bodies together in various combinations, learning new things about one another, and about ourselves, too.

I hadn’t realized certain places on my body could feel so good or be erogenous zones. He hadn’t realized he could train his body to slow down before coming too quickly. I let him explore places on my body I never imagined, even when I read Cosmo with Cassie at our sleepovers. Every moment we had together felt like a crash course in exploration. As if we were making up for lost time.

It was too fast, the drive. The two weeks. The years since I’d met Wes. Cassie pulled up to the airport, driving to the departure gates and finding a spot to unload. It was quick work with only two suitcases. Soon I was standing on the curb, staring at my friends and trying not to sob.

“Mads,” Cassie cried, pulling me in for a hug that I wasn’t sure would end. “I’m going to miss you and I can’t believe

we're not going off together." The watering eyes from earlier had now spilled, breaking the dam of composure. Mine followed, and we held each other tighter.

A whistle from the other end of the unload zone blew, as a security guard began moving drop offs along to clear the traffic behind us. Cassie wiped under her eyes and blew out a big breath.

"I'm going to sit in the car and pretend this isn't happening. Your turn, Mitch," she said, patting his back. I watched her walk to the driver's side door and get in the car, a sad wave before she dropped inside.

Mitch stood in front of me with his hands in his pockets, kicking his toe on the pavement between us. "You're my little sister," he began.

I rolled my eyes and cut him off. "By *ten minutes*."

Wes chuckled, and Mitch shot him a look that caused Wes to clear his throat and drop his smile. Mitch turned to me. "*Like I was saying*. You're my little sister—and goddamnit, ten minutes count!" I tried not to laugh and nodded to go on. "I can't believe you won't be by my side when we start college. We've always done the scary stuff together. It feels like we should be doing this, too." His eyes watered, tears threatening.

"Mitch," I whispered, my chest filling with emotion. "You're my best big brother."

"I'm your only one."

“Still the best.”

He wrapped his heavy arms around me and tucked me into him, snuggling me as if he were trying to fit me into the pocket of his button up. Part of me wished he could. It didn't feel right to leave him.

He kissed the top of my head before turning back to the car, wiping his cheek. “Your turn,” he said to Wes, patting him on the back the way Cassie did for Mitch.

I wasn't sure why goodbyes had gone in the order they did, other than Wes had conveniently been hanging behind everyone else all morning. It was by design, I realized, and when it was just the two of us standing in front of one another, I grinned like a lunatic. It was more from nerves than anything else, but I couldn't help it.

His grin spread nearly as wide, and I wondered how it was possible to look elated when we were dreading the other side of this goodbye.

“I look insane,” I mumbled, unable to drop my smile.

Wes nodded, taking my hands in his. “You do.”

We both laughed, and I took a deep breath. “I can't stop smiling, even though I'm sad. Is that weird?”

“No, Mads. Besides, I'm grinning like an insane person too.”

“You are,” I agreed.

A whistle blew, this time directed at us. The security guard, a portly man in a uniform with a bright safety vest over the top, waved excitedly. “Move it along!” he shouted.

*Shut up! This is my goodbye.* Didn’t he understand how hard this was? Couldn’t he see that my heart was being torn apart by every second that passed, a second I could never get back?

Wes and I turned to one another, grins now gone.

“I can’t believe you’re leaving,” he said. “It’s too soon. I thought we’d have more time, but you’re leaving me early.”

*I don’t want to. Come with me! There’s football in Illinois!*

I swallowed the plea down. “It’s just a day before you are leaving anyway.”

He leaned in close, his breath hot on my neck and giving me goosebumps. “But imagine all we could have done in a day.”

If the past two weeks had been any indication, the answer was a lot.

“The last couple of weeks have been the best of my life, Wes.” The intensity of my words didn’t embarrass me, not anymore. I didn’t think I could hide the truth of them anyway.

The way he was looking at me made me forget we were at an airport, our best friends, and my brother, looking on curiously. Wes’ brown eyes, bottomless with affection and warmth, told me he felt the same.

If I had any doubt about it, though, he squashed it. “Me too, Maddie. I’m so grateful we had this time. I’m going to

remember it forever.”

I playfully punched his arm. “You make it sound like we’re never going to see each other again. I’ll see you at Thanksgiving.”

Something flashed across his face for a moment—worry, maybe. Did he really think we wouldn’t see each other again? The thought made my palms sweat.

“Move it along, I said!” the security guard hollered, walking toward us with his whistle tucked between his fat lips.

Wes looked at him, then back at me. “We’re out of time, Maddie.”

I nodded, desperate to hold him for every second I could. “We’ll still talk all the time, right? We’re still friends?” My grip tightened. *I can’t let you go.*

“We’ll be friends forever,” he said softly.

Part of me worried that was true. That we’d never be more than friends like I wanted. If the last two weeks had shown me anything, it was that Wes and I *could* be more if we gave ourselves the chance.

The other part of me felt relieved by his assurance. I never wanted to lose the friendship we had.

“Thank you, Maddie.” He leaned in, kissing my cheek softly, hovering just a moment before he brought his mouth to mine, kissing me deeply.

I heard a window rolling down, a vague muttering of Mitch's voice asking, "What the hell?" and tasting the salt of my tears as they ran down my face and mingled with our lips.

Wes pulled away first, causing me to panic. "I don't want to go," I said, looking around at the busy departure drop off, an angry security guard ready to blow his whistle, and my best friends preparing to drive off without me. "I can't do this."

Wes ran his thumbs in small circles along the back of my hand. "You *can* do this, Mads, and you will. This is the start of something great for you. Your writing career waits. Go, be brave, and remember to say what you want, what you need. Always, okay?" He hesitated, like he was thinking something, but kicked his foot nervously instead.

I searched his face. "What? What is it, Wes?"

He shrugged. "Do you think we could maybe write to each other? Like actual letters? It's not immediate or exciting, like a text or an email, or even a call or FaceTime, but I kind of like the idea of doing that with you."

*Love, Kurt.*

"*Mads, have you read Love, Kurt?*" he'd asked me. "*You should. It's a series of letters that Kurt Vonnegut wrote to his first wife, Jane. They were schoolmates who came back together when they were nineteen. They had a summer romance, and they promised to keep in touch at the end of it, even though they were heading to their respective colleges. It's pretty sweet to read two people corresponding on the precipice of love.*"

Was that how he saw us? My heart felt like it was going to beat right out of my chest. Was he on the precipice of love? Did he want us to come back together, a treasure chest of letters to look back on and cherish? A documentation of our feelings for one another, growing over time?

“Please. I want to. I need to.” The desperation in my voice was obvious, and with it came the goodbye I never wanted to hear.

Wes ran the pad of his thumb under my eye, wiping away a tear. “The hardest part of leaving is looking back and seeing the person still standing there. Don’t stand there, Maddie. Go, start your life.”

I felt like I already had, just two weeks ago, but as I watched Wes climb into the car, heard a loud shriek from Cassie inside, no doubt regarding the kiss, and stared at them as they pulled away from the curb and headed home—I realized he hadn’t looked back, and I was still standing there.

## *Seven*

### *Maddie*

“Don’t cry into the mashed potatoes,” my mom said, wiping her hands on her apron. “What’s got you so down?” She gave me a gentle nudge with her hip.

I scooted aside, letting her finish the one job she’d assigned me for Thanksgiving dinner.

“Nothing,” I said, fooling no one.

My dad shot my mother a look from across the kitchen, the kind that said *Leave her alone*, but my mom was persistent.

“If you’re upset about that article that didn’t get published, don’t be. You’ve already had *three* in the paper, and Kate says that’s three times as many as most freshman interns.”

I nodded, looking over at Kate, my roommate, and appreciating how quickly we’d become friends. She had no family, and my parents insisted on her joining us for Thanksgiving. She happily agreed, fitting in seamlessly already, parked on a barstool at the island and looking



comfortable. My mom had put her to work right away as she prepared the green beans for the casserole.

“Yeah, thanks, Mom,” I said, wanting to change the subject. “When is Mitch going to be back?”

I caught Kate flinching with the mention of Mitch, stopping mid-snap of a green bean and blushing. They’d only met the night before, but Kate had taken quite an interest in him already. It wasn’t surprising—Mitch was handsome and outgoing. That hadn’t changed since he started college.

What *had* changed was his availability. As it turned out, college football held a schedule that didn’t care about holidays, promised get-togethers, or planned phone calls. It didn’t care about disappointment or tears or heartbreak, and when Wes told everyone he couldn’t make it back for Thanksgiving, I cursed the thing keeping him from me. I didn’t care that football was his life now, college a distant second, because I wasn’t even in the top five important things to Wes anymore.

His letters had been regular at first, arriving at my dorm near weekly. I’d rush to the mail, finding the stark white envelope with blue inked block letters addressed to me, and clutch it to my chest. I even smelled each letter, hoping that *maybe* there’d be just a hint of his scent on them.

There never was, of course, and it was probably gross to smell something that had been touched by dozens of dirty hands, but I craved some sense of closeness with him.

We called and texted at first too, but even that had dropped off as the peak of football season took over. Calls became non-existent, and even texts dwindled or were left without a response.

Mitch, just as busy as Wes, had explained how hard it was to keep up with everything. It wasn't just training and games. It was fundraisers, promoting the college team, attending alumni parties to draw donors, and that was all on top of having a full class schedule.

Mitch described it as treading water with a wetsuit made of bricks, and he was barely keeping his head above the surface.

I tried not to take it personally. I really did. I was busy enough with my full class schedule, a part-time job at a coffee shop on campus, and my internship at the student paper. While the thought of pulling away from Wes, and Mitch for that matter, tore my heart in a way I hadn't thought possible, I wasn't wallowing. There were parties to go to, friends to meet, and plenty to learn.

Still, I'd be lying if I said I hadn't been holding my breath, waiting to hear from Wes.

"Mitch will be back any minute. Maybe he could take you both to the Japanese Tea Gardens to see the changing leaves," my mom suggested, checking the turkey in the oven. "You have a couple hours until dinner and there's nothing to be done other than wait for everything to cook through."

I made my way to the kitchen island, sitting on a barstool next to Kate. "I think I'll stay local and go see Cassie," I said

thoughtfully. “Kate, you and Mitch can go.” I winked at her, her round cheeks turning pink with embarrassment.

Kate had taken an interest in Mitch, but I knew full well that Mitch reciprocated interest. Kate was beautiful. Long black hair that ran down to the middle of her back, a soft, round face with almond-shaped eyes the color maple syrup, and a heart-shaped mouth that had left Mitch near speechless when he saw her.

Kate wasn’t just beautiful—she was brilliant. Her intention was to study neurobiology, and she was already carrying a load of junior level classes because she’d done Running Start in high school.

“Oh, tell Cassie hello for me, will you?” my mom asked, kicking the oven door closed. “I ran into her mother at the store the other day. She said she had to bribe Cassie to come home for Thanksgiving. Apparently, she’s loving Florida so much.”

I nodded in confirmation. “She is. Cassie and Florida were meant for one another.”

“We’ll see for ourselves when we go in April,” Mitch said, coming up behind us without making a peep. “Kate.” He nodded at Kate, who gave him a full, white-toothed smile.

“Can you take Kate to the tea gardens?” I asked, sliding off my chair and reaching for my keys on the counter next to my dad. “I’m going to see Cassie and it’s just going to be a big catch up. *Definitely* boring for Kate.” I waved my hand dismissively, but I would not win any drama accolades for my

performance. My dad grinned, showing Kate where me and Mitch got our smile from.

Mitch had his eyes on Kate. “Sure can. Come on, Kate.” She followed behind him, turning back to me and winking. Kate was supposed to be sharing my old bedroom with me, but I wouldn’t be surprised if I woke up in the night to an empty air mattress on the floor.

“Oh, Maddie,” my mom said, slapping her hand to her forehead. “There’s a letter for you in the foyer. I forgot. Grab it on your way out.”

“A letter?”

I headed out of the kitchen. There, on the foyer console, was a stark white envelope with blue inked block letters addressed to me.

“Don’t forget about it!” my mom called from the kitchen. As if I could.

I swallowed, picking it up and sniffing it out of habit. I hurried to the car so I could open it in private. Mitch and Kate waved from Mitch’s truck as they pulled out of the driveway and I got into my parents’ SUV, ripping into the letter immediately.

*Dear Maddie,*

*Don’t be mad, Mads. I know you’re probably upset that I didn’t come home for Thanksgiving. Coach Barber is a real*

*hard ass with time away, especially since I'll be starting next week. Did you know that? Yeah, it kind of blows my mind, too.*

*I don't mean to be so removed from your life, and I'm sorry. I meant it when I said we will be friends forever. Right now, my ability to be a good friend is shitty, and I'm sorry. I still think of you all the time, though, and I can't wait to see you at Christmas.*

*You can keep writing to me, even though my response has been slower. I read your letters as soon as they're in my hand, and they always make me smile. I read your articles, too. The internet is pretty helpful sometimes.*

*I'm proud of you, Mads. You're doing great. Tell Mitch I saw his Deep Post play and I'm nervous to step on the field as his rival this time. That's weird, huh? Feels weird for me, too. Tell Cassie I saw the video she posted of her recital and that I can't believe she can bend so far backwards. Maybe tell her to send the video to Mitch, come to think of it.*

*I think I'm at the start of something big with the team, Maddie. Coach Barber says I have what it takes to play after college, and there are already agents meeting with me. I'm nervous. I don't want to fuck this up somehow. The pressure—it's a lot. I know, the world's smallest violin, right? I don't even have to pay for my dining pass. How can I complain?*

*See you at Christmas.*

*Love, Wes*

He always signed his letters like that, and no matter what they said, what was inside, it was how I knew we were still connected. I tried not to cry as I pulled out my phone and sent a quick text to Wes.

**Happy Thanksgiving, Wes. I got your letter. I'll be watching your start next week and cheering from Illinois.  
Xx Mads**

He didn't message back.



“Merry Christmas!” Cassie cried, throwing her arms around my neck as she came through the door of my parents’ house, stepping into the foyer and kicking off her furry boots. “It’s cold as all hell outside.”

“Hell is supposed to be hot, Cass,” Mitch said, joining us for a group hug.

She gave him an icy stare, sharper than the icicles that hung from the gutters after a snowstorm came through two days before, dropping the temperature far below what was normal for this time of year.

“I’d rather be in hell then,” she said, sashaying into the living room as she peeled off three sweaters and a down jacket before plopping onto the couch.

I raised my eyebrows. “Cassie, it’s cold, but it’s not *Arctic* cold. What’s with all the layers?”

Cassie raised her hand to examine her nails, a bright red covering them to match her sweater. She wore a chunky necklace with plastic Christmas lights on it, a battery powering the flashing bulbs. “After living in Miami, I’ve become a tad sensitive to the cold, that’s all. I think I’m at a higher risk of hypothermia.”

I laughed, sitting down next to her on the sectional and patting her shoulder. “Imagine Chicago in the winter,” I pointed out.

Cassie thrust her down jacket at me. “Ugh, here. You need this more than I do, obviously.” She turned and grinned at Mitch. “Mitch, you’re looking well. Tell me about things.”

Mitch sat on the coffee table in front of us, the way our mother hated. *Seats are for sitting*, she would holler at us as kids. We’d throw our hands over our mouths and giggle, teasing back that *tables are for tabling* and *benches are for benching*. All kinds of smart ass comments that made it clear why our parents had stopped reproducing after twins.

I pointed at Mitch’s seat, and he shrugged. “I’m tabling,” he said. He sighed and dropped his shoulders. “I’m tired, Cassie. Remember how I told you last week about that asshole in my dorm who hates football players?”

Mitch made it a point to call Cassie every week to check in.

I crossed my arms, feeling my heart sink. Mitch could make time for a phone call, however brief. Why couldn't Wes?

"He called the cops and busted up a party," Mitch went on. I stopped listening, uninterested anyway, but mostly because my eyes were watching the door. Waiting.

*Any minute.*

Wes was coming over any minute. We were all going to meet at my parents' house for a Christmas party, just the four of us, and watch movies and drink beer while all of our parents were at a party down the block.

I'd spent the day so nervous. Changing outfits, putting my hair up, then taking it down, then putting it back up again. I was as ready as I could be.

It wasn't more than five minutes before there was a knock on the door, and in stepped Wes. I don't know what I expected. We hadn't seen one another since August, but he'd changed somehow. His shoulders had filled out more, and his arms looked bigger.

Looking at Mitch, I could see a similar transformation. They trained hard, and weight training was important. Yet somehow Wes had trimmed up as well. Even with a thick sweater, I could tell he'd cut what little softness he had the last time we were together.

"Merry Christmas," he called, his voice deep and familiar, yet somehow feeling unknown to me.



When was the last time we'd actually spoken? Not a text, not an email, not a letter? I couldn't even remember. Had his voice deepened too?

“Motherfucker!” Cassie cried, jumping off the couch and running to Wes, wrapping her arms around his corded neck. “You don't call, you don't write. Are you in the goddamn CIA, Wes? What gives?”

He hugged her tight in a way that made me jealous, but I shook the thought. We were friends. Wes was my friend. There was no reason to be jealous.

Mitch joined them, his hands thrust in his pocket as he sized up Wes. “Impressive gains, bro,” Mitch said, puffing his chest to show his own. “Too bad it still couldn't stop the ass whooping we gave you.”

Mitch hadn't actually played in the rival game, but that would not stop him from giving Wes shit. While Wes' football career appeared to be on a streamlined path, Mitch's was less certain. He was good, and he got game time, but it would probably take another year or two before he'd start in a game. Wes' reputation had already taken off, and not just in town gossip. There were bloggers, agents, and sports reporters watching his progress.

I longed to jump into Wes' arms the way Cassie had done, but I didn't. Not even close. I stood up, staying sheltered between the couch and the coffee table, feeling apprehensive about how to greet him.

Once Mitch hugged him and stepped away, Wes looked at me. He ran his hand along the back of his neck. He was nervous too.

“Hey, Mads,” he said softly. A shy smile followed.

“Hey, Wes.” I wanted to wave or do something with my hands. Something human. Instead, I stood with my arms stuck to my sides, more robotic than anything else.

“You two aren’t going to kiss again, are you?” Cassie asked, rolling her eyes. “Cause that *really* fucked with my head to see.”

We both went crimson, Wes bringing his hand up along his neck again.

Mitch elbowed him and shook his head. “Shut up, Cass. I don’t think Evelyn would like that much.”

“Evelyn?” I said it without thinking. *Evelyn?* Evelyn. Her name repeated in my head. *Evelyn.*

*Who is Evelyn?*

Wes’ face got even more red, and he dropped his eyes. “Shut up, Mitch,” he mumbled.

“Oh, *Evelyn,*” Cassie teased, wrapping her arm around Wes’ elbow. “Do tell.” She guided him to the couch and sat him down as everyone moved through their conversation and caught up like the world hadn’t just shattered around me.

*Evelyn.*

She was his girlfriend. They'd met in an intro to psych class. She wanted to study sports medicine. She was from Lincoln City. She was funny. She lived in an apartment off campus and had a dog named Cole.

I don't know what I expected with my visit home and seeing Wes again. It became clear, crystal clear, that I had assumed we'd pick up where we'd left off. I had assumed he was too busy to see anyone because he'd been too busy to write to me, to call me, to text me. I had assumed that this visit would be a stopgap to the pain and longing I'd had for *months* in his absence.

I had assumed he missed me too.

I was a fool.

"Excuse me," I said, standing up and grabbing Cassie's jacket. "I need to go out and make a call."

"Oh, come on now," Mitch whined. "You can make calls tomorrow. It's been months since we've all hung out."

*Months.* Months consisted of weeks, of days, of hours, of seconds when Wes was moving on with his feelings, when mine had been standing still. *You fool.*

I held up my phone. "I realized I haven't wished Kate a Merry Christmas. She's alone in the dorm." It wasn't a lie, but Kate didn't care if I called or not. She hated Christmas and pretended it wasn't a thing.

Mitch blushed. "Right. Well then, tell Kate hi for me, will ya?"

Cassie gave him a side-eyed look but said nothing.

“Yep.” I almost didn’t make it out the door before bursting into tears. “You fucking idiot,” I chided, standing in the cold on the other side of my best friends.

My best friends, joking and laughing like life was good just beyond that door.

“You’re such a fool.”

The Christmas lights around the neighborhood twinkled and shone in response, looking like a postcard with all the snow. It was perfect. Angelic, really. The kind of night to sit by a fire, snuggled beneath a blanket with someone you love.

I collapsed on the bench next to the front door, watching the swirls of snowflakes that had caught in the frigid wind, circling wildly and out of control. It was exactly how I felt. Like someone had blown on me, sending a gust of confusion and chaos to scatter me in any which way.

“Maddie?”

*Shit.*

Wes stepped out, closing the door behind him and zipping his coat. He thrust his hands in his pockets and shivered. “It’s cold out here. Everything okay?” I avoided looking at him and his stupid, handsome face.

There was no way to answer that, other than truthfully, because as soon as he saw the tears on my face he’d know I was lying if I said everything was fine.

“It will be okay,” I said, wanting to believe it and keeping my gaze on the Henderson’s light display across the street.

Wes kicked his boot at the welcome mat, shaking the snow from it. “I’m sorry. I should have told you sooner.”

“You don’t need to be sorry,” I said with a shrug. “We’re friends, right? I want you to be happy. I just... You’re busy, and now I understand why.”

It hurt, but it was true. I couldn’t be mad. Wes had done nothing behind my back. Done nothing to hurt me or lead me on. Even his letters had been friendly and benign.

“Maddie—”

I held up my hand as I shook my head. “Wes, it’s fine, really.” I wiped my cheek.

“It doesn’t look fine,” he said softly.

I let out a shaky breath. “It will be, though.”

We said nothing for a while, Wes hovering above me uncomfortably, like he wanted to reach out and touch me, but he didn’t. He didn’t touch me at all. Not even a hug when he’d come in.

I swallowed it down. This was *my* fault, not his. He’d said we would be friends. He said it wouldn’t change things. He hadn’t changed things, but I sure had. If I had kept my feelings as friends, then his busyness wouldn’t have killed my heart.

“Do you regret it?” he asked quietly, still standing over me.

Part of me wanted him to sit next to me. To rest his arm against mine and share some sort of space. Another part of me wanted him as far away as possible so I could be alone with my feelings.

My voice was steadier this time. “No,” I answered honestly. “I don’t regret it. Do you?”

Wes shook his head. “Not for a moment. Not that part.”

I closed my eyes, sucking in a breath and rubbing my lips together. I had needed to hear that, and I suspected he had needed to hear the same from me.

“I told you to go. Not to stand there.” His voice was so quiet, so sad.

It was simple, really. He’d warned me when we said goodbye at the airport, and I’d ignored it because I thought it somehow wouldn’t apply to us.

I sighed, a deep well of emotion buried in my chest. I pushed it down further, waiting for a time when I could collapse in private.

“Yeah, well. I stood.”

Getting up, I pulled a letter from my back pocket and thrust it into his hand. One I’d yet to send, but had written that morning, hoping to give it to him in person tonight, like a Christmas present.

*Fool.*

Then I left, heading inside and taking his advice to not look back.



The airport was crowded and chaotic. It was the day before New Year's Eve, a busy travel day, and the buzzing of energy and people left me looking around, confused. I could have sworn I'd heard my name.

“Maddie!”

I definitely heard it that time. Flipping around, I spied the source, standing about fifteen feet away next to a Jamba Juice near the A gates.

“Andy,” I said, waving and approaching him. “It’s good to see you.”

“Small world, huh?” he said, shaking his head. His blonde hair was still longer than I was used to seeing, but he tucked it behind a trucker hat with a picture of mountains on it. Just beyond one of the thin lines of a mountain was a Sasquatch.

I pointed to his hat. “Very Pacific Northwest,” I said with a nod of approval.

Andy smiled, his white teeth lined up in a perfect row. I ran my tongue self-consciously over my own, wishing I'd had braces like Mitch. I hadn't needed them, not really, but I still had a crooked canine.

"Thanks." Andy tugged on the straps of his backpack as it sat on his shoulders, looking a little nervous. "Did you have a good Christmas?"

*No. It finally sunk in that there's no point in pining for someone who isn't in love with me anyway.*

"I did. Did you?"

Andy scrunched his nose. "Honestly? Not really. My parents hate each other and can be such assholes to one another."

"I'm so sorry," I said, holding my hand to my chest in a gesture of sympathy. "Are they divorced?"

He laughed. "Nope, which is *actually* the problem, because they should be. Which flight are you on?"

A rampaging toddler ran between us, his face bright red as he screamed and pointed to the Jamba Juice. An exasperated mother followed on his heels, apologetic at the child's lack of awareness for others. I smiled sympathetically and stepped out of the way while she scooped him up and carried him under her arm as he kicked and continued to scream.

Andy smiled and shook his head. "I don't envy her," he said earnestly. "So, which flight are you taking out?"



“The ten fifteen.” I looked at my boarding pass and then at the clock near the departures board. “I board in thirty minutes.”

Andy scoffed. “No way! Me too. *Definitely* a small world. You want to grab a coffee while we wait?”

I’d only met Andy once before, at the cabin in the summer when he showed up for the bonfire, but there was something about him that felt comfortable. He was friendly, likable, and pretty positive. Having a coffee with him seemed like it would be pleasant.

“Yeah, that sounds great. Thanks.”

Andy reached his arm out for mine, looping his and placing my hand inside his elbow as he escorted me to Starbucks.

“Maybe someone will switch seats and we can sit next to each other on the flight,” he suggested.

I laughed, not at the idea, but at his energy. Andy wasn’t cocky, but he was confident, and it was just the right amount to draw me to him.

“Six hours is a long time to be stuck next to someone,” I teased.

“Maybe,” he said thoughtfully, running his hand over the light stubble on his jaw. “Unless that someone is you. I think I could talk to you for maybe even seven.”

“Hush!” I cautioned. “Adding time just asks the universe for delays on the tarmac.”

“Then let’s push it to eight.”

I laughed, leaning into him. “Don’t you dare.”

He stopped and furrowed his eyebrows, looking at me. “Nine,” he deadpanned.

We settled on nine as Andy paid for the coffees and walked us to a couple of empty seats near our gate. We sipped our drinks in silence, watching people as they passed. It was a comfortable silence, which surprised me.

“What are you doing for New Year’s Eve?” Andy asked, standing up as they announced our boarding.

I got up too, shrugging. “I’ll probably stay in, to be honest. It’s been a long trip home and I could use some downtime.”

Andy nodded like he understood. “Do you want some company? I can come over and we can watch a movie or something.”

The way he asked was so casual, so under the radar, that I almost believed it wouldn’t be a date.

“You really want to drive all the way to Evanston on New Year’s Eve just to watch a movie?”

Andy smiled, bold and bright, and I knew that if he came over, it wasn’t just to watch a movie. I wasn’t sure if I could do it. If I wanted to.

*Evelyn.*

I closed my eyes at the thought, shaking my head. The final boarding call brought me back to the hustling airport around

us, the empty seats from passengers having filtered into the plane already, but I stayed still, thinking it all over.

Andy lifted his hat and ran a hand to smooth his hair before putting it back on. “Come on, Mads,” he said, reaching for my hand.

I wasn't sure how the sound of that nickname on his lips made me feel.

“Final call. Don't just stand there.”

I didn't.

*Phase Two*

***Ten Years Later***

## *Eight*

*Wes*

“Get that tush out of bed,” she said, throwing open the blackout curtains and ushering in the sting of sunlight.

“Monica!” I hissed, throwing a pillow over my face and rolling over with a disdain for California’s endless sunshine. “Go away.”

I didn’t need to see Monica to know that she was standing with her arms crossed and her mouth pinched in disapproval. “Perhaps if you hadn’t had such an *enjoyable* evening at the banquet, this morning’s early rise would be a tad easier.”

Groaning, I reached for a second pillow to sandwich over my head.

As far as assistants went, Monica was the best. Detail-oriented, organized, efficient, and a bit of a ball buster. She was also twenty years older than me, and while not as old as my mother, she sure acted like her.

“It’s my job to have a good time when I show up,” I mumbled, clenching my teeth as the vibrations of my words painfully shook my brain.

“*Was* your job,” she pointed out, clucking her tongue. “As of last night, your contractual obligations are done. Congratulations, Mr. Cohen. You’re a free man.”

She shuffled around the bed, picking things up. Likely my clothes, which I now realized had come off at some point after stumbling into my bedroom.

I pulled the blanket higher on my body. Monica was my assistant, and a damn good one, which meant she ignored a lot of embarrassing shit from me. Still, I tried not to be naked in front of her.

When I pulled the blanket up, I caught sight of underwear and sighed with relief. I hated when she found me naked in bed. Even worse, when I wasn’t alone.

“Free,” I said with a laugh. “How many interviews do I have today?”

Monica said nothing, and I peeked out beneath the pillow to see her standing with her arms full of laundry and that pinched disapproval. “Just because you’re not contractually obligated to be in the public eye for the team anymore doesn’t mean you *shouldn’t* be. Barry says—”

I groaned again and collapsed the pillow on my face. *Barry says*. With those words, I considered smothering myself.

“Barry’s an asshole,” I mumbled.

This caused Monica to laugh, and when I peeked out under the pillow again, I saw her clutching the laundry, shaking. She pointed at me. “You’re not wrong.”

Barry was my manager and had been for the last five years. He was also Monica’s husband.

She straightened up, collecting herself. “And Barry isn’t wrong, either. Retiring doesn’t mean you shouldn’t keep your public profile. The income from these interviews, speeches, and appearances—Jesus, Wes, the endorsements alone—are only going to ensure your financial stability. Have you had an appointment with your financial advisor recently? Do you want me to schedule you one? Actually, I have a cousin who is a financial planner. I can probably get you in to see her if you want to consider options.”

“No,” I said firmly. “No more of your family, Monica. I love you, but you’ve infiltrated my life enough.”

She dangled a pair of boxer briefs from the tip of her finger and raised an eyebrow, only confirming my point.

“Put those down. I can do my own goddamn laundry.”

Monica dropped the heap of clothing from her arms. “You’re right, you can.”

I knew that once I left for my interviews, Monica would do my laundry anyway. It wasn’t part of her job description, but she liked to take care of me.

“There’s a suit pressed and ready for you, hanging in the closet. David Cospy is your first interview.” She looked at her

watch. “That’s in forty minutes at the Sheraton, so get moving.”

I sat up, yawning and rubbing my hands over my face. “He’s with Sports Illustrated, right?”

She nodded. “He is, and he wants to run a piece on what it’s like to be retiring from the NFL and transitioning into civilian life. It’s a lifestyle piece with you, Bucky Wilson, and Drake Rogers. I’m not sure if the photoshoot will be together or separate, but that’s tomorrow afternoon. I’ll get you the details.”

I yawned again, kicking my legs over the side of the bed and scratching my ribs. “Yeah, okay. Thanks.”

She frowned. “And there’s still the matter of making arrangements for the wedding.”

My jaw clenched at the mention of it. “Yeah,” I mumbled again, running my hand along the back of my neck and giving a squeeze. “Can you schedule me for a sports massage, too? My neck is bugging me.”

Monica sighed, her face flat. “You’re going to have to decide, Wes. I can’t keep putting your response off forever.”

I grinned, but the feeling behind it was empty. “Well, technically, you don’t have to. The wedding will come and go and my attendance will become unnecessary.”

“You’re not as funny as you think you are,” she deadpanned. “You already missed his sister’s wedding. Are



you going to miss your best friend's wedding, too? He has asked you to be his best man."

She stood up tall, which was saying something because Monica was nearly six feet. She'd been a model when she was younger, Barry told me. Looking at her bright red hair and smooth skin, I could believe it. She certainly didn't look fifty years old and was still a bit of a knockout. She must have been a heartbreaker in her youth. I wondered how the fuck Barry had landed someone like Monica.

"I *am* as funny as I think, and remind me of the details."

I kept my feet planted on the hardwood floor beneath me, staring down at my toes as I wiggled them anxiously. I knew the details. I remembered them the first time Monica told me, but I wanted to buy myself time while I thought through it.

She pulled her phone from the pocket of her fitted blazer and reviewed it. "The wedding is next month, in Montlake at The Chateau. The inn has been reserved for the wedding and there is..." She paused for a moment, pointing her finger and counting something. "Four days of events before the wedding. Mr. Sheffield is still waiting for confirmation that you'll be his best man, which would require you to be there for the week lead up. If you decline to be the best man, you can show up on the day of the wedding, which is August seventh." She looked up and smiled. "There's an itinerary I emailed for review."

"Mitch," I said to my toes.

"Excuse me?"

“You don’t need to call him ‘Mr. Sheffield.’ It’s just Mitch.”

Monica pulled her shoulders back. “Fine. What should I tell Mitch?”

*Tell him no. Tell him I can’t go home, and I haven’t been able to go home for nearly ten years. Tell him he knows why. Tell him I’m settled here, and this is home. Tell him to hug her for me.*

“Tell him I’ll think about it,” I said, even though I already knew the answer.

I wasn’t going to go. I *couldn’t* go. I’d spent a lot of time putting distance between us, and I’d done well.



It didn’t take Mitch long to finally hunt me down. Monica, the gatekeeper to my privacy and emotional stability, betrayed me.

“Shit,” I groaned, looking down at my phone as Mitch’s name blazed across the screen. I handed Monica the phone, turning to look out the window again. “Deal with this, please.”

My driver, Bartley, cleared his throat and looked at me from the rear-view mirror. I knew the look. I sounded like an

asshole, and he didn't like it. Bartley was Monica's brother.

She took the phone from me, answering it. "Hello, Mitch," she said in a friendly voice. "Mhm. Mhm. Why *yes*, he is available to talk to you. Just one moment." She looked me dead in the eye and held out the phone.

"What the hell, Monica? I told you to deal with it," I hissed, taking the phone as I covered the receiver with my hand.

She shrugged. "I am." She crossed her legs and went back to reviewing paperwork in her lap. I caught sight of Bartley grinning from the front.

*Oh, fuck off.*

I took a deep breath, then brought the phone up. "Mitch, buddy. Good to hear from you. How are you?" I flinched, hardly recognizing my voice. It was my interview voice—the one I used for an audience. Mitch caught it, too.

"I'm not sitting down for an interview, superstar. I'm just calling to ask you a simple fucking question. Are you going to be my best man or what?"

Mitch, God love him, was always quick to cut through the bullshit. It's part of what kept us best friends all these years, despite the distance. It was a glue that held us together when the years got tough. When we got busy with college ball and classes. When we went our separate ways across the country. When he met his fiancé and started a life with her. When my career blew up and left even less of me to share with others.

“You mean like, am I the *best* man? Monica says I am.” I winked at her and she rolled her eyes.

“Fuck off, Wes. Yes or no? You can’t avoid me forever.”

I sighed and rubbed my temple. “I’m not avoiding you.” That was true. It wasn’t Mitch I was avoiding. *I’ve avoided her for ten years. Don’t make me deal with her now.*

There was a pause and an exhale. “You’re avoiding her then, and that’s not okay, Wes. You swore we’d all stay friends and now you can’t be bothered to come to my wedding?” He stopped, whispering something under his breath. “You disappeared and now you have to make it right.”

“It’s such short notice, Mitch.” That wasn’t a total lie. A month wasn’t much time to plan, but now that my contract was up and I was retiring from football, I had the time. Monica could rearrange any interviews or appearances and plan a vacation for me. It’s what I paid her for.

There was a chuckle on the other end. “Yeah, well. We thought we’d have more of a lead up. If I’m being honest, it feels a little fast for me too. But call me old-fashioned. I want to be married before Kate has the baby.”

“*The baby?*” I gripped the phone in my hand, squeezing with an excitement that hit before I’d even registered what I was feeling. “Mitch, you’re going to be a dad?”

I could hear the pride in his voice. “I am, man. A bit of a surprise, but who doesn’t love a surprise? Kate is fine waiting until after the baby, but not me. It matters to me.”

Mitch, for all of his philandering when we were younger, had a sense of importance and duty to family. I'd known it since we were twelve years old, just watching the way he treated Maddie.

“She doesn't want to look pregnant when she's in her dress, so we gotta move fast, you know?”

I closed my eyes, smiling. “Mitch, congratulations. That's amazing. Your family must be thrilled.”

I'd met Kate a handful of times through the years when Mitch had made the trek to visit or come to a game or two. It had been obvious from the onset that he was smitten with her. He said she was everything he could want. Smart, kind, beautiful, and a part of his family immediately. That mattered to Mitch. His parents loved Kate. Maddie did too, but I tried not to think about that.

“Oh, they're excited,” Mitch confirmed. “Ever since Sam was born they've been pleading for more babies around. It only took nine years, but hey, that's okay, right?”

I swallowed thickly, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Mhm. How is Sam?” I asked, as if I had a right to know.

Bartley drove over a hidden speed bump, the SUV bouncing suddenly, and I dropped the phone into my lap. I scrambled to pick it up to hear his answer.

“... Much bigger than the last time you saw him.”

Mitch called me on FaceTime from the hospital on the day Maddie had given birth to Sam.

*“Look, Wes! I’m a fucking uncle!”* he’d cried, so much enthusiasm and emotion that I couldn’t do anything other than smile for him.

He’d pointed the phone at Maddie, and there she was. Her honey blonde hair tucked into a tight bun on the top of her head, and her face bare of anything except exhaustion. A tiny head peeked out from her breast as she held her son to her, looking down at him sweetly.

*“I can’t believe you’re not here!”* Cassie cried into the phone, pointing at Maddie. Maddie, as if suddenly aware there was a screen in front of her, looked up with those wide blue eyes. The deep blue of a cobalt sea that I could drown in.

*“Is that him?”* she asked. So hopeful.

I had wanted desperately to touch her, hug her, run my hand along the smooth skin of her face. To be there with her, but I wasn’t. It was an important game that week and Coach Barber wouldn’t let me miss it for the world. And back then, Maddie felt like my world, however distant.

Cassie had flown in for the birth, and since Mitch wasn’t starting in his college games yet, he could take off. I was the odd man out.

*“Is that him?”* she asked again.

*“It’s Wes,”* Mitch said from behind the phone.

Maddie’s eyes dropped in slow recognition, a sadness filling her face. *“Oh. I thought he might have wanted to see the baby.”*

I clenched my jaw at the memory. She hadn't been wishing for me on that call. She'd hoped it was Andy. The asshole hadn't even been at the birth.

*"Hey, Mads,"* I said softly. *"Look at that. You've done so good. He's absolutely beautiful. How are you feeling?"*

She looked directly into the screen, her eyes a sinking light. *"Hi, Wes. I'm tired."* She looked at Mitch behind the phone. *"Can you hang up, please? I'm so tired."*

I swallowed down the pain of that day. One of my best friends and favorite people had the biggest day of her life, and I wasn't there.

She also happened to be the woman I loved, the one I thought would come back to me when life allowed. When we grew up. The day Sam was born was the day I realized that would not happen.

"Did you hear me? Did you cut out?" Mitch's deep voice split through my memories.

I blinked a few times. "Yeah, Mitch. I'm here. Say it again?"

He gave an impatient sigh, something brushing against the receiver with a moment of static. "I said you have to decide. Like, now. I can't plan without knowing, and it's you or Andy. Only one of you has been my best friend since we were kids."

I sat up straight, knocking my fist into the leather seat beneath me. "Andy? Are you kidding me, Mitch? You're considering *him* as your best man alternative?"

There was a growl on his end, impatient and uninterested in hashing this out. “Look, Wes. I’ve told you time and time again. He fucked up, and he knows it, but he did the right thing by Mads. He came back, he married her, and he’s been raising that kid. He’s not a bad guy. They were just so young.” He whistled slowly. “Can you imagine if you’d knocked up someone your freshman year of college?”

I flexed my jaw instinctively. “I would have done everything to support her and keep her in school.”

Mitch said nothing for a moment, and I didn’t either. I hated that Maddie had dropped out of school. I hated that she’d moved back in with her parents, had a baby alone, and spent the first few months of Sam’s life without the asshole who’d been responsible for it all. Mitch and Andy may have kissed and made up, but I hated him, and I always would.

“I believe you’d have done that,” he finally said. “That’s *best man* material, Wes. So what’s your answer?”

I looked over at Monica, who was pretending to have her nose buried in something important, but I caught the side eye she was giving. Shaking my head, I ran my hand along the back of my neck.

“Yeah, Mitch. I’ll be your best man.”

There was a *whoop* from the phone, so loud that even Monica flinched in surprise.

“Then I’ll be seeing you soon, superstar.”



I hated the thought of missing my best friend's wedding, but even more, I hated the thought of Andy standing where I should be.



Sometimes, the need to punish myself was so overwhelming, I could do nothing but indulge in bringing the pain.

The edges of the letter were soft, the paper worn from years of handling whenever the longing to be with her struck. At eighteen, it was near daily. As the months went on, the longing lessened, though it never completely faded.

Sitting on the edge of my bed, waiting for Bartley to bring the car around, I carefully unfolded the letter Maddie gave me that first Christmas at college. The one she'd hastily shoved into my hand as she cried.

*Dear Wes,*

*Merry Christmas! It feels so strange to come back to my parents' house, almost like it's no longer mine to call home. My dorm room isn't exactly a home, either, so I don't know*

*what feels right anymore. Is this what it means to become an adult? If so, I'm not sure I'm ready.*

*I've spent the last several months starting my life in Evanston and adjusting to college. So far, I think I like it. My roommate, Kate, is wonderful. The journalism program here is outstanding. The school paper has been a rich source of learning. My skin has thickened from it, but that's probably a good thing. I've made friends and I feel like I fit in. I don't think I could have asked for a better start to college.*

*Yet something is missing. I felt it before I even arrived in Illinois, felt it immediately after letting go of your hands at the airport. Missing you at Thanksgiving made me realize how much I've missed you every day that you haven't been in my life, and I don't know what to do about that.*

*Call me crazy, but I looked into transferring to Eugene. I know Northwestern's program has long been my plan, but plans change, right? Life shifts and moves and develops in ways we don't always know are coming. I could do it, Wes. The more important question is whether you want me to. Will you think about it?*

*Love, Mads Xx*

I read the letter again before gently folding it up and tucking it into my dresser drawer in the top corner with my socks, where it lived.

*"I don't want to go," she said at our airport goodbye. "I can't do this."*

Every part of me wanted to agree with her on the day she moved. To tell her to stay, to get back in the car and come home and we'd figure it out. But I couldn't do that to her.

Maddie was smart. She was driven. From the day I met her, she'd spoken about being a journalist and traveling the world to write stories about important people or news. As a kid she carried a small notepad in the back pocket of her jeans, writing ideas for stories or characters she'd dreamed up.

She was a voracious reader, and she loved to learn. Maddie needed to go to college because Maddie had worked hard to get there. I couldn't, and I wouldn't, ask her to stay for me.

Then to get her letter on Christmas, an offering of herself. She would move for me. She would *move* for me. I thought about it, like she asked. My instinct was to say no. What if she moved to Eugene, sparking a relationship that was snuffed out by the demands of my blossoming career? What if our friendship suffered?

But then I realized that despite my best intentions, our friendship *was* suffering. It was impossible to balance football and school and a social life. Letters were lagging, texts were unanswered, emails were unread.

It wasn't because I didn't want to talk to her or because I didn't care. I was barely nineteen years old, and I didn't know how to handle it. At least now I had Monica to babysit me. Back then it was an emerging maturity, ridiculously shallow and incapable. I was ashamed of myself for it.

The problem was, it took me too long to realize that.

Maddie had been hurt when I'd come home that first Christmas and Mitch announced to everyone that I had a girlfriend.

It was true. I'd been seeing someone, and I liked her, but I'd only been dating because Maddie deserved to be with someone who wasn't too busy for her, and I was. I was too busy. Long distance wouldn't work for us. It wouldn't be fair to hold her back like that, so I didn't.

That was before her letter, though. Before she offered to move. Before it felt possible to end that distance.

She didn't take my calls after Christmas. She didn't answer my texts or my letters. I didn't give up, reaching out and hoping that she'd answer me. If only I could apologize. To explain to her I hadn't wanted to be unfair by asking her to work with my absence on top of a long distance relationship.

To tell her that her letter changed everything, and if she was in Eugene with me, we could be together. Really be together. She'd be in class and busy too, but we could take any time available to us. Study together, have meals together, share a bed when we both had to sleep.

Finally, at the end of February, she answered my call.

*"Mads."* I'd exhaled into the phone, the relief of her voice on the other end filling every empty ache in my body. *"Thank god you answered. I've been going out of my mind trying to talk to you. I'm so sorry, and I need to explain some things."*

She hadn't waited for me to explain anything, and when she spoke, her voice sounded as if it was detached from any emotion at all.

*"I'm pregnant, Wes, and I'm keeping the baby. Not that it's really something you need to concern yourself with. I just thought you should know."*

*"Mads—"*

Then she hung up. And that was it. I had explained nothing, and neither had she.

*Pregnant? How is that possible?* It couldn't be. We hadn't been together since August, and she certainly hadn't been pregnant at Christmas.

The idea that she could be pregnant with someone else's baby had felt so implausible that my brain did mental gymnastics to figure out how I was the father.

The answer was simple. I wasn't.

Mitch filled in some blanks. Cassie, too. Maddie had been with Andy. She was pregnant. He wanted nothing to do with it. She was trying to stay in school and deal with it, but eventually couldn't and moved back to Montlake. She transferred to UW, determined to finish her degree after she had the baby.

She never did.

Andy stayed in Chicago, missing the birth. He eventually came around, apologetic and with his tail between his legs. I couldn't believe Mitch allowed it, or Maddie for that matter,

but Mitch liked to remind me that Andy was just a teenager when all of this happened. Eventually, he grew up, married Maddie, and graduated. But Maddie had just been a teenager too, and it had been her dreams and hard work sidelined.

I hadn't gone to the wedding. I hated Andy, but part of me felt ashamed to say I was angry with Maddie.

Cassie had tried to help me understand.

*“She’s not even twenty, Wes! What the hell do you expect? He’s the father of her son, and she’s a college dropout. Where is she going to go? What is she going to do? Of course she’s going to forgive him. You’ve seen her parents. She wants that, Wes. So badly for her son. She’ll try for him.”*

*“She doesn’t have to. She could do it on her own.”* God, I was angry with her. Looking back, it was unfair, and Cassie was right. It didn't matter at that time, though. My heart burned with an anger so deep that I wasn't sure the fire would ever die.

*“You really think she’s going to do this on her own, Wes? She’s scared.”*

I closed my eyes. Every time I thought of Maddie, the Maddie I knew so well, scared like that... I hated Andy, but I hated myself more, because I disappeared. I buried myself with football and preparing for the draft and the start of my career and trades and new cities and luxury houses and big parties and women.

So yeah, maybe Andy had fucked up when he was nineteen, but Mitch wasn't wrong. Andy returned to her, and he did the right thing.

Not me, though. I'd left her and not looked back.

## *Nine*

### *Maddie*

“**Y**ou have something right there,” the woman said, pointing at my cheek as she stared with a slight scowl. “Perhaps you should freshen up.”

I reached my hand up to my cheek to wipe it, recognizing the sticky substance immediately.

“Jam,” I said, embarrassed. “Making sandwiches before you’ve had your coffee will do that.” I shoved the books she’d purchased into her bag and held it out for her. “Here you are. Have a nice day.”

The woman took the bag and opened it, peeking her beaked nose in. “There better not be any jam on my books.”

She looked like she’d had about seventy years to practice her disapproval, and she had perfected it.

My teeth ground down and I smiled. “Nope, all the jam is on my face, ma’am. You’re good.” I blinked a few times, watching her back up with an uncertain look.



“If there is, I’m bringing them back.” She crossed the front display, passing the historical fiction aisle, standing on her heels.

I saluted her. “Receipt is in the bag.”

Her slight scowl was now a full one. “That’s an awfully rude attitude. Your manager might not like that you’re treating customers like this.”

*For Pete’s sake.* This woman hastily shoved her way into the bookshop before I’d flipped the sign to *open*, riffled and rearranged every book on the display table, and acted offended by my face. Who had a rude attitude?

This time, my smile was sincere. “My manager is quite fond of me, actually. You’re welcome to give whatever feedback you’d like.”

I reached for my coffee next to the register, taking a long sip of the hot drink. Mornings were never my favorite, but usually they were quiet. This woman was spoiling the start of what was sure to be a long day.

She shook her head, backing out the door. “I just might.”

I toasted her with my cup. “It’s me, by the way. I’m the manager.” I took another long sip, enjoying the displeasure on her face. “Cashier, customer service rep, manager, and oh—owner, too. Have a nice—”

She was out the door before I’d finished. I shrugged and sat down at the stool behind the counter, pulling out my laptop and shuffling through emails.

There were several from the PTA requesting volunteers for some events at the start of the school year in a few weeks. I deleted those, moving on to some business related inquiries that I also ignored.

I settled on reading a newsletter from my favorite romance writer, announcing a new book release and giving a sneak peek of the first three chapters.

*Oh yes. Now this is what I need.*

Bringing my coffee back up, I enjoyed the flavor while diving into the start of what was sure to be my next escape.

The bell above the shop door jingled, alerting me to a customer, but as usual, I ignored it.

“You can’t just do that, you know?” I recognized the voice right away, but I ignored her too. “Maddie,” Kate said more forcefully. “Stop ignoring everything.”

I rolled my neck impatiently and looked up. Kate stood across the counter in a long maxi dress that flowed to the perfect length above her ankles and the strappy leather sandals she wore. I’d never worn a maxi dress that hadn’t dragged on the ground.

“Oh, Kate. Good morning. I didn’t see you standing there.”

She dropped her hands to her hips and watched me with her wide eyes, a look of disbelief that I was well familiar with. “Maddie, I have no idea how on earth you get any customers at all.”

Pointing at a sign behind the counter, the bookstore's logo shone in neon. *Rude Librarian*, it read, the silhouette of a woman with her arms crossed grumpily as she stood in front of an oversized open book. "It's literally in the shop's name."

She raised her perfectly sculpted eyebrow. "People think you're being cheeky."

"I'm being *honest*. I've done nothing misleading."

Kate shook her head but had a smile on her face now. She wasn't wrong that my business model was less than friendly, but I wasn't wrong either. Most customers *loved* the theme of the bookshop, thinking it was playful or in jest. It wasn't.

There was a long sigh as Kate brushed her hair over her shoulder and leaned one arm against the counter. "It's been months, Maddie. You've been struggling for months and I wish you'd just let us help."

I grimaced but pulled my mouth into what was maybe a smirk. At least it wasn't a frown. I knew that much.

"I'm fine, Kate. *Fine*. The shop is doing great. Sam loves summer camp and drama. I'm thrilled because my two favorite people are getting married and having a *baby*." I paused thoughtfully. "Doesn't seem much of a struggle."

In the months Kate and I had been roommates in college, we'd gotten to know one another so well that we didn't have to say much to understand each other. If the universe sends people into your life with a purpose, I was certain that Kate's purpose was to be my best friend. Second to that was her love

with Mitch, but I still liked to think it was for *me* foremost. With that friendship, though, came honesty.

“I said *you* have been struggling for months. I didn’t say the shop or Sam or I have been.” She dropped her elbows to the counter and rested her head in her hands, a sympathetic look to follow. “It’s been a hard year. Pretending otherwise isn’t fair to yourself.”

“I’m fine,” I repeated.

Kate stood up and gestured behind the counter. “You’re in sweatpants. At work.”

“Casual Friday,” I mumbled, scooting myself closer to the counter and hiding my legs.

“It’s Wednesday, Maddie.” Kate patted her hand on the counter. “Hire someone already.”

“I like being here,” I said.

Kate adjusted the strap of her purse, pulling it higher on her shoulder as she frowned. “You can’t hide here forever. Books are only a distraction.”

Tucking my long hair up on my head, I grinned. “A distraction... of the best kind.”

Kate’s frown deepened. “You have something on your face.” She pointed at the cheek I hadn’t bothered cleaning yet.

“On it,” I mumbled, reaching for my purse under the counter to pull out a wipe. “I’m not usually this bad.”

Kate groaned and ran her hands through her hair impatiently, her telltale sign she knew I was lying.

“Okay, okay. I won’t be this bad forever.” I wanted to believe it was true.

She pointed a finger at me. “You have four weeks until the wedding, Mads. Four weeks. You’re my maid of honor, and if you think I’m going to let you stand up there in sweatpants, you’re crazy.”

I watched her as she hurried to leave before I could argue with her.

“Call me crazy...” I called. To a now empty store.



“You’re not *that* bad,” I said to my reflection, running a hand along my face and turning my head side to side as I studied myself in front of my bathroom vanity.

There were dark circles under my eyes, but my skin still looked good and my face wasn’t as hollow as it had been just six months ago.

“You’ve been better, but you’re not at your worst.”

My worst had been a year ago, when my marriage officially fell apart, though it had been crumbling for years. Threatening tremors and quakes of resentment, indifference, and stonewalling had weakened the foundation of a relationship built on obligation instead of love.

The constant stress had damaged even the best intentions over the years, and while I wished there had been an obvious or big catalyst for my marriage to end—there hadn't been. Andy wasn't an asshole. I wasn't an asshole. We were just two different people who'd built a life together with hope instead of love.

Eventually, that wasn't enough.

Even though it was the right thing to end it, it was a hard thing, and while I wasn't at my worst anymore and I wasn't *that* bad, I wasn't quite good yet.

The shop helped, which is why I was so hesitant to hire employees to run it. It would probably help the business if I did. I could handle an online inventory and build up a marketing platform, rather than relying on word of mouth to bring in customers.

When Andy and I had finally called it quits, I wasn't sure what I would do. He had a stable job, a solid salary, and financial security. Me? I was a stay at home mom with a kid who was nearing the end of his elementary years and would head to middle school soon enough. Did he really need me home anymore?

Buying the shop from Edmond Bruthers had seemed like a good use of divorce settlement money. So far, it was proving to be. I wasn't exactly riding a wave of cash into an early retirement, but I could afford the rent on the townhouse I'd moved into and the bills with it.

I missed our old brick Tudor, even the tile steps leading to the small porch that I'd spent years complaining about. They'd slick in the rain, and at least once a week I'd find myself planted on my ass after slipping as I cursed the stupid house.

Now that house didn't seem so stupid. It seemed like a time when there was routine and consistency. Even if some of that routine and consistency was an injury.

There wasn't a day that went by when I didn't wonder if I was doing the right thing for me and Sam. Maybe I was being selfish to pull away from a man who may not be in love with me, but who stayed anyway. Who took care of me.

But I couldn't do it anymore, and I finally got the courage to say what I wanted, what I needed. I wanted choice over obligation, and I needed love.

I smiled at myself in the mirror, satisfied with how far I'd come. Sweatpants and all. I owned a business, could pay my way, had a sensational nine-year-old, and had walked away from something that was safe, but didn't work for me.

I may not be living in a beautiful brick Tudor with guest rooms and plentiful square footage, but I was building something for myself, and I had a plan.

Three phases, this was Phase One. Get stable.

I was nearly there. The jeans I changed into were evidence of that, and I managed to wiggle into the stiff denim and get out the door on time to go meet Kate for dress shopping.

Manny, our mailman, walked up the long driveway as I got to my car. I gave him a wave, getting ready for an attempt to flirt. I'd been practicing that lately too, even if it wasn't part of Phase One.

“Hey, Manny. Anything for us today?” My lines were *stellar*.

Manny had the friendliest face of maybe anyone I'd ever met. While my lips were a natural straight line unless I was smiling, his curved upward in perpetuity. With bright eyes that wrinkled in the corners just slightly when he spoke and a caramel skin that was so smooth I was desperate to know his skin care routine, I could hardly believe he was ten years older than me.

When he asked me out a few weeks ago, I *almost* said yes, but I wasn't quite ready for it yet. My dating experiences in the last year had been disasters, but fortunately, clean breaks.

I saw Manny Monday through Friday. Could I really trust the man responsible for delivering my monthly specialty shampoo to maintain an affable relationship if a date crashed and burned? I was prone to split ends, and fearful to find out.

He reached into his satchel, pulling out a small stack of letters and shuffling through them.



“You’re popular today, Maddie,” he said, handing me half a dozen items. Most were bills related to legal fees, but I didn’t want to admit that to a man I’d been considering dating.

“I like to think I’m popular every day, Manny,” I said with an exaggerated seriousness.

He ran a hand through his short black hair and smiled. “Those debt collectors sure think so,” he said with a wink.

My jaw dropped as he laughed. While most men flirted in kindness, Manny could be absolutely wicked.

And I loved it.

“Believe it or not, but they’re reimbursing me because I overpaid,” I lied.

He crossed his legs at the ankles and leaned against the mailbox in a casual move that made my stomach a little tight. “So you’re buying dinner, then?”

My body sank as I considered agreeing to a date, my legs going weak. It had been so long since I’d been with a man and really *been* with him. Flirted, touched, gazed at, and enjoyed it. I had forgotten how to do it, and that scared me.

“I absolutely will,” I said, fanning the mail over my face. “When I’m ready.”

Manny didn’t press further. Montlake wasn’t exactly a bustling town and news of my divorce was well known. He uncrossed his ankles and walked backward down the driveway, watching me.

“Until then, I’m sure I’ll be here again tomorrow. Since you’re so popular.”

He went on his way, leaving me alone to beat myself up for not just saying yes to a date and fighting my fear.

In the last ten years, I’d mostly been with one man, and that man had been with me because he felt he had to. And I’d *let* him. I’d let him apologize and offer to marry me. Not because I wanted him, or he me, but because I was scared that it was the best I would get.

Years of making love with my eyes closed because opening them to the face of someone who *had* to be there hurt me more than I ever wanted to admit.

Andy and I tried really hard to love one another. At first, it had been mostly okay. Sam was such a joy in my life that I was grateful to Andy for giving me our son, and I didn’t hate him for any of it, even when he wasn’t there.

When Andy finally came around to meet Sam, I’d just felt relief with his help. As angry as I wanted to be with him, I found the relief easier to sink into. So I listened as Andy told me he was sorry, that he’d made a mistake in not supporting me, and that he wanted to be a father to his son.

Andy transferred to UW, married me soon after, and finished his degree after graduating on an expedited track and taking a job at Boeing. We spent years building a life that probably looked pretty decent on the outside, even if it was empty on the inside.

I collapsed into the driver's seat and tossed the mail next to me, not bothering to sort it. Starting the car, I backed out, tossing one arm over the passenger seat to look behind me as I cleared the driveway. That's when it caught my eye. In the shuffled pile of letters sat a stark white envelope with blue ink blocked letters addressed to me.

My heart hit the floor, along with my foot on the brake. There was a honk behind me as a passing car waited for me to enter traffic, but I put the car in park and stared at the letter.

Without thinking, I picked it up and smelled it. Expecting—what? They had never smelled like Wes, and besides, it had been over ten years since I'd seen him. I didn't even know what he smelled like anymore.

With shaking hands, I tore into the envelope. If I expected a long letter, a catch up, an apology, a greeting, an update—anything, I would have been disappointed. On the page was a single sentence. Despite the brevity, it took my breath.

*See you soon, Maddie.*

*—Wes*

## Ten

### *Maddie*

*R*elax your hands. Shoulders down. Core tight. Breathe, you out of shape potato.

My pace was slow, a groan escaping every fourth step or so, but I was doing it. I was *running*. Or jogging. A really slow jog at that, but I was *moving*.

“You’ve got this!” Mitch cheered, trotting next to me with a smile on his stupidly handsome dumb face. “It’s not so bad, right? Just like old times. You’ll get the hang of it again!”

“Just... like... riding... a...” I groaned again. “Bike.”

Mitch clapped, staying by my side and cheering me on. It was obnoxious, and I both loved him and hated him for it.

“A bike... that throws... you... off and then... runs you over.”

He gave a light slap on my back, which actually propelled me forward slightly and was appreciated. “Why don’t we keep

the conversation to a minimum, huh?” His voice was smooth as silk, no effort or strain.

My flop sweat was stinging my eyes.

We made it two miles, and while it wasn't anything close to the distance I used to cover, it was a damn big accomplishment for someone who hadn't been up and moving like this in years.

“Look at me!” I grinned big as Mitch handed me a bottle of water when we got back to our cars parked at the trailhead. “I *ran*.”

“By next week we'll be at an easy three miles.” Despite hardly having a drop of moisture on his face, Mitch drained his water and tossed the empty bottle into his truck.

I shot him a look. “Let's not get carried away.” Then I grinned at him again, because as close to torture as running had been after years without it, I was looking forward to improving my distance and pace.

It was still early enough in the day that the temperature was tolerable. By lunch, the July sun would break through the morning clouds and make this route a whole lot harder. Mitch and I enjoyed running trails in the Arboretum, shaded and without too much traffic on our path. As far as runs went, this was easy. And it was still hard.

In the last week, I'd committed to move through Phase One within three weeks. If anything had lit a fire under my ass, it was the wedding. Not just Wes attending, though I'd be lying if I said that wasn't motivation, but I didn't want to be

standing in front of family and friends wearing sweatpants under my dress or a look of disarray beneath a painted face of makeup. I wanted to *feel* better.

Phase One: Get Stable.

That meant building a routine, which I'd lost in the last couple of years. Part of routine meant self-care, and part of self-care meant physical movement. Getting up to go to the bathroom between chapters in whatever book I was reading did not constitute sufficient exercise.

Mitch had offered to help get me back into it, and this was our third run in four days.

Also recently built into my routine was solidifying better working hours. It didn't take me more than two days to find a couple of part-time employees to help at the shop. As it turned out, teenage girls were the perfect vibe for *Rude Librarian*, and shopping at the bookstore was more of an *experience* than anything, so it worked out.

I'd also launched an online presence for the store, which was generating more sales already. With a few authors booked for signings and readings, I felt like I'd hit a real Business Bitch stride.

"I need to go home and shower," I said, running my arm over my forehead to clear the sweat. "Cass gets in today and she'll refuse to stay with me if she sees me like this."

Cassie was flying in from Florida, very early, to get more time with me, Mitch, and her family. I hadn't seen her in a

year. She'd flown home when I told her Andy and I were getting divorced, stayed a week to hug me while I cried, and then went home again.

I missed her terribly, so when she made plans to attend Mitch's wedding, I insisted she bunk with me until her husband, Diego, flew out to join the wedding party.

Mitch grimaced. "Does that mean no more sweatpants?"

I was still working on consistently building jeans into my routine.

I flipped him off and dug for my keys in my running belt. "No promises, but I think she *might* let the sweats slide."

"You know she won't."

He was right, but I didn't want to acknowledge it.

We said goodbye, and I made my way home, opening the door to my house to be greeted by the smell of a stew in the slow cooker. Cooking *and* eating regular meals were now built into my routine as well.

"Mom!" Sam ran to greet me at the door, his eager face dancing with excitement. "Guess what?"

I kicked my shoes off, groaning a little with the relief of freeing my swollen feet. "What, bubs?"

He absolutely beamed, the same big grin that his uncle Mitch and mama had.

"Terrance Lewis got *sick*. Like puke-fest sick!" He clapped his hands and twirled in a circle, his socks sliding smoothly

across the entryway tile.

“No fucking way!” I shrieked.

Sam stopped twirling and eyed me with a look of disapproval. I threw my hands over my mouth. “Sorry, buddy. I mean, no flipping way!”

I bit my tongue, reminding myself that it wasn’t okay for me to ask him not to tell his dad about my potty mouth. *Dammit*. Andy was going to chide me about this.

“Yes, flipping way!” Sam squealed back. “Terrance is barfing so bad that there’s *no* way he can be in the play tonight, and that means *I* will be Romeo.” His face scrunched in recognition. “Which means *I* have to kiss Emily Barker.” He frowned, then shook his head. “But I’ll still be Romeo!”

Emily Barker was nearly twelve years old. Poor Sam was surely sweating over this. He overthought *everything*, much like me, and I felt my stomach churn with the nerves of a first stage kiss.

Sam was the understudy in the town’s community children’s theater production of *Romeo and Juliet*, and at nearly ten years old, there were few things he took more seriously than his art.

“I’m *thrilled*.” I spun in my socks too, grabbing his hands and taking him with me as we giggled. I stopped and got serious for a moment. “You brush your teeth *really* well before we leave.”

Sam groaned, collapsing in a bent over position of embarrassment. “*Mom!*”



“Shower too, actually. Wash your stinky bits. Listen, Sam. Good hygiene, especially for a young man, is probably the most important thing you can do for yourself as you get older.”

The sound of a clearing throat at the door interrupted us.

“Says the woman in sweatpants.”

“Cassie!” My smile hardly had time to hit my face before I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her into me.

She pushed me away and shook her head. “Mads, you smell.”

I took a step back, admiring her. “I do, yes.”

Cassie hung in the doorway, her coiled hair cut to her shoulders with a bandana tied around her head. The yellow piece of fabric caused her hair to pop and accentuated her tan. The white sundress didn’t hurt either, and she ran a hand along the cotton fabric as she trailed over a large baby bump.

“I’d take my shoes off, but I can’t see my feet,” she complained.

Grinning, I dropped to help her slip her sandals off.

“No guarantees they’ll get back on these fat fucking feet now.” She looked down at me with a shrug.

Sam’s eyes went wide and Cassie laughed. “Sorry, baby doll. I meant these fat freaking feet.” She paused and thought for a moment. “No, I’ll take it back. I meant these fat fucking feet. Look at my toes. They’re like baby sausages.”

I tried not to laugh as I pinned my hands over Sam's ears and spun him around. "Why don't you go run your lines, buddy?"

Sam looked at Cassie again and grinned. "Hi, Aunt Cassie. Dad said you'd probably say things you shouldn't."

Cassie rubbed her belly faster. "Yeah, well. Your dad and I were always the best of friends."

She smiled in what was a believable look of pleasantries, but I knew better. I had forgiven Andy for initially bailing on me. Mitch had too, but not Cassie. She was for sure my best friend.

Making her an even better best friend, though, was the fact she never rubbed her disdain for Andy in my face. Or Sam's. Andy's face? Well, that was another story.

"I can't wait to see your show tonight, baby doll!" she hollered after Sam, watching him trudge up the stairs to his room. She looked at me again, shaking her head and reaching for my hands to pull them to the side as she took me in.

"Girl." She sighed. "Sweatpants, though? Really? I thought you wanted to be out of Phase One by the wedding."

"I ran today," I said, pointing at my pit stains.

Cassie winced a little. Seven months pregnant, and she was impeccably dressed and glowing. Nearly ten years postpartum and I was still recovering.

"I'll be there soon, I swear." She gave me a skeptical look in return. "Really," I insisted. "I've already delegated some shop work and will take the entire wedding celebration off. I ran

*three times*, have been preparing and eating regular meals, and Sam hasn't been late to a single summer camp activity in the last week." I beamed proudly. "I'm crushing it."

Cassie reached out and tucked some loose hair behind my ear. "You'll be there soon," she mumbled. Maybe meaning it.



"Do you miss him?" Cassie asked, taking a sip of her iced tea and fanning her face with a coaster.

I reached across the kitchen table and grabbed a lemon wedge from the bowl she'd requested. Cassie's pregnancy cravings were quite tart. She slapped my hand away before I could take the wedge. "I need these."

I pulled my hand back and rubbed it. "Ouch, Cass. Jesus." She raised her eyebrows, and I pushed the bowl of lemons closer to her. "Um, no, I don't think I miss Andy." I fiddled with my hands beneath the table, pretty sure I meant it.

There were times when I took in Andy's green eyes, eyes that had never quite felt right but had always caught my attention, and liked what I saw. He kept his hair short once he

graduated, those long blonde locks changed for a more professional look, but Andy still reminded me of the young man I'd met ten years ago. It was the young man that I missed. The man he was in the brief time before I got pregnant.

“He’s well and truly in phase two, Maddie,” Cassie said quietly.

As if I needed the reminder that my ex-husband had a girlfriend. Maria Barnett, an old friend from high school. I liked her well enough, and she was good to Sam, which was really all that mattered.

I wasn’t jealous. Not of Maria, but maybe of feeling loved and cherished. It was clear Andy wanted to be with Maria by choice, and he treated her as such.

Fear of splitting our family in two and building walls or paths of war in a custody battle had kept me rooted in a failed marriage longer than it should have. As it turned out, though, Andy and I co-parented well. More friends than anything, which I guess had been our marriage in a nutshell.

Andy hated that his own parents stayed married and resentful. Neither of us wanted to do that to Sam. When we finally called it quits, there was more sadness with our failure to make it work than anger at each other because it hadn’t.

“He’s in phase three, Cass. He’s moved on and started over.”

Cassie nodded thoughtfully, picking up a wedge and sucking it into her mouth to make a yellow smile. “You will

too,” she mumbled. At least, I think that’s what she said.

“Sometimes I miss our old life. I miss what I wish we’d had,” I said honestly. Cassie opened her eyes and nodded sympathetically. It looked ridiculous with a lemon rind in her mouth. “But I don’t wake up in the morning or go to bed at night missing having Andy next to me, if that’s what you mean.” I sighed and picked at my thumbnail absentmindedly. “How’s Diego?”

She spit the lemon out and wiped her mouth with a napkin. “He’s great. His mother is flying in from Puerto Rico for the birth and he’s rented her an apartment, so I don’t have to deal with her. *That’s* how I know he really loves me.”

I laughed. “Or how you know he really loves *her*.”

Cassie held up her fist playfully and shook it. “I’m a ray of fucking sunshine, Mads. That man loves me.”

“That he does,” I agreed, because it was true.

Cassie met Diego just after graduating from college. She’d been at a club, dancing on the bar with friends, stepped just a tad too far over, and fallen hard. On the floor, yes, but she’d also fallen hard for the doctor who had been watching from the upstairs marquee and rushed down to administer some very personal first aid.

They’d been inseparable ever since, marrying a couple of years ago in an intimate beachfront wedding. Andy, Sam, and I had attended. Mitch and Kate, too. Wes declined the invitation.

Something about some contractual event in Dallas where he'd been playing at the time.

“So, Phase Two,” Cassie said, tapping her finger on the table and looking out the window over the kitchen sink. I followed her look. Manny was standing at my neighbor's mailbox, sorting through his satchel.

“Yeah...” I trailed off, half turned toward the window and watching Manny. “Phase Two: Move On.”

She licked her lips and swallowed, fanning herself faster. “Move on. Like how?”

“Like, just not feeling stuck in life as it was, I guess.” I turned back to Cassie, watching her as small beads of sweat broke above her lip. “Letting myself do things I wasn't doing before. Letting go of everything I didn't ever actually have, and instead trying to get what I want now.”

“Mmhm.” She waved her coaster fan even faster. “Hot,” she mumbled.

“You want me to get a proper fan or something? You can take my room while you're here. There's a portable AC unit in the window.”

She shook her head. “No, *he's* hot,” she said, pointing toward the window. “Your mailman is fucking hot, Mads.”

I blushed, though I wasn't sure why. “That's Manny,” I said. “And yes, he is pretty hot.”

She snapped out of whatever trance she was in. “You talk to him?”

“Sometimes, yeah.” I felt shy suddenly. “He’s asked me out a few times.”

“Maddison Marie!” Cassie cried, slamming the coaster down rather dramatically. “Why is this the first I’ve heard of it? What have you said to that beautiful, beautiful man?” Manny stood outside my mailbox now, taking his time as he sorted through the mail.

“Um.” I reached for the lemons while she was distracted, but her eyes fell to my hand and I swear to god she growled.

I pulled away and traced my finger along the rim of my glass of iced tea. “I’ve mostly just told him I’m not ready to date yet. Every date in the last year has been spectacularly terrible.”

Cassie threw her hands up. “Dammit, Mads. *That* right there gets you to Phase Two. *Move on*. You move on by moving under *him*.” She licked her lips again.

*Jesus*. “Okay, Cass. I love you, and you’re probably not wrong, but you might want to, um, settle down.”

She groaned and dropped her head on the table. “I can’t help it. It’s all of this blood flow to my vagina. Or maybe it’s the hormones. Or the heat. Or the fact that I can’t even *see* between my legs anymore. Whatever the reason, I’m so goddamn horny.” She lifted her head and pointed out the window. “That’s not helping.”

I patted her hand sympathetically, though it’d been a long time since desire had hit me quite like that. “Want me to tell

him to go away?”

She glared at me. “God, no. I want you to go out there and bang him in the mail truck and then tell me all about it.”

“Cassie, based on your suggestions, it seems you may not know me as well as you think you do.”

Manny put a handful of letters in my mailbox and continued on his route. Cassie threw her hand up. “You’ve missed your opportunity,” she complained.

I laughed and got up, taking my empty glass to the sink and checking on the crock pot. “He’ll be back tomorrow, Cassie. He’s generally here Monday through Friday.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Then on Friday you go out there in a summer dress or a frock or a miniskirt and you wait for him to put *something* in your box. Do you understand me?” She crossed her arms and shook her head. “Get it.” She fanned herself again, lost in thought. “When’s the last time you were with someone?”

Cassie asked a question she already knew the answer to. I’d called her after every failed attempt in the last year. That whole ‘get your groove back’ thing post-divorce? Yeah, it was a flop. I’d had several dates, most of which didn’t progress to anything other than an uncomfortable drive home. But two had turned into sex, and that sex had been... Well, it had been.

“Shut up,” I mumbled. “I’m never sleeping with someone again. I’m done, Cassie. It’s been such an utter disaster.”



“You had bad sex with, like, two people. Consider yourself lucky! Most of us have had more bad sex than that. It doesn’t mean it will forever be bad, or that you won’t meet someone you like. You won’t get there if you don’t try, though.” She glanced out the window, staring into the empty yard.

She wasn’t wrong, but I didn’t want to concede. The truth was, I felt like I’d been spoiled in some ways. My first sexual experience was wonderful. From it, I gained confidence. Knowing how my body worked, knowing how I responded to the right touch, knowing the rewards of asking for what felt good. It was powerful. I felt like a fucking queen on my throne, ready to conquer the world.

Then I got knocked up, effectively knocking me down.

It wasn’t that Andy wasn’t a good enough lover. He was fine. The mechanics of our sex life worked well enough. The connection was disrupted, and as it turned out, that connection was just as powerful as confidence, but I could manage and compromise on it. For a while, anyway.

The two men I’d slept with *since* Andy, however, had left me feeling jaded. One was rushed and unbothered with foreplay. So shockingly fast, I hardly had time to think about it. I spent my drive home ruminating on my lack of voice, questioning why I hadn’t slowed things down and demanded my own pleasure.

The other was not so fast, but it was awkward and uncomfortable. A silent room with no passion to distract from the clumsy movements and collisions.

All of that culminated in the realization that the confidence I'd started with had long petered out. So now I had no connection *and* no confidence. That left me with no desire.

I kept my back to Cassie, resting my hands on the counter and dropping my head. Granite had been a good choice for the countertops by the builder. I focused my eyes on the brown and gold flecks, sinking into the colors as they swirled into memories of a time when longing had weighted me in my body, keeping me grounded in pleasure as I stared into eyes I couldn't look away from.

Those soft brown eyes with gold specks, so warm and wanting. I'd gotten lost once in the brown and gold, keeping my own eyes open to watch him as everything in me crescendoed in gratification. There was an intimacy in holding his gaze as we tipped over the peak of pleasure, barreling down the side of a mountain of bliss.

I slammed my eyes shut, shaking my head and trying to let it go. It'd been a long time since I let the memories of Wes flood me like that. It was only because I knew he'd be here soon. Next week, Mitch said.

"When was the last time you came?" Cassie asked, examining her nails as if she were indifferent, though I guarantee she was anything but.

I opened my mouth to answer, and she held up a perfectly manicured hand. "*With* someone else?" I promptly shut my mouth. "Right," she continued. "Look, Mads. I'm not saying do something you don't want to do, but check in with yourself

here. Are you really not ready? Or are you scared and not letting yourself do it despite your fear?”

“I was the fearless Sheffield once,” I said thoughtfully. More to myself than to Cassie.

She shrugged. “And now you’re the Sweatpants Sheffield. Ask yourself which one you really want to be.”

Silence hung between us for a few long moments before she started laughing.

“What? Are you laughing at me?”

Cassie shook her head, her curls bouncing as she clutched her chest and laughed even harder.

“*What?*”

She was red faced and snorting now. “Your mailman is named Manny,” she cackled.

“Okay?”

Her laughter didn’t subside. “Mail Manny.”

## *Eleven*

### *Wes*

**T**he paper slammed on the table in front of me, jolting my attention from the phone in my hands.

“What the hell is this, Wes?” Barry, my manager, asked, his dark eyes twice their normal size. Barry’s eyes were so dark they looked black, and if I were being honest, he scared me a lot.

He sat down, waving off the server as they came to offer a drink. When Barry meant business, he couldn’t be bothered by refreshments. He prodded a finger at an image on the front page and squinted his eyes to read the caption underneath it.

“Wes Cohen, 29 years old, seen pictured above, stumbles out of Greystone Manor with an unidentified woman.” He pointed at the picture next to it. “Wes Cohen, seen pictured above, holding the hair of an unidentified woman as she vomits outside of Greystone Manor after a late night of partying.”

I sighed, setting my phone down and half looking at the gossip rag in front of him. Barry cared way too much about the local celebrity news.

“They failed to describe me as a gentleman for holding her hair back as she puked, Barry. I like to think my parents would be proud of my chivalry.”

Barry scrubbed his hands over his clean-shaven face several times as he groaned.

“Jesus, Wes. I just got a call from ProEnergy RX and they’re livid. They don’t want an endorsement from a drunk, philandering athlete. There are enough of those out there. *Your* brand, *your* appeal, is that *you’re* a nice guy. Handsome, small town quarterback with a winning story. Trained hard, worked hard, and had good ethics.”

He pushed the paper to the side, giving one more groan for good measure.

“You have way too much time on your hands in retirement and I don’t want you to fuck it up. Retirement is a tough spot for an athlete. You only have a window of time to pull in big bucks, Wes. Then you disappear with every other player in the sport’s history.”

“Jerry Rice, Joe Montana, Lawrence Taylor, Peyton Manning...” I held up my hand and started counting, but Barry interrupted.

“You’re not them, Wes. I love you, and you were a skilled player, but you’re not those guys.”

I wanted to grumble about that, but he wasn't wrong. My career had been a good one, but I wasn't likely to land on a Wheaties box.

“Your best bet is to capitalize on the endorsements you have, and the few more you can get. Maybe move into public speaking or coaching consultation or running camps or any other thing to squeeze some cash that, combined with your investments, will keep you living a really good life until you die.”

Barry and I weren't friends, not like me and his wife, but one thing I knew about him was that he had my best interest at heart. In part because even though he was an asshole, he wasn't an asshole. And also in part because my success paid his bills.

I dropped my head back, puffing my cheeks and exhaling as I stared at the ceiling. “How bad did I fuck up?”

Barry wasn't wrong about the endorsements. I had a few obligations over the next year, but most contracts would end soon. ProEnergy RX was the only new endorsement I'd been offered recently, and I'd be a fool to pass it up.

Barry smoothed his tie as he called for the server. His tough love business was done and he could have his coffee now.

“On scale of one to ten of your fuck-ups? I'd say this is a three. ProEnergy isn't thrilled, but they're understanding. That Sports Illustrated piece was great, and you won a lot of hearts when you talked about looking forward to building a future outside of football that included a wife and children. Coaching

peewee ball.” He waved his hand dismissively. “All that sappy shit? ProEnergy loved it. *Everyone* loved it.”

Barry leaned forward, quieting his voice as if anyone else in this restaurant cared about our conversation. “That’s your brand, Wes. I don’t care who you fuck or how drunk you get or where you’re stumbling, so long as it’s out of the public eye. Keep on the straight and narrow and you’ll be fine. I already assured ProEnergy that this was just a misunderstanding. That woman had a stomach bug.”

“They believed that?” I looked down at the pictures again. I couldn’t remember the name of the woman that night, but I remembered that little black dress.

He sighed and nodded. “They believed what they wanted to believe. Just like the public believes what you show them. Whether or not it’s real. If the public says it’s you, it’s you.” He pointed at the paper. “Is this you, Wes?”

It was me because... Well, it was quite literally me. Yet it wasn’t. I hadn’t taken that woman home, and even if she hadn’t puked all over the sidewalk outside of the club, I wouldn’t have. There had been plenty of women who came home with me, but it was always discreet and in better taste than someone who’d over-consumed.

My career left little time for dating, and the dating I’d done hadn’t led to much, for the most part. A couple of women got serious, and we’d parted amicably, but I’d kept those relationships out of the public eye. However people viewed

me was their business, but as Barry was trying desperately to point out, their business was my business, and I needed it.

“I’ll behave,” I promised. It wasn’t a leap.

He nodded. “Monica arranged your flights. Take a week, get away, take a vacation. It’s probably good to get out of this fucking town.” Barry referring to LA as a “town” was rather amusing. “Not much trouble you’ll get into in Bumfuck Nowhere.”

“Montlake,” I corrected him. “Given the biggest club there is Rockbox Karaoke, I think you’re probably right.”

He nodded, sipping on his coffee. “I’ve got some meetings set up for when you get back. A couple of promos and one voice over for a commercial.” I grimaced, and he held up his hand. “You entertain all offers, Wes. You want that palace in the hills? You gotta pay for it. You want those women in the club to keep on your heels? You gotta have appearances. This life you want? It has conditions.”

This life I want. I sat through breakfast with Barry, wondering whether it was actually true.





“Car is on its way,” Monica said, poking her head through the door to my office. “You have ten minutes.”

My stomach shifted nervously, and I smiled at her. I wasn’t normally an anxious flyer, but going back to Washington did that to me.

“Thanks, Mon.” She nodded and disappeared again, likely looking for something to do around the house.

I’d given Monica the week off, but she would not take it if I didn’t force the issue. She didn’t know it yet, but I’d booked her and Barry a week in Napa while I was away. I kind of hated rewarding Barry, but I loved Monica.

Her own car was coming in twenty minutes, and I expected an angry text in twenty-five.

I’d avoided Montlake for so long. The few trips I’d made home for visits over the years were brief, less than a weekend, and usually unannounced. Most of the time I flew my parents to see me or met them in Seattle.

Anything to avoid Maddie, as much as it shamed me. I couldn't handle seeing her, seeing Andy, seeing the life they had together. It's not that I wanted that life, it's just that I didn't think Maddie did, either.

I had loved Maddie since the day I laid eyes on her. That honey blonde hair glowing in the afternoon sunlight, her cobalt eyes buried in a book as Mr. Sheffield, Mitch, and I tossed a football around the front yard.

*"What's your name, son?"* Mr. Sheffield had asked.

Her head lifted slightly, her eyes on the pages in front of her, yet I knew her attention was on me.

*"Wes, sir,"* I said, keeping my voice loud enough so she would hear.

Mr. Sheffield nodded his head. *"Well, Wes. Seems you've got a strong arm on you. Mitch here plays football for the junior league. Are you interested in signing up?"*

And that was it. I started football in Montlake, met my best friend, and fell in love with his sister.

What could I do, though? Maddie was so many things. Smart, funny, thoughtful, creative, beautiful. She was also Mitch's sister. That left her off limits. So I sought her friendship instead. She gave it easily, and soon she'd pulled *her* best friend into our circle as well, and Mitch, Maddie, Cassie, and I were thick as thieves.

I tried not to think about her as anything other than my friend. She was Mitch's sister, potentially ruining our tight-

knit group—it felt too risky for a girl who was probably uninterested in me anyway. The girls at school liked me because I played football. They liked me because I was popular. They liked me because I was handsome.

Maddie, though? She wasn't interested in that. She came to games because she supported me and Mitch. The popularity of the sport? Of me? She ran from it. Maddie didn't elbow into a group and bid for attention. She shied away from it, going off on her own to read or write, choosing to hang out in low-key settings.

Telling Maddie how I felt was not only a risk. It was stupid. She'd shown no interest in me to indicate that she wanted more.

When we graduated, ready to start our lives in college, moving us on paths in separate directions from one another, I took a chance. I had to try.

And hot damn if it wasn't a brilliant decision. I spent two weeks with Maddie, a blissed out journey of exploration, saying goodbye with a pull of regret for having let her leave. If I'd known then what I know now, I'd have done some things differently.

Not those two weeks. They were unforgettable, but beyond that, they were weeks in my life where I felt a connection. Sincere, genuine, and unconditional. The energy between us radiated with a fervor that I'd yet to experience since. When Maddie kissed me, when she touched me, when she so much as breathed my name—everything in me lit up.

I'd had many relationships since leaving for college. Some were brief, some were more serious, and some were really enjoyable. Yet none had left me with the same connection.

Maybe it was simply the excitement of exploring sex with Maddie. We were both inexperienced, and both so vulnerable with one another. That likely heightened emotions.

I tried to remember that when I moved on in life. There would always be nostalgia for my first time. That's part of why I'd waited for Maddie. Out of all the girls I knew in high school, Maddie was the one I never wanted to forget.

Then her life changed so much, grew in ways that felt unrecognizable to me at nineteen years old. The gulf between us wasn't just miles of country. It was life circumstances. Maddie became a mother, then a wife. There wasn't a place for me in her growing commitments. What little I had available couldn't even squeeze into the cracks of her life. Eventually, I realized I had to give up.

When I left for Eugene, I'd held the belief that Maddie and I would come back together someday. When we were grown-ups and had finished college, maybe. We'd always be connected. We'd find our way. I couldn't imagine a world where that didn't happen. Until I saw her with a baby in her arms, and the reality of it crashed down on me. She wasn't mine, and she wouldn't be.

So, I let her go. Or maybe I ran away from her. I'm not sure which, to be honest. Over the years, Mitch told me that Maddie was a beautiful mother. She loved Sam so much and

took such good care of him. Mitch was proud of her, which made me proud of her too. It couldn't have been easy to have a baby at nineteen years old, and on her own, at that. Maddie was fearless. She could do anything.

Me? I was the coward who couldn't face her because I couldn't look at her happy with a life that didn't include me.

I was a selfish prick.

When the plane touched down and I stepped off, feet back on Washington soil, I took a deep breath. I didn't want to be a coward anymore, but I wasn't exactly sure if I could be fearless. Either way, I was going to find out. Very soon.



“Motherfucker!”

*That's meant for me.*

I knew it was her before I turned around. “Cassie,” I said, dropping the handle of my suitcase and spinning to greet her. “What are you doing here?” My eyes dropped to her belly, so round and full. “And holy shit!”

Running her hand over her bump, and with a wicked grin, she rolled her eyes. “Right? This baby just keeps growing. I’m going to float away any minute.” She pointed a finger at me. “*You* came early and unannounced. *Mitch* sent me to get you because of it.”

“I’m only a day early,” I pointed out. “And Mitch said it was no big deal when I called him from California to let him know.”

Cassie pulled me in for a hug, as close as she could with a basketball between us.

“It’s not a big deal. He’s just busy right now, so he sent me.” She stepped back, keeping her arms on mine and taking me in. “Jesus, Wes. It’s been a minute. You look good.”

“You look good too, Cass. I didn’t realize you’d be so pregnant at the wedding.”

A hustle of people ran around baggage claim, scrambling to pull suitcases and bags from the conveyor belts as an influx of arriving passengers collected their belongings. I pulled my baseball hat lower, hoping no one would recognize me.

Cassie moved next to me, tucking her hand into the crook of my elbow and escorting me to the parking lot. “Well, Wes, that’s how these things work. The size of my bump progresses.”

I kissed the top of her head and gave her a squeeze. “Well, the last photo Diego sent me was you with a tiny little thing.” I

stuck out my stomach and grinned. “A bit like this.” She hit my now flat stomach playfully and shook her head.

“I’ve been told I’m going to get *much* bigger in the next two months, but I’m finding it hard to believe. I can’t even touch my toes, amongst other things.” She muttered something under her breath that I didn’t quite catch, then pointed to her rental car. “I’m just over there.”

She clicked the key fob and popped the trunk. “Mads looked like a fucking house at the end of her pregnancy, so I guess I can’t feign ignorance.”

I swallowed thickly, tossing my suitcase into the trunk and closing it without looking at Cassie. “Mhm.”

“You wouldn’t know that, though, because you didn’t see it.” Her smile wasn’t wicked anymore. It was angry.

“Cass—”

She shook her head, tossing me the keys. “You drive. I can hardly fit in this thing.” She awkwardly slunk into the passenger seat, tucking her legs in and groaning. “Jesus.”

“Do you need anything? I can run back in and get you some water or something.”

She fanned her face, her cheeks flushed and a small sweat above her lip from the exertion of getting into the car. “I’m fine,” she mumbled, eyes closed and head resting on the seatback. “But you. You are an entirely other matter, Wes Cohen.”

Sensing trouble ahead with Cassie's tone, it didn't take me more than a minute to put together that Mitch probably wasn't busy at all. Cassie bullied her way into picking me up so we could have this confined moment.

"Okay, Cass. Just say what you need to say."

Cassie and I had been friends for just about as long as I'd been friends with Mitch and Maddie. She was honest, straightforward, but most importantly—loyal. To me, yes, but first and foremost to Maddie.

"She's nervous about you being here. I hope you know that."

Cassie didn't need to clarify who she was speaking of. "I'm nervous too."

Cassie nodded, her eyes still closed as I pulled out of the parking garage. "I know."

I hesitated, wanting to ask so many questions, yet fearful of the answers. "How is she doing?"

Traffic was already backed up as soon as I hit the highway, and I knew this was going to be a long drive. How pleasant the drive would be remained to be seen. I held my breath, waiting for her answer.

Opening one eye, Cassie turned her head to look at me. "You really want to know?"

*Tell me everything.*



For years I'd kept my distance, avoiding details that would paint a picture of Maddie's life with Andy.

*Is she happy? Does she laugh a lot? How does she spend her days? Is Andy affectionate with her?*

*Fuck.* I clenched my jaw at the thought of having to watch Maddie with Andy. Mitch rarely talked about them, and I never asked anymore in the infrequent occurrences when we talked.

"Of course I want to know." I gripped the steering wheel tightly, my hands clammy as they clung to the faux leather.

"Then I guess you're just going to have to ask Maddie when you see her." She stuck her tongue out at me and then looked out the window at the passing scenery of billboards and strip malls. "Jesus," she groaned. "I have to pee."

I frowned. Not at her need for a bathroom, but with her answer to my question. I signaled to turn off, and Cassie shook her head.

"Don't bother," she said. "I'll just have to pee five minutes after that. Just get us there before I piss myself, okay?"

"Are you sure?"

"Holding it counts for my daily Kegels." She sighed and reached her hand for mine. "It's good to see you, Wes. Really. It's been too long and we've all missed you."

Keeping my eyes on the road ahead of us, I smiled. "I missed you guys too."

She pulled her hand back and punched my arm. “Ten *fucking* years,” she muttered. “You gave Mitch a real scare by taking so long to agree to be his best man.” She sighed, looking out the window again. “Couldn’t come to my wedding or Maddie’s wedding, but I suppose Mitch was always your favorite.”

*Depends what we’re talking about.*

“Hey, turn down Fidalgo, would you?” Cassie asked. “I’m not actually staying with my folks. Just take the second left.”

I flipped on my blinker, following her directions. “Sure. I’ll just take an Uber to my parents.”

“Oh, no need. I’ll take you. I just need to make *one* brief stop first, that’s all. Grab a few things before heading back to see my folks. Then we can go together?”

There was something in Cassie’s tone, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. I nodded instead, listening to directions and pulling into the long driveway of a two-story townhouse.

I eyed it through the windshield. “New construction?” I asked. Cassie nodded. “Is this your Airbnb?”

She smiled. “Something like that. Why don’t you come in with me?”

I unbuckled myself, getting out of the car with the feeling that Cassie was leading me into a trap. It wasn’t but a minute before it became clear that was *exactly* what was happening.

The front door of the townhouse opened, and out stepped Andy. He looked different, older. His hair was short and

clipped, his body a little softer, but I recognized him all the same. On his heels and with a hand tucked into his, was a familiar face.

“Maria?” I asked, trying to make sense of what I was seeing.

Andy dropped her hand immediately, and Maria threw them over her face in surprise. “Is that *the* Wes Cohen?” she cried, running past Andy and meeting me for a hug. She pulled back and shook her head. “Jesus, Wes. You look *good*.” She squeezed my arms. “You feel good too.”

Maria hadn’t seemed to age at all. Her dark hair was just as long and shiny as it had been when we were teenagers, and her bronze skin was just as smooth. She wore dress slacks and a white blouse, a far cry from the miniskirts and tank tops she wore in high school, but she still looked good.

Andy reached his hand out. “Wes,” he said, taking mine formally. “Good to see you. Mitch said you were coming for the wedding. Surprised us all.”

“Where’s Maddie?” I asked, ignoring him. *And why were you coming out of this house holding another woman’s hand, you fucking asshole?*

If football had taught me one thing, it was how to think under pressure. My instinct was to shove Andy against the house, my arm strangling his neck until he explained what the hell he was doing with another woman, but I was walking into a situation I knew nothing about, and keeping calm was the only reasonable thing to do.

Andy shook his head. “I think she’s still out with Mitch on a run. I had to drop Sam before we head back to the office.”

“We?” I asked, crossing my arms. Cassie opened her mouth to say something, but then closed it quickly, as if she thought better of it.

“I’m his assistant,” Maria said proudly. “I’ve been working as an executive assistant at Boeing for the last few years and *finally* got transferred into this guy’s office.” She smiled at Andy, though Andy’s face was flat.

“Was Maddie expecting you?” he asked, his arms now crossed like mine. Jesus. The asshole’s testosterone was leaking like a sieve, emitting a toxic odor and making my jaw clench.

I stood up taller, my barrel chest on full display now, maybe leaking a little myself. Was Andy getting territorial when he clearly was hiding something? And why hadn’t Cassie chewed his balls off by now? She was just standing there, glaring at Andy. She had to have seen what I saw.

“Dad!”

From out of the house flew a little boy, eyes like his father and a near spitting image too. Then he smiled, and I saw his mother in him.

“Sam?” Andy turned.

The boy held his hand out, a phone in it. “Maria left her phone inside.”

*Jesus.* Andy was fucking around on Maddie, and he'd brought his mistress around their kid. I wanted to hit him, but I kept my fists tucked at my side. I watched Andy take the phone from Sam, catching the shine of pink and red painted nails on the boy's fingers.

He looked at me curiously. "Who are you?" Sam asked.

"Wes," I said, offering him my hand. Sam took it. "I'm a friend of your mom."

Sam scrunched his face and scratched his head. "You look familiar."

Maria stepped next to Sam and put her arm around his shoulder, looking at me. "Wes is your uncle Mitch's football friend," she said, beaming at me. "He's won a super bowl, even." She stood up straight. "Can we see your ring?" Her eyes lit up.

"I don't wear it," I said. Truthfully, it embarrassed me when people asked. I was proud of my career, but the attention and fawning had never sat well with me. I just wanted to play. The rest was my least favorite part of the sport.

Sam looked at me. "Did you play with my dad?"

"Yeah, your dad and I played ball," I said, trying to unclench my jaw.

Until Maddie, I'd had no problem with Andy. We'd played at different high schools, and I'd liked him fine enough. That was before he ran out on her, though. And now he was stepping out on her, and I wanted to murder him.

Sam gave Andy a hug and jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "I'm going to go back inside. Bye, Aunt Cassie." He smiled at me. "Bye, Wes."

"Bye," I said softly, watching him go. It felt impossible to wrap my head around the fact that he was Maddie's son. The kid felt so foreign, and yet so familiar. I could tell right away that he had Maddie's warmth and temperament.

Sam stopped just before going back in, turning to look at me with a sudden recognition.

"I know where I've seen you," he said. "You're in that picture in Mom's room. The one on her dresser. You, Uncle Mitch, Aunt Cassie, and Mom. She said it was the day she moved to college." He nodded, satisfied with his memory, and went inside, closing the door behind him.

Cassie elbowed me and smiled.

Andy stood awkwardly for a moment. Maria stood next to him with a grin on her face as she watched me. Cassie stared daggers at both of them.

"So," Andy said. "I guess you guys are just going to wait for Maddie to get home, then?"

Cassie nodded. "That's the plan. And you're leaving, *right?*" Jesus. The tone in her voice wasn't just frosty. It was downright Arctic. I may have taken a place on Cassie's shit list, but it was still lower down than Andy's position, and that was relieving.

Maria waved at us as Andy tugged her along. “Bye, Wes,” she said, not taking her eyes off of me. “You really do look good.”

Once they’d left, Cassie turned to me. “We need to talk.”

## *Twelve*

### *Maddie*

“**C**ass?” I called, stepping into the house and kicking off my running shoes. “Do you have any remedy for thigh chafing? Don’t hold out on me. It feels like someone strapped sandpaper to one thigh and let the other suffer for it. No jokes about being raw between the legs, either.”

I tossed my keys on the end table by the door and rested my hands on my back, leaning into a stretch.

“The last time I was raw from anything other than thunder thighs is but a distant memory.”

I heard footsteps above me, and it was just a moment later that Sam came barreling down the stairs. “Hey, Mom!”

“Hey, bud,” I said, bending down to stretch my calves while simultaneously hiding my embarrassment. I hoped Sam hadn’t heard me hollering at Cassie. “I didn’t realize Dad dropped you off already. I thought it was just Cass here.”



Sam hugged the banister as he stood a step up from the bottom of the stairs. “Yeah, he and Maria had to drop me on their lunch break.” He paused and looked toward the kitchen. “Cassie and your friend came as they were leaving.”

“My friend?” I looked up at him from my stretch.

He nodded. “The one from the picture.”

“The picture?” I dropped my hands to the floor, flattening my palms. “What?”

“Hey, Mads.”

My head shot up so fast I got dizzy and nearly fell over. I caught myself with a hand against the wall as I straightened up, mouth agape.

“Wes?” I swallowed. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Mom!” Sam squeaked.

I blinked a few times, looking at Sam, then at Wes. “Sorry, buddy,” I whispered, not taking my eyes off Wes. “I mean, what the flip are you doing here?”

Cassie stepped into the entryway, a devilish smile on her face. “Sam, baby doll. Would you like to come out on a walk with me? I get cramps if I don’t stretch my legs.”

Sam shook his head. “No, thank you.”

I continued blinking more than necessary. Meanwhile, Wes grinned at me. *That grin*. It had changed little in ten years. But the rest of him had.

His body was bigger, filled out, muscled. His hair was longer too, the rolling waves dark as cocoa, so soft that I wanted to reach out for him. I tucked my hands tightly behind my back.

Cassie grabbed Sam's arm and tugged him gently from the stairs. "Come for a walk, Sam. I need company." Sam was going to complain, but Cassie shot him a look that quickly stopped it. She patted Wes' shoulder and nodded at me. "You two can catch up."

She was shoving Sam out the door when she turned and called over her shoulder. "Petroleum jelly, Mads."

My face went crimson. "Excuse me?" I squealed.

"Petroleum jelly. It will help your thighs. Among other places." She closed the door behind her, and I heard her cackle from the other side.

With no blood left in my head, I pointed at the sweat stains on my shirt. "I was running."

Jesus. This wasn't how I wanted my first visit with Wes to go. Ten years. *Ten years*, and the first thing I do is point out how disgusting I am. *After* yelling about my raw thighs.

"I can see that," Wes said, amused.

He crossed his arms and leaned against the wall separating the kitchen and entryway, looking entirely too handsome. I was at a disadvantage. Even at my best I would have been, but I wasn't even close to my best right now. Not by a long shot.

In the fantasy that had been playing out in my mind for the last few weeks, this meeting would have gone much differently. I would be a nearly thirty-year-old confident woman entering Phase Two of my comeback. I would be dressed in something flattering—red if I were feeling saucy, but most likely something deep blue to favor my skin tone and eyes.

My hair would be down my shoulders with loose curls effortlessly framing my face, which would have just the *right* amount of makeup. Some mascara and a nude lip gloss. Nothing obvious, but a dusting to enhance my best features. And I certainly would have shaved my armpits.

Instead, I stood three feet away from a man I thought I'd let go of, feeling like that lovesick eighteen-year-old all over again. Except instead of a tight body and an effortlessly youthful face, I was sweaty, pink-cheeked, and soft in all the wrong places.

Sweat slicked my hair, and I was pretty sure I smelled less than fresh in my run gear, but to my surprise, Wes didn't grimace or look away.

"You look good, Maddie," he said, lying through his teeth. I scoffed and crossed my arms as well, but he shook his head. "I mean it."

"You're taller," I blurted.

He smiled and nodded. "An inch and a half after high school. You noticed, huh?"

I wanted to tell him that of course I noticed. I'd been able to stand facing him and lift onto the tips of my toes to kiss his lips without him leaning over the last time we were together. Now it would be a struggle. Not that I was thinking about kissing him or anything.

“Your hair is darker.”

He nodded. “What else you got, Mads? This is interesting. Like one of those I Spy puzzles or something.”

I laughed, pulling my hand to cover my mouth self-consciously. “You have *a lot* more stubble.”

“Puberty complete.” He grinned, relaxing into his pose. I laughed harder and shook my head.

“Um, you're... bigger. Stronger, I mean,” I said, feeling embarrassed for noticing *that*.

Wes flexed playfully. “Turns out years of football will do that, you know?”

I shrugged. “I'm pretty much a human pillow, so no, I don't know.”

Wes cracked, erupting into a laugh and stepping toward me. For a moment, I thought he was going to hug me, but he gave my arm a gentle push instead. “You say it like it's a bad thing. Everyone loves a pillow.”

“I didn't realize you were getting in so early.” I brushed past him, ignoring the comment.

Wes followed me into the kitchen, saying nothing. He sat down at the table in what was probably the spot he'd been when visiting with Cassie. He reached for the glass of water in front of him and took a long drink.

I leaned against the counter, watching him and not wanting to sit down. Distance seemed important. For many reasons.

"It turns out I had nothing going on, so I thought I'd catch an earlier flight," he finally said, setting his glass down.

I nodded, reaching into the cupboard to get my own. "I bet your parents will be excited to see you."

He rubbed the back of his neck. He was nervous, though I didn't know why. He had the advantage here. In all ways.

"They are," he said. "I leave the day after the wedding, which they're already complaining about."

"I see." I filled my glass and stared at it.

In all my fantasies leading up to seeing Wes again, I had imagined meaningful and deep conversations from the start. The small talk was deflating. Everything about this was deflating. *Why did I let myself get carried away in my fantasies?*

"Andy..." Wes started, slowly turning his glass in a circle between his hands. "I hadn't realized you guys split up. Cassie—she told me, just a bit ago."

That *definitely* wasn't the deep conversation I'd wanted to have.

*Outstanding. I'm really winning today.*

I glanced out the window. It was an ideal summer day with no clouds and unfiltered light. I wished I were outside instead of dying a little on the inside of this house.

“Yep.”

“Mitch didn’t tell me,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry, Maddie.”

“Well, we didn’t exactly start out on the best foot, did we?”

“Sam seems like a great kid.” The way he said it—my heart pulled, and I sucked in a breath.

This wasn’t territory I wanted to get into with Wes. Yes, my kid was great. Yes, I was divorced. Yes, my life was not glamorous or exciting or enviable. It was lonely, pathetic, and not at all what it was supposed to look like.

Most days I counted my gratitudes, but Wes showing up again... It made me feel all kinds of inadequacy and embarrassment. I just wanted to take a shower and put on my sweatpants.

“He is a great kid,” I said, clearing my throat. “I need to take a shower, Wes. I don’t mean to be rude, but...” I eyed the door, and Wes’ glance followed.

“Oh, um, yeah, of course.” He stood up, rubbing his neck and staring at the floor. “Well, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow at the inn?”

I tried to smile, I really did, but all I wanted to do was cry. “Yeah,” I said, swallowing.

“Hey, Maddie?” He was halfway out of the kitchen, turning to look back at me. I stared expectantly, trying to keep my face neutral. He smiled, his eyes soft. “It’s good to see you.”

He left, and I crumbled.



“Oh, no! No you don’t. Get *out* of those things.” Cassie stood with her hands on her hips, glaring at me.

I looked down at myself and then back at her, tucking my wet hair behind my ear. “What?”

I reached into a can of Pringles, taking a large stack and getting to work, watching her from the couch.

Cassie sighed and waddled to the couch, where she awkwardly sat down next to me. She reached for the Pringles, pulling them from my hands and taking her own stack.

“Those sweatpants,” she said with a full mouth. “Get out of them. You’re in Phase Two.”

I groaned, wiping crumbs from my chest. “I’m not. I was fooling myself.”

She chewed for a moment, holding her finger up before swallowing and continuing. “You were *not* fooling yourself. You have done all kinds of things this last month to move out of Phase One. You’re there. Do not let one discouraging day take away from all the good you’ve done for yourself.”

She was right. I hated that Cassie was right. It sometimes felt easier to be miserable than it was to put in an effort to feel anything else.

“Fine.” I stood up and brushed the rest of the crumbs off me. “But I’m not taking the sweatpants off. It’s nearly bedtime. Tomorrow I’ll wear proper clothes. Probably.”

Cassie’s lips curled up mischievously and her eyes lit up.

“Cass?” I didn’t like the look of this.

“Get dressed in proper clothes. *Now*,” she said. “We’re going somewhere tonight.”

I groaned and dropped back onto the sofa, throwing my hands over my face. “What? No. I smell like sour cream and onion chips and my hair is wet. Besides, there’s nowhere I want to go.” I peeked through my fingers to see Cassie’s smile unfaltering.

“Brush your teeth, your hair will dry on the way, and Rockbox, bitch.” Boy, she looked like the cat who ate the canary.

“I can’t leave Sam,” I pointed out. Sometimes a kid could be a convenient excuse to back out of something. If ever there



was a time to appreciate being a parent, it was moments like this.

Cassie rolled her eyes and pushed herself off the couch, looking down at me. “Not that I appreciate you finding a second best friend, but if you *had* to do it, I’m glad it’s someone as solid as Kate. She’ll be here soon to stay with Sam. Mitch will drop her off and pick us up. Go, get ready.”

We argued back and forth for another five minutes, but in the end, I headed upstairs to change like Cassie asked. It was pointless to fight her or her persistence. With each stair, though, my willingness grew. It had been a very long time since I’d gone out, let alone gone out for karaoke, and the thought of spending time with Mitch and Cassie *did* sound fun.

Cassie frowned at me as I came downstairs. “Jeans and a t-shirt? Really?”

I looked at Cassie draped in a beautiful turquoise frock with a floral scarf tied in her hair.

“Everything is clean.”

She huffed and waddled over to me, taking a hair tie from around her wrist and reaching for my wet strands. There was a tug and some pulling, some grumbling from her pursed lips that held the hair tie, and maybe a curse word before she stepped back and smiled. “Like magic.” She nodded in approval of her work.

I stepped into the hallway to assess myself in the mirror next to the front door. She wasn’t wrong. Whatever trick she’d

done with my hair was a little magic. It was a messy updo, yet styled to flatter the roundness of my face. I turned my head to the side, then the other, and smiled. “Cassie, thank you!”

She stood behind me, sifting through her purse and pulling out a tube of lipstick. “This too,” she said.

I took it, trusting her judgment, and applied a light pink to my lips that made me smile wider.

“Being a dance coach means knowing how to pull it together in emergencies.” She planted her hands on my shoulders and watched me in the mirror. “It’s okay to let yourself feel good.”

My shoulders slumped under her hands, and I dropped my eyes from the mirror. She wasn’t wrong about that, either. I spent an inordinate amount of time feeling like I was never enough for anyone. I hadn’t been enough to keep Wes, and even though Andy had stuck around, it was from obligation above anything else.

The last couple of years had felt like a reckoning. Coming to terms with the possibility that I just wasn’t enough. So I gave up. I gave up on making someone stay because they had to. I gave up on ignoring the gnawing fear of my inadequacy. I gave up on myself.

I raised my eyes to meet Cassie again. I may have given up on myself, but Cassie hadn’t, and for that, I owed her an effort to move on.

“Thank you, Cassie. For thinking I deserve more than what I’m allowing myself.”

Her eyes welled up, and she sniffled, pulling her hands away to fan her face. “You’re going to make me cry, Mads. These damn hormones.” She puffed her cheeks and exhaled. “I’d never give up on you. Even if you give up on yourself. I’m going to come back to Montlake anytime I catch wind that you’re mistreating yourself. I know you think it was you that couldn’t make it work with Andy, but it wasn’t. You guys held on with the best intentions for the wrong reasons. That doesn’t mean there’s something wrong with you. It means you guys did everything you could because you’re good people, but it wasn’t right.”

I raised my eyebrows and turned to face her. “You’re saying you think Andy is a good person, too?”

Cassie nearly choked, but swallowed down her pride and nodded. “I do. In the end, he wasn’t a bad guy. But he’s not *your* guy, and you never wanted him to be anyway. You’ve looked at this entire marriage from *his* perspective. What about yours, Maddie? You seem to forget that you were with him for the same reasons he was with you. You can’t force love, no matter how much you want to. That doesn’t make you broken.”

I pulled her into a hug, gripping her tightly and forever grateful that we’d connected over kick ball and a hatred of Alex Perkins when we were in second grade. “I love you, Cassie,” I mumbled into her shoulder.

I felt her chest expand and a rumble of a laugh begin. “Tell me that again in a minute, okay?”

“What?” I stepped back, noting the flash of guilt on her face. “What did you do?”

“Knock, knock!” Kate called, opening the door behind us. I scooted back into the living room, giving Kate and Mitch room to come in. Before Mitch could close the door, one more person entered.

Wes.

“Sorry we’re a little late,” Kate apologized. “Mitch couldn’t decide which pants to wear.” She rolled her eyes, dropping her purse and shrugging off her sweater to hang on the hook by the door.

“Pants have to match the mood of the night, Kate, I told you. Am I doing high kicks with a little Iggy Pop? Am I getting low in a squat with some Lil Jon? Some pants are better than others.”

Cassie laughed and shook her head, a sympathetic look tossed to Kate. “I don’t know how you tolerate this.”

Kate kissed Mitch’s cheek and wiped away the smear of lipstick, but Mitch just grinned bigger.

“Hey, Maddie,” Wes said softly, closing the door behind him but not coming closer. “I hope it’s okay that I’m tagging along. Cass invited me.”

*I bet she did.*

I gave him an honest smile. “Of course. I’m glad you came.” I’d spent so much time today ruminating on my feelings for Wes based on two weeks of our lives ten years ago that I’d lost the perspective that we were friends first.

“Shotgun, assholes!” Mitch hollered, kissing Kate briefly before rushing out the door.

Cassie groaned, following on his heels. “You’re driving, Mitch. *I* get shotgun. There’s no way I can crawl into the back of the cab of your truck and get out again.”

Wes looked at me and grinned. That grin. “Guess we’re in the back.”

“Just like old times,” I said, blushing immediately. I hadn’t meant to actually say it.

Wes held his hand out, waiting for me to go first. “If one could be so lucky.”

## *Thirteen*

### *Wes*

**T**ime changed us both, in obvious and not so obvious ways.

One thing that hadn't changed, though, was the way my heart skipped when I sat close to Maddie. The steady rhythm was long gone, now bouncing in uneven and sporadic leaps through my chest.

It took all of my effort not to slide closer to her and let our arms touch in the backseat of Mitch's truck. She hadn't hugged me, hadn't patted me, hadn't so much as breathed on me since I'd been home. I worried this was purposeful, and I didn't want to push boundaries.

I knew Maddie well. Or I had, anyway, years ago. Her face hid little. It never had, and she'd been embarrassed when I was at her house that afternoon. Of what, I wasn't sure. Her self-deprecating jokes about sweat and soft bodies were unnecessary. Years of training left me well familiar with the

perspiration from exertion, and if anything, I was impressed she was still running.

As for her body, well, I couldn't sleep without a pillow, I'll just say that.

We sat a seat apart, Mitch and Cassie arguing in the front about what songs they'd sing at karaoke. Maddie stared out the window, the sunset sending a soft gold light through the truck that hit her hair in an ethereal haze. She looked beautiful.

Ten years had matured her more than aged. She still looked young, her skin clear and with a softness that made me want to run my hand along her cheek, but there was a fullness to her face that changed in the last decade. Her cheek bones were sharper, more pronounced, and there were small lines that formed near the corners of her mouth when she smiled. I liked these. Very much.

When we were teenagers, Maddie had been tight and compact. She hadn't been lanky, but she had the skinniness of a young girl. Now she had filled out. Her shoulders were wider, sliding down into an obvious waist, curving back over mature hips. Her thighs were thicker and her breasts were full.

Whether motherhood or maturation, Maddie was a woman in ways she hadn't been in my eyes before. I'd memorized the curves of her body in just two weeks' time, but the map of those desires was now unfamiliar. An entirely unique landscape presented itself.

I closed my eyes and exhaled through my nose at the thought of discovering this new terrain.

“Yea or nay to ballads?” Cassie asked, turning around to me and Maddie. “I’m on the fence, but Eternal Flame is just such a power ballad, you know?” She looked at Maddie, who was lost in thought. “Mads? An opinion?”

“Huh?” Maddie pulled her attention away from the window, blinking a few times.

Cassie sighed. “Yea or nay? Eternal Flame.”

Maddie thought for a moment. “Yea, obviously. What kind of question is that? It’s such a power ballad.”

Cassie grinned and turned forward again, hitting Mitch’s arm. “See? I told you.”

The last time we’d been to Rockbox for karaoke was Cassie’s eighteenth birthday. We were too young to drink, relegated to the underage section of the club, but tonight we were well and truly adults. Maddie seemed determined to prove that point, heading straight for the bar as soon as we walked in.

I lost track of her in the crowd, the dark lighting not helping and all the tables nearly full, but she emerged a few minutes later with a small tray, setting it on the table that Mitch had commandeered.

“For you.” She passed Mitch a shot glass. “And you,” she said, handing me one. “Me.” She took her own. Then grinned. “And you.” She handed Cassie a tumbler of water, looking incredibly satisfied with the move.

Cassie groaned. “This baby better be worth it.”



Of the four of us, Cassie was the party girl. It was a true sign of changing times that she was sipping water while rubbing her growing belly.

We held our shot glasses up, ready to toast. Mitch cleared his throat. He was always the first to start a speech, and usually one to cry with it.

“To best friends, together again,” he said, his face radiating pride, but surprisingly, no tears. “To best friends who care enough to make it happen.”

“Hear, hear,” Cassie called. We clinked tiny glasses, tossing our drinks back, three of us wincing in pain at the bottom shelf vodka.

“Jesus,” Mitch grumbled, patting his chest. “Fuck this, Mads. I’m getting the good stuff.” He left the table, heading for the bar with the empty tray tucked under his arm.

“A man on a mission,” Maddie mumbled, sipping on Cassie’s water.

Cassie glared at her and pointed an angry finger. “That man is a saint for getting you more drinks. You better bring your karaoke game, Mads.”

She would. No one could karaoke like Maddie when she relaxed after a few drinks. At least tonight she could partake freely, rather than hide out in the bathroom sipping on a flask of contraband.

“Excuse me?” There was a tug on my arm and an excited voice over my shoulder, though the overhead music drowned

her out. “You’re Wes Cohen, aren’t you?”

Cassie smiled and leaned across the table toward the three women standing behind me. “*Yes,*” she drawled. “This is *the* Wes Cohen, ladies.” Cassie winked at me, then looked back at the gobsmacked women. “*The* superstar. *The* football god. *The* man of the hour.”

Catching on, Maddie laughed and leaned forward on her elbows, looking at the young women with a serious expression. “Yes. *The* god among men. *The* rockstar on *and off* the field.”

Mitch elbowed through the crowd and set the tray down with a shaky hand. Three rocks glasses filled with something dark splashed just over their rims and he cursed before licking his hand and smiling. “Jesus,” he said, eyes wide. “Are you *Wes Cohen?*”

I smirked, flipping him off and turned to the women, none of whom looked much older than twenty-one and all of whom were dressed in tight, fitted skirts that would make most men blush.

“Yes, I’m Wes Cohen. Are you football fans, ladies?” I caught sight of Cassie and Maddie making gagging motions to one another. Ignoring them, I smiled at the women.

“Oh no,” one said, nervously fiddling with her long, dark hair. “We’re just Wes Cohen fans.”

“Aren’t we all?” Cassie sighed, making eyes at me as Maddie choked back laughter.

The woman who'd pulled for my attention stood up taller, looking more brave than she had just a moment ago. "Can we get a selfie with you?"

I nodded, though I wanted to groan. I hated selfies, and worse, I hated where they always ended up.

One of the women pulled a phone from a purse covered in sequins and all three crushed into me, arms wrapping every which way, and a hand ending up on my abs in a way I was used to. Women could get goddamn grabby when it came down to it.

"Oh now, that looks great!" Maddie said, her eyebrows raising high on her forehead and her smile stretching across her face. She almost looked believable. "You know what, though? Why don't you let me take one from a different angle?"

The woman handed Maddie her phone, and Maddie gestured for us to move closer. "Squeeze in there tighter," she instructed. "Don't be shy!"

A second hand snaked along my torso and I grit my teeth into a tight smile.

"You're so thoughtful, Maddie."

She smiled brightly and held the phone up for much longer than necessary to take a simple photo.

When she was finally done, Maddie handed the phone back. The women stood awkwardly for a moment, as if they expected an invitation to join us, but I knew better.

“Ladies, I hope you have a wonderful night and enjoy your karaoke. Sing a little Journey for me, will you?” I winked, turning back to the table as they giggled and left.

Maddie rolled her eyes as Cassie hit my arm. “You’re way too good at that, Wes,” Cassie said. “Practice much?”

Mitch grinned and passed out drinks. “Wes is always fighting off the ladies, huh?”

“Not always,” Maddie mumbled, tossing her drink back. She grimaced. “Is this straight bourbon?”

Mitch grinned and nodded, moving the conversation forward, even though I very much wanted to clarify his comment to Maddie’s annoyed face.

“Kate said as long as I’m not hungover tomorrow, I can drink as much as I want.” He pointed at Cassie. “And she’s driving home.”

“I am?” Cassie crossed her arms and smoothed her face. “You’re assuming I can fit behind the steering wheel of your truck.”

“You can,” Mitch said earnestly. “Even Maddie drove my truck at the end of her pregnancy, and she was big as a fucking cruise ship before she had Sam.”

Maddie glared at him. “Mitch!” She looked at me, embarrassed.

“I’m sure you looked glowing,” I said.

Cassie snorted. “If by ‘glowing’ you mean sweaty and a face pinched in nonstop consternation, then yes, Mads was glowing.”

Maddie flipped her off. “My pregnancy was hard. I was so sick that I could only eat pancakes.” Maddie took another sip of her bourbon and smiled into her glass. “And cake.” She pointed her finger at Cassie. “You’d be pretty grumpy too.”

“No, I wouldn’t. I love cake.” Cassie tilted her head, closing her eyes and holding up her hand. “You hear that, Mitch?”

Mitch matched her smile. “I sure do, Cass.” He stood up, pushing his chair back and extending his hand for hers as soon as the first notes of Under Pressure began playing.

They went off to dance as a group of women stood on the stage next to the bar, ready to sing. One of them wore a sash across her chest that said “I’m The Bride, Bitch.”

Maddie watched on, shaking her head and pointing to Cassie. “I helped her get her sandals on before we left the house and she still has the balls to throw me under the bus.” She bit her lip and smiled, looking at me. “I wasn’t the size of a cruise ship,” she clarified. “More like a yacht. Impressive size compared to a speedboat, but not the Titanic either, you know?”

I smiled at her, running my hand along the rim of my glass and studying her face while she was looking elsewhere. I used to do that a lot. Steal looks in the moments she wasn’t paying attention to me. It felt just as good now as it did then.

“I’m sorry, Maddie,” I said, taking a drink and looking away from her. “I’m sorry I didn’t see it, and I’m sorry that I wasn’t there for you how Mitch and Cassie were.”

She finished her drink and set it down, nodding to the table. “I know you are.” She paused. “I’m sorry too. But Wes?”

When her eyes looked at me, I may have stopped breathing.

“Whatever happened between us then? It’s not us now. I’m just glad you’re here.” She slunk down in her seat, dropping her head in her hands and shaking her head. “That bourbon really hit me.”

I narrowed my eyes. God, she was sexy. “Yeah? How hard?”

She looked up at me, her eyes alight. “Hard enough.”

I threw back the rest of my drink, wiping my mouth with my hand. “Are you sure?”

Maddie stood up, slightly off balance, but caught herself. “Positive.”

I stood up, shaking off my sweatshirt and grinning at her. “Once it’s on the list, it’s on the list. No take backs.”

She crossed her heart, her finger tracing over her chest and drawing my attention to her breast. She wore a simple white cotton t-shirt, but it hugged the outline of her body in the most delicious way. *Fuck*. I bit back some thoughts.

“Put it on the list,” she challenged. “It never disappoints.”

That's because Maddie never disappointed, but I wouldn't tell her that. Instead, I put our duet on the list at the bar and we awaited our turn. When our names were called, I took Maddie's hand in mine to walk her on stage. She halted, looking down at our hands tangled together.

I was done not touching her.



“Holy shit!” Maddie gasped, stepping off the stage and clutching her chest. “I don't think I've done a worse rendition of Summer Nights.” She clung to my arm as she laughed, her head thrown back with abandon. I hadn't seen it in a long time.

I laughed with her, patting her arm as it tucked into the crook of my elbow. “I think we might be a bit out of practice,” I admitted.

I put my hand over hers as it stayed on my arm, holding her there. If she noticed, she didn't react as she walked back to the table with me.

Cassie pinched her nose and shook her head. “What was that?” she murmured nasally beneath her hand.

Mitch passed me a beer as I sat down, and I let go of Maddie so she could sit too. “That was probably the worst performance of the night,” he said.

Maddie giggled, stealing the beer from my hand and taking a swig. Not all of her drink made it to her mouth, and she giggled even more as she tried to catch a trail of beer down her chin.

I passed her a napkin, smiling at her without realizing it, until she looked at me with a serious expression.

“Shit, did I get it all?” She wiped with the napkin in a wide circumference, smearing her lipstick, thinking I was smiling at her clumsiness. Cassie winced and turned Maddie toward her, licking her thumb and wiping Maddie’s face like a child.

“You’re going to be a natural mother,” Maddie mumbled between passes at her face.

I didn’t even bother hiding my smile this time. I watched Cassie’s thumb with envy as it ran over Maddie’s soft lips, remembering a time when she’d let me touch her like that. Though instead of cleaning messes, I was making them.

*“Look at my makeup, Wes! If I go home looking like this, my parents are going to know we were messing around.”* It was our last week together, the week after the cabin at South Lake, and we’d spent nearly every free moment with one another.



She'd snuck into my bedroom window that night, while my parents were asleep.

*"Don't be ridiculous, Mads. Your parents are sleeping,"* I'd assured her, smiling like a fool as I took in her tousled hair and swollen lips with the shining gloss now spread nearly to her nose. The eyeliner she'd carefully applied earlier in the day had smudged under her eyes, but fuck if she hadn't looked sexy. I'd have kept her like that forever if I could.

*"Mitch isn't sleeping! He'll know."*

*"So let him. I don't care. I'm not embarrassed about us."*

Maddie hadn't wanted to tell Mitch. She was afraid it would make things weird between all of us. She didn't want Mitch to get upset or be suddenly protective of her or hate me, but what she didn't realize was that Mitch would have been relieved. He'd always worried about what kind of asshole she'd end up with. Like Andy. And fuck if it wasn't my fault that she ended up with him.

Maddie leaned closer to me, her voice louder than she was aware, but the bar's music was too loud for Mitch or Cassie to hear. "Tree trunk, I'm drunk," she hummed.

Her breath was warm on my neck and it made me shift uncomfortably in my seat. If she got any closer, I was going to have to hide a hard-on.

It was the Fourth of July, all of us sixteen years old, when we got drunk for the first time. Cassie had stolen wine coolers from her mother and smuggled them in a backpack to the park

where Maddie, Mitch, and I met her to drink beneath a darkening sky.

We sipped the contraband while watching fireworks and laughing so loudly that the grand marshal of the show asked us to leave.

Maddie danced home in her short shorts and oversized hoodie, twirling with her arms outstretched and singing, “*Tree trunk, I’m drunk!*” at the top of her lungs. None of us could stop laughing.

We’d had so many memories like that growing up. So many firsts, so much silliness, laughter, and countless good times. Being home with my friends now and having the memories and the feelings come back—it was everything.

I’d spent nearly a decade surrounded by people who knew my career, my plays, my potential, but they didn’t know *me*. No one at this table tonight was going to ask me for an autograph. They were going to give me shit for it, as any best friend would do.

I leaned in to meet Maddie, my breath colliding with hers as she stared expectantly, waiting for me to say something. “I kissed you that night, but you don’t remember.”

Maddie’s eyes got wide. “Liar,” she hissed.

Laughing and tugging on her shirt, I pulled her even closer. I’d be lying if I said the flush on her cheeks didn’t give me courage. “I did, but you didn’t remember it.”

“Obviously,” she said, biting her lip and her eyes shining. “Tell me what happened.”

My mouth was so close to her ear that my lips fluttered against the shell. I felt her shiver, and I nudged my nose into her hair, catching the faint scent of something floral.

“You skipped home, singing that sweet little song, so happy. Everything in me wanted to take you in my arms and pull you in for a kiss, but you wouldn’t so much as stand still for one minute.” Maddie reached her hand out, steadying herself against my thigh.

“When we got back to your parents’ house, Mitch passed out and Cassie fell asleep in the chair by the TV. You still wouldn’t sit down. ‘I have so much energy,’ you said.”

Maddie leaned into me, the weight of her arm now fully supported by me. “I don’t remember.”

I ran a finger along her forearm. “I sure do. You were wearing those shorts—the purple jean ones that you cut from an old pair of pants. Your cut was off, and one side was a little higher than the other, but Jesus, if you didn’t look good in them.”

“Wes,” she whispered, her voice catching and her weight falling heavier on me.

“I finally got you to sit down on the couch. It was going to be my moment, Maddie. I had it all planned in my head. I’d sit next to you, put my arm around you, pull you close, and taste

your lips. I was certain they tasted like strawberries or cherries or whatever sweet flavor the wine coolers were.”

Her voice was hushed, her body pressed to mine. “Did they?”

My hand moved up and brushed a loose hair behind her ear. “I don’t know. You asked me to get you a glass of water and when I came back with it, you were asleep on the couch. I was a gentleman, so I kissed your forehead and tucked a blanket over you.”

Maddie sat up laughing and shook her head. “Wes! I was certain there was going to be more than a sneaky forehead kiss. You got me all riled up!”

*Good.*

The absence of her touch after she pulled away was immediately noticeable. The humid air of the bar was suddenly colder without the heat of her body curled into mine.

I placed my hand on the table, tapping my fingers. “I don’t think our timing was ever great.”

“Certainly not tonight. Did you hear us singing?” she asked.

I smiled, trying not to feel slighted that she pulled out of a moment I carefully crafted. Had that been purposeful? Or was she too drunk to notice what I was doing?

*Asshole.*

Maddie was treating me like a friend again. What the hell was I doing risking that? I’d been unfair to her once. I couldn’t

be again.

No, that was a lie. I *shouldn't* be. Everything in me knew I could.

## Fourteen

### *Maddie*

“**Y**ou look like shit.”

Cassie stared at me from across the table of the restaurant at The Chateau. She shook her head and fluffed her hair. “You certainly seemed like you had a good time last night. You and Wes looked... *comfortable*.”

I somehow raised my head and sat up, grimacing as I took a sip of coffee through my hangover and agreed.

“Yeah. When I saw Wes walk through the door, I was so afraid it was going to be a terrible evening.” I sighed, setting my cup down and rubbing my temples. “Then I realized I’ve spent all these years avoiding him just as much as I convinced myself he was avoiding me. And for what? Two weeks of our lives when we were eighteen years old? As if that should erase all of our history before then?”

Cassie nodded along, sipping her tea. “I’m glad you realized Wes is your *friend* first, Maddie. It never seemed right that you

guys lost touch, you know?”

I bit back the instinct to defend myself by blaming Wes for that. “We’re friends first,” I agreed.

She sat back in her seat, watching me. “And what about second?”

“Cassie,” I groaned, reaching for my coffee. “There is no second.” She narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms. I sighed, leaning in closer to her and lowering my voice despite no one sitting around us. “Fine. I don’t think there is a second. For him anyway.”

She thought for a moment. “Maybe ask him about it.”

“I’m not asking Wes about it.”

She crossed her arms over her belly. “Why not? You want to know what’s going on with the two of you? Ask him. Simple. You’re a grown-up. He’s a grown-up. Be grown-ups.”

I tugged at the edge of the white linen tablecloth, rubbing the fabric between my fingers as my stomach shifted wildly at the thought.

*Hey, Wes. Were we having a moment at the bar? What did it mean? Have you missed me as much as I’ve missed you? Do you ever think about me?*

“He probably has a girlfriend,” I said, working any angle to back out of having to be a mature adult about this.

Cassie shrugged. “Maybe, but he came by himself. You don’t know until you ask. Do you hope it was a moment

between you two?”

I pinched the tablecloth harder, avoiding Cassie’s eyes.

“So, that’s a *yes*,” she said emphatically. She reached for my arm and patted it. “Talk to him, Mads. What do you have to lose? Just keep your friendship first. You do that, and you’re good.”

“It doesn’t feel that easy,” I admitted.

Cassie’s face lit up as she spotted Diego coming through the dining room. “Babe!” she called, so loud that my head split in half.

She awkwardly pushed herself up from her seat to greet him. I stayed in place, giving a weak wave and watching the happy reunion. Diego was hard pressed to get time away from his practice but had taken half a week off for the wedding. This meant the world to Cassie, and the joy on her face showed it.

He joined us, attempting to pick off Cassie’s plate of food, but stopped when she nearly stabbed him with her fork. Eventually she relented though, probably because she couldn’t finish it all, and the two stole kisses between bites in a way that made me very much feel like a third wheel.

By the time Kate came into the dining room to greet us, the coffee had eased the throbbing in my head and it was more like a dull beat, rather than pulsing as if I were at an EDM club.



“Morning!” Kate chirped. She looked absolutely radiant in a white sundress and wedge sandals, her hair tied in a loose braid down her back.

Sam and Mitch were just behind her, arguing about something that left Mitch with a frown on his face, though not at all looking hungover. His mouth shifted into a smile as soon as he saw Kate.

“Rooms are ready,” Mitch said, wrapping his arm around Kate’s waist and pulling her in for a kiss. “Take your time down here. The staff will bring up your bags.” He checked his watch. “But we meet at the gazebo on the lawn in an hour to go over the next few days.”

Mitch and Kate rented out the inn for the wedding party. Truthfully, the inn needed the business. There were rumblings and rumors that it would shutter its windows after this season, which was part of why Mitch and Kate could afford this place.

Renting the inn was a thank you to everyone for taking the time to participate in the wedding, but it also made things logistically easier. My parents were staying at the inn as well, and Mitch had booked them a suite so Sam could stay with them, knowing that it would be difficult for Andy or me to keep eyes on him while we were on wedding party duty.

I wasn’t going to lie—the thought of having four nights alone in a room with clean sheets and other people cleaning up after me and feeding me was prodigious.

Mitch and Kate took Sam to check out the grounds, and Diego and Cassie went straight to their room. With his hand

cupping her ass, I doubted they would be relaxing up there.

I sat at the now empty table, finishing my coffee and wondering what to do with an hour to myself. There was a new romance novel that Kate suggested, *Heist of The Heart*, and I smiled into my coffee as I thought of cracking into it undisturbed.

“Is your coffee better than mine?” Wes asked from over my shoulder. “Because the cup I got from the kitchen tastes like mud.” He sat down in Cassie’s empty seat.

I held up my cup in solidarity. “Mud water for sure. Same kitchen.” I ran my hand unconsciously along my forehead. “Are you hung over?”

Wes shook his head. “Nah.” Grinning, he said, “But I can’t say the same for you.”

Swatting at him, I pressed my forehead to the table again and groaned.

He cleared his throat, his knee bouncing beneath the table. “I was thinking, Mads. I’m here. You’re here. We’re here without dates. Karaoke last night was fun, and we’ve both improved in our rhythm since high school. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to have someone to dance with at the wedding. Will you be my date to Mitch’s wedding?”

“*Your date?*” I squealed. My hangover may have made my brain feel like a balloon, but now I was at risk of floating away.

“Yeah. I’m here for the week, and I don’t want to have to celebrate on my own. So, will you be my date? I can’t imagine a more fun companion to torment Mitch with.” *That grin.*

I curled my lips into a smile. “Your date, hm? Well, I’ll need to check my social calendar, maybe cancel a few plans.” He laughed, and I bobbed my head, nodding. “Yeah, I’d like to be your date.” I raised my voice three octaves, throwing my hands over my mouth and widening my eyes. “I can’t believe *the* Wes Cohen asked me to be his date.”

He groaned, dropping in his seat. “Yes, well. I’m a local celebrity, in case you were unaware.”

“Should we throw you a parade? Name a street after you?”

He reached for his coffee. “They already did, remember? Three years ago, after we won the super bowl.” He took a very smug sip of that shit water beverage.

“Oh, right. I forgot. Wes Cohen Lane, that little gap of concrete between the Safeway and Goodwill.” *It’s good to keep him humble.*

Wes laughed and nodded. “The very one.”

A silence fell between us, a little uncomfortable, and I decided to just ask what needed to be asked. “As friends, right? The wedding date? We’re going as friends?”

He shifted in his seat, his hand on the back of his neck. I knew the move, recognized it, and knew he was uncomfortable. I wasn’t sure at which part, though.

“I live in California,” he stated, as if I’d forgotten. His residence had changed throughout the years, but I’d always known where he was. He wasn’t answering with a yes or a no. He was answering with the reality of the situation. It was answer enough.

“Friends, okay.” I confirmed, trying to hide my disappointment with an amiable smile. “I’m glad for it. I’ve missed being your friend, Wes.”

His expression was hard to read, but his message was clear. This week was a week we could have together, friendship first. It wasn’t terribly different from the circumstances of our time together ten years ago, except this time, I would not let myself get carried away in daydreams and fairy tales. I’d save those for romance novels. Maybe one day I’d get my own happy ending, but it wasn’t going to be with Wes, and it wasn’t going to happen this week.

“It’s not—I mean—” Wes took a deep breath. “There are things—”

I held up my hand and shook my head, rescuing him. “Last night, when I said whatever happened between us then, it’s not us now? I meant all of that. Ten years was a long time ago.”

“We’re different people now,” he mumbled, maybe more to himself.

It was true, in some ways. In other ways, it wasn’t. There was a lot about Wes that hadn’t changed, but ten years was a long time and the circumstances of our lives had shifted cataclysmically. That didn’t mean our friendship had to. We

made that mistake before, and I would not make it again. Friends first.

I dropped my hands to my thighs and rubbed my legs under my sweatpants before stretching. “Well, now that I’ve snagged a date for the hottest event in town, I can breathe again. I was fearful Mitch would relegate me to the singles table.”

Wes grinned. “I’d have been there with you.”

“Fantastic! We were destined to be stuck together anyway.” I stood up. “I’m going to take my things up to my room. I’ll see you in an hour for Kate’s instructional meeting. If you thought Mitch was a real pain in the ass with getting you to be his best man, just wait until you see Kate’s organizational capabilities.”

Wes stood up too. “Should I be worried?”

“Worried?” I repeated. “No. Terrified? Yes. Are you going up to your room?”

He nodded and gestured for me to take the lead. “Yeah. I’m going to squeeze in a meeting with my manager.”

I couldn’t at all relate to the words coming from Wes’ mouth, but I nodded as if I understood.

“Yeah, I hear you,” I said. “I’ve left my shop in the hands of two teenagers and a newly hired full-time employee who told me he wanted the job so he could move out of his mom’s basement. So, I think I understand the pressure to architect a career and keep yourself relevant.”

Wes chuckled as he followed me upstairs. “His mom’s basement, huh? And you hired him?”

I spotted room four and eyed my door. “What can I say?” I stopped and pulled out my key card, tapping it and opening my door as I held it, not yet going in. “I’m a recently divorced woman who wears sweatpants to work and has to set a reminder on her phone to drink water. Call me crazy, but I kind of like an underdog.”

Wes pulled out his key card and swiped the door next to mine. *Shit.*

“You’re not crazy, Mads. You’re a risk taker.” He grinned. “See you in an hour, neighbor.”

I was still standing in the hallway when his door closed.

## *Fifteen*

### *Maddie*

“Was it you?”

I stalked over to Mitch and thrust my finger into his chest. “Did you pick the rooms?”

We stood in the gazebo, waiting for the wedding party to join. I tried to keep my voice down, but it was proving hard.

“Hey!” he cried, swatting my hand away. “What gives, Mads? You’re going to break my sternum.” The smile on his face said all I needed to know, and I crossed my arms angrily as I glared at him.

“Mitch, why would you do that to me?”

“Do what to you?” Cassie asked, sauntering over as she rubbed her belly with one hand and held an iced tea in the other. For the first time since she’d arrived, she looked relaxed. *Diego.*

I looked around, making sure the space in the gazebo was clear of spying ears. “He put Wes in the room next to me.” I kept my voice low as I muttered between clenched teeth.

Cassie’s eyes lit up, and she squealed before high-fiving Mitch. Mitch smiled back, but only until he caught my death stare and dropped his smile.

“Listen, Maddie, it’s just how it worked out.” He shrugged apologetically, even though I knew he was sorry for none of it.

Cassie sipped her iced tea. “Diego and I are in room ten,” she said. She gave Mitch a sincere smile. “The only room with a jacuzzi and I’m not trading.” Mitch winked at her.

I groaned, half collapsing as I gripped the banister of the gazebo. “You know what, fine. I’ll stay, but goddamnit Mitch, no more surprises.”

“What surprises?” Kate asked, strolling up behind me. She stepped into the gazebo, wrapping her arms around Mitch and giving him a sickeningly sweet smile.

There was no way she didn’t know about the room situation. Kate lived for logistics and had no doubt planned the sleeping arrangements.

“Your husband put me in a room next to Wes.” I pointed at Mitch.

“He’s not my husband yet,” Kate said breezily. “Besides, he didn’t put Wes next to you. *I* did.” She lowered her eyes and glared at Mitch. “*He* put Andy across from you.”



“MITCH!” I loved my brother, but I really hated him too. “We are nearly thirty years old! You cannot be such an asshole!”

“What’s the asshole doing now?” Wes asked, approaching the group. Distracted by my rage, I hadn’t seen him coming.

*Jesus.*

“Nothing,” I blurted. “Just normal asshole stuff.” I looked out at the grass as staff set up tables and shuffled about. “They’re really working hard.” I wanted to talk about anything else. “What’s the final guest count?”

“I’m not an asshole,” Mitch defended. Kate shot him a look, and he grinned. “Maybe like, half asshole.”

“Who’s half an asshole?” Andy asked, coming up from behind me in a stealth attack of humiliation.

I groaned and covered my face with my hands. “Everyone, look at the tables!”

It was no use, and everyone ignored me.

“What room are you in?” Cassie asked Andy. Her tone was so uncharacteristically neutral with him that he looked afraid to answer.

“Are you asking me for real, Cassie? Or are you trying to fuck with me?” He thrust his hands into the pockets of his jeans and tapped his foot nervously. I almost felt sorry for him. She didn’t answer his question, but he sighed and said, “I’m in room five.”

Cassie tried to hide her laugh but failed. “That’s like, what? Across from room four?”

Andy nodded, unaware of what was so funny, but Wes immediately caught on and dropped his eyes to examine his shoes.

I opened my mouth to say something profane, but was interrupted by Amy, Kate’s other best friend and bridesmaid. “Hey.” She gave a shy wave.

Amy and Kate met in graduate school when they both pursued PhDs in neurobiology. Kate taught at the university and Amy was currently finishing her residency at the hospital. She was far too well put together and polite to talk about assholes, and everyone straightened up as soon as she approached.

“Hi, Amy,” I said, relieved to see a buffer. “Have you seen the tables?”

She glanced over her shoulder and smiled. “Yep. They look good.” Her purple maxi skirt had pockets, and she tucked her hands into them, rocking on the balls of her feet as she stretched her skirt around her.

“Okay then,” Kate said, clapping her hands. “Looks like we’re all here and can get started.”

The ice in Cassie’s tea clanked loudly in the glass as she took a long sip and brought it back down. I stared at her and gestured with my head for her to leave. I was not happy with Cassie at that moment, either.

“Wedding party stuff,” I grumbled.

She smirked at me. “I’m running the sign-in table. I’m part of the party too.”

I bumped her playfully with my shoulder. “Really stretching that one.”

She ignored me and stayed put before mumbling from the side of her mouth. “This is all so entertaining, Maddie. I can’t miss a moment of your discomfort.” She wasn’t exactly quiet, and I caught the smile on Wes’ face as he pretended to listen to Kate.

Running through a list of instructions about the timeline of events, Kate assigned everyone tasks to help with the planning and setup.

That afternoon we’d help with some arrangements around the venue. Tomorrow would be the combined bachelor/bachelorette parties. The day before the wedding would be last-minute details, helping to welcome arriving guests, the rehearsal dinner, and a sleepover of the bridesmaids with Kate and the groomsmen with Mitch.

What I wouldn’t give to be with Mitch, Wes, and Andy to hear how *that* was going to go.

The day after that would be the wedding. Then it was done. This hoopla would be over. I would go back to regular life. Wes would go home to California. Cassie would return with Diego to their life in Florida. Mitch would go on his honeymoon. This reunion would be over.

Kate checked her watch. “You have about three hours before I need you back for your jobs.” She narrowed her eyes at me. “Come back ready to participate and dressed for the day.”

I looked from left to right and pointed at myself. “Me? Did you direct that at *me*?”

Kate crossed her arms, and Cassie leaned into me. “You’re the only one in sweatpants.”

Surveying the group, I noted she was correct.

“It’s still the morning!” I protested, hoping my blush was minimal. Everyone stared at me. Only Andy had the decency to politely look away. Or maybe he was ashamed that he’d married me.

Amy checked her watch. “It’s eleven-thirty, Maddie,” she whispered.

“Jesus, Amy,” I groaned, throwing up my hands with the betrayal. “I thought we were friends.” I pointed out at the grass. “Seriously guys, those tables.”

Kate’s eyes didn’t leave me, and I kicked my toe against the wood planks of the gazebo. “Fine, I’ll change.” I pointed my finger at Amy. “Eleven-thirty still counts as the morning because it’s in the a.m.”

Amy gave a quiet scoff, very ladylike and under the radar disapproving, but I rose above it. Phase Two: Move On.

“I’m going for a run anyway,” I said casually. “I was only in these because I didn’t want to get ready before I worked up a

sweat.”

I didn't believe myself either when I said it.

“Still running?” Andy asked, mild surprise in his voice.  
“That's great.”

He probably thought I'd give up on it. I'd had many false starts to getting back into taking care of myself over the course of our marriage.

“A run?” Wes asked, butting in. “Can I join you?” He interrupted anything else Andy intended to tack on to his surprise and I looked between the two of them, trying not to read into whatever energy they were emitting.

This wasn't ten years ago, and neither man had wanted me in the end anyway.

“Uh, sure,” I said, because what else could I say to Wes when he invited himself along? “I'm pretty slow, though.”

Mitch laughed. “Sure are.”

I flipped him off. Then Mitch lifted his fist and used his other hand to pretend to wind it into a jack-in-the-box in which his middle finger popped up.

Kate, looking horrified that her nearly thirty-year-old fiancé was an immature baby, slapped his hand down. This caused me to point and laugh at him, matching his immaturity and not feeling the slightest bit embarrassed about it.

“Jesus,” Kate grumbled. “I'm having his baby and marrying into this family.” She rubbed her temples for a moment before

waving everyone away. “Go, do whatever you’re going to do. If you’re not back by two-thirty, I’m going to have a meltdown.”

There were polite nods of agreement and everyone shuffled out of the gazebo, splitting up.

“For someone who couldn’t have cared less about a wedding, you sure have adopted a real military precision with this wedding planning,” I said, catching up with Kate and looping my arm with hers.

She sighed, collapsing her head on my shoulder. “I didn’t think it mattered, but now that I’m in it?” She looked at Mitch, thirty feet away as he stood talking with Andy. “Turns out, it does matter.” The longing on Kate’s face was enough to make my jaded soul puke, but I kept my apathy to myself.

“You’re going to be my sister,” I squealed. “I always wanted a sister, and now I get one.”

Kate squeezed my arm in hers. “I love you.”

“Stop,” I mumbled. “I’m going to be a blubbering mess all week if you keep on with the love fest.” I paused, resting my head against hers. “But I love you too, and there’s no one I’d rather see my dumb, juvenile brother marry.”

“He is juvenile,” she agreed, and we both laughed.

Wes watched from the side, having the good sense not to interrupt the moment. He wasn’t far, but still out of earshot.

“I did that for you, you know,” Kate whispered, eyes on Wes now. He smiled back at us, unaware he was our topic of

conversation. “I know you’re acting pissed off when you’re actually excited, and I know this because I’m your best friend. You can’t fool me.”

“Shut up,” I mumbled.

“Andy was all Mitch, though, and I thought I was a step ahead of him and squashed that, but he was onto me and rearranged things at the last minute.”

“Juvenile,” I repeated under my breath.

Kate shrugged. “He’d describe himself as youthful.” She gave me a slight push toward Wes, nudging me. “Go work up a sweat with that tall drink of water.”

Wes’ deep brown hair and California tan were complementary to the plain white t-shirt and linen shorts he wore and it felt deeply unfair that he was so handsome in such a simple ensemble. There was no doubt I wanted to work up a sweat with him, though I preferred to do it in ways that didn’t involve running.

Giving him my best smile, I approached Wes with a deep breath. “Run now?” I blurted, the air in my lungs releasing with my awkward invitation.

Wes laughed and nodded. “Run now. I know a great trail around the lake. Right to the lookout. Maybe you remember it?” The smirk on his face lived with an air of cockiness, but I overlooked it.

“Not ringing a bell,” I said nonchalantly. “A lookout? Can’t say I’ve been.” Kate waved goodbye to us as we turned and

headed back to the inn.

Our pace was leisurely, the sun warm on our faces as we passed the busy staff and headed into the lobby. It was quiet and the front desk attendant looked up briefly, smiling before registering that we didn't need help and going back to the work in front of her.

"I'm certain it was you with me that day, but I can understand if you were a bit too *distracted* to take it all in," he said with a smirk.

*Arrogant.* Rightly so, but I ignored that fact.

I wondered what he looked naked now. He had *definitely* filled out. I frowned. I had filled out too, though not in as exciting of ways.

We passed through the lobby and up the stairs to the guest rooms, stopping at the end of the long hallway in front of our doors. I pointed at my room. "I'm going inside to change. I'll be out in a sec, but I need to find Sam and check in. Can I meet you in fifteen minutes out front?"

Wes nodded, his careful eyes looking me over with a thought I couldn't read. "Think of your betting terms for the run, Mads. Or we could just stick with tradition. Your call."

Shaking my head in disbelief, I gave a clipped laugh. "I'm not making a bet, Wes, and I'm certainly not making *that* bet again."

Wes' grin was mischievous and overly confident. "That's fine. We don't have to make a bet to go for a swim."



*What the hell does that mean?*

“What the hell does that mean?” I blurted, because apparently my brain decided a filter was unnecessary.

Wes chuckled, opening his door and not looking back. “Whatever you want it to mean, Maddie.”

What *did* I want it to mean?



There was no way to look sexy when sausaging oneself into spandex, but I did my best to make sure my ponytail was on point and doubled up on the deodorant.

My normal worries when going for a run revolved around my deconditioning, poor lung function, and whether I'd have to stop and pee along the way. Appearance was generally far down on my list of concerns. While Wes was my friend, and I shouldn't care *what* he thought of me, I cared. I cared very much.

I couldn't find Sam after getting dressed, despite searching the grounds, but it surprised me to step out to the main lawn of

the inn and find him standing there, talking animatedly with Wes.

I watched for a moment, wondering what on earth the two could discuss with such passion or when they had become such fast friends, but my confusion didn't stop the smile on my face. Cassie and Mitch were important to Sam. It had always felt a little sad to be missing Wes in there.

*You dummy. He's going to fly home in less than a week and not come back for another ten years. He's not your kid's new friend.*

Realizing my slip into fairy tales and daydreaming, I shut the smile down and approached them. My new automatic smile replaced sincerity.

"Hey, I was looking for you," I told Sam.

Sam stopped mid-sentence and nodded. "Yeah. Hi, Mom." He turned back to Wes. "I just can't believe it."

"Believe it," Wes said with a firm nod. "And believe it was as great as you'd imagine."

Sam thought for a moment, pulling his knuckle to his lips in contemplation. "I just don't understand *how* he got the car on the roof."

My eyes went wide, and I shook my head when I realized Wes was telling Sam about some of Mitch's high school pranks. "No," I interrupted, but the ears of my companions were impervious to my horror.

“That’s the magic of your Uncle Mitch,” Wes went on. “There was this one time, junior year, when he figured out how to jerry-rig the entire sprinkler system for the school and —”

“Okay!” I exclaimed, grabbing Sam by the shoulders and turning him around. “It’s time you go back with Grandpa and Grandma.”

Wes grinned. “Ask them about the sprinklers. They were not happy about that.”

Sam’s eyes shined, and he looked up at me, grinning. “Mom, Uncle Mitch was a *troublemaker*.” I wasn’t sure if it was disbelief or adoration, but I didn’t like the sound of the awe in his voice.

“Yeah, well. He’s still a troublemaker,” I mumbled.

Sam giggled, high-pitched and carefree, and it made me smile. Sometimes he seemed way older than nine, and other times, like now, I was reminded of just how young he was. “Bye, Uncle Wes,” he said, waving over his shoulder. “Thanks for the stories.”

*Uncle Wes.*

My stomach dropped as I turned back to Wes, ready to apologize for Sam’s eagerness for friendship. To explain to him that Sam had a big heart and loved the people in his life ferociously and there was no obligation or expectation with his salutation.

I didn't have to, because Wes had a grin on his face as he held up his hand and waved back at Sam, unbothered by his new title.

"Bye, kiddo. Anytime." He winked at me and mouthed *anytime*. I rolled my eyes and laughed, seeing Sam off. I'm sure Wes would be delighted to share precarious stories with my kid.

I walked back to Wes, shooting an elbow into his stomach playfully. "You didn't tell him anything about me, did you?"

Wes shook his head, his lips pinched. "Oh, no, Mads. No." My eyebrows shot up and he laughed. "I mean, I would have, had you not interrupted us, but no. I was still on Mitch."

"Just don't tell him any of Cassie's stories," I said with a sigh. She had the most nefarious by far.

I stretched my arm across my shoulder, then reached for the other as I gave my muscles a slow warmup. Wes watched, standing with his hands on his hips in his gym shorts and basic T-shirt.

The asshole was so fit that the two-mile run to the lookout was just a leisurely warmup for him. I, on the other hand, was still building up my mileage.

"As long as we take a break when we get there, I can make it the full distance," I said confidently.

Wes said nothing, just nodded and waited for me to finish stretching. He let me set the pace as we started along the trail, and unlike Mitch, he didn't push my speed.

I felt like I should be embarrassed about the slow jog, but I wasn't. Wes could always do that to me—settle me and make me feel okay with who I was. When I recognized the feeling, it shook me a little. It had been approximately ten years since I'd had that feeling with someone.

I cleared my throat, finally fit enough to engage in a conversation while jogging. “Thanks for being good with him, even if you were telling him shit stories he will someday throw in my face when he's getting into trouble.”

Wes gave a breezy laugh. “Come on. There's something special about that kid. He won't throw it in your face.”

We passed through the open path of the trail and headed into the tree covering of the forest around the lake. I spent most of that first half mile lost in Wes' comment.

*There's something special about that kid.* It warmed my heart to hear him say that, and not just in the same prideful way I received the compliment from strangers.

I shook my head, working the thought out. *Days. You have days with him, and then he's gone.*

“When I started running with Mitch, I could barely handle a mile,” I said, changing the subject as we hit our first mile mark.

I knew we'd hit it because we were rounding the dock near the cabin we'd rented that summer before college. The dock where Wes and I kissed. Where I had my first orgasm with

another person. Where this all started. The heartbreak. Where the heartbreak started.

My eyes looked at the dock as we passed it, but I said nothing. Wes looked straight ahead. I wasn't sure if he'd heard my comment, so I repeated myself.

“Huh? Yeah, Mads. That's a real achievement. You should be proud of yourself. Look at you now. You're making this look easy.” He gave a casual smile but said nothing else for the last mile to the lookout. I said nothing either.

The lookout was exactly the same as ten years before. It was a popular route around the water and summers were busy at South Lake. It felt strange to think we'd changed so much in ten years, yet the space around looked pebble for pebble the same.

Resting my hands on my head, I glanced around, catching my breath. “This is just like before.”

Wes nodded, breathing like he'd hardly stood up from the couch. “I like that. It feels familiar.” He paused, his hands on his hips as he took in our surroundings. “So much of my life has been moving, you know? Moving teams and states. Moving for games and playing all over. Moving for events or contractual obligations.”

“Why didn't you come back more? Why did you stay away for so long?”

I'd always wanted to know. It ate at my insides for years, made me feel so sad that I'd get sick to my stomach. It felt like

a rejection, and it was impossible not to take it personally.

Wes shrugged, looking out at the water and not at me. “I was busy.”

Busy. Busy with training, playing, and building his career. Busy with his parties and women and flashy accolades strewn about the media. I knew, because I’d followed along like everyone else, as much as I hated myself for it.

“Well,” I said, running my hand over my head to smooth any stray hairs. “I’m glad you’re finally able to take a break.”

In the last couple of days, there had been moments with Wes when time had failed to pass between us. Then there were moments like this, when he felt closed off and unavailable, reminding me again that the Wes of ten years ago and the man he was today weren’t the same.

I sucked in a breath, wiping my brow as I gazed toward the lake, matching his view. “It’s hot as Hades today,” I grumbled. Pulling the spandex of my sports bra beneath my tank top, I groaned. “I feel like I’m in a wetsuit. How is it you’re not even sweating a little bit?”

I looked him over, his dry shirt not giving a hint of exertion. “Do you wear prescription deodorant or something?”

Wes laughed, shaking his head and turning to face me, finally. “No, just abnormally lazy sweat glands.” He pointed at the water. “You can get in to cool off.”

“I’m not running back in wet clothes,” I said, crossing my arms and eyeing the water.

The gentle lapping of waves on the shore was melodic and the sun shining on the water made it a deep emerald color, more inviting than I cared to admit, but I wasn't prepared to wear wet clothing back and I *certainly* wasn't prepared to wear no clothing to get in.

Wes peeled off his shirt and tossed it to the ground. Despite my best attempt otherwise, my jaw dropped.

"Wes," I mumbled, ogling him without apology. "You've definitely grown up."

Football had been good to the man. His arms were lean and strong, his chest muscled with definition, and a flat stomach with waves for days.

He looked down at his torso and poked a finger into what little softness could be found near his obliques. "I've stopped rigorous training. This will all soften soon enough."

*Like hell it will, you bastard.*

Wes' definition of softness varied drastically from my own, but even in a doughy state, Wes would still be my favorite body to ogle.

"What are you doing?" My voice hitched as I watched him push down his shorts and briefs, getting bare ass naked as he kicked them into the pile with his shirt. Wes stood up like a man who led with confidence.

*And dick.*

I raised my head to the sky in prayer for the strength to not look at him. "You're naked."



I heard the low rumble of his laugh as he kicked off his shoes. “As the day I was born.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m not running back in wet clothes, either.” I heard the splash of his jump and caught sight of him just in time for his head to pop up from the water, a shit-eating grin on his comely face. “The water is nice, Mads. You should join me.”

My face raised to the sky again. There wasn’t a cloud to be seen. I shook my head furiously. “I’m good on dry land. Thanks, though.”

“Maddie, look at me.”

*Do not look at him! Don’t you dare!*

My eyes met him easily.

“Phase Two,” he said with a smirk.

## *Sixteen*

*Wes*

**I**t was a cheap shot, really, and despite integrity wagging a finger at my capitalizing on Maddie's personal goals, I still said it.

"Phase Two," I repeated to her bewildered face. "Cassie told me about your phases."

"Traitorous turncoat!" Maddie forced through a clenched jaw. "I'll be having a word with that gossiping woman soon enough." She sighed, crossing her arms. "It's not as pathetic as it sounds."

Maddie muttered on the shoreline, standing near a wall of rocks that dropped into the water from the tip of the lookout. It was the perfect jumping off point, if she could build a little courage to join me.

*Not courage, asshole. She's brave enough. She's too smart to join you.*

Maddie was reluctant to join me *because* of me, and she probably wasn't wrong in her resolve. A niggling pulled at me, unrelated to my desire to see this woman naked. Cassie had confessed her worry about Maddie, her fear that Maddie was depressed and stuck in a bad spot.

Maddie had a plan to get herself out of it, because that was Maddie. Determined, self-aware, and strong. To Cassie's defense, and perhaps worth mentioning to Maddie, Cassie had been hesitant to tell me what those phases were. Once I convinced her to let me help, Cassie and I decided to work together to assist Maddie where we could. She was our friend, and friends helped each other.

I also really wanted to see her naked.

"It's not pathetic," I comforted. "Cass worries about you. She wants you to move on in your life and feel good again." *Just be honest.* "I want you to feel good again too. So come on. Phase Two: Move On. Do the unexpected."

She tapped her foot anxiously, maybe considering it. "You just want to see me naked, Wes. It's been ten years, but I still know you."

I grinned, wondering how I'd let myself lose touch with this woman. "An unintended consequence."

She laughed, uncrossing her arms and visibly relaxing. I liked when Maddie let down her guard. She did it so easily with me, and it never ceased to make my heart sing. And as much of a dirtbag as I could be sometimes, her trust wasn't lost on me.

“I’ll look away.” She gave me a skeptical eyebrow raise, but I ran my finger over my chest. “Cross my heart.”

Maddie looked at me. *Really* looked at me, like she was assessing whether she could believe me. It didn’t take long before she decided. She held up a finger and twirled it in a circle. “Turn around.”

I did as she asked, my back now to her as I heard the quiet rustling of clothing hitting the ground. There was a muffled grunt, like she was wrestling with something, and it took all my restraint not to look at what it was. *Sports bra*, I assumed. Some things never changed. Chuckling to myself, I willed my dick to stay quiet with the thought.

A moment later, there was a small splash as Maddie lowered herself into the water. “Oh, this *does* feel nice,” she moaned, leaning her head back to wet her hair.

“Can I look now?” I asked, slapping my palm on the surface of the water to distract myself.

Maddie giggled, that flirty and full-throated way she’d done when we were teenagers and she was teasing me. Thankfully, I had the support and buoyancy of the surrounding water, because the sound made my knees a little weak.

“You think you can keep your hands to yourself, superstar?”

“Mads, you cannot let Mitch rub off on you like that,” I groaned.

She bounced her way to me, stopping when she was about a foot away and grinning in my face. “I like the nickname, and I

think it's going to stick." She leaned back to float, the peaks of her breasts rising slightly above the water, and I raised my eyes higher to look at the trees on the opposite shoreline.

"What's it like, Wes? To be famous?" she asked.

"I don't really consider myself famous," I admitted. "I'm an athlete, and that means only a specific subset of people care about me or what I do, and they only cared when I was playing. It's not the same as a movie star or anything like that."

Maddie spit a stream of water into the air above her. "You make the news, Wes. That's famous."

A half smile on my lips, I tried not to laugh. "You made the news once too, Mads."

"Wes Cohen, you shut your mouth." She feigned anger, but there was a playful tone beneath.

I cleared my throat, stretching my arms out as I ran them in a circle around me. "And I quote, 'Pictured: Maddison Sheffield, winner of the fifth annual pie-eating contest, clearing the contents of her victory after she defeats thirteen other contestants ranging in age from fifteen to seventy-three. Despite her official victory, controversy surrounds her win. Full story on page seven.'"

Her laughter was uninhibited and enthusiastic. "It doesn't matter! The rules were clear—if you didn't barf within ten minutes of the whistle, it counted as consumed. I puked after twelve minutes! I was the winner!"

I laughed with her, remembering that day at the Fourth of July carnival well. We were seventeen years old, and Maddie had been damned proud of her win. I had admired how she let the embarrassment of emptying her stomach roll off her like it was no big deal. Most teenagers cringed at any potential embarrassment, but Maddie seemed indifferent.

“I think my favorite part of that story is the piece you wrote in self-defense in the op-ed of the paper,” I said with fondness.

Maddie righted herself, the water up to her shoulders and her face serious as she pointed a finger at me. “I cannot believe the controversy followed me all summer long. The rules were crystal clear, and I *won*. Trevor Franklin can suck it with his weeks of complaints. He left me no choice but to clear the air and state the facts so everyone knew he was just a big fucking baby.”

Trevor Franklin was forty-six at the time and a father of four.

“Your journalistic integrity started young.”

She sighed, wading back toward the rocks, ready to get out. “Yeah, well. Much good that did.”

I stayed in, unsure if she was going to hoist herself out of the water with my eyes on her, but not wanting to turn away. She sounded so defeated.

“I don’t know, Maddie. You spend your days surrounded by books. That feels like it suits you. Do you ever write?”

Leaning her arms against the rocks, she looked at me from over her shoulder. “I’ve tried. I just can’t seem to motivate myself.” With that, she lifted herself up and out of the lake, a cascade of water falling in her wake.

Even the fastest of eyes couldn’t avoid the flash of her skin as she got out.

“It’s fine,” she said, her back to me.

Her full, plump ass was visible and shaking slightly with the movement of her hand as she brushed out her hair between her fingers.

“You saw me regurgitate an entire blueberry pie. There are far less embarrassing things than you catching sight of me naked. It’s just a body, remember?”

*“Relax, Maddie. They’re just bodies. Besides, I happen to like the way yours looks, too.”*

I’d said that to her ten years ago at the lake, when we went skinny dipping together. The memory stuck with me with a vividness so strong I could *feel* the same dancing of my stomach from that day when I thought about it.

I scrubbed my hands over my face before shooting my eyes to the cloudless sky above. Was this some kind of test? Her voice shifted as she turned around, and I clenched my jaw shut, determined to avoid getting caught in whatever trap she was constructing.

“Aren’t you curious, Wes?”

*Fuck.* I wanted to groan. To look right at her, take in the entirety of her body, note the differences, and commit to memory this shapely woman and her accompanying femininity.

I wanted to know the details of her curves, the lines of her form, the landscaping of her body. Desperately and with fervor, I wanted to look at every part of her. But I had crossed my heart, and for that reason alone, I kept my eyes on the sky.

*Maybe if I stare long enough at the sun, I can burn my retinas.* It might take such drastic measures to keep my word.

“You can look at me now,” she said, humor in her voice. She was standing fully out of the water, her tank top on and in her panties. She twirled her sports bra around her finger.

“Next time you want to convince me to do something by calling on my pathetic phases, just remember that I know you’re a good man, Wes Cohen. I can use that against you too.”

Her tank top was thin and nearly sheer, the pink tips of her perfect nipples standing in salute with the outline of her full breasts. I pointed at her. “That’s not exactly a conservative look.”

Maddie threw her head back, laughing with gleeful abandon. “Wes, I’m mean, but I’m not cruel. I’m well aware of what you can see.” She winked. “Come on, if we don’t get going, then we’ll be directly responsible for the aneurysm that Kate will have.”



“Yeah,” I mumbled, clenching my jaw. “Just, um. Give me a minute.” It took another five before I was calm enough to get out of the water.



I didn't know what kind of game Maddie was playing, but after a slow and mostly silent jog back to the inn, I decided I wanted in on it.

After all, I was a professional athlete. Trained, conditioned, determined, and focused. I could deal with pain, waiting, and delayed gratification. If anything, it was Maddie who should question what she was up to, not me. She was messing with the wrong man.

We said goodbye at our doors, each disappearing inside our respective rooms to clean up and get ready to meet the wedding party for an afternoon of tasks and errands for Kate and Mitch. Not that I was unwilling to help, but there were certainly other ways I preferred to spend an afternoon.

*Stop it.*

Maddie asked if we were attending this wedding as friends, and it was determined we were. I didn't know how to answer her when she asked, but her confirmation of friendship made sense. We lived in a strange space between friendship and an otherness that was undefined. Like if things had lined up a little differently, we might have been more.

In less than a week, I'd be back in California, though, and she'd go back to her life in Montlake. We'd be right back where we started—apart.

If we did this right, we could take our friendship with us this time. A comfort to the distance, and this time without the awkwardness of messy feelings between us.

So what kind of game was she playing at the lake? And why was it impossible to stop thinking about it?

I started the shower, desperate to get the lake water off of me, though maybe more desperate to wash away the images of Maddie's naked backside that flashed through my mind anytime I closed my eyes. And don't get me started on her peek-a-boo nipples. *Fuck.*

The last time I'd seen Maddie naked, she was hardly an adult. Her body held the thin girliness of narrow hips and raised breasts that were apparently not done developing if her current shape and size were to be considered. Now she was a woman. Round and full and thick in all the right places.

I turned the water temperature down in the shower, needing some reprieve from the heat rising in my body. Closing my

eyes, I leaned an arm against the shower wall and let the lukewarm water run over me.

There was a slight rattling sound, like pipes kicking in, and my head shot up. *The shower next door.*

Was Maddie in the shower too? Did our bathrooms share a wall? Was she just on the other side of this tile, naked and wet and running her hands over her slick body, lathering and scrubbing and... *Goddamn.* My dick hardened at the possibilities, immediately coming to attention with a throbbing rush of blood that my brain no longer needed.

All bets were off as I let any conscious thoughts go. It was just Maddie now, in that shower, and my mind racing with all the ways I'd be touching her if this fucking wall wasn't between us.

It didn't matter if the old pipes were simply cantankerous and aged, if she wasn't actually in the shower right now, or if she'd left her room long ago and was doing something else. In my head she was naked, wet, and just as eager as me to find relief buried in one another's bodies.

Running along my dick, I let out a groan as I imagined her soft skin, so supple and pleasing beneath my hands. The way her breath had hitched all those years ago when I touched her. A soft gasp between those full lips with the quietest inhales and forced exhales.

How she bit her lip in concentration when her climax was building, her thighs shaking as she'd squeeze them together tighter. When it was my face between her thighs bringing her

to the crescendo of her pleasure and she would squeeze so hard it hurt my head, but I didn't care. It only encouraged me to work my tongue faster, pump a finger into her, or lavish her with fervor until she broke around me and cried my name from her lips.

*"Fuuuuuuck,"* I groaned, the pain of the word echoing against the surrounding tile. "Fuck."

*Tap.*

My hand stilled and my eyes shot open.

*Tap tap.*

*Is that coming from the wall?*

I waited a moment, but the sound didn't come again. Uncertain, I stepped away from the wall, looking at it. The sound didn't resume, and I stared blankly. *What the fuck was that?*

Could Maddie hear me? Was she actually in the shower? Testing, I groaned again, this time quieter than when I'd been in the fever of my imagination.

Sure enough, a second later, there was a *tap*. It was heavy, not like a finger, but maybe more like a fist hitting against the wall. I balled my hand and hit it against the tile, testing the sound. Indeed, it matched.

*Holy shit.* Maddie could hear me. She was letting me know she could hear me. I wasn't sure how I felt about it. It wasn't exactly embarrassment—I was only a man, after all—but there

was something else beneath the curious turning in my stomach. Something that emboldened me.

What if she *liked* that she could hear me?

*Shit. What if she's crept out?*

I gritted my teeth, unsure of which direction to take this. In the end, it didn't matter. My cock had gusto, and it wasn't going to give me enough blood to my brain to fully think through this. Gripping myself with a tight fist, I picked up again, generous with my groans.

The sound came again, this time with a steadier rhythm against the wall. I slammed my eyes shut, counting between my own pumps. Groan. *Tap*. Three, two, one. *Tap*. Groan. *Tap*. Three, two, one. *Tap*. The pattern continued, building a carnality in me that was boiling with intensity. Was she touching herself too?

"Jesus," I hissed, pumping my hand faster with the gratification that was seconds away from releasing. Her face. Her smile. Her laugh. Her tits. Her ass. Her wide, cobalt eyes watching me as I fucked my hand, thinking about her.

The swirling combination sent me into a frenzy, and I exploded, coming with a force that pulled one final deep groan from my throat. "*Fuck.*"

Collapsing my arms against the shower wall and dropping my head, I watched the water run down the drain as I caught my breath. The *tap* continued, but the three-second intervals narrowed, coming faster now.

I pushed myself up, leaning against my arms as I pressed my ear against the wall, desperate to hear something, anything. My heartbeat pounded in my ears, the reverberations from my orgasm, but I shut off the water, standing in the cooling air and held my breath.

Then I heard it, small and far away, but there regardless. It was the low echoing of a moan, undeniably clear through the wall.

## *Seventeen*

### *Maddie*

**F**ire.

I was playing with fire.

But the heat felt so damn good that I hardly cared if it burned me.

In less than three days, something ignited within me that had extinguished years ago. For the last few years, I'd moped around in life, forgetting that I was a person, let alone a woman with needs and wants and desires. I'd been sad and depressed and unmotivated, but three days stole me out of the fog of three years and life felt lighter, playful, and exciting suddenly.

So yeah, maybe masturbating in the shower to the groans of my friend and former lover's own self-gratification was a little questionable, and maybe he'd be leaving in days anyway, but there was zero doubt in my mind that I'd progressed to Phase Two of my life.

And it felt fucking *good*. With it came a hope that I could one day make it to Phase Three: Begin Again.

It wasn't proving to be completely linear to move through the phases, but with each move forward came a renewed confidence that I *would* get there.

Except it wouldn't be Wes with me at that finish line, and the disappointment was heavier than I cared to acknowledge. I decided to avoid it instead, heading back to my room rather than joining the group for dinner after wedding prep.

Cassie, Diego, Mitch, Kate, Amy, and Andy had pushed two tables together in the restaurant, even though there was no other party at the inn tonight. Wes wasn't with them yet, and that settled my stomach a little.

Giving a wave as I approached, Kate leaned over Mitch and whisper yelled, "They're getting *drunk* and I'm going to murder them all because being pregnant and sober with drunk people is other level hell." Cassie nodded sympathetically.

Not that I wanted to question Kate's choices in life, because if anyone deserved to unwind with a casual murder it was Kate in her furor of wedding spreadsheets and tasks lists, but the wedding party was already small and we'd be hard pressed to find replacements.

"Your self-restraint is remarkable," I said with mild amusement.

Andy swatted his hand dismissively. "Sit down, Maddie. Join us." I noted the slurring of his words.



“Hey, Andy,” I said. “Having fun?”

He hiccuped and nodded, bringing a glass of something clear up to his lips and muttering incoherently. *Gin and tonic*, if he hadn’t changed his habits.

Spotting Wes coming down the hallway and heading toward the bar, I hastily pointed to my room. “You know, I think I’m going to call it a night.”

*Distance*, my brain yelled. *You need distance from this man!* Like a tiled bathroom wall...

Wes’ eyes met mine, and he gave a perfectly friendly smile. Nothing on his handsome face said *I know what you were doing in that shower*, but the pink blush across my cheeks certainly said it all.

Cassie reached for my hand, knocking Diego’s drink as he grabbed his glass quickly to save it. “Stay! Please.”

*Three seconds until he’s here.*

“Sorry,” I said apologetically. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

When I passed Wes to leave, I nodded, yes *nodded*, like we were business acquaintances. “Wes,” I said with diplomatic bravery.

He grabbed my hand, sending chills over me. His right hand held mine. His dominant hand. The hand that had surely been well used in his shower.

“Where are you off to?”

I didn't want to meet his look, but my body betrayed me and my gaze found its way to the deep brown eyes that felt like they could pull me in, only to sink me.

"I have some things to do," I said, shifting my look to the floor between us. As if my self-effacing would support the possibility that I *actually* had things to do.

He gestured to the table. "Come join us. You're supposed to be my date. I can't show up to all the events alone." His voice was soft, rolling over me with a gentle wave of comfort that was convincing enough to have me agree immediately.

"Yeah, okay."

*What was I thinking?*

That was easy. I wasn't thinking. My libido was, and that bitch was assertive.

Wes didn't drop my hand, clasp it tightly instead as he escorted us to the table. Cassie sat with her arms tucked over her chest, a smug look on her face. "Change your mind?"

"Shut up," I grumbled, taking a seat across from Andy and Mitch and directly next to Wes.

I crossed my legs, taking up as little space as possible. Meanwhile, Wes manspread as if he owned the surrounding air, his heavy thigh pressing against my leg like it was supposed to be in my jeans, too.

"Wes!" He didn't so much as look at me, but the uptick of a smirk rested in the corner of his mouth.

Mitch stood up, heading to the bar, and returned with two drinks before distributing them to me and Wes. He made sure everyone else had a fresh glass and cleared his throat. “I want to say something.”

Cassie groaned and rolled her eyes but put herself back together when Diego clucked his tongue and whispered something in her ear. That man kept my best friend on good behavior through methods I didn’t want to know about.

“You guys are our best friends,” Mitch said, his voice thickening with emotion as he scanned the tables.

Cassie leaned forward, grinning like a loon. She looked at me, and I narrowed my eyebrows. *How long until he cries?* It was a game we played as kids. Whenever Mitch was hit with an overwhelming emotion, he couldn’t contain himself. He cried.

It was probably why he spent so much of his life acting playful and goofy. *Any* overwhelm set him off. Tonight it was happiness, but it could be other emotions too. Anger, frustration, anxiety, or sadness, though we’d never tease him about those feelings.

She nodded briefly, then looked back at Mitch. He would not last long tonight.

“We couldn’t—we—” He choked for a moment, and Cassie held up three fingers. I shook my head, holding up five. He was cracking, but I gave it another five seconds before a tear spilled.

Mitch took a deep breath, his hands resting on his hips as he looked up at the ceiling. *Yes*, I internally hissed. *Draw this out*. One, two... At three, he started speaking again, his face still dry and Cassie dropped her head in defeat as she muttered, “Shit.”

“We couldn’t do this without you all, but more importantly, we wouldn’t want to. Thanks for being here with us,” he finished, his finger in a stealth swipe of a tear.

“Six seconds,” I said triumphantly. “I’m closer.”

He glared at me, then at Cassie. “For real? Are you kidding me? You’re still doing that shit?”

Cassie at least had the decency to look apologetic, but I held no airs about my pleasure with winning the game. “Six seconds, Mitch. I won.”

Mitch crossed his arms as Kate tugged on the tail of his shirt, asking Mitch to clarify. He kissed the top of her head and pointed two fingers. One at me and one at Cassie.

“These assholes love to bet on when I’m going to cry. I’m *sensitive*, and they think it embarrasses me.” He furrowed his brows, dropping his finger from Cassie’s direction but keeping one on me. “It doesn’t embarrass me.”

Wes’ hand underneath the table began running along the top of my thigh, the movement covert to those around us and stunningly bold. Wes didn’t look at me when he spoke.

“Given Maddie blubbers at weddings, I’d say the two of you are standing in glass houses, holding some serious stones,”

Wes said.

My jaw dropped as I stared at his profile. Wes refused to meet my eyes. *One of us has some serious stones, that's for sure.*

The movements of his hand were slow but firm. I squirmed in my seat, unsure if I wanted his hand to move farther up my thigh or completely off me.

Andy shifted uncomfortably in his seat, his eyes slightly bloodshot and his hand running through his short hair. “She doesn’t always blubber at weddings,” he mumbled. “She certainly didn’t blubber at ours.”

“I—” I shut my mouth, surprised by his contribution to the conversation and unsure how to answer. Wes shot a look at me, and this time it was me avoiding him as I stared at my drink in front of me. Picking up my cup, I drained it in one go, nearly slamming it on the table.

Everyone looked at Andy and me. Me and my ex-husband, poignantly sitting across from one another. My ex-husband, who maybe finally said something that showed some feelings about me after years of indifference.

Mitch slapped a hand on Andy’s shoulder and grinned big. “I cried enough for the both of us.” He clapped his hands together and gave a *whoop*. “Who needs another drink?” he hollered. Sometimes I really did love my brother.

The next round of drinks brought lighter conversation, but Wes stared at my profile off and on. I mostly ignored it.

Cassie and Diego stood up, announcing it was time to leave. Diego had more to drink than anyone at the table, as evidenced by the empty glasses in front of him, but he held his composure far better than his wife, who'd had nothing but iced tea.

“Woo!” Cassie sang, her voice high-pitched with delirium. “Get some sleep, bitches! Tomorrow we *really* party. Lake at noon, motherfuckers.” Diego wrapped his arm around her shoulder and escorted her out, probably to the relief of the bartender.

Andy stayed rooted in his spot, his face buried in his phone as he sipped another drink. Amy sat next to him, quiet but watching the table. Kate fell asleep with her head on the table a short while later. Mitch didn't notice, too engrossed in conversation with Wes as they joked and laughed, reliving some stories of the past that brought immense joy to their faces.

Resting my head in my hand as I propped my elbow on the table, I watched the two of them with deep and sincere enjoyment. They'd really been the best of friends growing up, and their reunion was probably the biggest love story of this wedding, although I'd never share that thought with Kate.

Every so often, Wes would squeeze my leg and give a quick glance at me, making my heart sink. After the lake swim and the shower, I wasn't sure what was going on between us.

*Nothing is going on. He's always been a hands-on friend.*

And Jesus, did I want his hands on me.

When Amy left, I decided to use the chance to leave as well.

Wes grabbed my hand as I stood up. “Leaving so soon?”

I felt it. The electricity between us. Dangerous. It was dangerous, and all logic in my brain told me not just to leave, but to *run*.

“Yeah, I’m pretty tired and I have an early breakfast with Sam before the lake tomorrow. I’ll see you guys. Don’t stay up too late.”

I heard Mitch’s protests on top of Wes’, but I ignored them both, hurrying out of the bar.

Distance. I just needed distance to get some perspective and settle these stupid, *stupid* hopes of more between me and Wes. We had days. *Days*. Then life would go back as it was.

Turning down the guest hallway. I hadn’t expected to run into anyone, and I *certainly* hadn’t expected to run into my ex-husband’s girlfriend as she wandered along, gently knocking on each door she passed, but when I looked ahead, there she was.

“Maria?”

Maria turned to look at me, her long dark hair loose around her shoulders and her makeup extra heavy with liner tonight. She wore a tan trench coat, closed at the waist with a belt, but she pulled it tighter when she saw me. “Maddie,” she squeaked.

More important than liking Maria, I *tolerated* her. I was realistic about the death of my marriage and she hadn’t held a

role in that—nor did I do or say things to make her think otherwise. Yet she was chronically nervous around me and tonight was no different. She looked like I'd caught her doing something illegal.

“Room five,” I said casually as I swiped my key.

“Th-thanks, Maddie,” she stuttered, clinging to her coat.

A trench coat in August. Andy was going to be very happy when he got back to his room.

“Have a good night, Maria,” I said politely, opening my door. She stood frozen across from my room, awkwardly waiting for a man we had in common.

“It's nice that he's back,” she said quietly, her hands running nervously over the hem of her coat. “Wes. It's nice that he's back.”

I stiffened, unsure if there was anything beneath her comment. “It is,” I agreed.

She hesitated, biting her lip as if she wanted to say something, but shook her head instead. “Sleep well, Maddie.”





If Maria really wanted me to sleep well, she would be more mindful of the fact that she was a fucking screamer, a fact I *never* needed to know.

A fact I wouldn't know if my goddamn brother hadn't thought it funny to assign my ex-husband the room across from mine. A fact I'd be oblivious to if I'd packed some headphones or earplugs or smothered myself to death with a pillow.

*"Sleep well, Maddie."*

I squeezed the pillow tighter around my ears. As tempting as it was to smother myself, I had too much to live for.

It didn't upset me much that Andy was having sex with Maria, or that she was enjoying his lovemaking so *thoroughly*, but I really, really didn't want to hear it first-hand.

The Chateau was a beautiful venue. The grassy knolls along the lake, the manicured lawns that stretched parallel to a lush and green woodland, the tranquility of gardens with their blooming flowers and propagating succulents.

But the inn was dated, with small rooms and thin walls, quarters far too close for comfort, and somehow I'd heard Wes jerking off *and* my ex-husband plowing his girlfriend today.

I waved my white flag, pulled on a sweater, ignored the fact I was still in my sleep shorts, and trudged barefoot down to the lobby.

The circular room was empty, a few low incandescent lights on, but the staff had long gone home for the evening. I heard

nothing other than the quiet steps of my feet as they slapped against the tile and echoed into nothingness. It was nearly one a.m., and the peace was welcomed.

The lobby was a comfortable enough space to wait out my ex's vocal girlfriend, and if I knew Andy as well as I thought I did, I could go back up in another ten minutes. I'd make it twenty to be safe.

The antique wingback chairs in the common space were comfortable enough, and I draped my legs over the side as I stretched out in one.

"Comfortable?" Wes asked, approaching from my left with cat-like silence.

"Jesus!" I cried, sitting up immediately. How a man of that size could move with such stealth was truly staggering.

Wes chuckled, low and rumbling, hitting me in a way that made me uncomfortable. "Just me."

He held his hands up apologetically before he plopped down in the chair next to mine, sighing as he stretched his long legs out in front of him. "Can't sleep either?"

He looked unfairly dapper in black pajama pants and a tight black v-neck that hugged his body far too kindly.

I crossed my arms, mumbling from the side of my mouth. "A bit difficult at the moment."

Wes' brows drew together with concern, and he reached to touch my arm. "Are you okay?" He must have heard them, too.

I wasn't sure how to answer that. "Yeah, I am. It is what it is." I shrugged, like I'd done so many times over the last few years. You'd think my shoulders would be cut and ripped by now. Instead, I just had worse posture.

"It's okay if you're not okay, Maddie," Wes said softly. "You were married for nearly a decade. You have a child together. You... you loved each other." He swallowed, dropping his eyes to his hands as they rested in his lap.

I nodded thoughtfully, though I wasn't sure how I felt about Wes' observations. "You want to go for a walk?"

He looked at me, surprised. "A walk?"

"Yeah. I could use some air," I said, getting up and stretching. "Andy will be done in another ten minutes, but I was going to give it twenty to be sure."

Wes raised his eyebrow, standing up. "That's all?"

"We can't all be superstars," I said, elbowing him playfully. "Come on."

The temperature was warm and the air slightly humid as we made our way across the front lawn to the path running along the lake. It was dark, but a full moon in a clear night sky cast enough light to illuminate our way.

The glow of lights from the inn faded behind us as we strolled through the quiet, not saying anything for a while, the gentle rolling of the lake the only sound around us.

"We can probably turn back now," I said, breaking the silence. I didn't want Wes to feel obligated to stay too long

with me, and by the time we got back, Maria would have likely quieted. If not, I could always just sleep in the lobby.

“Just a little longer,” Wes said, his voice soft as he took my hand. “We’re almost there.”

“Almost there?”

He smiled and nodded. “Yeah, Maddie. We’re almost there.”

## *Eighteen*

### *Maddie*

**S**taring at my past, the dock looked endless as it stretched above the dark waters of the lake.

My stomach rolled like the lapping waves against the shoreline, but I still followed Wes as he headed toward it.

“Here, huh?” The amusement in my voice was clear, and Wes grinned as he pulled me along.

The planks of wood, slightly frayed with wear and age, were rough under my bare feet. I was careful to lift them, rather than shuffle and get a splinter.

“It’s nice out here, Mads. Really peaceful,” he said, as if I didn’t understand his intentions. Which, maybe I didn’t. Maybe he wasn’t bringing me out here with any purpose other than talking.

*But please tell me your intentions are naughty,* everything in me cried with embarrassing desperation. I kept it to myself.

*Days. You have days. That's it.* My stomach roiled at the thought. Things couldn't just be casual with Wes, could they? They certainly weren't ten years ago.

*That was ten years ago,* my desire argued. We weren't the same people anymore, and I wasn't young and naïve. I'd seen firsthand the truths of love and adult relationships. A seasoned veteran of heartbreak and disappointment, I could steel myself to the realities of being with Wes for a few days and then saying goodbye.

I had a life waiting for me. To start living. To move on. To begin again. Wes wasn't a beginning. He had a limited warranty. This thing between us *would* work, guaranteed, but once it expired, I would be out of luck.

*Friends first.* I knew the deal. Could I live with the consequences? If I didn't expect anything more than he could give, unlike last time, we could stay friends.

Right?

*Don't fuck this up.*

But I probably would.

We stopped halfway down the dock and Wes sat, crossing his long legs underneath himself and patting the spot next to him. "Have a seat with me."

Blowing a hair out of my face for dramatic flair, I muttered as I sat down. "Don't think I'm not onto you, Wes Cohen. You may be a superstar, but you're not suave."

He laughed, bumping his shoulder to mine and lowering his voice conspiratorially. “I’m hiding nothing, Maddie. I’ve been thinking about this dock since we passed it on our run.”

*That’s all? I’ve been thinking about this dock for ten years.*

“Oh, yeah. I suppose we passed it, didn’t we?” I wasn’t fooling either of us, but Wes had the good sense to let it be.

There was a comfortable space of silence between us as we stared out at the lake, a dark expanse of undulating water that somehow felt like a buffer between us, despite our position over it.

As if having a similar sense, Wes pulled his feet out from under himself and dropped his toes into the water. I mirrored him, surprised by how cold the water was when I wasn’t standing under the high noon sun.

“You didn’t cry at your wedding?” he asked after a minute, his foot swirling in the calm water.

The question caught me off guard, and my reaction was to choke on my spit as I swallowed quickly. “I’m sorry?”

“You didn’t cry at your wedding?” he repeated, this time turning to study my face. Had it not been so dark, he’d have found my cheeks to be a bright red.

I *hadn’t* cried at my wedding. Me, the blubbering mess for anything romantic, couldn’t be bothered to muster tears at her own wedding.

Andy and I had gotten married in a hurry once he was finally back in Montlake. It was a small ceremony at city hall,

with a dozen of our closest family and friends joining us, and only one noteworthy exception.

While it was simple, it was lovely. Remorseful and repentant, Andy tried really hard to give me a beautiful wedding. Sam was only five months old, and I leaked breast milk through the bodice of my dress. But otherwise, it had been an admirable attempt at a joyful event.

“It was actually a charming wedding,” I said, getting the courage to look at Wes. His absence had felt like a deep cut, and I wanted him to know it. “You didn’t even respond to the invite.”

He opened his mouth to say something, then closed it and shook his head, looking back at the water.

I wasn’t going to give him an out, so for once I kept my mouth firmly shut and waited. It didn’t take as long as I’d expected before he answered me.

“I knew it was going to hurt you when I didn’t show up, but I also knew it would kill me if I did.”

My mouth fell, unprepared for his answer. It stole my breath, and maybe the flow of blood to my brain, because all I could do was stare at him.

“That wasn’t how any of it was supposed to go, Maddie. None of it. You weren’t supposed to get pregnant and drop out of school, marry someone like Andy. I don’t know what I thought your future was going to look like, but it wasn’t that.”



I couldn't do anything other than laugh. "You think it's how I thought it was all going to go? Never in a million years did I think I'd end up like this." I sighed, dragging my feet back up and tucking my knees under my chin. "It wasn't all bad."

"You loved each other, though, right?" There was an eagerness to his question that I recognized as a need for comfort. He wanted to know that things hadn't been total shit in my life, and they hadn't been.

"We did," I answered softly. "Andy wasn't bad to me, and I wasn't bad to him. I still love him, and I'm grateful for what he gave me with Sam. We co-parent well, and I hope he finds sincere happiness with someone. It wasn't me who could give it to him, and I wasn't blind to that."

Wes placed his hand on my forearm, squeezing tightly. "It's not because of you, Maddie."

We were wading into a swamp of vulnerability and sadness. A pit of pitiable stories and memories, but from Wes, I didn't want to hide.

"I know that. It's hard not to feel like it was me, though. Like I should have been able to make it work. I spent nearly ten years with someone who was with me because he had to be, not because he wanted to be, and that does something to a person." I stood up, brushing off my shorts. "It's really late, Wes. We should get going."

It wouldn't be long before dawn broke through the blanket of night sky, shooing away the stars and bringing with it the

sun. A new day. A new beginning. At that moment, I needed a fresh start.

Wes didn't stop me.

"I don't regret how things turned out," I told him, staring down at his thick brown hair and remembering a time when the need to run my hands through it had felt as desperate as the need to breathe. "Just like I don't regret our time together ten years ago. I know I sound pathetic when I talk about staying with someone who didn't want me—"

"Maddie," Wes interrupted, but I cut him off.

"It's okay, Wes. Really. I know how it sounds, but I need to say this because it's you I can thank for many of the good things in my life." That seemed to surprise him, and he watched me carefully.

"You taught me to say what I want—to say what I need." The blush on my cheeks burned hotter. "I know it was in the context of a physical relationship, but that helped me a lot. I lost my voice for years due to fear, but I found it again, and it helped me to leave by remembering to say what I needed. So, thank you."

I had intended to keep that to myself, but it seemed like something important to give him. It was also true. There had been many positive benefits to having Wes as my first lover, but most notable was the comfort and confidence he helped me to explore and embrace.

I lost it for quite some time, but when it came back to me, it gave me enough power to walk away from the silent acceptance of a marriage that was too bad to stay, but too good to leave.

“Anyway, thank you,” I said again, stewing in an awakened feeling of awkwardness.

Wes stood up, his eyes not leaving me as they brewed something consuming. Forget the dark waters of the lake. It was his eyes I could drown in. I threw my thumb over my shoulder and began walking backward toward the beach.

“You can stay. I’m fine walking myself back. Goodnight, Wes.” I spun on my heels and prepared to hurry off, but his voice, deep and gravelly, stopped me immediately.

“Maddie.”

*Do not turn around. Keep going.*

My stubborn legs didn’t listen, rooting me in place despite my brain’s frantic demand otherwise.

“Look at me.”

My eyes squeezed shut, but only for a second as I turned to face him. I opened them to the shadow of a man, larger than life in my world, stalking slowly toward me. A fervent look in his eyes and intensity scrawled on his face. I said nothing to stop him.

Within two seconds, he was standing in front of me, so close I could feel the heat of his breath on my skin as it

pebbled beneath his rasps. His hand came under my chin, tilting my face to look at him.

“Say what you want. Say what you need. Right now, Maddie. Here.” It was an ardent request, the longing unmistakable, and my knees went weak with his words.

*Everything, my body screamed. I want and need everything from you at this moment.*

I didn't have to say it, not with my words. My body took over, leaning until my chest pressed to him and his lips were an easy reach to mine. The rising of his chest increased in pace the closer I moved, and the hitch in my breath was impossible to hide.

“Say what you want, Maddie.”

Everything in me collapsed. Any worry, any care, any apprehension about life days from now—it ceased to exist. The only awareness I had was of the inferno ignited in my core, blazing with heat and intensity impossible to extinguish.

“I want you.”

The curl of his lips was wolfish, as if these three simple words would unleash something untamed and primitive. “Thank god, Maddie, because I can't stop myself.”

His hand wrapped around the back of my neck to bring our mouths together in a collision of desire, built through years of absence, ignored and unattended, finally freed with the fever it deserved.

Wes' lips—full, firm, and familiar—commanded mine with little restraint as his tongue traced the seam of my mouth, gaining entrance with ease. Our tongues tangled—pressing, pushing, and pulling—exploring and revisiting the most delicious of memories. It wasn't a gentle reintroduction. It was messy, passionate, and craving.

The throbbing of my need heightened every movement and thrust of his tongue in my mouth. Enlivened, I pulled his bottom lip between my teeth and sucked on him, winning a groan from his throat, guttural and pained. My knees sank as I fell into him, unable to hold myself up through my shaking legs.

How many times had I thought of this moment? Having this again? It felt like a dream, and yet the most real moment of my life.

His hands dropped to cup my ass, lifting me to the tops of my toes as he groaned in my mouth, nuzzling his face in my neck and burying his lips on the soft skin of my nape.

“Wes,” I moaned, dropping my head back to give him better access. His hands gripped tighter along my ass, pulling my shorts up above the cheeks, and he groaned again as his fingers squeezed into my bare flesh.

“Jesus, Maddie.” His hands palmed me so forcefully I was certain he'd leave bruises, and *fuck* if I couldn't wait to see the proof of his vigor in the morning. “Your ass is divine. This morning at the lake...” He abandoned my neck, pulling away

to catch my eyes. “I thought of you pulling yourself out of the water when I jerked off earlier.”

Letting go of my ass with one hand, he traced a finger along the side of my face and down my jaw. “You knew that, though. You heard me, didn’t you?” I bit my lip, nodding at the memory, and he grinned. “I heard you too.”

“Wes,” I whispered, smashing my lips to his. “I thought of you. I thought of all of you. Of touching you. Of you touching me.”

Without a wall between us, there was nothing stopping our pleasure from combining. Instead of pressing my palm against a slick tiled wall, I slid my hands along his hard, muscled body. Wes’ chest was unreal, solid and thick, his torso and abdomen no different, and dear lord, neither was his cock when I ran my hand over his length.

I could *feel* his excitement, both in energy and response. His cock was hard and full beneath his pants and the sensation of him in my hand sent an electricity through my body. Was his dick bigger? His dick was definitely bigger.

He placed one hand over mine as I slid along him, moving together and encouraging me to grip him over the fabric of his clothes. “Do you feel what you do to me, Maddie? How much I want you?”

“Yes,” I whimpered, moving freely over him.

He stilled my hand, lifting it and placing it just beneath the waistband of his pants as my palm met the skin of his cock. I

gripped tightly along his shaft, running my hand over the smoothness of him and feeling the heat as he pulsed beneath my grasp.

“You feel so good, Wes. I missed this.”

He pressed his forehead to mine, and I closed my eyes, licking my lips as I let my hand run over him.

“Do you want me, Maddie?” he whispered, shaking his head against mine ever so gently. It was an unneeded question. Everything in me wanted him with a charge so electric I almost couldn’t take it. With my heart pounding wildly, I could only nod.

“Can I feel how much you want me?” His finger hooked at the band of my shorts. Not in a threat, but in a promise—the most glorious of promises, an offering of delectation.

“Please,” I begged. “I want your hands on me.”

He smiled, his forehead still pressed to mine as he dropped his hand into my panties and met the wetness of my center. Moaning as his fingers found me, I felt his dick twitch in my hand.

“You’re so fucking wet for me. It’s beautiful.”

His breath caught ragged in his throat as the thrusts of my hand picked up to match pace with his fingers circling me. My hips gyrated wildly, instinct pushing me harder against his hand to find the right pressure as I jerked him off at the same time.

“So. Fucking. Beautiful,” he intoned. “I want to taste you. Can I?”

“Oh god.” I shuddered at his words, excitement pulsating through my body at the thought of his mouth on me. “Yes, *please.*”

Dropping to his knees, Wes grinned up at me. “So polite, Maddie. Such good manners. Tell me what you want.” He tugged playfully on my shorts, waiting for me.

The anticipation of his mouth, his tongue, his lips, his *words*. It roused each nerve in my skin, as if every possible feeling could be touched by him, caressed, and brought to life.

“I want to come with your mouth on me,” I answered, any shyness long since gone and a confident woman stepping forward. “Then I want to taste you. I want your cock in my mouth until you come, and I want to swallow all of you until you’re panting my name.”

“Christ.” He pulled my shorts down and buried his face between my thighs, inhaling deeply.

Wes used his fingers to spread my pussy, his mouth finding my clit. Licking and sucking, he pulled me into his mouth as my hands threaded his hair, tugging him closer so I could grind against his face. “I could die smothered in your pleasure and forever be a happy man,” he mumbled against my pussy. “Heaven.”

I moaned, overwhelmed by the intensity of his mouth, but it wasn’t long before my sensitivity acclimated and the eagerness



of his sucks and tongue strokes shifted to a patterned motion, building a gratification so strong that I had to grip his shoulders fiercely, otherwise collapse.

“More,” I gasped, my eyes rolling up to the sky. It wasn’t the stars in the darkened night that I saw, it was the stars of pleasure dancing behind my eyelids as I focused all of my awareness on the rising bliss between my thighs. “I need more.”

Wes grunted, his hand joining his mouth as he slid two fingers into me. I whimpered, my jaw clenching as my thighs began to quake around him.

“Yes, like that.” It was nearly a sob, the concentration of delight overwhelming me now as everything in my core tightened and my legs went weak. Wes used his free hand to wrap around me, steadying me against him as I dug my fingers into his arms and murmured incoherently.

Sensing my edge, Wes slid another finger into me, pumping faster as his tongue pressed hard against my clit. “Jesus,” I cried. “Wes!”

My body shook, the waves of my climax beginning in my pussy and radiating through the entirety of my body. Everything in me trembled, and I fell forward, collapsing over him as the sensations overtook me. I rested on him for a moment, trying to compose myself, unsure if I would ever put myself back together again.

“That was stunning, Maddie.” Wes pushed himself up, pulling me with him as he whispered in my ear. “Fuck, you

take my fingers so well. I can't wait to watch you take my cock, too. Watching you come is divine. You're so good at it." He sighed, sucking his fingers into his mouth. "That was maybe better than coming myself."

His words buoyed a desire to please him, to reciprocate. Not because of obligation, but because of want and need. I wanted to taste him, like he'd tasted me. To know what his flavor was. To know the sounds he made when he found his release. Ten years was a long time, and it was all probably different now. I wanted new memories with Wes. New sounds and touches and tastes and sights.

I dropped to my knees, sliding his pants down with me. "Your turn," I mumbled, releasing his perfect, thick cock as I grasped the base of him.

"Yeah, I won't say no to that," Wes said with a chuckle, fisting his hands in my hair and tugging with the right amount of force to make me ache. I whimpered with the sting of it, and he grinned down at me. "Fuck, Maddie." His words were hissed, elevated and craving. "Do you like that?"

I kept my eyes locked with his, nodding as I licked him from his base to tip.

Wes dropped his head back and groaned, then he looked at me again. "Show me how much you like it. Touch yourself for me."

It didn't matter that my body was sensitive from the climax he'd given me moments before. My hand did as he asked, one grasping him, one stroking my clit. Holding his gaze, I opened

my mouth and took as much of him as I could in one, long bob.

“Jesus, that’s sexy, Maddie. Goddamn. You look so good with your hand on your pussy and my cock in your mouth.”

He slid forward, encouraging me to take him deeper. With his hands wrapped in my hair, he guided my head as he slowly fucked my mouth. The leisurely roll of his hips was deceptive, and despite the gentle pace of his thrusts, each movement shoved him deeper into my throat, choking me.

His breath quickened and he clenched his jaw while tightening his grip on me. He was going to come, but I wasn’t done yet. I pulled back, releasing him with a *pop*. Wiping the corners of my mouth, I grinned as Wes groaned and shifted his touch from the acute pull of my hair to a gentle caress.

“You’re stunning, Maddie. Such a good girl for me. You’ve always been such a good for me. I missed you.” His fingers combed through my hair, admiration radiating from his tender gaze. His lips curled into a smile as he traced a finger down my jaw. He spoke so softly. “Now finish what you started and let me watch you swallow me down. Don’t fucking stop again.”

*Fuck.* The way Wes made me feel... Desired and powerful and beautiful. Like everything I was doing pleased him, and God, how much I wanted to please him.

Licking him again, I brought my mouth over the head of his cock, taking the crown of him into my mouth as I swirled my tongue around him, flattening it against the underside of his

head and pumping the length of him with my free hand. He groaned, his hips pressing forward, encouraging me to take more.

I did, until the tip of him hit the back of my throat again. I didn't gag or choke this time, and he hissed with the depth. "Fuck, that's good. That's really good, Maddie. You're so good, baby. Keep doing that."

I moaned, picking up speed as I ground into my hand with his affirmations.

"Oh, fuck. You're going to come again." The realization left his mouth with a pained groan of approval, and I mumbled agreement, his cock stifling any audible answer. With my mouth around him, I gave a muted moan as my second climax found me. "God, take what you need, Maddie. Make yourself feel good. You're making me feel fucking phenomenal."

His hand wrapped tighter in my hair. I brought my mouth up to circle his head again, my hand covering the base of what I couldn't fit with a tight grasp. Then I repeated it all. Again. And again. And again.

I sucked him in, licked him, flicked him, flattened my tongue over him, and brought him deep into my throat. I moved faster with each pass as his breath picked up and his stomach muscles tightened. When I felt the exhale of his breath before he came, I pulled lightly on his balls. His eyes shot open with the movement and he cried out, "Oh, Maddie, fuck!"

I took him all, accepting everything he had to give as I swallowed every last bit of his pleasure after he'd given me so much of my own.

Rather than having me stand to join him, Wes collapsed next to me, hovering on his knees for a moment before pulling my mouth to his. Our lips crashed in a combination of one another, and there was nothing more delicious.

"Maddie," he mumbled between broken pants. "You're incredible." Our lips smacked with wet and noisy passes, tongues wild and tasting of one another. "I missed you so much."

The fervor at the start of our kissing shifted to a slow and gentle enjoyment of one another. No longer rushed, but still with a hunger between us. It was entirely possible that I could kiss him forever.

Except it wasn't possible. We had this moment, and few after.

But it was something. For ten years, we'd had nothing. Now we had something. It had a best by date, but I could live with that, because a few days with Wes was better than all days without.

"Stay with me tonight," Wes said, breaking our kiss. "Come back to my room and stay with me. Please, Maddie." The pleading of his eyes looked like he truly didn't think I would. The fool.

“Of course,” I said, pulling him to stand with me. “But are you only asking because there’s like, three more hours until the sun comes up?”

He squeezed my hand and kissed the top of my head. “I’ll take all the time I can get.”

*You and me both.*

“Me too,” I said. This time knowing I could be okay with that.

## Nineteen

*Wes*

“**Y**ou’ve learned a few things,” Maddie said, a light skip in her step as she clutched my hand and led us back to the inn. “I’m not surprised, by the way. Just... happy to receive the benefit of your experience, I suppose.”

I smiled to myself, pleased that *she* seemed pleased. “I had a pretty solid foundation to start. Find me a person with a better first partner. I dare you.”

Maddie’s hand shot to her mouth, and she stifled a laugh. “I was *terrible* at everything that first time.”

I shrugged, squeezing her hand. “Not *everything*,” I emphasized. “And you were a fast learner. But boy, Look at you now! You touched my balls. That’s definitely moving to an expert level.”

Her shoulders shook with silent laughter, and I enjoyed the vibrations as she tucked into my side, stumbling slightly with

her amusement. She threw up her free hand to cover her face between giggles.

“I’m happy to receive the benefit of *your* experience, Maddie,” I said, tugging her hand away from her face. That didn’t quiet her laughter, but I didn’t want to, anyway. I liked the sound, and with silence around us, the mellifluous bouncing of her giggles was more like a roar than a chuckle.

It was nice to see Maddie relaxed. Happy. Content. This was the Maddie I grew up with.

Neither of us spoke for the rest of the walk, and the air, empty of words, was comfortable. Knowing she would stay with me left me with no panic of a goodnight I didn’t want to say, a moment lost that we couldn’t get back. I wasn’t here long, but I wanted Maddie for every minute I could have her.

The glowing lights of the inn, illuminated and imposing, took view and Maddie squeezed my hand tighter. “I know at the dock I said I’d walk back by myself just fine, but I was lying. I really wanted you with me, Wes.”

Her sweetness knew no bounds. This woman may as well be molasses. When Maddie felt something, it was sincere, genuine, and authentic. Her heart was candied—coated in honey and thick with a syrupy good nature. Of course, I wouldn’t have let her walk back by herself, a lonely path that neither of us wanted. I wanted to be with her too.

“I was afraid something would eat me if I was unaccompanied,” she went on, patting my ass as she leaped to



the front steps of the inn, taking them two at a time and looking over her shoulder toward the dark woods.

I scoffed, feigning offense. “You mean to tell me you weren’t lying because you wanted *me*? You just wanted a chaperone?”

She shrugged. “It’s dark out there, Wes. Thank god for the moonlight.”

“You know,” I said, following her up the steps. “The moon steadies and stabilizes the earth. Helps it from being all wobbly.”

Maddie chuckled. “Wouldn’t want a wobbly earth.”

“No, we wouldn’t,” I agreed. “That stabilization regulates all kinds of important things—the climate, day and night, the tides.”

Maddie stared at me for a second, her face questioning. I ran my hand along her arm and gave her a saccharine smile.

“You’re like the moon in a lot of ways, Maddie. You make things feel less wobbly.”

Her smile started slowly, until it grew wide enough to cover her entire face. The radiance of it nearly blinded me, but I couldn’t take my eyes off of her.

Maybe it wasn’t fair to tell her that. To tell her any of my feelings for her. Maybe it would be confusing or messy for two people on limited time, but with Maddie, I never wanted to hold back. Judging by the look on her face, I wasn’t sure if she wanted me to, either.

She wrapped her arms around my neck and pressed her lips to mine, soft and tender as her words fluttered between us. “Wes, you make me wobbly.”

*And you steady me.*

“I can really make you wobbly,” I offered, pulling her closer and leaning to whisper in her ear. “Take you out of this world.”

Maddie laughed, uninhibited and free, then cringed as its echoes bounced between the tile and walls of the empty and silent lobby. “Come on, superstar, let’s go create a supernova.”

“We’re so bad at this,” I mumbled, pulling her toward my room.

“We are,” she agreed, half a step behind and trying to keep up with my excited pace. “But there are some things we’re very good at, Wes.”



“What do you want, Maddie?” I asked, closing the door behind us and watching as she took off her sweater. “Do you want to sleep, or see the stars?”

She stood several feet from the door, just next to the bed, with her eyes fixed on mine. Her t-shirt came off, and I sucked in a sharp inhale as she stood bare-breasted in her tiny shorts and nothing else.

Her body was familiar, the color and shape of her perfect pink nipples the same as the first time I'd seen them, but the surrounding breast was fuller. I'd thought about those nipples many, many nights over the last ten years. Some mornings too.

I licked my lips, taking her in and estimating that I could comfortably cup her breasts in each of my hands.

Her skin had always been so soft, and the skin of her thighs had certainly felt like velvet, but I had an urgent need to touch the rest of her. To run my hands along her shoulders, down her arms, across her stomach. To touch her until she screamed for me, desperate and longing for anything and everything I could give her.

*Please say stars.*

Sliding her shorts down slowly, she stepped out of them, completely naked. She traced her hands down the sides of her thighs. "We have years ahead of us to sleep. We only have a few more days together."

I didn't like that idea, but I let it go. Eager to join her, flesh to flesh, I slipped my shirt over my head and hustled my pants down, standing naked with her.

My cock ached with the need to be closer, but I waited for her permission first. Maddie took her time assessing the

situation, looking me over and focusing her eyes in a slow roll along my body.

“Wes,” she said, her voice breaking as she shook her head. “I can’t get over it.”

My body, she meant, and I didn’t need her to clarify. The benefits of being a professional athlete were many, and at that moment, I was grateful for every grueling training session. Just to impress this woman.

I cocked an eyebrow. “You don’t have to get over it, Mads. You just have to get under it.” I could hardly keep a straight face, but in the end it was worth it to watch Maddie’s face explode in laughter as she dropped her head, howling.

“Wes.” She tried to catch her breath. “That was good. I’ll give you that.” She settled her laughter, but her smile stayed in place. “I have so much fun with you.”

“Me too, Maddie,” I said softly, stepping closer to her. I resisted the urge to make a joke about the ways we could have even more fun, instead settling into the slow burn of arousal building between us.

I loved laughing with Maddie. Hell, it was maybe one of my favorite things to do with her, but there were other things I wanted to do with her too.

She retreated until the backs of her knees hit the bed, sitting down on it as she held my gaze. Dropping her hands behind her, she rested propped up on her arms as she watched me approach.

“I want you, Wes,” she said, her voice husky as she let her eyes sink to my erection. “I want to feel you inside me. You always felt so good there.”

*Fuck* if it didn't do something to me to hear her say what she wanted.

Standing over her, I traced my hand through her hair, careful not to catch any tangles between my fingers. Her honey-blond locks had become disheveled in our time on the dock, and it made my cock throb as I thought about her mouth on me. Jesus. I was tempted to ask for it again, but I wanted to bury myself between her thighs, driving myself into her instead.

Sinking to my knees, we were nearly face to face, staring at one another. We said nothing, our eyes desirous and longing, yet an unspoken need to fully see one another.

“Hey,” I said, breaking the silence in the room.

“Hey,” she whispered back, her lips curling into a sweet smile I'd missed so much. Maddie had the prettiest mouth.

My hands ran along the tops of her thighs, feeling the faint softness of the downy hairs on her body. She had never been good at shaving without missing spots, and it was endearing as all hell.

Slowly, her hips rocked lazily, calling for me. I didn't slide my hand to her pussy, not yet, detouring instead along her soft stomach as I palmed her skin, delicate and silky beneath my touch.

She'd made so many comments about her changed body, jokes about the lack of rough edges. But if it were possible to sink into every part of her, I would. Her thighs, solid and delicious, her ass, round and luscious. Her hips, full and desirable. Touching her exhilarated me, and I appreciated the woman she was.

As joyful as it would be to slip into her, I wanted to feel and explore these changes. I'd waited so long to touch her again. My hands traveled up, tracing her belly to her ribs before palming the sides of her breasts. Her breath hitched as I cupped them, holding the fullness and kneading them like two delicate loaves of the sweetest bread.

"Jesus, Maddie," I groaned. "Your tits are perfect."

"They're lower than they used to be," she mumbled, a hint of apology in her words.

"Hey, Mads?"

She dropped her head back with a moan as I pinched a delicious, pink nipple between my fingers and tugged gently. "Oh," she gasped. "Hm?"

"You're beautiful, and your body is beautiful. Don't try to talk me into thinking otherwise." I kissed her stomach. "You'll never do it."

She scoffed, tugging my hair as my mouth wandered along her body.

"Maddie," I mumbled, kissing her neck. She made a soft mewling sound as my lips pressed into her skin and it sent

shivers through my spine, arousing all my senses.

The noises she could make combined with the feel of her skin, the taste of her, the smell of her floral lotion, the voluptuous shape of her body—it made me want to collapse.

“You are sexy, Maddie, and there are few things I want more than to fuck you because you make me so hot.” Her chest rose with quick, stunted breaths as she panted with the increased fervor of my mouth on her, nipping at her.

“I want you to fuck me, Wes,” she gasped.

“You didn’t let me finish,” I mumbled into her skin, running my mouth along her jaw and planting kisses across it until I found her mouth. Cupping her head in my hands, I pulled away briefly as I stared into the cobalt of her eyes.

“There are few things I want more than to fuck you because you make me so hot, but there is one thing I want more.” The cobalt expanded as her eyes widened. Vast like the ocean and I just might need a life raft, else get lost. “I want to make love to you, Maddie, because you’re someone I never wanted to forget.”

“Oh my god,” she groaned, dropping back and spreading her legs for me with a wicked smile. “Do both! Wes, I was wrong. You *are* suave. Please, I need you.”

“What do you want, Maddie?”

She bit her lip and traced her finger over her nipple, the pert tip pearled beneath her touch. “I want you, Wes. I want all of you and for you to take all of me.”

She didn't have to ask twice. Reaching into the nightstand, I found my wallet and grabbed a condom, sheathing myself and joining Maddie on the bed.

The possibilities were nearly endless, all the ways I could take her, but Maddie didn't give me much time to decide before she reached for me.

Caging her between my arms, I hovered over her, bringing my lips to hers. Her mouth accepted mine hungrily, biting on my lip and tracing the mark with her tongue to quiet the sting of it. Resting at her entrance, I made no moves to enter her, using my tongue to thrust into her mouth instead as we built a raw and excruciating need to connect our bodies.

Maddie's hands ran along my torso, along my back, and smoothed down my arms, repeating the movements until she squirmed beneath me, her arousal a discomfort that demanded soothing.

"Look at me," I instructed, sliding into her slowly as I cradled her head between my arms. Maddie's eyes widened with the motion, a drive forward into the depths of comfort I had enjoyed so long ago.

And that was it, the repeat of sincerity with simple words I'd once whispered to her, transporting me back to the first time I was with Maddie. The beating of our hearts, so fast I wondered if we'd ever recover, the quiet gasps and moans shared between our open-mouthed kisses, sharing breaths with our building pleasure.



The rising of her hips to meet mine, the instinct for her to push into me as I thrust in kind, connecting all pieces of us as we smiled between kisses and laughed quietly with the enjoyment of our bodies fitting together so effortlessly. It was like no time had passed between us. My heart was just as tender for her now as it was then. And fuck me for it. I was in trouble.

“Wes,” she whispered, nuzzling into my neck before nipping at my collarbone. “I missed you.”

Our hands met above her head, my hands holding her wrists as I thrust deeper, the momentum of our adoration driving the energy between us. “I missed you too, Maddie,” I whispered back.

Our kisses were tender, yet eager. Being with Maddie was fucking electric, whether pounding, driving, thrusting, or gently moving with her—any way I could have her filled me with gratification. And gratitude.

“I’m going to come if you stay at this pace,” she moaned, and I lifted myself for better leverage, hitting just the right spot with the base of me as I brought my hand between us to help her along.

When my thumb pressed to her clit, circling a few times, she came undone. The quake in her thighs shook down her legs, her knees trying to pull together, stifled by my body.

She dropped her head and closed her eyes, biting her lip as she came. When she opened her eyes, there was nothing but

affection there. It made my heart explode, and with it, I came undone.

“Maddie,” I groaned, dropping my head to her chest and kissing the tops of her breasts. She reached her hands up and swirled her fingers through my hair, massaging along my scalp and kissing the top of my head. I clung to her, not wanting to let go. She didn’t ask me to, holding me just as tightly to her.



The knocks were angry, fast and furious with little space between them. Whoever was at the door was not happy, and if I’d had more than three hours of sleep, I could probably process that fact a little faster.

Groaning, I rolled over and checked the time on my phone. Eleven a.m. I had *definitely* slept more than three hours.

I shot up, throwing the blankets off and rousing my exquisite companion. Normally I’d admire her silhouette beneath the thin sheets and explore her body in the daylight, but whoever was on the other side of that door was at best impatient and at worst infuriated, and I suspected I knew who it was and which way it was going to go.

“Mads, get up, quick,” I said, keeping my voice low and calm. “Baby, you gotta get up.”

She swatted her hand at me and pressed the pillow over her head. “Shut up. Early.”

Maddie was kind of cute when she was grumpy, but I’d have to get lost in that another time. “Actually, it’s not early. It’s *eleven o’clock*.” The knocks hadn’t stopped, and Maddie finally registered them. She sat up, panicked.

“In the morning?” she exclaimed. Half her hair on one side was matted and her lips were red and swollen from kissing. There was little doubt about how she’d spent her night and little chance I’d let Mitch see her like this.

“Go hide in the bathroom.”

“Dammit, Wes! I know you’re in there. Open the fucking door before I get the staff to open it for me. You better be dead, because if you’re ignoring me, I’m going to kill you!”

Mitch didn’t sound playful, and the fact I was supposed to meet him thirty minutes ago to go over my speech and get his approval wasn’t helping matters. Mitch was terrified I was going to say something embarrassing or inappropriate. Which, of course, I would never do.

Mitch would do it to me, though, and as a precaution, he was running a tight ship.

Maddie’s hands shot over her mouth, her luscious tits squeezed between her elbows and popping through the space

of her arms. I looked up at the ceiling, averting my eyes and trying to calm my dick.

The fact I could be aroused with a thundering Mitch on the other side of a thin, hollow-core door was kind of amazing.

There was no time to congratulate myself. I hustled Maddie to the bathroom, closing the door and running a hand through my hair as I quickly found my pajama pants and stepped into them.

“Mitch?” I called, feigning a sleep-filled voice. “Is that you?”

“Yeah, it’s me, motherfucker. Open the door, Wes.”

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door and stared eye to eye with a man who might light me on fire if given the chance.

“Mitch,” I said casually, leaning my body along the doorframe to prevent him from coming in. “Good morning.”

He stood on the tops of his toes to peek around me and then lowered to glance through the space of my arms. “Why are you being weird?”

“Weird?” I shook my head like I didn’t understand what he was referring to. For added measure, I crossed my arms as I leaned further to the left, opening up more of the view to my room.

“Your bed is fucked up,” Mitch observed, crossing his arms to match mine. “What were you doing in here?”

“Restless sleeper,” I answered quickly. Maybe too quickly.

“Shit is everywhere.”

I shrugged, running my hands over my elbows indifferently.  
“I’m a pig.”

Mitch shoved past me. “Where’s Maddie, Wes?”

A moment of truth. Lie to my best friend, a man I loved like a brother and respected beyond measure, or call out his sister, who I loved like... Well, loved like someone special to me and respected maybe more than Mitch.

She and I hadn’t talked about what we were doing or the boundaries of it, and I wouldn’t decide the parameters for her. I could deal with the wrath of Mitch. I couldn’t deal with the wrath of Maddie.

“I’ve no idea,” I said, staring at Mitch and willing my eyes not to look toward the bathroom.

Mitch and I were the same height, but somehow, he seemed to grow a foot taller. “She missed breakfast this morning, and no one has seen her. You *also* missed breakfast and have disappeared.”

“Disappeared?” I asked innocently, gesturing around my room. “Mitch, I’ve been here the entire time. No secret about it. I’m sure Maddie is fine, though. In fact, last night she mentioned something about wanting to go for a hike this morning or something.” I shrugged. “I don’t know. If I see her, I’ll let her know you’re looking for her. Can I meet you in the dining room in a few? Sorry about a late start, but I promise my speech will be worth it.”

Mitch grumbled something under his breath as he looked me over. He wasn't buying anything I was saying, but he wasn't sure what to do about it. The Sheffields were transparent, thank god, because it meant I could stay half a step ahead of Mitch by reading his face. If I kept my eyes away from that bathroom, I would likely outmaneuver him.

*"Been here the entire time,"* he mocked, uncrossing his arms and thrusting his finger into my chest. "Here, being a restless pig. Don't think I believe you for one second. You tell Mads that I want to talk to her."

"You'll probably see her before I do," I said dismissively, my eyes staring at the open door to the hallway and willing Mitch to move it along.

"Maybe," he muttered, turning to leave.

Exhaling, I stared at his back for a second before glancing at the bathroom. I don't know why. Maddie wasn't going to suddenly jump out and announce herself, but as soon as I did, Mitch turned around and caught my quick look.

Our eyes locked, and his lips curled into a knowing smile. "You sonofabitch."

It would probably have been easier to just admit defeat, but I was competitive and I would not let my best fucking friend win. "What?" I somehow fended off a smile.

Mitch grinned like the Cheshire cat. "Let me use your bathroom before I leave, would you?"

He would not get the upper hand. No fucking way. I rolled my eyes up to the ceiling. Part of me hoped Maddie could hear so she would have a heads up that Mitch was about to come charging in, and part of me hoped she couldn't hear because of what I was about to say.

“I don't recommend that, Mitch.” I patted my stomach and puffed my cheeks, exhaling. “You know how it goes after a night of drinking. Bit of a situation in there you're best to avoid.”

“I don't mind,” he challenged, stepping toward the bathroom. “I was drinking last night too.”

“Wait!” I said, desperate to stop him. “It's caustic, Mitch. Like, biohazard. You're an asshole, but even I couldn't do that to you.”

Mitch narrowed his eyes. “Adjust your diet, Wes, but I gotta piss and I'm going to use the closest toilet.”

“Uncle Mitch?” a quiet voice called from the hallway. “Are you down here?”

Mitch stopped, his hand on the doorknob to the bathroom. “Sam?” he answered.

Mitch's face relaxed, his demeanor shifting into a responsible adult who didn't want to scar his nephew for life. He dropped his hand from the doorknob and glared at me.

Sam poked his blonde head into the room, a big grin on his face. “Hi, Uncle Wes,” he said cheerfully before turning to

Mitch. “Did you find Mom?” Sam looked at me. “She didn’t come to breakfast and I think she forgot.”

I cringed inside, but kept a smile plastered on my face. I could only imagine Maddie berating herself for sleeping through breakfast with Sam.

“No,” Mitch said, meeting Sam at the door and putting his arm around his shoulders. “I didn’t find her, but Uncle Wes said she went for a hike this morning. She’ll be back soon. I suspect in the next ten minutes she’ll be down on the front lawn,” he said, raising his voice. Mitch pointed at me. “I’ll see you in the dining room in *five*.”

“Yep, five,” I repeated, saluting him and shuffling the two out.

I leaned against the door, finally getting a full breath as I shook my head. Collecting myself, I knocked softly on the bathroom door and opened it.

I don’t know what I expected to see, but it certainly wasn’t Maddie balled up in the shower, naked, her head in her hands as tears rolled down her cheeks.

*Dammit.*

She must have felt so bad. Lying to her brother, missing breakfast with her son, maybe regretful about our night together. My heart sank, and I dropped to the shower floor to face her.

“Wes,” she gasped, choking on a laugh.



“Maddie?” She wasn’t crying with remorse or guilt. She was crying from *laughter*.

She lowered her hands, wiping underneath her eyes and sitting up. “I have so much fun with you,” she mumbled, shaking her head before she lunged for me. Her mouth found mine as she continued laughing between kisses.

I told Mitch I’d meet him in five minutes, but surely there was some flexibility in that timeline.

## *Twenty*

### *Maddie*

“Don’t think I’m done with you,” Mitch muttered behind me, watching me load a wagon with a couple of drink coolers.

Ignoring him, I called over to Kate. “Which wagon has the towels and umbrellas?”

Kate stood with her hands on her hips and scanned the group of wagons carrying all of our lake supplies to be trudged down the path to the quiet patch of shoreline where we’d planned to day camp. She pointed at one in the middle. “That one.” I nodded and carried over extra towels.

“You can’t hide,” Mitch, my sudden shadow, barked.

I rolled my eyes, walking away and answering with a middle finger over my shoulder. Initially, I thought it sweet that Kate and Mitch wanted to have a combined bachelor/bachelorette party, but my opinion of that had shifted quickly.

Cassie waddled down to the shoreline. A tiny triangle top bikini barely containing her breasts, which had ballooned in pregnancy, and a beautiful sarong tied around her waist, framing her bump.

“Which one takes me?” she asked, pointing to the wagons.

Diego followed in her wake, white linen shorts and a casual linen button up. The Good Doctor had excellent style.

“You’re a goddess who deserves to be carried, but my love, today you walk.” He smacked her ass playfully. To my surprise, Cassie didn’t argue, just blew him a kiss and dropped her things into a wagon and started walking down the path toward the water.

The swimming spot in front of the inn had a narrow shoreline, so we opted to move the party about a half mile down the lake, nearly the perfect meeting point between the inn and my favorite dock. The pebbled sand was smoother with fewer rocks, there was more privacy with an alcove, and most importantly, it was close enough to walk back to the inn to re-up our bevies when we drank through our coolers.

While this was, in theory, a bachelor and bachelorette party, meant to celebrate and get wild if tradition dictated, Sam was tagging along for the daytime festivities.

For Kate’s party, there would be no penis-shaped decorations or food cutouts, no gratuitous or overt sexual tones, and no black out drinking, at least to start. Mitch, the philandering bachelor he was before settling down with Kate,

couldn't be bothered with the stereotypical strippers and alcohol poisoning.

This was really just an excuse for everyone to party, and today saw some old friends coming back to town for the wedding.

Matteo and Tony, Mitch's close friends from high school, sat arguing at the beach as we rolled up. I hadn't seen either for years, but as they playfully pushed one another, the two women I assumed to be their dates sitting next to them, it didn't seem like much had changed.

"What are they doing?" Sam whispered, leaning closer to me as I pulled a wagon of gear and parked it on the side of the path.

Holding my hand over my face to shield my eyes from the sun, I shrugged. "Being dumb."

Wes brushed by, patting Sam's shoulder in passing. "Those boneheads never grew up, Sam. Take it as a lesson. Arrested development is not adorable."

Sam scratched his head. "Like the show? I love that show!" he exclaimed.

"No kidding?" Wes stopped and wiped his brow with the back of his hand. "You're one cool kid, Sam."

It was impossible for Sam to hide his smile. "Thanks," he mumbled shyly. "Mom lets me watch it with her, but don't tell Dad because he says I'm too young."

“Oh, Sam—” I cut in, patting his shoulders and steering him toward the sand. “We don’t need to tell all our secrets, okay?”

“Safe with me,” Wes said solemnly, and he meant it.

“It’s not like I understand all the jokes,” Sam went on as I pushed him forward.

Andy pulled up with a wagon, parking behind us as Maria set her bag down at their feet.

“Understand what jokes, Sammy?” Sam, now out of earshot, kept on toward the beach, plopping down on a blanket next to Kate, who pulled him in for a hug.

Jesus. I rolled my eyes, feeling the limited boundaries of Montlake bared to me. Maybe Cassie had it right to move to a different state and marry someone unknown. I watched her sit on her beach blanket, feet kicked up as Diego smothered sunscreen on her skin while she ate a sandwich.

“Did you have a good hike, Maddie?” Maria asked softly, not looking at me. She was trying, and I recognized it.

“Hike?”

Andy put his arm around Maria. “Yeah, Mitch said you were on a hike and that’s why you were MIA. Where’d you go?”

I swallowed, desperate to come up with a hike in this area. I knew one, didn’t I? Had I been hiking before?

“Did you say you went to Rattlesnake Ridge?” Wes asked, starting to unload the first wagon. “Or thereabouts?” With a

cooler in his hand, he left for the beach again.

Andy nodded in approval. “That’s a good trail.” He looked at Maria and gave her a smile. “Maybe I’ll take you up there tomorrow before the rehearsal dinner.” He turned back to me. “Where’d you start from?”

“Start from?”

“Which lot?” he asked.

Wes was down at the shore, laying out blankets and anchoring them with coolers from the wagon, too far to hear the rest of the conversation, let alone jump in with an answer.

“Um,” I mumbled. “Lot three.”

Wes stood up, assessing his work and moving on to set up umbrellas for shade, starting above Cassie’s blanket.

“Lot three.” Andy mulled it over. “Decent place to start.”

For real? I let out a breath and smiled, relaxing into the lie. “Oh yeah. It was. Not busy at all, plenty of parking, easy to find.” I *really* leaned into it. “I mean, you don’t want to leave anything in your car at the trailhead, you know, but it felt pretty safe and the hikers I passed were friendly enough. A few dogs, too.”

“Dogs?” Maria asked, tilting her head. “I thought they weren’t allowed on that trail.” Maria had an obnoxious, slobbering Saint Bernard, and just my luck, a familiarity with trails.

My face pinched in confusion. “Rule breakers, I guess.”

Maria shrugged and nodded. “There are some in every bunch.” She picked up her bag and pointed toward Wes. “I’ll go set up.”

She sauntered over, untying her wrap to reveal a hot pink bikini that complimented her tan skin. Wes, god love him, didn’t even look.

I wore a bikini too, a little black triangle top with high-waisted bottoms, covered by an oversized t-shirt. Maybe not as sexy, but it still felt like a bold statement when compared with my sweatpants. Which I would have worn if Wes hadn’t talked me out of it.

Andy sighed, lifting his hat off his head and wiping his brow. It was the same hat he wore when I met him at the airport our freshman year, just after Christmas, when we were traveling back to Chicago.

The thin lines of the mountains were faded, and the sasquatch was missing an arm now, but the memory of seeing him at the airport still brought a smile to my face.

Until he opened his goddamn mouth.

“There’s no lot three, Maddie. That’s a ridiculous guess.” He laughed, shaking his head. “There’s one trailhead, no lot numbers, and no dogs on that trail. Strictly enforced because of the mountain lions.”

“*Mountain lions?*” I squeaked. Well, I was certainly never going there.

Andy patted my shoulder. “Hope you had fun, Maddie.”



As much as it felt otherwise, the world didn't revolve around me.

Any ego upset about that was easy to overlook when the benefit was a party in which people stopped asking about my whereabouts or showing interest in what *or who* I had been doing.

Instead we celebrated, enjoying the fruits of friendship and camaraderie, toasting Mitch and Kate and their love for one another. And like a decade before, listened to shitty nineties pop songs while partying at the lake.

Absent a nine-year-old roaming from beach blanket to beach blanket and a very pregnant Cassie, and we could have been eighteen again.

Sam caught my eye, smiling and heading toward me. He settled next to me, resting his head on my lap and closing his eyes.

I brushed his hair from his face and reached for the sunscreen to put more on him. Sam inherited my fair skin



coloring. He shook his head when I slathered on the first passing of sunscreen, but steadied when I clucked at him.

*“Mom.”*

“What? You don’t want to burn. Take care of your skin now, Sam. I promise it will matter to you later.” I sighed, perking my ears to the tune spilling over from the speaker near Cassie. She held her phone, no doubt crafting a careful playlist of nostalgia.

“What song is this?” he asked.

“It’s called Wannabe and it’s by a group called the Spice Girls.”

Sam nodded thoughtfully. “I like it,” he said sweetly. He kept his head in my lap for a while before yawning and sitting up. “Can I go back with Grandma now? She said we could roast marshmallows at the firepit and stay up watching movies.”

I checked my phone. It was nearly five o’clock and Sam had made it far longer at the lake than I’d expected.

“Of course.”

Glancing down the shoreline, I spotted Andy and Maria dancing, arms around one another. Tony and Matteo clapped and hollered, watching on. Gross.

I told Sam I’d walk him back. He hurried off to say goodbye to everyone.

Kate, Cassie, and Amy sat flipping through magazines and catching the last rays of the sun before it started its slow descent. The women scooped Sam into their arms and gave so many hugs and kisses that he nearly drowned.

Mitch, attempting to start a bonfire with Wes, saw the love fest and hustled over to join, nearly tackling Sam as he grabbed him and hoisted him into the air. Wes looked on, laughing, and attempted to wrestle Sam away from Mitch. Sam gasped as he tried to catch his breath, his giggles so fierce that I was afraid he may actually choke. His face was bright red and his gasps now breathless.

I smiled as I watched the people I loved dearly love the most important person in my life. I hadn't expected to become a mother at nineteen, but I also hadn't expected to have the community I did. I wasn't sure it was possible to have a heart more full than at that moment.

Wes finally won Sam from Mitch, lifting him onto his shoulders as the two waved their hands triumphantly in the air and fist pumped.

Dropping Sam at my feet, Wes grinned. "Let's go," he said, collecting Sam's bag and pulling it over his shoulder.

"Oh, it's fine," I said. "I'll just run him back real quick. I'll be back in twenty minutes."

Sam looked up at Wes, smiling with an admiration that made my heart both swell and break. He was falling for Wes just as much as I was. Unlike me, though, Sam didn't understand the impermanence of Wes in our lives.

I bit my lip, looking between the two before shaking my head at Sam, signaling that Wes couldn't come with us.

Wes gave an affable smile, but it didn't hide the hurt in his eyes. "Bye, kiddo," he said, running his hand through Sam's messy hair. "Enjoy the s'mores and give your grandparents just a little hell." He pinched his fingers close together. "Just a touch to be interesting, but not so much that you give them more gray hair."

Sam laughed and pointed at me. "Grandpa said all of his gray hair is because of Mom."

He probably wasn't wrong. My parents were saints, and may Sam never do to me what I'd done to them throughout the years. Sam gave Wes a last wave before we headed back to the inn.

"I wish you would let Wes come with us," Sam said, disappointment in his voice.

I did too, but I couldn't let him. I could handle Wes breaking my heart, but I couldn't handle him breaking Sam's.



“Do you always wander in the woods alone?” Wes asked, approaching at a leisurely pace.

I stopped along the path, throwing my hands on my hips.

“Wes Cohen. Did you come all this way to walk me back?” The inn had hardly disappeared behind me, and his appearance did not fool me. Wes trailed me and Sam back.

“Who knows what wants to eat you in this forest?” he asked, his voice absolutely wicked.

*Oh, I can think of one animal who would eat me in this forest.*

“Hm.” I shrugged. “I heard mountain lions.”

Wes stood up straight. “Oh shit, really?”

Laughing, I stood next to him and nudged him with my elbow. “Come on, I’ll make sure you get back to the camp safely.”

He took my hand, the feel of his firm grip comfortable in mine. “Thank Jesus, Mads. I’m not sure I’d make it otherwise.” He winked, tugging me along with him. He was quiet for a bit, humming softly under his breath, faint and indistinguishable.

“What song is that?” I asked.

Wes grinned, keeping his eyes straight ahead. “Spice Girls, Wannabe.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “It’s pretty on point,” I admitted.

Wes squeezed my hand and began singing the song *word for word*. The giggles that cascaded from me were roaring and uncontained. This fucking guy.

Eventually, I sang with him, the two of us skipping back to camp like a couple of teenagers.

The embers of the bonfire were easy to spot in the distance, though the sun hadn't yet fully set. "Did Mitch use gasoline to light that?"

Wes looked on, not at all concerned. "I think he has a handle on it. Come on." He pulled me off the path and into the woods.

"Wes," I screeched, lifting my feet high as I stomped through the bushes in flip-flops and swimwear. "Where are we going? Am I going to get a tick?"

Evidently, we weren't going far, just enough off the path to be hidden by the trees, but not so far deep into the woods we'd be cuddling with the mountain lions.

"What—"

I didn't have time to finish my question before Wes held my arms and pushed me back against a tree. Despite his gentleness, I met the trunk with an "*oof*" and lost my breath.

He didn't give me a chance to catch it before his lips were on mine. Who needed oxygen? Not me. Not when this man was breathing for the both of us.

"Maddie," he groaned, running his hands along my body frantically as he pressed against me. "I've been wanting to

touch you all day. I've behaved myself. I've really fucking behaved myself." He was hard. So very hard.

His mouth kissed along my neck, just below my ear, and sent electricity through every cell in my body. His hand moved under my shirt, fingers nimbly scaling the edges of my bikini top to find my nipple. When he made contact, the brush of his fingertips before he rolled it between his fingers, I moaned and sunk into him.

"You've behaved," I agreed, my body a fever, hot and building with the rough passes of his tongue over my skin. "But I don't need a gentleman with me. Show me what happens when you don't keep your hands to yourself."

He pulled away, his eyebrows furrowing as he softly cursed. "Fuck, Maddie." He kissed me, hard and determined, leaving no chance to catch my breath.

My hands grasped his arms, the strength of them stunning and nearly sending me into a tailspin. He could lift me up, fuck me standing against this tree, and hardly break a sweat.

*Say what you want.*

"Fuck me against this tree, Wes," I demanded, my breath breaking with every movement of his hips, every pass of his body pressing into mine.

He pulled his bottom lip between his teeth, groaning. "Jesus. I want to. I really fucking want to, but I don't have a condom. Are you on birth control?"

*Shit.* I shook my head, embarrassed. “No, not anymore.”  
*And hating myself for it.*

If Wes was disappointed, he didn't show it. “I can still fuck you,” he said, his voice husky as his finger traced along the bottoms of my bathing suit. “Not with my cock, but with my fingers or my mouth. You choose, and I'll be happy to oblige.”

His hand rubbed along the inside of my thigh, grazing its inner edges before sliding along to my ass and cupping my cheek. “God, I love your ass, Maddie,” he hissed, kneading it with his palm. “Remember when I had that, too?”

*Oh god.* I closed my eyes; the memory stealing my breath. When Wes said he wanted to explore and learn with me, he meant *everything*. He was still the only man I'd trusted enough to have all of me.

I licked my lips, opening my eyes to look at him. “I remember everything about our time together, Wes. I forgot none of it.”

His breath was hot against my neck as he leaned in, one arm resting above my head to cage me against the tree. “Did you ever want to forget any of it?” His free hand slid from my ass to the inside of my thigh again, his finger running along the seam of my bottoms.

“No,” I answered, breathless as everything in me focused on his hand between my thighs, the wetness he encouraged, and the way he made my stomach feel like it was going to bottom out.

“*Good.*” He mouthed the word, making my stomach flutter.

Wes pushed aside the fabric of my suit and ran his finger through my slickness. “I like this, and I think you like this too. I’m going to use my fingers, okay, Maddie?”

“Okay,” I whispered, hardly able to utter the word. “Ohhh,” I moaned as he thrust two fingers into me, his thumb circling over my clit. I swayed my hips, bouncing my ass lightly against the tree and then bouncing forward against his hand. My knees threatened to give away, but leveraging myself between Wes and the tree helped me to stay upright. “That feels good.”

Wes pressed his forehead to mine, his eyes watching me as I struggled to keep mine open with the building intensity of his touch. “Tell me how good it feels to have my hands on you.”

I hummed. “It feels like I’m going to burst. Like I’m impatient for you to make me come, but I’m praying this will never stop.”

His breath picked up, the pace of his fingers following suit as he slid another finger into me, pumping with a pressure and speed he knew would satisfy me.

“Let me show you how it feels.” I shoved my hand into his shorts, finding his cock hard and throbbing, and fisted it. Running my hand from shaft to head, I smiled as Wes groaned and pushed himself deeper into my hand. Taking my hand off of him for a second, I spit in my palm and began pumping him again.



“Goddamn,” he grunted. “I love fucking your fist. Keep doing that, sweetheart.” His words left his mouth and traveled straight to my pussy, the thought of his orgasm building on the foundation of my own, and my core tightened as my release came with little warning.

“Wes,” I cried, just before he shot into my hand, the warm, sticky ribbons of come spilling on us both. His eyes still on mine, foreheads stuck together, tethered with the sweat of our efforts, Wes and I grinned at one another.

We cleaned up as best we could, but without wipes, towels, or spare clothes, we were a mess. Impossible to face our friends at camp and impossible to face the guests at the inn, we were left with few choices.

“You sure you’re up for this?” Wes asked, stepping out of the woods and holding my hand as we hurried to the shoreline.

“No,” I admitted. “But what other choice do we have?”

We took off running, the blasting music a soundtrack to what was probably a bad idea, but the only one we’d come up with.

“What the hell?” Mitch hollered, watching us sprint past the bonfire, the sky darkening and the fire aglow. “What are you—”

He didn’t even finish his sentence before we jumped into the lake, the water cold but cleansing, laughing like we’d gone crazy.

Maybe we had.

## *Twenty-One*

### *Maddie*

“**L**ook at me. Look. At. Me,” Dana said, her voice firm and unamused. “If I catch you not paying attention one more time...”

*You’re going to kick me out of the wedding?* I bit it back, shaking my head and apologizing.

“I’m sorry. I was distracted.” I glared at Wes, making my eyes three times their normal size. *Shut the fuck up.* He smiled back at me, boyish and unbothered by consequences.

Wes seemed thrilled to make suggestive faces and mouth dirty words at me every time Dana, the wedding coordinator, attempted to run through my role as matron of honor.

“Am I still a matron if I’m divorced?” I asked Dana.

A woman in her early sixties and fit for the military with her barking orders, Dana eyed me impatiently. “You’re spoiled goods, whether the big D or not.”

Wes raised his eyebrows and mouthed *Big D*.

“Divorced, you idiot,” I mumbled.

Dana crossed her arms, the shoulders of her black blazer running tight. “Are you talking to me?”

I shook my head furiously, looking around the gazebo as all eyes watched me. “No, I was pointing to that idiot.” I shot my finger toward Wes, who looked absolutely aghast.

“Maddison Marie,” he scoffed. “That is unnecessary.”

Dana nodded, not taking her eyes off me. “You’re going to be the wild card.” She rubbed her temples and muttered, “Jesus” before clapping her hands and starting the entire procession over again.

Kate grimaced sympathetically as I half collapsed, dragging my feet back to the start of the aisle.

“If you took it seriously, then we’d be done faster,” she said, a kindness to her voice that felt generous given she was stifling yawns and massaging her back. I felt like an asshole for being the hold up.

“Are you doing okay?” I asked, rubbing her back for her. “Feeling okay?”

“Yes,” she said, covering her mouth to hide another yawn. “I’m just ready to get this show on the road. Now I’m remembering *why* I initially told Mitch I didn’t care about a wedding. This is so much work.”

“It is,” I agreed, though I had to do very little. “But you’re getting *married*.” I felt the tears building, small pools threatening a spill, waiting for one tip to send them over the edge. “And then you’ll be my sister, and Mitch’s wife. But *my sister*.” I wiped a leaking tear, sniffing. “Then you’ll have a *baby*. My niece or nephew. Then you’ll have, like, five more after that.”

“Whoa,” Kate held up her hand. “Let’s see how the first one goes.” She ran a palm over her stomach, still flat, though not for much longer.

She probably wouldn’t be as big as a dump truck like I had been. I loved Kate so much that I didn’t even hate her for that.

“I’m going to spoil you rotten,” I said to her stomach, kneeling in front of her. “We’re going to have sleepovers and stay up all night eating candy and ice cream and I’m going to give you back to your mom and dad and they’re going to be *so* furious and I’ll promise never to do it again, but that will be a lie.”

Kate chuckled, shaking her head.

“And I’m going to love you so goddamn much.” I kissed my hand and touched Kate’s belly, grinning at her. “Don’t believe me when I say I’ll never do it again.”

Kate’s face was stern. Her voice was less so. “If that’s your attempt to get out of babysitting by front-loading your weaknesses, think again. I’m handing this baby off to you when I need a break.”

“I’ll hug it and hold it and love it because wittle itty babies are the best.” She grimaced, and I couldn’t hold my laugh.

Kate elbowed me. “Maybe you’ll have more someday.” She looked over at Wes, then back at me. “You look thirsty. Do you need a tall drink of *water*?”

“Oh, fuck off,” I grumbled. “He’s going back to California the day after the wedding. I live here. Our lives—they aren’t compatible.”

Kate shrugged, her long hair splayed over her shoulders and shining with the sun. “Maybe your life circumstances aren’t compatible, but life circumstances are *changeable*. You, as *people*, are compatible, and that’s far more important.”

I hated that her words sprung roots of hope for me. Buried deep in the dirt of my skepticism, part of me hoped she was right. It embarrassed me to think it might be possible. It was self-preservation to convince myself it wasn’t going to happen, and letting that skepticism go was vulnerable. It managed expectations and prevented a bigger letdown than I was already going to have.

“He’s a superstar, Kate. He lives in a mansion and fucks models and makes money just for showing up places. I... I run a bookstore, am divorced with a nine-year-old, and live in our hometown. None of that shifts easily to merge. Thinking otherwise is like me thinking I’m going to be a brain surgeon someday, like you.”

She didn’t argue with me, just gave a gentle smile. “I *teach* about brain surgery. I don’t perform it.” She sighed, looking at

Wes again. “But to that I’ll just say... When the cup is full, drink up.”



“What’s the plan for tonight?” Wes asked, leaning into me and pressing his mouth so close to my ear that I swore he was going to lick it.

I squirmed in my seat, shifting and peeling my stuck thighs from the chair. August heat was unkind, and Kate’s dress code of cocktail attire at the rehearsal dinner was unfair.

“Plan for what?” I asked, rubbing the back of one thigh and wondering how much of my skin was still stuck to the seat.

Wes clucked his tongue. “You really think I’m going to go an entire night without seeing you, Maddie? That I’m going to spend the entire night with Mitch and...” He paused dramatically. “*Andy?*”

I shrugged, picking up my fork and eating my salad. “Yes, I do. I think you girls are going to have a super fun sleepover, tell sexy stories, have a pillow fight, and maybe play truth or dare.”

Wes sat up, his eyebrows raised. “Does that really happen at sleepovers?”

I wanted to scoff and tell him of course not, but it actually did.

“When you play, ask Andy to tell you his most humiliating story. He’s going to say it’s the time he barfed in front of Rebecca Montgomery at a party, but don’t believe him. There’s worse, and he’ll hide it, but don’t let him.”

Andy sat across the round table, engaged in a conversation with Amy and Maria, talking animatedly and unaware that I was on the verge of outing his most embarrassing moment.

“Well, you have to tell me now,” Wes said, crossing his arms. “That’s insanely unfair.”

“Sorry,” I said, pushing around some cherry tomatoes. “It’s not for me to share.” I lowered my voice, looking at Andy to make sure he *really* couldn’t hear. “It wasn’t just vomit he couldn’t control that night, and let’s just say, Rebecca became *very* aware of it.”

Wes scrunched his face. “Like, which other exit are we talking about here? There are at least three more I can think of that would make a man blush.”

I held up my finger. “You get nothing else from me. Do the work yourself.”

He nodded, holding his fork in his hand and moving around his food. Not looking at me, his other hand disappeared under

the table like a neat magic trick. Abracadabra! His hand reappeared. This time on my thigh.

“Wes,” I hissed as his fingers traced along the skirt of my cocktail dress, circling lazily as he slowly inched up my thigh.

“Relax, Maddie,” he said with a smirk, staring at his plate. “We’re at the corner table and no one can see beneath the draping of this tablecloth.”

I spread my legs.

“Fine, but only over the panties action,” I said maturely. “This is a fancy event.”

Wes grinned. “Maddie, your dad cooked the hamburgers and your mom made all the side salads.”

“Right?” I said excitedly, sitting up. “So why the hell do we have to wear cocktail attire?” I glanced down at Wes, the black button up and dress slacks he wore were a sexy combination that made me a little okay with Kate’s direction.

“I like that little black dress on you,” Wes mumbled. “Your tits can barely fit in it, and it’s driving me wild. Did you do that on purpose?”

I cackled maniacally, rubbing my hands together. “I *did*. It was always my evil plan to get pregnant at nineteen, grow some *real* tits, and then gain weight so the only dress I own hardly zips.”

He looked at me, amused, and wiped the corner of his mouth with his napkin. “The long con, I see. Touché.”



I pushed his arm playfully and shook my head. “Over the panties action *revoked*.”

“Oh, *Mads*,” he groaned. “Un-fucking-fair.”

A heavy hand came down, one on my shoulder and one on Wes’ as Mitch’s big dumb face appeared between us.

“Hey you two,” Mitch said, a delighted grin spread wide. “I can’t seem to separate you. A lively conversation?” He blinked a few times, looking between us.

This time I groaned. “Go away, Mitch.”

“Sorry, *Mads*,” he said with mock sympathy. “I need to steal this guy away for some manly man stuff.”

“Pillow fights?” I asked hopefully. “Cause sign me up! I’ll stop by for an opportunity to beat you to death with goose feathers.”

Mitch smirked. “You think this inn uses real down? It’s a down-alternative, *Maddie*. Be realistic. And no. You’re not invited. No girls allowed. Even sisters count as such tonight.”

“Yes,” I muttered. “As opposed to every other night when my vagina is ambiguous.”

“*Maddie*,” Mitch and Wes groaned at the same time. Mitch from disgust at thinking his sister might actually have genitalia and Wes because the implication somehow embarrassed him.

I glared at Mitch. “What? It’s not like I don’t have a vagina every day of my life.”

Mitch pinched the bridge of his nose and stood up, not looking at me. “Just meet me and Andy in my room in twenty minutes, Wes.”

Andy watched, a smug look on *his* face, as if he’d somehow been part of this, and I flipped him off.

Mitch left, thankfully. He wandered over to Kate as they wrapped up dinner, circling the tables and thanking the family and friends who had flown in for the rehearsal dinner. Kate, without a family of her own, had easily been welcomed into ours and effortlessly danced from table to table, far more loveable than Mitch.

Local friends came for the dinner as well, and the mini-reunion was actually pretty sweet. I saw most of our local friends regularly, but there was a bit of fanfare at having Wes attend the wedding. No shortage of interest, particularly from some women, but he handled it all well.

“Forget training for the game,” he told me. “I train for publicity. My manager is always telling me ‘You are who they think you are,’ meaning make *other* people happy. You’d think it was just the field where my behavior mattered, but no.”

He sounded tired when he spoke of it, and despite my inability to relate to his work and training, I *could* relate to feeling like I had to do things that made other people happy.

“Your happiness should be your priority, Wes. Not chasing the expectations of others. You’ll never catch what it is you’re looking for, and you’ll collapse from exhaustion before you do.”

He shrugged. “You start to believe the excess of the life is necessary. The big house, the flashy shit, the influence of your existence. Like you *need* it. You can’t fuck it up, else lose it.”

I placed my hand on his leg, squeezing gently. “It’s okay to want all of that. You’ve worked really hard to have the career you do, for everything you’ve earned. It’s okay to want to enjoy it.”

He said nothing for a while, just looked around the lawn and amongst the filled tables, fairy lights buzzing on with the setting sun. It was peaceful, charming even, and the muffled conversations and intermittent bouts of laughter flowing through the crowd felt like a moment worth remembering.

“Maybe it’s not what I want anymore.” He said it so quietly, I wasn’t sure if he was actually talking to me.

*Don’t say that. Don’t water the seeds of my hope, feed the roots and threaten to grow the blossom of possibility if you’re just going to mow it all down in two days.*

I cleared my throat and set my napkin on my plate. “Say what you want, Wes. Say what you need.”

He thought for a moment, considering it, then grinned and leaned close to my ear. “I want you, Maddie, and I need you in my room.”

“Wes, the party. Mitch is expecting—”

“Oh, Maddie.” He made a *tsk* sound and shook his head with a pout. “If I’m going to prioritize my happiness, why not

start now?” His finger traced along my thigh. A threat and a promise.

“Twenty minutes isn’t long,” I said hesitantly, despite my increasing arousal telling me I was a goddamn liar if I thought I wasn’t going to eagerly join him.

“It’s not,” Wes agreed. “It’s all I have, though, and I’ll take it.”

A pathetic catchphrase we were learning to live with.



Three sheets to the wind, I stared up at the ceiling and watched the fan spin overhead.

Or maybe it was my head spinning. Cassie should not have played bartender at the sleepover tonight, as evidenced by Amy passed out on the bathroom floor with her arm around the toilet. Kate and Cassie were asleep in the king-sized bed, surrounded by a thousand pillows. One of them was snoring like a congested rhino.

I sighed, rolling over and checking the time. My phone screen lit up. **1:25 A.M.**

Tomorrow was going to be rough.

My fingers tapped against the back of my phone as it rested on my belly, an anxious energy rolling through me. There I was, suffering a bout of insomnia on the couch in Kate's suite, wasting precious time alone and without Wes.

I rolled over again, feeling pathetic. I should be able to go a night without Wes. After tomorrow, I was going to go every night without him.

The thought made my stomach shift uncomfortably. Would all my nights be restless as I stared aimlessly at the ceiling and wondered what he was doing.

Or who he was doing it with.

"This is stupid," I grumbled.

But *this* was even stupider.

Picking up my phone again, I began typing a text.

**Me: Are you awake?**

I stared at the phone for what felt like hours. Wes was probably asleep. Or he'd murdered Andy and had been dragged off to jail. Either way, I doubted I'd hear back from him tonight.

Until I did.

**Wes: Yes. And your brother snores like a motherfucker.  
Can't sleep?**

Biting my lip, I held my squeal, not wanting to wake anyone. Getting a response from Wes made me feel like that

excited teenage girl, just waiting for him to notice me.

**Me: I can't settle. Everyone is asleep and I'm going to step out and get some air. You know, in case you happen to find yourself similarly restless. Some company might be nice.**

I held my breath, waiting for his response.

**Wes: Company?**

I exhaled, closing my eyes for a moment before opening them and remembering I could be brave and say exactly what I wanted.

**Me: Yes, company. I'm getting fucked tonight, and I'd prefer you join me so I don't have to do it myself.**

**Wes: Shit, Maddie. Don't start without me!**

I jumped off the couch, hurriedly searching for my flip-flops when the ping of his text caught my attention.

**Wes: Nevermind. Go ahead and start, but don't you dare finish without me.**

**Me: Better hurry, superstar.**

## *Twenty-Two*

*Wes*

Maybe it was the fact I was drunk. Maybe it was the energy of the night. Maybe it was that nothing rocked me the way Maddie's words and desires could.

The smile she wore as she stood on the lawn out front was hypnotic, challenging me, *daring* me. She gestured a finger for me to follow her down to the lakeshore. A few picnic tables lined the narrow private beach in front of the inn, and Maddie headed to them.

Maybe it was all these things, and then some, but standing with Maddie on that shoreline under a blanket of stars, I could see nothing but the two of us. And we were wearing entirely too many layers of clothing and standing entirely too far apart.

My dick was hard, but I'd pretty much had an erection my entire time in Montlake. It twitched as I stalked closer to her, my eyes focused on her face as she sucked in a breath, watching me approach.

She said nothing to me, and I said nothing to her. We didn't need to.

I moved closer, backing her up to the picnic table as my body pressed into her. My cock rested against the softness of her stomach, and I couldn't help but push myself harder against her. Maddie's body felt so good, so comfortable.

My hands immediately took over, running along her waist and dropping back to cup that luscious ass as I dipped my hips to hers. She gasped, reaching between us and stroking me. I groaned with her touch, always desperate for more of her.

Our eyes locked, the intensity of her stare matching my own. This woman, this divine and perfect woman, stealing every ounce of self-restraint from me.

Spinning her around to face the table, her plump ass to me, I bent her over and reached a hand around, dropping into her shorts and palming over her panties.

"Your panties are soaked," I mumbled in her ear. Her skin raised immediately, goosebumps all over, and I ground harder into her. "Always ready for me, Maddie. So good, baby."

She moaned, sliding her shorts down. "I want you to fuck me right here and I need you to do it now. I've been thinking about you all night." Her hands moved for my shorts next, pushing them down to free my cock. Jesus, I wanted to, but drunk and eager, I left without stopping by my room first.

"I don't have..." I nipped at her neck, and she pushed her ass harder to me, the heat of her pussy pressed against my



aching cock. It'd be so easy to slip inside, to take her and consequences be damned, but we'd been drinking, and sober it wasn't a choice we'd make.

“Pull out,” she moaned, circling her hips and begging. “Come on me. Remember how good it looked when you'd do that?”

“Shit,” I swore softly, remembering how she looked with my come on her. “Like a masterpiece.” It was primal and possessive, this instinctive thrill with seeing her dirtied by my pleasure.

I hesitated, unsure, but when Maddie gritted her teeth and demanded, “Please, fuck me,” I couldn't help myself. The idea of unloading on her made my balls ache.

“Fine,” I said, pushing her shirt higher up her back and revealing the two dimples that sloped next to her hips, just above her cheeks. “But I'm coming on your ass, Maddie.”

She gave a throaty laugh that tightened my balls. “Is that supposed to be a punishment?”

“Jesus, fuck.” I lined up with her pussy, holding my cock with one hand while gripping her hair with the other. Thrusting into her, the energy between us electric and laid bare, I could do nothing other than groan in pleasure. “You feel fantastic, Maddie,” I hissed. “So good. God, baby.”

She panted, her palms flat on the picnic table as she dropped her head back with the tug of my hand in her hair. “You fill me so good, Wes. Feels fucking amazing.”

Picking up my pace, I drove into her as she grasped the edges of the picnic table and held herself. “You take me so well.”

I let go of her hair, reaching around to find her clit, rubbing firmly and increasing pressure as her breathing turned erratic and rushed. “I want to make you feel good, baby. So good. I want you to feel like you make me feel.”

“You feel fucking unreal, Wes.” She pushed back against me to match my pace, the slapping of my body on hers echoing between us. Fuck if I gave a shit if anyone was around to hear it.

“Come on me.” She moaned deeper, her own climax building and ready for release, and it made me go wild.

Her tight, wet pussy, the driving of my cock, bare and alert to every sensation of her. The naughtiness of fucking her outside where anyone could see. The alcohol—fuck, maybe it was the fucking alcohol, but something in me broke. I wanted this woman. To keep her, to hold her, to have her. For her to be *mine*.

“One day I’m going to fuck you bare and I’m not going to pull out. I’ll fill you with everything I have, and neither of us will care.” I shifted my hand from her hip and ran it along her stomach, soft and empty. “It will be me inside you, and you’re going to fucking love it.”

Her pussy squeezed my cock as the orgasm started, and I clenched my jaw to let her ride it out before I came too.

“Please, Wes,” she begged. “Oh god, yes.” She bucked wildly beneath me, my words sending her into a spiraling climax.

It was nearly impossible to get the words out. Her exquisite body rolled beneath me with the waves of her gratification. Her gasps, heavy and breathless, as she collapsed on the table. Letting my hand slip from her pussy, I pumped harder into her. Four hard thrusts and I gripped my cock, pulling out and shooting my load onto her ass.

Giving a playful slap for good measure, I fell on top of her, breathing hard and feeling like my heart might explode from my chest. Not from effort, but from affection. I kissed her back softly, running my lips until my mouth was against her ear.

“I meant it.”



The light was an assault to my eyes, blinding and painful. My jaw tightened, teeth grinding with the sharp sound of a phone ringing.

Opening one eye reluctantly, I scanned the room. Mitch lay on the couch, sleeping on his stomach in his tighty-whities. Andy was on the floor next to him, also on his stomach.

My phone kept on, the noise shooting lasers into my brain in painful waves. Gripping it, I held it up to see my manager's name flash across the caller ID.

"Shit," I groaned, getting up and letting myself into the bathroom to take the call privately.

"Barry," I grumbled, examining myself in the mirror. Other than an intense cowlick, I externally looked okay. Internally, I felt like I might be dying. *Never let Mitch bartend*. He had a heavy-handed pour.

"Wes!" he sang, entirely too loud and chipper for—I checked the time—ten a.m. "Glad I caught you. You didn't return my messages." His voice was friendly enough, but there was a hint of Angry Dad in there, and though hungover and slow, I still caught it.

"Been busy," I said through clenched teeth. Riffling through Mitch's bathroom contents, I found a bottle of aspirin in a makeup bag. I took a couple and rinsed my mouth. "What's up?"

"What's up?" Barry repeated. "What's up? Your stock is up, Wes. You're now streamlined for print ads *and* TV commercials with ProEnergy RX, baby!" I heard him clap his hands in satisfaction. "That's a *fifteen percent* pay bump *and* with your stupidly good-looking face, an opening to other options. You said retirement, but I say *career change*."

Massaging along my eyebrows, I nodded as he spoke. “Yeah, that’s great, Barry, really.”

The creak of his chair picked up on the line as he shifted positions wherever he was. His office, I was guessing.

“You’re not happy about this, Wes? I just spent two days negotiating the *fuck* out of an insane deal for you. Why do you sound like someone just ran over your puppy?”

*Because I don’t want to be in ads and I don’t want to be on TV and my game days are over.*

“Hung over,” I grunted.

“All right,” Barry barked. “I won’t give you shit, but don’t go crazy. Turns out, ProEnergy’s marketing department showed your appeal increased substantially in the 18-34 age range. With women, specifically.”

“Outstanding.” I rolled my eyes. The motion made my skull ache.

“Sex sells, Wes,” Barry said. “Sell yours while you can. You won’t be beautiful forever.” He clapped his hands again. “I’m going now, but Monica said she’s got grocery delivery for you coming tomorrow. Your housekeeper will take care of it. Laundry is done, and she’s taking an extra day in Napa with her sister.”

I smiled, glad Monica had taken the break. “Thanks, Barry. I’ll see you in a couple of days.”

He hung up without saying goodbye, and I gripped the sink, dropping my eyes from my reflection in the mirror, not

wanting to look at myself.

*“One day I’m going to fuck you bare and I’m not going to pull out.”*

My words from last night crept into my head, sinking into the pounding and hitching my breath. I rubbed my face, then turned on the sink and splashed water on it.

*“I’ll fill you with everything I have, and neither of us will care.”*

*“Please, Wes. Oh god, yes.”*

I shook my head, toweling off my face and making eye contact with myself again.

“You’re an asshole,” I muttered, ashamed of myself for getting lost in a moment like that. Sliding my phone into the pocket of my shorts, I straightened up and left the bathroom.

One more day. Barry’s call had been a harsh reminder that I’d be going home soon, and that home wasn’t Montlake any longer.



“I’m nervous as fuck,” Mitch muttered from the side of his mouth, twitching in his suit as he stared down a long and empty aisle.

The front lawn of the inn was littered with rows of white chairs, all occupied, waiting for Kate to meet Mitch in the gazebo for the start of their union. Dana’s silver bob peeked around the back of the gazebo as she held up seven fingers and mouthed *Seven minutes*.

It was an awfully precise number when Kate was already running behind schedule, but it brought some relief to Mitch’s face, at least.

“See?” I said, patting his shoulder as we looked out at rows of family and friends. “She’s not standing you up.”

Andy leaned over me and muttered to Mitch, “If Maddie didn’t stand me up, I can sure as shit guarantee Kate won’t stand you up.” He relaxed into position again, smirking.

“Did you think she would?” I asked, careful to keep a smile on my face as the audience watched on. It was clear this wedding was running behind schedule and guests were whispering.

Andy shifted his weight between legs. “Kind of. I wasn’t exactly her first pick, you know? Second string. Not the man she wanted, but the man she got stuck with.”

I said nothing, staring straight ahead. The air between us was uncomfortable, but I was used to that by now.

Maybe Andy wasn't Maddie's first pick, but he was her first husband and a man she'd been with for nearly a decade. He got all those years with her. Ones I'd missed.

Andy held up his hand and waved to the first row where Sam sat, his grandparents on one side of him and Maria on the other. Maria raised her hand to wave back, elbowing Sam to get his attention, and the kid gave a blinding smile in return.

"That guy, though," Andy mumbled. "Worth it all."

I had no doubt, biting down a weird jealousy that felt like it was bubbling in the pit of my stomach.

*"It will be me inside you, and you're going to fucking love it."*

I closed my eyes, shaking my head to get rid of the words. Some sort of toxic male possessiveness. That had to be it. I swallowed, and tried to smile, though it was likely a grimace.

"Sam's a great kid," I agreed.

Andy lowered his voice. "He's the best kid, Wes. Maddie and I work really hard to make sure he's always first in our lives. So whether you're here for today, tomorrow, forever, or never again, just know that."

It was a clear warning, and I didn't like it. I also respected it. Andy was a good dad, and as much as I hated him for leaving Maddie alone in her pregnancy, I could see why Mitch had come around to the idea of him.

"You're a good man, Andy," I said softly. "You did well for them."



The words sunk in, his face firm but satisfied. “Thanks, Cohen. You know—”

He didn’t get to finish whatever he was going to say before the string quartet began to play and Amy appeared down the aisle. She wore a mid-length light pink dress, looking lovely.

In her hands was a bouquet of lilies, and she gracefully slid along the path to the gazebo. Dana stood off to the side, bobbing her head excitedly as she approved of Amy’s performance.

Next was Maddie, standing at the start of the aisle. A breeze kicked up and caught the hem of her dress, sending it into a flutter. It was the same soft pink that Amy wore, but the color was stunning on Maddie’s skin. Her shoulders were bare beneath thin straps, and the silk of the fabric clung tightly to her curves. She looked beautiful.

Her hair was in a long braid, tucked over her left shoulder. Loose and casual, yet well contained, and there were tiny flowers tucked into the creases of each fold.

She held a death grip on the bouquet in her hands and kept her eyes on the ground in front of her. I bit back a laugh, looking at the high heels on her feet and knowing she was focused on making it to the gazebo without tripping.

Dana danced off to the side, her arms waving wildly as she tried to get Maddie’s attention to tell her to pull her head up, but Maddie was oblivious, and fuck if it didn’t tug at my heart.

She made it down the aisle and lifted her head, grinning. She was proud of herself, but it wasn't the face of her brother or ex-husband that she sought when she finally looked up. It was mine, and my grin matched hers with equal enthusiasm.

I kept my stare on Maddie, hardly noticing when the quartet shifted the song to the bridal chorus. I knew Kate had appeared when everyone in the audience stood up. The *oohs* and *ahs* mixed with a few gasps as the surrounding energy shifted.

But I didn't look. I couldn't take my eyes off of Maddie, who stared back at me, grinning like a fool. She pointed at her feet. *I did it*, she mouthed. I nodded and mouthed back, *Brilliant*.

Maddie furrowed her brows in confusion and shook her head slightly.

*Brilliant*, I mouthed again.

Maddie shrugged, her head shaking a little faster as she cupped her hand around her ear.

"Brilliant," I whispered.

"Huh?" she whispered back, so quietly I hardly heard her. Mitch, standing dumbstruck between us, watched Kate with a big smile on his face as she glided down the aisle.

*Billiards?* Maddie mouthed back.

"Brilliant!" I said, exasperation consuming me.

Mitch turned and glared at me, rightly so, for the interruption, and I caught sight of Maddie beyond him, her face red as she held the bouquet to hide her laughter.

*She set me up.*

“Eh hem.” I cleared my throat. “Kate looks brilliant,” I said diplomatically, patting Mitch on the shoulder and finally looking at Kate.

I wasn’t wrong. Her long hair was swept up in a bun, a lace veil covering her face. Her dress was short and well fitted, the style unknown to me, but it was an old-fashioned look. Given she was three months pregnant, I really loved the irony. Knowing Kate, it was purposeful.

“Brilliant?” Mitch murmured from the side of his mouth. “When the fuck did you go to England?”

I didn’t bother reminding him that I’d played a summer in the British American Football League.

“*Brilliant.*” He shook his head. “Striking. Ravishing. Stunning. Elegant. Dazzling. So many other choices, asshole. Brilliant...”

He continued muttering until he caught sight of Dana, daggers shooting from her eyes. She held up her hand, miming a camera and reminding us we were supposed to do nothing other than smile and create moments for the photographer.

When I looked back at Maddie, her face had returned to its normal color. She lowered her flowers and gave me a smile so

sweet that any annoyance melted away. I shook my head, smiling back at her.

Mitch and Kate didn't write vows, and the officiant made quick work of the ceremony, but she wasn't fast enough to move through before Maddie was sobbing silently, her shoulders shaking beneath exhales as she struggled to catch her breath.

When Mitch kissed Kate for the first time as his wife, I thought Maddie was going to drown in her tears. Never had I met someone so in love with love. Standing next to her ex-husband, it made me sad that she'd been missing it. Maddie was a woman who should have that happiness. Not just because she believed in it, but because she deserved it.

And why couldn't I be the one to give it to her? I loved Maddie. I had loved her since we were kids, and I'd fallen in love with her when we were hardly adults. She loved me too, and whatever was going on between us—it was electric, but it wasn't just lust.

As Mitch and Kate walked down the aisle, this time as husband and wife, I held my arm for Maddie, waiting for her to join me as we left in the procession. Her tears hadn't stopped, but they weren't torrential, and I leaned over, kissing the side of her head as she took my arm. She sniffled, giving Sam a little wave. Sam may favor Andy's looks, but to my amazement, he was crying just like his mama.

The two smiled at one another, an acknowledgement of their hearts, and it nearly stopped me in place. It was intensely

sweet, but it was also a reminder of Andy's warning.

This wasn't just me and Maddie, and her life existed beyond the grounds of this inn. Days of celebrating weren't the same as days of working, paying bills, sending kids off to school, or juggling responsibilities. I swallowed thickly as she leaned into me, steadying her breaths and calming her tears.

"That was such a beautiful ceremony," she whispered. Taking a deep breath, she grasped my arm as we began walking out of the gazebo. "Don't let me fall, Wes. Please."



"This is my *song!*" Maddie cried, throwing her arms in the air as she swayed her hips to some beat I didn't recognize.

She wasn't alone, and most of the bridal party was on the dance floor with her. A swarm of guests, too. I rested my head in my hand, elbow on the table, and watched her with a smile on my face.

"Do you realize how creepy you look?" Mitch asked, sitting down next to me and taking a swig from the beer in his hand. "Just staring like that?"

I punched his arm. “Shut up, Mitch.”

He rested his elbows on his knees, leaning forward and dangling the bottle between them as he peeled the label off, not looking at me. “Are you ready to go home tomorrow, superstar?”

Home. Wherever that was. California didn’t feel quite right. Montlake didn’t feel quite right. I couldn’t live forever at this inn with Maddie.

“Does it matter?” I asked, sounding morose when I didn’t intend it.

Mitch made a sound in the back of his throat, some sort of scoffing, and looked at me with a squint. “Of course it matters, Wes.”

He said nothing for a while, just stared at his wife as she clutched Maddie’s hands, twirling and twisting with one another as they laughed with joy. “But promise me that this isn’t it, okay? This isn’t the last time you come back here, and you don’t wait ten goddamn years, either.”

“Yeah, I can promise you that.”

Mitch nodded, finishing his beer and setting it on the table. “She’ll be okay either way. You know that, right? She’s strong as hell, and she can take care of herself.”

I kept my eyes on Maddie. The alluring shake of her hips. The shining of the lights over the dance floor sparkling in her eyes. The absolute radiance on her face as she emitted happiness and love.

“I know she can.” My voice broke, and I cleared my throat, dropping my head to stare at my hands.

Mitch gave a playful smile and slapped my shoulder. “Doesn’t mean she should have to.” He stood up. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go dance with my *wife*.”

As if perfectly timed, as soon as Mitch was at Kate’s side, the band changed to a slow song. Kate threw her arms around Mitch’s neck and buried herself against him, hugging tight and closing her eyes. Mitch kissed the top of her head, swaying with her.

Maddie stood watching, her hands on her hips, barefoot on the dance floor and lost in thought.

“What are you thinking of?” I whispered into her ear as I approached from behind, standing close enough that I could see her arms rise in goosebumps as my breath hit her neck.

She hugged her waist, swaying to the song. “That I would like to dance with you.”

She leaned her head back onto my chest. I wrapped my arms around her, caring little that curious eyes watched on. We moved together slowly, back-and-forth movements as she brought her hands up over mine. Nuzzling into her neck, I planted a kiss before gripping her hand and spinning her to face me. Maddie’s face lit up.

She looked at me for a moment before resting her head on my chest and sighing deeply. “This is nice,” she said.

*Fuck nice. This is everything.*

“Maddie, about last night, and the things I said...” It felt important to acknowledge, although for all I knew she remembered little of it anyway.

“It’s okay, Wes,” she said quietly, running a hand over my shoulder and another across my back. It was a tender movement, gentle and slow, her touch soft, but it lit me up.

“I know you said some things in the moment, and it made me just as hot, okay? I’m well aware it was emotions and sex carrying us away and not a suggestion or offer.” She sighed again, her breasts pressing against me with the exhale.

I ran my nose through her hair, enjoyed the scent of her. The sweet floral of the flowers combined with the light fragrance of roses in her lotion. The lotion in a small white jar, pink writing scrawled on the plastic of a brand I couldn’t remember. I’d seen it in her room, smelled it when I picked it up as I waited for her to shower, and immediately recognized it as her.

“I’m sad to say goodbye, Wes, but I’m not eighteen anymore. I knew what it meant to be with you while you were here, and I understand what comes after.”

“Maddie.” God, I couldn’t fucking get it out. All the things I wanted to say.

“Do you remember when we were at the cabin and you were propositioning me to sleep with you?” The band slid effortlessly into another slow song, and I was grateful for it.

“I do,” I whispered.



Couples swayed and rocked around us, bodies linked and tied. Some friendly, some passionate. Some hands behaving, others roaming wildly. I kept mine mostly politely positioned, knowing Maddie's family was in attendance.

“You asked me about why I liked reading romance stories so much, and I told you it was because I liked the idea of a connection between two people.”

I smiled, resting my cheek against the top of her head and nodding gently. “And I believe I said ‘Call me crazy, but I like the idea of a connection between two people, too.’”

Maddie stopped dancing and looked up at me. “That’s—that’s exactly what you said.” Her eyes went wide for a moment as she shook her head and went back to resting against my chest. “Your memory is freakish, Wes.”

“Just for you,” I mumbled, kissing into her hair and nuzzling my cheek closer to her face. I wanted to take her hand, walk off the dance floor, and be alone, but we both had speeches to make, and as selfish as my need for Maddie was, tonight wasn't about us—or so I told myself.

“You're already getting laid tonight, superstar. You don't have to try so hard.” She slid her hands down and wrapped them around my waist, pulling me closer. “We have a connection, Wes. We always will. I know the realities of our lives, and I don't expect more than the time we have. I don't want you to think I'm worrying about the things you're saying or the implications of being with you while you're here.”

Maybe it should have relieved me to hear this comfort, but it didn't. It made me feel worse. Maddie had steeled herself to any feelings about this extending beyond the wedding, or maybe she really wanted nothing beyond this. Either way, she was giving me an out. I could walk away and not feel bad. Not worry about breaking her heart like last time.

But what if that was breaking *my* heart?

I didn't have an answer for that, and as the song faded out and the band went quiet, preparing for speeches, toasts, cake cutting, and whatever else happened at weddings, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was running out of time I couldn't get back to figure it out.

## *Twenty-Three*

### *Maddie*

*D*eepest breath. Don't pass out. You're almost done.

“Kate is the sister I always wished Mitch was, and I'm so grateful she promised in front of God, family, friends, and caterers that she would stay with him forever because there are no take backs. You're stuck, Kate.” I blew her a kiss. “I love you, and I love my dopey brother. You deserve all the happiness in the world.”

I toasted along with all the other guests as laughter and applause rang out in the group. Clanking silverware on glass called for more kisses between the newlyweds, and Mitch didn't turn down an opportunity to French kiss Kate in front of everyone.

“Marking his territory, clearly,” Wes said with a chuckle as he stood up to speak, smoothing down his tie and buttoning his jacket. Good grief. He looked dapper.

Mitch continued with his grotesque making out, despite Wes' attempt to dovetail into his speech.

Wes cleared his throat, but Mitch paid no mind. "I'll just wait until he comes up for air."

The crowd laughed, and Kate pushed Mitch off her, blushing and shaking her head. Mitch wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and gave a thumbs up to Wes.

"Are we good?" Wes asked Mitch.

Mitch nodded. "We're good, superstar." There was more laughter at that, and Wes smiled affectionately.

"What Mitch is trying to tell you all is that, until Kate, *I* was his universe. Now I'm just another star in the sky. Kate, though, Kate is his sun. The most important star in his galaxy. She lights his world, guides the currents of his motivations, and makes life possible. Without her, his world wouldn't just be dark—it would be incomplete, maybe even uninhabitable, because we all have forces in our lives, the people who make it worth living. Who make life a little less wobbly and a little more steady."

A blush crept along my cheeks. Was he talking about me?

I closed my eyes, afraid to look at Wes. Afraid I'd fall apart if I did. Or maybe I'd fall into him, deeper and more in love than I wanted to admit, because this wasn't sappy speeches and flutes of champagne. This wasn't calls for kisses and wedding dresses. This was Wes and Maddie, two friends who

loved each other. Friendship first. I couldn't fall into his orbit because I didn't even live in his world.

I opened my eyes, catching the end of his speech and shaking my head to right myself.

“So please join me in toasting two forces with love so strong and vast, there's no doubt it's as infinite as the universe.”

“Hear, hear,” voices called, mingling with *whoops* and whistles. Mitch's grin covered his entire face, and Kate had tears on her cheeks. Reaching a hand up, it didn't surprise me to find tears of my own.

Wes sat down, taking his seat next to me at the main table and giving a low whistle. “So bad I made you cry?”

“Shut up,” I mumbled, bumping him with my shoulder and blotting under my eyes with my napkin. *This* was why Kate and Mitch opted to do wedding photos *before* the ceremony. “Is my makeup smudged?”

Using his hand to lift my chin, Wes inspected my face, turning my jaw from side to side.

“Absolutely destroyed,” he said softly. “And still the most beautiful woman out here.”

“Okay, Wes,” I grumbled. “Now I'm considering revoking that guaranteed sex because you're laying it on a bit thick now.”

He leaned closer, his lips brushing the shell of my ear and his voice a low rumble that could move every sensation to the

most sensitive places of my body. “I’ll lay it on however I desire, and I can promise it will be *thick*.”

I choked on a laugh, well aware I’d set myself up for that one.

Wes’ hand dropped under the table, his palm smoothing over the silk of my dress in a steady swath of movement that had the power to make everyone around us disappear.

“I don’t want to sleep tonight, Maddie. We don’t have to make love or fuck or anything if you don’t want to. I want to be with you, hold you, kiss you, feel you. I need to do it for every available minute I have.”

How his words could so thoroughly saturate my heart and yet simultaneously break it was beyond me, but there would be plenty of time to nurse my wounds after tomorrow. Tonight I’d let it soak in his affections.

Despite this decision, I couldn’t stop myself. “Maybe you could stay a few more days? If you don’t have to get back to anything?” *Or anyone.*

As soon as I suggested it, I wished I hadn’t. Wes’ jaw clenched tightly and his hand left my leg, though I didn’t think that was purposeful.

“I...” He ran his hand along the back of his neck, that signal of discomfort and nervousness that he’d carried since he was a kid. “I have some obligations I can’t get out of, Maddie. I’m sorry. My schedule—it’s kind of nuts for a while.”

I bit back the sting. *It’s not like ten years ago.*

Ten years ago, I didn't understand what being busy could mean to someone with intense expectations. Ten years ago, I didn't know that you could actually survive your heart being ripped out of your chest if you just carried on as if you hadn't needed it in the first place.

"Of course," I said, straightening up and giving my best attempt at a smile.

"Maddie," he said warningly.

So often Wes' ability to read me and understand what I was thinking brought me fulfillment, but at that moment I hated he saw my feelings for what they were. I wanted to hide from him, to pretend his departure wasn't going to hit with an impact that would leave a permanent crater in my heart.

I forced my smile higher. "Wes, I know. It was a casual ask. You have a life you're getting back to, and I... I have a bookstore to run and I'm thinking of getting a cat." I cringed. "Just one cat. Not, like, six or anything. I'm not becoming a crazy cat lady."

Jesus. Well, at least I took my heels off hours ago. I'd hate to have this foot in my mouth with stilettos attached.

His eyebrows furrowed as he looked at me, scanning my face. "Say what you want, Maddie. Tell me what you need."

His attempt to comfort and soothe were the antithesis of comforting and soothing. I was embarrassed and ashamed of letting my feelings run away from me.

*I want you to be with me, and I need you to stay.*

I pushed it away. “I want to spend our last night together enjoying one another.” I reached for his hand, taking it in mine and giving a squeeze. “And I need to start that immediately. Don’t you dare let go of my hand, Wes Cohen. Let’s go shut down the band.”

His grip didn’t break when we stood, and he held my hand through every dance, every conversation and goodnight to friends, the walk back to his room, and while we made love.

Slowly, almost agonizingly so, adoration and fondness between us, Wes and I made love three times that night.

We didn’t sleep, the fervor of our passion for one another a stimulant to drive us onward. There’d be coffee in the morning, naps in the afternoon, and a chance for recovery when we were thrust back into our normal lives. For that night, we had an ardent task of using our time wisely.

My eyes stayed open all night, sleep be damned, and with every climax I found his eyes watching me just as intently as I was watching him.

Every toe curl, every fistful of sheets in a guttural cry of passion. Every caught breath, every exhale of pleasure. Every raw slap of our bodies, every comforting touch between us. Every pass of his tongue, every hungry kiss. I felt it, heard it, tasted it, saw it—vivid and heightened, like a fever dream.

In four days we made up for ten years, and for eight hours we filled ourselves for an uncertain future. Maybe we’d do this again. Maybe we wouldn’t. I didn’t want to look back and see the days gone, so I held the moment like a chapter in my life, a



story written between us that I could memorize and recite, revisit and reread when I desperately needed the comfort.

On the last pass of our bodies, as the sun made its way through the curtains and illuminated a day I wasn't ready for, I rode Wes with lazy circles, sliding along him unhurriedly. I made love to him with a methodical pace as his hands held my breasts and encouraged my descent into an orgasm that rocked through me. Everything in me tightened and swelled. When I came, I came apart, collapsing on him as he found his own release a minute later. I tried hard, so desperately hard, not to cry.

I failed.

His hand ran along the back of my neck, wrapping in my hair as he pulled me to him. "It wasn't enough time for me either," he whispered.



The black town car rolled slowly down the dirt road to the inn, an ominous feeling sinking in my gut as it pulled up to reception.

“Who’s it going to be?” Mitch asked, his voice elevated playfully but his face flat.

Cassie rubbed her lower back, leaning forward with a groan. “Only three possibilities. If it’s not my car, it’s Wes’. If it’s not Wes’, it’s Mitch and Kate’s. We should have thought this through and taken an Uber XL to the airport. Saved some money.” She held a small electric fan to her face, blowing softly on her damp skin.

Diego wrapped an arm around her, his hand running over her belly. “You want to squeeze into an Uber XL with four other adults and their luggage, my love? I can cancel the town car.”

Cassie elbowed him and he smiled at her, willing to do whatever he needed to make her happy. I wasn’t sure I believed in a perfect match, but Diego for Cassie may make me rethink that.

I moved next to Cassie, resting my head on her shoulder. “I’m glad you came early, and I wish you would give up on Florida and move back here. It’s not right without you.”

Cassie leaned her head to mine. “I wish you weren’t such a vampire and could tolerate sunshine. You could always move to Florida.”

I sighed at the ridiculous request. The boob sweat alone was powerful enough to dissuade that possibility.

“I’ll be there when she’s born, Cassie, and stay as long as you need me to, okay?” I looked at her beautiful bump, so

fucking happy for my best friend.

“So if I say I need you until she’s eighteen...”

“I’m not moving to Florida.” I paused. “But I’ll come when you need me, and I’ll get you a wine club membership. I’ll upgrade to spirits when she’s a teenager.” Cassie groaned with the thought, likely running through her own teenage years in a flash of mental pictures, like a horror film.

“Narvaez party?” the driver asked, stepping out of the town car and popping the trunk.

Cassie straightened up, throwing her arms around me and nuzzling into my neck. “I’m going to miss you, Mads.”

“Me too, Cass.” I hugged her extra tight, knowing that when I flew to Florida in a couple months, she would transform herself and her life in completely mind-blowing ways. I stepped back, wiping my cheeks as another town car pulled up behind the first.

“Sheffield party?” the driver asked, the same sterile and professional tone as the first driver as she popped the trunk and stood next to it.

Mitch whooped and threw his hands up. “Aruba, baby!” Grabbing his and Kate’s bags, he shoved them into the trunk and grabbed her hand. “See you, assholes!”

He laughed as every jaw dropped. Slowing down and grinning, Mitch said, “I’m kidding, guys. Come here!” Everyone circled together, arms wrapped around shoulders,

heads together in a giant circle of affection. “You guys came together to make me and Kate happier than a pig in shit.”

I groaned. “Mitch.”

“What?” He feigned offense. “It’s a classic. Anyway, Maddie’s objections aside, you guys came together for us, and fuck if it doesn’t make my heart—my heart—”

The emotion in his voice cracked, and Cassie’s eyes lit up. She held up three fingers, and I shook my head, holding up two. “My heart so damn...”

The tears came in two, and I balled my fist triumphantly. “Yes,” I hissed.

“Full,” Mitch finished, his mouth agape. “Jesus Christ, Maddie.”

“Sorry,” I whispered, not meaning it. I was undefeated this weekend. Cassie and Mitch flipped me off, but I didn’t care. Their wrath was worth being right.

Mitch shook his head. “I’m going to take my *wife* on the trip of her dreams. If she wasn’t already pregnant, she’d sure as shit come home stuffed. You assholes enjoy the sweltering humidity of Florida, the traffic of LA, and the whatever the fuck it is you’ll be doing Maddie.”

My cheeks flamed and Mitch grinned wildly, breaking away and taking Kate’s hand as he escorted her to the car, keeping his hand on her lower back as she got in. “I love you, assholes.”

“We love you too,” I mumbled, mostly believing it.

Cassie and Diego gave last hugs and goodbyes, leaving on the dusty trail of Mitch and Kate. Wes and I stood, waiting.

“What time is your flight?” I asked, checking the time on my phone. “I thought the cars were all supposed to come at eleven.”

Wes nodded. “They were, but I pushed my car for noon.”

I kicked at the pavement beneath my feet and crossed my arms. “Why?”

Wes ran his hand along my arm. “So we could do this goodbye differently.” He lowered his voice as a few guests passed, lugging bags out front to wait for their own cars. I waved to my aunt Dora and grabbed Wes’ elbow, pulling him away from prying eyes.

“You mean you don’t want to stand in an airport while a security guard yells at us to move it along and I bawl and confess I don’t want to really move?” I shrugged. “Seemed like a storybook ending to me.”

“I don’t need storybook endings, Maddie, but I want to rewrite the scene.” He ran his hand over the back of his neck as he shifted his weight between legs and looked at his feet. “I told you that day, I said the hardest part of leaving is—”

“Looking back and seeing the person still standing there,” I finished, closing my eyes. I could still hear the words, his voice not as deep, his face not as filled out, but the regret just the same.

Wes nodded, raising his eyes to look at me. “Yeah. Then I left and didn’t look back.”

“And I stayed, standing and watching you leave,” I whispered, hugging myself.

Reliving that day wasn’t exactly an exercise of enjoyment. It was a tender memory, sore and raw to this day. There’d been so many moments between us that brought me delight and contentment, but that was one that was excruciating, even a decade later.

Wes reached for my hands, taking them and squeezing. “This time you go, Mads. I’ll stay and watch you go. You leave, and you don’t look back.”

The tears in my eyes embarrassed me, and I swatted my hand to wipe them away. That wasn’t how I wanted to say goodbye to Wes. How we ended our time. I wanted there to be laughter, joking, playfulness. I didn’t want to cry and sob and ache. I appreciated his symbolic gesture, but it wasn’t the solution to my sadness.

“You idiot,” I said, my voice breaking. “Even if I don’t look back, I’m still looking back.” I wiped my cheeks and took a deep breath. I wanted a happy goodbye, and I was going to get it.

“Wes, I appreciate you wanting to give me a chance to say goodbye differently, but that implies we’re actually saying *goodbye*. We’re not. We’re saying ‘see you later.’ I don’t know when later will be, or what it will be like when we do actually

see each other again, but I can tell you that goodbye is a word that does not exist between us.”

I wanted to leave us in better condition than we’d found each other days ago. I was confident that I was.

“Our connection, our friendship, it is everything. I want nothing but good things for you, Wes, and every time I see you, I will hug you and remind you of that.”

I knew it was likely that one day our hugs would shift, maybe shorten, become chaste, or even include other people besides one another, but I was sincere with wanting good things for Wes. Even when those good things didn’t involve me.

“We’re going to do this better,” he said softly, his hand caressing my hair as he stared into my eyes. “This... friendship. We’re going to do it better this time.”

“We are,” I agreed, smiling at him.

Wes cleared his throat, looking at me expectantly. “So, did you make it through them all?”

“Make it through them all?” I repeated, as if I had a hearing problem instead of simple confusion.

“The phases, Mads.”

*Three Phases.* Somehow I’d completely forgotten about them, the need for them unnecessary when I relaxed into my time with Wes.

Phase One: Get Stable. I'd definitely done that leading up to the wedding. Routine, consistency, better health, and better work/life balance. High-five to me!

Phase Two: Move On. Had I moved on? Yes. I certainly had let go of the grief of what I would not have with Andy. I said yes to things I didn't want to do, and I allowed myself to take a chance with Wes, despite the limited time between us.

Phase Three: Begin Again.

Like ten years ago, I stood on the precipice of beginning a new chapter in my life, starting with this goodbye.

I was ready to begin again, and while it wasn't with Wes, it was going to be with someone, and I was going to be okay. This time it would be a purposeful choice, not made in fear and inexperience, because now I could trust myself to do whatever came next.

"I've definitely made it through," I said confidently. "So thank you, Wes."

His mouth spread into a phenomenal grin, a wattage so high it illuminated everything within me. "Cassie wasn't sure if this—" He pointed between us. "Would help or hurt the process."

"Help," I said with a firm nod. "Definitely helped. You always help me, Wes, even when I don't immediately see it. I know we started this with an intention to learn all the physical things we could, but that left me with so much more, just like



this time will, too. I'm grateful for it, and I'm grateful for you."

When one of his hands wrapped in my hair and the other around my waist, I knew that was it. It was our see you later, but it was entirely possible the kiss we shared could be a goodbye of its own. When his lips pressed to mine, I leaned into him, taking his mouth deeper, unsure if we'd have a kiss like that again.

The strength of his lips against mine, the tangling of our tongues, and the feeling of my heartbeat against his chest brought a soft moan that echoed between us. Whether starting with him or me, I wasn't sure, but it would stay with me. A reminder of what contentment truly sounded like.

The pain of pulling away from one another was searing, but it had to be done. With a soft brush of his lips on mine, Wes mumbled, "Go, Maddie."

I shook my head, my forehead pressed to his as I held my tears and willed for the strength to keep gratitude ahead of sorrow. "No. We'll leave at the same time, and neither of us will stand waiting, okay? I want all the seconds between us before we don't have them any longer."

Wes didn't argue, his head pressed to mine as we swayed together. When it was time for him to leave and me to go home, we kissed again. It wasn't desperate, but it was craving, like a last pass between us of the permission to love one another at that moment, without apologies, and without expectations.

“See you, Wes,” I said, holding his hand until the last possible moment.

“See you, Maddie,” he whispered, kissing my cheek one last time.

We let go of one another, watching for a moment before we turned away and left in separate directions. This time, no one stood watching or waiting.

*Phase Three*

***Two Months Later***

## *Twenty-Four*

### *Maddie*

“People complain about *everything*,” Manny explained.

“But sometimes being a mail carrier has some perks.”

I leaned forward, propping my head in my hand as I stared at his handsome face, glowing in the candlelight. “Such as?”

Manny smiled, so generous with his affection and easy-going. “Delivering legal bills to a particularly *popular* customer.”

I laughed and pointed a finger at him. “I *am* popular.” I dropped my hand and fiddled with my napkin. “And like I said, I overpaid and they’re righting their wrongs.”

Manny wiped his mouth with his napkin and winked. “Tonight is still my treat.”

Sitting across from him at Geo’s, a small pub and bar at the edge of town, I watched Manny with a grin. He was good company. Witty, fun, *funny*, and interesting.

“How many dogs have chased you?” I asked him, picking up a fry and dipping it into Manny’s ketchup. He didn’t even blink, a test of his interest in me. Another date last week had nearly flipped the table when I made the same move.

He shrugged, his broad shoulders strong and muscled beneath a simple t-shirt and blazer. I wasn’t yet used to seeing Mail Manny in civilian clothes, but he looked very, very good.

“Enough to make me not like dogs.”

“*Psychopath*,” I hissed. “Only psychopaths don’t like dogs.”

“Maddie,” he deadpanned. “You have a cat.”

I held up my hands. “I hate dogs,” I said. “I’m a psychopath too. Why do you think I agreed to go on a date with you?”

It was only our second date, but it was clear from the start that Manny was not only handsome, but I liked being around him. He was relaxed and adaptable, comfortable. He wasn’t trying too hard, and that translated into a self-assured confidence that felt gravitational.

Despite these very desirable qualities, I was still hesitant to end a date anywhere other than at our cars in the parking lot. Tonight I was going to let him kiss me, though. I think. Probably. It was possible.

I gritted my teeth at the thought, wondering what the hell was wrong with me. It had been nearly two months since the wedding, and while I was still riding the wave of it all, I’d settled into a comfortable float in my life.

Work was going well, my staff were an immense help to the shop and allowed me to take days off. I'd started dating. A few disastrous attempts, but mostly good, like this date with Manny.

Sam started fourth grade and was happy at school, still in drama while sitting on the sidelines at football. Andy proposed to Maria, and the two would jet off to Hawaii with Sam and the grandparents for a small and intimate elopement next week. This timed well, because I was leaving in a week to be with Cassie as she prepared to give birth.

Things were good. Life was moving on and unlike before, I was moving with it.

When we'd finished our meal and let the conversation simmer, it was do or die time. Standing at my car, back pressed against the door as Manny leaned one arm against it, he moved closer.

*My first post-Wes kiss.* It felt like some sort of test, and I braced myself for it.

*Relax, dummy. You're supposed to relax.* I listened to my obnoxious brain, smoothing my lips and not stopping Manny's approach.

His hand reached for my cheek, tracing it gently with his palm as he cupped my face and brought his lips to mine. Soft at first, asking permission, it wasn't long before he pressed his mouth harder to me and nudged his tongue to mine. It wasn't invasive, and if I were being honest, it was good. Manny was a

great kisser, his lips amorous and hungry, yet tender and soft in the next pass.

When our mouths broke, he gave a playful smile and tugged on the strands of hair over my shoulder. “Should we...”

*Should we continue this?* He was asking, and I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t charming and tempting. Giving a chaste kiss on his cheek, I shook my head. “Second date, Manny? What kind of girl do you think I am?” It was a playful attempt to buy myself time for something I wasn’t yet ready for, and everything in me felt stupid for not being ready for it.

“I think you’re amazing, Maddie, and I can’t believe you finally let me kiss you.” He planted a soft kiss on the side of my head and pushed off from the car. “Will you let me take you out again?”

I nodded, my chest feeling warm at the thought. “I’d like that.”

I meant it.

The house was quiet when I got home. Andy had Sam tonight, and his nights were the only time I went out with men. While I’d been going on regular dates, I didn’t want Sam to know it. He was still asking about Wes and whether we’d see him again.

Heading to the kitchen, I grabbed a glass and filled it at the sink. I turned around and leaned against the counter, deep in thought.

Coming home from a date left me with mixed emotions. Excited, anxious, disappointed, and guilt-ridden. I wondered when I'd get to the point where the bad feelings eased or disappeared, and I could fully enjoy myself without comparisons. The thief of joy, comparing men in my life didn't serve anyone well.

Bouncing off the sink, I went to set my glass on the table when I saw the pile of mail that Sam must have collected when he came home from school. Bill, bill, bill. I shuffled through the letters, ending on one that brought a humongous smile to my face.

A white envelope with blue ink block letters rested in my hands, the comfort of its paper an immediate balm to any tender longing.

It was the first letter from Wes since the one he sent letting me know he'd be at Mitch's wedding. We had kept in touch, though, as best we could.

In the last couple of months we managed a few phone calls to check in and say hi, keeping things friendly and benign except for one call, but that was perhaps a moment of weakness on both our parts and hadn't happened again. He texted occasional hellos or silly memes, and only twice asked me to send him pictures of my tits, though I suspected he was being playfully provocative and not serious.

Just to tease him, I sent back a picture of breasts that weren't mine from a geriatric porn site. It was hilarious, until he sent back a shot of old, saggy balls.



Even though part of me craved constant communication with Wes, I was proud of our friendship, and proud of myself for not being stuck in a past that held fond memories that couldn't translate to the real world.

I practically skipped up the stairs, closing my door behind me and sliding down until I rested flat on my butt.

Like a bad habit, I pulled the letter to my nose and inhaled, accepting the risk of germs for the slight possibility that I'd catch some of Wes' scent. It wasn't there, the freshness of earthy undertones and bergamot, but I still smiled, knowing that his hands had held this letter. Recently, too. It didn't take long for mail to get from California to Washington.

Tearing into it without care, I squealed as glitter exploded from the envelope, scattering *everywhere*.

"*Wes!*" I screeched, though he wasn't in the room with me. My sweet tabby cat was, though, and Nancy leaped up in a startled state with the commotion. Apologizing, I held my palm out for her. She came to me, but instead of accepting the offer of soothing pats, she scratched at the door frame, demanding to leave.

"Yeah, okay," I mumbled. "I don't blame you." Nancy trotted down the hall, disappearing into Sam's room, and I shut myself in my room again, hand clasped over my mouth as I shook my head. "Asshole."

Fortunately, there was at least a letter to go with the sparkly guts of PVC that now lived all over my carpet. I was still muttering profanities and grievances as I unfolded the letter.

*Hey Mads!*

*Surprise! Wait, no, don't crumple this letter before you read it, please. No, wait! Forgive me, please. I promise it was all in good fun. Wait—no—Maddie, wait! Pleeeeeeeeeaaaaase!*

*You're still reading, aren't you? Of course you are. You're an avid reader with a voracious literary appetite. A woman who loves books of all persuasions, though you favor romance. I can't fault you for that, Maddison Marie. I'm a sucker for a happy ending, too. No, not that kind of happy ending, you smarmy woman. Quit being inappropriate.*

*You're dying to know why I'm writing to you and what I'm going to say because you're a curious person and your mind wants answers to all of those questions it comes up with. It's one thing I find endlessly fascinating about you, Mads. You're like this goddamn confetti. Somehow, you saturate and permeate into everything, my thoughts included.*

*But this isn't a letter about that, and the confetti isn't a celebration of it. It's a simple letter, really.*

*Hello Maddie. I was just thinking of you and wanted to say hi.*

*Love,*

*Wes*

Biting my lip, I reached for my phone, taking a minute to prepare a message back to Wes.

“There,” I mumbled, taking a screenshot of an instant quote for carpet cleaning and sending it to him.

He messaged back a few minutes later.

**Wes: Ah. I see my letter arrived.**

*Indeed it did.*



Squeezing my hands over my temples, I tried to rub the block out. The first half of my story outline was effortless, rushing to paper in days of cascading creative flow. The second half was proving to be more of a challenge. I had the characters. I had their story. I just didn't know their ending yet.

My kitchen table wasn't the most inspiring place for writing, but the morning at the shop had been so busy and I could only ignore customers for so long before it *actually* became neglect. Sam was on a plane to Kauai with his dad. I was packed and ready to leave for Florida the next day, and I just wanted to smooth out this writer's block.

For years I thought my writing career was over because it hadn't even begun, but in the last several weeks I decided that

beginning again meant starting over. That start wasn't exclusive to my love life.

"Okay," I said, exhaling and massaging my temples. "If it were me, what would I want to happen?"

I stared at a blank screen as my characters tried to find the courage to acknowledge their feelings for one another. I'd written myself into a corner. A space I hated as a reader, where my characters could solve this problem with a simple conversation and some honesty.

Rubbing harder, I closed my eyes and thought. And thought. And thought... And thought I heard the doorbell. Opening my eyes, I heard it again. I wasn't sure if this was a divine intervention or an unwelcome distraction, but I closed my laptop and trudged to the front door.

"This better not be Greta," I mumbled. Greta was my neighbor, and she was fond of complaining that Nancy pooped in her flowerbed.

"She's a cat!" I said, throwing open the door with my claws already out. "Oh."

I stared, blinking at a stranger. He was short, just a smidge taller than me, and rather rotund. He held a clipboard in his hand, looking down at it as I answered. His head bounced up with my screeching and he gave a friendly smile.

"Hello, I'm Mike and I'm from Carpets, Carpets, Carpets. Are you Maddison Sheffield?"

"I am," I answered cautiously. "How can I help you?"

He pointed at his clipboard. “I have a charge order for a full cleaning of all carpets at this residence.”

I threw a hand over my open mouth. “Excuse me?”

Mike seemed like an affable man, charming in his own right, but nothing about his attire or clipboard screamed prank, and I didn’t anticipate him ripping off his clothes for some sort of candy gram or striptease, but I also hadn’t scheduled any cleaning in my house. From Mike at Carpets, Carpets, Carpets, and not even from myself at Maddie Is Lazy, Inc.

“I have a charge order for a full cleaning of all carpets at this residence,” he repeated as he looked at his clipboard again, shifting in his spot. “This is 3124 Fidalgo Avenue, isn’t it?”

I pointed at the illustrious clipboard. “It is, but I didn’t call anyone about cleaning my carpets and I’m not paying for it.” I crossed my arms for dramatic effect.

Mike, a friendly and apparently patient man, gave a cordial smile, even though I probably didn’t deserve it.

“It’s been paid in full, ma’am. I have shoe covers, and if there are any pets in the house, it would be helpful to have them sequestered somewhere safe from escape. I will come in and out of the house occasionally.”

“I’m sorry.” I held up my hand. “Who paid for this, exactly?” I knew the answer, of course, but wanted confirmation.

Mike shrugged his meaty shoulders. “I don’t have that information, ma’am. I’m just here to do my job.”

I would not argue with a man who wanted to do my housework for me. Instead, I held the door open and gestured for him to come in.

“Don’t worry about the cat,” I mumbled, kicking a pile of loose shoes out of Mike’s way. “She’s an indoor/outdoor cat and likes to visit with the neighbors.”

Mike got to work, instructing me to stay off the carpets for several hours after his cleaning, effectively leaving the kitchen and living room available to me, but that was fine. I worked on my writing through the cleaning, saw Mike off, and decided that falling asleep on the couch while watching Spiceworld for the fifth time in less than a week was a perfectly fine way to spend a Saturday night.

I snuggled into a blanket. A little confrontation was in order. It was unlikely Wes would answer his phone on a Saturday night, probably out on a date or at some function or gala or celebrity event, but I could always leave a passive aggressive message letting him know I got his apology.

To my surprise, Wes answered on the second ring. “Hello, Maddison. Good evening to you. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

I choked on a laugh and rolled my eyes, grateful he couldn’t see me. “Hiya, Wes. How are things?” Keeping my tone casual was a challenge, but I succeeded.

He paused, on the verge of breaking. “Things are fine. How are things with you? What’s new?”

I grinned, shaking my head and raising my eyes to the ceiling, desperate not to laugh. “Not too much, not too much. I made a new friend today.”

I wrapped the plush sherpa blanket tighter around me, appreciating its softness as I let Wes’ playful intonation sink through me.

“A new friend? Gee, that’s neat. I bet it felt good. Tell me about your new friend.”

His voice was smooth and deep, and when I closed my eyes, I felt every word pass over me as if it were brushing my skin. He could do that to me, even in a stupid conversation where neither of us wanted to admit why I was calling, waiting for the other to crack.

I lowered my voice into a sultry taunt. “Mhm. His name is Mike. Wes, I don’t mean to be forward, but... I let him *clean my carpet.*”

His laugh was deep and guttural, and he took an inordinate amount of time to let it finish before he caught his breath. I smiled at the sound, staring at my free hand and tracing circles along my knee.

“Listen, Mads. I felt bad about the glitter bomb, but I do not feel bad about hearing you talk about your carpet. In fact, you can call me *any* time to tell me about it, okay?”

I pinched my lip between my fingers and tugged, holding back a laugh. “Oh, there’s nothing to talk about, Wes. I ripped out all my carpet. Bare floors now.”

I expected a laugh, but Wes was quiet for a moment before hissing out a long exhale. “Shit. For real? Cause I’ve got some real hardwood at my house just thinking about that.”

I swallowed and closed my eyes, shaking my head at my foolishness. It was so easy to slip back into it with Wes. Knowing how dumb it was didn’t stop me, either.

“Mhm. I’m leaving for Florida tomorrow, bathing suit weather and all, and I’m terrible at shaving.”

“You are,” he said softly. “What are you doing right now?”

I looked around my living room, the clutter of books next to the couch, unfolded blankets strewn about, and a few protein bar wrappers on the floor nearby. “Um, I’m just having a night in.”

“No hot date this evening?” There was humor in his voice, but I heard the seriousness beneath it.

I considered making some sort of joke about it, but ultimately decided not to. Honesty seemed a better direction to go. “No, not tonight.”

“Not tonight? What about other nights?”

The question ran through me, settling in the pit of my stomach with a seed of something. Hope. That fucking hope. That hope that he was asking because he wanted to tell me not



to, to tell me to never see anyone except him because he wanted to be with me and only me.

I closed my eyes again, shaking my head and repelling the idea.

“I’ve gone on some dates, yes.” It wasn’t his business, and it wasn’t fair for him to ask. Rather than tell him directly like an adult, I made the admission, hoping he was jealous.

“Were they hot dates, Mads?” There was an ache in his voice, and it wasn’t painful.

*Holy shit. He’s jealous.*

The thought may have started in my brain, but it quickly traveled down my body, nestling in my core in the quiet rumbling of arousal. I *wanted* him to be possessive of me. To want no one’s hands on my body except his. I wanted his blood to boil at the thought of me with another man, the way my bones ached at the thought of him with anyone else.

Breathing a little heavier, I stretched out on the couch. “I had a good time,” I said, biting my lip as I ran my hand along my thigh, imagining it was Wes touching me. What I wouldn’t give to have him here with me.

He was whispering now. “How good of a time?”

“Good enough to go out again,” I answered.

He made a sound, almost a growl, and *good lord* if it didn’t make me hot. “Did you fuck them, Maddie?”

My hand slid up my thigh, cresting over my hips and riding along my stomach, sliding under my shirt and reaching for my breast. I circled my nipple with my finger, bringing it to a pert tip and pinching as I arched beneath the pleasure of it.

“Does it matter, Wes? There’s nothing that says I can’t fuck men I date.”

“No, there’s not,” he grumbled. “Did you fuck them? Any of them?”

The rumbling of his discontent awoke my desire. My want. My need. I wanted Wes, but I needed him too. At best I was going to get his words, but maybe, at least tonight, I could live with that.

I changed breasts, my hand finding my other nipple, slightly more sensitive, though maybe it was simply the heightened arousal of my body as I let myself collapse with his jealousy. I wanted him angry, and I wanted him here to take it out on me. To fuck me. *Really* fuck me until my teeth rattled and I couldn’t take anymore.

“Wes,” I moaned, lost in the thought of what I would do with him here. “Does it matter?”

“Maddie, baby,” he whispered, his voice shifting from possessiveness to desire. “Are you touching yourself?”

There was a shuffling on his end, some indistinguishable sounds, and I heard the catch of his breath a moment later, no doubt finding his hands on himself, too.

When I didn't answer, his voice got rough. "Fucking answer me, Maddie." It was the bark of his pleasure, one I knew well by now. The building of his need changed into something uncontrollable, with a bite and force that made demands I never wanted to rebuff.

"I didn't fuck them," I mumbled, my breathing labored as I slid my hand into my panties.

"No," Wes growled. "I don't care about them. Are you touching yourself? Answer me."

The echo of my breath was loud in the receiver as I made no secret of my proclivities. "I am, Wes."

"Tell me what you feel like right now."

"Have you forgotten already?" I teased, my voice low and throaty. "How wet I get for you? My hands—they aren't your hands."

His breath was raspy and broken, and I closed my eyes, picturing his thick cock and imagining his hand as he pumped along it.

"No one touches you like I touch you, do they, Maddie?"

"No," I whispered.

He groaned. "Fucking right. God, I'm so hard, Maddie. I want you on my dick. Your luscious mouth and your tight, sweet pussy. Your thick ass. I want to fuck all of you."

"I'm close," I gasped, my pussy swollen and tight at the edge of my climax. "Have—have you had anyone else?" Jesus.

On the verge of coming and I think to ask about his sex life. “Have you been fucking people and thinking of me?”

He hissed, the pace of his speech erratic. “No. Fuck. No. I’ve been fucking my goddamn hand, thinking about you for weeks and aching for you.” He was on the edge too, and it sank me. I wanted him to tumble over with me. “Come for me,” he rasped. “Come for me, and I’ll come for you.”

“Wes.” My thighs pressed together with the force of my climax. “I’m coming. Oh god,” I whimpered, biting my lip hard enough to leave a mark. The undulating waves of pleasure washed over me, sweeping me into a sated state that was only good enough to take away the edge of my longing.

“Good girl, Maddie. Always my good girl.” Wes sucked in a breath, holding it for a moment and I smiled, thinking of his face when he comes and knowing that in the quiet pause was the start of his orgasm. There was a light grunt, signaling the moment he erupted, and a heavy exhale as he passed through it. His face would relax now, the hunger in his eyes melting and giving way to adoration.

God, I missed him.

“Come to California. Come see me,” Wes whispered.

“I’m leaving—” I started, but Wes interrupted.

“After you see Cassie, come see me. Please, Maddie. I miss you.”

Dumbstruck and with my brain the equivalent to jello, I didn’t understand. “Wes, I can’t leave that long. I have Sam,

and the shop, and, and Nancy.”

He paused. “Nancy?”

“My cat,” I explained. “I can’t leave her too long or the neighbors will snare and relocate her.”

I was trying to make light of an uncomfortable moment. I hadn’t expected the night to go like this, let alone Wes to ask me to come see him.

“Yeah, of course. I understand. It was ridiculous to think you could just come down here.” *Shit*. He thought I was rejecting him.

“It wasn’t ridiculous. It was... unexpected. But like a really great present when you think your friends have forgotten your birthday kind of unexpected, *not* an unwanted unexpected, okay?”

“Yeah, Mads,” he mumbled, but I was afraid the damage had been done.

Suddenly my blanket was too hot, and I threw it off. “Maybe you can come up here again?” I suggested. “We could spend a weekend together?” I tried not to squeak as I said it, the excitement at the idea stealing all my resolve to play this cool.

Wes was quiet for a moment, and I hoped he hadn’t fallen asleep. Maybe he was just thinking it over.

“I wish I could,” he answered finally. “It’s just, with my schedule and some campaigns for a few endorsements—I can’t get out of here for a while. I’m sorry.”

“We’re bad at this.” I said it without thinking.

Wes exhaled into the phone, long and slow. “I wish I could be that person for you, Maddie. I can’t. There’s... There’s so much here I can’t escape.”

Of course he couldn’t. If my life felt hard enough to arrange between work, a kid, and a garden-shitting cat, I could only imagine the juggling act Wes had to do on the regular.

“Will you stay on the line with me while I fall asleep?” I asked.

Wes mumbled something softly that sounded like “Of course, baby,” but it was probably just my desperate longing for his affection, making me think he was using terms of endearment outside of sex.

I closed my eyes, a strange sensation of peace and turmoil mixing within. Like tonight was a clear sign that things were as they should be. Because even when we were trying, it felt impossible to work.

## *Twenty-Five*

*Wes*

“Don’t you fucking hold back, you gorgeous man. I want it all. Everything,” Katarina cooed. “Oh yes, like that.”

Sighing, I shifted my position to get more comfortable. This was getting tedious.

“Almost there,” she mumbled, her attention rapt and her energy intense. “Everything, Wes. Give me everything.”

I dropped my arms and grimaced. “Katarina, there’s only so much I can give when I’m standing shirtless and eating a protein bar next to a pool.”

Katarina lowered her camera, her square jaw locked as her wide eyes sought Monica.

“Monica!” she snapped, locating her across the set as she stood talking with Pam, the creative director for the commercial. “Can you please come here?”

Monica sauntered over, smoothing down her blouse and approaching with a neutral face. Though she showed no visible emotion, the angry sway of her hips in that pencil skirt was a dead giveaway for anyone that knew her. Monica only busted old model moves when she was pissed. She blinked a few times at Katarina.

Monica, towering and imposing, stood nearly a foot taller than the tiny photographer. “Yes?”

I took a step back, running my hand along my jaw and trying to hide a smile. Monica hated when people treated her like a footman. Sure, she was my assistant and coordinated my life, but that possibly made her the most important person here today.

Katarina pointed at me, a pout on her face that made her look even younger than she was. She couldn’t be more than twenty-three and had the ignorant confidence that came with youth. “Can you handle this? I’m not getting anything I can use here.”

“Can I handle this?” Monica repeated, blinking again. She looked at me, and I winked. Somehow Monica withheld her eye roll. She reached for Katarina’s camera. “Let me see.”

Katarina looked hesitant. “Excuse me? These are my shots and I fail to see how you can make an assessment on the quality of the work we’re doing—”

Monica grabbed the camera. “You’d benefit from learning to work with people and accepting what they offer you.”



Katarina opened her mouth to object, but Monica spoke first. “There. Your problem is the angle you’re shooting from. Look at this.” She pointed to the viewfinder. “Angle him thirty degrees in the opposite direction. Shoot from up, you get his jawline.” Monica handed the camera back. “But also, you’re shooting him shirtless next to a pool eating a protein bar. Who does that in real life? Move him to the lawn, lay out some equipment, spritz him so he looks dewy, and get him in the afternoon light as he’s having his post workout snack.”

Katarina shook her head a few times, humbled, and shrugged. “Yeah, I guess we could go that direction.” She recovered and waved her hands above her head. “Take fifteen, people!”

I watched Katarina head into the house the company rented for the shoot in Malibu. “Monica, have I ever told you that you’re one of my favorite people?”

She sighed, crossing her arms. “Wes. I don’t hire the crew. These are ProEnergy people, but how many times do I have to tell you, advocate for yourself here? If it feels like it’s not working or you’re not liking the setup, say something.”

I scratched my head and followed her to the catering table. “Am I allowed to do that?”

I’d spent years following directions, listening to coaches, doing what I was told to do. Running plays that others decided were the right call, showed up for practice at the scheduled time, smiled at events other people told me to go to. On the field, it was my instinct, judgment, and decisions on the line,

and I could *thrive*. I was good at it, and it made me love the sport. Off of the field was an entirely different matter.

Popping a pod into the coffee maker, Monica shrugged. “There aren’t rules to these things, Wes. But I can tell you that you train people what to expect from you, and if you set your bar low like you’re a pliable peon, then they’re going to treat you that way. You’re new to this side of things, but trust me, you don’t want that reputation. Be kind but firm, and tell them what you want. You can’t always get it, but at least you’re advocating for your work.”

I watched her stir a packet of sugar into her coffee and take a long, slow sip as she looked beyond the patio at the rolling ocean.

It was a beautiful October day in Malibu, the kind that made California feel like a desirable place to live. I’d ended my career playing here, but I suppose I could have retired anywhere. Given my commitments were now shifting from training and sport to endorsements, commercials, and ads, LA just made sense as a home base. Today I was okay with that choice. Maybe.

“Do you miss it? Being in front of the camera?” I asked her. Barry had shown me some of Monica’s modeling work over the years, but despite her talent, she found little traction in her career.

“Sometimes,” she answered thoughtfully. “Though if I’m being honest, it’s torturous work with sporadic reward. It’s hard for women, Wes. We’re torn apart and then elevated, only

to be torn apart again. That messes with you. The love/hate rollercoaster of the public eye and public opinion.”

I could understand that. I'd been off the field for a handful of months and so far, the taste of this new career was making me a little sick to my stomach. Or maybe I'd just been feeling that way since I left Montlake. Since I said goodbye to Maddie.

*Not goodbye.* My jaw clenched, and I smoothed a hand over it. *See you later.*

But fuck, when was later when my time was spent on shitty sets looking like a fool and getting photographic proof of it? And for what? The house and the cars and the status and the women?

My house was big enough to have three families living in it, but it was lonely and empty. I had cars I didn't drive because I hired a driving service just to avoid dealing with LA traffic. The pressure of public opinion was weighted and suffocating. I hadn't had the urge to be with any women in the last two months. I was working so fucking hard for things I didn't want.

When I ran it by Monica, she looked hesitant. “Wes,” she said carefully. “There's an important distinction between being overwhelmed by it all, because it is surely overwhelming, and not wanting it. Sometimes, the overlap between the two can cause confusion. Once you step away, you can't get it back. Years of your hard work and efforts, gone.”

She was right. Years of training for a career that I was forever grateful for, and opportunities that were still coming because of that career. Playing was my focus, but playing wasn't an option anymore. I had to shift. Pivot.

*Shit.* I shook my head as soon as the thought hit. *I need to begin again.*

Maybe it wasn't just Maddie who had phases of her life to sort out.

“Can you excuse me for a sec, Mon?” I asked, heading back to the staging area. “I need to make a call.”

She sipped her coffee, staring at the beach. A small hand raise was the most she gave me in return, lost in thoughts of her own.

Shuffling through my bag, I found my phone, suddenly desperate to call and check in with Maddie. I'd done better over the last two months, and we reached out a couple times a week with a quick text, or less frequently, a call.

I was careful with my outreach, knowing we were in a precarious gray space with one another. Too much and I'd be encouraging her to hold off on her own life. Not enough and she'd slip away from me, and I would not let that happen again.

*“I wish I could be that person for you.”* Jesus, I wished I could. Our timing had never worked out, though, had it? Our foundation was solid, but life carried us away from one another and seemed content to keep it that way.

*"I'm sorry I can't be that person."* It was a dismal apology. Not at all what she deserved, and not at all what I wanted to give. Had it hurt her? My shitty inability to explain it to her wasn't likely helping. Did she know I loved her? I hadn't said it. I'd just said I was sorry instead. The order of it felt wrong.

"Asshole," I mumbled, phone clutched as I waited for her to answer.

She'd left for Florida last week, and even though I asked her to give me updates about Cassie, I hadn't heard from her. I couldn't fault her. Our last conversation started with a point of connection and ended with the reality of our distance. It didn't feel like there was a bridge to cover that gap.

The phone continued to ring, and I mentally prepared my message.

*Hey, Mads. Just saying hi. Not meaning to fuck with your life and insert myself whenever I miss you, knowing it doesn't matter because I'm not giving up this shit that I hate for the woman I love. But hey, enjoy—*

"Hello?" a gruff voice answered. Either Maddie had some sort of issue going on, or she'd turned into a man.

Another man was answering her phone.

"Uh, hi, yeah. Is Maddie around?" *Who the fuck are you and why are you answering her fucking phone?*

"Maddie?" He rolled her name over his tongue like he enjoyed the sound of it. My jaw tightened as I counted to ten and tried not to smash my phone in my hand.

“Yes, Maddie,” I repeated calmly.

“Hm. Maddie. You know, the name sounds fam—” He cut off, laughter erupting as I heard a shuffling on the other end.

“Give me that—”

More laughter, this time from both of them.

“Dammit, Javi!” The shuffling silenced, but Maddie’s sweet laughter hadn’t. With the phone reclaimed, she cleared her throat. “Who dis?”

I ran a hand over my face, stifling a groan. “Hey, Mads,” I said, trying to sound cheerful despite everything in me collapsing. I recognized the playful hilt to her speech, the uncontrollable giggle. She wasn’t sober, and she was having fun. “How’s Florida?”

If I could see her now, I would bet my top dollar that she straightened up immediately at the sound of my voice. The way her body responded to me was more instinct than choice, and if I knew her as well as I thought I did, she was running a script of guilt in her mind right now.

*Good.*

*Asshole.* My teeth might grind to dust after this call as I clenched them, yet again, at my shitty thoughts. *She owes you nothing and you don’t get to be a jealous dick because you don’t want anyone else to have her.*

“Wes.” She cleared her throat again. “Hi. I—I’m sorry. Diego’s brother got to my phone first, and, well, you obviously know. He—” Her voice shifted, like she was moving in a way

that caused the phone to distance from her mouth. “He thinks he’s funnier than he actually is.”

There was a faint shout in the background. “I’m fucking hilarious!”

She laughed again, mellifluous and carefree. It sounded so good, so light, that it almost made my jealousy turn down to a simmer instead of boiling over. Almost.

“You’re having a good time,” I observed. “How is Cassie doing?”

“Hold on,” she mumbled, on the move. I heard a door sliding and the surrounding air became stagnant and quiet. “Hi.” She breathed, like she was finally realizing she was on the phone with me. “How are you, Wes?”

“I’m fine,” I said, teeth crunching. *Just having an existential crisis on set and questioning all my life choices.* “How are you?”

“I’m good,” she answered. “Not that I’m not happy to hear from you, but... Are you calling about something?”

*I wanted to hear your voice. I miss you like fucking crazy and I’m trying to keep things friendly, but I think of you all the time. Do you think of me when you’re laughing and playing with other men?*

“No.” I shook my head, staring across the yard of the house, watching Katarina give instructions for setting up a workout station. Guess they really were going to spritz me and make

me stand next to some dumbbells. “I just thought I’d see how Cassie is doing.”

“Oh!” Maddie cried excitedly. “Wes, she’s getting induced *tomorrow*.” The exuberance in her voice was unmistakable. “We’re having a going away party at the house today—just Diego’s family and a few of their friends. Everyone is so friendly and excited about this baby. It’s bustling and fun.”

“I’m sorry.” I wasn’t quite understanding. “Did you say ‘going away party?’”

Maddie’s voice hitched with excitement. “Yes! A going away party. To their sanity. Parenthood is a motherfucker, Wes. It was Javi’s idea, actually. He has two kids, six and four. Sweet little ones.”

Her chattiness only showed her enjoyment of the celebration, and it made me smile. Or maybe it was the fact that this phone-stealing man had children. Single men at a party with a sexy, inebriated Maddie didn’t sit well with me.

“Of course, Javi and the kids have had a tough transition with the divorce, but they’re getting it sorted. As someone well versed in *the Big D*, I can understand some of those struggles.”

*Okay, well. Shit. Nevermind.*

My disappointment took the lead, and I ignored the bait of *the Big D*. “Hey, Mads. I’m glad you’re having a good time. Um. I’m going to go. I just wanted to check on things. Tell



Cassie I'm super excited for her, and send a picture of the baby if you can, okay?"

"Sure," she said quickly. I heard a muffled voice, and Maddie's hand covered the receiver. "... minute... be right..." Her voice came back on, slightly hurried. "Hey, Wes? I have to go." She hesitated, her voice softening. "Thanks for calling."

"Friends call," I mumbled. I wasn't sure if she'd heard me, because she'd already hung up, not waiting for a goodbye.



Friends call.

But what was sitting on the tarmac at the airport, delayed and sweating through nerves, as time moved at a glacial pace when you wanted nothing more than acceleration to an arrival you weren't sure was welcomed?

Asking for a friend.

My leg bounced nervously, the cabin entirely too stuffy. The air was thick enough to chew, the cry of a baby the only thing to make it through the fog of it, and I stared out the window,

trying to remind myself that a five-hour flight was survivable. Even in coach.

Fucking Monica and her sardonic humor.

“Book me the first available flight to Orlando.”

It took me about three minutes after hanging up with Maddie to decide. Faced with a photo shoot for a product that was borderline inedible and getting on a plane to talk to Maddie in person, there was no contest. Maybe my career was time-limited and a finite resource, but so was she.

“Where’s my please?” Monica had asked calmly, but underneath I could hear the annoyance. Rightly so, given the crew at the shoot had done a piss-poor job of recognizing her efforts.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. “It’s urgent, that’s all. *Please*, would you book me on the first available flight to Orlando?” She blinked a few times. “Please?”

“Wes, ProEnergy is in Malibu, not Orlando.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, about to make a decision that was really going to piss off Monica’s husband. “I don’t care. They have enough material to do *something* with it. I have to go, and they can deal.”

She smiled with a slow stretch of approval. “I’ll make the arrangements and be sure to let Katarina know.” She turned to leave, then stopped and pointed a well-manicured finger at me. “*You* have to call Barry.”

“Oh, come on, Monica,” I pleaded. “You’re an intelligent and articulate woman with a gift of delivering information that no one else can rival. It’s why I’ve desperately held onto you all these years and relied on you to keep me alive and functioning. You’re so good at what you do and I don’t tell you that enough.”

It was of no use. She was impervious to my charm, shaking her head and walking away.

“Fine,” I grumbled.

Fast forward several hours to a seat in coach and a slice of humble pie tucked into my carry-on. My knee bounced faster, the air increasing in temperature another ten thousand degrees and a sweat pooling in my armpits. It may have been nerves more than the surrounding environment.

I had no plan other than to show up in Florida and talk to Maddie. And say... I wasn’t sure yet. I hadn’t thought that far ahead, and stuck in a pipeline of heat and suffering, I suddenly felt foolish for it.

I left my shoot. *One* shoot. But what then? I back out of my obligations and move to Montlake? I couldn’t ask Maddie to move to California. It was even more ludicrous to consider that possibility.

*God, it’s fucking hot.* Another baby joined in screaming along with the first, and I rubbed my temples.

I had one year left on the contracts. One year. I could travel back and forth as much as my sponsors allowed and just not

continue my endorsements next year. Or maybe I could take Monica's suggestion and train their expectations. The crew could come to me. Yeah, maybe.

The old woman sitting next to me gave a glare at my knee, the bouncing now shaking her seat as well.

"Sorry," I mumbled.

She made a *humph* in her throat and turned her eyes back to the crossword puzzle in front of her. She gave me approximately six more disagreeing looks as I fiddled with the air above us, opened the window cover and then closed it. Then I repeated it. More heavy sighs and switching between knees for bouncing. Maybe I was the most difficult passenger on this flight.

Finally, she set her crossword down and folded her hands in her lap, her bright red lips puckering as she looked at me. "Are you nervous, dear? Or are you trying to shake me out of my seat? You're welcome to sit in the middle. All you have to do is ask. I'm a generous person."

"No, I'm sorry," I said. "I'm nervous, that's all. I don't mean to be disruptive."

She sighed, her white hair bouncing with her nod. "Nervous about flying? Or something else?"

"Oh, not flying," I said with a puff of masculinity like an idiot. "I flew so often for my career." I looked around. "The team plane was a little more spacious, though."

She raised her eyebrows. “Oh, so we have a celebrity on board this bird. Dear, should I ring the flight crew to let them know? Perhaps they could make an announcement and we can all applaud for you.” She cackled, elbowing the even older woman next to her. “Siggi, did you hear that? We have a *celebrity*.”

Immediately regretting my boast, I shook my head. “No, I’m really not—”

The woman next to my seatmate leaned forward to get a look at me, her glasses dangling from the tip of her nose as her wrinkled face squinted in disapproval. “Never seen him before.”

“I’m not actually a celebrity,” I clarified. “I’m an athlete. Or I was, anyway.”

“Professional shuffleboard player?” my seatmate asked.

I squinted and shook my head, unsure if that was actually a thing. “No.”

She waved her hand dismissively. “Then we don’t care, dear. We’re in our eighties.” She readjusted in her seat to offer a bony hand. “I’m Margaret, dear, but you can call me Nan if you’d like.”

I accepted her invitation and gave a gentle shake of her delicate hand. “I’m Wes, Nan. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“You have a weak handshake,” she observed, before pointing at my knee. “Ah, see? You stopped shaking.” I looked down and noted she was correct. “Sometimes you have to get

out of your head and give yourself a break. I have a granddaughter. She's always in her head, too. Terrible thing to do to oneself, be stuck there. Sometimes you need to let yourself out." She pointed between her and her friend. "We're letting ourselves out and going to Disney World."

Siggi leaned forward and grinned. "The Tower of Terror is my favorite."

The name alone was a nope.

"I'm going to tell the girl I love that I love her," I said. "It's not a rollercoaster, but it makes me want to scream and throw up at the same time."

Nan nodded her head. "That's how you know it's real love," she said with a chuckle. "Does she want to throw up when she thinks of you, too?"

I laughed, not minding the playful elbow that Nan shoved into my rib. "I sure hope so."

"Well, dear. I'm rooting for you."

The crackle of static came over the speaker as our pilot announced we were finally clear to taxi. Dropping my head back, I kept my eyes to the ceiling with gratitude as I felt the plane push back from the gate and everyone broke into applause and cheers. It brought a smile to my lips, the palpable relief of finally making movement.

Nan leaned over. "They're not clapping for you, dear."

## *Twenty-Six*

### *Maddie*

“Can’t you just knock me out?” Cassie begged, pulling on Diego’s t-shirt and pleading for relief. “I don’t need to be awake for this, do I?”

She looked at the nurse, preparing the birth suite for the baby’s arrival. A contraction hit, the wave strong and overtaking her ability to speak. A guttural moan left her lips, the tail end of some choice profanities to follow. “Where’s my fucking epidural?”

Sandy, a calm and patient sweet-faced nurse about our age, gave Cassie a gentle smile. “You’ll need to be at four centimeters dilation before we can give it.” Despite Cassie’s death glare, Sandy held her smile. This only seemed to anger Cassie more.

“You’re welcome to get in the shower or use the ball to help you through your contractions,” the nurse went on. “Until you get the epidural you can walk and labor wherever you’d like.”

“Oh, a free-range fucking labor,” Cassie grumbled. She looked at Diego. “Baby, there has to be some way you can get it for me sooner. Pull some sway at the hospital. Otherwise, what was the point in marrying a doctor? This shit *hurts*.”

He held her hand, kissing softly. “My love, I will rub your back in the shower. Come on.” He helped her off the bed and walked her over.

Sitting in a chair in the corner, I watched Cassie’s face soften with his gentle escort. She peeled off her gown, standing naked in the center of the suite in a pair of hospital grip socks.

With a neutral face, Sandy looked at me and cleared her throat. “If you want to give your friend privacy, I can show you the waiting area by the nursery.”

“No!” Cassie cried, gripping Diego’s arm tightly. “She’s my doula!”

I wasn’t, but I could live with the lie to stay with my best friend when she needed the support. Which, I suppose, was part of what a doula did. I’d also pushed out a baby, and there was something to be said for first-hand experience.

“Your doula?” Sandy chewed on the question. “You’re certified?”

*Certified fibster.* “Yes, I am,” I lied. Diego shot me a look, but I held out my hands and shook my head with a *What?*

Sandy sighed. “I’m not arguing with anyone here about what a mother’s plan is, so long as no one is in the way.



Cassie, sweetie, I'll be back to check you again in a bit and see how far you've progressed. Then we can talk about that epidural and move you to the bed."

I gave Cassie two enthusiastic thumbs up as I watched Sandy leave the room, excited to still be standing like a contestant in some weird elimination reality TV show. "Can I catch the baby?"

Diego looked up from helping Cassie into the shower. "You know what, Maddie? Yes. If you'd like, I'll step aside for you to do it." Dammit. The man could call a bluff.

Scratching the back of my head, I gave a sheepish smile. "No, I'm good. I don't need to see my best friend's vagina and everything coming out of it."

"Shut up," Cassie snapped, her head dropping back in the water as Diego massaged her lower back. "It's a beautiful moment."

"Until you poop," I mumbled under my breath.

Cassie's death glare had only intensified in the last three seconds, nearly bowling me over when her fiery eyes landed on mine. "I'm not going to poop. Not everyone does, and I'm a hold out."

"If you say so..." I trailed off.

Diego rubbed her back faster. "Breathe, Cassie." He looked at me and pointed at the door. "If you're not helping to calm her, you're waiting outside with Javi."

“I’m just saying, it *happens*.” I flinched with Diego’s added fire eyes.

Cassie groaned, swaying her hips as the water cascaded over her and Diego pressed a knuckle into her back. “Did you poop when you had Sam?” she asked.

“No,” I confessed. “But only because I ate a gut bomb of a burger the night before and it cleared me out before I went into labor. Poop before four centimeters and you’ll be okay.”

Cassie’s head shot up, panicked. “What if I can’t poop before four centimeters?”

“Shh,” Diego comforted. “Cassie, look at me. Deep breath. Of all the things to care about, this should be lowest on your list. Birth is beautiful and you’re doing so well, my love. Keep focused.” He pointed at the door. “Maddie, out.”

“But—”

“Out,” he repeated.

Kicking my foot and scuffing the tile, I kept my head down and left with my tail tucked between my legs. Turning around as I slunk out, I stopped half out the door and looked back. “As your doula, I’m just saying, try before four centimeters—”

“Maddie!” Diego roared, his normally patient demeanor giving way to an upset that I did not want to fuck with.

“Okay, okay,” I held up my hands. “But if you change your mind, I’m outside. You won’t poop on the table,” I quickly added in a show of support. I swear Diego was reaching down to remove his shoe and throw it at me.

“How is she?” Javi asked, looking up from his phone at the sound of the door.

I shrugged, tucking my hair into a pile on the top of my head as I sat down next to him. “She’s... coming to terms with some aspects of labor.”

Javi chuckled. “Dare I ask?”

“Hey.” I gave him a playful shove. “Your wife had two babies. You know the realities of bringing life into this world.” Unlike his brother, Javi wasn’t serious. Opposite in most measurable ways, Javi was other level relaxed and cool.

He stared at me. “Yeah, Maddie, and I divorced her,” he deadpanned.

Laughing and swatting his shoulder as I stood up, I tried to hide my yawn. Javi had kept the going away party celebrating far too late last night and I wasn’t prepared for the consequences of a potentially long labor. “I’m grabbing a coffee. You want some while I’m up?”

Javi shook his head. “Nah, I’m good. Your friend is bringing me one back.”

My friend? I pointed at the room. “She’s not going anywhere.”

Javi’s face split into a mischievous grin. “Not that friend.”

His words made sense, but the meaning wasn’t coming together for me. “I don’t know anyone else in Florida, Javi.”

“You know me, Mads.”

Defying my belief, I turned around to see Wes approach, a drink tray of coffees in his hands as he set it down on a table in the waiting room and handed one to Javi.

Wes, my Wes, stood at a hospital in Florida. His dark waves were messy and unkempt, heavy circles under his eyes as if he hadn't slept in days, and he wore wrinkled joggers and a t-shirt, but it was definitely Wes. He looked a mess. And it was... the best.

He held a coffee for me and I stared at it blankly. Unable to compute, I opened and closed my mouth a few times before Javi's barking laughter startled me.

"You broke her." Javi took a sip of his coffee and winced. "I'm going to go call my mom and check on the kids. I'll give you a second to catch up." He stood up, patting Wes on the shoulder. "She wouldn't shut up about you this entire week."

My face flushed. "Javi!" *She speaks!*

He shrugged indifferently. "The man flew to Florida, Maddie, and it wasn't to buy me coffee." He sauntered down the hallway, whistling and waving at the nurses' station.

My eyes found Wes' as the two of us stood staring at one another and saying nothing. Finally Wes broke the silence, setting the coffee down and running his hand along the back of his neck. The simple move made my knees weak.

"I needed to talk to you in person and I know it's probably invasive or intrusive or just insane to fly all the way here to do

it and Cassie is on the cusp of having a baby and there are a million other things to focus on—”

I didn't give him a chance to finish before I took the three steps to him in one giant leap, wrapping my arms around him. “Wes, you're here.” I breathed him in. “Did you just get in? You smell like an airport.”

He chuckled, pulling me closer to him. “I got in a few hours ago, but I wasn't sure which hospital Cassie was at and it took me two tries to get it right.” I squeezed him tighter, hardly believing he was actually here. His nose ran through my hair as he inhaled deeply. “You smell like a field of roses and Jesus, I am disgusting, but I couldn't wait to talk to you.”

Refusing to pull away from him, as if he might disappear when I did, I nuzzled closer into his chest. “You're here. Talk.”

He stepped back, holding me at a slight distance but kept his hands on me. “Maddie, yesterday I stood on the other end of a phone call during a photoshoot, wondering what the hell I was doing with my life. Football—it was everything for so long. My identity, my dedication, my focus. It was also my distraction. Now I don't have that, and I spent all yesterday wondering if I actually wanted the ruins of a career I loved but no longer have. When I realize the cost of that is losing you, I can't justify its worth.”

He exhaled, his eyes rising to the ceiling before meeting mine again. “I love you, Maddie, and I have loved you since we were kids. I assumed because life didn't line up for us that it meant we weren't supposed to be together. That wasn't it.

Maybe it wasn't our time. But Jesus. If it takes me having to move the fucking earth, I will make this work to guarantee our time has come."

"Wes," I whispered, my eyes stinging with tears. "Say what you want."

I needed to hear him say it. To say it was me. He wanted to be with me. We were going to do this, to figure it out, because this kind of love and connection deserved a happily ever after.

Running his hand through my hair, his eyes not leaving mine, he broke me open. "I want you, Maddie. I need you. Not just today, not just tomorrow, but forever." His forehead pressed to mine, his soft whisper brushing the skin on my cheeks. "You told me I was a good man, but you were wrong. A good man would have had the sense to know that *this*, that us, this connection, is worth more than anything. I can't believe it took me so long to get there."

"Well." I wiped my cheeks. "Men do mature slower than women."

Hearing the admission of his heart, his longing, his realization, his efforts—it made me feel like I was fucking flying, and nothing had ever felt so weightless or good.

"But you're wrong," I said, my voice soft. "You are a good man, and I know because you came all this way to tell me something you could have done over a phone call."

Wes chuckled, the sound bouncing between us and bringing a smile to my face. He shook his head. "Maddie, friends call.

Good men show up.”

“No,” I corrected. “The *best* men show up. Wes, I don’t think there’s ever been a time in my life when I haven’t been in love with you. Would you just kiss me now, please?”

*Yes*, he mouthed before wrapping a hand behind my head and pulling my lips to his. Two months without his mouth, his taste, his moans. Two months, and I collapsed in on myself. Falling harder—harder into him, and in love with him.

He deepened our kiss, his tongue seeking refuge within the seams of my lips. His hands slid along my back, beneath my t-shirt, and palmed the raised skin as I shuddered at the familiar feel of his touch. My hands ran through his wild hair, the thickness soft and smooth beneath my fingertips. Somehow everything around us faded, and when the clearing of a throat did nothing to stop us, a swatting of a newspaper did.

Diego stood with his arms crossed, his fire eyes now simmering embers of annoyance. “I thought I was going to have to throw water on the two of you.” He tossed the paper down on a chair in the waiting room.

Pulling me under his arm and tucking into his side, Wes gave a friendly smile. “Hey, D-Man.”

Diego shook his head. “That is the worst nickname any friend has suggested.”

He turned to look back behind the door he held open, checking to make sure Cassie was okay and I leaned into Wes,

keeping my voice a whisper. “It’s really not the worst. I can think of others.”

Diego turned around to look at us. “She’s asking for you, Maddie. She dilated faster than expected and she’s scared. She said if you promise not to talk about poop you can come back.”

Wes raised his eyebrow and I waved him off. “It’s not important,” I said quickly, stepping toward the room. “Can Wes come say hi?”

A decision battle was going on in Big Daddy D’s head as he weighed the choice to let the two of us in, but against his better judgment, he held the door open wider. “Yes, but be quick. I called the nurse and she will be back any minute.”

Wes and I shuffled into the room where a very uncomfortable Cassie sat naked on a giant yoga ball as she rubbed her lower back and rocked her hips. “Hi, Wes,” she said, as if it were no surprise she’d see him standing in the hospital room as she prepared to give birth. Exhaling through her nose, she asked, “What brought you to Florida?”

“Waffle House,” he said with a straight face, not scared away by the scene unfolding in front of him.

Cassie’s eyes lit up and she nodded in approval. “Baby, put that on the list for when I can eat again.”

I made my way to her, kneeling next to the ball and rubbing her back. “Hey, honey. What do you need?”



She let out a low, long groan. “For this hellion to exit my loins and GET THE FUCK OUT!”

Her face scrunched with the passing of a contraction and I continued rubbing her back. Wes stood to the side, watching with a look of utter fascination at the events unfolding.

“I didn’t poop,” Cassie moaned. “I tried, Maddie, but Diego says I’m past four centimeters and I’m going to poop on the table.”

Wes threw his thumb over his shoulder and looked back at the door. “So, I’m just going to go,” he said slowly. “Godspeed, Cass. I’ll see you on the other side.”

“Oh you are not leaving, Wes Cohen. You are going to stand and watch this *fucking* monster crawl its way out of me so you remember that where you put your dick matters and *this* is what happens to the person you claim to love when you do this to her!” Diego didn’t flinch, just held Cassie’s hand and encouraged her to breathe. “It’s like exorcising a fucking demon,” she grunted.

“Sounds like you’ve progressed,” Sandy chirped, coming into the room as she pulled a glove over her hand. “Let’s get you on the bed for a quick check.” Noticing Wes in the corner, Sandy pointed a purple gloved finger at him. “What are you doing here?”

“He’s a doula, too!” I cried.

Cassie nodded her head vigorously. “He is. They work in tandem. Make him watch. Make him fucking watch so he can

tell every other man what happens when their seed inhabits, takes over, and then splits out of their *fucking wives*.” She clenched her teeth and closed her eyes, squealing in pain.

Sandy hurried to Cassie. “Not sure I need to actually check you, sweetie. How long have they been this close together?”

Diego helped Sandy lift Cassie and scoot her to the bed. “For several minutes now. She has to be at least an eight by now, don’t you think?”

“An eight?” Cassie cried. “Hurry, get Dr. Epidural here!” Her brows furrowed as she exhaled through another contraction. “I need to poop!” The declaration was said in pure joy. “Maddie! I need to poop! Let me poop before Dr. Epidural gets here.”

Sandy shook her head, removing her glove and tossing it in the wastebin. “I’m sorry sweetie, that feeling is because you’re fully dilated. Baby girl is letting you know she’s ready. There’s no time for an epidural.”

Sandy moved calmly to the call button to request the doctor come immediately to Cassie’s room. Diego took action front and center, helping Cassie to position on the table as he stood ready to catch his daughter. “Maddie,” he called. “Hold her knee. Second doula, hold the other.”

Wes shook his head. “Oh, I’m just a spectator.”

Sandy raised her eyebrows. “A spectator doula?”

“Wes,” Cassie cried. “You missed everything and now you’re actually here. Come grab my fucking knee.” Another

contraction hit and she cried out and grunted at the same time. Wes didn't argue, standing across from me and holding Cassie's knee up while gripping her hand.

For the next thirty minutes, Cassie grunted, groaned, and pushed. She grasped hands with a force that left Wes wincing. He didn't complain, encouraging her along with everyone else.

"Amazing, Cass. You're almost there." He didn't dare look to confirm that.

Cassie gave her final push, the shrill cries of a newborn filled the room, and Diego handed Cassie the beautiful, pink baby, completely sidestepping the doctor. I burst into tears and clung to Cassie. Wes wrapped his arms around both of us and squeezed tight.

Wes and I cleared space for Diego and Cassie to have a moment, since it was their baby and all, and kept our eyes locked while grinning.

*We did it!* I mouthed to Wes, though whether it was a celebration of our surviving childbirth with Cassie or our reunion, I wasn't totally sure.

"Mitch!" Cassie cried. "We need to call Mitch." It took a minute, but eventually one of us located a phone and FaceTimed Mitch into the room.

With the longest reach, Wes held the phone in front of us, three grinning fools and an apprehensive Diego cradling a sleeping newborn.

"Mitch!" Wes said excitedly. "We're uncles again!"

Mitch's voice echoed on the video call, but it was entirely possible he was just repeating himself with excitement. "Hot damn! Hey, Cass. How are you doing, baby girl?"

Cassie smiled, looking at her daughter and then back at the phone. "I'm tired, Mitch. It was a lot of work."

"You did great, and she's beautiful. I wish I could be there to hug you." He paused, as if he was fully taking in the situation of the room. "What the fuck is Wes doing there?"

Wes waved his free hand. "Hey, Mitch. Just came to ask Maddie to marry me."

Staring at the new life in this world, I hardly heard him. Until I did.

"*What?*" I shrieked as Cassie gasped, "What the fuck?"

Wes grimaced at Cassie. "Oh shit, Cass. Am I stealing your moment? I'm totally stealing your moment. Here." He handed Diego the phone. Confused with what to do, Diego kept it pointed at Cassie.

"Steal my moment!" she shrieked. "Steal it!" Her face was glowing with excitement, lit up like a Christmas tree.

Mitch's piercing voice cried through the phone. "Dammit, Wes! You better not be fucking with me!" His cries faded as Wes pulled me out of the room.

"Come on, Mads. Let's give them a minute." Winking, he took my hand, just the two of us.

## *Twenty-Seven*

### *Maddie*

**M**y heart sped up, beating so rapidly that I was grateful to be in a hospital.

“Defibrillator,” I mumbled. “I need a defibrillator.”

Not letting go of my hand, Wes chuckled as he walked me out of Cassie’s room, down the hallway, past the nurses’ station, beyond the cafeteria, and out the hospital doors. Looking around a courtyard of concrete, he spotted a semi-private corner shaded by large palms and walked me to it with a sprightly pace.

He stopped once out of earshot of other lingerers, running his hands along my arms and looking at me with a grin before taking a step back. “Eh hem.” He cleared his throat. “Maddie —”

“Wes! You dropped a bomb on me!” I crossed my arms, energy buzzing through me as I interrupted him. I wasn’t sure if I was angry or excited. Both, definitely both.

My sweaty palms balled into fists as I tried to figure out what to do with all of that energy.

He held up his hands defensively, maybe afraid those fists were going to hit him.

“Listen, Maddie. Hear me out.”

As if I wouldn't. I rolled my eyes, and Wes grinned wider.

“I'm ill prepared and this is not the proposal you deserve, but my heart is going to explode as I watch you emote so much love. Look at you! You're sobbing at the joyful experience of someone else because your heart is so goddamn big. How fucking lucky am I to get to be loved by you too?”

He ran his hands through his hair before dropping them with enthusiasm, his head falling back and looking at the cloudless afternoon sky.

“Fuck!” he shouted into the blue expanse above. “I love this woman!”

The handful of people in the courtyard looked over, most indifferent, but one older gentleman clapped. “You tell her!”

Wes gave him a wave and cupped his hands around his mouth to shout back, “Thanks.”

Looking at me, Wes grew serious. His dark eyes focused, determined. This was a man who knew what he wanted—and thank the heavens it was me.

“This isn't how I wanted to ask, but at the moment, I can't imagine holding it in, Maddie. You deserve more than a

proposal at a hospital, but I don't want to waste another minute without asking you to be with me. Forever this time."

"A happily ever after isn't in a proposal, Wes. It's a lifetime of love, dedication, intention, and hard work. I don't care how you're asking me, I only care that you asked. I love you. Right now, years ago, and forever onward."

"So is that a yes?" he asked, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "Because you have to say it."

I crossed my arms and glared at him. "You have to *ask* it."

He groaned, scrubbing his hands over his face and shaking his head as he laughed. "You're absolutely right. Um, my knees are a little creaky from some hard hits. Do you want me kneeling, or..."

I stepped closer, pressing my chest against his and wrapping my arms around him. His body, firm and solid, felt agreeable in my arms. "Just ask me, Wes."

"Maddison Marie Sheffield, you're the best woman I know and the one who has held my heart since it could recognize that girls were not the enemy. You're my friend first, and the foundation of everything that makes life worth living. Will you marry me?"

The tender look on his face held notes of affection, adoration, and fondness. It was charming and amorous to look into eyes that hadn't changed in two decades, the same besotted look I'd somehow missed when I was lost in my youth. He was the boy behind me, the man in front of me, and

the love of my future. I'd marry him a thousand times if I could.

"I'll think about it," I said, shrugging one shoulder playfully.

Wes hugged me tighter, nuzzling into my neck and kissing softly, hitting a spot just above my collarbone that made my knees buckle.

"A lifetime of this, Maddie."

His hand ran along my lower back, dipping teasingly toward my ass. Whether merely to taunt me or because there were people in attendance, Wes stopped short.

"Oh, well, when you put it that way..." I trailed off, my voice dropping. "I can't think of anything I'd rather do than marry you, Wes Cohen. Make me your wife and never take your lips off me."

He chuckled, his mouth moving along my jaw and finding my lips. "Might get awkward, but I can live with that."

I don't know how long we were kissing or when the afternoon shifted to sunset, but when we finally came up to breathe, the air around us was cooler and the courtyard was empty. Time with Wes didn't seem to exist in any consistent measurement. When we were together, it could pass at the speed of light, and when we were apart, it felt like it stopped moving altogether.

Knowing we weren't saying a goodbye, that we weren't on borrowed or limited time—well, maybe that would right the



imbalance.

“We have a lot to talk about,” I warned.

Wes laced his fingers with mine as we left the hospital after saying goodbye to Cassie and Diego. The walk to the parking garage was slow, our hands swinging playfully between us.

Wes nodded. “That we do, but I spent five hours in the air planning it out. I have a year left on my current endorsements. I can fly back and forth, or turn into a demanding asshole and renegotiate terms so they come to me. I don’t care.”

“Wes, I can’t live in California,” I said softly. “This, us, it means you’re agreeing to be with me *and* Sam—in Montlake.” I paused, hesitating. “Andy too. Because he’s Sam’s dad. And of course Maria, because she’s Andy’s wife now and a bonus mom, I guess.”

He shrugged. “So you’re saying I need to understand that with you comes your ex-husband and my high school ex-girlfriend?”

“Oh, my god.” I threw a hand over my open mouth. “How did I forget you dated Maria?”

“One drive-in, no handies, and I *think* we may have kissed at some point, but it’s a hazy memory.” He smirked. “Doesn’t really constitute dating.”

“Maybe not to a superstar,” I mumbled.

Wes stopped walking and turned to me, taking both hands this time and giving a deep smile. The kind that radiated assurance.

“Maddie, I called Sam on my way to get coffee. Andy too, obviously, to get Sam. I probably should have called and asked your dad for permission.” He kicked his foot into the sidewalk. “Shit.” Shaking his head, he looked up at me and smiled. “I’ll do that when we’re back at my hotel. Just don’t tell him I asked you first.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Your hotel? Forward, don’t you think?”

He bit his lip. “Forward, backward, vertical, horizontal—I’ll take you in the hotel anyway you want. You choose, Maddie.”

Ignoring him, as hard as it was because I *really* could get on board with his offer, I tried to stay on topic. “You really called them and asked permission?” As if I could love him more—turns out, I could.

He nodded. “Of course. I mean, Andy was a default ask, let’s be honest. I wasn’t sure how to explain calling Sam otherwise, but he was pretty thrilled.”

“Probably because he can stop paying alimony.” I meant it as a joke, mostly, but Wes called me out.

“You know what he said?” I shook my head and Wes gave a soft smile. “He said he always wanted you to be happy. It wasn’t him who could do it, but he never not wanted it for you.”

I sucked in a breath, feeling like both an asshole and eternally grateful that if I was tied to an ex-husband for life, it

was Andy. “Then he told me if I fucked it up, he’d kick my ass.”

I dropped my head back and laughed. Wes laughed with me. “Right? I thought it was a hilarious threat too. His reach is pathetic.”

“What did Sam say?” I asked, watching Wes unlock the Chevy Impala he’d rented. The last photo I’d seen of Wes on an internet gossip magazine had him driving a Bentley.

Giving the car an amused glance, Wes shrugged. “It was all they had left on short notice.” He opened my door for me, watching me get in. “And my assistant is in a mood, so it’s entirely possible that she arranged this.” I settled in my seat, watching in the rear-view mirror as Wes crossed to his side, letting himself in.

“Sam?” I asked again as he sat in the driver’s seat. “What did he say?”

Wes looked at me, his face serious. “He asked if it was weird to still call me Uncle Wes.”

Pulling my hands into my chest, I laughed as I collapsed my head against the seatback. “Really?”

Wes nodded. “Really. He said yes too, Maddie.”

Relaxing in my seat, the faint smell of cherry air freshener blanketing us, I smiled. “Thank you,” I said, turning to face him. “Thank you for thinking of asking Sam and including him.”

“I’ll never not include him.”

I didn't doubt that for one second.

“You're grotesque,” I said, leaning over to kiss him before I wiped his cheek with my hand. “How are you even real?” I shook my head. “Forward, backward, vertical, horizontal—you're going to get them all at the hotel.”

The sound of screeching tires filled the parking garage as Wes made a hasty exit.



The security of the promise of forever brought our love making to new highs of intensity, raring and desperate, despite years ahead of us. If I could have melted into him, I would have.

Impatient and greedy, I didn't want to wait to have him. When we got to the hotel, Wes let us into a beautiful suite overlooking the city skyline. I wanted him immediately, and taking in the view of city lights in a darkening sky be damned.

He hardly had time to close the door before I leaped for him, taking his mouth with fervor and command as he dropped our bags and wrapped himself around me. Holding me in his

arms, he lifted my legs around him, squeezing my ass as he pressed me against the wall, bracing himself with one arm.

The feel of his cock was exquisite, and I regretted the fact I hardly wore dresses, desperate to make quick work of getting off my shorts.

“Too many clothes,” I mumbled, my hips circling fiercely as my core sought friction with an aching need.

Wes nodded, mumbling something indistinguishable as he lowered my feet to the floor and kicked his pants off before pulling his shirt over his head. I pushed down my shorts and tore off my shirt, the two of us naked and staring at one another as if this was all new.

His breath hitched, and he licked his lips, his eyes running over my body. “I’ve missed you. So much it hurts.” He pointed at his dick. “Not just blue balls, Maddie, but here.” He brought his finger to his heart.

He said it with such earnestness, but his face cracked into a wide grin, reminding me that part of what I loved about Wes was his playfulness.

“I’ve missed you too,” I said softly. Taking his hand, I held it up and traced his fingers with mine. “And I’ve missed these, maybe most of all.”

He gave a wicked smile. “No one touches you like I touch you, do they, Maddie?”

I closed my eyes in a flutter, remembering our phone sex and my desperation to have those very hands running along

my body. I shook my head, and he hissed out an exhale, his other hand sliding down and running along my outer thigh before he turned his path inward.

Nudging his knee between my legs, he encouraged me to open for him. I obliged, dropping my head against the wall behind me and taking a deep breath in anticipation of his fingertips.

He groaned as he found me, nuzzling into my neck and whispering affirmations of my wetness and feel, his fingers sliding inside me. My breathing picked up, quickening as my chest rose with need and hunger.

“I don’t want to wait,” I panted. “I want you now.”

Wes lowered his kisses from my neck to my collarbone, dropping lower still until he circled my nipple with wet, hot flicks of his tongue.

“Now,” I moaned.

Wes, ever a gentleman, was trying to urge a climax before he took me, but everything in me screamed for him. Impatient, craving, and aching for this man, I grasped his cock, running my hand along his length from base to tip, squeezing with the pressure I knew he liked.

He groaned, giving in and lifting me to wrap around him, my legs tucking over his hips and ankles meeting above his ass. He held his cock, guiding himself into me as he kept me pushed against the wall.

Flattened between the wall and Wes, my breaths were shallow. The pressure of the position and the hard thrusts into me collapsed my ability to breathe, but I didn't care. As soon as I felt the familiar fill of him, I came alive.

"Hey," he whispered, his eyes finding mine as he slowed his pace.

"Hey," I whispered back, my hips rolling in encouragement.

Fuck, he felt amazing, picking up his pace again. The adulation between us, the affection, the adoration—it heightened every touch, every thrust, every kiss, every movement of our bodies connected.

"Is this okay?" He looked down between us, watching himself as he drove into me, and groaning. "Should I get a condom?"

Digging my fingers into his arms and biting my lip with the delectation of feeling him, I shook my head. "I'm on birth control now. Oh, fuck. Right there," I encouraged.

Wes kept his pace, slapping into me with the right force to make my goddamn eyes roll back in my head. Leaning closer to me, his breath hot on my ear, he nipped before mumbling to me.

"One day you won't be, Maddie. When you're ready. And I am going to fill you up and make a baby with you."

I moaned, my thighs tightening around him as I felt the cresting of my climax. I fucking loved when Wes got

possessive with me, but more than anything, I fucking loved the idea of having his babies someday.

“You like that, don’t you?” he whispered, licking my skin and slamming harder into me.

“Yes,” I moaned. “I want that.”

Slowing down, he dropped his hand between us, finding my clit and circling with his fingers as my orgasm crested. Wes smiled at me, heart-felt and full. “I want that too.”

We came together, a surprising first for us, and with it, I came apart.

This man, this best goddamn man. My best friend. My lover. My future.

Sometimes life puts us on a path that feels certain. So certain that it’s impossible to imagine another route to get where you think you’re going.

When I was eighteen, I believed that certainty was an order of things that never came to fruition. Judging the end point in a series of markers and accomplishments. College, career, marriage, kids, happily ever after.

What I didn’t know when I was eighteen was the certainty of my path wasn’t an order of *things*. It was my love for a man who found me again despite the detours.



## *Epilogue*

*Wes*

**L**ost in the rapture of stocking books on a center display table in the middle of Rude Librarian, Maddie didn't turn around at the sound of the bell ringing above the door.

What should be a pleasant sound to any business owner's ears only seemed to make Maddie cringe.

"Not open yet. Read the store hours and come back." She hesitated, her shoulders dropping. "Please."

Biting my knuckle to hold a laugh, I considered several ways to play this. My brain, trained for making fast decisions on plays and next moves, loved the opportunity to flex its talents. Having been off a field in a professional capacity for over two years now, I looked for these moments anywhere I could.

After attending dozens of Sam's plays and helping him run lines frequently, my ability to take on an accent and shift my voice had become surprisingly good. I could feign some

strange voice, say a few weird things that would get a normal person arrested. Catch her off guard that way.

*Nah.* I needed something better.

Reaching into my jacket pocket for ammunition, I pulled out a few unusable contents before pinching my fingers around a rubber band.

Juvenile, but classic. I could stretch that smooth rubber between my thumb and pointer finger and use my rather impressive aim to get her right in that plump ass. Which happened to be bent over picking up more books from the box at her feet, the fabric of her long skirt stretching across the broad spread of her cheeks and tightening in the most delicious display of voluptuousness.

*Oh god.* Too easy.

I kept my eyes on her ass, suppressing a groan as I watched her stretch and bend, her hips swaying in a rhythmic pattern that dysregulated my heartbeat.

“Did you hear me?” she asked, standing and setting a stack of books on the large, round table.

I kept my eyes on her ass. Licking my lips, I took two long strides and wrapped my arms around her, leaning in to whisper in her ear, pranks be damned.

“Oh, I heard you, and I was counting on you being the only one in the shop.”

She sank into me, that gorgeous tush hitting my crotch and no doubt recognizing the steeled affection I carried with me

day in and day out for this woman. It didn't matter that I saw her every day. That we woke up together, went to bed together, spent our days together. My desire hadn't faded in two years, as if it were catching up on the ten years we'd missed.

Maddie leaned harder into me, cooing as she ran her hand along my stubbled jaw. "Oh? And why is that?"

*Jesus.* The dirty things I wanted to do to this woman in her place of business. It would have to wait.

"Because I wanted to get a picture of my very favorite author before her wild and untamed fans show up to knock this store down with demands for the hottest book on the market today." I squeezed her tighter. "The next New York Times bestseller."

I looked at the box of books, Maddie's very careful approval for a cover that held the contents of her heart. Her first book. I was so fucking proud of her.

Maddie groaned and stepped away, going back to her books. "I was hoping you were going to say you were here for a quickie. You know, to distract me from my nerves." She sighed, placing her hands on her hips as she stared down at the table. "Besides, the tickets for the reading didn't come close to selling out and I've only had three pre-orders. I'm pretty sure two of those are from Cassie and Kate."

And one from me, but I wouldn't mention it.

"Baby, nobody pours their heart into what they love the way you do, and this book proves that. You're going to sell

millions, bring home some serious bacon, and I can spend my days as a househusband, tending to your every need and taking care of you so you can keep this ship steady.”

I reached for her, hugging her in my arms, and she buried her face in my chest. Her voice, muffled by my shirt, had hints of levity. “You are already a househusband,” she mumbled.

“Comfortably unemployed,” I corrected her.

My last endorsement contract ended more than a year ago, and with it, offers for more. As Barry forewarned, the opportunities would be limited if I didn’t build the momentum in retirement. While it pissed him off to watch me turn down renewals, he didn’t fight me on it. Once I sold my place in LA and moved to Montlake, he knew I wouldn’t be coming back.

“Invest the hell out of your money, Wes,” he recommended.

So, I took his advice. When there were rumblings that the owners of The Chateau were looking to sell the property they’d owned for decades, I saw not a dated and aging inn in need of renovations and a marketing face lift. No, I saw an *opportunity*. My brain, running plays and next moves, envisioned a transformation.

The owners of the inn, the Wattermans, had struggled for years to keep it going. With newer venue builds and heavy-handed overseas investors in local wineries that had pivoted to using their acreage for weddings, The Chateau had been unable to compete for some time. Wanting to retire, the Wattermans had accepted that the inn would likely be torn down and built back up as something else. A casino, maybe.

Two years ago, when I'd reconnected with Maddie at that inn, I had wished we could live there forever. It was a bubble of love, one I never wanted to burst with the realities of returning to our everyday lives. The inn wasn't responsible for that feeling, but it was where that feeling was born.

When I guaranteed to keep the bones of the inn standing, the Wattermans enthusiastically accepted my offer. I still got their final approval for my plans, bringing Barry in to help with securing some personal connections to load the first season of its opening next year, when I expected renovations to be complete. And of course Monica was helping. Or running it all, if I were being honest.

Summer weddings would be replaced with summer football camps, run and led by me and Mitch. I hadn't asked him yet, but I couldn't imagine a world where he'd say no. Hell, I could probably get Andy on board, too. He wasn't a superstar on the field, but he had been a solid running back and he had a great temperament with his kids, which I assumed would translate to other people's as well.

"Wes," Barry barked. "Brilliant! Do you know how many rich sonofabitch celebrities and CEOs are going to send their kids to a luxury football camp in a small, picturesque town next to an idyllic lake to train with one of the NFL's greats? 'Where legends are born.'" He clapped his hands and let out a *whoop* as he let the idea roll over his lips.

Did I know how many? Not exactly, but I knew there would be enough to float scholarships to the kids who couldn't afford

to come. The kids I *actually* wanted to coach and train. Barry wasn't totally happy about that, but he didn't shut it down, either.

That was important, because as much as I hated to admit it, I needed Barry and his connections. Those connections would not only help load the camp, but they negotiated with several NFL teams to advertise the inn as an off-season player retreat where teams could escape for some team building. This source of revenue would guarantee the inn's success.

The contractor responsible for the renovations was shockingly ahead of schedule, proving that throwing money at something could bring the privilege of results. We were going to have to add some things, like landscaping the grounds to include football fields and free-standing locker rooms near the fields, but our timeline was achievable and I'd already extended offers for camp to several at-risk youth selected through a charity that Monica had ties with.

It was so goddamn hard to hide my excitement over the last three months, but I hadn't wanted to tell Maddie until I was sure this was going to work. I didn't want to give Maddie anything to worry about as she worked on launching her own career. No distractions and no stealing of her moment, but I was going to tell her after the reading.

Maddie's playful shove of my arm slingshot me out of my head and into the shop. "Did you hear me?" she asked.

I grinned. "I did, but your voice is so mellifluous that I'd love to hear you say it again."

Her long ponytail shook with her head, laughter commanding her above annoyance. “You fool no one. I *asked* if you could please FaceTime Cassie into the reading.”

“Of course.” As if she needed to ask. As much as Cassie wanted to fly out to watch Maddie in person, she was wrangling a freshly two-year-old terror while preparing to give birth to another little one. Maddie and I were planning to be there for the birth in a few weeks. Mitch too, with Kate and their son Connor joining.

Maddie sighed, placing the last book on the display table and looking over her work. “I’m nervous.”

Kissing the top of her head before gently pushing her forward, I took out my phone. “Let me get a picture of you in front of this amazing display.”

Maddie stood, arms lifeless and a grimace on her face.

It was perfect.

I quickly sent the picture to Mitch and Cassie, beaming at her. “It’s okay to be nervous. Tell me what you need, and I’ll do it.”

She took a deep breath. “I’m nervous, but not about the reading. Sit down.” She gestured to the couch in the reading room, and I trudged over, taking a seat and watching as Maddie joined me. Her lips were pinched and her eyes uncertain, and I didn’t like the look of it.

“Um. So some things have come to my attention that will need to be dealt with, and I’m trying to plan.”

“Okay...” I drawled. “You need Monica’s help in planning?” Monica loved Maddie more than she loved me and I had no doubt she’d prefer working with Maddie over me.

Maddie shook her head, a stiff smile on her face. “No, I don’t need Monica, Wes. Not all of us need a babysitter.”

Fuck if that wasn’t the truth. I laughed and reached for her hand, lacing our fingers together. “Say what you want, Mads. Tell me what you need.”

“Do we have any plans in July?” she asked, biting her thumbnail nervously. I reached for that hand too, gently pulling it down. She didn’t bite her nails unless she was really feeling anxious about something. She’d nearly made it to the nail bed of each finger as she finished her book over this past year.

*Yes. The camp will be well and truly running. We’ll enjoy a summer living by the lake and I’ll be working again, finally, doing something that feels meaningful and fulfilling.*

“Actually,” I said, clearing my throat. “There may be something.”

“Cancel it!” she cried, the excitement catching me off guard. “Cancel the entire month. The entire summer, Wes. I want you to cancel it all and I need you to commit to keeping me sane because we’re going to be saying goodbye to our sanity come July.”

“Saying goodbye to our sanity come July?” I parroted, chewing it over.



*“Did you say ‘going away party?’”*

*“Yes. A going away party. To their sanity. Parenthood is a motherfucker, Wes.”*

“Oh my god,” I gasped, my hand squeezing hers. “Maddie, are you saying...”

She’d ditched her birth control six months ago, after we’d well and truly settled together and tied up loose ends of merging two lives, just after our wedding. A small ceremony of close family and friends at our house. Maddie had sobbed the entire time, and the officiant had to ask if it was a hostage situation before he married us.

We took a two-week honeymoon in Hawaii where she’d ceremoniously tossed her birth control. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t come hard each time we’d fucked that trip. The idea of a baby with Maddie rocking everything in me. It was wishful thinking, of course, too soon after stopping for her to likely get pregnant, but every time I filled her I held hope to hear the very sweet words she was about to utter.

“There’s going to be a demon spawn hellion, clawing its way out of me in the next seven months.”

My eyes dropped to her stomach, the shape and form looking no different from the outside, but suddenly it held my entire world.

“Maddie,” I whispered, running my hand over her stomach with awe. Part of her, part of me, together, growing into a life

we'd created. "I knew your tits were bigger." I eyed those goddesses too, giving them their due.

Maddie laughed, dropping her head back on the couch. "You're happy?" She looked at me, her face seeking an answer she already had.

"Fucking thrilled," I said softly, my hand not leaving her stomach. "How are you feeling? When did you find out?"

She sighed, rubbing her eyes. Suddenly, her frequent yawns and bleary eyes were making sense. I'd assumed she was tired from preparing for her book launch.

"I'm okay. Tired, mostly. I hadn't realized I'd missed my period—too distracted by all of this." She waved her hand around. She'd been working so goddamn hard to make her dreams come true. My fearless wife.

"It occurred to me yesterday that I hadn't reached for a tampon in a while and that maybe my exhaustion wasn't just stress and lack of sleep, so I took a test this morning." She smiled, sweet and serene as the contentment spread over her face.

"Bed by nine," I said, holding up my fingers to list the ways we were going to shift her routine. "You nap in the afternoons. I'll get Sam to and from school. Gentle walks, no more long runs—"

Maddie cut me off. "Wes, stop. I'm not dying, I'm pregnant. Early bed and naps sound great, the rest is unnecessary."

"Let me take care of you," I said. "That's my job."

“You’re comfortably unemployed,” she pointed out. “You don’t have a job, and while I won’t argue with some extra help on household chores, you don’t need to seek employment as my manservant.” She raised her eyebrows and traced a finger along my thigh. “Though when these hormones really get going, I may need to call on you regularly for some, um, special attention.”

“Oh, yes, please,” I groaned, burying my face in her neck and kissing her. The soft moan that escaped her lips made my dick throb, but I ignored it. “So, about July...”

When I finished telling her, Maddie crossed her arms, though her face was anything but angry.

“You’re telling me you bought the inn to save it from being torn down and to preserve the memories, but can’t run it as it is and have invested heavily in giving it a facelift by convincing people with too much money to pay you so you can simultaneously offer training to kids who can’t afford that kind of camp?”

I nodded. “More or less.”

Her arms were around me in half a second. “Wes, I love you and your big freaking heart. Don’t cancel a thing. Newborns are portable. Baby and I will sit on the sidelines and watch you wrangle kids and try to keep your cool.” She gave a content sigh. “Looks like we’re both birthing something this summer.”

She relaxed into me and glanced at her book display thoughtfully. “I’m so damn happy,” she whispered.

I continued rubbing along her stomach, unsure if I'd ever take my hands off her. "Me too, Mads. I have no idea what I did in life to deserve any of this, and certainly not all of it, but I'm so goddamn grateful."

Leaning down to lay my head in her lap, I let the warmth of her skin heat my palm as it ran beneath her blouse and I talked to her belly. The home of our baby.

*Our baby.*

"I promise to always be a good step-dad to your brother, a good dad to you, and a good man to your mama. Always and forever." I lifted her blouse and kissed her bare stomach, Maddie giggling with the tickle of my lips.

"Wes," she said softly. "You're the best step-dad, will be the best dad to our baby, and are the best man for me." She kissed the top of my head, her hand running through my hair in the absence of her lips. "And even though you make me feel wobbly, you keep me steady."

Two decades ago, I met a girl who held my heart for safekeeping. In the last two years, she'd given it back to me, stronger and better, beginning a life that was always supposed to be ours.

**Xx**

# *Thank you*

Hello Dear Reader,

As an indie author who self-publishes their work, I appreciate every single one of you and every single page you've read! Sincerely, thank you, thank you, thank you. I write to tell stories that people enjoy reading, and if you've enjoyed reading this book, I hope you'll be willing to leave a review. Every single one counts, and I appreciate it from the bottom of my heart.

I also love hearing from readers and talking about stories (whether it's what I'm writing or what other people are reading and writing—seriously, romance is *the best* community of readers **ever**). Drop me a line via my website [www.kceverly.com](http://www.kceverly.com) or shoot me an email [kceverly@gmail.com](mailto:kceverly@gmail.com). Truly friends, I appreciate you so much!

And while I'm sure your email, like mine, is stuffed with more unnecessary than necessary correspondence, I'm always tickled when people sign up for my newsletter. Don't worry, I promise I rarely send out emails, and while I've been told that's very poor indie author behavior, I'm sticking with it ;)

**Xx**

**KC**

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